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## **THE EAST AFRICA JOURNAL OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY**

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### **Purpose:**

EAJET is published twice a year by the staff of Scott Theological College in order to provide African evangelical theological students with editorials, articles and book reviews on subjects related to theology and ministry.

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### **Cover:**



The Baobab tree is the EAJET symbol for the gospel in Africa. The good news of Christ, like the baobab tree, is ageless, enduring and firmly rooted in African soil.

# EDITORIAL

## On Building And Perfecting The Church

His hands move carefully over the ebony block. Great chips fly as his hammer and chisel give rough shape to the image that only his eyes can see imprisoned in the wood. Days of chiseling, carving, sanding, and polishing continue. Finally the rough block becomes a finished work of art.

It is fascinating to witness a master carver at work. What sets him apart from the amateur? Perhaps it is his attention to detail. Every step is painstakingly followed with great precision. The craftsman builds and perfects his carving. Only when every operation has been completed does the master lay down his tools and sigh with satisfaction at the beauty of a work well done.

The church of Jesus Christ in Africa is still being shaped by the master. It would be easy to let statistics stun us into complacency. The size of the church, however, is not the only concern of the craftsman. Michael Griffiths, currently principal of London Bible College, reminds us that the Lord's detailed shaping of his corners includes more than just standards of quantity. In his book *Shaping the Sleeping Beauty* ten dimensions of the churches growth toward perfection are mentioned. These include:

1. Numerical Growth (Acts 2:41; 5:14; 6:7)
2. Multiplying of Congregations (Acts 9:31; 16:5)

3. Growth in Love and Interpersonal Relationships  
(Eph. 4:16; Phil. 1:9; I Thes. 3:12)
4. Growth in Congregational Co-operation as a  
Body (Eph. 4:12-13, 16)
5. Growth in Training of Teachers and sending out  
of Missionaries (Acts 11:23,26; 13:1; 15:35;  
Heb. 5:12)
6. Growth in Quality of Christian Family Life  
(Eph. 5:21,22; 6:4)
7. Growth in Holiness and Beauty of Lifestyle (2  
Cor. 3:18; Eph. 5:27; I Thes. 3:13; 5:23)
8. Growth in Congregational Impact of Society in  
Witness and Service (Phil. 1:27)
9. Growth in Doctrinal Understanding and Exper-  
ience of Christian Truth (Col. 2:7)
10. Growth in Worship and Knowledge of God (Col.  
1:9, 11-12)

Griffiths concludes his discussions of these dimensions of growth by noting that "the biblical emphasis is at least as much upon quality as quantity."

EAJET begins its third year of publication by reaffirming its commitment to promote in a modest way the full range of church growth that the scripture calls for. In particular EAJET as a journal for African Christians willing to think through the implications of the Gospel, seeks to concentrate on those issues which can help improve the African Church's quality and growth toward perfection. Theological thinking that is shaped by biblical convictions can be a useful tool to chisel and groove the church in ways pleasing to her master.

In this issue we give attention to those details great and small that must be confronted as the carving, sanding and polishing continues. Yemi Ladipo suggests a creative way to tackle crucial issues in his call for a "think tank" conference. Donald Carson reflects deeply on how we as African Evangelicals can provide a relevant theology [that is] faithful to God's word. Josh Yego

surveys the current status of the christian debate over polygamy. Our book reviews mirror a wide number of concerns from church history to Old Testament exegesis. Each piece in its own way seeks to contribute to the perfecting process of the church in God's workshop of history.

The master carver is at work. No detail can be overlooked. Out of ebony will emerge his work of art. But the work is not finished yet. So let the chips continue to fly under the hammer of his word and the chisel of his spirit.

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# **Do We Need A Christian 'Think Tank' Conference In Africa?**

*Rev. Yemi Ladipo*

"Our ancient continent is now on the brink of disaster, hurtling towards the abyss of confrontation, caught in the grip of violence. Gone are the smiles, the joys of life." So says Edem Kodjo, former secretary general of the OAU.

To get a true picture of what is actually happening in Africa one has to rely on the secular press. The Church by and large is not addressing itself to the problems confronting the ordinary man in the street. No wonder unbelieving African intellectuals find it easy to dismiss the Church as an irrelevant foreign outfit which Africa can ill afford. While the Church in Africa continues to dissipate its limited resources and efforts on what people consider non-essentials, the common man looks among the politicians for a "promising messiah". Reflecting on the political and economic frustrations experienced by the everyday African, Peter Enaharo said:

By and large, we Africans look upon government rather as a father-figure. When things go wrong we are immediately at our wit's end ready to follow the latest messiah to the ends of the earth. His promises are new and so we think they are different; and because we believe they are different we swear they will work. The journey has often been a very short one. [1]

For the Church in Africa to earn the right to be listened to by the suffering masses, she must become what she is called to be, "The light of the world, the salt of the earth". Martin Lloyd Jones once said, "The glory of the gospel is that when the church is absolutely different from the world, she invariably attracts it. It is then that the world is made to listen to her message, though it may hate it at first." John Stott underscores this idea when he observes: "The influence of Christians in a society depends on their being distinct, not identical." God is at work within His Church, seeking to renew its life and equip it for its mission as light and salt in the world.

In what specific ways might the Church in Africa be mobilized to tackle the continent's problems? The purpose of this essay is twofold, to consider some major issues confronting Africa today and to suggest a specific first step for the Church to take.

### **Major Issues Facing Africa Today**

A catalogue of the major issues confronting Africa was made in an article entitled "A Continent Gone Wrong", in the 16 January 1984 issue of *Time*. This analysis of the "harsh facts and hard choices" confronting Africa today deserves a careful study by the Church. The article shows some areas where the African masses are hurting. As it happens, the Church is affected in each of these areas too. They include the following:

1. **Ostentatious living by the privileged few, in the midst of abject poverty.** As *Time* pointed out, "Even in the poorest African capitals, such as battle scarred Ndjamen, Chad, government officials can be seen in convoys of Mercedes-Benz limousines, scattering cyclists

and pedestrians as they pass. Owning a Mercedes is so potent an African status symbol that in East Africa a Swahili word was coined to describe the elite that drive them: 'Wabenzi' — literally, men of the Mercedes-Benz." [2]

And what about the number of bishops among the 'Wabenzi'?

2. **Lack of genuine political freedom.** "'Uhuru', the Swahili clarion call for freedom from the European colonial powers, has brought independence but little liberty for millions of black Africans. The rallying cry, 'one man, one vote' has been transformed into reality but it has suffered an ironic distortion. Many Africans now have one vote but often it can be cast for only one man. . . . All too frequently, fledgling African democracies have become hostage to leaders intent solely on gaining and holding power." [3]

But how much real freedom do local congregations have in deciding before the Lord the right people to be their pastors or even bishops? Unspiritual leaders are often imposed on local churches and good pastors taken away from them with hardly any advance notice.

3. **Economically the picture is bleak,** because of rampant corruption (which has become a way of life), gross mismanagement, and uncontrolled population growth. Sub-Saharan Africa's population growth rate, at 2.9% annually, is the highest anywhere in the world.

Since the African Church has been described as the fastest growing church in the world (225 million according to Dr. David Barrett), a lot of the rampant corruption and gross mismanagement of Africa's resources is being perpetrated by those in Africa who call themselves Christian. New Christians are untaught about what it means to be Christian in their society.

4. **Continuation of tribal conflicts.** In the nations of Africa, tribalism has consistently undermined the best efforts at national development. Meanwhile in the

Church, tribal allegiance too often takes precedence over what the Bible teaches. Tribalism erodes the structure of Christian unity and encourages tolerance of inefficiency and immorality within the body of Christ. Instead of proclaiming "all one in Christ", individual Christians carry the flags of their tribes as their badge of honour and allegiance.

5. **Rapid urbanization.** Although it has been suggested that this process has hastened 'detrribalization', many African sociologists "see the phenomenon as a primary cause of social disintegration; young Africans in particular discard values and disciplines for an urban-centered culture of Coca Cola and transistor radios."

What a great opportunity for the churches in urban areas to provide an alternative lifestyle for the rootless young people that flock to African cities in search of wealth. Unfortunately many of our big city churches are too politicised and tribalised to be able respond to the crying need of the unsaved.

6. **The suffocating influence of foreign domination** in African affairs has made Africa a continent of beggars that survive on foreign handouts. As a Tanzanian academic said:

We are undergoing a second colonialization. . . .  
Our present leaders are just like the old tribal chiefs who signed pacts with colonizers for a few beads. Friendship and military pacts are now penciled up in return for guns and/or cash loans. Africa is up for grabs.

It is no use blaming our stars, or the former colonial masters. Africans have over the years become the architects of their own misfortune. Africa's major achievement in the last three decades has been in

exchanging political independence for economic dependence on foreign powers. This is true not only of many African countries but also of many African churches and especially para-church organizations. The issue of moratorium, which provoked so much resentment from evangelical Christians when it was first raised a few years ago, deserves a fresh look. The African church will not come of age until it assumes the responsibility of finding African solutions to African problems, without the rich and powerful church from the West telling her the 'short-cuts' to achieve her objectives. Too often those short-cuts lead to cul-de-sacs. The dilemma of Africa and of the church in Africa is well summed up in the cartoon which appeared in a British newspaper. On a picture of an American five dollar bill were printed these words: "In God We Trust. All Others Must Provide U.S. Military Base Facilities."

The African Church must learn to trust God instead of perpetually depending on foreign funds.

7. African leaders holding on to power, long after they have ceased to be the voluntary choice of the people they rule. Apart from Presidents Senghor (Senegal) and Ahidjo (Cameroon), no other African elected leader has voluntarily relinquished power. In an article entitled "Why African Leaders Cling to Power", the leader of Uganda's opposition, Paul Ssemogerere, explained why:

The incumbent in crisis rules out the option of resignation or retirement out of real fear for himself. Not only does he fear to lose his high office and the accompanying material benefits; but he is not sure what his successors might do to him, given the considerable coercive powers he has concentrated in the office they might inherit, and given the contempt and wrath with which he has been treating his critics.[4]

What is true of political leaders is also true of many church leaders, who cling to leadership roles long after they were due for retirement. "African church leadership lags behind the reality of the African church

situation" a friend recently told me. One reason this is so is because some experienced church leaders consider everybody mortal but themselves. They are often so busy consolidating their grip on the local churches that they have no time to pour their lives into younger men to continue where they left off. The training of 'Timothys' to replace African 'Pauls' remains one of the most arduous tasks facing the Church today. The future of the Church in Africa cannot be built on 'the slippery slopes of permanent uncertainty.'

These issues the ordinary man on the street in Africa understands. But how seriously does the Church in Africa take them? What hope does the Church offer the Africans in facing these issues? Here and there one sees positive steps. The National Christian Council of Kenya has published A Christian View of Politics in Kenya. By giving a meaningful Biblical definition to Kenya's 'Nyayo' philosophy of 'love, peace and unity', the NCCK is helping Kenyan Christians to think right and act as 'the salt of the earth.' But it is only one step in the long journey needed if the Church is to become a positive influence in African affairs.

### **Why a Continental Think Tank Conference is Needed**

The Church in Africa is potentially strong enough to bring about a change in the right direction. But first it must assume control over its destiny. Well-meaning non-Africans have demonstrated amazing willingness to help the African church. They seem to understand the African problems more than the African Christians themselves. They offer quick solutions without a full disclosure of their real motive. As Paul Ssemogerere has observed, African leaders have become "attractive and generous hosts to a mixed bag of the . . . mushrooming social engineers and policy analysts who in large measure come to Africa respectively to test their theories and work out strategies in international politics and economies from their points of view."[5]

What is true of our political leaders is also true of many of our church leaders. Their leadership style is defaulting because they rely too heavily on non-African 'experts' to do their jobs for them--chiefly because they do not have to pay for their services. And what is more, provided these 'experts' are given complete freedom to experiment with their theories, the local African churches will benefit from increasing inflow of money from the countries that sent the missionaries. Thus in Africa today not a few 'successful' evangelical leaders are nothing more than figureheads maintaining the 'white elephant' inherited from missionaries, with the continuing help and financial support of the 'offspring' of the pioneering missionaries of previous generations. In Africa an 'expert' is someone from a far away country.

I wish to propose that what the church in Africa needs as a matter of urgency just now is a continental Think Tank conference. We need such a gathering to achieve the following strategic goals.

1. To provide a forum for influential African Christian leaders to establish a 'priority order' on the felt needs of the Church in Africa.

Up to this point we have allowed our foreign benefactors to tell us what to concentrate on. African leaders give in once they are assured that funds will be raised for the projects by the friends of Africa in Europe and America. Top priority is often given to projects which in my view are not true reflections of the felt needs of the African church today. Many such projects would not be in existence if the bulk of the money were to come from the church in Africa. This is not because there is no money in Africa to fund the projects--but because the generality of the African church do not consider them to constitute 'top priority', so projects depend on foreign funds for their survival and would be closed tomorrow without them.

My comments must not be taken to mean that I do not appreciate the need for some of these projects in Africa. I do. The point I am trying to make is that their importance can be easily over-rated in the context of the present and future needs of the African church because they do not arise from a sense of priorities determined by African Christians. For example, it may be that a national conference center, that offers on-going training on different aspects of the Christian life for the clergy and lay people of the church, should be a higher priority in Africa than post graduate level residential theological colleges. What is more, such a conference center may be highly 'sellable' to the local churches.

The needs of the African church are very great but African Christian leaders must meet to establish how they are going to solve these problems with their limited resources. They must establish set criteria for any help from outside of the continent to prevent permanent dependency on foreign aid.

**2. To provide an opportunity to discuss creative ways of meeting the vital needs of the African Church.**

Instead of continuing to respond to external stimulus, the African Church must learn to consider creative ways of meeting her priority needs. The African leaders must demonstrate to the rest of the church universal that they accept full responsibility before the Lord of reaching their continent with the claims of Christ, without depending on external initiatives. Present benefactors of Africa must be encouraged to adopt the attitude of the Western diplomat who said recently: "We are going to see some difficult times ahead. We should try to help those who are doing most to help themselves, to create some success stories."

The image of the African church always carrying a 'begging bowl' must be corrected for the African church to live within its means. It must be willing if neces-

sary to take some steps backward in order to take a giant step forward. Dependence on foreign funds may seem a short cut to putting a project in orbit. But the history of missions has repeatedly shown that when the indigenous church assumes (or tries to assume) control of the project, often the church finds the project to be in the wrong orbit, with much energy and funds required to keep it there. The choice is often between crash-landing the project or continuing to keep the project in the wrong orbit with foreign funds and control. The latter choice seems to prevail in Africa.

3. To define the role of non-African missionaries in Africa and what foreign aid (if any) will be acceptable to the African Church.

The time has come for our foreign benefactors to "choose between remaining master in isolation and darkness, and giving up supremacy to find brotherhood."

### Proposal

As general coordinator of Nigeria's National Congress on Evangelization from 1974 to 1979, I worked with a committee of Nigerian leaders to organize two major conferences to deal with specific issues facing Nigerian Christians. Issue papers were given by influential Christian leaders. And as honorary secretary of the Nigerian branch of the Evangelical Fellowship in the Anglican Communion from 1979 to 1982, I took part in organizing two national conferences to deal with issues peculiar to that church in Nigeria—using denominational clergymen as speakers. My desire to see an African Think-Tank Conference organized for influential African thinkers stems from the way I saw the NCE and the EFAC conferences help the church in Nigeria in 'equipping the saints for the work of the ministry'.

My proposal is that participants at such a conference must be influential Christian thinkers from across Africa. After establishing the needs of the African

church in order of priority, the first two or three needs could be tackled at the conference in committee. An outline for the issue papers on these two or three major needs could be approved by the whole conference. Then gifted, interested and qualified individuals should be assigned to write out a draft for each of the issue papers for field testing in different countries. Papers to be ratified must be written simply (but not simplistically), in such a way that they could be used as Bible study materials in local churches.

I am aware of the excellent plan of the East Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology (EAJET) to produce a Handbook of African Evangelical Theology . As one of the consulting editors of EAJET, I endorse the process outlined in the briefing papers sent out by EAJET to its consultants. The Christian Think Tank conference I am proposing could help to put continental 'priority order' on the topics to be included in the Handbook. In fact, the immense problems facing Africa today need a two-pronged approach. The production of a Handbook of African Evangelical Theology is one approach. However, since the Church in Africa has lost its credibility to be taken seriously on matters of national interest (having too long been part of the problems), African Christian thinkers need to produce issue papers on matters in which the 'common man' has vested interest. It is my conviction therefore that the production of such apologetic papers on contemporary African issues should helpfully precede the publication of the Handbook, in order to demonstrate that the Church in Africa is committed to a 'holistic' lifestyle.

As the Think Tank gains continental and international credibility, it could be constituted into an African Institute of Contemporary Christianity, similar in purpose to that of the recently founded London Institute for Contemporary Christianity, which has as its stated goal "To help thoughtful Christians (especially graduates, professional and business people) to relate their Christian faith to every area of their responsibility--

their home, work, leisure, personal life and civic duties."

The continental Institute could give birth to regional and national institutes, with facilities for training pastors, politicians, students, business and professional people, in interpreting the Bible, understanding the modern world, living as Christian disciples, reaching out in mission, with management seminars, marriage seminars, stewardship seminars, and so forth.

I believe the bulk of the funding for holding the proposed Think Tank Conference can be met from within Africa, if the conference is considered a priority by the influential African thinkers to be invited. I think the idea of the conference needs to be 'floated' among African Christian leaders. It will be the responsibility of a small nucleus of interested leaders to consider how the expenses of the conference will be met and what kind of people to be invited. Needless to say, I am excited about the idea of the Think Tank Conference. The question I am asking myself now is whether anybody else is interested? Time will tell.

## Notes

[1] Africa Now, January 1984, page 7.

[2] Time Magazine, 16 January, 1984

[3] Time

[4] Africa Now, January 1984

[5] Africa Now

# **Reflections On Contextualization: A Critical Appraisal of Daniel Von Allmen's "Birth of Theology"**

*D. A. Carson*

Some essays capture a mood or put into words what many others have been struggling to articulate. When such essays are published, they immediately gain assent and wide recognition — not necessarily because they are cogent or their arguments unassailable, but because they burst onto the theological scene just at the time when they seem to confirm the opinions of many readers.

Arguably, something like that has happened to Daniel von Allmen's important article on the birth of theology.[1] Von Allmen's argument, as we shall see, turns on his interpretation of the New Testament at several key junctures. Perhaps that is why the editors of this Journal have asked a New Testament student like myself for a preliminary evaluation of his essay.

In what follows I shall summarize von Allmen's arguments, and then proceed to a discussion of exegetical and methodological problems associated with his work. Finally, I shall try to assess von Allmen's judgment of the kind of contextualization that ought to take place, closing with some concluding reflections of my own on this crucial issue.

## **1. A Summary of Von Allmen's Article**

Von Allmen's essay was itself a response — indeed, a response to a response. The late Byang Kato had

responded to the growing dangers he perceived in the work of such African theologians as Harry Sawyerr and John Mbiti.[2] Emerging as the dominant evangelical voice in African theology before his untimely death, Kato had detected in certain strands of African theology what he variously called "Christopaganism", "syncretism" or "universalism" and in which he saw "a real threat to the future evangelical church" of Africa.[3] Against this protest, von Allmen sets out "not only to reaffirm that an African theology is necessary, but also to show how it is possible on the basis of a true fidelity to the New Testament." [4] In other words, the force of von Allmen's criticism of Kato is that he is not biblical enough, and that Scripture itself authorizes the kind of contextualization von Allmen advocates.

Von Allmen turns to the New Testament, and begins by assuming that the "Judaic, that is Semitic, character of the Christian faith at its birth is beyond question." [5] Within one generation, however, the church found its firmest footing on Hellenistic soil. Von Allmen therefore proposes to discover "what were the forces behind this Hellenization of Christianity, and what sort of people were its first exponents." [6]

### **Forces Behind Hellenization: The Missionary Movement**

Von Allmen distinguishes three movements, almost stages, based on three types of people. The first is the missionary movement. This explosion came about without initiation by the Jerusalem "pillars" (Gal. 2:9): indeed, the Aramaic-speaking apostles were caught unaware by these developments. What happened rather was that "Philip and his Hellenist brothers saw in the persecution that was scattering them a divine call to preach the gospel outside the limits of Jerusalem." [7] This was partly because they had the linguistic competence: they were at home in Greek and familiar with the LXX. Even at this stage, however, this Hellenistic "missionary" movement was not a missionary movement in

any modern sense. No one was being commissioned or sent. It was simply "a work of evangelism undertaken under the pressure of external events (of persecution) that were understood to be providential." [8] All of this suggests to von Allmen that in this "first adaptation of Christianity to a new context," although there was a "missionary thrust" it was not the thrust of people from one culture evangelizing the people of another, but the spread of Christian witness from Hellenistic Christians to Hellenists. In other words:

No true "indigenization or contextualization" can take place because foreigners, the "missionaries", suggest it; on the contrary, true indigenization takes place only because the "indigenous" church has itself become truly missionary, with or without the blessing of the "missionaries". [9]

#### Forces Behind Hellenization: Translating The Good News Into Greek

The second movement is that of "translators". In one sense, as von Allmen rightly points out, no translation was needed. The "missionaries" and those being evangelized shared Greek as a common language, and even a Greek Bible, the Septuagint. What concerns von Allmen here is something else: viz., "the manner in which the Hellenists, who had received the Gospel from the lips of Aramaic Christians, translated it into Greek for the pagans. By Gospel I mean here, therefore, the living preaching." [10] Von Allmen uses form critical theory and appeals to I Cor. 15:3-5, 11 to insist that the Hellenists were not free-lancers: there were limits to how far they could digress from the tradition that had come to them. But a telling step came, he says, when the Hellenistic believers chose **kurios** to render Hebrew **rabbi** and Aramaic **mari**. The result was a title for Jesus that served simultaneously as, among Jews, a Greek transcription of the divine Name, and, among others, as the word used to pay honor to the Emperor. This is the

pre-Pauline history of the title. Von Allmen asks:

Was it a fatal slip? Criminal truckling to the Greeks and Romans? Paul does not look at it in that way, since he makes this very title of Lord the centre of his theology. In any case, there can be no talk of truckling when to confess "Jesus is Lord" exposed one to persecution for refusing Caesar the honour he claimed for himself.[11]

What all this assumes, von Allmen argues, is that "the 'native' preachers were bold enough . . . to be themselves, while remaining faithful to the foundations of the faith they had received, to sift critically the received vocabulary in order to express themselves intelligently to their linguistic brothers." [12]

#### Forces Behind Hellenization: The Rise Of Christian Worship

The third movement was the rise, not of theologians, but of poets -- i.e. those whose work assisted the church in its indigenous worship. Von Allmen approves the thesis of Schlink, that "the basic structure of God-talk is not the doctrine of God but the worship of God." [13] We may examine this movement, he says, by studying some of the hymns preserved in the Pauline epistles. Von Allmen selects as his test case Phil. 2:6-11. He prints it in poetic format, putting in parentheses the bits that many scholars hold to be Pauline redaction. Von Allmen's chief point with respect to this hymn, however, is that the parallelism between "taking the position of a slave" and "becoming like a man" (2:7) is not a Jewish or Jewish-Christian idea at all; for among them a man was not considered to be a slave. "It is for the Greeks, particularly at this late date, that man is a slave, bound hand and foot in submission to all-powerful Destiny." [14] Moreover, von Allmen argues, "it would be possible to find in the hymn a number of other expressions which find their closest

equivalent in the Gnostic myths of the Original Man: the 'divine estate', the equal of God." [15] But none of this is dangerous syncretism, von Allmen argues, for in this hymn the language used describes not "a mythical Original Man losing his divine form and assuming a human appearance"; for only the vocabulary remains, and "it is used to sing the praise of Jesus of Nazareth who entered history as a man of flesh and blood." [16] "We must see in this hymn an interesting, and indeed successful attempt to express the mystery of the condescension of Christ in the characteristically Greek vocabulary." [17]

From this, von Allmen draws a more general conclusion:

The theologian has no right to fear the spontaneous manner in which the Church sometimes expresses the faith. If the apostles had been timorous and shut the mouths of the poets through fear of heresy, the Church would never have found footing on Hellenistic soil. Thus the way things happen in the primitive church teaches us that in the Church the life and faith is [sic] the primary thing. Missionaries do not preach a theology but rather the Gospel (the good news). Nor is the response of faith yet theology, but rather worship or hymns proclaiming the mighty deeds of God in Jesus Christ. [18]

It is only following these movements, von Allmen argues, that theologians are wanted, exemplified by Paul. But even here, he points out, Paul is not a systematician in any modern sense. The two functions of theology are the critical and the systematic, and Paul in his writings devotes himself primarily to the former. By this, von Allmen means that before adapting an already coined formula, Paul examines it "critically" and his criterion is "the received faith".

He does not demand that doctrine should be in literal agreement with the primitive Christian preaching. But whatever may be its formal expression, the

doctrine must correspond to the inner thrust of the apostolic faith. New hope is part of the inner thrust of the faith, and so eschatology is an essential element of Christian theology. Provided one reintroduces this moment of expectation, this eschatological tension, then why not use Greek terminology? [19]

Along this line, von Allmen argues that the church began with the language of master/disciple, and adapted it to the Hellenistic mystery religions of the day to make Christianity over into "the definitive and absolute mystery religion." [20] The one limitation Paul imposed on this Greek influence was resurrection language. Christ may be like Osiris or Kore when Paul says "You died with Christ," but Paul is independent of Greek thought when he says "You have been raised with him" — especially so when he sets the ultimate raising as a hope for the future.

Along similar lines, Paul in Colossians (von Allmen is not sure whether the epistle was composed by Paul or someone from the Pauline school) responds to the strange amalgam of Judaizing and syncretism by setting over against the worship of angels the supreme headship of Christ. Paul begins, von Allmen argues, with the centre, viz. Jesus is Lord — i.e. as crucified and risen, Jesus is Lord. This central feature of Christianity enables Paul to rebut the Colossians. This what von Allmen means by the "ordering function of theology."

Even amidst the fiercest polemic, Paul remains firmly rooted in the basis of the Christian faith: Christ who died and was raised. It is only from this centre that one may dare to say anything at all and all theological statements, whether polemical or constructive, must be set in relation to this centre. [21]

Von Allmen then turns from the New Testament to the problem of how anyone, African or otherwise, must properly set about "doing theology" in his or her own context. Before setting forth his own proposal, he

briefly describes three impasses that must be overcome.

**Von Allmen's Impasses to African Theology: Paternalism,  
Heresy, and Conservative Contextualizing**

The first is paternalism. Paternalism expresses itself not only in the sense of superiority manifested by Western theologians, but also in the "colonized" complex of Africans and other victims of colonization. In the first century, the power relationship between the cultures was if anything the reverse of modern problem: the Jewish-Christians must have felt threatened by the all-pervasive Hellenistic culture, not the other way round. Von Allmen's solution is that Africans become aware of the value of their own culture in its own right, so that they may "bring to birth an African theology that is more than a theology characterized by reaction." [22] Moreover, just as the Hellenistic Christian movement in the first century was the work of Hellenists themselves, in a spontaneous movement, so also must Africans do their own theology; and this means that Westerners cannot without paternalism even encourage Africans to get on with it. Rather: "Once and for all, then, there must be trust."

The second impasse is heresy. Von Allmen says that since "everyone is a heretic in somebody's eyes," [23] we must tread very cautiously. His study of the New Testament leads him to conclude that at the first stage of indigenization, people are not too worried by dangers of heresy; and in any case, in Paul's writings,

the heretics are not to be found among the Hellenistic progressives but rather among the Judaizing reactionaries who feel themselves obliged to denounce the foolhardiness or the rank infidelity of the "translation" project upon which the Church has become engaged in Hellenistic territory. But, remarkably enough, this very conservatism goes hand in hand with a, perhaps unconscious, paternalism. The legalism of the Colossian heresy is accompanied by a disproportionate respect

towards other powers than Jesus Christ.[24]

The third impasse is an approach to contextualization that perceives it as an adaptation of an existing theology. The Hellenists, von Allmen argues, simply proceed with evangelization; and the theology eventually emerged from within this Hellenistic world — but as a later step. Von Allmen's conclusion is stunning:

It must be said with all possible firmness: there can be no question, in our days either, of an Africanization or a contextualization of an existing theology. Any authentic theology must start over anew from the focal point of faith, which is the confession of the Lord Jesus Christ who died and was raised for us; and it must be built or re-built (whether in Africa or in Europe) in a way which is both faithful to the inner thrust of the Christian revelation and also in harmony with the mentality of the person who formulates it. There is no short cut to be found by simply adapting an existing theology to contemporary or local taste.[25]

What this means is that so far as it is possible, African Christians, and indeed all Christians, must begin *tabula rasa*. Missionaries should provide working tools and building materials to believers not yet able to train their own people, and then leave them to get on with the task.

Rather than teach theology (even a theology that claims to be a "New Testament theology"), what we should try to do is point out what the forces were that governed the elaboration of a theology on the basis of the material furnished by the early church. This is the reason why, in my opinion, the study of the history of traditions in the early church is of capital importance in Africa even more than elsewhere.[26]

In short, what von Allmen proposes is that no one has the right to tell or even encourage Africans to get on with the task, as that would smack of paternalism

and meanwhile no one has the right to provide them with any theology, as this would vitiate his understanding of the principles of contextualization as he understands them. We must simply let the African church be African and an African theology will ultimately result.

## 2. Problems in von Allmen's Biblical Exegesis

There are many points of detail in von Allmen's exegesis that could be usefully raised; but I shall restrict myself to four areas. Like him, I shall largely dispense with the clutter of detailed footnote, and sketch in a response with fairly broad strokes.

### Drawing Wrong Lessons About Hellenistic Witness

Von Allmen's reconstruction of the earliest stage of witness is seriously deficient. As we have seen, he denies the influence of the Aramaic-speaking apostles, assigns all credit to the Hellenistic believers who interpreted the outbreak of persecution as a divine call to preach the gospel outside the limits of Jerusalem, and from this deduces that true contextualization takes place not because outsiders (the Aramaic-speaking apostles) suggest it, but because the indigenous church (the Hellenistic Christians) have themselves become truly missionary.

### Six Assertions About the Witness of the Early Church

Now it is true, as Boer[27] pointed out some years ago, that the church in Acts is not presented as a community of believers with an immediate and urgent sense of commitment to carry out, in an organized and methodical way, the great commission. Nevertheless, the arguments of both Boer and von Allmen could do with a little shading. First, the church began from a tiny group. It did not begin as a multinational missions agency with boards and head offices and district conferences, plotting the systematic evangelization of the

world. It began with a handful of people transformed by the Spirit of God and by the conviction that with the death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah the promised eschatological age had begun. Immediately there was witness — not the strategic witness of careful planning but the spontaneous witness of irrepressible spiritual life, the most effective witness of all. In this atmosphere of early pulsating beginnings, it was inevitable that each group of early believers shared their faith primarily with those of its own language and culture. But at this very early stage, to draw lessons about the slowness of the Aramaic-speaking community to reach out to the Hellenistic world is no more realistic than to draw lessons about the slowness of the Hellenistic church to reach out to the Aramaic-speaking world. Luke's narrative simply does not address the kind of questions von Allmen seems to be posing.

Second, even at the earliest stages of Christianity, and within the Aramaic-speaking community, there was a consciousness that what was being experienced was the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant by which all peoples on earth would be blessed (Acts 3:25). And when the Aramaic-speaking church faces the first strong opposition, the believers pray for holy boldness to speak the word courageously (Acts 4:24-30). It is very difficult to distinguish this from the attitude of the Hellenistic believers when they faced persecution. There is no evidence (pace von Allmen) that the latter alone saw in persecution a special divine call to preach the gospel outside the confines of Jerusalem. Rather, the believers scattered, the Aramaic-speaking ones to places congenial to them, and the Hellenistic believers to places congenial to them — both groups still boldly witnessing. Even then, the Hellenistic believers spoke, at first, primarily if not exclusively to Greek-speaking Jews (Acts 11:19-20) — a point von Allmen finds so difficult he has to say that Luke probably shaded the account here "to prevent the stealing of Paul's thunder and keep for him the honour he thought his due." [28] But a simpler explanation lies immediately to hand,

provided we are not trying to squeeze the text into a preset mold. The Hellenistic believers were in the first instance themselves Jews; and so quite naturally they witnessed within their own Greek-speaking Jewish environment. In this sense there is still no major cross-over of racial, cultural and linguistic barriers by either Aramaic-speaking or Greek-speaking Christians at this point. And when the Hellenistic believers do begin their witness before Gentiles in Antioch (Acts 11:20-21), the account is placed after the evangelization of Samaria and of Cornelius, about which I'll say more in a moment.

Third, the reticence the Aramaic-speaking believers ultimately displayed was not over the fact of evangelism among Gentiles, but over the conditions of entrance to the messianic community.[29] Many streams of Judaism were aggressively proselytizing others in the first century so it is not surprising, even from the perspective of their background, that early Jewish Christians, both Aramaic and Greek-speaking, did the same. The debates behind Gal. 2 and Acts 15, therefore, do not stem from problems in mere indigeneity or contextualization, still less from carelessness about the great commission (or, in much modern discussion, its inauthenticity), but from a massive theological question: On what grounds may Gentiles be admitted to the messianic community? The answer had to do with the way in which the new covenant could be seen to be related to the old; and the synthesis forged by these debates in the early church was used by God to contribute to the writing of our New Testament documents.

To reduce such complex and frankly unique circumstances to the parameters of the modern debate over contextualization is to distort and trivialize (however unwittingly) the biblical evidence. It is historical nonsense to label the Hellenists "progressives" and thereby tie them to modern liberal theology, while labeling the Aramaic-speaking Christians "reactionaries" in order to tie them to modern evangelicals. Indeed, it

is worth observing that according to Luke the first opposition that resulted in a martyr sprang from a "conservative" Hellenistic synagogue (Acts 6:9). This entire point is so important that I shall return to it from another perspective in the next division of the paper.

Fourth, within the synthesis I am suggesting, the large amount of space Luke devotes to the conversion of the Samaritans (Acts 8) and of Cornelius and his household (Acts 10-11) is eminently reasonable — the latter completely unmentioned by von Allmen, the former barely so. The Cornelius episode is particularly instructive for here, before there is any record of witness to non-proselyte Gentiles by Hellenistic Jewish believers, an Aramaic-speaking apostle is sent by the Lord to a Gentile who is not, technically, a proselyte. The point of the story, carefully repeated by Peter before a suspicious Jerusalem church, is that if God by pouring out his Spirit on the Gentiles, as on the Jews, has shown that He has accepted them, can Jewish believers do any less? This point does not concern the crossing of merely cultural, racial and linguistic barriers, as significant as such barriers are. The "them/us" dichotomy stems from Israel's self-consciousness as the people of God, and therefore with the clash between God's antecedent revelation in what we today call the Old Testament, and God's revelation in Christ Jesus and all that has come from it. The Jewish believers raise their questions not at the level of contextualization, but at the level of theology — indeed, at the level of systematic theology, for their question ultimately concerns the way in which the old and new covenants are to be related to each other. But none of this does von Allmen consider.

Fifth, part of von Allmen's argument about the reticence of Aramaic-speaking apostles stems from silence. The truth of the matter is that Luke does not purport to give us a comprehensive history of the early church, but a highly selective one. After Acts 8:1, we know nothing

or next to nothing about the ministries of (say) Matthew or Thomas or Bartholomew or Andrew. Extra-canonical sources are not very reliable in this area but some of the best of them tell us that Thomas, for instance, proclaimed the gospel as far east as India, where he was reportedly martyred. Von Allmen's sweeping conclusions regarding the Aramaic-speaking apostles are therefore based not only on a rather selective and anachronistic approach to Acts, but even on the silences of Acts.

Sixth, the above arguments suggest that Luke is less interested in providing us with a merely sociological analysis of how various groups in the early church functioned, as how the resurrected Christ, by his Spirit, continued to take the initiative in building his church. There are indeed heroes and villains in Acts but above all there is on display the missionary heart to God himself. Not only does the initiative belong to God in the Cornelius episode, but even in Acts 2 the gift of tongues enables Jews from every linguistic background to hear the wonderful works of God in their own language — not only the principal reversal of Babel but the demonstration of the principal removal (and not by Hellenists or Aramaic speakers but by God himself) of the temporary barriers surrounding his old covenant people. The prophecy/fulfillment theme in Acts is designed to display the inevitability of the dawning of the gospel age — precisely because it is God who planned it and is even now bringing it to pass by his Spirit. To force this magnificent panorama into lesser molds is to fail to understand it. We may learn some useful lessons about contextualization in the pages of the New Testament but we must not force this book into our preconceived categories.

### Conclusions Not Based on Evidence

In almost every case, von Allmen's conclusions are not entailed by or even very clearly suggested by the exegetical evidence he presents. To take but one example: After discussing the role of the "poets" in

leading the church in worship, von Allmen, as we have seen, draws "some more general conclusions. The theologian has no right to fear the spontaneous manner in which the Church sometimes expresses the faith. If the apostles had been timorous and shut the mouths of the poets through fear of heresy, the Church would never have found footing in Hellenistic soil." [30] Even if von Allmen's exegesis of Phil. 2:6-11 is basically correct, there is no way it will support so broad a conclusion. Von Allmen himself points to areas in which the earliest witnesses and apostles refused to follow Greek thought and that means the church was not willing to give the poets an entirely free hand. In any case, although it is true that a growing church, like the first century church, often produces its own hymnody, it is illegitimate to deduce from Paul's citation of one particular hymn that he had no right to check any hymnodic form of expression. Von Allmen's error in logic immediately becomes obvious when his argument is set out in syllogistic fashion:

- Poets preceded theologians like Paul.
- Paul approves a particular poem.
- Therefore no theologian has the right to call in question the content of any hymn.

In reality, to provide a competent assessment of how far the apostles were willing to step in and question the theological formulation (including the poetry) of others, it would be necessary to examine all that the New Testament has to say about heresy — a point to which I shall briefly return.

Thus to argue that "the way things happened in the primitive church teaches us that in the Church the life of faith is the primary thing" [31] is to obscure some important distinctions. In one sense, of course, this argument is valid: the early church was little interested in the niceties of theological argumentation for its own sake, but in life lived under the Lordship of Christ. But this life of faith did not perceive

"faith" to be exhaustively open-ended: it had an object, about which (or whom) certain things could be affirmed and other things denied. Indeed, I would argue that the church was interested in theological formulations, not for their intrinsic intellectual interest, but precisely because it rightly perceived that such formulations shaped and controlled much of the "life of faith" believers were expected to lead. In any case, von Allmen's conclusions in this regard seem to depend rather more on an existentialist hermeneutic than on his own exegesis.[32]

### Questionable Christology: Three Criticisms

Von Allmen's presentation of the development of Christology[33] is questionable at a number of points. I shall mention only three. First, the background on which he relies for his judgment reflects only one line of research, that of the history-of-religions school made popular in New Testament studies by such scholars as Reitzenstein and Bousset,[34] and mediated to us by Rudolf Bultmann and others. Not only is this line of scholarship in less favor today than it once was, its many intrinsic weaknesses have been made clear by significant publications which a commitment to evenhandedness might at least have mentioned. Brown, for example, has shown that the use of *mysterion* in the New Testament finds its closest antecedents not on Greek mystery religions but in a semitic milieu.[35] Again, it is not entirely clear that full-blown Gnosticism, as opposed to neoplatonic dualism, antedates the New Testament[36] but even if it does, the differences between it and the New Testament presentation of Christ's death are profound. And to what extent may the "in Christ" language reflect not Greek mysticism but forensic identification with Christ?[37]

Related to this is a second criticism. To what extent do the demonstrable developments in the ascription of labels and titles to Jesus of Nazareth reflect innovation removed from the historical actuality, and to what extent do they merely reflect clarified and growing understanding of what was in fact true — an understanding mediated in part by the pressure of events,

including opposition? This sort of question von Allmen does not raise; but it is essential that we consider it if we are to understand what he himself means by developments that remain "faithful to the foundations of the faith." [38]

Consider, for instance, his treatment of *kurios*. There is little doubt that Paul understands "Jesus is Lord" to be a confession not only of Jesus' "lordship," i.e. his authority, but also of his identification with Yahweh, rendered *kurios* in the LXX. Was the apparent development from master/disciple relations ("my lord" meaning "rabbi" or the like) to full ascription of deity to Jesus in accord with or contrary to what Jesus himself was and is? If von Allmen would respond, "Contrary to," then certain things inevitably follow: (1) The truth of Christological confessions does not matter, but only the sincerity and naturalness to any culture of its own formulations. (2) Jesus himself should not be identified with Yahweh at any ontological or historical level, but only at the level of confessions which may or may not reflect reality. (3) "Remaining faithful to the foundations of the faith" can in this case only refer to existential commitment to an empty *dass*, not to "foundations of the faith" in any propositional or falsifiable sense. (4) How a culture responds to the gospel, i.e. with what degree of contextualization, is far more important than the content of the gospel proclaimed.

If, on the other hand, von Allmen would respond, "In accord with," then again certain things inevitably follow: (1) He holds that Jesus really was and is "Lord" as "Yahweh is Lord," even though some time elapsed before the disciples fully grasped this. (2) More broadly, he has in this case committed himself to what is sometimes called the "organic" view of the rise of Christology: i.e. the full-blown doctrine grew out of the truth dimly perceived but truly there in the beginning of Jesus' ministry. The development is one of understanding and formulation regarding what was, not

innovation and inventive explanation of what was not. (3) "Remaining faithful to the foundations of the faith" therefore has objective criteria, rendering some formulations unfaithful.. (4) The gospel itself includes true propositions and historical verities, and at all such points is non-negotiable, even if it clashes with some dearly held cultural prejudices.

Which answer, then, would von Allmen give? I am uncertain, for his essay does not make this clear. Perhaps it is a little troubling, however, to find him asking whether the adoption of **kurios** was "a fatal slip." His answer is that it was not "truckling" if it exposed believers to persecution. True enough but was it a fatal slip?

I myself hold to the "organic" view I outlined above and elsewhere I have sketched in the kind of growth in understanding that was involved.[39] It is arguable, for instance, that even in the parables Jesus tells in the synoptic gospels, the figure who clearly represents Jesus (in those parables where he is represented at all) is frequently a figure who in the Old Testament metaphorically stands for Yahweh (bridegroom, farmer, and eight others).[40] Certainly there is ample evidence that Jesus repeatedly applied to himself passages from the Old Testament that had reference to God. There even appears to be dominical sanction for using "Lord" in reference to Jesus (Matt. 21:3), even though it is very doubtful that the disciples understood all of this at the time. The question arises therefore whether the shift to Greek **kurios** was so very innovative after all, or largely the result of increased understanding of who Jesus truly was, in the light of his resurrection and ascension. And in any case, if the gospel was going to be preached in Greek at all, Greek terms had to be used. The crucial question, therefore, is whether the Greek terms used by Hellenistic believers were filled with pagan content, or with Christian content in harmony with the gospel truth transmitted. Von Allmen implicitly recognizes this when he points out that the "man"

in Phil.2:7 is not the "Original Man" of Gnostic mythology, regardless of the term's provenance. Context is more important as a determiner of meaning than is philological antecedent. Why can't the same insight be deployed in other cases?

Similar things may be asked about von Allmen's treatment of the slave/man parallel in Phil.2:7. Apart from the fact that here as elsewhere in his essay von Allmen sweeps the Greeks together into one undifferentiated structure of thought,[41] the question is whether the hymn's formulation says something untrue of Jesus. In fact, it does not put him in the condition of a slave "bound hand and foot in submission to all powerful Destiny." Although some Greek thought conceived of man's plight in such terms, the word for "slave" has no necessary overtones of such thought and in this context, the essence of Jesus' "slavery" is his voluntary refusal to exploit his equality with God [42] in order to become a man, not involuntary submission to inflexible and unavoidable Destiny. In what sense, therefore, has anything of substance in the gospel been changed by this Greek terminology?

A third criticism of von Allmen's questionable Christology relates to his use of vague language which blurs important distinctions. Paul, von Allmen says, "does not demand that doctrine should be in literal agreement with the primitive Christian preaching." [43] What does "literal" mean in this sentence: It cannot mean "verbal," since we have crossed from Aramaic to Greek. But what, then? Von Allmen simply says that "the doctrine must correspond to the inner thrust of the apostolic faith." [44] Note that he states not to the apostolic faith itself, but to its "inner thrust." We may ask how this inner thrust is to be isolated, or, to put it another way, who is to determine it. Calvin? Barth? Bultmann? Von Allmen? The only answer von Allmen gives here is that since "new hope is part of the inner thrust of the faith," therefore "eschatology is an essential element of Christian theology." [45] But

"eschatology" is a "slippery word"[46] in modern theology. In Bultmann's theology, it has nothing to do with the return of Jesus at the end of the age, the present inaugurated kingdom being finally consummated in a new heaven and a new earth. Rather, it is reduced to the tension in the existential moment of decision. Does von Allmen follow Bultmann, then, when he rhetorically asks, "Provided one reintroduces this moment of expectation, this eschatological tension, then why not use Greek terminology?"[47] Why not, indeed — provided it is the same eschatological structure as that of the historic gospel. But if this "eschatological tension" has been redefined as "this moment of expectation" by appealing to Bultmannian categories, the "inner thrust of the apostolic faith" appears to have come adrift. There is no longer any objective gospel at all; and appeal to "inner thrust" may simply hide infinite subjectivity. I am, again, uncertain where von Allmen stands in all this, or what he really thinks about Bultmann's reinterpretation of Pauline eschatology, because his language is so vague but I am persuaded his approach would do well to heed the wise assessment of Beker in this regard:

First Corinthians 15 provides us with an impressive example that the coherent center of the gospel is, for Paul, not simply an experiential reality of the heart or a Word beyond words that permits translation into a multitude of world views. Harry Emerson Fosdick's dictum about the gospel as an "abiding experience amongst changing world views", or Bultmann's demythologizing program for the sake of the kerygmatic address of the gospel, is in this manner not true to Paul's conception of the gospel. However applicable the gospel must be to a Gentile in his contingent situation, it does not tolerate a world view that cannot express those elements in the apocalyptic world view... that to Paul seem inherent in the truth of the gospel.... And far from considering the apocalyptic world view a husk or discardable frame, Paul insists that it belongs to the inalienable coherent core of the gospel.... It seems

that Paul sacrifices dialogical contingency to dogmatic necessity by imposing a particular world view on Hellenistic believers. And if Paul imposes a dogmatic interpretative scheme on the "core" of the gospel, he seems to require not only faith as fiducia but also faith as assensus.[48]

### Misunderstandings of Judaism and Hellenism

Von Allmen's overarching reconstruction of the development of early Christianity depends on a reductionistic schema that runs more or less in a straight line from Judaism to Hellenism. More careful work has shown how misleading this schema is.[49] Judaism was already impregnated with Hellenistic concepts and vocabulary. Almost certainly the apostles themselves were bi- or tri-lingual. At the same time, many New Testament documents (e.g. the Gospel of John) that had previously been classed as irretrievably Hellenistic have been shown to have enormously close ties with conservative strands of Judaism.

The same point can be made by again referring to two observations already alluded to in this paper. First, there is no record of Hellenistic Jews being evangelized by Aramaic-speaking Jews. This is because the church was bilingual from its inception. It could scarcely be otherwise, considering that most if not all of the apostles came from Galilee. Even von Allmen's expression "the Aramaic-speaking apostles" is misleading for in all likelihood, both the Eleven and Paul were comfortable in both Aramaic and Greek. Of course, many Jews who became Christians during the first weeks and months after Pentecost were from the Diaspora and presumably most of these would not be fluent in Aramaic, but would be more at home in the Hellenistic world than would those who had spent all their lives in Palestine, even Galilee, but it was never the case that a purely Aramaic-speaking church had to learn Greek in order to reach out to Greek-speaking fellow Jews. For von Allmen

therefore to distinguish the Hellenistic wing of the church from the Aramaic wing as if the former were the freshly evangelized and therefore the exclusively "indigenous" church which alone could become "truly missionary" is to propound disjunctions with no historical base and which offer no direct parallels to modern problems in contextualization.

Second, we have seen that the really significant movement recorded in the New Testament documents is not from Judaism to Hellenism, linguistically and culturally considered, but from the old covenant to the new. This development had racial and cultural implications, but primarily because the old covenant was enacted between God and one particular race. Profound theological questions therefore had to be faced, in light of the new revelation brought by Jesus and confirmed and unpacked by the Holy Spirit in the early church. Modern problems of contextualization cannot in this regard be seen as parallel to the first expansion to Gentiles -- unless new revelation is claimed as the basis on which the modern expansion to new languages and cultures is taking place.

### 3. Broader Methodological Problems in von Allmen's Essay

There are two methodological problems in von Allmen's article that deserve separate consideration, one relatively minor and the other major.

#### Problems of Method: "Either/Or" Reasoning

The first problem is found in the frequent disjunctions that force the unwary reader to "either/or" reasoning when other options are not only available but are (arguably) preferable. For instance, von Allmen, [50] as we have seen, approves the work of Schlink, who by concentrating on the form of "God-talk" argues that "the basic structure of God-talk is not the doctrine of God

but the worship of God." Quite apart from the question as to the relation between form and content (a notoriously difficult subject), this conclusion is far too disjunctive: doctrine or worship. After all, even in worship the worshiper has some notion of the God he is worshipping and therefore unless that notion is completely ineffable, he has some doctrine of God. Even the postulate "God is utterly ineffable" is in fact a doctrinal statement. It is logically impossible to be involved in worshipping God or a god without a doctrine of God, even if that doctrine is not very systematic, mature, well-articulated or for that matter even true. Meanwhile von Allmen's approval of the Schlink disjunction has done its damage by giving the impression that so long as there is worship, doctrine really doesn't matter and can safely be relegated to a very late stage of development. The kernel of truth in his analysis is that it is possible to have doctrine without being involved in worship — a pathetic and tragic state indeed but that does not mean the converse is possible, let alone ideal.

Or again, to take another example, von Allmen concludes: "Even amidst the fiercest polemic, Paul remains firmly rooted in the basis of the Christian faith: Christ who died and was raised. It is only from this centre that one may dare to say anything at all.... "[51] Now the first of these two sentences is true. Indeed we may go further and insist that Paul's understanding of Christ's resurrection will not compromise over such matters as a genuinely empty tomb and a resurrection body that could be touched and seen. It is certainly true that this is one of the cornerstones of the faith Paul preaches. But it is going too far to use this non-negotiable truth as the sole criterion by which all must be judged. True, no aspect of genuine Christianity can temper with this central truth, or fly in its face but it is not true that this is the only non-negotiable for Paul — as if, provided a person holds to this center, all else is for the apostle negotiable. That is demonstrably not true. The eschatological error

in Thessalonica, or the assorted moral errors in Corinth, are not resolved by simple reference to Christ's death and resurrection yet Paul is adamant about the proper resolution of these matters as well. Indeed, as von Allmen has phrased things, someone might believe that Jesus died and rose from the dead exactly as did Lazarus, and still be holding to the "centre." But Paul would not agree for Christ's death and resurrection is qualitatively different from all others. If so, we must say in what way (e.g. his was the death of God's son it was an atoning death his body after the resurrection was different from his pre-death body along the line of I Cor. 15, etc.) and by saying in what way we are admitting other non-negotiables, other matters essential to Christian faith. The implicit disjunction (only from this center, from nowhere else) suddenly begins to fray around the edges.

#### **Problems of Method: Sacrificing the Content of the Gospel for a Process of Contextualization**

But there is a far more important methodological problem with von Allmen's work. At the beginning of his essay, he sets out to show that the creation of an African theology is both necessary and possible "on the basis of a true fidelity to the New Testament." [52] In a sense that I shall shortly elucidate, I entirely agree that an African theology is both necessary and possible. But von Allmen's way of establishing what is in "true fidelity to the New Testament" is not the way most readers of the New Testament would judge such fidelity and therefore it needs to be clearly understood.

Von Allmen does not attempt to justify his position on the basis of what the New Testament documents say, but on the basis of his reconstruction of their development. The authority lies not in the content of the Scriptures, but in von Allmen's understanding of the doctrinal changes those Scriptures reflect. This is manifest not only in the thrust of von Allmen's essay, but especially in its conclusion: "Rather than teach a

theology (even a theology that claims to be a 'New Testament theology')," he writes, "what we should try to do is point out what the forces were that governed the elaboration of a theology on the basis of the material furnished by the primitive church." [53] The "material furnished by the primitive church" can only be a reference to the New Testament documents (and perhaps also to other early Christian literature) so von Allmen is saying that we should not attempt to teach the content of these documents, but restrict ourselves only to deductions about the forces that generated the elaborations found in these documents. And what is in conformity with von Allmen's understanding of these forces is precisely what he says is in "fidelity to the New Testament". In reality, of course, his theory is not in fidelity to the New Testament, but to his deductions about the forces that shaped the New Testament for as we have seen, these deductions frequently run counter to what the New Testament documents actually say.

More troubling yet is von Allmen's confidence regarding the objectivity and reliability of the scholarly reconstruction he sets forward as the core of the new curriculum. But I shall let that point pass for the moment to focus a little more clearly on the cardinal difference between Byang Kato and Daniel von Allmen. In brief, it is the source of authority in Christianity. Both profess allegiance to Jesus Christ as Lord. But what Jesus? The Jesus of the Jehovah's witnesses? The Jesus of von Harnack? The Jesus of Islam? For Kato, it is the Jesus of the New Testament, because for him the New Testament documents are authoritative. Therefore every religious claim or precept must be tested against that standard. For von Allmen, it is not entirely clear how the confession "Jesus is Lord" is filled with content and although he appeals to the New Testament, in reality he is appealing to his reconstruction of the forces that shaped it. That reconstruction serves as the supreme paradigm for an endless succession of further reconstructions, and in that sense gains some

authority. But the documents themselves, in their actual content, are stripped of authority. A person might therefore confess "Jesus is Lord" but mean something very different from what Paul means. Doesn't this matter? Von Allmen seems to want to defend a core of gospel truth as one of the final criteria but it is not clear how that core can avoid endless changes in content, making it no core at all but the proverbial peeled onion.

The same sort of problem appears in Kraft.[54] Basing himself on von Allmen's article, Kraft assigns Luther's description of James as an "epistle of straw" to Luther's "unconscious ethnocentrism,"[55] without struggling with Luther's later growth in understanding both of the gospel and of the nature of the canon.[56] The point, according to Kraft, is that the Bible is a "divine casebook" that embraces many different models of appropriate religion, each in its own way reflecting the non-negotiable core. Different cultures will feel most at home with this part or that part of the Bible, and prefer to overlook or ignore other parts. Luther found Paul congenial, and was uncomfortable with James. Well and good, Kraft argues: let each culture choose those parts that speak to it most clearly. This diversity produces many different theologies; and, writes Kraft:

We need to ask which of these varieties of theology branded "heretical" were genuinely out of bounds (measured by scriptural standards), and which were valid contextualizations of scriptural truth within varieties of culture or subculture that the party in power refused to take seriously. It is likely that most of the "heresies" can validly be classed as cultural adaptations rather than as theological aberrations. They, therefore, show what ought to be done today rather than what ought to be feared. The "history of traditions" becomes intensely relevant when studied from this perspective.[57]

Note, then, that the "scriptural standards" to which

Kraft refers are not what the Bible as a whole says, but an array of disparate theologies each based on separate parts of the Bible, an array that sets the limits and nature of diverse traditions and their development. In treating the Bible as a "divine casebook" Kraft is very close to von Allmen in the way he conceives of biblical authority.

#### Difficulties in Von Allmen's View of the Bible: Theoretical, Practical and Cultural

At the risk of oversimplification, I would argue that there are three difficulties in von Allmen's conception (as a divine casebook of conflicting theologies). The first is theoretical: i.e. is this the way that biblical authority is to be perceived on the basis of its own witness? I would answer with a firm negative. Of course there were cultural forces at work in the development of the biblical books. But the question is whether God so superintended those forces that the Bible's documents are to be read not only as historical documents that reflect the progress of revelation in redemptive history but also as a whole, not merely as case studies but as a divinely ordered progression that results in a unity of thought, a world in which there is prophecy and fulfillment, type and antitype, dark saying and clearer explication, diverse styles and genres and languages but a complementarity of thought — all resulting in the possibility of finding unambiguous biblical truth for many kinds of doctrinal, ethical, and intellectual matters, not simply disparate biblical truths. I have dealt with the matter at length elsewhere,[58] and shall refrain from repeating myself here.

The second problem is practical. It is true, as Kraft says, that every culture finds certain parts of the Bible more congenial than others. On this basis Kraft seems to encourage each culture to operate with its own "canon within the canon." But this inevitably

means that the final authority rests, not in the Bible, but in the culture. The canon comes to lose all canonical authority. If a society is polygamous, it may follow Abraham or David (Kraft's example) but then why not follow, in some other culture, Mosaic law regarding slaves, stoning, temple ritual and the bitter-water rite? How about wiping out entire peoples? A Hitler might find such accounts and commands very congenial. On the other hand, does any society find the sermon on the mount congenial? The problem is not only how the Old Testament passages to which I've just referred relate to later revelation (part of the first problem, above), but also how the Bible can ever have any prophetic bite or force at all. In my understanding of the canon, the preacher who is sensitive to the cultural sensibilities of his hearers will not only exploit their canonical preferences, and seek to relate the parts of the Bible into a self-consistent whole, he will also take extra pains to preach, teach and apply, within this canonical framework, those parts of Scripture his hearers find *least* palatable. Otherwise no prophetic word will ever be heard, no correction of culture, no objective canonical balance.

The third problem concerns the nature of von Allmen's appeal to a core gospel which he does not see as culturally negotiable, or, to use Kraft's expression, the "supracultural truth" of the core. But I shall return to this problem in the next section.

#### 4. Reflections on von Allmen's Three Impasses

##### The Impasse of Paternalism

The first impasse to a truly African theology, in von Allmen's view, is paternalism. There is real insight here. We have all witnessed or heard about those horrible situations where a Western missionary squelches the honest probing of an African student who was questioning the missionary's interpretation of Scripture at

some point. The put-down might have been in terms like these: "What right do you have to question the interpretation? This is the product of two thousand years of study and thought. Your business is to go and learn it." May God forgive all teachers who employ such tactics, especially those who do so in the name of the authority of Scripture while unwittingly elevating tradition above Scripture. Moreover, von Allmen is wise to point out the inverted power structures when we compare the first century with the twentieth.

Nevertheless, von Allmen's solution — simply to let Africans get on with it, offering neither criticism nor encouragement (because that too is a reflection of paternalism), but simply trust — is in my view not nearly radical enough. Unwittingly it falls into a new kind of paternalism. While theologians in the West are busily engaged in cut and thrust among themselves, is it not a kind of inverted paternalism that declares a respectful "hands off" policy to African theologians and biblical scholars? Surely it is far better to enter into debate with them. The real problem lies in the heart attitude. The solution is the grace of God in the human life, grace that enables African and Westerners alike to learn from and criticize each other without scoring cheap shots or indulging in one-up-manship. Certainly some of the most forthright and thought-provoking discussions I have ever enjoyed have been with colleagues from around the world who were brought together for concentrated study and interaction under the auspices of the World Evangelical Fellowship's Theological Commission.

### The Impasse of Fear of Heresy

The second impasse to a truly African theology, in von Allmen's view, is a fear of heresy. Certainly there is a great danger in this area, found not least in Western missionaries whose zeal is great but whose knowledge is slim. But von Allmen gravely underestimates

the seriousness with which heresy is taken in the New Testament, and overestimates the amount of diversity there.[59] At what point, for instance, can von Allmen sympathize and empathize with the sentiments expressed in Matt. 7:21-23; John 3:36; Acts 4:12; Gal.1:8,9; II Tim.2:17-19; Rev.21:6-9? Even Paul's famous "all things to all men" (I Cor.9) unambiguously presupposes limits beyond which he is unprepared to go.[60]

Granted the truthfulness of Scripture and the rightness of the canonical approach I have briefly sketched in, Christians have not only the right but the responsibility to learn from and to correct one another on the basis of this agreed standard. This must not be in any witch-hunting or judgmental spirit but failure to discharge these responsibilities in a gracious and thoughtful way may not only reflect inverted paternalism but a singular indifference to the truth claims of "the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3).

#### **The Impasse of a Conservative View of Contextualization: The Impossibility of von Allmen's Radical View**

The third impasse in the way of a truly African theology, according to von Allmen, is the perception that contextualization must be merely the adaptation of an existing theology. Again, there is considerable insight here. Will that theology be truly African which simply takes, say, Hodge's *Systematic Theology* and seeks to rewrite it for some African context? Anyone who has thoughtfully worked cross-culturally for an extended period of time knows the answer to that question.

Nevertheless, von Allmen's solution, to foster a true *tabula rasa* and insist that a truly African theology can only flower when it emerges without reference to any existing theology, is impossible and (even if it were possible) unwise. It is impossible and unwise for four reasons.

## Impossible To Teach Process But Not Content

(1) It is impossible because a *tabula rasa* is impossible. If the new hermeneutic has taught us anything, it has taught us that. Even if we were to follow von Allmen's suggestion and teach only tools and the history of traditions, we would be conveying some theological content. Teaching Greek invariably includes Greek sentences from the New Testament and translating them entails theological decisions about the history and development of traditions as well as linguistic expertise. Moreover, one cannot talk about the traditions themselves. Even initial evangelization and church planting could not possibly have been accomplished by conveying no more than "Christ died and rose again." And in any case, even what one does not teach is teaching something. If a lecturer refuses to discuss, say, the interpretation of Romans or the language used of the atonement, he or she will invariably appear to be hiding something, thus conveying something distasteful — e.g. that such matters are religiously unimportant, or frightening, or too difficult.

## There Is No Supracultural Core

(2) It is impossible because there is no core of gospel truth in the sense defended by Kraft.[61] They both treat the Scriptures as having only casebook authority, examining it for every hint of cultural development, while nevertheless insisting that there is an undissolved core of indispensable gospel truth, a supracultural truth. On the one hand, this is far too radical; on the other, it is not nearly radical enough. It is too radical, I have argued, because it reduces the locus of non-negotiable truth to one or two propositions such as "Jesus is Lord" or "Christ died and rose again," when in fact the corpus of non-negotiable truth embraces all of Scripture: that is the database from which

theological reflection must take its substance and controls. But now I wish to argue that their position is not radical enough, in that it seems to think these core or supracultural confessions escape all restrictions of culture and that is demonstrably untrue.

Consider, for example, the sentence "Jesus' is Lord." We might all agree that no Christianity is possible where this three-word sentence is denied. But to a Hindu, the sentence might be happily accommodated within his syncretistic framework. To a Buddhist, it would mean Jesus is inferior to Gautama the Buddha, for it still predicates something of Jesus. To a Jehovah's Witness, there is no entailment regarding Jesus' deity. And to an existentialist, the sentence is a mythological expression designed to call us to the decisions that characterize authentic existence.

My point is that from the perspective of human perception and formulation there is no supracultural core. However the heart of the gospel be conceived by human beings, it is conceived in a particular linguistic, cultural, philosophical and religious framework. Only God is supracultural. But this does not relativize the gospel. Far from it: it simply means that the supracultural personal God, in order to communicate with his finite and culture-bound sinful creatures, necessarily had to accommodate the form of his communication to their space-time limitations, their historical contingencies. This does not entail the relativizing of the truth but it does mean that if any person is to understand the culturally conditioned Scriptures and apply them aright, he must, as part of the exercise, seek to shape his own horizon of understanding to that of the cultures and languages of Scripture, and then make the transfer back to his own environment.[62] To put the matter another way, I must find out what "Jesus is Lord" means in the Greek New Testament, how it functions, how it is coordinated with other truth, and then seek to confess the same truth in my own language and culture -- even if it takes a paragraph instead of a

three-word sentence, or a complete overturning of my conceptual framework (as, in this case, must happen to, say, the Buddhist).

But if this is so, there is no intrinsic philosophical reason why the entire New Testament cannot be seen (as it claims to be) as a definitive and true revelation, even if all of it is, in the sense I've just explained, culture-bound.[63] But it does mean that the appeal of von Allmen, Kraft and others is epistemologically and hermeneutically naive.

#### **Von Allmen's Own Dogmatism Imposes Itself**

(3) It is unwise because von Allmen, thinking his proposed *tabula rasa* is possible, and his particular reconstruction of gospel traditions neutral, is in fact promulgating his own brand of theology, while honestly but mistakenly thinking he is above the fray. No blindness is worse than that which thinks it sees (compare John 9:39-41). Is it not obvious that even as Western evangelical missionaries may impose their theological frameworks on their converts, so Western missionaries of more "liberal" persuasion may impose their skepticism and relativism on theirs?[64] Far better is it to admit these tendencies, and become aware of the limitations these inevitabilities impose on the cross-cultural missionary.

#### **Neglect Of The Third Horizon - The Modern**

(4) It is unwise because it fails to grapple with the third horizon. Modern debate over hermeneutics commonly speaks of the two horizons: there is "the horizon of understanding" of the text, and there is "the horizon of understanding" of the reader or interpreter. The horizon of understanding of the latter will be roughly similar to that of the interpreter's colleague in his own culture so when the interpreter has fused the horizon of his own understanding with that of the text (to use the modern jargon), and learned to think through

the meaning of the text in his own language and cultural framework, he can easily communicate his findings to his colleague. Of course, his own understanding may still need considerable correction, revision, deepening and so forth; but for the sake of simplifying the argument, let us suppose that he is substantially right in his understanding of the text, the "fusion" operation having been responsibly carried out. If this interpreter now wishes to communicate his findings to a person in another culture, he faces a third horizon: viz. the horizon of understanding of this "target" person. To communicate accurately the substance of what he has learned, the interpreter, who has now become a witness or preacher, must use the horizon of his own understanding with that of his hearer — i.e. he must learn a new culture. The truth he wishes to convey must then be passed on in the words and actions and parameters of that language and culture. That is one of the things that makes an effective missionary. In time, the new hearer, now a convert, learns to fuse the horizon of his understanding with that of the biblical text and because he likely knows his own culture better than the missionary ever will, he has the potential, all things being equal, to become a far clearer and more effective witness and theologian in his own culture than the missionary does.

One problem, of course, is that the missionary may unwittingly intrude a lot of his own cultural baggage into the gospel he is preaching. But that substantial truth can be conveyed across cultures is demonstrated by both von Allmen and Kraft themselves: they are read, and understood, by Africans and Westerners alike. A second problem is that the new convert may have unwittingly picked up some of this unnecessary baggage from the missionary. But it is precisely in fostering the fusion of the convert's horizon of understanding with that of the biblical text, which both missionary and convert agree is the basis of authority for their shared faith, that there is a possibility of the convert's divesting himself of these unwise and sometimes unwitting

ting accretions, a possibility of developing a genuinely contextualized theology.

In fact, the model can become far more complex yet, because (in theory at least) each generation of believers tries to grapple with the way the gospel given in the Bible has been understood in other ages, branches and cultures in the history of the church and this involves still more fusing of horizons if true understanding is to be gained. That is what makes a competent historian. Moreover, von Allmen frequently speaks of a genuine African theology over against Western theology, as if these two labels represent undifferentiated wholes; whereas in fact there are many different Western theologies (not to mention cultures and languages) and even more African theologies (and cultures and languages). But cross-cultural communication is possible, even if rarely approaching perfection, as communicators accept the responsibility of tackling the third (and fourth, etc.) horizon.

In short, reflection on the third horizon, which relates to the missionary responsibility of the church, sheds light on the relation between the first two horizons, and renders invalid all theories that depend on the possibility that humans can formulate supracultural truth. This means either that there can be no gospel at all (which of course von Allmen would not say), or that the locus of revealed and propositional truth must include far more than the restricted core some are advancing.

## **5. Concluding Reflections: Four Guidelines For African Evangelical Contextualizing**

Where, then, does all this leave us? What is genuinely contextualized theology that is faithful to the gospel preserved and proclaimed in Scripture, and how do we foster it?

I should first set out what I mean by contextualization. In the past, many missionaries of large spirit and vision spoke of the importance of the indigenization of the church. By this they meant to stress that national churches needed to develop their own leadership, support themselves financially, develop their own patterns of and responsibility for self-propagation, remain within the cultural stream of their own architecture and music, and so forth. "Contextualization" goes beyond this in applying such principles to problems of biblical interpretation and theological expression: i.e. the Word of God needs to be "contextualized" in each culture.[65]

In many ways, this is surely right. Precisely because each culture approaches the Scriptures with its own set of prejudices and blinkers, it will be able to see, and (initially at any rate) be prevented from seeing, certain things that another culture might respond to (or fail to respond to) in quite a different way. For this reason, not only every culture, but ideally every generation in every culture (especially in those cultures that are undergoing rapid transition), must get involved in its own Bible study, and learn to express biblical truth in and apply it to its own context. In this light African theology, indeed many African theologies, are both necessary and possible.

But from the drift of the argument here, I would delimit that contextualization of theology by four considerations:

### **Theology Must Be Based On The Whole Bible**

First, the "given" is Scripture. Of course, other things are no less important: prayer, humility, personal knowledge of the Savior, enthusiastic submission to the Lord Jesus Christ, and more; but the "given" data on which any truly Christian church must base its theology is the Word of God. How this model of theology

is related to the problem of the "hermeneutical circle" has been worked out elsewhere.[66] But a truly contextualized theology is, in my view, one in which believers from a particular culture seek to formulate a comprehensive theology in the language and categories of their own culture, but based on the whole Bible itself. In doing so, they will want to be informed about many other attempts in other languages and cultures but the direct line of control is from Scripture. In one sense, therefore, I agree with von Allmen that theology has not been properly contextualized if it simply tries to take over the effort of some other culture. But this does not entail the abandonment of all contact with other theologies which is impossible, but only that the line of direct control must be from Scripture.

Arguably, the thing that has tripped up von Allmen in his understanding of contextualization is his sub-biblical grasp of the Bible. For whenever there is an attempt to build a theology on an alleged supracultural core, or on an entirely non-propositional revelation (the Bible being nothing but a faulty witness to that revelation),[67] the inevitable result is that the real line of authority lies elsewhere: in the presupposed philosophy (articulated or otherwise), or in the standards and world-view of the culture, or in the preferences of the theologian. Western Christendom has generated its liberal Jesus, its Marxist Jesus, its Mormon Jesus, its unknown but existentialist Jesus, and so forth but from the perspective of the Christian who believes that the Scriptures are authoritative, the core problem behind these reductionist and faddish theologies is their abandonment of the biblical givens. Uncontrolled and speculative subjectivity is the inevitable result, even though each siren theology proclaims itself as the answer. Similarly, if we now cultivate various, say, African, Scottish, Indian and Burmese theologies, while abandoning the authority of Scripture, we have merely multiplied the subjectivity and speculation of the enterprise and none of these efforts will prove very enduring, because at no level will they mesh with the

central heritage of biblical Christianity, however expressed in diverse cultures. But if by African, Scottish, Indian and Burmese theologies we are referring to attempts by nationals to work directly from Scripture in order to construct a biblically controlled theology each for his own language, culture and generation, the enterprise cannot be too highly lauded and encouraged and the result in each case will mesh substantially with other efforts elsewhere, once their respective "horizons of understanding" have been fused. And where there are disagreements that are not purely linguistic or cultural about what the Scriptures actually say, then at least in this case there is a common, recognized authority that renders further joint study and discussion possible and potentially profitable.

### **Historical Theology is Indispensible**

Second, the study of historical theology is a well-nigh indispensable element in the task. As I have already indicated, it strikes me as a kind of inverted paternalism to give Western students substantial doses of historical theology, including the study of theology in many languages and cultures not their own, and then advocate keeping such information from (say) African students. Yet historical theology should not be taught as if it were normative, but should be constantly assessed both culturally and against the norm of Scripture. In other words, while von Allmen wants to assess streams of inner canonical tradition, as he reconstructs them, against the minimalistic, supracultural gospel he judges to be normative, I want to assess post-canonical streams of tradition against the "given" of the canon itself. Such study invariably widens the options, generates care in biblical interpretation, exposes the thoughtful student to his own blind spots, and enables him to detect patterns of genuine continuity, frequent doctrinal and ethical sources of contention or objects of disbelief, and so forth.

### **Different Cultures Can Learn From Each Other**

Third, it follows therefore that a Christian in, say, Lagos, Nigeria and another in Oslo, Norway do not have to pass each other as ships in the night. They will of course construct their theologies along quite different lines, using different languages, metaphors, genres, and so forth. But once the linguistic and cultural barriers between them have been substantially overcomeeeeeeeis the case when one of the two learns the language and culture of the other), enabling them to communicate fairly freely, there is no intrinsic reason why these two Christians should not sit down and, with patient probing, not only learn from each other but be corrected by each other — precisely because each of them has learned to fuse his own horizon of understanding with that of the Scriptures both hold to be normative. The African, for instance, might expose the unbiblical individualism of his European counterpart, and show how much of the biblical language of the church is "family" language — points on which the European may have been insensitive. On the other hand, the European may challenge the African to ask if his understanding of family solidarity may not have been carried too far — perhaps by introducing elements of ancestor worship into his theology, even though such worship has no sanction in Scripture.[68] It thus becomes important for every cultural group to "do theology" not only for its own sake but also because each will contribute something valuable to the worldwide understanding of biblical truth. But the exchanges must ultimately be reciprocal: and it must be recognized that the authority which corrects every culture is the Word of God.

### **Western Theology Should Encourage**

Fourth, it follows that, in contrast to von Allmen's view, there is no reason why Westerners should not encourage Africans to develop their own theology — just as there is no reason why Africans should not encourage us to do a far better job of developing our own.

The aim must always be to develop indigenous, contextualized Christianity that is in hearty submission to Scripture, growing in its understanding of and obedience to God's Word. If this means, in the West, that we must re-think our tendencies toward, say, skepticism, individualism, an arrogant sense of racial superiority, and materialism, is Byang Kato so wrong when he warns believers in his own context of their dangers of falling into syncretism, universalism and Christo-paganism? Why should it be thought that the Bible can be wielded as a prophetic sword over Western culture and not over African culture?

The struggle between the views of Kato and von Allmen do not ultimately turn only on the way contextualization should proceed, but even more on the authority of Scripture and as such, the debate is a reflection of a similar struggle throughout Christendom -- one which, ironically, is fueled even more by the West's rationalism than by post-colonial nationalism.

#### Notes

[1] Daniel von Allmen, "The Birth of Theology: Contextualization as the dynamic element in the formation of New Testament theology," IRM 64 (1975) pp 37-52. This work has been frequently mentioned or discussed by missiologists, and has appeared as will in important reprints: e.g. see Charles H. Kraft and Tom N. Wisbey, ed., *Readings in Dynamic Indigeneity* (South Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1979).

[2] Byang Kato, *Theological Trends in Africa Today* (WEF Theological News, Monograph 6; April, 1973).

[3] Kato p. 1. [4] Von Allmen p. 37 (emphasis his).

[5] von Allmen p. 38. [6] von Allmen p. 38.

[7] von Allmen [8] von Allmen p. 39.

[9] von Allmen [10] von Allmen p. 40.

[11] von Allmen p. 41. [12] von Allmen

[13] Edmund Schlink, "Die Methode des dogmatischen ökumenischen Dialogs," KD 12 (1966) 209.

[14] Von Allmen, basing himself on P. Wendland, *Die hellenistisch-romische Kultur* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1912) pp. 104-106.

[15] von Allmen, referring to J. Gnilka, *Der Philipperbrief* (Freiburg: Herder, 1966) pp. 131-147.

[16] von Allmen [17] von Allmen

[18] von Allmen p. 44 [19] von Allmen p. 46

[20] von Allmen p. 45 [21] von Allmen p. 47

[22] von Allmen p. 48 [23] von Allmen p. 29

[24] von Allmen [25] von Allmen p. 50

[26] von Allmen p. 51

[27] Harry R. Boer, *Pentecost and Missions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966).

[28] Von Allmen p. 39.

[29] For general discussions on Jewish proselytizing in this period, see B. J. Bamberger, *Proselytism in the Talmudic Period* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union, 1939); W. G. Braude, *Jewish Proselytizing in the First Five Centuries of the Common Era* (Providence, R.I. : Brown University Press, 1940); F. M. Derwacter, *Preparing the Way for Paul: The Proselyte Movement in Later Judaism* (New York: Macmillan, 1930); D. Georgi, *Die Gegner des Paulus im 2. Korintherbrief* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1964); and on this particular point, see esp. W. Paul Bowers, "Studies in Paul's Understanding of His Mission" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Cambridge University, 1976).

[30] von Allmen p. 44

[31] von Allmen

[32] See the assessment of von Allmen by Bruce J. Nicholls, *Contextualization: A Theology of Gospel and Culture* (Outreach and Identity: Evangelical Theological Monographs No. 3; WEF Theological Commission; Exeter: Paternoster, 1979).

[33] Von Allmen esp. p. 40-46

[34] Esp. R. Reitzenstein, *Der hellenistischen Mysterienreligionen nach ihren Grundbedanken und Wirkungen* (2nd. ed'n; Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1920); Wilhelm Bousset, *Kurios Christos: Geschichte des Christusglaubens von den Anfängen des Christentums bis Irenäus* (2nd ed'n; Gottingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1921).

[35] R.E. Brown, *The Semitic Background of the Term "Mystery" in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968).

[36] Cf. Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism: A Survey of the Proposed Evidences* (London: Tyndale, 1973); idem, "Some

Alleged Evidences for Pre-Christian Gnosticism," in *New Dimensions in New Testament Study*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker and Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974) 46-70; idem, "Pre-Christian Gnosticism in the Nag Hammadi Texts?" *Church History* 48 (1979) 129-141; and the literature he cites.

[37] See the discussion by Peter Stuhlmacher, *Gerechtigkeit Gottes bei Paulus* (2nd ed'n; Gottingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1966).

[38] His expression, "Birth," 41.

[39] Cf. D. A. Carson, "Understanding Misunderstandings in the Fourth Gospel," *TynBull* 33 (1982) 59-91; idem, "Christological Ambiguities in the Gospel of Matthew," in *Christ the Lord* (Festschrift Donald Guthrie; ed. Harold Rowdon; Leicester: IVP, 1982) 97-114.

[40] Cf. Philip Barton Payne, "Jesus' Implicit Claim to Deity in His Parables," *TrinJ* 2 (1981) 3-23.

[41] There were of course many quite different positions or schools of thought in the Greco-Roman world. For instance, Lucretius, a Roman largely dependent on the Greek Democritus, was a thoroughgoing materialist.

[42] See esp. the frequently overlooked article by Roy W. Hoover, "The Harpagmos Enigma: A Philological Solution," *HTR* 64 (1971) 95-119.

[43] von Allmen p. 46

[44] von Allmen

[45] von Allmen

[46] The expression is that of I. Howard Marshall, "Slippery Words: I. Eschatology," *ExpT* 89 (1977-78) 264-269.

[47] Von Allmen p. 46

[48] J. Christian Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) 170.

[49] Cf. inter alia I. Howard Marshall, "Palestinian and Hellenistic Christianity: Some Critical Comments," NTS 19 (1972-73) 271-287; and esp. Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in Their Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic Period* (London: SCM, 1974).

[50] von Allmen p. 41

[51] von Allmen p. 47

[52] von Allmen p. 37

[53] von Allmen p. 51

[54] See, for instance, Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979), esp. 232-233, 286-287, 295-297.

[55] Kraft p. 232

[56] On recent treatments of Luther's attitude to the Scriptures, cf. Eugene F. Klug, "Word and Scripture in Luther Studies since World War II," *TrinJ* 5 (1984) [forthcoming].

[57] Kraft, *Christianity in Culture* 296 (emphasis his).

[58] Cf. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, ed., *Scripture and Truth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), esp. the essay "Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: The Possibility of Systematic Theology."

[59] Carson; and cf. I. Howard Marshall, "Orthodoxy and heresy in earlier Christianity," *Themelios* 2/1 (1976) 5-14.

[60] Cf. D. A. Carson, "Pauline Inconsistency: Reflections on I Corinthians 9.19-23 and Galatians 2:11-14," *NovT* [forthcoming].

[61] *Christianity in Culture* 296-297.

[62] For the best discussion, cf. Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons* (Exeter: Paternoster / Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979).

[63] Cf. D. A. Carson, "The Limits of Dynamic Equivalence," *ERT* (forthcoming).

[64] Many examples could be cited. For instance, one major brand of liberation theology has strong roots in Marxism -- originally a European philosophy.

[65] I here follow one common use of "contextualization," recently and ably discussed by Martin Goldsmith, "Contextualization of theology," *Themelios* 9/1 (1983) 18-23.

[66] Cf. n.59, *supra*.

[67] E.g. V. E. Devadutt, "What is an Indigenous Theology?" in *Readings in Dynamic Indigenaity*, ed. Charles H. Kraft and Tom N. Wisbey (South Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1979) 313-324.

[68] See the important discussion by Tite Tienou, "The Church in African Theology: Description and Hermeneutical Analysis," in *Biblical Interpretation and the Church: Text and Context*, ed. D. A. Carson (Exeter: Paternoster, 1984).

# **Polygamy And The African Church: A Survey**

*Josphat Yego*

## **Introduction**

The polygamy issue has been a problem to the African Churches for well over a century. Judging from the fairly steady flow of books and articles that continues to be produced the debate over polygamy is very much alive and shows little sign of letting up. My hope is that this article will make many more aware of this practical problem. Therefore, I have approached it as more of a pastoral problem and not simply an academic exercise. The purpose of this article is simply to survey some of the Biblical, historical and pastoral aspects of the issue.

## **The History of Polygamy**

Polygamy[1] is a general term which means mutiplierity of partners in the family relation by one of either sex. In some societies, the issue is polyandry whereby one woman has many men in family relation to herself. However, polyandry has not been very much practiced. Polygamy is supposed to have been largely the result of tribal wars. A majority of the women and children were taken by the conquerors. They then became concubines, slaves and in some cases mistresses of the conquerors.

What shall be done with this surplus of women? Here again the might of the strongest comes to the front. The chief or the most heroic fighter would

assert his right to choice of captives, and thus concubinage or what is the same thing - polygamy would be set up. Successes in further wars come and add other women to be distributed. Of course to the sheik or king there soon comes the seraglio and the harem. Polygamous practices will come in other ways. The prisoner of war becomes property and passes from hand to hand by gift or sale. So woman - the weaker party - endures what comes to her as slave, concubine.[2]

Polygamy in most of the African Societies is viewed as a social, economic, and in some cases political asset. There are some cultural reasons as to why men get more than one wife. In some instances, it is for security, as a means of getting a son to take care of one in old age.

The polygamous institution of marriage is found in almost every African traditional society where the rate of such marriage may be as high as 25 per cent in some societies. Within that context of life, polygamy is not only acceptable and workable, but is a great social and economic asset.[3]

Historically, polygamy has been an accepted if not recommended pattern of marriage in many African societies. Polygamy is seen as a sign of prestige, and prosperity. The prosperity comes through having many children with is the father's "life insurance" as well as a guarantee for a good home in old age. Due to cultural and economic changes, polygamy does not seem to have the respect it used to have. It seem that it will not be as much of a problem in the future as it has been in the past.

Broadly, polygamy had four major and related functions. First, polygamy traditionally helped to satisfy the need for having a large family at the same time keeping the women's fertility rate low and also preventing prostitution. Thus, spacing of children was not uncommon. Having a second baby when the older one was not four or five years was frowned upon. Second, poly-

gamy also catered for childless marriages. Since divorce was almost unheard of, barren women were always comforted by getting a co-wife who in some instances gave one of her children to the barren wife. Also, women who had no sons hoped the co-wives could provide a son for the husband. Third, polygamy provided a form of security and a guarantee because the children cared for the parents in their old age; and fourth, polygamy brought a tie between families through multiple marriage. It tightened the bonds of society and broadened the circle of relatives.

### **The social and cultural factors which encourage polygamy in Africa**

Polygamy is still accepted in many tribal groups. Hillman says:

From this total of 742 clearly identified socio-cultural units, it was found that in 580 of them polygamy is the accepted preferential form of marriage. In other words, polygamy is traditionally and socially normative in 78 per cent of these anthropological groups although the incidence is not the same in all of them. [4]

Hillman continues his analysis to indicate that in 34 per cent of all these sub-saharan tribes, the incidence of polygamy is more than 20 per cent. He concludes by saying:

In general, therefore, it may be said that according to the widest and most reliable data analysis polygamy is regarded as a socially valid form of preferential marriage among the majority of peoples in Africa, south of the Sahara.[5]

Elaborating on the above generalization - Kitembe, Magesa and Shorter report the following on polygamy rates:

Polygamy rates appear to be lower in East, Central and Southern Africa than in West Africa. One can compare, for example, Gabon 1:41; Ghana 1.35; Ivory Coast 1.40 with Kenya 1.21; Tanzania 1.25 and Uganda 1.18, these figures all being taken from the 1960s. In Tanzania the crude polygamy rate increased from 1.20 in 1957 to 1.25 in 1967, and the rates of certain regions show how local factors may influence the practice. Iringa Region had a rate of 1.50; Kigoma 1.48; Mara 1.37 and Mbeya 1.37, all well above the national average. The same is true of Uganda where the national rate was 1.18 and the local rates in the Eastern and Northern region both 1.25. Generally speaking, there is no polygamy rate for urban areas, since married men usually outnumber married women in towns. This does not, of course, mean that there are no polygamists in towns. What it means is that married women often remain in the rural areas when their husbands are at work in the urban areas.[6]

As indicated by the above quotation, polygamy is still a significant phenomenon in Africa with which those concerned with presenting the gospel must reckon.

There are broadly three factors which have encouraged polygamy in Africa. Other factors could be mentioned such as sexual desire, but I have restricted myself to what I believe are the more prevalent causes.

### **Economic**

Often polygamy is not only socially acceptable but also economically advantageous. In the past many families worked in the fields, herding cattle and so on. Polygamy is therefore, an economic asset.

The wives will work and the man simply oversees. The wives and the children are there to produce or become income generators. Girls in many societies are

simply income generators. The dowry is an economic asset. The more girls one has, the larger the herds will be in the future.

## Security

Most of the African societies believe that the security is in the children, particularly the boys. This is their "life insurance", the guarantee of good place in old age is in their children. Most if not all African societies believe that their security is in their sons. If a man has no children, it is usually assumed that it is the fault of the wife; therefore, the only answer would be to get a second wife. Presumably the second wife might bear a son. Children have been a sign of pride in the past. In the past the more children one had the better one's status in the society. Most if not all African societies stress the importance of large families. The woman, therefore, sees her own personal fulfillment through childbearing, and a mother of several children is respected by both relatives and friends. Furthermore, she will build a name for her family. Her sister will not have any difficulty in getting married. Barrenness is one of the most severe psychological traumas that a woman can suffer. To avoid this trauma as mentioned, many first wives encourage their husbands to get a second wife. The older or first wife can be comforted as well, bestowing her affection upon children of her co-wives. In some societies, such as the Masai and Kalenjin, it is a normal procedure for a barren wife to receive an infant of a co-wife who has had several children. That becomes her own child. This child is the barren wife's security.

There is another type of security which can be seen as a cause or reason for polygamy. A father may want a good home for his daughter and it could happen that all the good men are married. The father (or relative) will encourage a family man to take another wife (the man's daughter) provided the woman is not of the same age group. This is done for security reasons.

As it was in the Old Testament times, so in African societies, polygamy is motivated by more than the need to have children. Sometimes the need to make peace with another group encourages the practice:

There is also the practical need to form an alliance between family and clan groups. Where marriage is conceptualized as an arrangement between such groups and only concomitantly between husband and wife, and the bonds of marriage, and the payments that support the stability of marriage, it may be seen in terms of social alliance. In other words, polygamy is a function of social solidarity on the level of the extended family, the clan and the tribal or ethnic community. Each new marriage sets up new relationships of affinity between two different kin groups - that of the husband and that of the wife, and their children are kin to both groups. A variety of new mutual assistance are thus established.[7]

### **Status and Social pressure**

In the past people of status in the society such as kings, chiefs, spiritual leaders, as well as intermediaries, were polygamists. Polygamy, therefore, became a symbol of status. Besides, a man with many daughters is given respect by many for the hope of getting his daughters. Stories are told of how men with many daughters were invited to beer parties whereas those without daughters were rarely or never invited. The larger the family is (for size is considered a blessing), the higher the status. Polygamy, therefore, helps in extending one's family. Therefore, polygamy was a measure of status in the community.

Polygamy in the past was an accepted if not a desired norm. Some people became polygamous not because they wanted to but because they were encouraged by relatives and friends. This at times is a sign of being a gentleman. A father may desire to give his daughter

to a friend as an expression of his respect.

Finally, Mbiti sums up social and cultural factors which encourage polygamy when he says:

Polygamy has evolved as an accepted, honourable and respected form of marriage. Indeed many of those who take additional wives are convinced or believe that polygamy, is a higher status of marriage than monogamy since it meets better their aims and purposes of marriage.[8]

### Polygamy in the Old Testament

Polygamy was cited for the first time in the Old Testament. In Genesis 4:19, Lamech had two wives. Abraham seems to be one of the first polygamous marriages of the Old Testament where we are told what happened and why. This came about due to Abraham's impatience and Sarah's encouraged marriage. According to Genesis, Sarah was the match-maker. Later Sarah became jealous and requested that Hagar be driven away. She then referred to her as a concubine.

The marriage of Abraham and Sarah seems to have been an original love match, and even to have preserved something of that character through life. Still we find Sarah under the influence of polygamous ideas, presenting Abraham with a concubine. Yet afterward when she herself had a son, she induced Abraham to drive out into the wilderness this concubine and her son. Now Abraham was humane and kind, and it is said "The thing was very grievous in Abraham's sight" (Genesis 21:11). But he was in the toils of polygamy and it brought him pain and retribution. A divine direction may be hard to hear.[9]

The other well known polygamous personalities in the Old Testament are Jacob, David and Solomon. Jacob's case is one of the complicated ones due to Laban's trick. Furthermore, there is not much distinction bet-

ween the children of Rachel and Leah. According to Genesis 35:22-26, it is hard to say whether any of Jacob's children were of other than polygamous origin. David was a man who wanted to be a righteous man with all his heart. Like many other kings and rulers of his day, he was polygamous. According to Adrian Hastings, polygamy was accepted by the Israelite society.

The Old Testament presents us with a number of examples of polygamous marriage, notably the cases of Jacob, David and Solomon. Israelite society of the time undoubtedly accepted polygamy and there is no condemnation of the practice as such anywhere in the Old Testament.[10]

There was however a change of attitude and practice during the post-exilic time. There is no reference to polygamy in any books of the post-exilic period. Most books seem to indicate that the ideal of marriage was a monogamous one.

Walter Trobisch approaches polygamy in a slightly different way by presenting the consequences which followed polygamous marriage:

To the Old Testament writers polygamy was indeed a legally recognized form of marriage and home life. An Israelite who had two wives was by no means considered one who had fallen in his faith or in the necessary obedience in faith. He was not placed into the category of a second-class Israelite who was under discipline and first had to repent before he would be admitted to full congregational membership.[11]

In response, Trobisch points out that this was done out of one's desires, but in turn God did not bless it. There was always some kind of a problem. He says:

Abraham's polygamy is reported as a criticism. No blessing rested upon it. It constituted a poor human makeshift solution, a sign of lack of faith, leading to

contempt, jealousy, quarreling in the home and estrangement between husband and wife (Gen. 26:35). Jacob had nothing but trouble with the two sisters he married in one week. There was rivalry and hatred in his home (Gen. 29:30-31)... In the story of Abimelech, polygamy actually leads to murder. In a war of succession, he kills his brothers with the help of his maternal uncle. (Jud. 9:5).... David's kingdom was ruined through polygamy because his wives turned his heart after other gods.[12]

Although Mosaic law from all indications permitted polygamy and accepted it without condemnation, any writing on polygamy was very rare during the post-exilic period. Monogamy was becoming more and more the ideal marriage in the Jewish tradition. This gave very little room for polygamy but it did not necessarily condemn it.

The Jewish ideal of marriage was becoming more and more clearly a monogamous one, a true covenant relationship... Yet polygamy was by no means outlawed among Orthodox Jews either then for or many centuries afterwards, and it continued to be entered into by a few, chiefly in cases of Levirate and prolonged child issues. In subsequent centuries it only came to be forbidden among Western Jews about the twelfth century.[13]

It is, clear that the Israelites did not condemn polygamy. Polygamy was accepted by the society, although there is no writing indicating that polygamy was encouraged except in Abraham's case where Sarah, his wife encouraged him to marry the maid. The list could be continued to include Solomon but the above examples are enough for the purpose of this paper. It must be pointed out that as time went on polygamy ceased to be practiced by the Jewish people. Monogamy became customary among them. There is no mention of polygamous marriages after the Babylonian exile.

## Polygamy in the New Testament

As Christians our purpose in analysing or solving a problem is to look into the teachings of Christ and the Bible as a whole. Furthermore, one must understand the history as well as the cultural evolution.

Although God permitted polygamy in former times, a careful reading of the Old Testament reveals a gradual evolution away from this ancient Jewish custom, toward monogamy. Because of this progressive development in the history of salvation, monogamy emerges as the properly human and divine form of marriage.[14]

History clearly shows that change of attitude in the Jewish society from the time of Abraham to the time of Christ and the apostles. There is nowhere in the New Testament where Jesus Christ himself condemned polygamy. Many a time Christ condemned divorce. It is therefore best to admit that the New Testament has no certain explicit word, either in recognizing the existence of polygamy or in condemning it.

Jesus surely accepted the monogamous ideal of post exilic Israel. In no recorded word does he go out of his way to condemn polygamous marriage as he so strongly condemned the Jewish practice of divorce though that too had the authority of Moses behind it. Yet his teaching does presuppose that marriage is monogamous, it would hardly be true that a man who divorces his wife and marries another would be guilty precisely of adultery (Mark 10:11), if he had the right to marry another even without divorcing the first.[15]

Hillman supports Hastings contention that the New Testament does not directly condemn polygamy, though it does seem to imply disapproval.

To recognize this is not to deny that the values may also be realized, and perhaps even more fully in a monogamous union. The point here is that while the New

Testament explicitly repudiates ... prostitution, and homosexuality (cf. Rom. 1:24-27, I Cor. 6:9, 12-18, Eph. 4:19), which compromise the christian ideal of marriage there is no prohibition against simultaneous polygamy.[16]

Karl Barth, contends that the New Testament is silent on the issue of polygamy.[17] We can hardly point with certainty to a single text (of the New Testament) in which polygamy is expressly forbidden and monogamy universally accepted.

There is not much discussion about polygamy during Jesus' period. Jesus' teachings on marriage come from Gen. 2:24. The man leaves his mother and father and joins himself to his wife and both will become one flesh. Paul in his epistle does not say anything to condemn or accept polygamy, except "faithful to his one wife" (I Tim. 3:2, Tit. 1:6). However I must point out that Paul's teaching as far as I can tell in I Cor. 7:4, presupposes monogamous union.

Monogamy was accepted during the apostolic period and through time, it became the accepted way of life.

Monogamy was characteristic of the marriage of Christians from apostolic times, indissolubility is clearly called for by Jesus' strong condemnation of divorce, the ecclesiastical approbation of marriage is already suggested by Ignatius of Antioch in the early second century. It is not certain, however, that polygamists were not at times received into the early church. Indissolubility has not always and everywhere been understood in the same way - as a 'cannot' rather than a 'should not'. The obligation to solemnize one's marriage before a priest was only laid down after many centuries.[18]

It is therefore clear that polygamy is not treated directly by the New Testament writers. Obviously they were aware of polygamy because of their particular time

and place in history, but there is no clear reference to any polygamist in the New Testament. It must be pointed out that Christ in Mt. 19:5 and Mk. 10:7 teaches that the ideal is monogamous marriage. The man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife. They shall become one flesh. The reason for marriage is for cleaving. This too is a command.

The only explicit indication and directive regarding polygamy is the qualification for a bishop and elder that he be faithful to his one wife (I Tim. 3:2, Tit. 1:6). Hasting contends that Paul was trying to exclude polygamists and men from broken homes from holding positions in the church.

It is just possible that its intention was to rule out the appointment of a polygamist as elder and does, then, imply both a moderate condemnation of polygamy and the acceptance within the congregation of the church of some people with more than one wife. It is far more likely, however, that its meaning is either simply to stress the duty of fidelity to one's wife or to exclude from office men who have had a broken marriage in the past, or even a remarried widower.[19]

Based on the above, it can be said again that there is no flat condemnation of polygamy anywhere either in the Old Testament or in the New Testament. In the apostolic period and the subsequent generations there was very little polygamy, if any; monogamy therefore became the rule.

Monogamy became, indeed, so firmly the rule that soon some, such as Athenagoras and Tertullian could deny that a second marriage, contracted after the death of a first wife, was other than adultery.[20]

It is clear however, that Christ condemned divorce. Mark 10:11,12 states that "Whosoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her. So, too, if she divorces her husband and marries another,

she commits adultery." Paul refers to a similar case in Rom. 7:3. The scripture is not as directive in the issue of polygamy as it is in the issue of divorce.

### Historical Review of Polygamy and the Church

Historically, there has not been one accepted way of handling polygamists. However, there seems to be one major practice by various churches; that is, expulsion. Many of the Mission Churches excommunicate the polygamist for taking the sacraments. Many polygamists have sought refuge in the independent churches or some sects and cults.

In Kenya, there were many causes of agitation between Africans and Christianity. These caused disagreements within churches and eventually separation. Probably the most crucial issues were female circumcision, land acquisition, and polygamy. A story is told of a chief who wanted to become a Christian but he could not be allowed to do so until he had divorced his second wife. Divorce was almost unheard of in African culture. Finally the man came to the missionary, the story continues. The man told the missionary that he was ready to become a Christian. He was no longer a polygamist, the man said. The missionary asked how? The man said that he had killed his second wife. The missionary told the chief that he could not be a Christian because he was now a murderer. The above story, though not verified as true, illustrates the dilemma of a polygamist.

David Barrett says that one of the major causes of the formation of independent churches is a revolt against the practice of the churches in regard to polygamy.

The reasons for the formation of independent churches have been many, but most can be contained in one or other of the following: A revolt against European domination in church or state, a revolt against the practice of the churches in regard to polygamy, or a revolt against limitation of spontaneous expression in worship such as drumming, hand clapping and dancing or of the application of the christian faith to healing and the related world of witch-craft.[21]

Two church fathers touched on the issue of polygamy. These are St. Augustine and St. Thomas. St. Augustine said that polygamy was neither contrary to the law of nature nor to the nature of marriage. St. Augustine argued from the law of nature that just as one man could bear children through many women but one woman could not concieve children from more than one man at a time so a man may be able to have more than one wife but it would not be proper for a wife to have more than one husband.[22]

Similarly, St. Thomas came to the conclusion, from his theory of natural law that simultaneous polygamy was not always and everywhere prohibited.[23]

It seems that some theological scholars during the reformation period were confused on the subject until the time of Calvin who claimed that polygamy was prohibited by natural law and that it was directly opposed to the secondary end of marriage because it hindered domestic peace and created inferiority amongst the wives[24]. Monogamy was then seen as preferable to polygamy. As the economy changed, the culture evolved, many people in the western world became more sympathetic to monogamy rather than to polygamy. Yet among some early missionaries there was a surprising tolerance.

Hastings summarizes:

By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, there had been nearly a century of Protestant missionary work in Asia. Many missionaries here had shown themselves quite sympathetic towards the validity of polygamous marriage, and some at least open to the baptism of polygamists as such. Thus early in that century a series of missionary conferences in North India, at which a number of different denominations including Anglican had taken part resolved that 'if a convert, before becoming a Christian, has married more wives than one, then in accordance with the practice of the Jewish and primitive churches, he shall be permitted to keep them all. But such a person is not eligible to any office in the church.[25]

The above conclusion seems to have spread rapidly and was accepted and adopted in other countries. This was adopted by the Anglican Missionaries in 1850 in Nigeria and Sierra Leone.

In 1853, John Colenso, the first Bishop of the Anglican diocese of Natal, challenged the refusal of the church to accept polygamists to baptism.

The conviction has deepened within me more and more that the common practice of requiring a man, who may have more than one wife at the time of his conversion, to put away all but one before he can be received to Christian baptism, is unwarranted by the Scriptures, unsanctioned by Apostolic example or authority, condemned by common reason and sense of right and altogether unjustifiable.[26]

Bishop Colenso's opposition did not go far because he was opposed by Bishops Cotterill and Callaway. Later Colenso was given his freedom. He had no connection with England, so naturally his arguments died. In 1866 at a church congress at Wakefield, polygamy was discussed. Under the chairmanship of Lightfoot, Bishop

Bickersteth of Exeter urged liberty for polygamy in certain circumstances while James Johnson, a Nigerian Anglican priest, strongly opposed Bishop Bickersteth.

At the Lambeth congress convened in 1888, a committee of fifteen bishops met under the chairmanship of Lightfoot of Durham. Although Bickersteth argued for a more tolerant view, the committee passed the following resolution:

It is the opinion of this conference that persons living in polygamy be not admitted to baptism, but that they be accepted as candidates and kept under Christian instruction until such time as they shall be in a position to accept the law of Christ (5 (A), passed by 83 votes to 21)... The wives of polygamists may, in the opinion of this conference be admitted in some cases to baptism, but it must be left to the local authorities of the church to decide under what circumstances they may be baptized (5 (B), passed by 54 to 34).[27]

The above resolutions were confirmed unanimously at the Lambeth conference of 1908 by its committee of foreign missions. Other missions through the years have adopted this resolution.

In reading the historical part of the church practice on polygamy it seems from 1888, on missions condemned polygamy. One mission society reported:

Our correspondents in Africa view with unanimous intolerance conditions of life which are not only unchristian, but are at variance with the instinctive feelings of natural morality. With them there can be no question of polygamy. It is simply one of the gross evils of heathen society which, like habitual murder or slavery, must at all costs must be ended.[28]

The Anglican missionaries were not alone in the polygamy issue. The Presbyterian and the Methodist missionaries followed the decision of the Lambeth conference of 1888.

In other churches, too, the argument has gone backward and forwards. Thus the Presbyterian Church in the French Cameroons formerly held a position of admitting the wives of polygamists in some circumstances, but in the 1930's moved away from this and finally declared in 1940 that there was no other way consistent with Christian teaching than to outlaw polygamy entirely from the Christian church, even at the expense of individuals. Again the Methodist Church in Ghana admitted the wives of polygamists to baptism until 1951 and then ceased to do so.[29]

Finally, in 1920 the Lambeth Conference confirmed its 1888 resolution. Their conclusion was that once you allow polygamy a foothold in the church it will tend to increase in spite of all efforts to the contrary.

Since then there have been numerous meetings discussing the issue of polygamy. In January 1930 a Synod of the Anglican Church of Uganda accepted "native" marriage but to them "polygamy is an evil that cannot be tolerated in the church." [30]

In 1938 the International Missionary Council held its second world Assembly at Tambaram, Madras and decided to do research in the Gold Coast on the attitude of the Christian Church towards polygamy. Their findings were as follows:

It cannot be expected that the present survey will provide either a critique of Christian matrimony or such an estimate of polygamy as will revise the almost unanimous practice of Christian Missions since their inception in Africa. It is a vain hope to think that there may be in the system of polygamy some saving clause, to be discovered from this survey, that will make its practice generally permissible to African Christians.[31]

The Evangelical Lutherans in Liberia originally

accepted that the wives of a polygamist could be baptized but refused the men. Later in 1948 they resolved that it was illogical so they said polygamy was definitely unchristian. This lasted for four years and in 1951 they concluded that 'monogamy is God's plan for marriage, that it is the ideal relationship for the expression of love between man and woman, and is the proper atmosphere within which to develop a Christian family'. The church decided that where evidence of true faith is shown and upon approval of the district church council, parties to an established polygamous marriage may be baptized and confirmed. However, it further affirmed that in accordance with St. Paul's teaching no such person, man or woman, shall be permitted to hold office in the church or congregation or be engaged as a Christian worker.[32]

The more recent seminars indicate more and more divisions. There seems to be no consensus as to the fate of the polygamist as far as the church is concerned. In 1958, the All Africa Church Conference which was held in Ibadan, Nigeria tried to analyze the issue of polygamy by examining the factors which encouraged polygamy. It was followed by a meeting in Mindolo, Zambia in February to April 1963. This meeting was led by Professors Gordon Dubstan and Bolaji Idowu. The recommendation was "that a pagan polygamist upon conversion be received into the church, he and his wives and children, and that the position of monogamous Christians who become polygamists be carefully studied, each case being judged on its merits".[33]

Another attempt to solve the problem of church and polygamy was discussed in early 1969 by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania. The president of the Southern Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzania argued that:

The church is right in discouraging polygamy among its members. But they are wrong in making monogamy into one of the conditions of baptism and church membership

.... My plea with the church and mission, therefore, is that the pre-baptism polygamy should be baptized together with their wives and children without being forced to divorce their wives. They should also be accepted into full church membership. The post-baptism polygamists also should not be excommunicated from church membership because of their wives they married besides the first wife.[34]

The seventies did not produce much in solving the polygamy issue. The Anglican Archbishop meeting in Lusaka, Zambia in 1970 and the Anglican diocese of Victoria - Nyanza in Tanzania simply agreed a polygamist who is legally married by native or Muslim law may be baptized together with his wives and children after they are taught.

There have been a few denominations which have been different in that they are prepared to baptize polygamists without requesting them to send any of their wives away: Mennonites, Salvation Army, Ghana Baptist Church, African Methodist, Episcopal Zion Church, and the Assemblies of God, all in Ghana.

Kenya has not been execeptional. The majority of the Protestant churches, mostly mission churches do not baptize polygamists or admit them to partake the sacraments. Some churches, such as the Africa Inland Church, encourage polygamists to put away all wives but the first wife to have been married.[35] The practice of the other churches is not much different. Several independent churches and some sects do admit and baptize polygamists. This was one of the major causes of a split between the African Brotherhood Church and the Africa Inland Church.

Although many churches in Africa and Kenya in particular seem to agree that a polygamist can accept Christ, there seems to be no agreement as to what he should be and what he can do.

## **Broad Church Categories or Stand Regarding Polygamy**

The following are six broad categories which seem to be the most widely accepted by major denominations in Kenya.[36] However, it is clear from this summary that there is no consensus as to what should be done to polygamists.

1. The polygamist who is converted should put away all other wives except one. The polygamist is given the privilege to choose the one wife he wishes to keep on the condition that she accepts to be baptized and married in the church. (The scripture condemns this - I Cor. 7:39, Rom. 7:3. Mk. 10:11-12).

2. The polygamist is requested to send away all other wives except the first one.

3. The polygamist is kept waiting until he is freed from 'sinfulness' by death of all wives except one.

4. While recognizing monogamy as the ideal, some churches feel they should extend pastoral care and accord full privileges of the church except pastoral leadership to the polygamist and his family.

5. In other churches, wives of polygamist and their children are accorded full privileges but the husband is denied the same.

6. The polygamist who accepts Christ is accepted fully for lay leadership without discrimination, but will not be admitted for ordination.

The above six categories are held by the major denominations in Kenya, although even within those denominations there is no consensus or agreement amongst all the members of each particular denomination. The polygamy issue is still alive in the churches.

## Conclusion

We can only conclude that the polygamy issue remains one of the biggest pastoral problems Kenyan pastors must grapple with. The problem becomes acute when it comes to baptism. Some churches do not baptize the children of second wives because to them they are illegitimate, some do baptize them. It is hoped that this brief survey has reminded us that the polygamy issue is still with us. What of the future? As the culture changes people by choice will probably become monogamists. The economic crunch as well as the norms and mores of society will change. Unfortunately, we may be moving from a polygamy issue to the divorce issue which is on the increase in the African continent. But peering into the future does not remove our responsibility to face the issue of polygamy today. We should not ignore vital questions which need further discussion among our churches on this issue:

1. What should be done to a polygamist who has lived happily for perhaps 30 years with his wives and then he accepts Christ? Should he send some away? If he sends them away who should provide for her?
2. Does the scripture deny the fruits of grace to a polygamist?
3. What should be done to the children of polygamous marriages? Could they be baptized? Could they train for the ministry?
4. What is the most Biblical and appropriate approach in dealing with polygamists who accept the Lord Jesus as their personal Saviour?
5. Many churches do not allow a polygamist to participate in the Lord's sacraments, should this continue. Is polygamy the unforgivable sin?

6. What hints or helps can we give to our pastors to assist in dealing with this pastoral problem so that the pastors cannot be accused of favoritism? People are known to have moved from one church to another due to this problem.

More study, reflection and prayer are needed as we seek to minister the gospel of Christ in an Africa still characterized by the fact of polygamy.

## notes

- [1] Polygamy: The word polygamy and polygyny tend to be used inter-changeably for the sake of this paper the word polygamy alone will be used.
- [2] James Orr, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1929)
- [3] John S. Mbiti, *Love Marriage in Africa* (London, Longman, 1973) pp. 81-82
- [4] Eugene Hillman, *Polygamy Reconsidered* (MaryKnoll, New York: Orbit Books, 1975) p. 94
- [5] Hillman, p. 94.
- [6] Kitembo, Magesa, and Shorter, *African Christian Marriage* (London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1977) pp. 65-66.
- [7] Eugene Hillman pp. 117-118.
- [8] John Mbiti p. 192.
- [9] James Orr, *ISBE* p. 1460.
- [10] Adrian Hastings, *Christian Marriage in Africa* (London, SPCK, 1973) pp. 19-20.
- [11] Walter Trobisch, *My wife made me a Polygamist* (Downers Grove, Illinois, Inter-Varsity, 1971) p. 18.
- [12] Trobisch pp. 19-21.
- [13] Hastings pp. 6-7.
- [14] Hillman p. 140.
- [15] Hastings p. 7.

- [16] Hillman p. 140.
- [17] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics Vol 4* Ed. by G. W. Bromley, Trans by G. T. Thompson & H. Knight, (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1961) p. 199.
- [18] Hastings pp. 5-6.
- [19] Hastings p. 8.
- [20] Hastings p. 8.
- [21] David Barrett, Ed., *Kenya Churches Hand Book* (Kisumu, Kenya, Evangel Publishing House, 1973) p. 188.
- [22] Hillman pp. 180-181.
- [23] Hillman p. 181.
- [24] Hillman p. 182.
- [25] Hastings p. 11.
- [26] Hastings p. 13.
- [27] Hastings p. 14.
- [28] Hastings p. 15.
- [29] Richard A. Hall, *Marriage law in the Ghanaian Churches: The Christian Approach to Polygamy* p. 52.
- [30] Hastings pp. 19-20.
- [31] Hastings p. 21.
- [32] Hastings p. 22.
- [33] Hastings p. 23.
- [34] Judah Kivowe: "Polygamy as Problem to the

Church" in Africa Theological Journal (Feb. 1969) pp. 24-25.

[35] Africa Inland Church Constitution (1972 Edition) p. 49.

[36] Some of these ideas first appeared in a WEF Theological discussion at All Saints Cathedral in 1983.

# Book Reviews



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Guidelines For Christian Theology In Africa

by Osadolor Imasogie

(African Christian Press, P.O Box 30, Achimota, Ghana,  
1983) 86 pages, n.p.

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Dr. Imasogie's book is a worthy contribution to the ongoing debate on contextualization of theology. He has said in an organised systematised form what some other African thinkers have been saying in fragmented form.

The book is divided into four chapters. In chapter one, the author demonstrates that though Christianity is a cosmic religion, it has always particularized itself within cultures (the primary one being Jewish, then Roman-Grecian) in order to be relevant. Therefore the task of every theologian in every generation, argues the author, is to communicate the gospel in the theologian's particular culture using the language, symbols and thought-forms that make sense in that culture. Both the divine source of theology and the temporal situation in which the eternal Presence must be discerned should be kept together in creative tension. To substantiate this point, the 16th century Reformation which gave birth to Protestantism was cited. Imasogie reasoned, and rightly so, that the Reformation raised not only doctrinal but also cultural questions. Before the Reformation, the author states, sadly without concrete examples: "Much of the history of Christian doctrine is a commentary on the struggle between Jewish thought patterns and the Greek world view vis-a-vis the existential apprehension of the Christ within these thought-patterns" (p.21). Failure to contextualize the Christian faith when it entered Africa has resulted in "many Africans not accepting Christianity completely as the all-sufficient religion that meets all human needs" (p.23). "The truth of this assertion is borne out by the fact that in times of existential crisis many respectable African Christians revert to traditional religious practices as the means for meeting their spiritual needs"(p.23).

In chapter three a good case is made for the failure of Western missionaries who brought the gospel to Africa to contextualize.

In fact, in many cases they dogmatised or absolutised their form of Christian doctrines. By and large, the author considers these missionaries as products of traditional western Christian theology (which he discusses in chapter two), which on the one hand, has failed to reconcile the basic Christian message with the contemporary self-understanding of human existence and on the other hand has de facto identified Christianity with the status quo. Beyond that however, Dr. Imasogie views the quasi-scientific worldview underlying the traditional Western theology as the greatest handicap of the Western missionaries when brought to another cultural context -- the Third World in general and Africa in particular.

By quasi-scientific worldview, the author means a by-product of the Enlightenment which at best accommodates faith to scientific materialism (a process whereby God was made an absentee landlord of the universe) and at worst explains away the supernatural as mere superstition. At the time of the modern missionary movement (i.e. the beginning of the nineteenth century), Christian faith in the West has become merely only a thing to be believed and not experienced. Faith has been distilled into five ideas, namely: creation, God the Creator, freedom, immortality of the soul, and reward or punishment after death. "Other than these, such traditional Christian beliefs as the incarnation, divine activities in the world, as well as spiritual forces in general believed to be immanent on the earth, were considered obsolete in a world which had come of age"(p.49). "By the time Christianity was introduced into Black Africa in the fourth decade of the nineteenth century the worldview of the Christian theologian retained only a veneer of the biblical worldview" (p.52). Coming from such a background the early missionaries did not appreciate the African worldview that places a lot of emphasis on spiritual realities. Consequently the African perception and interpretation of the spirit world and the dynamic influences of spiritual forces on human existence especially with regards to crises were largely dismissed as primitive and superstitious. More unfortunate according to the author is the introduction of a strange God and of a Christ who could save from sin but who seemingly could not deliver from the demonic and anti-social forces. As a result of the sad ambivalent situation, the author concludes many so-called African Christians usually resort to traditional African religious practices

such as divination, sacrifices and wearing of protective charms or amulets in time of crises.

It is therefore imperative for every African theologian, concludes the author in his final chapter, to re-examine his theological presupposition and methodology. He argues that for any Christian theology to be relevant in Africa, account must be taken of the African worldview and the self-understanding of the African people. Before closing with three proposed guidelines, the author draws the reader's attention to what he calls "typical elements in African worldview and religion." Given the cultural complexities of Africa and the importance of worldview, the author's discussion here is unfortunately sketchy. Nevertheless, one cannot agree any less with the author concerning his proposed guidelines for theologising in Africa. He has called (1) for a new appreciation of the efficiency of Christ's power over evil spiritual forces; (2) for a new emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit and the present mediatory efficacy of the Living Christ; and (3) for a new emphasis on the omnipresence of God and the consequent sacramental nature of the universe. Excellent as these are, one is terribly disappointed at the author's failure to isolate a thorough study of Africa's cultural anthropology and sociology as part of a necessary prerequisite for theologising in Africa. Equally disappointing is the space given to the discussion of the guidelines - about six pages - though the book took its title from that topic.

Further, writing in 1983, one expects to find allusions to vital contributions being made by African theologians in the area of contextualization. The Authors silence seems misleading. One would have preferred an analysis of Allen Boesak's Black Theology and Black Power to the author's consideration of Juan Luis Segundo's Liberation Theology coming from Latin American context(see pp. 38-43).

There is the danger of "every" and "all" language that a theologian should avoid. The author runs into that quite often (e.g. first paragraph, p.41; second paragraph, p.64; first paragraph, pp.65,69). This tendency of generalization may also apply

to the main thesis of the book. While it is true lack of total commitment to Christ can be due to the gap between Christian theology and African life, it is not equally true that this is totally due to the failure of Western orthodox theologians to take African worldviews into consideration in their theological formulations. The parable of the sower and the soils of Matthew 13 should caution us from making a sweeping judgment.

Undoubtedly as a guide the book is a significant contribution to theologising in Africa. Dr. Imasogie's proposals demand our attention if Christian theology is going to be relevant in Africa. The book is well written, easy to read, but overburdened with unnecessary repetition. It is recommended for every Bible College library and theology class.

Dr. Tokunboh Adeyemo, AEAM

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**History of the Church in Africa: A Survey**  
by Jonathan Hildebrandt  
( Africa Christian Press: Ghana, 1981) pp 269, n.p.

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The author of this book is no stranger to the field of African history per se or the history of the Church in Africa. He earned his MA in African history at Northwestern University, and did further graduate work at Columbia University and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. In addition to these qualifications, Hildebrandt spent ten years teaching in African secondary schools and latterly, teaching Kenyan theological students in his capacity as principal of Pwani Bible Institute of the Africa Inland Church at Mombasa.

In developing his thesis, Hildebrandt adopts the horizontal method, i.e., he takes up his survey of the history of the church in Africa by time periods and further sub-divides the African continent into five main geographical areas. He follows the various developments in each of these areas and then leaves them

at the stage in which the close of that period finds them, to pick them up again at the same point in succeeding chapters to trace further development and thus brings us up to the present time. (It should be noted at the outset that this is a survey only).

From the preface and introduction we are able to glean that the book was written with a double purpose in mind; first, to "provide a basic outline of the history of the church in different parts of Africa," and secondly, "to demonstrate that Christianity is neither a recent arrival in Africa, nor yet some sort of religious import from the West imposed upon Africans by missionaries and colonial officials, but rather, a dynamic worldwide faith that has been a part of Africa for nineteen long centuries." Hildebrandt takes exception to some historians who see African church history as containing a series of disconnected events and chooses rather to emphasize the "continuity of the development" of the African church. If he means an historical continuity with the church of North Africa from A.D. 35 - 800, he failed in his quest, but if he means (as he really seems to) a continuity of fellowship, then, in this reviewer's opinion, he has succeeded quite admirably. We are reminded of the contributions made by those early Christians of North Africa in the fields of organization and forms of worship, to say nothing of the tremendous contributions to the church's understand of the truth by such men as Tertullian, Cyprian and Augustine. The African church is the heir of these things in a special way, simply because these developments took place on African soil.

The book consists of thirty-three chapters. Chapters one through four introduce us to the African scene at the time of Christ, the planting of the church on North African soil, and its growth up until A.D. 700. Chapters five and seven give us a brief glimpse of the expansion into the upper Nile regions of Nubia and Ethiopia (Abyssinia) up to about A.D. 1600. Chapter six deals with the rise of Islam and the challenge it presented to the church and the latter's decline in the face of the Muslim conquests of this whole area. Chapter eight provides a sort of parenthesis between the previous chapters and those following in that it provides the reader with some idea of the religious controversies

of those early centuries out of which there emerged both good and evil - the church torn asunder by heretics and schismatics and yet great advance made in the church's understanding of the Scriptures. Modern African Christians are warned of the dangers and pitfalls of similar erroneous and heretical ideas being introduced into their midst today. In chapter nine the author provides us with a "time-line" of African church history from A.D. 100 - 1950. From this point on the North African church drops from sight only to be included in some statistical reports in the final chapter. The author now hurries us on to the introduction and establishment of Christianity south of the Sahara. Chapters ten and eleven recount briefly the attempts of the Portuguese to establish missions along the coasts of west and east Africa in those areas which would eventually become the colonies of Angola and Mozambique. Chapters 13 - 26 introduce us to the beginning of the modern missionary movement and bring us up to the period of rapid church growth ending with 1914 and World War I. Fleeting glimpses are given of the slave trade, the scramble for colonial possessions on the part of European powers, the reaction between white settlers and missionaries - not always a happy relationship - some outstanding missionaries and explorers and church planters, both Western and African, i.e., Livingstone and Samuel Crowther. A short evaluation of the period between 1878 and 1914 is given in chapter 27. From this point on to the end of chapter thirty-two, Hildebrandt deals with the movement toward full church autonomy from the various parent mission bodies along with a few glimpses of the rise of African Independent churches. The struggle for and realization of political independence and its effect upon the church comes in for consideration here as well. The closing chapter (33) provides some statistics of the African religious scene up to 1976, together with the number of languages of the various African nations and the degree to which the Bible has been translated.

Despite its relatively small size the book has a number of excellent features. Included among these are the "time-line" mentioned earlier, and the series of well-illustrated maps and their inserts. These two items are almost worth the price of the book itself. Sources are given in footnotes and quite a selective bibliography. One is pleased, also to find a very complete

index for quick references. Attached to each chapter are a number of questions and aids for further study.

The book has some definite weaknesses as well. One of these has to do with the author's style. The book is structured in such a way that it lends itself to the give and take of classroom procedure. In several places this does not make for either smooth reading or continuity of thought and tends to lessen the objectivity of the work. There is a strong tendency to moralize in places and at times it becomes "preachy", particularly in chapter eight. The style also gives rise to a number of repetitions and redundancies, colloquialisms and footnote errors. Here and there some misspelled words occur. More careful editing would have prevented these things from happening. One personal complaint is this: since African Independent churches form a considerable part of the modern church situation here in Africa, a separate chapter, or at least a sub-section on this phenomenon would have been helpful.

Most of the above defects are of minor importance and do not destroy the real value of the volume. It serves well the aims of the author. Moreover, it should remind us all, that though the church seems firmly planted in the rich soil of Africa the task is far from completion.

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Quest For Authority  
by Norvald Yri  
(Evangel Publishing House, 1978) 376 pages, n.p.

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Dr. Norvald Yri's book, Quest For Authority, is one I would call a pregnant book because of the quantity and depth of material in it. He tackles the issue of the authority of Scriptures, among churches and missions, with primary emphasis on both the

ecumenical and evangelical view of Scripture. His primary purpose is that those in either camp who read this book will be encouraged to "hold to the authority of Scripture and thereby guard its peace and purity, and its unity and mission,"(p. 15).

The book consists of six chapters with the first chapter setting the stage and the sixth chapter forming the conclusion -- the evangelical affirmation of biblical authority. Chapters two through five form the body of Dr. Yri's presentation. The material in these chapters is treated in a scholarly format:

- Historical review
- Theological development
- Quest for religious authority
- Summary

The summary, in particular, is excellent for this type of scholarly work. It is given as statements summarizing what has been discussed under the historical review, theological development and quest for religious authority. This is very helpful to those who find the material hard to read and difficult to grasp. In a sense the summary section brings into focus the issues. The book clearly shows that the World Council of churches has increasingly substituted an economic and political theology for the Word of God. The documentation is quite impressive.

The authority of Scripture is quite evident in all chapters, especially in chapter six, where Dr. Yri states that ". . . all Scripture is inspired by God and has authority . . . . We believe that the biblical record reveals what God actually wanted to say to fallen mankind. He wanted to reveal his will touching man's salvation, and he did. He wanted to show how man could be saved, and he did. . . . We cannot agree that the fallible human beings and ambiguous human languages make it impossible for an all powerful God to communicate to mankind His ultimate will in understandable words. "(p.244)

I would strongly recommend this as good reading for Bible school and theological students and a must for every library.

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Ecclesiastes  
by Michael Eaton  
Tyndale Old Testament Commentary Series, ( IVP, 1983) 159  
pages, 3.95.

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"That's a hard book." "I don't read it very often." These were typical comments which were made when friends found me reading a commentary on Ecclesiastes. It's reputation of pessimism and scepticism make it seem not quite Christian. So it is all the more important that we now have this commentary in a series whose concern is "to get at the true meaning of the text and make its message plain."

At the outset Michael Eaton recognises that the God-oriented realism of the Preacher is the only remedy for the pessimistic cynicism and despair that is so widespread.

The introductory articles, as well as covering pertinent critical matters, set the book in its original context and so lead the way to an understanding of its message.

The first section concerning the Hebrew text of the book, shows from a survey of the various versions and their general agreement with the Massoretic text that it has been well preserved. There has been considerable discussion as to the date of the book, much of it revolves around the interpretation of linguistic data. What is the significance for dating of Aramaisms, or of Canaanite-Phoenician influence? This data does not lead to a reliable date. Nor are arguments from Greek influence any more certain. All that can be said is that the date must be left undecided. On the question of authorship he concludes that an "editor-author", calling himself 'Qoheleth' (the Preacher), is reporting in his own words the teaching of a revered wise man.

The association of the book with Solomon clearly expedited its acceptance as part of the Old Testament canon. When questions were raised about this (often because of its internal contradictions), they were concerning why it was canonical; that it was part of the canon was taken for granted.

Ecclesiastes is a good example of a style of near eastern wisdom literature which he calls "pessimism literature." Parallels with the wisdom literature of surrounding nations are not evidence of dependence, rather these techniques and materials were used and developed into distinctive forms that were able to express Israel's faith in God. In his wide survey of material his comments were occasionally superficial. For instance, the story of the noble and the servant (p.35) is given as an example of pessimism, whereas Derek Kidner's treatment brings out its cool and witty cynicism (A Time To Mourn and a Time To Dance pp.19-20).

What are we to make of this book? For von Rad it is a bitter marginal note to the wisdom tradition with no unity of thought. For Eichrodt it is a profound meditation on the power of God in creation. For Gordis it is a monument of man's striving after the good life. There are almost as many opinions as commentaries. Part of the problem is that wildly different moods and seemingly sheer contradictions are set unashamedly side by side. Is it a unity, were there many writers, or were the pages on which it was written mixed up at some stage? The different views about the Preacher seem endless. Michael Eaton discusses this 'enigma' in order to raise two important questions.

First, is there material inserted into the book? Evidence for this is claimed for editorial and contradictory passages. These are examined and judged as unlikely, with the further confirmation that the vocabulary and thinking of these disputed sections as 'remarkably similar' to that of the rest of the book.

The second is the more important question. Is there an overall coherent purpose? The answer given is that it is an essay in apologetics which defends the life of faith in a generous God by pointing to the grimness of the alternative. But instead of developing this we are introduced to some of the themes of the book; the heaven-earth dichotomy, the relationship with the first eleven chapters of Genesis, the limit set to wisdom and the significance of certain curious omissions. In the last short paragraph of this section he alludes briefly to the purpose, but Eaton does not show clearly what he means by the

life of faith, it is only in the latter part of the commentary that it finally emerges that what is being referred to is a life lived in trust and dependence upon God. This section is helpful as regards the book's themes; however, a clearer statement of the purpose (on p. 55) is that the Preacher commends "a God-centered life by presenting a critique of all forms of secularism."

The question of structure has resulted in as many divergent views as the other matters discussed. However, enough indication is found of an objective progression to enable a fairly detailed outline to be suggested, while recognising that there is often only a loose coherence within and between the sections.

The commentary itself consists of a detailed verse by verse examination of the text to bring out the "true meaning." This is done with fine scholarship, though Bible students who are looking for help in understanding the message of Ecclesiastes will be in danger of missing the wood for the trees. Nevertheless there is a great deal to be learnt. The futility and meaninglessness of life lived without God is emphasised throughout, together with the corollary that contentment and joy are only possible when God is acknowledged and trusted.

The first part is rather straightforward; contrasting the failure of secularism, wisdom and pleasure-seeking, and the despair of the certainty of death, with the alternative of faith in God. The poem in chapter three is seen in terms of God's providence rather than of the relentless inevitability of time. The bulk of the book (chapters four through ten) is described as groups of sayings clustered around particular themes. In an important insight he sees the sayings, which many have taken as puzzling contradictions or insertions, to be presented first from the viewpoint of "under the sun" and then from the viewpoint of faith; most notably for the crux of chapter eight, verses twelve and thirteen. The final part (before the epilogue) is seen as a sustained call to faith with the decay portrayed in chapter twelve stressing the urgency of the decision.

At times his reasoning is unconvincing, as at the bottom of page 117 where the parallelism of thought is too vague to support his point. On page 125 the short second paragraph is

misplaced, it belongs with the following section. There is more transliteration of Hebrew than is usual for Tyndale Commentaries, the policy stated in the general preface is that words are transliterated where necessary; in many cases the argument would be as clear without the Hebrew, in some a knowledge of Hebrew is demanded in order to grasp the point being made (e.g. page 22 line 14 and page 42 line 2 from the bottom). So it is unfortunate that the diacritical marks are frequently missing or wrong.

This is a valuable commentary that is very useful in discovering the meaning of the text, though since the overall message is often obscured by the fine attention to detail, it would be helpful to read Derek Kidner's exposition *A Time to Mourn and a Time to Dance* as its complement.

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**Numbers - An Introduction and Commentary**  
by Gordon J. Wenham  
Tyndale Old Testament Commentary  
(Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, England, 1981) pp.240

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If the purpose of a commentary is to make available information and meaning which most Bible students never have the time or skill to attain otherwise, then Dr. Wenham has helped us greatly. Dismissing fanciful interpretations made by commentators desperate to make the Old Testament relevant today, Wenham's exegesis draws on a wide range of historical and textual scholarship. Most critical information is placed in footnotes or appended note sections. This arrangement allows for a thorough discussion that moves quickly and easily.

"The theme of the book of Numbers is the journey to the promised land of Canaan." The author effectively introduces and reviews major themes and literary structure throughout his exegesis, giving the reader the needed sense of continuity. This context consciousness is especially important for this book because of its "insistence on organization, ritual and hierarchy." Reviewing is also important for grasping an overall perspective

a book which has been referred to as "the junk room of the priestly code."

The introduction, while following a conventional format (i.e. Title and Contents, structure, sources, date and authorship), is largely the place where the author brings the reader to face the difficulties and confusion which surround the book of Numbers. His two major concerns in the introduction seem to be; (1) the proposition of the structure, both of the book and its relationship to Exodus and Leviticus, and (2) the significance of ritual and how to interpret its meaning.

The book of Numbers cannot be understood apart from Exodus and Leviticus. Israel's history is interpreted as cynical, and Numbers contains two of the three cycles which began in Exodus. Each of these cycles ends with important eras of revelation at Sinai, Kadesh, and the plains of Moab. Within this literary structure for the interpretation of historical events, Dr. Wenham understands the meaning and continuity between the law and travelogue of Numbers.

These cycles are meant to be compared and contrasted. Wenham uses this key to unlock much understanding about the theology of Numbers. Thus, by comparison we are meant to see that the refusal to enter Canaan from Kadesh was as blasphemous as worshipping the golden calf at Sinai or Baal in the plains of Moab. Wenham warns against supposing that such a literary device distorts history by being synthetic. The honesty of biblical records is attested to by the inclusion of material which does not fit the cyclical scheme exactly.

"Rituals reveal values at their deepest level." With this Wenham introduces what has been for him a breakthrough in understanding the significance of Old Testament society and theology. He admits modern man's aversion to ritual or liturgy. For this and other reasons, the Old Testament ritual and sacrificial system are largely undiscussed. Wenham continues to explain in his introduction the essence of ritual as a two sided form of communication; "Everyone involved had to play his own role on a public stage under the eyes of man and God." Far from being

dry, the author's discussion is intriguing and challenges the reader to follow down a mysteriously ancient path. The path to understanding is beset with major problems of interpretation. Biblical rituals are "so rarely explained in the Bible, or so briefly that several interpretations are possible." Just when the path seems darkest and unknown, light comes from an unexpected source -- anthropology. Wenham explains how methods of investigation and interpretation developed by social anthropologists can be applied to the records we have of the ancient Israelite society. These methods help the student to examine the ritual and symbolic system as a whole. "It is the contrasts (the distinctions and gradations) between similar elements within the system that are of primary importance, not the individual elements in it." With this introduction, Dr. Wenham pursues an intriguing and scientific exposition of the book of Numbers. He admits this approach is so new as to be "tentative" and leaves its merit to be born out by the fruits of understanding. In chapter six Wenham compares the restrictions and sacrifices of the Nazarite with the high priest and learns that while the prerogatives are not the same, their comparative holiness is equal. Thus the depth of the Nazarite vow strikes us. This is one example of the fruit of Wenham's attempt to apply anthropological methods in his exegesis.

The author's analysis of Numbers, conforming to the cyclical structure he proposes, divides the book into five major sections with thematic subsections. All of these generally follow the chapter divisions of the Bible. These chapters are then divided for the purpose of exegetical discussion. Wenham does not generally divide as far as verse by verse exegesis, but discusses meaningful sections of material. Wenham's style of exegesis by section, whether twenty verses or two, presents detailed material without fragmenting it excessively. The result is the sense of having a detailed understanding of the whole picture.

There is no devotional or personal application in this commentary. It is not written as a sermon. But at the end of most chapters the author notes the relationship between the passage discussed and the New Testament. In this way he points to the relevance of Numbers in our new covenant relationship,

encouraging the reader toward personal application.

Studying this commentary also sheds light on the New Testament. Understanding the meaning of the separation and holiness of the Nazarite vow, that the vow could not be forsaken to take care of a dead relative, one can appreciate Jesus' concern for the holiness of being his disciple when he said, "Let the dead bury their own dead." (Matthew 8:21-22). Wenham's commentary on Numbers is an excellent tool for continuing our understanding of the New Testament Scriptures.

Wenham's exposition and theology of the book of Numbers is a much needed contribution to the understanding of this ancient and mysterious canonical literature. It's brevity should not restrict its use by either the scholar (by being too simple) or the layman (by requiring too much background). It is well written and draws the reader into the study of Numbers, even into further study. It offers much in carrying on the fine tradition already established by the Tyndale New Testament Commentaries.

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Calvin's Doctrine of Atonement  
by Robert A. Peterson  
(Presbyterian and Reformed Pub., 1983) pp. 113, \$4.95

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This well written book is going to be a boon to biblical pastors and students. Dr. Peterson has not only drawn on his personal reading of Calvin but also made extensive use of selected theologians. His simplicity of style and brevity make for easy reading. The numerous footnotes, extensive bibliography and indexes enhance the usefulness of this reference work.

The starting point of the book, as with Calvin's theology, is the free love of God in Jesus Christ. This free love of God is "both an adjective describing the sovereignty of God's love and a noun depicting His lovingkindness (p.3). Peterson clearly draws out the love/wrath dilemma of God's righteous