

GOSPEL

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The relevance or irrelevance of the Church in Africa today will depend on the Church's re-interpretation of its witness and Mission. The Church must be seen to be effectively addressing itself to the realities of the pressing social problems if it is to retain its credibility in its Mission. The Church must be able to re-define its theology of the Mission in the face of historical, ideological and political changes that are sweeping over the Continent.

In an attempt to liberate the gospel (good news) from the cultural and historical impotence the emphasis in relation to Mission and evangelism has shifted from indigenization to contextualization. While the concept of indigenization has been accepted as the most appropriate way of ensuring that the Gospel has taken root in a given context, it has, nevertheless, been accused of being static and in danger of being post oriented.¹ The concept has also been interpreted to refer only to the Churches in Asia and Africa. Contextualization is a new concept which has been introduced in missionary circles to refer to all that was meant by indigenization. It is an all-embracing term which is non-discriminatory. It includes all aspects of mission and evangelisation process and has dynamism which is open to change and which is future-oriented. Before we consider the efforts of the African Church towards contextualization of the gospel we need first to establish the goals and objectives of such endeavours.

Contextualization as an evangelistic witness:

The task of every evangelistic witness is to lead a person to the acknowledgement of the saving work of God wrought in Jesus Christ. It is the attempt to make people aware that Christ is Lord of all and that their lives would be much more meaningful if lived under the Lordship of Christ. This does not mean proclamation is the only way in which evangelistic witness is made. In this day and age, and given the present situation in Africa, mere preaching is no longer an effective way of evangelistic witness.

I believe the primary method of evangelism is the sharing of love with those to whom we are sent (I John 4:19). We have to demonstrate the power of the gospel by doing, not just mere talk. I believe this is the Wesleyan foundation of evangelism. We have cheapened the gospel by mere talk and little practice. It is tragic that evangelism in most places has been made personal and individualistic. Evangelistic witness must be directed both to the individual and the community. The community consciousness is so strong in Africa that I am tempted to say that our proclamation and witnessing must be directed to the community in order that an individual who is a member of that community may respond to the message. This is an important consideration for mission of the Church in the African context.

Those who are acquainted with African communities will agree with me that they are closely knit together by a web of relationships and other social structures. This type of structure emphasizes corporateness as against individualism. The community makes and produces the individual. The individual has no existence of his own apart from the community's. A common saying has been suggested by John Mbiti as, "I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am"². In the African community, therefore, people need to be liberated from the sin of self-centredness as opposed to other-centredness. They need to avoid splitting reality into religious and secular, sacred and profane. In this context sin is the absence of brotherhood and love is relationship with other people and the breach of friendship with God, a situation that creates hostility, suspicion and alienation. This in essence leads to the emergence of oppressive structures, the exploitation of people as well as environment.

This seems to be the biblical understanding of maintaining relationship with God. In the Old Testament good relationship with God is demonstrated by the community's cohesion and relationship with neighbour. To despise one's neighbour, to ill-treat the worker, to exploit the weak is an offence to God. The people are exhorted to cease to do evil and learn to do right, pursue justice and champion the oppressed; give the orphan his rights and plead the widow's cause (Isaiah 1:10-17). As a Church we are called upon to take up the struggle for the creation of a just society and earnestly identify ourselves with the search for a better future. We are called upon in our proclamation to break down barriers that separate people and create genuine communities.³ Evangelism must, therefore, take the cultures of the people seriously. It must strive to make the gospel speak to the life and thought of the people in the language and images they understand. It must endeavour to articulate and reflect on the concrete life situation of the people. This is what is essentially meant by contextualization and enculturation.

Looking at the familiar situation in Africa today we may want to find out what form would evangelism take or what contextualization would be applied. The majority of African peoples have entered a period of independent nationhood only since 1960's. Most of the independent nations are struggling to make sense of this new era. In most of these countries, Christians have been in the fore-front during the struggle for independence, at times, through violent means. It is clear that their chief concerns have been liberation and emancipation. Many of the communities live in appalling conditions. In addition to poor living conditions, other evils such as nepotism, corruption, ethnicism and racism beset many communities. What is the relevance of the gospel in such situations? How can the gospel be contextualized and address itself to concrete and existential situations?

The theology of the mission in the developing nations must address itself to the historical and cultural situation of the people. It must become a critical reflection of the conditions of the majority of the people trying to fulfil a liberating function. The theology of the mission must, therefore, be unique in each situation since situations would be different from one another. Even though such theology must be biblically-oriented it must be able to speak to the afflicted in a unique manner.

There can be no such a thing as universal theology of the mission. In African situation for example, there would be cultural and philosophical differences between our theological reflection and that done in the West. As John Mbiti has nearly put it, "The African theologian who has experienced the agonies of having a burning appetite but nothing to eat will surely theologize differently on the theme of food from the American theologian who knows the discomforts of having a plate full of steak but no appetite."⁴

In the African context, Christian missions must recognize the seeds of the Kingdom in African cultural tradition. They must be able to make sense of African religiosity borrowing from its customs, traditions, arts, metaphors and images.⁵ In our engagement in mission we must realize that in every culture God has revealed himself in a unique way. Had Christ been born in Africa, for example, he would have used the same literary forms that are found within the African communities. He would have used African images and stories to illustrate his message and proverbs which are a powerful tool of conveying the message in a striking manner. Contextualization and enculturation in this sense would mean making use of the living culture to reflect on the message of the gospel and its relevance to contemporary life-situation.⁶

Incarnation and Contextualization

It is my belief that there is no such a thing as a universal mission strategy if by this we mean that which can apply to every situation in the world. The gospel must always be applied to a particular situation or context in order to be relevant. The gospel which Christ preached had a cutting edge because it was in favour of the poor, the oppressed, the prisoners, the outcasts and the neglected. This was the concrete incarnation of the gospel precisely because it confronted people with a message that was relevant to their situation.

In order to speak to people in their own situation the Church must, of necessity, become incarnated in its own culture. In practical terms it means that the Church must be self-propagating, self-governing and self-reliant. This seems to have been the objective of the early Church. Mission was the very essence of the Church and a Church which lost sight of this vision would wither away.

There is a sense in which the missionary endeavour of the Church in Africa is foreign to the African Church since the centres of direction are outside the local Church. As John Mbiti observes, "As long as Christians...remain tied through this structural link to their counterparts overseas, they will not develop a proper image of themselves and their part in christendom."⁷ It is lamentable that the Church in Africa has been subjected to so much receiving in mission that it has lost its orientation as a mission-minded body of Jesus Christ. This is not limited to Africa alone since examples can be cited in other continents where mission of the Church has been seen to be foreign. The initiative and leadership in mission must always come from the local Church. When organizations send missionaries to a given location without the sanction of the local

Church, manage only to kill the initiative of the local Christians. The local Church must be seen to be engaged in a meaningful mission to its own people, using methods that suit that particular context. If they are assisted by others, it must be on their own terms. It would take an awful long time for anyone to be versed in the customs and traditions of the people in order to be able to speak to their situation.⁸ It is difficult to imagine a self-propagatory Church that is dependent on outside resources (money & personnel) to engage meaningfully in mission. The real problem of self-hood of the Church in a given situation must be tackled in relation to the nature of the mission. Autonomy and self-reliance are qualities that must be emphasized as a way of overcoming the problem of foreigners of the mission. We must put more emphasis on the local Church. While we may be called by God to serve him in a global context, we must recognize that we live in local communities in which we receive inspiration and vision. We are the product of our local environment and we are able to understand our situation better than any other. The reality of the universal Church must be lived at the local level.⁹ Of course there is room for others to engage in mission away from their cultural context. Those who do so, however, must remember that their task is to be catalysts in helping the local Church in its own mission. They must not hinder the mission of the Church through ecclesiastical imperialism. They must be able to adapt to the structures that have been designed by the local Church, and resist the temptation to devise their own structures however efficient they may seem to be.

Today there is an awareness that different cultures and traditions are all of them making their contribution to a universal theology. Theology of the mission should not be adapted to any situation. It must be incarnational, that is, stemming from a given cultural context. Theology that is not incarnate in the life of the peoples of a given culture is both superficial and peripheral. The accent is on the creativity and dynamic responsibility of the local Church which must have the freedom to make the gospel become incarnate in the life of its community.¹⁰ I am tempted to see a close affinity between this position and the early methodist search for identity and autonomy. The early methodist separations and differences were characterised by search by the local Churches for self-hood and identity. Local Churches felt that they needed to retain autonomy in various aspects of Church life. The local Churches felt that they had to remain free to express themselves in their own way while at the same time cherishing the right to belong to a wider body.¹¹ The Wesley model of "class system" offered a further incentive in development of an "ekkllesiola" within "ekkllesia". Members of a given "class" were free to develop their own style of spiritual exercise which contributed to the spiritual welfare of the local Church. This type of freedom is essential in the development of mission consciousness. People need a certain amount of autonomy to feel that they are making a positive contribution to the ongoing mission of the Church.

It may be important to mention here that the Bible does not offer any normative pattern of congregational life style which can be transplanted into our own location and time. What can be applied in our situation is the principle of variety and diversity. In the New Testament pattern we find a reflection of the theological and historical basis of the diversity of the congregational life. A study of the congregational life in the New Testament times would perhaps indicate that the life of an "outsider"

(in cultural and social milieu) did not dictate the forms of congregational life. The shape of the community and its theology was created by a concern for authentic existence in a given historical situation. This is what is supposed to be in our own situation. Since each situation would be unique, congregational life and concerns for missionary outreach must be dictated by members of that particular community.¹²

The Spirit of Moratorium as a strategy for Self-Reliance

The Spirit of Moratorium in mission that was begun in early 1970's has been interpreted as a process the Churches in the third-world are undergoing in their search for self-identity and self-reliance. The concept was given prominence by Rev. Gatu in his epoch-making speech at the mission Festival at Milwaukee in 1971. He pointed out that the continuation of the missionary movement as presently constituted is a hindrance to the selfhood of the Church. What John Gatu (and others who have made a call for a moratorium on missionaries) was reacting to was the common assumption, particularly in the West, that Christianity cannot survive in Africa without large-scale presence of missionaries.¹³ Certain, there are some people who have felt that perhaps Christianity in Africa is superficial and therefore, the presence of the foreign missionaries is indispensable. Such attitude is not shared by local Christians who feel that Christianity is as much part of the African cultural heritage as African traditional religion. The feeling is that unless people are given an opportunity to organize and run their missionary endeavours the selfhood of the Church will be compromised and the missionary zeal quenched. The call for a missionary moratorium was echoed by the AACC Assembly at Lusaka in 1974 when the African Church felt that a moratorium may be necessary in order to "enable the African Church to achieve the power of becoming a true instrument of liberating and reconciling the African people, as well as finding solutions to economic and social dependency."¹⁴

Most people in the third world would readily agree that the Church witness in mission and evangelism ought to be more self-reliant than it is now. The situation is however complicated by sheer limitation of resources to perform this enormous task. Furthermore the matter is complicated by Churches and missionary societies abroad who feel that they cannot shy away from foreign missions out of theological considerations. Some feel very strongly that the obligation to preach the gospel is an absolute one which cannot be abandoned on any grounds.

This state of affairs is complicated by the locally-founded Churches who have emerged largely through dissatisfaction with the mission-founded Churches. When closely examined, these Churches have never had any help from any other Church. These Churches are numerous in South Africa, Kenya, Zaire, Nigeria and Ghana.¹⁵ Most of these Churches have grown out of Protestant Churches and have demonstrated a vitality that is not equalled elsewhere in mission-founded Churches. This multiplication of Churches points to the characteristic Protestant spirit of independence. It has always been said that Methodist missions form a breeding ground for

Independent Church movements. Certainly the 19th Century British Methodism with its frequent schisms provided a model in Africa. What is unmistakable is that those who have succeeded from Methodism to form other Churches have demonstrated that they were in fact good Methodists. All this points to the fact that locally-founded Churches have invariably left their former confessional bodies to form separate Churches in order to feel much more authentic and autonomous. They have done this in their endeavour to be faithful to their missionary calling and evangelistic zeal.

The call for moratorium arose, then, out of the desire of the African people to seek self-discovery, self-expression, self-determination and self-development. This was done in full realization that the universal Church is always manifested in the local Churches and the Lusaka Assembly strongly felt that "the Churches in Africa can be both authentically African and at the same time an integral part of the universal Church of Jesus Christ."¹⁶

Towards a Contextual Awareness

In local Churches from where, as we have stated, missions ought to spring, there ought to be the pedagogical relationship established between the pastor and the congregation. This, I believe, is the Wesleyan pattern of the ministry. The pastor is supposed to prepare his Church for mission and the Church should contribute actively to the minister's formation. Through dialogue and reflection the Church ought to produce a type of mission which is contextual and incarnational. The Church should learn on the models that are created out of the traditional societies. The ministry of the Church must identify itself with the local community both socially and culturally. A good example of this is the Kimbanguist Church in Zaire which boasts of success in mission work because it has paid much attention to the cultural values of the people they evangelized. Kimbanguism did not experience any cultural alienation because it was both African and Christian from the onset.¹⁷

We are called upon to create structures for dialogue on mission as well as those for sharing resources in mission. We are called upon to critically and prayerfully examine our missionary priorities and structures in order to formulate better and workable structures. We have to assess our relationships to see whether they help to enhance the task which is before us. We need to examine our missions in the light of a wider ecumenical context. We need to see whether we are being faithful to the Word of God in our own cultural context. I wish to conclude by quoting the words of Kosuke Koyama. He says:-

"A tragedy of immense proportion takes place when a community of Christians underestimates, ignores and rejects 'whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just...' of their own community. What kind of tragedy! Theirs is a 'ghetto' existence among their own people!"¹⁸

NOTES

- ¹Anderson & Stransky, Ed., Mission Trends No. 3, Third World Theologies, Paulist & Eerdmans, 1976, p.20.
- ²John Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy, Heinemann, 1969, p.108.
- ³Basil Moore, "Jesus and Black Oppression", A New Look at Christianity, WSCF Books, Vol.2, No.2, 1972, Serial No.5, p.48.
- ⁴John Mbiti, "Theological Impotence", Mission Trends No.3, op.cit., p.115.
- ⁵Brian Hearne (ed.) Revelation: The Mystery of God's self-gift to Humanity, Spearhead No.57, Gaba Publications, 1979, p.58.
- ⁶Ibid., p.61.
- ⁷John Mbiti, "The Crisis of Mission in Africa", African Journal of Theology, No.5, December, 1972.
- ⁸Elliot Kendall, The End of an Era: Africa and the Missionary, SPCK 1978, p.155.
- ⁹Emilio Castro, "Structures for Mission", Mission Trends No.1, Anderson & Stransky (ed.), Paulist & Eerdmans 1974, p.160.
- ¹⁰Aylward Shorter, African Christian Theology - Adaptation or Incarnation?, Orbis Books 1977, p.151.
- ¹¹Oliver A. Beckerlegge, The United Methodist Free Churches, London, Epworth Press, 1957, p.15.
- ¹²Thomas Wieser (ed.), Planning for Mission, The U.S. Conference for the World of Churches, New York 1966, p.152.
- ¹³Elliott Kendall, op.cit., p.88.
- ¹⁴Adrian Hastings, African Christianity, An Essay in Interpretation, Geoffrey Chapman 1976, p.22.
- ¹⁵Ibid., p.24.

- 16 A.A.C.C. Lusaka Conference, August 1974, Report of Section I.
- 17 Ministry with the Poor, Theological Education Fund; W.C.C., Geneva 1977, p.73.
- 18 Kosuke Koyama, Waterbuffalo Theology, London, SCM Press 1974, p.45.