

Challenges and Prospects of Teaching Theology in Africa

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INTRODUCTION

THERE IS NO doubt that African Christianity is indebted to her rich heritage including the role Western Christianity has and continues to play. History is replete with the major contributions and sacrifices that the Western church made and continues making towards the birth and growth of Christianity among African peoples.

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Even after the church in Africa has grown, the West still provides human and material resources that impact the church in Africa. Missionaries continue to be sent to evangelize unreached African peoples; the Bible is translated into many languages; Bible teachers provide theological education, and many other social services are rendered to alleviate the suffering and poverty afflicting Africans. In spite of all these positive influences, there are, however, areas that need to be improved in order to make the church stronger. In this paper, I will focus on the teaching of theology in an African context, a subject that plays

a significant role in the development of ministers and teachers for the church.

Teaching theology in Africa is always an exciting venture, full of challenges, and criticism. In regard to criticism, many today argue that teaching theology in Africa must be done differently. Since systematic theology is so indebted to the West, some say, it cannot speak to the African situation. Furthermore, “Western” theology is often viewed as merely theoretical and abstract and thus not relevant to the real issues of life. Africans, in general, we are told, do not like abstract and theoretical thinking but instead prefer to focus on practical issues. It is for this reason that many criticize the teaching of theology in Africa, especially theology indebted to the West. In terms of the challenge of teaching theology in Africa, then, there are many. For example, the teacher often finds his students raising questions that are not immediately relevant to the discussion at hand. Often the question begins with a story that needs a response, and this can be confusing to the teacher since he does not know exactly what the question is. However, as one begins to understand the African worldview and way of asking

questions, one realizes that the question itself is in the story. In addition, another challenge, whether it is in Africa (or anywhere in the world!), is the disconnect between what is learned in class and what happens in life. Sadly, our culture has the tendency to mold us after it, instead of being transformed by Scripture.

In this paper, I want to address the challenges and prospects of teaching theology in Africa from an African perspective. I will first respond to the charge that theology taught in Africa is too “Western” in orientation and then secondly give some practical reflections on how to teach theology that is meaningful and relevant to African Christianity.

IS SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY TOO WESTERN?

Let us look at two criticisms that are often made in regard to teaching systematic theology in any context outside the Western world.

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY IS MERELY A WESTERN PRODUCT NOT SUITABLE FOR OTHER CONTEXTS

The first criticism deals with the perception that systematic theology is so indebted to Western thought that it is not useful for other contexts, especially an African context. No doubt, it can be demonstrated that most systematic theology written today originates from the Western world. Just the sheer number of theology texts emanating from the West is a strong enough reason to suggest that a good portion of systematic theology originates in the West. Indeed, for hundreds of years, many works on theology have been exported from the West to other parts of the world. But is this enough reason to say that systematic theology is merely a Western product? The answer is no.

Thomas C. Oden argues persuasively that, historically, “Africa played a decisive role in the formation of Christian culture. Decisive intellectual achievements of Christianity were explored and understood first in Africa before they were recognized in Europe and [it was a] millennium

before they found their way to North America.”¹ Historically, Africa played a vital role in the first five centuries of the church. In the study of church history and theology, many seem to forget the role that Africa has on the intellectual development of theology. Oden again states the obvious:

Christianity would not have its present vitality in the Two-Thirds World without the intellectual understanding that developed in Africa between [A.D.] 50 and 500. The pretence of studying church history while ignoring African church history is implausible. Yet, this assumption has been common in the last five centuries in a way that would have seemed odd during the first five centuries, when the African mind was highly honoured and emulated.²

While studying history in the West, I noted that history professors would hardly acknowledge the presence of Africa in the formation and development of Christian thought. One prominent professor even denied that Egypt is part of Africa! Another denied the fact that Augustine was an African. On this same note, Oden continues:

Well-meaning European and American historians have a tilted perception of the relation of African and European intellectual history in the third and fourth centuries, and thus at the apex of African influence. This perception is prejudicial. The facts show that the intuition is wrong.³

The situation in Africa is not any better. Even the church history taught in many seminary and Bible college classes in Africa falls prey to this deliberate ignorance of the African contribution. This in no small measure contributes to the idea that Christianity and indeed systematic theology is merely a Western product. Yes, “the longstanding preconceived notions and biases”⁴ continue to shape how Christianity and theology is shaped. The intellectual history of the church and Christianity is ignored, resisted, and disregarded. This is

largely responsible for the minimal or even nonexistent role of Africa in the development of Christian thought and writing. But historical theology would certainly be incomplete without the role of Africa and Africans. We cannot minimize the significant role that Africa has played in the history of the church and as a result it is difficult to conclude that all systematic theology is merely a product of the West.

Historic Christianity is indebted to prominent African theologians such as Origen, Tertullian, Augustine, Cyprian, Clement, Cyril, and Lactantius. We know that theologies in the early centuries were immensely shaped by these African thinkers on major issues such as Christology, the Trinity, and other crucial theological doctrines. Some have referred to Origen and Tertullian—both Africans—as pioneers in systematic theology, and rightly so, even though we would not agree with everything they said. A number of major classical philosophers were Africans, including Clement of Alexandria who was responsible for the development of *logos* philosophy and the Christian teaching of God. Major heresies, such as Gnosticism, Arianism, and Marcionism were fought by several African theologians. The monastic movement itself originated in Egypt. The arguments that propose that all these Africans were non-Africans is simply not correct. Is it possible that the motivations for such thinking are intended to minimize the African contribution to the development of systematic theology? It is hard to say, but Oden seems to be onto something in noting how, “even today many African-born scholars trained in the West seem all too ready to play the role of European chameleons.”⁵ The often-biased premise that Augustine and all North African theologians are really extensions of Europe is not correct. Historically, at one time, African Christianity was a powerhouse, and its contribution to systematic theology, even what has been labeled “Western” theology, is significant.

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY IS NOT RELEVANT TO AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY

A corollary to the preceding criticism is that theology, precisely because it is Western, is too abstract and irrelevant to the African. The charge is often made that abstract thinking without relevance is foreign to the African worldview. Behind this charge is the assumption that those from the West are more suited for abstract thinking while Africans are more practical in their orientation. Is this true? No. This is clearly a naïve way of characterizing both Westerners and Africans. Human beings, because they are created in God’s image regardless of race, geographical location, or any other factor, both *think* and *do*. It is not as if some cultures are “thinking” cultures, while others are “doing” cultures—one cannot so neatly distinguish the two. Reflection and action are natural abilities to all humans—Western, African, Asian, and all others. One without the other is impossible, and an overemphasis to the neglect of the other is unbiblical. Systematic theology is therefore what properly belongs to both thinking and doing and can be appreciated by all human beings because of their God-given capacity to be rational, systematic, logical, coherent, and practical. Systematic theology properly understood is not just a philosophical abstraction of ideas but a real reflection and application of God’s word to all of human life.

REFLECTIONS ON TEACHING THEOLOGY IN AN AFRICAN CONTEXT

Let me reflect on the teaching of systematic theology in an African context. I will begin by defining the nature of theology and then turn to some practical suggestions.

DEFINING THE NATURE OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Theology’s task is to make sense of Scripture on any particular issue or to apply Scripture to every area of our lives. Theology starts with issues raised in Scripture (e.g., sin, justification), and it also

addresses issues or questions from life, some of which may or may not directly be addressed from Scripture (e.g., abortion, homosexuality, genetic engineering, witchcraft, or ancestral belief). From whatever angle the theologian answers the questions of life, he must do so from Scripture. In seeking to address the real questions of people, the theologian must also answer the issues that his people are asking. In this regard, it is important to note that not every cultural context wrestles with exactly the same issues. To be sure, given the fact that we are God's creatures and that we have the same problem of sin, there is much more that unites us than divides. That said, sometimes theology influenced by the West does not always address the same issues or questions that Africans face or ask. The mistake many Western systematic theologies make is to presume that the questions they are raising in their own context must be the same important questions everybody is asking, and that the answers Western theologies provide to these questions must apply equally in every part of the world. This assumption is so pervasive because most who study theology in the West bring back to Africa Western-oriented questions and answers and try to plant them in contexts that have different questions and different answers.

For example, in many theology textbooks there are often detailed proofs for the existence of God—ontological, cosmological, moral arguments, to name a few. Teachers may spend entire class periods discussing different theological and philosophical arguments about the existence of God only to look out and see their African students completely disengaged with the discussion. And this is not because Africans cannot think philosophically; rather, it is because they are not asking precisely the same questions those in the West may be grappling with. For the most part, in Africa, the existence of God is not in question the way it is in the West. Belief in God is basic and, for most, unquestioned. Instead, the question that the African is concerned with is not whether God exists, but how a loving and powerful God relates

to daily problems, sickness, pain, and death. The problem of evil is another example. In the West, discussion centers around theodicy, or the justification of God: how can God exist, given the existence of evil? But in Africa, this is not the question. Africans are more concerned about the role of evil forces that bring evil and suffering upon the child of God. It is not that the Western approach is more rational than the African. Both are rational, theological, and philosophical, but they ask different questions and face different issues. In Africa, systematic theology must address the African questions, not merely the non-African ones.

The same applies to the issues that concern the African adult. For example, on issues of marriage and sexual ethics, the West is preoccupied with issues of divorce, homosexuality, and abortion. The African, on the other hand, is more entrenched in questions concerning procreation, polygamy, infertility, and the gender of children. It is not that these questions do not overlap; they do. My point is that theology taught in Africa must address particular African concerns. The chance of a Western theologian including a lengthy discussion on polygamy in a systematic theology textbook is slim, but for an African theologian writing in an African context, to not address this would be negligent. The same goes for the African trying to discuss issues of utmost relevance to the Western theologian such as homosexuality, gay rights, abortion, and euthanasia. The strong condemnation of homosexuality by African bishops in recent debates on the issue is a case in point. My point is simply this: the issues or questions sometimes discussed in Western theologies do not always have the same relevancy to the African person, and this should remind us that we have to be cautious about adopting Western texts on theology without acknowledging this fact and making sure the content of what we teach addresses the people we are teaching.

Probably one of the reasons why theology from the West has been problematic in Africa is that there is an uncritical transfer of theology as taught

in the West to Africa. Many people think erroneously that the theology taught in the West is a-cultural or a-temporal and must therefore equally apply to the African person. Once again, there is much that is common between all human beings, regardless of their culture or background. But theology, in seeking to *apply* Scripture to specific contexts must also address the questions, problems, and issues in that context so the gospel will be brought to bear on their lives. We must develop and teach a theology that is not only true to the Scriptures, but also speaks cogently to the needs of the African person. Let me now lay out some concepts that are important to move in this direction so that we may better and more faithfully teach theology in Africa.

AFRICAN IDENTITY

In order to develop a theology that is useful for the African Christian, the African theological student and teacher, and even the ordinary lay African Christian must know his true identity. The great undoing of African Christianity is the attempt to mimic Western Christianity. Teaching theology from a Western perspective contributes immensely to the notion that theology is Western. In order to stop this, African theologians need to make sure they are asking the right questions, given their context. To do that, they need to understand a number of things about African identity. A useful place to start, then, is history. For African theology, a fruitful starting point would be an earnest study and writing of African Christianity, historically and theologically. African people, particularly Christians, must know their history, culture, and worldview. Foreign teachers and Christian missionaries to the continent ought to know the African person in order to inculcate biblical and Christian truths. There is a rich legacy for Africans—and those interested in teaching theology—in knowing African culture and history. The call for an African Renaissance by Thabo Mbeki, the former President of South Africa, must go beyond cultural and political renewal to

include a reenactment and serious study of Africa's rightful and prideful role in the intellectual development of Christian beliefs, traditions, and practices. Oden is certainly right to conclude: "It is a category mistake to rule the interpretation of Jewish and Christian Scriptures out of early African history."⁶ Among African theologians, this exclusion has spawned what Oden calls "a dilemma of self-esteem."⁷ African Christianity with all its various theological, ethical, historical, and exegetical aspects must be a key element in the curriculum of seminaries and Bible colleges where men and women are trained. Carthage in North Africa formed a center of learning in ancient times. Why cannot Africa with its many modern megacities such as Johannesburg, Lagos, Nairobi, Accra, Bujumbura, Kigali, Kinshasha, and Harare not form serious centers of learning today? The way forward is for the church to recover and reaffirm what was good in her traditional culture. The belief that all African traditional beliefs and practices were pagan and evil must be re-examined. Every culture is fallen, and no culture is neutral. As Christians we have to evaluate every culture in light of Scripture, and we must do this in Africa as well. J. N. K. Mugambi has stated it well:

The modern Christian missionary enterprise has assumed, in general, that the culture and ethics of the missionary is "Christian" and "good," whereas that of the prospective converts is "non-Christian" and "evil." Missionary expansion has thus been rationalized in terms of going out to convert those of different cultures and religions so that they might become like the missionary.⁸

All that happened was that these so-called "evil" practices of African beliefs were simply replaced with alien Western beliefs (which were not necessarily Christian or biblical) that did not find a dwelling in our African souls. What is being called for is "cooking of Christianity in an African pot" as we evaluate our culture in terms of the standard of Scripture.

HOLISTIC APPROACH TO LIFE

African thought tends towards a unified vision of reality in which there is no room for irreducible dichotomies between matter and spirit, soul and body.⁹ Indeed, in an African worldview, the physical and the spiritual, training and ministry, academic and life situations, theory and practice, religion and economics, politics and religion, all go together. Speculative reflection apart from action has never been a defining characteristic of the African worldview. This interconnectedness, relatedness, and cohesion are what Nkemkia refers to as “vital force” by which he means, “the parts are really indispensable for the whole, and enable the whole to include in itself all the parts, though different from them.”¹⁰ Right belief without action is a paralysis. A right belief in a holy God results in righteous living. The right ethical life of Romans 12 is built upon a righteous standing with God. Formal moral ethics taught in class must go along with informal moral education of the students. This must be taught in our classes and churches. It is one package.

In every culture but especially in an African culture, theologians must bridge the compartmentalization of academic theology and moral transformation. Often theological teachers at universities and seminaries train lay and ordained leaders to pass on to their congregations and communities what they themselves have not learned. Perhaps it is up to theological teachers at tertiary educational institutions to bridge the gap between the compartmentalization of the intellectual affective and volitional aspects of Christian practice.¹¹

In addition, it is my conviction that the traditional Western approach that sometimes emphasizes spiritual needs over physical needs must also be discarded. Churches that are witnessing significant growth and impact in Africa are the ones who “get their hands dirty” trying to meet the real needs of people in the present. If the church in Tanzania is going to be relevant and Christian, it must not simply bemoan the problem of ritual killings of the albinos; it must also seek to

eradicate the poverty and other social ills that are driving these evil practices. The killings are not isolated events but involve other important practical issues—hunger and poverty to name a few. If evangelical Christianity is going to make sense and cut into the very fiber of the African, it must deal with life as one whole. Salvation must be seen to affect every aspect of life. Salvation is not just about cleansing and forgiving our sins before a holy God; it also deals with our present physical needs and challenges. Keta Sempangi states correctly that “a religion that speaks only to man’s soul and not his body is not true. Africans make no distinction between the spiritual and the physical.”¹² Christianity is not an abstract, theoretical system. It is very concrete and practical, involving the present and the future, the now and not yet, the spiritual and the material, the head and the body, politics and religion. A religion that seeks to answer only questions of the head will fail. Christianity must be seen to be relevant to every aspect of life. Any attempt to disjoint, dichotomize, compartmentalize, or overspecialize life is foreign and alien to an authentic African Christianity.

COMMUNITY LIFE

Closely related to the holistic thinking is the idea of community that is paramount in many African societies. Whether one sees it in terms of the clan, tribe, or nation, the idea of community is still the *sine qua non* in Africa. “If the community exists,” says Nkemkia, “then the individual exists.”¹³ The individual is always aware of the fact that “I am because we are, and we are, therefore I am.”¹⁴ This means that existence is interpreted in terms of relationships and the society. John Mbiti correctly notes that “within African communities where kinship makes a person intensely ‘naked,’ these moral demands are uncomfortably scrutinized by everybody so that a person who fails to live up to them cannot escape notice.”¹⁵ Because of this very communal and relational aspect of ethics, the family, clan, and the community serve as a public control on the moral lives of the individu-

als. The concepts of shame and honor become critical here. While we will develop the concepts of shame and honor later, it is sufficient to note that in community-based morality, how the individual conducts himself becomes critical. One's actions either shame his family or bring them honor.

It must be noted that although individualism has contributed to many modern developments, it has also negatively impacted a number of moral issues in the Western world. Issues of abortion, euthanasia, and homosexual unions, as but a few examples, are hotly contested issues. Individualism, as a major force in modern American and European ethics, is a demon that cannot be exorcised easily. Individual rights and freedom are given as legitimate reasons for such behavior as children rebelling against parents, girls aborting their babies, and men and women cohabiting. Though Africa has been challenged and threatened by the individualism of the West, one of God's gifts to Africa has been its community approach to life. Not only is this African, though, it is also a biblical idea. Christianity must reclaim community life and cease the overemphasis on the individual that emphasizes self and personal achievement without reference to other people. We must learn the proper biblical balance of the individual who also relates to his community.

It is a shame that an unbiblical, secularized form of individualism (often inherited from the West) is beginning to be imbibed by Africans. The breakdown of law and order, and the rise of a number of moral crises are mainly due to an overemphasis on individual rights and freedom, where the "I" is celebrated more than the "we," where the individual is stressed over the community. Individuals commit shameful acts without a feeling of shame or accountability to the group or community.

In Scripture, one finds a balance between the individual and the community. We stand as individuals before God, but we are also part of the human race, and even more, we are part of God's redeemed community. From Genesis to Revelation

we see individuals present, but we also see a strong emphasis on communities and groups. There are families, clans, tribes, communities, and nations. The biggest and fullest, of course, is the Christian tribe that Jesus gave birth to. The blood of Jesus Christ runs through this organic body, called the church. The tribe is international and local. This international tribe has ancestors, great ancestors whose stories need to be told and retold in proverbs, songs, and riddles. These include the biblical ancestors such as Abraham, David, Daniel, Paul, Silas, and Timothy. Other important historical figures include Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, and African continental ancestors such as Byang Kato, Bediako, and John Mbiti.

This is precisely why it should not surprise us that personalities in the Bible are always mentioned within the context of the family, tribe, and lineage. David Wells correctly notes that in the biblical world, "people thought of themselves, not as free-floating, isolated individuals, but as belongers."¹⁶ He goes on to explain that in that world, "one stood by and within one's group, and it was from this group that one derived prestige."¹⁷ The genealogy of Jesus provides this vivid picture: "A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the Son of Abraham ... and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of who was born, Jesus, who is called Christ" (Matt 1:1ff). The Lukan account (Luke 3:23ff) similarly speaks of "Joseph the son of Heli, the Son of Matthat, the son of Levi ... the son of Enosh, the son of Seth, the Son of Adam, the Son of God." The idea of connectedness, belongingness, and togetherness is critical in the existence of persons. No one belongs to himself. Everybody belongs to a group. A man's morality is seen, and judged, in terms of his connectedness to the larger whole. No man stands and exists for himself.

Moral judgments are made, not only for the individual person, but also for the larger community. The sin of Adam not only affected him but all of his descendants (Gen 3; Rom 5:12ff). The blessings of Abraham become blessings for the whole

believing community (Gen 12:1-3; Gal 3:14). The entire clan is punished for the sins of Achan (Josh 7). The sin of the adulterer in 1 Corinthians 5 reflects greatly on the perception of morality on the church. The moral failure of one person is a reflection on the entire assembly. The whole idea of the body in describing the church also influences Christian morality.

A very important reason for the community is that it is the best way to fight our moral decay. The community is better able to fight and win problems and challenges than the individual. If the church is going to fight the moral problems in our society, it must fight it collectively.

SHAME AND HONOR

In order to recapture our sense of morality, we must recapture the key concepts of honor and shame. In saying this I am not downplaying the importance of guilt. Sin renders us guilty before God and justification is God's declaration that we are right before him by faith in the finished work of Christ. However, in stressing this point we have often downplayed the role of shame and honor. We must not choose between them because they go hand in hand.

Shame and honor serve as a means of public control of morality. Honor, which in a community means respect, dignity, pride, and a sense of accomplishment for exemplary conduct or acts by a member of that community, serves as a major motivation for morally praiseworthy acts. Shame on the other hand, is a feeling of being let down, disappointment, a sense of personal shortcoming or betrayal against oneself and the community.¹⁸ A shameful act not only lets a person down, but also disgraces his relations and community. There are two kinds of shame in most African communities, namely—as the people of New Guinea called them—the “shame of the skin” for minor transgressions, and “deep shame” for major transgressions. Thus, to come into physical contact with an in-law may be shame of the skin or of the face, but to commit incest is deep shame or shame of the

heart that calls for confession and retribution. If the person is to become whole again, the shame needs to be removed by special rites.¹⁹

Shame and honor serve as a major restraint for moral wrong-doing—honor in terms of bringing respect and pride to the larger society to which one belongs, and shame in making a man feel that he has failed his own by doing something evil, bad, or disgraceful. It is not only he that has failed, but that the whole society has failed by his act. One's actions are not just a failure by the individual, but really a failure of the community. The Bajju of Nigeria, would say, “A thief is not ashamed of himself, but his own clan.” In other words, if the thief would really consider his clan and the disgrace that his act brings, he would not dare do it. Thus the Kuria says, “Often the whole community suffered retribution collectively for the ills of individuals.”²⁰ People acted for honor for their families and clans and not for money and material personal gains. To be ashamed or to lose face means that the whole family or community suffers. For the Saramakans of South America, “to lose face” is rendered “your face has fallen” or, “our faces have fallen,” and the remedy is “clean your face” or “clean our faces.” Failure is not personal, but communal. David Wells argues:

To lose face is to suffer embarrassment because others see the offender as having let them down, or having dishonored their family, or town, or the business. Shame and dishonor become intertwined, the one hardly ever happening without the other, because of the sense of responsibility towards others.²¹

Restoring the concepts of honor and shame in our lives will put some checks in our moral behavior. The concepts of shame and honor are not just the values of Africans, but also reflect those of the Jewish people in the Old Testament. The theologian and missionary would do well to adopt these powerful images in teaching the Christian faith in Africa.

MODELS OF THEOLOGY

In order to be established, African Christian theology must contextualize itself to its own situation and thus find proper models that fit her situation. Finding appropriate models and concepts has been normal practice for Christian theologians for over two thousand years. The early church had to respond to heresy and make sense of the Trinity and the person of Christ with models that made sense to their hearers. For example, the church fathers, through many lively debates and councils, articulated the Christian message in meaningful models and concepts best understood by their contemporaries. Justin Martyr, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Anselm, and others used philosophical categories to apply Scripture to their respective contexts.

Likewise, the West uses categories and models best suited to make Christianity meaningful for its context. African Christianity must in the same way aim to make the Christian message “enter the hearts of Africans, so that it may bear abundant fruit in a way of life which is at the same time both truly African and truly Christ[ian].”²² As has been clearly demonstrated by Philip Jenkins, Africa is a fertile ground: Africans are very familiar with questions of evil spirits, poverty, agriculture, divine healing, rituals, and evil, and are therefore naturally more at home with biblical themes. The political, economic, social, and religious concerns of Africa create fewer roadblocks in the reading and application of the Scripture than do those in more Western contexts. Africans are privileged to have this intimate relevance to the original context of the word of God.

It must be admitted that this is not an easy task. Given what I said above about the African contribution to systematic theology in Christian history, it does not mean that all theological models from the past can be discarded. But it is to say that as we seek to apply Scripture to the African context we must think of ways that do so with power and precision to the people we address without jettisoning the wisdom of the past. To this day the standard

textbooks in theology used in Africa are those written by Westerners or Europeans. Their mindset is not always the mindset of Africans. We must be careful that we do not simply parrot other theologies from different contexts. Just as the West found a relevant theology in its own context, we must produce a theology that best fits our context.

So far, the predominant theologizing of Scripture has been foreign. This does not necessarily make it wrong since our theological conclusions must always be evaluated in light of Scripture. But we must be careful that we do not baptize an overly intellectualized and secularized reading of Scripture that many in the West have given us. We must make sure that our reading of Scripture is first and foremost given to its primary and ordinary intended meaning. We must let Scripture first speak to us and then we must apply it to our context. One needs only to read some exegetical studies on passages on homosexuality, abortion, and marriage, to see how liberal, secular, and postmodern biases can distort the texts and treat them as “biblical.” Scripture must be our standard as we seek to understand it and apply it. Can we even say that Africans may be able to read and hear Scripture better given the fact that we have not imbibed so much of the critical mindset of biblical scholarship? Jenkins notes that Africans typically possess,

a much greater respect for Scriptural authority, especially in matters of morality; a willingness to accept the Bible as an inspired text and a tendency to literalism; a special interest in supernatural elements of scripture, such as miracles, visions, and healings; a belief in the continuing power of prophecy; and a veneration for the Old Testament, which is considered as authoritative as the New. For the growing churches of the global south, the Bible speaks to everyday, real-world issues of poverty and debt, famine, and urban crisis, racial and gender oppression, state brutality, and persecution. The omnipresence of poverty promotes awareness of the transience of

life, the dependence of individuals and nations on God, and the distrust of the secular order.²³

This may explain why Pentecostal churches are growing faster than many other churches since they take the Scriptures at face value. Obviously this is not universal among Pentecostals. My point is that those areas where readers of Scripture do not impose the critical, liberal approach on Scripture but approach it as God's word and desire to sit under it and not over it, are those where the gospel is taking root. The Lord's Prayer which says, "Give us our daily bread" is very relevant to many Africans who indeed lack bread on a daily basis. They do not need a Greek scholar to tell them what bread meant in the original languages. Other examples could be given, but the point is that Scripture must be heard and followed in all of its depth and breadth in the African church as well as every church around the globe.

MINISTERIAL TRAINING

If an authentic African theology is to avoid the criticisms labelled against it, it must challenge and reformulate the old mode of ministerial training. Residential ministerial training grounds which remove student pastors from their local context and place them in foreign, strange environments with strange people and strange curricula have been unsuccessful in producing productive ministers in the church. What residential seminaries have succeeded in doing is reproducing in their students foreign ideas that do not fit their ministry context. The Western mode of residential institutions has also resulted in a strict class distinction between teacher and student, master and disciple. This class distinction has also been introduced into African Christianity. There are many pastors who live a completely different, largely materialistic, lifestyle while their members are living in abject poverty. Many of us who trained in the West, or in traditional schools in Africa, struggled to adjust back to Africa in a relevant way. The catalogues, books, resources, and approach

to ministry were completely Western. Again, these Western resources were and are uncritically imported wholesale to schools and churches in Africa. Although we did not have problems about the existence of God, Western theologies forced us to deal with atheism. Even when we had no problem about the Bible as the word of God, or the existence of God, we were taught to wrestle and memorize the theistic proofs and the arguments in favor of inerrancy and infallibility. Why do we need to belabor the point when we already believe in God and the Scriptures?

The Scriptures give us some hints on how to train ministers. Moses went along with Joshua and Caleb, Elijah took Elisha as well as a school of prophets who lived and ate together. Jesus and his disciples walked together, ate and drank together, struggled together, and celebrated together. They shared their aspirations, despair, anxiety, and hopes together. Joshua, Elisha, Paul, Timothy, and Titus became great religious leaders because they worked and lived alongside their mentors. The idea of a professor standing in front of a class and merely passing on learned ideas to students sitting at his feet without taking the time to make disciples by his example is not biblical. The biblical—and most effective—method of teaching has always been the intimate relationship between mentor and mentee. This is the way that Africans have traditionally trained their young. Farmers took their children to the farm, and the sons became farmers. Hunters took their children to the bush to hunt, and the sons became hunters. Mothers cooked with their daughters in the kitchen while they taught them housekeeping, love, and motherhood. We need to recapture those modes of learning in our ministerial training of pastors and leaders.

DOUBLE LISTENING

Theology has always sought to understand the meaning of the word of God and also apply it to life situations. This is what many have labeled, "double listening." John Stott has been credited with the

concept of double listening, which is a powerful metaphor for the task of theology. Stott calls for,

double listening, listening both to the Word, and to the world.... We listen to the Word with humble reverence, anxious to understand it, and resolved to believe and obey what we come to understand. We listen to the world with critical alertness, anxious to understand it too, and resolved, not necessarily to believe and obey it, but to sympathize with it and to seek grace to discover how the gospel relates to it.²⁴

Theologians and pastors have been good in interpreting the Scripture but often quite weak in understanding the times. Bible teachers, evangelists, and missionaries are often guilty of this as they feel that their calling is only to teach and preach the word of God without getting an understanding of the people's culture. This cannot continue as it will affect the communication of the authentic gospel. In order to avoid this problem, our reading and interpretation of Scripture must move to the application of Scripture to our culture and time. We need also to know something of our culture's politics, economics, and tastes in order to apply the Scripture effectively to our people's lives. One of my seminary professors used to say, borrowing from Karl Barth, that for his devotions he read with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. This of course does *not* mean that the Bible and the newspaper have equal weight in terms of providing the Christian with truth in matters of life and conduct. The Bible is our final authority in matters of truth, faith, life, and morality (2 Tim 3:16-17). However, the point is that an appreciation of one's context is critical in applying the word of God meaningfully. That is what I mean when I talk about double listening. The word of God cannot be preached, taught, and lived in a vacuum. We must know the circumstances and context of the people to whom we are preaching to be able to present a relevant word to them. Authentic theology must not only engage

and listen to the voice of God, but it must also put its ears on the ground and open its eyes to see the issues all around it.

Acts 17:16-33 provides some important insights on the need to understand and relate to the experiences and worldview of the people in order to communicate the message meaningfully. This exciting story narrates how Paul proclaimed the gospel in Athens by his awareness, understanding, and sensitivity to the real issues of the day. Verse 16 states that "he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols." The two verbs, namely "distressed" and "saw" emphasize the fact that Paul was greatly impacted by what he saw. Paul was not nonchalant about his surroundings. He was "provoked" or "enraged" by the glaring idolatry in the city. The phrase "the city was full of idols" means that "it was smothered with idols or swamped by them."²⁵ As a result of his great distress and provocation at what he saw, Paul reasoned with Jews, God-fearing Greeks, and those in the marketplace (17:17). He engaged the people with a serious intellectual discussion. He used this method to proclaim the Lordship of Christ to his hearers. When Paul later had the opportunity to address the Athenians, he did not begin by quoting Old Testament passages but started with the idols he had seen in the city. The point of contact was what he had seen in the city—the idols they worshipped! This approach means one can begin with a situation in order to teach a biblical truth. Paul acknowledged the Athenians's religiosity but pointed to their acknowledgement of their own ignorance on one of the inscriptions in the city (17:23). Paul then went on to explain the real meaning of this inscription—the gospel of Jesus Christ. At the end of the presentation, though many jeered and others postponed making a decision, a few believed in the gospel of Christ (17:34).

In teaching theology in Africa and other areas of the world, there are some compelling lessons to be learned from this passage. Bible teachers and missionaries must learn to see, understand, and appreciate their local context and realities. They

must preach the gospel by bringing it to bear on the world around them. They must seek to communicate the gospel from Scripture and drive it home to those they are addressing. John Stott states the obvious: "People are looking for an integrated worldview which makes sense of all their experience."²⁶ Seeing, listening, and understanding local realities provides an effective avenue for proclaiming an authentic gospel and biblical truth.

African theology must hold in tension its historic faith and modern relevance to faith. An essential and non-negotiable aspect of the historic past is the Holy Scripture. A central feature of this faith is that the word of God is unchanging, providing the basis for life and conduct. All behaviors, lifestyles, and theologies must be brought under the scrutiny of Scripture. Often people are tempted to manipulate Scripture to fit their interpretation or to justify their actions. But any deviation, in either faith or practice, must be interpreted as contrary to Scripture. Past attempts to dilute Scripture, or to water it down with new insights, have rendered Christianity unable to fulfill its mission. Modern, liberal theology is losing this historic base, this foundation, this respect for biblical authority. Hence the distortion and confusion in current theological formulations. Sometimes, these theologies do not even have a semblance of biblical Christianity. A disregard for the past renders Christianity rootless, vulnerable, and easy prey to flawed formulations, views, and errors. However, a Christianity frozen in the past, without a modern relevance, makes the faith archaic and irrelevant to modern life. Theology in Africa must be taught and practiced from a solid biblical perspective and related to the issues and questions being raised in its own context.

CONCLUSION

This article has identified some pertinent criticisms in teaching theology in Africa. Though some have suggested that systematic theology is foreign to Africans because it involves abstract thinking and is irrelevant, we have argued that the

wedge between theory and practice, reflection and action, does not really describe the real problem. All human beings, irrespective of geographical location are thinking and doing beings. Theology is not just about abstraction but involves action.

The critical issue is that the questions of life and how those questions are answered are affected by one's worldview and local context. Traditional systematic theology has often neglected this essential ingredient in African Christianity. Non-Western questions and answers which have been written in Western oriented textbooks are dumped on African Christian theological and ministerial students. While they can easily grasp the intellectual concepts involved, these concepts do not seem to have any immediate relevance in their lives and ministries.

In light of these challenges, this paper suggests that the teaching of theology taught in Africa must begin to ask its own questions and provide its own answers in light of a proper understanding of Scripture. These questions and answers must also take into consideration the essential nature of the African worldview, which includes the concepts of its identity, community, a holistic view of life, shame and honor, and the normative role of Scripture and double listening to both word and world.

ENDNOTES

¹Thomas C. Oden, *How Africa Shaped The Christian Mind: Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007), 9.

²Ibid., 9-10.

³Ibid., 31.

⁴Ibid., 11.

⁵Ibid., 30.

⁶Ibid., 25.

⁷Ibid., 26.

⁸J. N. K. Mugambi, "The Problem of Teaching Ethics in African Christianity," in *Moral and Ethical Issues in African Christianity: Exploratory Essays in Moral Theology* (ed. J. N. K. Mugambii and Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike; 2nd ed.; Nairobi: Acton, 1999), 14.

⁹Martin Nkjavu Nkemkia, *African Vitality: A Step*

Forward in African Thinking (Africa: Paulines, 1999), 165.

¹⁰Ibid., 166.

¹¹Louise Kretzeschman, "The Importance of Moral and Spiritual Formation for 21st Century Africa," in *African Christian Theologies* (ed. Ernst M. Conradie; Institute for Theological and Interdisciplinary Research Ecumenical Foundation of Southern Africa, 2004), 104.

¹²Quoted in Phillip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 97.

¹³Nkemkia, *African Vitality*, 172.

¹⁴John Mbiti, *African Traditional Religions and Philosophy* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998), 214.

¹⁵Ibid., 214.

¹⁶David Wells, *Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover its Moral Vision* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 165.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Laurenti Magesa, *African Traditions: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), 169.

¹⁹Ibid., 173.

²⁰H. W. Kinoti, "African Morality: Past and Present," in *Moral and Ethical Issues in African Christianity* (ed. J. N. K. Mugambi and A. Nasimiyu-Wasike; Nairobi: Acton: 1999), 79.

²¹Wells, *Losing Our Virtue*, 166.

²²Benezet Bujo, *African Theology in Its Social Context* (trans. John O'Donohu; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992), 76.

²³Ibid., 5.

²⁴John Stott, *The Contemporary Christian*, Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1992), 27-28.

²⁵John Stott, *The Message of Acts to the Ends of the Earth* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1990), 277.

²⁶Ibid., 290.