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What is African evangelical theology?

His name is Mumo. He is graduating this year from a Bible School somewhere on the continent of Africa. He will be a teacher after he graduates as well as a part-time pastor in a small local church. He will become more deeply involved with the two worlds he loves. His passion for these conflicting worlds is riddled with tension. There is, first of all, the world of Christian faith represented by the Bible he studies, the church where he worships, and a special religious vocabulary filled with words that blaze with personal meaning, words like, "born again," "justified," "Spirit-filled" and above all, "saved."

He was ushered into this new world of faith four or five years ago in a dramatic conversion experience. This is the world of Christ, the gospel, the Spirit. It is a world of light which fills him with great peace and satisfaction. It is a world to which he is intensely committed.

But there is a second world. It is the world of African culture represented by the name he bears, the ancestry to which he belongs, and the headlines of the daily newspaper, alive with political, economic, intellectual and social pulsations. The vocabulary of this world is filled with words like "tradition," "spirits," "development", "poverty", "cultural authenticity", "selfhood" and "non-alignment." He was ushered into this world of culture twenty-five years ago at his birth. It is a world of richness, a black richness, like dark, fertile soil. It is a world to which he is also intensely committed.

Mumo's crisis is the yawning gap between the two worlds he loves. His search is for a theology which bridges the chasm between his Christ and his culture. His search is for an African evangelical theology, a theology which bridges this gap by applying the truths of the world of faith, the lordship of Jesus Christ, as taught in the Scripture, to the world of African culture, issues and problems.

As such, any theology that would claim to be both African and evangelical, that would truly relieve Mumo's tension, should include the following:

1. The African evangelical is committed to the Lordship of Jesus Christ over the powers of this world.

The African evangelical has, as the very heart of his theology, not a theory, abstraction, philosophy or axiom, but a person -- the divine-human mediator, Jesus Christ. He rejects all speculative approaches to theology which do not recognize the centrality of Christ. Thus African

evangelical theology can never be merely academic. Its aim is intensely personal – to follow, exalt, serve, worship and proclaim Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

What does someone like Mumo mean when he utters that oldest of Christian confessions – “Christ is Lord”? It includes Christ’s lordship over the power of sin. Only he can take it away. Only he has paid its penalty. It includes Christ’s lordship over the power of evil. No curse, charm, magic or fetish; no corrupt politician, dishonest businessman or false ideology can thwart the power and plan of Christ. Even his enemies unwittingly do his will. He will bring righteousness to triumph in his time and in his way. It includes Christ’s lordship over the power of death. His resurrection proves that new and greater life awaits those who trust him. The African Christian, knowing that he will be guided through death by his powerful Lord faces death honestly, soberly, yet without fear. It includes Christ’s lordship over culture. Christ is Lord over culture – the author of its good; the judge of its evil. For this reason African evangelical theology does not worship African culture, although it appreciates its God-given beauty and richness. Instead the evangelical submits all his culture, even his love of his culture, to Christ for his use, his transformation and his judgment.

2. The African evangelical is committed to the Word of God and the Spirit of God as the only reliable guides to understanding the truth about the Lordship of Christ

While Christ is the center of Christianity, the Bible is the cradle where he is displayed. While Mumo is deeply moved by the traditions of his fathers and the cries of African culture, it is to the Word of God he turns for truth about salvation, man, the world and right living. Why? Because only the Bible gives him the truth about Christ as redeemer and Lord. The African evangelical does not recognize as Saviour the prophetic Christ of the Qu’ran, the hidden Christ of Hinduism, the silent Christ of African tradition, the revolutionary Christ of liberation theology or the middle-class Christ of Western culture. Only the biblical Christ is the object of saving faith. How can Christ be seen clearly in the Scriptures? The African evangelical seeks the illumination of the Spirit (John 16:13). The full dimensions of His power – power sufficient for the needs of Africa – are brought to light only by that supernatural searchlight – the Spirit of God.

3. The African evangelical is committed to applying this biblical, Christ-centered faith to life in Africa

What makes evangelical faith African? The key is the area of application. African evangelical theology is simply evangelical theology applied to the African context. To be authentic Mumo must let Christ and his power

speak to African questions, issues and needs. What are these needs? African evangelical theologians who helped draft the 1982 Seoul Declaration describe the areas which need application:

Those of us in Africa will have to take seriously the traditional African world view, the reality of the Spirit-world, the competing ideologies, the resurgence of Islam and the contemporary cultural, political and religious struggles. Theology will have to explore ways of presenting the personal God and Jesus Christ as the only mediator between God and man. Also it will seek to respond to the quest for human identity in the context of the dehumanizing history of colonial exploitation, tribal feuds and racial discrimination.

These are the larger questions. But the smaller ones relating to family, marriage, morality, jobs are no less pressing.

If these are the commitments essential to authentic, African evangelical theology, how do we integrate them in such a way that a bridge is built for men like Mumo? **EAJET** is but one of many efforts to build such an integrated faith. Two of our four articles in this issue deal specifically with the theory of contextualization -- applying biblical Christianity to culture. Our two lead articles are case studies in evangelical theology interacting with rival views of salvation, encountered in the African context. Mumo can't live forever caught in the tension between his two worlds. With help his faith and vision will grow. Answers will be found. Bridges will be built.