



Developing an African Evangelical Theology

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Abstract

Evangelicalism in Africa is an export of American theology and therefore considered inadequate for the African situation because it is shaped by Western culture. Consequently, I argue that Evangelical theology contains cultural elements from the dominant cultures of the West that apply only to those cultures. This article argues that if Evangelical theology is relevant in Africa, it must consider the cultural context. In most cases, references to Evangelical theology in the writings of sub-Saharan African theologians seem to mean previous theology done by Western theologians. In particular, the debate centres on the type of Christianity transmitted to Africa through Western theologies in the 21 Century. African theologians such as Bujo (1992:43) accuse Western theologians of being ethnocentric and paternalistic. This is perhaps the most prominent critique of Western Evangelical theologians' approach to Africa as if it had no heritage. For this reason, Western Evangelical theology fails to understand that African anthropology treats a person through the community. (Maimela, 1994: 4-5). The lived realities of poverty and suffering must be taken seriously in developing a praxis of Evangelical Theology for Africa. A qualitative methodology is employed in this article by using the works of African and Latin American theologians to understand how their works may assist in developing an African Evangelical theology that focuses on an integral mission.

Keywords: African Theology, Evangelicalism, Western, Poor, Liberation Theology Integrated Mission

Introduction

Harold (2019, 2022) has repeatedly argued that Evangelicalism spread a form of Christianity marked by Western culture. Western Evangelicalism widely overlooked the lived socio-economic and political realities by emphasizing the "winning of the African soul to Christ". This is more accurately described by Mugambi (1989:32), that Western missionaries applied a strategy of transforming African culture by requiring Africans to look like Westerners as evidence of their Christian conversion. Tiénou (2005:116-117) suggests a critical ethnic study claim about Christian evangelicalism is that Evangelicalism is only willing to tolerate evangelicals of colour to the extent that they can be incorporated safely within white Evangelicalism.

Thus, Mbiti argued that African theologians and all Africans need to remedy this situation by making Christianity more African. Mbiti (1971:2) contends,

It is not enough to transplant prefabricated Christianity from Rome or Geneva to Kampala or Lagos: that period is now over. We have to produce a type of Christianity here which will bear the imprint made in Africa and which will not be cheap imitation of the type of Christianity found elsewhere or at periods in the past.



Mbiti's observation is essential for the African Evangelical church as he calls the church in Africa to develop an authentic African theology. The *Final Communiqué* of the Pan-African Conference (1977) stated, "African theology must reject, therefore, the prefabricated ideas of North Atlantic theology." Agreeing with this consultation in Accra, African theologians often reiterate the argument that previous theology done by Western Christian missionaries in parts of sub-Saharan Africa is inadequate.

Based on the Pan-African Conference, a call for developing an authentic Evangelical theology for Africa is made. Oden (2007:25) states that according to most sub-Saharan African theologians, to separate the European missionary enterprise from the colonial occupation of Africa is impossible. This is because Western missionaries worked closely with colonial powers in sub-Saharan Africa and thus advanced Christianity alongside European colonizers and fully supported the colonial governments' socio-political agendas. Consequently, becoming the agents of the colonial powers in sub-Saharan Africa (Tiberondwa, 1978:28-29).

African theologians, such as K. Busia (1976), F. Eboussi Boulaga (1984), Kwame Bediako (1992), and Watson Omulokoli (1986), have attempted to make an even more fundamental charge by arguing that Western missionaries misrepresented Christian theology. Busia (1976:14) argued that not only was the method of introducing Christianity to Africa detrimental but also Western missionaries made the situation worse by misrepresenting the Christian message to Africans by allowing the values of their affluent, materialistic society to shape their thinking and acting toward the poor. In addition, Western evangelicals were becoming increasingly individualistic and adopting an eschatological premillennial view led to the 'great reversal' in which a dichotomy between proclamation and social action emerged, specifically after World War I (Harold 2019).

Arguments against Western Evangelical Theology

African theologians reveal at least two recurring arguments against previous theology done by Western missionaries. First, African theologians have joined the worldwide liberation interpretation that claims Western theology, more specifically evangelical theology, has failed to serve the poor. Maimela (1993:55) argues that the ruling classes have always usurped the church's mission in history. He (ibid) further claims that traditional Western theology often serves "the interests of the powerful and dominant segments of society." Therefore, Harold (2019) argues that Evangelical theology is closely intertwined with the sociopolitical conditions that tend to discriminate between the rich and poor.

Costas (1989:246) views North American missions abroad as beholden to international business interests; despite a profession of political neutrality, their indifference to the status quo reinforces economic domination that perpetuates the impoverishment of the masses.

Second, Harold (2019) states that Western Evangelical theology tends to separate doctrine from lifestyle. Western Evangelicalism is overly concerned with "spiritual sins" to neglect socio-political issues. As a result, Western Evangelical theology largely ignored other evils in society. Maimela (1991:14) contends that Africans need deliverance from the wrongs committed against them, and he (ibid) further criticizes Western theology because it did not seem to care about the social conditions of Africans. To address the social issue, Harold argues (2022b) asserts that evangelical theologians should insist that the correct belief (orthodoxy) and the right doing (orthopraxis) belong together; both are equally essential tests of authenticity and integrity of the gospel. Escobar (and other Latin American thinkers (Boff, 1991; Costas, 1982; Steuernagel, 1988) have expressed concern that by failing to reflect on the earthly compassionate acts of Christ in history and by focusing only on the eternal benefits of his work, Western Evangelicals have presented a docetic Christ. Thus, Western Evangelical theologies presented us with, as stated by (Núñez cited in Smither, 2011), a "divine-human Christ in the theological formula; but in practice, He was far removed from the stage of the world, aloof to our social problem."



Presuppositions for an African Evangelical Theology

The 1977 Pan-African Conference declared that Africa required a new theological model different from other models of the dominant theology in the West (Appiah-Kubu & Torres 1991:189-195).

The intent of the Pan-African Conference was about the future of African theology. (Musorewa,129-30) This landmark meeting firmly established that African theology needs to arise from the African context and must be accountable to the African people. The final statement of this meeting declared: "The African situation requires a new theological methodology that is different from the approaches of the dominant theologies of the West. Our task as theologians is to create a theology that arises from and is accountable to African people" (Appiah-Kubu & Torres 1991:189-195).

African Evangelical theologians can learn from the 1977 Pan-African Conference to develop an Evangelical Theology that is African. The first step is to create a new way of doing theology out of the sub-Saharan African context, and the other step is to make that theology accountable to the African people. That is, Africans Evangelicals alone should conceive their theology, and the key aim of African Evangelical theologians is to create a genuine African evangelical theology "making it living, dynamic active and creative realities in our society" (Appiah-Kubu and Torres (1991:viii).

As African Evangelicals, we must consider two significant claims concerning the source of our developing theology. First, the Bible is the fundamental source of theology because it is the primary witness of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. Second, it takes the lived experience of many Africans seriously. Therefore, I argue that any theology that takes the Bible and the lived experience of Africans seriously must lead to a theology of liberation, as Nthamburi (1980: 232) argues that theology of liberation provides the only appropriate method of doing theology in Africa. He (ibid) claims that liberation theology helps the poor to reflect upon their concrete situations. Acknowledging the contextual concerns of liberation theologians, that was ignored mainly by Western evangelicals in the 20th century. Padilla (cited in Smith 1983:117) asserts, "The question for me is not how do I respond to liberation theology ... but rather, how do I articulate my faith in the same context of poverty, regression, and hopelessness out of which liberation theology has emerged?" I concede that an African Evangelical theology must consider the experience of Africans in their context of suffering to be authentic.

Additionally, it means an African Evangelical theology must take African culture into account, as argued by Tutu (1975:32-33) that theology must lead to the reception of "an authentic personhood." Using Okolo's (1978:53) understanding that Christianity must identify with Africans. I argue that for our theology to be relevant, it requires doing critical reflection based on concrete African context and experience because western Evangelicalism is become deficient because of its Euro- American influence and culture. I argue that an authentic African Evangelical theology begins with the context and experiences of Africans.

Arguably, Banana (1992:35) states that an African theology must be relevant to produce total human liberation. He (1992:15) contends that the authenticity of Christianity—and by extension of its theology is determined by the test of whether it can improve the living conditions of the African people. Therefore, I argue that the development of an African Evangelical theology must begin with a focus on the poor. Escobar (2002:114) states that what is needed is,

a fresh exploration ... into the depths of the biblical text, with the questions raised by the Latin American context that is, Scripture should be read in light of Latin America's very real social problems, including poverty, injustice and oppression – issues that have been addressed in Scripture and the earthly ministry of Jesus.



Therefore, any relevant and authentic African theology must speak to African people in their context. Learning from Latin American Evangelicals like

Authenticity as Central Criterion for an African Evangelical Theology

Pararat (1995:27) states that authenticity is the central criterion for African theology. Mbiti (1971: 2) posits that African theology is the theology that is "made in Africa", thus requiring our theology to "lose its foreignness" to be relevant "in the affairs of the African continent, as a participant, not as a spectator." Pobee (1979:22) suggests that doing African theology is to "interpret essential Christian faith in an authentic African language . . . so that there may be a genuine dialogue between the Christian faith and African cultures." Thus, an African Evangelical theology must emerge from the African context, bringing a distinctive stamp of African thinking and reflection. This is done by seeking to reflect upon and express the Christian faith in African thought-forms and idiom as it is experienced in African Christian communities and is constantly in dialogue with the rest of Christendom. (Kurewa,1975:36). Dickson (1984:5) notes that African Christian theology needs to be authentic Christian theology. He describes the task of theologizing in sub-Saharan Africa as the "quest for authenticity or selfhood." I, therefore, posit that the task of an African Evangelical theology is to express the Christian faith that speaks for justice through God-given ways and thoughts. In taking the African way of life seriously, an attempt is made to develop an African Evangelical theology that contrasts the individualistic approach of Western Evangelicalism.

Tienou (1990:74) suggests four pertinent aspects that define African theology. First, it is theology done in Africa. Second, it arises out of the context of African people. Third, it draws on African mentality, and fourth, it should reflect on the historical situation of African people. I would suggest a fifth: to remain Evangelical; the Bible also guides our theology. I believe this will develop a genuine African Evangelical Theology based on Scripture and the life experiences of Africans. It remains the responsibility of African Evangelicals to build an authentic theology that establishes the legitimacy of content by considering our cultural, geographical, spiritual, and social background, enabling our theology to be authentically African and meaningful to Africans. Thus, our African Evangelical theology must critically analyze and even reject aspects of Western Evangelicalism by defining our theology according to the struggles of African people to develop a theology that arises from and is accountable to African people to be authentic.

The Context of African Evangelical Theology

Some prominent African Evangelical leaders in the 1970 and early 1980's, namely Kato Byango (1970), made positive attempts to deal with African identity in culture and religion in articles like "Christianity as an African Religion" or "African Cultural Revolution and Christian Faith". Tite Tienou and Tokunboh Adeyemo attempted to present an apologetic to the liberal ecumenical work of John Mbiti. Tienou's primary concern was keeping academic theology close to the "grass-roots church life". Therefore, relating the "search for theological identity to worship and prayer life of the African churches." He observes a "gap between academic and popular theology". He wants to implement a "third way in African theology", paved for the local pastor by helping pastors ground their shaky popular theology on "sound scriptural interpretation" and proper contextual theology.

Bediako (1992) attempted a more constructive evaluation against Western Christian theologies by acknowledging the devaluation of African culture and religion and attributing people like Mbiti and Idowu with an honest personal interest in clarifying the serious question of African identity and selfhood using an experimental inculturation theology.

Simbiri (1983) on the question "What is African evangelical theology?" He points to three essential elements in the following priority list:



1. African evangelical theology has to be based on the “Lordship of Jesus Christ over the powers of this world.”
2. African evangelical theology has to be “committed to the Word of God and (!) the Spirit of God as the only reliable guide to understanding the truth about the Lordship of Christ”;
3. African evangelical theology has to apply “biblical, Christ-centred faith to life in Africa”, summarizing that African evangelical theology is “simply evangelical theology applied to the African context.” However, how it is applied to the African context is not stipulated.

Adeyemo (1983) wrote the article "Towards an Evangelical African Theology", obviously using the term 'African Theology' in a neutral sense defines who African Evangelicals are:

1. Bible-believing Christians living in a dynamic personal relationship with Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord.
2. An obedient Spirit-led reflection upon God's revelatory words and acts, culminating in Jesus Christ
3. An honest application of the same to our lives
4. A Consequent sincere communication of it for perfecting the saints for the work of the ministry.

However, none of these above scholars develops a praxis of Evangelical Theology. While they both speak of the application of theology to the African context, no demonstration is given. Here, I rely on Pauline Corpus to demonstrate evangelical theology's praxis in an African Context. I believe a holistic understanding of the gospel that considers the soul and the social aspects of the situatedness of a person is more consistent with a contextual understanding of the gospel.

The writings of the Apostle Paul contain a valuable glimpse into the manner of life required by the gospel. While Evangelicals focus on the great doctrines of Justification, Sanctification and Glorification, many do not read Paul as a “liberation” theologian. Yet, more space is given in his writings to his passion for the poor than justification by faith.

Paul's social concern: Collection Texts

The collection for the poor provides a vital window to Paul's understanding of social concern. Galatians 2: 1-10 calls on the leaders in Jerusalem to “remember the poor. The poor are the target of his plea for an offering to be taken. Acts 11: 37-30; 12:25 provides evidence of his concern for the poor due to famine. In Corinthian, Paul gives the church instruction for gathering and weekly collection. Romans 15: 25-28 discusses the obligation to give regarding the “debt” owed to the Jew by the Gentiles. As Paul's mission grew, so did his concern for the poor and his request for collection for the poor, shaping his life and ministry. Dunn (1998: 707) asserts that Paul's collection for the poor holds peculiar significance and “sums up to a unique degree the way Paul's theology, missionary work and pastoral concerns were held together as a single whole”. Such understanding is rarely seen in the Evangelical enterprise, including in the works of African Evangelicals. Most evangelical scholars who read Paul, more specifically his collection statements, interpret it entirely in terms of Paul's concern for the gospel project, leaving no room for the concern for the poor. At the very least, however, while many factors motivated the purpose of Paul's collection, the concern for the poor was one of them.

What Paul does with his theology of giving is to articulate that our salvation has ethical considerations, calling the believer to do good works (Ephesians 2:8-10; 1 Timothy 2:9-10; Titus 2:8; 3:1,8), calling his readers to the mutual benefit of the whole church from a charitable response to God's gracious, costly acceptance of sinners.

Giving generously has social implications drawn from Paul's texts and other Christian social concern teachings. This can be summarised as the ethical construct in Philippians 2:4 to consider the interest of others and in Romans 17:7 to spur us to hospitality. To follow Christ's example



suggest that Christian giving has no limits. Rosner (2007) reflects that given the sinful human state, such open-handedness is necessary to wage war against the idolatry of greed. In (Colossians 3:5; Ephesians 5:5 cf Matthew 6:19-34), idolatry goes hand in hand with possessing or pursuing wealth.

In addition to the call for generosity (1 Timothy 6:17-19), Paul provides guidelines for social care, requiring that family members take care of their own first so that Christian social care could exhibit human flourishing. Thus, an African Evangelicalism must bear witness to the biblical norm that orthodoxy cannot exist without orthopraxy.

An African Evangelical Theology

Evangelicals desire to do the will of God, so the key of orthopraxy is the practice of God's will in the coming of the kingdom, which is the commitment to the oppressed poor in society. Sider (1990) states, "one of the central biblical doctrines is that God *is* on the side of the poor and the oppressed. Tragically, evangelical theology has largely ignored this doctrine, and thus our theology has been unbiblical -- indeed, even heretical". An African Evangelical Theology shares crucial unity with liberation theology and together issues a challenge to all forms of social issues, such as poverty. Kirk (1979:199) states, "The theology of liberation issues a prophetic call today to the universal Church to consider the subculture of poverty and inhumanity suffered by people in the *majority world* as the pre-eminent context for today's hermeneutical task" (Italics added). Many evangelicals are suspicious of concerning a holistic mission, which incorporates a theology of the poor. Many see this as liberation theology, "which stands for the denial of the gospel and a politicization of the church which distorts its mission in the world" (Walker, 1993: 168).

While African Evangelicals would see a sharp dichotomy between Evangelicalism and Liberation Theologians because of our importance to scripture, I suggest that it is a false dichotomy. To suggest that to be an African evangelical and not to hold to a liberationist perspective is misleading because the biblical teaching that God is on the side of the poor and oppressed is the people of God. The prophets (Jeremiah. 22:13-16; Hosea 2:19-20) sometimes made this point by insisting that knowing God and seeking justice for the oppressed are inseparable. At other times they condemned the religious rituals of the oppressors, who tried to worship God while continuing to oppress the poor. Cone (1990) states:

Theologians of the Christian Church have not interpreted Christian ethics as an act for the liberation of the oppressed because their views of divine revelation were defined by philosophy and other cultural values rather than by the biblical theme of God as the liberator of the oppressed.

To develop an African Evangelical Theology, preferential option for the poor must be engaged, thus forming a contextual theology of the oppressed, developing a theology from below (Harold, 2018). Gutierrez accurately names the inescapable subjectivity of biblical interpretation and the need for all of the voices of the body of Christ to participate in the theological endeavour to overcome the distortions of their respective subjectivities. He (1983:16-17) states the following,

It must not be forgotten that the Bible has been read and communicated from the viewpoint of the dominating sectors and classes...The communication of the message as rereading from the point of view of the poor and oppressed and from the point of view of militant cooperation with them in their struggles will have the function of unmasking all intent and effort to make the gospel play the role of justifying a situation at odds with what the Bible calls justice and right... Only from the viewpoint of the poor are we going to understand the radical nature of Christ's liberation.



Accepting scripture as normative prioritizes the context of the poor, not to give primacy to social analysis, but one that comes from the gospel and its revelation of Christ's incarnation with oppressed humanity (Luke 4:18-19). An African Evangelical Theology acts against the oppression and exploitation of the voiceless and everything that contradicts the gospel message. Therefore, anything which claims to be good news for all but fails to address itself squarely to those conditions cannot be taken seriously by African Evangelicals.

Integral Mission

The term integral mission describes a holistic ministry, Christian or transformational development. The integral mission is about God's activity through the church for the establishment of his kingdom and the total salvation of humanity. Padilla (2016) explains that integral mission is how God intended to carry out his purpose of love and justice revealed in Jesus Christ, channelled through the church and displayed in the power of the Holy Spirit. In the Christian context, integral mission is used to describe the church's mission to meet people's needs in a multidimensional way, namely through the proclamation and demonstration of the gospel. Cone (1997: XVIII) articulates the essence of integral mission clearly by stating,

Theological concepts have meaning only as they are translated into theological praxis, that is, the Church living in the world on the basis of what it proclaims. This means that theology and ethics, though not identical, are closely interrelated: the mission of the Church is defined by its proclamation, and the proclamation is authenticated by the mission.

Conclusion

In the challenge to develop an African Evangelical theology, it has become clear that a contextual form of theology is of crucial significance. An African Theology must take its context seriously, thus departing from its Western counterparts that fail to accommodate contextual factors in their formulation. In the challenge to contextualize the realities of being African, living in the African continent, theology must be authentic. It requires not only to reflect God's revelation shown in scripture, but it also needs to do this considering the lived experiences of Africans. If theological formulations do not express the contemporary realities, they become irrelevant and detached from the situation in which people live. This article called for the development of the African Evangelical theology that understands God in a contextual way that encompasses the whole of our African human experience. In calling for an African Evangelical Theology, we must take the plight of the poor seriously, involving contextual methods and a holistic or integral mission. An African Evangelical theology, when understanding the gospel, must take a concrete form and fight against all forms of impoverishment and exploitation as going against the will of God, and His reign will never be ushered in, and as long as the reign of justice is deferred, the poor, who are always the helpless victims of injustice.

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