

Theological Pitfalls in the Quest for an Africa Evangelical Theology

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Abstract

The researcher reviewed the contributions of the African theologians on the subject and interrogated theological pitfalls in the quest for an Africa Evangelical Theology (AET). The study acknowledges that AET continues to face pitfalls from three theological trends in the continent. These are liberal ecumenism, pre-Christian traditional African religious experiences, and the prosperity gospel. These three aspects have resulted in liberalism, heretical tendencies, and the denial of the lordship of Christ, thus negatively affecting the Africa evangelical theology. These aspects threaten the Africa evangelical theology, although AET has the potential to influence all areas of faith and practice. The library research looks into the theological pitfalls that continue to threaten evangelical Christianity in Africa in the quest for a Christianity that is both African and biblically authentic.

Keywords: Theological Pitfalls, Africa Evangelical Theology (AET), Ecumenism, Liberalism

Introduction

The discussions about having an Africa Evangelical Theology began in the early 1970s. And according to Kapteina, the events at the Christian Education Strategy Conference from 25th to 31st January 1973 in Limuru, Kenya, prompted the inception of evangelical theology that best serves the African mind. It is believed that the remarks of Byang Kato at this conference became a turning point in the development of evangelical theology in Africa.¹ In his speech, Kato observed that “theological anemia” was the major problem of the African church, which

¹ Detlef Kapteina, "The Formation of African Evangelical Theology." *African Journal of Evangelical Theology*. (London: Oxford Press, 2006), 65.

was allowing “syncretism, universalism, and Christo-paganism to creep into her.”² The importance of sound evangelical theology to the church in Africa cannot be over-emphasized. As Mbiti had aptly expressed, “The African Church is a church without a theology and without theological concern.”³ Mbiti’s statement pointed to a valid concern that led to theological inquiries and subsequent production of volumes of literature handling the situation.

As used in this article, the term “evangelical” refers to the group of Christians that emphasize salvation by faith, in the atoning death of Jesus Christ, through personal conversion, and the authority of the Scripture. In addition, evangelicals stress the necessity of having a relationship with Jesus by being “born again.” They hold the Bible as God’s inspired, sufficient, and authoritative. Therefore, Africa evangelical theology deals with evangelicalism from an African point of view. In other words, it is “evangelical theology applied to the African context.”⁴ Theological pitfalls refer to the (hidden) theological challenges and dangers threatening biblical Christianity in a particular context. Byang Kato stressed that these pitfalls are spiritual battles fought largely on the theological ground and that the church should not lose it.⁵

Background of the Study

Africa Evangelical Theology has been an ongoing discussion in the continent. Prominent African biblical scholars like Byang Kato, J.Mbiti, Kwame Bediako, Tite Tienou, and others have intensively and extensively interrogated this subject in an effort to produce a theology that best addresses the plight of the African Church and, at the same time, remain close to the truth of God’s Word. Their endeavors voiced the concern that the church in Africa lacked relevant theological reflections and therefore needed higher theological training to equip the church in this regard.⁶

The former leaders in the African Evangelical Alliance (in the 1960s and 70s), the umbrella body which housed AET, had their prime purpose as “safeguarding Biblical Christianity in Africa against universalism, heresy, modernism, and syncretism.”⁷ Since its

² Ibid.65,

³ J.S. Mbiti, Some African Concepts of Christology. In: G.F. Vicedom (ed.), *Christ and the Younger Churches: Theological Contributions from Asia, Africa, and Latin America* (London: S.P.C.K, 1972), 51.

⁴ Detlef Kapteina, "The Formation of African Evangelical Theology," 66.

⁵ Ibid., 65.

⁶ Ibid., 65.

⁷ Ibid. 75.

inception in 1966,⁸ a lot has happened in addressing the emerging challenges faced by the nascent Christianity in Africa. Theologians from different corners of Africa have written about the subject. For instance, in West Africa, the following scholars stand out Kwame Bediako, Tokunboh Adeyemo, Samuel Kunhiyop, Lamin Sanneh, Matthew Michael, Yusufu Turaki, and Nkansah Obrempong. In Southern Africa, notable scholars like Christopher Magezi, Augustine Musopole of Malawi, and Joe Simfukwe from Zambia. While in central Africa, we have Kuzuli Kosse and Celestine Musekura. In East Africa, Jesse Mugambi, David Gitari, George Kinoti, *et al* stand out. Their scholarly works have directly or indirectly advanced the agenda of the AEA.

The establishment of the Association of Evangelicals in Africa (AEA) in 1966 is an indicator that Africa evangelical Christianity has a long-lasting imprint on the continent. It is worth noting that,

AEA currently comprises 40 National Evangelical Fellowships as full members and continues to work in the remaining countries to bring churches together for a fully-fledged National Fellowship. AEA also works through various commissions, including Women, Theology and Christian Education, Evangelism and Mission, Ethics, Peace and Justice, Relief and Development, Communication, Youth and Sports, Evangelical Focus on Children and Stewardship and Accountability.⁹

Other initiatives include establishing theological Bible colleges and universities in the continent; some include the Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology, now Africa International University, and Bangui Evangelical Graduate School of Theology, serving the Anglophone and Francophone Africa, respectively.

In addition, the development of African evangelicalism is epitomized in the publication of the African Bible Commentary (ABC). It is a commentary that discusses diverse theological aspects, including contemporary African issues. This publication remains one of the monumental achievements related to evangelical Christianity. However, it is essential to note that the usage of this Bible commentary is not limited to evangelicals. It addresses issues of concern to Christians in Africa. The ABC also addresses critical issues concerning Africa's traditional life and culture.¹⁰

⁸ Ibid. 65.

⁹ <https://aeafrika.org/about/> © 2021 Copyright Association of Evangelicals in Africa. (Accessed, Nov 11th, 2021), 12.

¹⁰ Paul Bowers, "Theological Education in Africa: Why Does it Matter?" *Presentation at AIM-SIM Theological Education Consultation in Honeydew, South Africa* (2007), 22.

Literature Review

Introduction

This section explores relevant literature on the subject. The role of Scriptures in formulating theology is underscored, for this is what determines whether a particular theology becomes fruitful, impactful, evangelical, or not. If African evangelical theology is to stand true to evangelicalism, it has to keep anchored on the source of all truth, the Scripture. Nyende agrees that the Bible is central to theology that seeks to be Christian. Thus, ‘it is incumbent on those who wish to articulate an African theology to use the Bible in dialogue with African cosmologies and culture for it to be a Christian theology.’”¹¹ Balcomb also concurs with Nyende, noting that “the characteristics which serve as the distinguishing features of African evangelical theology are the nature of its faith, its orthodoxy in relation to foundational doctrines of the Christian faith and its countenance of the powers.”¹²

Balcomb and Nyende’s thoughts above are very instructional; these are the same thoughts the fathers of Africa Evangelical Theology espoused. Byang Kato, for instance, was so much ingrained in the Word that he had no place for the world of compromise, unbelief, and destructive beliefs. And as Van der Walt notes, “As a consequence of his antithetical attitude towards the world and traditional African beliefs, Kato was often called a “second Tertullian” The same name was suggested for Adeyemo at his funeral.”¹³ Ayedemo, Kato’s successor in the AEA, had the same persuasion. Van der Walt, in his book, *An Evangelical Voice in Africa: The Worldview Background of the Theology of Tokunboh Adeyemo*, introduces that “Ayedemo was a Christian who loved the Word of God and wanted to submit himself to it unconditionally. In this respect, his evangelical faith was very close to the reformation convictions.”¹⁴ With these kinds of individuals in Christian leadership, Africa could not have asked for more in matters of evangelicalism.

However, African evangelicalism has been rocked by many storms such that remaining true to biblical foundations has proved an uphill task. Byang Kato prophetically foresaw this, writing two decades earlier, in his works, *Africa’s Battle for Biblical Christianity*, he observed that “Liberal Ecumenism with its watered-down gospel has no difficulty conforming to pagan demands because the Word of God is not held to be the final

¹¹ Christopher Magezi and Jacob T. Igba. "African Theology and African Christology: Difficulty and Complexity in Contemporary Definitions and Methodological Frameworks." *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 74, no. 1 (2018), 34.

¹² Ibid.35.

¹³ B. J. Van der Walt, Barend Johannes. "An Evangelical Voice in Africa: The Worldview Background of the Theology of Tokunboh Adeyemo (1 October 1944-17 March 2010)." *In die Skriflig* 45, no. 4 (2011): 956.

¹⁴ Ibid.,1.

authority.”¹⁵ He was able to see that evangelical theology in Africa faces three threats which are liberal ecumenism, African culture & pre-Christian religious traditions, and prosperity theology/ gospel. The section below explores these identified threats that have continued to be a challenge to African Evangelical Christianity.

Liberal Ecumenism

According to Encyclopaedia Britannica, ecumenism is “a movement or tendency toward worldwide Christian unity or cooperation. The term, emphasizes the universality of the Christian faith and unity among churches.”¹⁶ The Catholic Dictionary defines ecumenism as “the modern movement toward Christian unity, whose Protestant origins stem from the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference in 1910 and whose Catholic principles were formulated by the Second Vatican Council in 1964.”¹⁷

On the one hand, ecumenism can positively provide a platform for dialogue, unity, and understanding among Christian communities. In John 17, Jesus prayed for believers’ unity. On the other hand, ecumenism can become contentious, and the danger of liberalism looms when central tenets are sacrificed to accommodate all. Conservative theological scholars have had reservations about ecumenism. For instance, Kato lamented the emerging situation during his time,

The cancer of liberal ecumenism is gnawing rapidly into the heart of the church, with many no longer taking the Word of God at face value. A dubious type of cultural revolution has set in. The African Christian may be called upon to lay down his life for the unadulterated gospel he preaches and practices. The evangelical response to such worsening situations has been slow in coming. The first love which characterized the first-generation Christians in Africa has simmered down.¹⁸

Undoubtedly, liberal ecumenism was not a foundational block of ecumenism, but, over time, it came up in the name of inclusivity and universalism. Borrowing from John R Stott, Kato calls this “a fruit cocktail of religions.” Right from its inception, the Evangelical World Alliance was suspicious of the ecumenical movement; thus, they demanded to be given some assurances on items captured in the Evangelical Christendom editorial. They wanted to be assured that in this new union, there would be no false union outside of the truth, reunion

¹⁵ Byang H. Kato, "Africa's Battle for Biblical Christianity." *Moody Monthly* (1974): 57.

¹⁶ Hugh Chisholm, Ed. *The Encyclopaedia Britannica: A Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, Literature and General Information*. Vol. 29. (London: University press, 1911), 2343.

¹⁷ William E. Addis, *A Catholic Dictionary*. (London: Aeterna Press, 1928), 1222.

¹⁸ Byang H. Kato, "Africa's Battle for Biblical Christianity," 56.

with Rome, and no formation of a super-church.¹⁹ Commenting on the unity between the evangelicals and the ecumenists, Emilio Castro, who is an ecumenism champion, makes an insightful observation,

The participation of bonafide evangelicals in the programmes of the WCC will introduce other items on the WCC agenda, coming out of the concerns of our friends. For example, they remind us that we do not pay enough attention to the power of sin, that we do not adequately recognize that the basic alienation of human beings from God is the root cause of all structural alienation. They demand more clarity on certain issues like universalism and syncretism; they would like us to be more precise when we discuss the potentials and the limits of dialogue with people of other faiths; etc.²⁰

The above concerns are valid and provoke a critical evaluation of the initial idea of ecumenism. While the evangelicals' umbrella body is AEA, the ecumenically oriented churches espouse *The All-Africa Conference of Churches* (AACC). These two have a whole world of differences. The former is hinged toward exclusivity and theological separation, while the latter is bent toward inclusivity, faith, and unity. And these two approaches represent two different theological persuasions.

While unity is not a bad idea; nevertheless, unity at the expense of the truth can be detrimental. One question needs to be asked, why is there a great divide in the first place? And the answer lies in the 16th Century reformation. Many evangelicals feared for the return of the pre-reformation ecclesiastical situation, whereby,

The Catholic Church had become worldly— there was widespread corruption, bribery, simony, immorality, materialism, and internal power struggles. Many of the bishops and priests had slipped into self-indulgence, lust and greed. The popes for a long time had become heavily involved in the states politics. Many Christians by this time were looking for spiritual revival to end the malpractices that the church had indulged into during the Dark Ages. The clergy neglected their Episcopal duties as they held many offices within the church to enhance their income. The laity complained a lot on absenteeism, incompetence, and unavailability of clergy.²¹

In addition, it is noted that prior to the reformation period, “The Roman Catholic Church in Luther’s day was in a state of crisis. The great scholastic theological system of Thomas Aquinas was crumbling. The institutional church was promoting personal advancement and glory, but the glory of God was distant. In all of this, Jesus Christ was

¹⁹ Ian Randall, "Evangelicals, Ecumenism and Unity: A Case Study of the Evangelical Alliance." *Evangel* 22, no. 3 (2004): 62.

²⁰ Emilio Castro. "Ecumenism and Evangelicalism: Where Are We?." *The Ecumenical Review* 70, no. 1 (2018): 56.

²¹ William J Duiker, and Jackson J. Spielvogel. "The Essential World History, Volume II: Since 1500." (2016), 101.

difficult to find.”²² Liberal ecumenism embraces all forms of religiosity and merges them with the broad term Christianity. However, it is debatable whether the expressed fears by the evangelicals were indeed the future intentions of the ecumenical movement.

It is worth noting that other groups like the Presbyterian World Alliance praised the initiative as something significant to the universal church,

The ecumenical movement is “a singularly significant fact about the Christian Church in our time.” This “deep stirring” toward the unity of the churches is of God, not men, a sign of the work of the Holy Spirit in accordance with the mind and will of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ transforms us and makes us fully human in and through our fellowship with one another. He breaks down all barriers of separation. He reconciles and unites.²³

Kato was particularly worried about the influence of the World Council of Churches through the All-Africa Council of Churches (AACC). He very well knew that this dalliance between AEA and WCC would destroy Africa’s evangelical Christianity since. Earlier on, the Western experience had proved him right.²⁴ Indeed, African evangelical theology cannot truly remain biblical if she bows to the pressures of ecumenism, it will remain a shell of the former self. In conclusion, liberal ecumenism, with its watered-down gospel, has no difficulty conforming to pagan demands because the Word of God is not held to be the final authority. , This poses the danger of losing the real power behind evangelicalism.²⁵

Cultural Pre-Christian Traditional Religious Experiences

Culture is defined as “the way of thinking and behavior shared by a substantial social grouping which gives them an identity in relation to others.” It is “the total pattern of human behavior and its products embodied in thought, speech, action and artifacts and dependent upon man’s capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations through the use of tools, language, and systems of abstract thought.” Africa is blessed with diverse and rich culture. African culture and identity are expressed in its customs and traditional practices, including religious activities.

²² Timothy Palmer, "Luther's Theology of the Cross, and Africa." *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 24, no. 2 (2005): 129-137.

²³ Odair Pedroso Mateus, "The World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Modern Ecumenical Movement." *A Selected, Chronological, Annotated Bibliography (1863–Abkürzungen und Literature* 424 (2005).

²⁴ Byang H.Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*. (Kisumu: Evangel Publishing House, 1975), 11.

²⁵ Byang Kato, "Africa's Battle for Biblical Christianity," 56.

Theology and Identity

Bediako's search for an African identity in early Christianity took him into the African religious experience and life; he cites Bishop Sundkler, who argues that "it was in the myths of the African religions that could be found certain broad patterns of which theology in Africa must take account."²⁶ This thought is confirmed by former SA Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu while speaking at a conference in Jos, Nigeria, in 1993,

African theologians have set about demonstrating that the African religious experience and heritage were not illusionary and that they should have formed the vehicle for conveying the gospel verities. It is vital for Africa's self-respect that this kind of rehabilitation of the religious heritage should take place. It is reassuring to know that we had a genuine knowledge of God and our ways of communicating with the deity.²⁷

Many scholars have echoed Desmond's ideas. The crux of the matter is whether there is a break from the pre-Christian African religious heritage or continuity, in what is commonly called continuity versus discontinuity.²⁸ The advocates of continuity include Idowu, and Mbiti, among others. Idowu observed that "the church in Africa as a result of particular historical connection with the Western cultural dominance was failing to develop its theology, churchmanship, liturgy, or even discipline."²⁹ According to Idowu, the church in Africa was not yet independent, and that's why in the following statement, he provided the antidote, "To remedy this predicament of dependence, the African church needed to build its bridges to the revelation given to Africans in their pre-Christian and pre missionary religious traditions of the past."³⁰

Idowu spoke some decades before Desmond Tutu, and after them, Augustine Musopole seemed to echo their very sentiments that,

The tragedy of the African churches, of all theological complexions, is that very few, if any, have produced a confession in response to the question, what does it mean to be the church of God in Africa in the second half of the 20th century and beyond? The European churches emerged into their own particular identities by the confessions that they formulated in response to the theological challenges of

²⁶ Kwame, Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa*. OCMS, 1992, 4.

²⁷ Andrew F. Walls, "Africa and Christian Identity" *Mission Focus* 6, no. 7 (1978): 13.

²⁸ Continuity refers to the aspect of incorporating the pre-Christian African forms of thought, belief, practice, worship etc. in the formulation of evangelical theology. While discontinuity view argues for doing away with these pre-Christian traditional religious experiences and seeing life in a more different way devoid of this heritage.

²⁹ Kwame Bediako, "Understanding African Theology in the 20th Century." (Verlag Nicht Ermittlbar: 1993), 122.

³⁰ Ibid.122.

their day. By inheriting these confessions, African evangelicalism has become unwittingly captive to Western reformed scholastic theology.³¹

All these theologians argue for the absorption of pre-Christian African religious practices as integral to evangelicalism in Africa. However, the danger is that incorporating pre-Christian African religious practices into evangelicalism might create a form of syncretism if not carefully guarded and guided by the Scripture.

The discontinuity champion Byang Kato argues that “overemphasizing the value of African culture and religions for the African Christian identity, running the danger of applying to the substance of the African religiosity the form of Christian vocabulary, and this mixed with certain liberal theological Western concepts.”³² Kato was strongly against the continuity anthem, while the likes of Mbiti *et al* promoted a critical continuity provided that the spirit of the Scriptures guided it.

Kato takes a swipe at Bolaji Idowu and Mbiti, whom he accuses of promoting religious syncretism in Africa, the accusation springs from the writings of both writers, who argue in defense of African Traditional realities, religions, and philosophies. They affirm that to call these realities idolatry is unfair.³³ Kato joins the earlier African theologians in the period after the early church, the likes of Tatian and Tertullian, who tended to be more in favor of discontinuity with the existing culture.³⁴ Imasoje leans more toward Kato’s view of discontinuity. In his writings, *Guidelines for Christian Theology in Africa*, Imasoje agrees with Kato that contextualized theology should address those concerns that affect African Christians. He states that African biblical scholars should scratch where it itches.³⁵ African culture can positively or negatively impact evangelical theology. The other threat to African evangelicalism is the prosperity gospel, as shall be examined below.

Prosperity Gospel

The Origins

Coleman defines the prosperity gospel as “a fast-growing theologically conservative movement frequently associated with Pentecostalism, evangelicalism, and charismatic

³¹ Augustine C. Musopole, "Evangelicalism and African Christian Theology," *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 4 (1995): 995.

³² Detlef Kapteina, " 70.

³³ Byang H.Kato, "The Gospel, Cultural Context and Religious Syncretism." *Let the Earth Hear His Voice* 1217 (1975). 4

³⁴ Hinne Wagenaar, "Theology, Identity and the Pre-Christian Past: A Critical Analysis of Kwame Bediako's *Theology from a Frisian Perspective*." 7.

³⁵ Timothy Palmer, "Byang Kato: A Theological Reappraisal." *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 23, no. 1 (2004): 17.

Christianity that emphasizes believers' abilities to transcend poverty and/or illness through devotion and positive confession."³⁶ In addition, it instructs that God rewards faith and hefty tithing with financial blessings.³⁷ Although it seems they are rightly focusing on a holistic approach, it is not. The bottom line belief is about health and wealth. This form of teaching began in the West and has been closely associated with prominent 1980s televangelists Jimmy Swaggart and Jim and Tammy Bakker, Benny Hinn, and more recently, T.D Jakes, Joel Osteen, Eddie E. Long."³⁸

The Prevalence

The ease with which this teaching has spread to the Global South is frightening. According to recent research by Thinandavha D. Mashau *et al.*, "Christianity in post-colonial Africa is highly influenced and shaped by the prosperity message. The popular and materialistic gospel is sweeping across the continent like a gale-force wind, which is irresistible."³⁹ This phenomenon is prevalent in almost all the corners of the continent. In West Africa, for instance, research shows that "prosperity churches date from the 1980s. Some draw their structural and operational inspiration from American Pentecostalism. Numerous examples of prosperity churches abound in Nigeria. They include the Church of God Mission in Benin, which was founded by the late Archbishop Benson Idahosa."⁴⁰ Studies show that Nigeria, the most populous nation on the continent, is unrivaled in its potency of this phenomenon.

The three major expressions of the prosperity gospel in Ghana include the Word of Faith Charismatic Churches, the Deliverance Charismatic Churches, and the Prophetic Charismatic or Super-charismatic Churches.⁴¹ The same scenarios exist in Southern Africa with the Assemblies of God and a Zimbabwean expression of this movement, the Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa (ZAOGA) denomination.⁴²

In East Africa, according to a recent report about the statistics of churches in East Africa (2010), nearly seven out of ten Protestants in Kenya are Pentecostals or Charismatics.

³⁶ Simon Coleman, *The Globalisation of Charismatic Christianity: Spreading the Gospel of Prosperity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 121.

³⁷ Steve Huff, "If Jesus was Physically on the Earth Today, He Wouldn't Be Riding a Donkey." (Maxim, New York, 2018), 101.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 101.

³⁹ Thinandavha D.Mashau, and Mookgo S. Kgatle. "Prosperity Gospel and the Culture of Greed in Post-Colonial Africa: Constructing an Alternative African Christian Theology of Ubuntu." *Verbum et Ecclesia* 40, no. 1 (2019): 1.

⁴⁰ Deji Ayegboyin, "A Rethinking of Prosperity Teaching in the New Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria." *Black Theology* 4, no. 1 (2006): 70.

⁴¹ Emmanuel K.Anim, "The Prosperity Gospel in Ghana and the Primal Imagination." *Pentvars Business Journal* 4, no. 3 (2010): 67.

⁴² Gladys Ganiel, "Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in South Africa and Zimbabwe: A Review." *Religion Compass* 4, no. 3 (2010): 133.

The report further states that about one-third of Kenyan Catholics can be classified as prosperity gospel adherents. This is because of some prosperity gospel elements that can be found in them.⁴³ In a more disturbing study, according to Lin, “83% in Kenya, with 96 percent in Nigeria, and 80 percent in South Africa believes that God grants material wealth to all those who have strong faith in Him. This is prosperity theology at best.”⁴⁴ It should be noted that not all Pentecostals and charismatics denominations preach the prosperity gospel.

Prosperity Gospel Teachings

Now, it is one thing to know the prevalence of prosperity gospel churches in Africa, and it is another thing to understand what they teach and, of course, practice. Prosperity churches insist on health and wealth. Although the influence of the prosperity gospel came from the West, it also had cultural roots in Africa, “In traditional, pre-colonial societies, it was common for people to associate the deities with prosperity, it was believed that a harmonious relationship with the spiritual forces was necessary to ensure good health, long life, and prosperity and to ensure that one’s destiny was not altered for the worse.”⁴⁵ Bediako, also solidifies this thinking by alluding that, “the well-being of the society depends upon maintaining good relations with the ancestors on whom the living depend for help and protection.”⁴⁶ Thus, these churches also draw their thinking from the African cultural and religious context. Anim remarks that much of Africa’s traditional religion is concerned with fertility, health, and plenty.⁴⁷ Today’s health and wealth adherents are taught that “God can in a way provide for them like He provided manna to the Israelites, can bring wealth to those who have faith.”⁴⁸ This means that faith is the indispensable ingredient to prosperity.

The second aspect of the teachings of the prosperity gospel is the protection against magic and life ills. This is manifested in their worship services and gatherings. The dominating factor is always the practice of exorcism. The African thinking about evil is that it can be caused or brought to a person by a human or spiritual agent. Thus, “members feel protected against two major threats of human life that is poverty, diseases which most

⁴³ Alwala, 17.

⁴⁴ <http://iascculture.org/THR/channels/THR/tag/prosperity-gospel/>.

T. T. Lin, *Prosperity Gospel: There is Hope in Africa*. (2015), 45.

⁴⁵ Emmanuel K. Anim, "The Prosperity Gospel in Ghana and the Primal Imagination." *Pentvars Business Journal* 4, no. 3 (2010): 70.

⁴⁶ Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel in African History and Experience* (Akropong-Akuapem: Regnum Africa, 2000).23.

⁴⁷ Anim, 67.

⁴⁸ Alwala, 19.

Africans believe that could be caused by witchcraft.”⁴⁹ For the search of deliverance and protection from witchcraft, members will throng these churches and follow whatever instructions are given by the man/ woman of God, at whatever cost.

Many prosperity gospel preachers understand their congregations’ deep-seated needs and fears. Samuel Waje Kunhiyop paints a context that these preachers capitalize on,

Barren women, people whose children die at birth, women with irregular menstrual flow, accident victims, traders who suffer losses, office workers who fail to get promotions, a political candidate who fails to get elected, a student who fails examinations, a person who notices scratches on his or her body, a hunter or fisherman who fails to bring home meat, a fanner with bad crop yields. A football team that consistently loses matches-all suspect witches as the cause of their misfortune. Even those who are most successful in their business or profession constantly fear being bewitched by envious relatives or friends.⁵⁰

Now this underlies the involvement of some Africans in the prosperity gospel and theology. Moreover, the prosperity gospel is mainly concerned with a better life; it comes with class, fame, and celebrity status. In Kenya, for instance, “The desire to rise above the poverty level by most of the people in Kenya, especially the youth, makes them be lured by prosperity gospel churches with the hope of solutions to their unpleasant status quo.”⁵¹ The majority of the youth in the African continent want to succeed just like everyone does, and one of the ways to do this seems to be religion; here, the clarion call is *name it, claim it*. Sadly, living an expensive life is equated to success, godliness, and faith.

The adherents of the prosperity gospel clearly understand what they want. It is simply a transactional affair.

The ‘consumers’ of the prosperity gospel generally know what they are ‘buying.’ Specifically, they know that the betterment being promised them is not an illusion, and they know and don’t care that their preacher has a swimming pool and drives a Mercedes. If they put money on the collection plate, they generally believe that they are getting good value in return.⁵²

This defines the will and zeal of the adherents of this movement, for to them better life can never be insisted further. Some sympathizers of this movement claim that,

Even some of the more flamboyant prosperity preachers temper their message in this way. They say that God will help the faithful if they are disciplined, if they work hard at their job, or if they set up their own business. Many of these churches offer practical courses in setting up business enterprises.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 23.

⁵⁰ Kunhiyop, Samuel Waje. "Witchcraft: A Philosophical and Theological Analysis." *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 21, no. 2 (2002): 129.

⁵¹ Alwala, 22.

⁵² Ganiel Gladys, "Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity in South Africa and Zimbabwe: A review." *Religion Compass* 4, no. 3 (2010): 133.

This, in turn, helps to produce an entrepreneurial and hard-working culture inside these churches, where people do indeed become more economically prosperous.⁵³

The above discussion points to a severe deviation from the truth. Prosperity theology equates Christ with wealth and good life. The message of sin is no longer given a priority, for ‘blessing’ overshadows it. Now, if humanity’s greatest problem and source of all misery is ignored, then the product of such a ministry will be unauthentic or pseudo discipleship.

Prosperity, as observed above, does not focus on the Word and Christ. Rather it emphasizes success, the material, and the emotions. Even in instances where prosperity theology would appeal to Scriptures, the hermeneutic work is completely ignored, the context is never appealed to, and one Scripture can be ascribed different and differing meanings depending on the interpreter. This deviates from the teachings of Scripture on matters of faith, on the centrality of Christ as the fountain of life for the church. This section has reviewed literature from three theological fronts: liberal ecumenism, African culture, pre-Christian religious traditions, and prosperity gospel. The following section appraises these three aspects.

Evaluation of Liberal Ecumenism

Regarding liberal ecumenism and its impact on AET, the ecumenical movement’s clarion call is unity. The Lord Jesus wants the church to be one according to (John 17:11, 21-23) because through this, the world shall know and believe that God sent Christ. However, this unity should not be attained at the expense of the truth. Jesus admonished the church to remain in the truth (Jn 4:24; 8:32; 14:6), which is the Scriptures (Jn 17:17,19). Jesus also regarded the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of truth (Jn 16:13). Thus, the ecumenical call for oneness should be based on God’s exclusive truth,

When Jesus prays for “these” who have believed in him and belong to God, together with “those” who will in the future come to faith in him, that they may all be one, It is important to remember that oneness comes about as a result of divine action and that the community are one when they are one with the Father and the Son because of the glory that the Son has given them. “Their action is not the primary source of unity. Unity is created by God, not by the believers. They will be one because the Father keeps them in his name.”⁵⁴

From the above deduction, it can be seen that the unity that the Lord Jesus Christ had in mind in John 17:22 is not what the liberal ecumenists have in mind. On the contrary, the liberal ecumenical strategy is that of offering to free African theology from the shackles of missionary laced theology; as Kapteina argues that ecumenism “focuses on “liberating” Third

⁵³ Ibid.,144.

⁵⁴ Corinne Hong Sling Wong, *The Doxa of Christ and His Followers in the Fourth Gospel: An Inquiry into the Meaning and Background of Doxa in John 17: 22*. PhD diss., (University of Pretoria, 2008) 133.

World churches from so-called conservative “old-fashioned” missionary theology.”⁵⁵ This appears to be a very well-calculated ploy since no one will want to live in oppression, and liberation is a very appealing terminology. Nevertheless, this works counterproductively in upholding the truth. Liberal ecumenism also welcomes other religions to the unity table.

This is seen in the book co-authored by Desmond Tutu and Dalai Lama (a Buddhist) titled, *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World*. In their opening statement, Dalai quips, “To begin, I invited the Archbishop to offer a prayer, since, in his tradition, that is the way to open any important conversation.”⁵⁶ This opening statement shows two religions seated around the same table. The book goes on to extrapolate the message of happiness, about feeling good about oneself, to which both agree. Although inter-dialogue is a key component in Christian outreach, this kind of inter-faith unity should be a concern to any evangelical theologian in Africa, especially because the Scripture is unequivocal that true and lasting happiness cannot spring from self but from Christ alone (Jn 13:17; 1 Pt 3:14; 4:14).

The book was authored in the spirit of liberal ecumenism and loving one another, uniting with all humanity despite religious differences because all that matters is happiness. Liberal ecumenism comes with a cost to pay. It has already been discussed that the AACC was initiated for this very purpose as the representative continental body of the WCC. In the AACC lies the department of Theology, Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations, in charge of the ecumenical activities.⁵⁷ This was created in the Maputo general assembly of 2008.

Some theologians have suggested an *Ubuntu* model in line with liberal ecumenism. For instance, South African theologian T. Sakupapa opines that “the theological basis for wider ecumenism in which the whole family of the *oikoumene*, particularly people of other faiths, and creation are related and connected based on a spirit of *Ubuntu*.”⁵⁸ The issue of interfaith relations is prominently featured in the liberal ecumenical agenda, just as observed in the case of Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu. The implication here is that when other faiths come into play, to accommodate them, the way to God, the truth, and Christ himself, head of the church, will be denounced or replaced. Certainly, this goes against Christ’s exclusive claims that he is the way, the truth, and the life (Jn 14:6, Acts 4:12). Thus, if the African evangelical church will stand true to the Word of God, then it ought to be careful about how

⁵⁵ Kapteina, 69.

⁵⁶ Dalai Lama, Desmond Tutu, and Douglas Carlton Abrams. *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World*. (New York: Penguin, 2016), 30.

⁵⁷ Teddy C. Sakupapa, "Ecumenical Ecclesiology in the African Context: Towards a View of the Church as Ubuntu." *Scriptura* 117 (2018): 3.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

it relates to ecumenism, “Before they engage with the world, they first must relate with Christ; and, after that, they can only relate with the world through Jesus Christ.”⁵⁹

Evaluation of the Cultural Pre-Christian Traditional Religious Experiences

Regarding African culture and tradition, as observed in the literature review discussion, it is true that the African continent is indeed blessed with rich and diverse cultures. Moreover, it's a fact that the African continent had a pre-religious experience even before the arrival of the Western missionaries. However, how some of these pre-missionary experiences should be “rehabilitated” into Christian theology has been an issue of debate. In as much as culture is an important aspect of life, it exists in a fallen world and needs to be redeemed.

For instance, the Jewish culture abhorred women, Gentiles, and slaves, so much that some Jews would wake up and pray, “I thank God “that He didn’t make me a gentile, that He didn’t make me a woman, that He didn’t make me slave.”⁶⁰ This prejudice was embedded in the Jewish culture and tradition. The same applied to divorce in Judaism, where a woman was at her husband’s disposal whenever the man was overcome by a desire to satisfy his urges with her. And if she continues to rebel, he always had the right to divorce her without consultation.⁶¹ The Gospels portray how Christ dealt with this kind of culture and tradition. Jesus embraced women and even gave them roles in his ministry (Jn 4:1-30; 20:17). Moreover, the Lord welcomed Gentiles and gave them equal treatment with the Jews, the centurion (Matt 8:13), and the Syrophenician woman (Mark 7:26). All these people were treated with compassion and equity by Jesus, thus reproofing the very culture of the Jews.

Thus, the African culture, just like the Jewish culture, need not be wholly absorbed into African evangelical theology uncritically; it rather needs to be redeemed and critically evaluated. Some Roman Catholic theologians like Nyamiti, and Bujo, have developed theologies of inculturation to aid in this process. However, some theologians have adopted these models without a critical mind, leading to syncretism and heretic tendencies. For instance, Kwame Bediako’s incarnational Christological concept of Christ as the ancestor raises questions about Christ’s deity.⁶² African theology should consider the African culture and worldview; at the same time, it should embrace the Scriptures as authoritative in matters

⁵⁹ Gregg A. Okesson, "Sacred and Secular Currents for Theological Education in Africa." *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 26, no. 1 (2007): 45.

⁶⁰ Jonas E. Alexis, *Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism: A History of Conflict Between Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism from the Early Church to Our Modern Time*. Vol. 2. (West Bow Press, 2013), 33.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*33.

⁶² Jørn Henrik Olsen, "Contextualized Christology in Tropical Africa?." *Svensk Missionstidsskrift* 3-4/1997 (1997), 258.

of contextualization.⁶³ True formulation of evangelical theology should prioritize Scripture; Bible must judge culture but in cases where conflict results, the cultural element must give way.⁶⁴ Culture must be subservient to the Scripture and its teachings if AET is fruitful and God-honoring.

Evaluation of the Prosperity Gospel

As the literature indicated regarding the prosperity gospel, this movement seeks to give a heaven-on-earth kind of life. Christianity is relegated to a means to better life and celebrity status. God is reduced to a dispenser of blessings in form of money and other material benefits. The Scripture loses meaning, and the truth is neglected. Suffering is left to the 'faithless.' The problem is that health-and-wealth churches are counted as part of the evangelical church in Africa; in fact, some of these leaders hold positions in the African evangelical and national bodies.

Biblically, Christianity involves taking up the cross to follow Christ; the Lord Jesus Christ prescribed this (Mark 10:21). Moreover, faith in Jesus Christ is not a ticket to wealth. Having or not having is not a measure of faith. The life of Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31 is a clear example; the apostles' John and Peter had neither gold nor silver to give to the lame man at the temple gate (Acts 3:1-10). Scripture is replete with faithful and godly men and women who suffered greatly, for instance, in the Old Testament Job, and above all, Christ suffered. Christ's exhortation to the church is, "In the world, ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33, KJV).

If faith is the driving force to receiving from God, then this has far-reaching consequences for the person of Christ. This summary by Peter Young sums it up all,

Faith is the main condition given for receiving this abundance of material blessing, so it is important to understand what constitutes the substance of such faith. Teachers of the prosperity message stress that faith in God will keep His promises and act as he has said that he would that brings about a response from God to deliver prosperity in all areas of life. Not only will God act in response to this faith, but he is obliged to do so. Such considerations lead to prescriptive formulae as to how God will work. Since then, human faith has had the power to effect change and bring about this prosperity, and it can be regarded as a force in itself without reference to its object. This force is wielded not by God but by the human believer.⁶⁵

⁶³ Christopher Magezi and Jacob T. Igba. "African Theology and African Christology: Difficulty and Complexity in Contemporary Definitions and Methodological Frameworks." *HTS Theologese Studies/Theological Studies* 74, no. 1 (2018), 7.

⁶⁴ Byang Kato, "Africa's Battle for Biblical Christianity." *Moody Monthly* (1974): 54.

⁶⁵ Peter R. Young, "Prosperity Teaching in an African Context." *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 15, no. 1 (1996): 15.

In this kind of arrangement, God is reduced to a subject and an observer. The believer is empowered and given a false sense of faith and power. In effect, the lordship of Christ is denied in this arrangement. Prosperity theology, therefore, deviates from the teachings of the Scripture. Authentic evangelical theology will remain an illusion if this kind of theology influences evangelical theology.

Conclusion

The researcher has delved into pitfalls that have continued to affect Africa Evangelical Theology. Three aspects have remained pitfalls to the course of AET: liberal ecumenism, cultural pre-Christian traditional experiences in Africa, and the prosperity gospel. According to the study, liberal ecumenism is found to compromise the veracity of AET. Moreover, uncritical adoption of cultural pre-Christian traditional experiences in Africa will lead to ambiguity and corruption of theology. Finally, prosperity theology weakens the perception of sin's power and misleads people on true conversion's meaning and importance.

The author makes a few recommendations to this end. First, to avoid the theological pitfalls, the African evangelical scholars need to go back to the biblical foundations. Second, evangelical theologians need to emphasize training by establishing educational institutions to defend evangelicalism. Third, the African evangelical church needs to be sensitized to remain true to biblical theology, reject manipulation by the health and wealth crusaders, and remain faithful to the end. This calls for theologically informed and dedicated ministers of the gospel. Thus, the church will need to accelerate the training of such ministers. Fourth, biblical separation should be considered when it comes to liberal ecumenism; liberal theologians should not be allowed to teach in evangelical institutions. Fifth, African evangelical theologians need to look at African culture critically. This study does not prescribe a total abolition of African culture because that would be impossible. Instead, the researcher recommends a critical evaluation, removing the dross and taking what is godly in the quest to preserve evangelical theology that is African.

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