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MISSIONARIES, AFRICAN WRITERS AND THE
CHRISTIAN CLASSROOM

by

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1. INTRODUCTION

It is the intention of the author to explore the attitude that today's missionaries and Christian teachers should have in the light of what some African writers have to say about the activities of missionaries and to briefly show that the same attitudes are essential for the Christian teacher in the classroom as he meets the minds and world views of his students. The role of missionaries has been the subject of much debate in the last few decades. This has occurred particularly in the post-colonial era when almost anything considered to be connected to the colonial power was condemned. Some critics accused them of merely being the agents or pawns of the capitalist bosses saying that they were used to prepare the way for an industrial economy and propagate the idea of the superiority of the "mother country" (Majeke, 1952:chap. 1 & 2). The financing of the London Missionary Society by the industrialists in the nineteenth century would seem to give some credence to the accusations (Ibid). However it should be recognised that there are many positive aspects that could be mentioned as counter-arguments. A debate of this situation is outside the scope of this paper. History should be studied to gain wisdom so that one may avoid the mistakes and learn from the successes of the past.

There are three main aspects to this subject. They are: God's instructions to His church, African writers and the church and the attitudes that any Christian should have when he shares his faith in order to enhance the new believers' concept of God and strengthen their foundations in the faith as well as to avoid pressures and

problems that could lead to alienation and misunderstanding of God's character of love.

2. THE COMMISSION

Christ Himself gave His followers the following instructions in Matt. 28:19,20: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I command you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (NASB) Although the concept "all nations" was the subject of some debate it was generally accepted by all Christians to mean just that: the whole known world.

The problem that appeared very early in missionary endeavour was that the missionary, meeting a new culture, had ideas as to what Christian culture meant and often, without stopping to find out the motivation behind the cultural practices of their converts they condemned them outright. In contrast to this attitude the experience of the Apostle Paul and his handling of the difficult issue of circumcision is a good example.

"... Christ commissioned His disciples to proclaim a faith and worship that would have in it nothing of caste or country, a faith that would be adapted to all peoples, all nations, all classes of men." (White,1940 p.819. emphasis mine)

The concept of the adaptation of the Christian faith to meet different cultures raises some difficult questions. The above quote comes just after the author has quoted the great commission (Matt 28:19,20). Paul's comment in I Cor. 9:22 that he has "become all

things to all men, that I may by all means save some" seems to be pertinent here. In the context (verses 19-23) it would appear that he is referring to the need to meet people where they are and in humility lead them to an understanding of Christ and his love. The missionary needs to take the thinking of the people for whom he works into account without compromising principle:

Everything that Paul did, his ready adaptation to the particular society in which he found himself and his willingness to be tolerant and patient toward all men, had but one objective - the saving of those who would believe his message.... By his course of adjustment to the customs, habits, and opinions of all classes of men in order that he might save some, Paul followed closely the pattern set by the Saviour, of whom the prophet wrote: "A bruised reed shall he not break" (Isa. 42:1-3). Adaptability is one of the most useful qualities that a minister can cultivate. It helps him to work as Christ worked... (Nichol, 1957, p.734,735)(cf. 6T 673)

3. CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Various African writers have touched on the subject of the contact between Africa, western culture and the Christian Missionary. There will only be space to use a few examples to illustrate the problems and possible solutions.

An important difference between the western missionary and the African is their attitude towards who they are. The westerner sees himself as an individual and to a lesser or greater degree can identify with the dictum: "I think therefore I am". Not that they do not see themselves as part of a community but they are individuals first and then members of society. Sire describes this concept in the following way:

In ontological individualism "the individual is prior to society, which comes into existence only through the voluntary contract of individuals trying to maximize their own self-

interest." The idea is this: before society comes the individual.... Crudely put, in the West and especially since the Reformation and among Protestants, each human being is seen to be ontologically distinct. One's ego is bounded by one's skin. (1990,58f)

Amongst the African many of the tribes have the proverb: "a person is a person because of other people" (See poems below). This is a reflection of their concept of "ubuntu". A word that combines the ideas of humanness, community, unity and even includes customs and history. The important overall concept is the idea of community. The concept of self as seen by the East (and Africa) is depicted as:

...in many senses an individual, but that individuality is bound up with immediate and extended family. Each person is who he or she is only by virtue of relationships with others. Society is ontologically prior to the individual. (59)

To balance this the following quote is given from Neill:

...It is nevertheless true that the most primitive man, though less individualised and individualistic than the member of a more advanced community, is never completely submerged within the community. He remains an individual, with his own loves and hates, his own incommunicable experience of life. (1952,230)

The following two poems illustrate the two concepts of self. The first poem by Henley is the expression of the idea that the individual can manage on his or her own.

Invictus

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears

Looms but the horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find me, unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul. (Untermeyer.1960 p.485)

The next poem by Jeremy Cronin (b. 1949) was written from the poet's experience in prison in a cell, alone. He was sentenced for political activities. The title is a Tswana proverb.

Motho Ke Motho Ka Batho Babang
(A Person is a Person because of Other People)

By holding my mirror out of the window I see
Clear to the end of the passage.
There's a person down there.
A prisoner polishing a doorhandle.
In the mirror I see him see
My face in the mirror,
I see the fingertips of his free hand
Bunch together, as if to make
An object the size of a badge
Which travels up to his forehead
The place of an imaginary cap.
(This means: A warder).
Two fingers are extended in a vee
And wiggle like two antennae.
(He's being watched.)
A finger of his free hand makes a watch-hand's arc
on the wrist of his polishing arm without
Disrupting the slow-slow rhythm of his work.
(Later. Maybe, later we can speak.)
*Hey! Wat maak jy daar?**
-a voice from around the corner.
No. Just polishing baas.
He turns his back to me, now watch
His free hand, the talkative one,
Slips quietly behind
- *Strength brother, it says,*
In my mirror,
A black fist. (Cronin.1983.p.18)

**What are you doing there?*

This difference in the perspective of the individual's position in society has a marked effect on the two cultures' attitude towards competition and wealth as well as care for needy people.

In mission service in Africa the author came face to face with other ways of solving social problems. These customs are different from western customs but may actually be more socially constructive. One tribe's custom for dealing with a child born to an unmarried mother leaves the alleged father "holding the baby". It is the custom there that when the baby is born the mother's aunt takes the mother and child to the man accused of being the father and leaves them with him. He is duty bound to care for them until the court case decides his guilt.

The culture of many so-called "primitive" tribes is very complex. Great care should be taken when making comparisons between diverse cultures not to make value judgements based on the "superiority" of ones own culture.

4. AFRICAN WRITERS AND CHRISTIANITY

4.1 "The River Between" - An Illustration

In Ngugi's book (The river between) there is great animosity between the Christian missionaries and the tribal leaders. Phrases used by Ngugi illustrate an attitude that Christianity is a white man's religion and thus alien to the tribe:

He [Joshua, a Gikuyu convert] renounced his tribe's magic, power and ritual. He turned to and felt the deep presence of the one God. Had he not given the white man power over all?.... The unerring white man had called the Gikuyu god the prince of darkness. (1965.29 emphasis mine)

The white missionary is accorded complete authority in the mind of Joshua and he accepts his word in spite of the questions he has; notice the phrase "the unerring white man". The questions that Joshua has about some of the principles taught by the missionaries are illustrated by the following passage:

Many had gone back to take a second bride. Not that Joshua saw anything intrinsically wrong in having a second bride. In fact he had always been puzzled by the fact that the men of the Old Testament who used to walk with God and angels had more than one wife. But the man at the Mission had said this was a sin. And so a sin it had to be. Joshua was not prepared to question what he knew to be God-inspired assertions of the white man. After all, the white man had brought Christ into the country. (1965,99)

This blind acceptance of the pronouncements by the missionaries without any input from the people themselves in the decision-making process leads to the attitude that the religion is the "possession" of the white man. Jonson and VanVonderen in their book about spiritual abuse have the following to say about this type of situation:

The means by which it [spiritual abuse] happens now is the same as always: First, there is neglect of real needs in favor of the "needs" of authority; then legalism replaces rest in God with demands for spiritual performance. Abuse is perpetrated by people in positions of power.

.... There is no such thing as a perfect family or church where people don't ever get hurt. But the difference between an abusive and non-abusive system is that while hurtful behaviour might happen in both, it is not permissible to talk about problems, hurts and abuses in the abusive system. Hence, there is no healing and restoration after the wound has occurred, and the victim is made to feel at fault for questioning or pointing out the problem. (1991,32)

Livingstone, the missionary in The river between starts out trying to understand the customs and rituals of the tribe and later becomes dogmatic in his treatment of the situation and requires that

those who want to come to school renounce their tribal rituals before they are allowed to enrol at the school. Joshua disowns his daughter when she is initiated into the tribe.

The thing to remember is that we all have a world view and this affects our interpretation of Scripture. Should another world view want to do things differently missionaries should be very careful not to be dogmatic because of their world view differences rather than a "thus saith the Lord". Earnest prayer and an open mind are essential as new converts are encouraged to grapple with the issues themselves through careful Bible study and prayerful commitment to be led by the Holy Spirit. Holmes' comment about Christian education is apt here: "Overprotection breeds weakness; repression breeds rebellion." (1975, 70) As will be discussed below what really is needed is that the local people need to be involved in decision making as soon as possible so that they can learn to accept responsibility for the consequences of these decisions.

4.2 "Things Fall Apart" - Second Illustration

In his book Things fall apart Chinua Achebe winds into his story explanations and stories that illustrate the complex customs and beliefs that guide and control the actions of the tribe. For each occurrence there is a proverb that gives words of wisdom or there is a story to illustrate why someone has acted wisely or foolishly. It is as if he is showing that the white man did not come to a cultural vacuum when he entered Nigeria. The people had laws and ways to deal with the problems of their society that kept things running smoothly.

Other writers who deal with this topic follow a similar technique, for example Plaatje's Mhudi and Ngugi's The river between. Many of the books written about the contact between western and African cultures follow this pattern.

When the first missionary arrives at the village of Mbanta (in Achebe's book), where Okonkwo the protagonist is exiled for manslaughter, they use an interpreter who speaks a different dialect that was:

"...harsh to the ears of Mbanta. Many people laughed at his dialect and the way he used words strangely. Instead of saying 'myself' he always said 'my buttocks'. (Achebe; 1958,126)

The missionaries ask for land and as a way of putting them off they are offered land in the "evil forest". To the surprise of the people this is gratefully accepted and the Ibo people wait for their gods to wreck revenge because no one enters there except when absolutely necessary. Sometimes their gods do not act immediately and so they wait "twenty-eight days" and when nothing happens some people begin to listen to what the Christians have to say. Most of the converts were not people of consequence and so the villagers are not very concerned. They even accepted osu or outcasts. This was such a shock to the new believers that they protested:

...and were about to drive these people out, when Mr Kiaga [the Christian teacher] stopped them and began to explain.

"Before God," he said, "there is no slave or free. We are all children of God and we must receive these our brothers."
(132)

After some argument the osu were accepted and told that they were as other men before God. But when Nwoye, Okonkwo's son, becomes a Christian, Okonkwo is very angry and beats him. Nwoye has always

been concerned about the way the tribe treats the osu and twins: they are thrown into the evil forest at birth to die. He has heard them cry and it has disturbed him. The missionaries have saved these twins and this seems a kinder way to Nwoye. The villagers are not concerned with the rescue of the twins because the missionaries themselves live in the evil forest anyway. Clearly this new way was a threat to the fabric of the tribe but it would be difficult to fault the missionaries' reasoning when they said that all men were equal before God and tried to save the lives of innocent new-born infants. At a farewell feast given by Okonkwo before he returns to his own village Umuofia, a tribesman expresses their concern:

"But I fear for you young people because you do not understand how strong is the bond of kinship. You do not know what it is to speak with one voice. And what is the result? An abominable religion has settled among you. A man can now leave his father and his brothers. He can curse the gods of his fathers and his ancestors, like a hunter's dog that suddenly goes mad and turns on his master. I fear for you; I fear for the clan." (147)

The white man said that the Ibo customs were bad and the people of the clan who had become Christian said the same.

"We were amused at his [the white man's] foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart." (156)

The white missionary at Umuofia, Mr Brown, kept a firm hold on his followers endeavouring to prevent them from provoking the wrath of the clan. He

...preached against ...excess of zeal.... and so [became] respected even by the clan, because he trod softly on its faith. He made friends with some of the great men of the clan and on one of his frequent visits to the neighbouring villages he had been presented with a carved elephant tusk, which was a sign of dignity and rank. (158)

Brown built a school and a hospital and begged the people to send their children to the school avoiding a frontal attack but always trying to understand the people's way of thinking and listening to what they believed. Okonkwo was, however, deeply grieved at the break up of the clan and his son's desertion; the way that they no longer faced issues as one. Mr Brown left for home and was replaced by the Reverend James Smith.

...He was a different kind of man. He condemned openly Mr Brown's policy of compromise and accommodation. He saw things as black and white. And black was evil. He saw the world as a battlefield in which the children of light were locked in mortal conflict with the sons of darkness He believed in slaying the prophets of Baal. (162)

Smith was shocked at the ignorance of the converts on the doctrines and assumed that Brown had gone for numbers whereas he believed that the Lord had spoken of "fewness" and a narrow way. "Our Lord used the whip only once in His life - to drive the crowd away from His church". (162) Shortly after his arrival Smith suspended a woman because her husband had mutilated the body of her dead child to prevent it from returning to torment its mother. It should be mentioned that this woman's husband was not a Christian and it would therefore have been nearly impossible for the wife to hinder her husband's actions.

There was a saying [in Ibo] that as a man danced so the drums were beaten for him. Mr Smith danced a furious step and so the drums went mad. (163)

This leads to confrontation and the humiliation of the leaders of the tribe. Their will to defend their solidarity is broken down and they lose self-respect as a result.

Christ did state that He had come not "...to bring peace on the earth... but a sword." Matt 10:34. However this does not mean that the missionary must be militant, like the Rev. Smith, but that those who choose to follow the Lord will find differences arise between themselves and their families because of their beliefs. There are unchristian aspects in all cultures because of man's sinful nature, and for this reason the Christian missionary should not assume that his culture is superior. The dilemma facing any missionary is that a commitment to Christ is going to cause changes and this will often be painful but he or she must at all times allow the Holy Spirit to guide him or her and the new convert so no unnecessary problems are caused. Christ's instruction to his disciples was to be "...shrewd as serpents, and innocent as doves." Matt 10:16 Sire states :

"To have the mind of Christ is no mystical experience granted to those Christians who are especially holy. It is simply the attitude of humility toward oneself and service to God and others. (1990,19)

This humility should not lead to compromise on principle but it should keep anyone from making decisions without listening to and praying with one's charges. Paul's words are pertinent here:

Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God ... emptied Himself, taking the form of a bondservant... Phil 2:3,5-7.

5. POST COLONIAL ATTITUDES

In the early 1970's Western missionaries were called on by African, Asian and Latin American church leaders to go home. (Uka;1989,15)

...Anti-European disaffection [has] been building up since the 1900's with the conquest, colonization and Christianization of tropical Africa. It hat (sic) erupted in the call for a moratorium on Western missionaries and funds in the 1970's. The call manifests the desire ...[for] indigenous leadership [it also] reflects a desire for liberation from the oppressive paternalism of some Western missionaries. (Ibid.p.19)

The author maintains that there is a correlation between the growing independence of maturing youth and a maturing Christian church. This concept is mentioned by Bishop Neill:

The progress of the churches may well be regarded as parallel to that which takes place in any normal family. The period during which the children are dependent on the parents is followed by a time of conflict and criticism, when new adjustments of relationship have to be made. With patience and goodwill on both sides, this passes into the third stage of fellowship and co-operation between parents and their grown-up children.

As the younger churches enter on their new life of independent self-expression within the world-wide family, they are faced with the task of re-thinking their relationships with the past, and the older churches. How much of the tradition of the church must they keep as sacred, and how much can they reject as not belonging essentially to the faith? (1952.p.249)

Just as with parenting, missionaries need to realize that their role must change. The church in new areas is best served by well grounded dedicated local people. These people should be involved in decision-making as soon as possible so that they can feel responsible for their own church and learn how to govern themselves in the Lord. The missionary will best serve this end by prayerfully guiding his charges with diplomacy and openness. The need for experience to make self-government work should be the missionary's aim. Recognition and responsibility with sincere dedication can prepare leaders for God's work. Besides the fact that the work is usually best served by local people, cases arise where missionaries are barred from a country and

if there are no competent locals to continue the work it can suffer confusion, great loss or even closure.

5. CHRISTIAN TEACHING

It is the writer's opinion that the teacher's role in the classroom and the missionary's role in dealing with non-Christians correlates in many aspects. Both have the great responsibility of being Christ's representatives to souls who need to be lead to a full understanding of who God is. The importance of a right attitude and a personal knowledge of their Saviour cannot be over-emphasized:

Let there be dependence upon the efficiency of the Holy Spirit, and far less upon human agencies. I am sorry to say that at least some have not given evidence that they have learned the lesson of meekness and lowliness in the school of Christ. (White.1944.p.215)

An attitude of humility and the great need to be lead by the Heavenly Teacher should be kept ever before their eyes.

In the primary school phase as in the early days of a new church the role of the missionary/teacher is one of control and guidance with a humble attitude towards the great responsibility laid upon him or her. As the experience of their charges increases so the role of the missionary and the teacher changes. Children and converts need to carry more responsibility for their own decisions and the missionary/teacher needs to be giving them enough autonomy to begin making decisions for themselves. One cannot always be dogmatic and rigid as this does not allow one's charges to learn to take responsibility for their own actions or to learn by their own mistakes.

I have been shown that there is one practice which those in responsible places should avoid; for it is detrimental to the

work of God. Men in position should not lord it over God's heritage, and command everything around them. Too many have marked out a prescribed line which they wish others to follow in the work. Workers have tried to do this with blind faith, without exercising their own judgment upon the matter which they had in hand. If those who were placed as directors were not present, they have followed their implicit directions just the same. But in the name of Christ, I would entreat you to stop this work. Give men a chance to exercise their individual judgement. (White.1944.p.301)

The curriculum is important as is the teaching of the various doctrines but allowance must be made for the workings of the Holy Spirit. The teacher needs to pray earnestly for Spiritual insight so that he or she will not miss the opportunities to allow the Spirit to work in his or her classroom:

At times this Spirit has come with all-pervading influence into the school at Battle Creek Did you recognize His presence? ... When the Spirit seemed to be striving with the youth, did you say: "Let us put aside all study, for it is evident that we have among us a heavenly guest?"

The Great Teacher Himself was among you.... But was not the thought expressed that in school the time ought to be given to study, and that there was a time for everything, as if the hours devoted to common study were too precious to be given up for the working of the heavenly messenger? (White.1948.p.62)

6. CONCLUSION

An attitude of willingness to be guided by the Holy Spirit and an openness to hear what your students have to say about their problems and feelings is the first ingredient needed when a teacher wants to reveal the will of God. The communication of the intricate interrelationship between faith and the corpus of knowledge is more than conveying mere words or paying lip service to some sort of world view. It is the integration of a world view into the life of the teacher/missionary so that his or her example reinforces the message of God's truth and grace which is all-sufficient to restore the image

of God in man. The responsibility of the teacher and missionary can only be measured in the light of eternity. However this task does not have to be borne alone: "'Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,' says the Lord of hosts." Zech 4:6.

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