CHRISTIAN PREACHING IN THE AFRICAN CULTURAL CONTEXT: UNDERSTANDING SPIRITUAL POWER AND FELT NEEDS

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AN ESSAY SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THEOLOGICAL STUDIES IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE AWARD OF THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF DIVINITY IN MISSIONS AND EVANGELISM

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ABSTRACT

The Christian faith has sought its way and continues to seek its way in a diverse world of cultures, religions, socio-economic systems and political institutions. As it does, it exerts influence on those cultures, religions, systems, and institutions and is itself influenced by that varied world.

Within the context of Africa, that varied world is represented principally by the African traditional religion and worldview. It is a world where the paradigms of reality are wide open to the presence, power and interference in the affairs of men of benign and hostile spirits, thus introducing widespread fear, uncertainty, and frustration into the business of daily living.

Consequently, it is this thesis' submission that for the Christian gospel to transformingly penetrate the soul of the African through the instrumentality of Christian preaching, Christ must be preached as the all-conquering God of surpassing power. He must be preached as the Saviour of all that can be saved from the dominion of darkness of the pre-Christian world.

In other words, the Christian preacher in Africa's spiritual-power-oriented cultural context should ensure that the gospel is not only that of saving souls. It should rather, as with Jesus, involve the bringing of wholeness to broken people in every kind of existential distress by the liberating power of the Holy Spirit through signs, wonders, and diverse miracles. What the African harvest field needs is Christian preaching which is organic to the socio-economic and religio-cultural milieu of Africans – preaching that springs from the real life and felt needs of the people.

The following work sets out to do this, in the first instance, through a largely retrospective overview of the subject, presuppositions and purpose of the study. Preaching's indispensability to the Christian faith and God's own communication

paradigm are subsequently explored in a way that highlights the concept of world - view as Christian preaching's ultimate point of reference. In view of this, the work proceeds to appraise Africa's essential cosmology and spiritual power consciousness, drawing a connection between spiritual power and felt needs in the African context. Lastly, the dynamics of power-encounter preaching, seen from the largely successful employment of same preaching methodology in Africa by pentecostal/charismatic preachers and missionaries, culminates in the proffering of recommendations for present and future necessary action.

B. RECOMMENDATIONS

The clear import of the foregoing study of Christian preaching in the African cultural context is that the Christian preacher in Africa is under obligation to show that Christ both desires and is able to meet the existential needs of the African adequately and completely. However, this divine desideratum can only be actualized and satisfied through those preachers who are concerned that the African Christian remains totally committed to Christ through thick and thin.

Giving expression to this heavenly vision for gospel proclamation in Africa world demand that Osadolor Imasogie's rallying cry for both orthodoxy and orthopraxis in Africa be accorded respectful attention. The following are his guidelines for this task:

1. A new appreciation of the efficacy of Christ's power over evil spiritual forces;
2. A new emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit and the present mediatory efficacy of the Living Christ;

3. A new emphasis on the omnipresence of God and the consequent sacramental nature of the universe.

In other words, the following four-pronged approach to Christian preaching is mandatory in Africa:

1. The reality, supremacy, finality and adequacy of Christ must be emphasized, otherwise African Christians will subconsciously assume that what they need is Christ plus their ancestral spirits and religious specialists in order to realize their total being.
2. Such preaching must be conducted in the context of power encounters with demonic forces through prevailing prayer, fasting, and the exercise of spiritual gifts for the primary purposes of healing, deliverance and guidance. Without this, the ancestral spirits and demons will continue to appear more powerful than Christ.
3. The totality of Christian proclamation must be culturally relevant and directed at addressing itself to people's felt needs so as to open the way for meeting their real needs (foremost of which is the attainment of the new birth).
4. In recognition of the fact that there are certain indispensable African cultural distinctives which must form part of the totality of the experience of any African, Africa's rich heritage of music, expressiveness, community-consciousness and the like must be reckoned with as a great vehicle for worship, evangelism, and discipleship.

The single most important aim of contextual power encounter preaching in African must be to exalt Jesus Christ above all other powers or sources of power that have traditionally served the African as salvation providers. Consequently, it ought to be adjudged beneficial to incorporate into the preaching/teaching programme of the African churches or fellowships specific focus on the power of God and the powers of evil – which can be summarized in the following six points:

1. The superiority of the power of God and the supremacy of Christ: emphasizing the supremacy of God's power, demonstrated especially in the resurrection of Christ from the dead and his exaltation to a position of cosmic preeminence (Eph. 1:19-23).
2. The access of the believer to the power of God: God's superior power is available to believers and is working for their best interest. He desires to mediate it to his people for their protection and growth.
3. A new means of access to divine power: Believers are no more to seek access to power by resorting to demonic and magical sources. They are to rather avail themselves of God's surpassing power through maintaining a vibrant relationship/fellowship with the Spirit of Christ.
4. A new perspective on the powers of evil: While Satan's kingdom still retains a large measure of their power, their authority and rule has been emphatically broken by Christ's

resurrection and exaltation. As a result, all who are Christ's need not bow to the authority of the powers – who will be completely subjected by Christ and brought totally under His headship at the consummation.

5. A new posture toward the powers of evil: Since the powers will always attempt to reassert their control and authority over the convert, believers are enjoined to adopt a stance of resistance (Eph. 6:10-20). They are exhorted to appropriate the power of God so as to withstand the malevolent and vicious attacks of these powers.

6. A new purpose for divine power: While the spiritual power derived from demonic and magical sources has the individual in view, God's power imparted to believers has others in view in that it strengthens the Christian to love after the pattern of Christ (Eph. 3:16-17; 5:2).[1]

It is this writer's considered opinion that the spectre of syncretism will die a natural death in African Christianity when the gospel truly becomes God's power for individual salvation and, consequently, of cultural renewal and transformation. If the African people obtain from the gospel those salvific benefits they have customarily hoped to get from the deities and ancestral spirits, if God's power and protection tangibly surrounds the converts so that they gain victory over the fear of the spirits and, perhaps more

[1] The Immediate discussion on teaching/preaching scheme is adapted from Clinton E. Arnold, Ephesians: Power and Magic (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988),168-171.

importantly, if the Holy Spirit ministers in the depths of the hearts of African Christians in the context of their cultural personhood or at the very core of their worldview, syncretism must of necessity expire.

To cause this to happen is the task of contextual power encounter preaching in Africa.