

Remaining a Reforming Influence in Africa

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1 The need

It is true that the numbers of nominal Christians are still growing in Africa. It is unfortunately also a fact that the description “nominal” is all too true. Someone has described the church in the USA as “a continent wide and one inch deep”. The same is probably even more true of Africa.

In the recent censuses in South Africa 80% of the population declare their religion to be Christian. In actual fact, the majority of those have no active affiliation with any denomination. It is still fashionable to be able to “have a church”, for the purpose, among others, of a good burial, so people may call themselves Christian because a parent or grandparent once belonged to a certain denomination.

In Rwanda, by the end of the twentieth century, 90% of the population was reputed to be Christian, mainly Roman Catholic. Yet in the genocide of 1994 those “Christians” killed almost one million “fellow Christians”. Even nuns and clergy seem to have been involved.

The “established” denominations

Another insidious factor is that many of the established denominations which originally brought the gospel to Africa have since then rejected that same gospel – some already long ago. When one reads the histories of missions in Africa and learns about the devoted heroes and heroines of faith, their sacrifices and the sterling quality of their work, and the wonderful fruits it yielded, it is a heart-rending tragedy to experience how everything that they believed in, preached and suffered for is now rejected by church leaders and whole denominations with them. The moderator of a “Reformed” denomination which was regarded as conservative until less than a generation ago now seems to be intent on destroying all opposition to ancestor veneration.

In the same denomination, the resurrection of Christ and the uniqueness of Christ as the only way to God can be questioned; a prominent missionary can declare his belief that in the end all humanity will inherit eternal life regardless of belief or conduct.

Theologians reject the biblical revelation and create for themselves a user-friendly God, who in the end grants eternal life to all mankind. Paganism, drunkenness and random sex are condoned. In many churches the only gospel ever communicated is to be found in the hymns, composed more than a century ago, but still well known and popular.

There are still Bible believing Christians in those denominations, but they are mostly found among the simple Christian believers rather than in the clergy or seminaries.

African Independent churches

It is also a tragic fact that a large part of the church in Africa is constituted by the so-called African Independent Churches, of which the majority are totally syncretistic: a new paganism with a little Christian veneer on it. I said “the majority”, because there are a few of them which hold to biblical beliefs, and who actually confront paganism in a more meaningful way than most of the traditional churches.

A Korean missionary friend of mine established a conference centre in Malawi. In August 2016 he invited me and a reformed Baptist friend whom I suggested, to lead a pastor’s conference for a church which he founded. There were about thirty pastors present. The first question we asked them was whether they had any certainty of salvation, and on what basis they thought to have that certainty. Of the thirty pastors not more than four referred to Christ Jesus and/or faith in Him as the ground of their certainty. We were not surprised, since we both had had similar experiences with many pastors in Africa.

In the theological seminary where I taught, I made a point of it to ask every new student the same questions. Among them were more than one son of Reformed pastors. None of them had any idea of assurance of salvation or the basis for it.

This is an indication of the great need for biblical training for church leaders.

Pentecostal Churches

The largest part of more Biblically orientated churches in Africa, as in Latin America, is probably formed by what could be broadly termed the Pentecostals. As you all know, there are many different forms and degrees of Pentecostalism, some in which the Bible plays a very important role, and some, on the other edge of the scale, where personal experience and personal revelations from God are more dominant. They are generally, according to my personal observations, strictly against any form of paganism. In answer to an enquiry by me, one Reformed pastor in Venda told me that it was well known that most of the churches in the country were syncretistic by nature, except for the (Dopper) Reformed Churches themselves and the Pentecostal denomination “The Apostolic Faith Mission”. He mentioned the very interesting fact that the “Apostolics” and the “Doppers” watch each other with eagle eyes in order to discover any form of syncretism, so as

to be able to accuse the other of not really being Christians but still heathens.

2 Our task

Summarising what has been said so far, which I suppose is familiar to all of you, it should be obvious that the most important task, the most obvious way in which to remain a reforming influence in Africa, the approach which must surely have the strongest impact for the advance of God's kingdom in Africa, is providing Biblical teaching from a Reformed perspective.

Summarising what I mean by a Reformed perspective: the divine inspiration and infallibility of the Bible as revelation about God's relation to humankind; the three *Soli's*: to God's glory alone; by Scripture alone; by grace alone; which implies, among more, the adequacy and finality of God's revelation in Christ, eternal King and only Saviour, as reported in the Bible, and obviously also the doctrines of his sovereign grace.

Fatalism?

The criticism has been levelled at Reformed Christians that the belief in eternal election paralyzes incentive for mission because it inevitably implies fatalism. I very much doubt that any of you feels paralyzed by your beliefs. I have been a missionary for sixty years now, and, as is probably the case with you, I have always experienced the very opposite. Knowing that for the elect of God grace is irresistible has always been an incentive rather than a stumbling block for me. Most genuine revivals have happened in Calvinist communities. The country with the largest pro rata number of missionaries is Korea, where Reformed doctrine is dominant.

The challenge

It is a well known fact that hardly one in a hundred local churches in Africa is lead by a trained person, and that the vast majority of churches only have the services available of men who know very little about the background of the Bible, and not always much of the Bible itself.

3 Priorities

The target

The target should obviously be the majority of local pastors in Africa, who have little or no training in understanding and expounding the Bible, and in the majority of cases also not a high level of secular education. But there is also a growing number of well educated persons

who serve local churches, and this section of the leadership can be expected to grow rapidly in future. It is therefore obvious that material should be made available for persons at *different levels of education*.

The curriculum

Since the majority of local pastors is still from the lowest levels of education, the greatest need at present seems to be to develop programs for training as many local leaders as possible from that level. Actually many educated church leaders should benefit from this material too. According to my experience, biblically sound sermons which are appreciated by children of twelve are also appreciated by academics. Who is there who preached simpler sermons than our Lord Jesus? or sermons of a higher spiritual level? The reason why preachers deliver “difficult” sermons is usually that they themselves are not in command of their material, and therefore tend to obscure their “message” by producing difficult sermons.

There is much valuable material available on this level. There are the correspondence lectures and tests sent out in Xhosa (and I presume also in English) by the Free Church of Scotland. There is also much valuable material by the Timothy Bible Training Institute.

While working on the new isiZulu translation, I first translated the Hebrew and Greek text into a form of English in which I stayed as close as possible to Bantu idiom and sentence structure, in order to make it easier for the mother tongue translators to produce a meaningful, idiomatic translation. This method was very useful, resulting in an understandable translation in standard spoken isiZulu in the relatively short time of ten years – only half the time we spent on the Venda translation which we completed before that.

I hope to devote the remaining time of my life on earth to the task of producing literature and teaching material for church leaders in the same form of English. Most of what I published before this had been written in the Venda language. So I have now started compiling a series of short lectures for this purpose.

I am convinced that the lessons should be in the form of a sermon which the student can use as a message in the Sunday services, in that way applying directly what he has learnt.

Producing material for an *intermediate standard of training* would probably fall outside the scope of my work.

As for more *advanced training*, there is much material available. I personally used the extension training lectures of Mukhanyo, and those I used were all of them excellent in themselves. Still, according to my experience, there were two challenges. The first was the level of English used. All the Venda speaking persons who attended them

were professional people, most of them teachers, yet they found the English too difficult for them, and most of them did not continue after a few lessons. It should be noted that the challenge is not presented by the spiritual level of the lectures, but by the vocabulary used. The seminary might consider rewriting the lectures using an African person, and my experience in Bible translation warns me that the seminary should check that the translator understands the original English well.

A second and less important challenge was that the participants were not able to follow the sound of the lectures recorded in the classroom. The American English as well as the quality of the recordings were difficult for them to follow. Recordings should preferably be made in a studio and read by an African person.

The motive for these two suggestions is that this excellent material deserves to be understood by the students in order to have its full impact.

Confrontational training

Not very long ago the fashionable term among theologians was “contextual theology”. Theology should not be practised in a vacuum, but in the context of those practising it or to whom it is directed. In practice it very often leads to a theology in which the context – that is, the circumstances, frustrations, ideals or pet aversions – were not only addressed in theology, but also decided the outcome of the studies. Not the Word of God dictated the conclusions, but the context dictated it.

I am sure you would agree that such a theology does not need any revelation from God. The Bible is not studied in it, it is abused. It becomes a form of theological ventriloquism.

I would prefer the term “confrontational theology”. This means that theology addresses those involved in it in their context and measures them and their culture, beliefs and circumstances against the Word of God, and since natural, unregenerate humankind is in rebellion against God, all pre-Christian cultures and traditions express that rebellious nature. The apostle Paul makes it clear in the first chapter of his letter to the Romans that frequently non-Christians also do right things, because their consciences tell them what is right and wrong. Yes indeed, but in all cultures there are also elements which express rebellion against God.

Unfortunately, the Gospel is only too often brought to Africans without any reference to those matters. This is also the case among reformed churches. In some parts of the country, such as Venda and Kwa Zulu, it is well known that members of the Reformed Churches do not

practise ancestor veneration. In Kwa Zulu, in the Richmond district, there was a bloody battle between the ANC and Inkatha during the late eighties and the early nineties of the twentieth century. The Reformed Christians refused to take sides, because they could not condone the violence committed by either side. Six of the leaders of the Reformed Churches were shot dead by the ANC followers of Harry Gwala, a great admirer of Joseph Stalin, and his successor Sifiso Nkabinde. Afterwards the murderers threatened that this was the fate that awaited any Christians who disapprove of ancestor veneration.

In other parts of the country, such as Soweto, research indicated that a substantial percentage of members of the same denomination not only approves of but actually practises ancestor veneration with good consciences. Their pastors seemed never to have addressed the issue.

One theological student at Hammanskraal once had to do the practical part of his theological training under the guidance of Dr Sarel van der Merwe in the Kuruman District. When he returned, the student came to me with a personal confession. His words were, as far as I can remember them, the following: “Professor, when I came to study here, I was warned by some of the black pastors to beware of the influence of van Rooy. They said you are the worst enemy of black pastors; you begrudge them whatever they hold dear. I was very worried, and when I attended your classes, their misgivings were confirmed, because I often heard you witnessing against ancestor veneration, and I hated it.

“But when I visited the Tswana Christians at Kuruman, I got to know genuinely Christian black people, and I saw that you are right and your enemies are wrong. And now I want to confess to you that I also was wrong. Do not be discouraged, but keep on witnessing.”

It is obvious from this story that the Christian Gospel should address the traditional beliefs of Africans, and where this is neglected, the result is Reformed pagans or semi-pagans. The Old Testament, which was the Bible of the early Christian church, condemns any communication with the dead in no uncertain terms (eg. Deuteronomy 18:9-13; 26:14; Isaiah 8:19-22 NIV).

There is no time to address other aspects of traditional African culture. I have spent the largest part of my life studying the Bible and listening attentively to its specific message for Africa in its spiritual context. I can refer you to some of my writings if you do not know of any other sources of information on this topic. The Bible has a lot to say about it. One needs to go no further than the first three chapters of Genesis for sufficient material to fill a book.

Important subjects to be addressed

Finally, let me indicate some subjects which I believe should be missing from no theological curriculum on whatever academic level.

- Assurance of salvation (faith in Christ as Saviour, which also implies Christ as Lord and Prophet) Personal knowledge of God.
- The Heidelberg Catechism in the form of messages which can be delivered to a congregation. This should include the so-called TULIP principles of sovereign grace
- Comparison of what the Bible teaches with traditional African beliefs, in the form of Sunday sermons and/or Bible study outlines
- Practical Evangelism (the surest way to understanding the gospel is to immediately start spreading it oneself)
- Summary of the History of Salvation, both Old and New Testaments
- Principles of Biblical Exegesis, with practical exercises (Hermeneutics, with a study of the exegesis of different literature types in the Bible)
- How to prepare a sermon, with constant practical applications, students delivering sermons during classes (It should be noted here that at the primary level pastors and other church readers may be very bright intellectually, but not accustomed to express their thoughts in writing. A student may hand in a very poor sermon which is required from him in writing, but when he is allowed to deliver the message orally he may turn out to be a better preacher than the teacher himself, simply because that is his primary medium of expression)
- Combination of (a) the introduction to every book of the Bible (background, author) with the highlights of (b) the revelation in each book, also in the form of sermons
- Overview of the history of the church
- History of Missions, with case studies of specific missions in Africa
- Systematic Theology, also in the form of sermons
- Principles of Reformed Church Order
- Church planting and leadership (activating the variety of gifts of the Spirit in a church)
- How to communicate with members at house visitation
- Christian Education, specifically for youth of different ages
- Apologetics, with special attention to Islam
- Simple bookkeeping and auditing

In order to apply the principles about which we agree, and to stretch the usefulness of this consultation, I would like to suggest that a working

committee be appointed by the persons present at this consultation, with the assignment to gather information about suitable existing material about the above mentioned subjects and to communicate those to a central address. As central address I would suggest Mukhanyo. Personally I would very much appreciate a short quarterly newsletter for keeping us informed about happenings, triumphs and setbacks in our respective fields, also including news about fellow Reformed Christians not present here and not necessarily teachers and theologians. I love to see a map in my mind when regularly interceding for fellow missionaries.