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Africans into World Missions?

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The question in this title does not indicate any doubt about the validity or plausibility of sending Africans into the entire world as missionaries, on the contrary. It is my strong desire and life commitment to see this happen. Some of my estimated missionary colleagues however doubt whether this is possible and whether it will ever happen on a large scale. They see big problems – as I do myself; yet I have come to believe during discussions with many African Christian leaders that it is not only possible but vitally and crucially necessary. Therefore, more Africans must be mobilized and recruited to participate in world missions because without them the job will not be finished. They possess specific redemptive gifts most westerners lack. In this article I would like to highlight some of the problems Africans face and in a next what they can contribute to world missions.

Some problems

In the context of doctoral research I carried out two research surveys during a four-year period: one in a Southern African country and another in a Central-east African country. During that same period I also conducted the first of these two surveys in two West African countries. I interviewed dozens of pastors, Bible school teachers and –students, leaders of church denominations and in West Africa also leaders of indigenous mission agencies. I asked them about the missionary-sending status of the national church, the attention missions receive in Bible school- and seminary curricula, how many long-term, cross-cultural missionaries they had sent out and other related questions. Although the West Africans are way ahead with the missionary-sending process in comparison to their Southern African brethren, some features in the answers of both groups kept coming back. I want to mention five main problems:

1. Where the *common goal* of participating in world missions lacks, there will be no sacrificial giving to make it happen. Where sacrificial giving lacks the Church misses out on the blessings God intends to give her. Ps. 67 seems to indicate that when the blessing of v. 1 is spent for the benefit of the nations (so that they learn who God is, v. 2-5), business will boom and abundance abound (v. 6). So, as long as such giving lacks, the speed of world missions will be impeded and the poverty of ‘fields yielding no harvest’ will continue.

2. Where a *common vision* – like ‘all nations, tribes, peoples and languages’ (Rev. 7:9) – lacks, material means may be abused for idolatrous purposes. This was true of Israel in the wilderness when they made the golden calf, and it is sometimes true for the church today that fails to actively engage in world missions. In the case of Israel the purpose for their means was the building of the Tabernacle, so that God could live in their midst. Today, the purpose for the means of the church is similarly to meet the conditions that Immanuel, God with us, Jesus Christ can return and live in the midst of His people (Matt. 24:14). World missions is all about bringing the King back to earth and with Him His Kingdom on earth, visible for all. It occurred to me that this eschatological purpose is much more alive in West Africa than it is in Southern Africa. Wood and Takenaga write about A.B. Simpson:

One of the driving passions of his life was to see the Great Commission completed so that Jesus could return. ... He [Simpson] said, Missions is 'the Lord's own appointed way of hastening His speedy coming.'... Simpson made sure that his congregation knew that reaching those who have yet to hear the gospel was the only thing holding back Christ's second coming: 'The work of missions will hasten as nothing else the personal return of the Lord Jesus Christ. It appears to be the one yet unfulfilled condition of preparation' (in *Mission Frontiers*, July 1994).

Lack of vision – or orientation towards the future and the subsequent planning for it – is one of the main factors that may hinder Africans in general, and becomes visible in the lack of missionary acts in her church in particular. Therefore, missiology without eschatology is mere terminology. Maxwell states that

One of the most valuable benefits of vision is that it acts like a magnet – attracting, challenging, and uniting people. It also rallies finances and other resources (1999, 151).

After Moses shared his newly received vision for the building of the Tabernacle he was no longer short of funds, on the contrary (Ex. 36:3-7).

3. Where there is a *lack of leadership* there will be a *lack of initiative*. Israel failed in the wilderness by too *few* leaders and therefore Jethro rebuked Moses (Ex. 18). It failed by *rebellious* leaders like Korah, Dathan and Abiram (Num. 16) or *jealous* leaders like Miriam and Aaron (Num. 12). Israel's desert generation failed by listening to the *unbelieving* leaders with the grasshopper complex (Num. 13), whose confession was 'we cannot do it'. All of them lacked integrity and therefore lacked authority as well (Maxwell 1993, 39). Similarly the Church in Africa finds itself in a leadership crisis, resulting in reluctance if not outright failure, to lead her into world missions, culminating in the Promised Land of the Kingdom of God on earth. It may have to do with the fact that Corwin describes:

... you can only exercise and sustain personal leadership to the extent that you can bear pain (in *EMQ* 1998-1, 16,17).

Bruce put it into sharper words, stating that

In the grand equation of life, people equal problems. How you deal with problems not only bears upon your Christian witness and testimony; in large measure, it determines how long you last as a leader" (in *EMQ* 2001-1, 36-41).

Finally, lack of money and training are often seen as the 'giants' that are feared so much that it is widely believed that the African church cannot engage in world missions.

4. There is often a *lack of discipleship* resulting in syncretism, and it is quite unlikely that churches with conflicting worldviews (traditional African *and* Christian) will send out missionaries. Gbade links discipleship and world evangelization:

... discipleship is needed in the church. The church, when discipled, should be mobilized for World evangelization (in *Occupy* 2003-2, 11-14).

Where Christianity has become "a superficial veneer over old pagan beliefs" (Shorter, quoted by Schwartz 1996, 93), it will lack the willingness to sacrifice for world missions (op. cit. 97). At the

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same time it will doubt the utter, all-sufficient validity of the claims of a unique Christ as only way to their and the nations' salvation.

5. The white missionary sending church that brought the gospel to Africa has done a fine job in evangelism and church planting, but largely *failed to transfer missionary sending vision* to the African churches they established. Examples of missionary praxis that Africans saw from westerners were "too expensive to maintain, let alone reproduce" (op. cit. 5). Therefore the African Church does not – generally speaking – send missionaries, nor do their few cross-cultural missionaries transfer missionary vision themselves and repeat the old omission of the Western Church.

Three hypotheses

1. What lacks in the *acts* of the Church, also lacks at the roots, i.e. in her *theology*.
2. Where biblical eschatology again becomes part and parcel of theological thinking in the African Church, the 'car' of world missions will receive its 'engine' back.
3. Presently the African Church largely fails to recognize her redemptive gifts for world missions, which God placed in her midst, or underestimate their power.

With regard to the *first*, the 'acts' of the Church can be compared to the fruit, found at a tree's branches. Usually when fruit lacks, fertilizer is added around the roots in the hope to grow fruit in the next season (see Luke 13:6-9). Similarly, it is my hope that after digging around the roots of the Church in Africa (challenging old paradigms of thinking) and adding 'fertilizer' (theology of missions) 'fruit' may be seen after a certain period – in the sense that the African Church will send out a considerably larger number of long-term cross-cultural missionaries, especially to places where the gospel is not yet available on this continent.

Concerning the *second* I believe that when Africans will (re?)-discover the coming Kingdom of God to be established on earth, ruled by its glorified King, visibly present and addressing the Africans' felt needs, they will be motivated to fulfill the conditions to make this happen (as shown in Mat. 24:14). This motivation will become their 'engine' to participate in world missions, or, as Van Rheenens states: "... a theology of mission is like the engine of a ship propelling forward the mission of God" (in *Monthly Missiological Reflections* 2001, #20). A renewed vision for Christ's bright future will motivate Africans for missionary action.

The *third* hypothesis, about Africa's redemptive gifts, is in fact a statement of pain. Everywhere people were and are called to participate in the process of saving others, did they have to pay for their commitment in pain, suffering, persecution or other hardships. Examples abound: Abraham had to sacrifice the only son he had with Sarah; Moses endured many complaining Israelites in the desert for 40 years; Joseph was locked up in prison; David crept through caves and ditches, fleeing Saul; Jesus suffered more than anyone else; Paul suffered a lot; etc. etc. Many more examples are easy to find.

In a next article I would like to elaborate on the theme of Africa's redemptive gifts, and how they relate to the remaining unreached people groups on its continent.

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