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Africa's Redemptive Gifts

Steef van 't Slot, Ph.D.

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Africa's potential as missionary-sending continent traditionally has been and still is heavily under-estimated. In this article I would like to contribute some food for thought about how this could change. At one occasion, when I shared the thoughts below with some African Christian leaders, an elderly pastor with tears in his eyes commented "Brother, you are the first white missionary I have ever met, who genuinely believes in us, Africans, and in our missionary potential!" I couldn't agree more. Let me explain why.

Least-reached people groups

Unreached- and least-reached people groups¹ find themselves in that state for a reason. What reasons are we talking about?

- They are hard to reach *physically*. They live in remote areas that are difficult to access, because travel facilities like roads or means of transport lack;
- They are hard to reach *culturally* because they tend to isolate themselves in relatively closed communities;
- They are hard to reach *socially*. Their status in society is (much) 'lower' – or 'higher' – because they belong to differing educational and/or economical classes than those to which most Christians that live around them belong;
- They are hard to reach *generationally* (e.g. children and youth) because most Christians around them belong to older age groups;
- They are hard to reach because of *religious* differences, whether minorities or majorities; especially when Christian communities lack vision and training to reach out to adherents of other religions.

The list is of course much longer and more complicated. Let's look at some similarities between least-reached people groups:

- Many have a tribal, rural background;
- Many have an oral tradition;
- Many grew up in conditions of unemployment and poverty;
- Many are familiar with physical disease and absence of adequate medical care;
- Many have suffered through natural disasters, like droughts, famines, earthquakes, mud-slides etc.;
- Many suffered through wars and related pain, stemming from fear, fleeing, material loss, emotional trauma, physical disablement, rape, and death of loved ones;

- Many share a traditional religious background that keeps them in bondage to much feared evil spirits.

We might call these seven characteristics ‘The average profile of the world’s least-reached people groups’ – a thought to remember when we look at ‘Africa’s redemptive gifts’ – a little later.

Africa’s dilemmas & God’s solutions

Needless to say that almost – if not all of the above – applies to Africans in particular. The crux of the matter is ultimately how *Christian* Africans react to these dilemmas. Unfortunately history has shown how the tendency to sink into apathy has been a dominant feature in African life: ‘We cannot because we were not trained. Therefore we are unemployed, have no income, are poor, have no food, can afford no medical care, nor schooling for our children ...’ and so the cycle of apathy and inferiority continues *ad infinitum*. Some even have ‘theological’ reasons. Lumeya gives an example:

“The curse of Ham in Genesis 9:22-27 has been misread in Africa. It has been misinterpreted as applying generally to all black peoples ... As a result, many of them have gone astray and prefer to practice their local beliefs, rather than to accept the Lordship of Christ Jesus” (in his 1988 Ph.D. dissertation abstract).

This does not mean that the situation in Africa is hopeless or beyond recovery. Mbugua says:

“The story of Africa reads like a chronicle of perpetual doom ... slavery ... colonial oppression ... mismanagement, war, political turmoil, coups ... corruption, poverty and economic regression ... Sicknesses that were nearly eradicated are coming back with venom ... [Yet] in comparison with the rest of the world Africa has 72% of gold, 70% of diamonds, 26% of bauxite, 20% of copper, 12% of natural gas ... Africa produces 35% of the world’s uranium, 65% of cobalt, 40% of platinum and 80% of titanium ... In spite of the above natural wealth, Africa produces only 5% of the world’s wealth ... There must be a way of harnessing these resources for the African harvest” (in *Missionafric* 2003-1, 54-61).

I believe that God can turn all weaknesses into strengths and that the dilemmas Africans face He can turn into redemptive gifts, provided they are willing to stand up and walk the way of faith instead of that of self-pity and its resulting lethargy. If Africans choose to let God’s Word speak into their daily circumstances, attach their faith to it, and start walking ways they never walked before, there is hope for Africa!

Africa's redemptive gifts

The accent in this contribution lies mainly on Africans and the theological implications for their worldview with regard to practical missiology. Being conscious of the many differences among Africans, there are also similarities that cannot remain unmentioned:

- Most have a tribal, rural background;
- Most share an oral tradition;
- Most grew up in poverty, partially because of unemployment;
- Most are familiar with disease;
- Most suffered through natural disasters;
- Many have suffered through wars and related pain;
- Most share a background of religious traditional beliefs and a fear of evil spirits.

Little alertness is needed to see that this list parallels the seven characteristics mentioned under the paragraph 'Least-reached people groups' above. The 'average profile' mentioned there, matches the African's accumulated experience, basic worldview and the value systems and common reactions to these that flow from it. This brings me to the thesis that

Nobody is more suitable to reach the remaining unreached African people groups, than Christian-Africans are.

They who know Christ and learnt to make Him Lord of their circumstances, experiencing His salvation in these, uniquely qualify to testify to others facing similar ordeals. This is how Satan's agenda of bondage for African peoples can be turned into Christ's redemptive agenda for them. It is the old biblical stratagem of fruit, coming forth from suffering, or God's mercy being sufficient in the midst of weakness (2 Cor. 12:9). Needless to say that a biblical theology of missions will always contain a well-founded theology of suffering.

Kerr has some interesting observations from Zambia. He writes:

"... maybe poverty is one strange way in which this part of the world is blessed... Zambians tell us that they can evangelize Botswana a lot easier and quicker than us, their esteemed western brethren. They may reach the entire nation before we have our crates unpacked". At the end of his article he wonders whether "suffering itself is a blessing wherewith people are immeasurably enriched" (in *EMQ* 2004-2, 212-215).

When facing suffering, the Church grows qualitatively as well as quantitatively.

Some observations

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During my years of research I observed that

- although there are big differences among Africans, they have much in common too;
- there are tremendous needs on the African continent, but there is huge potential as well.

Unfortunately, most Africans, especially in the southern regions of the continent, are not involved in reaching unreached Africans, in spite of the fact that it is their biblical mandate and privilege to do so.

Therefore, teaching – biblical teaching, first of all – is needed, whether in oral or written form, to begin to mobilize the African Church at large and recruit her members to evangelize the rest of Africa.

They need to see that it is not ‘the white man’s job’, nor ‘the hobby of the few’ or ‘the task of the rich’ – as I heard some of them say. After all, what a white missionary in Africa can do, pioneering an unreached people group, may take him three years. An African could well accomplish the same job in six months, because he is so much closer culturally, linguistically, and in his worldview, decision-making pattern and leadership styles.

If we want to see the Great Commission finished in our generation it is of huge importance that the African Church participates. Without her contribution the vital tool to complete continent-wide evangelization of Africa lacks. True or not, it has been said that if the white man had been able to finish the Great Commission he would have done so long ago...

Conclusions

I have therefore come to these conclusions:

- *Biblically speaking*, execution of the Great Commission as formulated in the Gospels and Acts, applies to the whole Church, including her African branch.
- Two important reasons why little cross-cultural reproduction takes place from Southern Africa are that converts have been insufficiently discipled and that too few leaders operate according to biblical models of servant-hood.
- *Missiologically speaking*, the African Church should not occupy itself with ‘Jerusalem and Judea’ *only*, but *also* with ‘Samaria and the Ends of the earth’. E-2 and E-3 evangelism should be added to existing E-1 outreach.
- Cross-cultural outreach techniques of well-trained missionaries cannot be assumed among African Christians any more than among their western brethren. Therefore, specialized training has to be established, as distinct from mono-cultural pastoral education.

- *Spiritually speaking*, the African Church possesses the redemptive gifts that will enable her to reach the remaining un- and least-reached people groups on the continent in the shortest possible time.
- *Theologically speaking*, eschatology plays too little a role in the Southern African mindset. This forms an impediment for future-related Kingdom-thinking and therefore inhibits the dynamic of speeding up the Lord's coming through active participation in world missions by recruiting personnel to evangelize the remaining unreached people groups.
- African worldview, based on traditional religion as it is, faces the inherent danger of syncretism that can only be countered by biblical, Christological teaching as basis to preach the uniqueness of Christ for the salvation of mankind.
- From a *human resources perspective*, the African Church possesses all necessary man- and womanpower to increase the present indigenous long-term cross-cultural task force *to at least ten times* its present capacity. There is very little need for overseas personnel, other than in a teaching and consulting capacity that is specifically geared towards the mobilization of the church for world missions and the recruitment and training of indigenous missionary personnel. Help with research and strategy-development may be needed for a season.
- *Economically speaking*, there is no need to fund indigenous missionary outreach programs with monies from overseas, provided the Church at large and her leaders set the example of tithing and sacrificial giving. Combrinck says that

“... with the possible exception of a few ... every country in Africa has the primary ministry gifts, manpower and material resources needed to complete the task” (in *The Church leader in Africa* 2003-1, 4-5).

Smith remarks that

“Historically, missions from the West began when those nations were *not wealthy*. The Moravians *worked to support themselves* wherever they went, even *selling themselves into slavery* to reach the slaves in the Caribbean. For years William Carey *received no financial support in India but worked ... to support his Bible translation efforts*” (in *EMQ* 1999-1, 56-61; italics mine).

Therefore, I re-assert my plea that Africans reach thus far unreached Africa, and so cause a breakthrough in the 21st century world missions endeavor.

Endnotes

¹ Johnstone (2001:759) defines these as ‘World A: Nations and peoples in the least-evangelized world... that are less than 50% evangelized as defined in the World Evangelization Database compiled by Dr David Barrett and team’

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Steef van’t Slot, Ph.D.
steefvantslot@gmail.com