

AFRICA'S BATTLE FOR BIBLICAL CHRISTIANITY
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By mixing paganism with a smattering of Christianity, liberal forces have weakened the African church. Evangelicals are now taking a strong stand.

A strong and growing Christian church in Africa is a fact that cannot be disputed. Various estimates put the Christian population in Africa between 60 and 160 million. But when the church of Christ shines brightest, the devil attacks the fiercest. He works both quietly and violently depending on which approach is most likely to succeed. Today he is trying both methods in Africa. Theological and moral decay have set in. The cancer of liberal, ecumenism is gnawing rapidly into the heart of the church, with many no longer taking the Word of God at face value. A dubious type of cultural revolution has set in. The African Christian may be called upon to lay down his life for the unadulterated gospel he preaches and practices. Evangelical response to such worsening situations has been slow in coming. The first love which characterized the first generation Christians in Africa has simmered down. But the picture is not totally bleak. A number of Africa's evangelical leaders have seen the weakness of the church and the threat of liberal theology. They have joined together to strengthen the force of biblical Christianity by forming the Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar (AEAM). Through their united effort, these Christian leaders aggressively promote sound doctrinal teaching and challenge African believers to stand firm.

THE MOOD IN Africa today and the inroads of liberalism set a challenge that true believers must face. Ignorance of basic Bible doctrine is a major weakness in the church in Africa. One theologian has said the church is trying to exist without theology. Theological ignorance may be demonstrated with these facts:

Following his careful survey, Roger Coon, the AEAM Christian Education Commission coordinator, observes, "A survey among evangelical Protestant churches across Africa in November 1972 revealed that only half of the answers given by these African Christians would be considered evangelical." Only 39 percent believe that the Bible is the sole authority of the Christian. And in answer to the question: "What must a person do to receive eternal life?" Only 38 percent said he must believe in Jesus Christ.

Liberal theology appearing under the guise of "African theology" is seeking to solve the problem of theological ignorance. An advocate of African theology describes it as a theology which will systematize the traditional African experience of God and his relation with man, of man and his relation with God, of the spiritual universe of sin. This so-called African theology amounts to a return to paganism.

Another African theologian presents the universalism of the old liberal school of thought under the guise of African theology. He believes heaven and hell are not real places. They are only a state of being. The state of heaven will, he believes, swallow up hell-state. Unbelievers will eventually be rescued from the not-so real hell.

A FURTHER INGREDIENT of African theology is the high esteem accorded African traditional religions. Many African church leaders feel the gods of Africa should not be degraded to the status of idols. Pagan gods, in fact, are elevated to the rank of being co-eternal with God.

We evangelicals do not deny the fact that biblical theology needs to be expressed in the context of Africa. African theologians need to speak to Africa's problems such as polygamy, music in the church, the spirit world. But to call forth a new brand of liberal theology and call it African is not the

solution. Black theology is gaining ground in southern Africa. The basic idea is that the white man has pointed the black man to God. Then while the black man was looking towards heaven, the white man grabbed the benefits in this life such as land, technology and status. According to Black theology, the black man should turn his eyes to the here and now and to black power. Cultural revolution now looms overhead in Africa. But cultural revolution probably will not wipe out Christianity in Africa as it did in China. President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, a socialist head of state, has assured Christian leaders that "to reject colonialism and exploitation is one thing and to reject Christianity is another." At least two-thirds of black African heads of state profess Christianity. All these Christian statesmen would not likely reject the faith they profess.

What cultural revolution seeks to do is to get the Christians to practice a watered-down Christianity. Christians are already being asked to undergo pagan rituals. In some African countries school children are encouraged to practice sensuous dancing and sing the praise of ancestral gods.

LIBERAL ECUMENISM with its watered-down gospel has no difficulty conforming to pagan demands, because the Word of God is not held to be the final authority. The World Council of Churches seeks to discover ways of salvation in all kinds of experiences including pagan religions.

Another liberal view defines evangelism in terms of service to the world rather than of salvation being offered to sinners. The old concept of social gospel now gathers momentum in Africa.

Western ecumenism is welcomed in Africa as a new religion. Being so inclusive, it appeals to government authorities struggling for national unity. And ecumenism does seem to offer the African these advantages: a spirit of brotherhood, respect rather than truth, and compromise rather than open conflict. This view appears to be far better than denominationalism and division in Christendom.

BIBLICAL CHRISTIANITY is bound to come into conflict with these nonbiblical forces. The evangelical Christian may be called upon some day to defend the gospel with his life blood. But so far in most African countries citizens have liberty to preach and practice their biblical faith. While the opportunity is open, evangelical Christians need to join together. Unnecessary division hurts the body of Christ. But unity must have a sound theological basis. Brothers of like precious faith need to demonstrate positively what evangelical Christianity can do. The Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar (AEAM), formed in 1966, is seeking to unite believers throughout Africa, and to set forth a firm, uncompromising theology. AEAM's purposes are:

1. To provide spiritual fellowship as a means of united action among Christians of like precious faith.
2. To manifest before the world true biblical unity.
3. To promote evangelism and church growth.
4. To alert Christians to theological trends that undermine the scriptural foundation of the gospel.
5. To render special services for all men, but especially for those "of the household of faith" (Gal. 6:10).

The AEAM headquarters in Nairobi exists as a service agency to the national fellowships, churches and theological schools. It assists in a wide variety of evangelical projects and has helped sponsor such activities as seminars promoting church growth, church management, "New Life for All" and theological education by extension. It has also sponsored writers' workshops to produce programmed texts for pastoral training, etc. In view of the greater potential of evangelical impact

through cooperation, the 1973 AEAM General Assembly established two permanent commissions. The Theological Commission will promote understanding and possible accreditation for the existing theological institutions. It will also promote theological education by extension. It will continue to publish theological monographs on current trends in Africa. The Commission has resolved to establish two graduate schools of theology at bachelor's and master's level in Africa. Evangelical theological schools of this level so far do not exist in the continent. One school will serve French-speaking Africa while the other will be located in English-speaking Africa. The Christian Education Commission aims to help the churches in Africa strengthen their teaching ministries. The Commission will assist in curriculum development and will encourage Christian education leadership conferences and training programs. It will also conduct research into more effective ways to teach within the African cultures. These are days of unparalleled challenge and opportunity in Africa. Evangelical Christians must stand together for a united witness and defense of the truth, and must raise the banner against the Christo-paganism now threatening to pollute the church. END

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