

Is African Charismatic Christianity a Counterfeit?

For the last several weeks, I have been asked for my response to an article posted on the Grace to You website by Conrad Mbewe, pastor of the Kabwata Baptist Church in Zambia and one of the speakers at Pastor John MacArthur's upcoming Strange Fire conference. According to the article, which is entitled "Why Is the Charismatic Movement Thriving in Africa?" this movement is not a powerful visitation of the Holy Spirit. Rather, "We need to sound the warning that this is not Christianity."

Not Christianity? Really?

Now, had Pastor Mbewe said, "I praise God for the wonderful things that He is doing throughout Africa by His Spirit, but there are serious errors that need to be addressed," I would have said, "Amen," to many of his concerns. In fact, charismatic leaders in Africa are addressing these problems as well.

Unfortunately, Pastor Mbewe, just like many other anti-charismatic leaders, fails to see the extraordinary forest because of some very bad trees.

He distinguishes the modern charismatic movement in Africa from "the old conservative form of Pentecostalism once represented by the Assemblies of God churches," claiming that the new movement is spreading like wildfire because it "has not challenged the African religious worldview but has instead adopted it."

But this is a gross overstatement. Rather, as noted by J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, Ph.D., professor of contemporary African Christianity and Pentecostal/charismatic theology in Africa at the Trinity Theological Seminary, Accra, Ghana,

“Pentecostalism is a response to ... cerebral Christianity and wherever it has appeared the movement has defined itself in terms of the recovery of the experiential aspects of the faith by demonstrating the power of the Spirit to infuse life, and the ability of the living presence of Jesus Christ to save from sin and evil.

“The ministries of healing and deliverance have thus become some of the most important expressions of Christianity in African Pentecostalism. Much of the worldviews underlying the practice of healing and deliverance, especially the belief in mystical causality, resonates with African philosophical thoughts.”

As expressed to me by evangelist Daniel Kolenda, Reinhard Bonnke’s successor, “The Western brand of stale, cold, theoretic and purely cerebral Christianity that Africans have been offered by many of the [Western] evangelical denominations is laughable to them. For Africans, their faith must have real-world consequences or it is worthless.”

Put another way, since Africans see the spiritual realm and natural realm as one, and since they don’t need to be convinced about the reality of demonic spirits, if Jesus is really the Savior, then He also saves from sickness and demonic powers.

At the same time, Pastor Mbewe is absolutely right that many traditional, worldly practices and mindsets have been incorporated into African charismatic Christianity. What he fails to mention, however, is that some of these same errors are found in African evangelical churches as well—although, to be sure, the vast majority of evangelical churches in Africa practice the spiritual gifts as well—and, as noted by Kolenda, “Many of those who are speaking the loudest against these heresies are the Pentecostals and charismatics!”

What, then, are some of the most serious abuses? Pastor Mbewe

claims that in “the African Charismatic circles, the ‘man of God’ has replaced the witchdoctor,” endued with special powers and breaking through the barriers of the demonic world and ancestral spirits, which “is also why the heresy of generation curses has become so popular.”

Although somewhat overstated, this is a real problem, and so when the people are not experiencing divine blessing, they run to the “man of God” to pray for them, giving these leaders a stranglehold over the people. It is the man of God who can bring the “breakthrough,” because of which, Pastor Mbewe points out elsewhere, this form of Christianity threatens the important New Testament teaching of the priesthood of every believer.

Another charismatic minister involved in Bible school training in several African nations pointed out to me that “the preachers started to live like kings while the people that attend the churches live in abject poverty. Being a preacher became an occupation, not a divine calling. And now some even have private jets whilst their people are burying their dead because they couldn’t afford a doctor.”

But to repeat yet again, these abuses are being addressed by many charismatic leaders as well, and they are the loud, ugly, glaring exceptions rather than the general rule.

They should absolutely be addressed and exposed and corrected, but they should not be taken as an indictment of African charismatic Christianity as a whole, God forbid, nor should they distract from what God is doing in Africa. (Remember that Paul didn’t reject what the Spirit was doing among the Corinthians. Rather, he praised them for excelling in the gifts and then corrected the errors in their midst.)

As for the so-called “heresy of generation curses,” this teaching can obviously be exaggerated and exploited, but the Scriptures do teach that generational curses exist (see, for

example, 1 Samuel 2:27-33), and in a country like Africa, which is full of ancestor worship, it is not farfetched to think that certain demonic, generational curses need to be broken off of people's lives. Is it right to brand this a heresy?

There's something else we need to consider, and that is the extent to which we have baptized Christianity into our own American culture, equating size and prestige with spiritual success and running the church like a business. (Another distinctly American Christian error is mistaking patriotism for the kingdom of God.)

And just as some African charismatics have morphed the witchdoctor into the "man of God," we have morphed the megachurch pastor into the CEO and superstar, the almost infallible guide whose every word is to be followed and who does most of our scriptural thinking for us. So much for the priesthood of every believer! (It has been pointed out that preachers in the Reformation, wearing robes and ascending their lofty pulpits, did not sufficiently break with the Roman Catholic model of ministry.)

Turning back to Africa, Pastor Mbewe writes that "prayer in the modern Charismatic movement in Africa is literally a fight. In fact, the people praying are called 'prayer warriors'." And that's why so much time is spent in the prayer meetings rebuking Satan and demons in Jesus' name, with people shouting and praying fervently. Yes, he writes, "This is nothing more than the African traditional religious worldview sprinkled with a thin layer of Christianity."

Again, it is certainly a serious error to focus on Satan as much as (or more than!) God or to be more demon conscious than Jesus conscious (even remotely so), but it is also true that there is a time for intimate fellowship with God as well as a time for fervent, even warring prayer, in keeping with verses that speak of spiritual warfare and of striving in prayer

(see, for example, Ephesians 6:10-19; Romans 15:30; Luke 22:44; and 2 Corinthians 10:3-4). And what's wrong with the concept of "prayer warriors"?

Pastor Mbewe also claims that the main leaders in the movement "survive on a few, well-worn, tortured verses. ... There is absolutely no effort to properly exegete Scripture. Rather, by chanting phrases and making people drop under some trance, in witchdoctor fashion, they are holding sway over the popular mind." He wonders why others are not seeing this or sounding the alarm, stating, "For the love of crowds, we have allowed African traditional religion to enter the church through the back door."

And so he states emphatically, "This is not Christianity. It does not lead to heaven. It is a thin coating over the religion that has been on African soil for time immemorial, which Christianity was meant to replace. We have lost the Christian faith while we are holding the Bible in our hands and using some of its words. This is really sad."

As for the "men of God" who lay hands on the congregants every week, he says they "are imposters and must be rejected with the contempt they deserve."

Really, it is blanket statements like this that are so dangerous and inaccurate, leading readers to make their own, equally erroneous statements, such as: "How tragic that the church people of Africa have been duped into apostasy." Or this: "I think the charismatic movement should not waste their time debating cessationists, but rather take the time to fix the devastating effects they have had on Africa as a whole." (These comments were posted on the Charisma News and Grace to You websites.)

In reality, as noted in a Pew Research report, "The share of the population that is Christian in sub-Saharan Africa climbed from 9 percent in 1910 to 63 percent in 2010."

This is absolutely extraordinary and represents one of the greatest advances of the gospel in history, and almost all of this growth is charismatic in nature. Yet because of some abuses, many of which reflect the immaturity of the movement, this glorious work of God that has resulted in tens of millions of Africans coming to faith in Jesus is being rejected and scorned.

As for the very real weaknesses that do exist, as one of my colleagues heavily involved in African ministry expressed, how much better it would have been had Pastor Mbewe recognized, "If we have the gift of teaching, we should lovingly serve those who need it, instead of alienating them when they are giving God the best they know, and they have some real strengths too."

And perhaps we in the West could learn from some of their strengths.

As Kolenda notes, "Some of the finest, strongest and most sincere Christians I have ever met anywhere in the world are in Africa. I personally know families who have lost family members who gave their lives as martyrs because of their confession of Christ. Many of the Africans Christians that I know have a faith in Christ so strong that it would put most Western Christians to shame. Their faith, humility and love for the Lord is an indictment of the indifference and unbelief so prevalent in the Western church."

One of my American friends hosted a pastor from Ghana who was visiting for a few weeks, and after attending several church services—after which the people inevitably went out for a meal together—the pastor said, "Now I see why nothing is happening in your churches! You spend all your time feasting; we spend ours praying and fasting."

Some of the finest students we have ever trained in our ministry schools have been African charismatic believers,

marked by their devotion to Jesus, their passion for the lost, their willingness to sacrifice for the gospel, their solid lives of prayer and their hearts for holiness.

As noted by Professor Asamoah-Gyadu, *"The foremost theological emphasis of Pentecostal/charismatic Christianity is ... the transformative encounter with God who is holy and who is spirit.* In the African context, participants in Pentecostalism keenly testify not only about their new life, but also the transition often made from resorts to traditional religious resources in order to be sincere Christians believing in God alone."

Jesus is doing the transforming work!

Again, there is no denying that this rapid spread of the gospel throughout much of the continent of Africa bears all the marks of a new, often immature movement, but rather than rejecting it as un-Christian, God is pleased when we recognize His work and help bring it to maturity.

In the words of Kolenda, "If we are going to point out the negatives of the charismatic church in Africa, let's be fair and also point out the many, many positives. Without the 'charismatic' church in Africa, Islam would have taken the continent over and there would be very little gospel influence at present. Waves of salvation have swept across entire nations," and millions have responded to a clear gospel message of salvation through repentance and faith in Jesus alone.

And so, while it is likely that those attending the Strange Fire conference who hear Pastor Mbewe speak will come away with an entirely negative view of African charismatic Christianity, the perspective of Professor Asamoah-Gyadu is far more accurate: "African Pentecostal/charismatic Christianity is complex. It is alive. It is thriving. And it must be a major focus for Christians around the world who are

involved in evangelism, missions and the state of the global Church.”

In sum, quoting Kolenda once more, “Many of these African Christians are the first generation of their tribe in history to become Christians. They will have to work through many traditional, tribal and cultural issues (just as our ancestors did in the West when the gospel first came to them), but we should not underestimate the power of the gospel and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. We should thank God for the unprecedented harvest that is taking place and continue to contend for the integrity of the gospel.”

Can I hear an amen?

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