

# *Developing Evangelical Christian Theology in Africa*

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## **Introduction**

Evangelical Christianity is alive and well in Africa. Individuals are being converted, baptized, and discipled. Churches are being planted. Denominations are being created. Enthusiasm for Christian activities is being generated. However, there appears to be a gap between the growth of the church and her theological maturity. This condition which Yusuf Turaki at one time called theological “infancy”<sup>1</sup> is probably is a normal thing. The physical bodies of human beings grow faster than they grow in wisdom and understanding so that in the early years of life there is a gap between the two. Fortunately, the normal growth process gradually reduces that gap.

In a similar way, if the church in Africa is “normal,” it is expected that the gap between the physical growth of the church and its theological understanding will also gradually reduce. How is that going to happen? Who are those responsible to make sure that church matures in her understanding of God’s truth? Obviously, the first persons one thinks of are the pastors and church leaders. A pastor is first of all a teacher (Ephesians 4:11) so pastors must be those who are on the front end of addressing the theological development of the church. However, since the study and teaching of theology primarily resides in the theological institutions, I propose that the primary responsibility for making sure that the African church matures theologically lies with the theological institutions and particularly those people who teach Bible and theology in those institutions.

- The evangelist leads a person to Christ.
- The pastor leads the believer to maturity in Christ.
- The theologian leads the church to theological maturity.

Therefore, all of us who consider ourselves Bible teachers or theologians must understand and accept the heavy responsibility of translating the teachings in the Bible into functional and practical theology that will help the church to mature successfully. That is the foundation for developing evangelical Christian theology in Africa.

Fortunately, I believe we are well beyond the theological infancy stage in Africa. Much work has been done in Africa in the last 40 years to address theological issues from a wide range of perspectives. I will not take time to attempt to review that process for two reasons. First, I am not competent to do so and, second, others have already addressed that issue quite well.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Yusuf Turaki, *The Unique Christ for Salvation*, International Bible Society, Nairobi, 2001, p. 92. Turaki suggests that the theological maturity is being retarded by an over-emphasis on the cultural agenda and political ideology of the nationalist era.

<sup>2</sup> For an excellent brief survey of the key issues and persons involved in African theology, see Je’adayibe Dogara Gwamna’s excellent article “Hermeneutics and the Challenge of Doing Theology in Africa” found in his book *Perspectives in African Theology*, Africa Christian Textbooks, Bukuru, 2008, pp. 195-225.

## **Preliminary Statements**

First, I am an evangelical Christian. I understand that evangelicalism has two primary characteristics: First, evangelicals have a high view of scripture, accepting that the Bible, including the Old and New Testaments, is divinely inspired which means they are without error in what they affirm and are thus fully authoritative in the lives of all Christian believers. Second, evangelicals believe that all Christians must experience a personal relationship with Christ through regeneration which in popular terms implies being “born again.”

Second, though I have lived and worked in Nigeria for over twenty eight years, I am not an African. I will always see African theology through western eyes to some extent. Therefore, anything that I say about African theology must be interpreted in light of my own lingering western worldview.

Third, I am a Biblical theologian not a systematic theologian. Basically a Biblical theologian limits theological conclusions to what is revealed in the Bible. Obviously, to have a well-rounded theology, one must add logic and the opinions of others which is what systematic theology does. However, throughout most of my career I have specialized in Biblical theology which colors the way I approach any topic, including the question of how we develop evangelical Christian theology in Africa. Though there would be variations in our approaches and conclusions, I think that I stand within the tradition of those African theologians who are committed to a Biblio-centric approach to African theology, including Byang Kato,<sup>3</sup> Tokunbo Adeyemo,<sup>4</sup> Tite Tienou,<sup>5</sup> and Yusuf Turaki.<sup>6</sup>

Fourth, as a Biblical theologian, I do not believe that there is an African theology or a western theology or a feminine theology, in the strictest sense of the word. Theology is the study of the eternal and unchanging God. Therefore, all theologians must develop theology the same way regardless of what part of the world they come from. We do not create theology in light of our culture and context. We create theology in light of the culture and context of the Bible writers and readers. On this point Kato wrote, “It is more appropriate to talk of Christian theology, and then to define whatever context it is related to, e.g. reflections from Africa . . .”<sup>7</sup> Obviously our context develops different areas of interest, difference insights, different applications and perhaps even different conclusions but ideally Biblical theology should be affected very little by the context from which it is approached. If the process of doing theology is not the same around the world, then we have little or no basis for discussing and comparing our beliefs.

However, there is no doubt that our context does influence Biblical interpretation, and often positively. Because most African cultures are more similar to the traditional Semitic and Greco-Roman cultures in agricultural practices, marriage customs, linguistic and literary expressions, religious traditions, and even in reasoning techniques, many African Christians easily and naturally interpret portions of the Bible that western interpreters struggle with because these things are not part of their life experiences. So those people whose worldview is closer to the worldview reflected in the Bible have an advantage in interpreting the Bible over those whose worldview is completely different. Thus, African theologians and preachers

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<sup>3</sup> Byang H. Kato, *Biblical Christianity in Africa*, Africa Christian Press, Achimota, Ghana, 1985

<sup>4</sup> Adeyemo, Tokunbo, *Salvation in African Traditional Religion*, Evangel Publishing House, Nairobi, 1979

<sup>5</sup> Tite Tienou, *The Theological Task of the Church in Africa*, Africa Christian Press, Achimota, Ghana, 1990

<sup>6</sup> Yusuf Turaki, *Christianity and African Gods: A Method in Theology*, International Bible Society, Nairobi, 1999

<sup>7</sup> Kato, p. 43

do the worldwide theological community a favor when they bring non-western communication techniques to bear on Biblical interpretation, thus enabling interpreters to come closer to the original meaning. To the extent that Africans or theologians from any other part of the world provide a corrective to traditional interpretive practices, those practices become normative for all Christianity and are not restricted to the context from which they were produced. Hence, they are no longer African but universal principles.

Theology is like architecture. Architects from one part of the world do not use different principles for designing and constructing buildings than are used in other parts of the world. The laws of physics that relate to construction are all the same regardless of what part of the world in which one is building. However, the interest in certain techniques is different and the application of the construction principles is different so that the finished product might look different. A three bedroom house in Japan might look much different than a three bedroom house in Ghana, though the principles of architecture behind them are the same. It is the interests and application of the principles that causes the differences not the architectural principles themselves.

It is true that the church in Africa looks and even thinks a bit different from the church in India or the church in Bolivia. However, it is not because Africans use a different approach to develop their theology. It is because they have interests in different parts of theology<sup>8</sup> and also because they apply the theology in different ways. Thus, it is my understanding that African theology is primarily a reflection of different theological interests and different applications of universal exegetical tools and the theological process.

### **Convictions about the Church in Africa**

I would also like to state at this point some of my convictions about the church in Africa. First, I believe that it has been abundantly demonstrated by many researchers that the Christian church in Africa is growing.<sup>9</sup> Second, I believe that the church in Africa is primarily an evangelical church.<sup>10</sup> Many of the international mainline denominations, whose sister churches in the west have accepted theological liberalism, are solidly evangelical in Africa, including denominations such as Anglicans, Methodists and others. Third, because of her rapid growth and what Jenkins calls a “powerful southward shift,”<sup>11</sup> the church in Africa may soon be the gravitational centre of Christianity around the world. There are abundant evidences of this that have been documented elsewhere.

In light of this, I believe it is essential that the church in Africa to address seriously the issue of theology which is the framework around which the church is built. Good theology is the skeleton which gives shape, structure, uniqueness and even beauty to the

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<sup>8</sup> David T. Adamo, in his book, *Explorations in African Biblical Studies*, illustrates the particular interests that Africans tend to have in the psalms. Because of the similarity of worldview that has been created by similarity of problems and experiences in life, the psalms are particularly attractive to Africans who easily and naturally interpret and apply them. See pp. 11-43.

<sup>9</sup> For example, Philip Jenkins projects that the Christian church will grow in Nigeria from 50 million in 2000 to 83 million in 2025 and 123 million by 2050. He projects that the church in Uganda will grow from 17 million in 2000 to 24 million in 2025 and 43 million in 2050. See *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002, pp. 90-91.

<sup>10</sup> Jenkins uses such words to describe the southern churches, including the African church, as “stalwartly traditional,” “evangelical,” and “conservatism.” He says that these new churches in the global south “preach a deep personal faith and communal orthodoxy, mysticism and Puritanism, all founded on clear scriptural authority.” pp. 7-8. This is not a bad definition of evangelicalism.

<sup>11</sup> Jenkins, p. 89

African church. If the African church is going to be the leader of worldwide Christianity in the coming decades, that means other parts of the world will be looking to the African church for guidance on all matters related to our faith, including theological issues. This has several implications for the church:

- The African church must invest more time and energy in developing theology.
- Individuals and individual parts of the African church must become specialists in specific aspects of Christian theology.
- African seminaries and other theological institutions must invest the necessary time and resources in producing serious Bible interpreters and theologians.
- African scholars must study and learn all that the church has discovered up to this time. However, the African church must be prepared to go beyond the contemporary church and discover and apply the truth of the Bible to issues that affect the current and upcoming generations.

### **Process of Doing Theology**

I will now discuss the process of developing theology. I have attempted to reduce this to four steps (with one that could be divided into two parts). Much of what I will say is very basic. However, like athletes who are constantly reviewing the basics of their sport, we theologians must also regularly review the basics of our profession of developing theology.

#### **Exegesis**

The first step in developing theology is interpretation which is the ultimate result of exegesis. Exegesis is extracting from a written document the communication intended by the author.<sup>12</sup> Although we tend to restrict the word exegesis to theological studies, we are actually doing exegesis any time we are reading a document whether it is a newspaper, a textbook or any other written document. The only correct interpretation of that reading is the thought that the original author had when he or she wrote those words.

Exegesis is affected by many things, including the meaning of words, grammar, figures of speech and idioms and certainly the context, including the cultural, religious and grammatical contexts. To the extent we understand these things about the Bible, to that extent we will properly interpret its meaning. When we fail to understand any of these, our interpretation of that passage will be handicapped to that extent.

It is my conviction that exegesis is easier than most of us believe. Many tend to view the Bible as some kind of magical book or at least a book that contains such profound truths the average person could never comprehend them. However, we must remember when Jesus spoke, he presented his teachings to semi-literate people, orally, one time and they all seemed to understand him. In addition, when Paul wrote his letters, he assumed that they would be read publicly to semi-literate people who would hear them read one time and get the point.

There are two major problems of Biblical interpretation we must overcome. First, we must overcome a language barrier. The Bible was written in a language that most of us do not speak or read. Therefore, when one translates something from one language to another, it is often difficult to transfer the communication perfectly into the target language. Thus, some of

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<sup>12</sup> This is the definition that Craig Keener and I have used in our book, *Understanding and Applying the Scriptures*, Africa Christian Textbooks, Bukuru, 2003, p. 3

the communication is lost in translation. Second, the original communication was given to people with a worldview shaped by religion, family and political structure, geography, and history, all of which go together to create one's culture and worldview. All communication is culture specific. Therefore, in order to understand any communication we must learn as much about the cultural context in which the communication was given and received as possible. Once we overcome these two obstacles, interpreting the Bible is much easier.

## **Comparing Scripture with Scripture**

Even if we are able to satisfactorily extract from a specific passage the exact communication intended by the author, we have only understood that one passage, given in one particular context. We must now compare that passage with all other passages in the Bible that relate to the topics found in the first passage. We do this to make sure that we have a comprehensive understanding of those topics rather than just a snapshot of them from one part of the Bible.

To really interpret the Bible we must understand that it is not just a book. It is a collection of historical records, songs, speeches, prayers, laws, dramas, short stories, proverbs, biographies, prophecies, letters, and other literary devices. Each of these genres communicate truth in a different way so we must take all of that into consideration in our attempts to understand what the whole Bible teaches about a given subject.

Since there is a variety of ways the topics and themes are presented in the Bible, one of the fundamental rules of interpreting the Bible is that one always interprets obscure passages in light of clear passages. The following are some guidelines that will help do that.

***We interpret poetic passage in light of prose passage.*** Poetry is written to express a truth in a memorable and aesthetically pleasing manner while prose is written to express truth in the clearest possible manner. A lawyer would never argue his case in court in poetry because there would be a more precise way of making his point. Therefore, if there is a possible difference of interpretation between two passages, we would use the prose passage to interpret the poetry not *vice versa*.

***We interpret historical passages in light of didactic passage.*** Historical passages simply explain what happened though of course, even the telling of history can be biased and distorted. However, Jesus' speeches in the gospels and the epistles are didactic in the sense that their primary purpose is to teach specific truths. The gospels record the Passover Meal that Jesus and his disciples experienced (Luke 22:13-38) but the epistles explain the significance of it (1 Corinthians 11:17-31). Therefore, when building theology, we use the teaching passages to explain the historical passage.

***We interpret figurative language in light of literal language.*** The Bible is filled with idioms and figurative language. Figures of speech are designed to make communication more interesting and clear. However, sometimes we drift into misinterpretation when we overstress figurative language. For example, several times the Bible talks about people who "sleep" (Acts 7:60; 1 Corinthians 11:30; 15:6, 18, 20, 51; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-15). Based on that, some theologians believe in "soul sleep." This means that when people die, they go into some kind of soul sleep and remain in that condition until the resurrection. However, there are non-figurative passages that teach quite plainly that when a person leaves this body, he or she goes to be with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8). Paul declared that those who precede us in death God will "*bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep*" (1 Thessalonians 4:14). Thus a question raised by figurative language is clarified by normal language.

***We interpret earlier passages in light of later passages.*** Though this is a part of comparing Scripture with Scripture, this is a principle I will explain in more detail below.

## **Understanding Progressive Revelation**

I do not believe it is possible to understand the Bible without understanding the progressive nature of revelation in the Bible. What that means is that God did not reveal everything that his people would need to know in one time or place or document or through one person. God gradually provided revelations over hundreds of years that expanded and clarified earlier revelations. In other words, each new revelation was built on the previous, expanded it and provided the foundation for the next revelation.

### ***The First Revelation***

The first 11 chapters of the Bible seem to be introductory and lay the foundation for all revelations God was going to give to humankind. The first major revelation in the Bible was given when God spoke to Abraham and said, *“I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you”* (Genesis 12:2-3). In this statement, we have in seed form all that God was going to do throughout the rest of the period covered by the Bible and even until today. Although God made several statements in those verses, they can be summarized into two general promises:

- God was going to make a great nation out of Abraham.
- God was going to bless all the peoples of the earth through Abraham.

The rest of the Bible is a progressive unfolding of God’s attempts to fulfill those promises.

### ***Building the Nation***

The process of building the nation was slow and painful. When we get to the end of Genesis, there is no nation. There are only about 70 people and they are all living in a foreign land. When we get to the end of the Pentateuch, over 600 years have gone by and there is still not a functioning nation. God’s promise to Abraham to build a great nation was not fulfilled until the crowning of Saul over 1000 years after God had made that promise to Abraham. That nation reached its peak of development and success during the reigns of David and Solomon. After that, the kingdom went into a 300 year period of deterioration and decline until only a shell of the former nation was still in existence at the close of the Old Testament. However, God had fulfilled his promise to build a great nation out of Abraham.

### ***Building the Church***

During the New Testament era, we see something similar happening. John the Baptist announced and Jesus later taught that a new kind of kingdom had come. We get more insight into the nature of this kingdom when Jesus says to Peter who had just acknowledged that he was the Messiah: *“And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.”* (Matthew 16:18). Interestingly, this statement sounds a bit familiar to the statement God originally made to Abraham. Jesus, here is also promising to make something. He is promising to build his church. And on the Day of Pentecost, we see that promise start to be fulfilled. The church was established on that day in

a seed form and Jesus has been slowly building it ever since. Herein lies the fulfillment of the second promise God made to Abraham—that he would make him a blessing to all the peoples of the earth. It is through the church that all the peoples of the earth are being blessed.

- They are being blessed by learning the truth about God.
- They are being blessed because their sins are forgiven through the merits of Christ.
- They are being blessed because they have access to the Holy Spirit.
- They are being blessed because they are given assurance of eternal salvation.

### ***Significance of Progressive Revelation to Interpretation***

How does all of this relate to developing evangelical theology? The answer is that doctrine is created from the Bible. And the Bible is a collection of documents that relate to these two major institutions that God created. Some of the documents tell the history of these two institutions. Some of the documents give the laws related to them. Some of the documents give the music associated with those bodies. Because the Bible is such a diverse book, filled with so many different kinds of documents that were provided over a 1500 year, it must be interpreted carefully, making sure that each part of the Bible is not only interpreted in light of the genre in which it is given but each scripture is interpreted in light of the time period in which it was given. Laws that were given to a theocratic nation should not be viewed the same way as instruction given to a church in the church age. Ethical standards that were demonstrated by the military leaders in the Book of Judges should not be viewed the same way as the ethical standards of Jesus' apostles in the Book of Acts. We must assign each of these scriptures its appropriate place in developing theology.

It is important to recognize that though all scripture is given by inspiration of God and all of these scriptures are useful for creating doctrine, all scriptures are not of equal value in developing theology. Obviously New Testament documents have a much greater bearing on building Christian doctrine than Old Testament documents. Jesus himself said in the Sermon on the Mount, “*You have heard it said . . . but I say unto you . . .*” (Matthew 5:21, 27, 33, 38, 43). As the world progressed toward God's ultimate goal of blessing all the peoples of the world, each new revelation became more specific and more relevant to its own generation.

A progressive outline of the various parts of Biblical revelation would look like this:

1. God gives the promise of a nation and blessing to Abraham.
2. God provides the law of that nation to Moses.
3. God provides the history of the nation through the historical books.
4. God gives details about interaction with God and man through David and Solomon (in the psalms and wisdom literature)
5. God provides major lessons to the nation and the world about what happens to individuals and organizations that ignore or reject God, through the prophets.
6. Jesus introduces his new kingdom through his ministry and particularly his teachings.
7. The apostles implement the teachings of Jesus in the Book of Acts.
8. The apostles explain the details about Jesus' new kingdom in the epistles.

When we use the Bible to develop theology, we must understand the nature of this very special book. We must understand that the teachings of Jesus have far more relevance and should be given much greater weight in building Christian doctrine than the Mosaic Law, the prophets or even the psalms. Certainly Jesus knew and understood all of the revelations that had gone before him and, in his teachings, gave the interpretation and application of

those revelations that had come before him. The epistles, then, become the final inspired revelation that God has given to interpret everything that had been revealed before that time.

In light of this, Paul's words to Timothy about one "*who correctly handles the word of truth*" (2 Timothy 2:15) become significant. We do not confuse the various revelations that God has given to us. We do not take the early revelations given to a nation and use them to explain the church which was created hundreds of years later. In addition, we do not impose the ethical standards taught by Jesus and attempt to apply them to people who lived in a theocratic nation hundreds of years earlier. We interpret and apply all scripture in light of previous revelations and in light of the situation in which that revelation was given.

In some ways, the Bible is like a PhD thesis. A PhD thesis has an introduction, a dedication page, an abstract, an introductory chapter, background details, the main arguments, summaries, footnotes, appendices that may contain pictures, maps, letters, and other documents. One would use the statements found on the dedication page differently than the statements found in the main body and those would be used differently than the photocopies of old letters found in the appendix.

It is this same kind of carefulness and professionalism we must bring to the Bible when we interpret it and attempt to develop theology. We must recognize that the statements in the Mosaic Law reveal things to us about God and help us understand what God was doing in that particular period but because we serving God in a different kind of kingdom, they do not have the same bearing on evangelical Christian theology as statements from the Sermon on the Mount and the Book of Romans.

In summary, we return to the statement made earlier. We interpret earlier passages in light of latter passages. We interpret passages related to the nation in light of the passages that are given to the church. We interpret revelations from the period of judges or the period of the prophets in light of revelations given after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

If we are going to develop evangelical Christian theology we must recognize the reality of progressive revelation and we must know how to compare Scripture with Scripture.

## **Organizing the Material**

After we have done proper exegesis and compared Scripture with Scripture, we must next organize all of this raw information into a logical, understandable and useful arrangement. We must make sure that every statement that is made in this theological outline can be supported by scripture. For example, in one of my recent classes, my master's students went through the book of Matthew and identified 68 statements that we could make about the kingdom of God, using only those passages that had the word "kingdom" in them. However, 68 miscellaneous statements about the kingdom are a bit clumsy to use so we had to reorganize it into a logical theological outline.<sup>13</sup> This is a tedious process and sometimes after it is carefully done, it still does not yield any new significant insights. However, it is a process that is essential to developing evangelical Christian theology.

Once we have organized the material we have extracted from scripture this way, we have created a Biblical theological outline and got a good start on creating Christian doctrine.

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<sup>13</sup> I have included in the Appendix the theological outline of the kingdom from the Gospel of Matthew that was produced by my students.



## **Consulting other Works**

Up to this point, except for perhaps getting some assistance with the actual exegesis of the passage, we should have done most of the work on our own—without broadly consulting the opinions of others. However, once we have established what we believe the Bible says about a particular doctrine and created a theological outline of that doctrine, it is time to consult those who have thought and written about this subject before us. In doing this, probably most of the time we will find that our conclusions are validated by the experts. At other times we will observe that we may have gained an insight that the scholars we consulted missed. And there will also certainly be times when, after seeing what the theologians have said, we will revise our own conclusions to be more in line with theirs.

I am convinced that we can develop a lot of theology on our own, with just the aid of our Bibles and exegetical tools. However, it would be foolish and even arrogant to try to develop theology without observing what thoughtful people before us have said. The wise man was correct when he said “*many advisers make victory sure*” (Proverbs 11:14).

## **Summary**

This is the process of creating theology. It does not matter whether you are in Nigeria or California or Japan, this is the way evangelicals develop theology. However, once we have developed our theology to this point, is the process of developing theology complete? No. We have developed to some extent “evangelical Christian theology” but we have not yet developed “evangelical Christian theology in Africa.” To make sure that we bring Africa into the picture, we have to move from exegesis to application. We have to take the conclusions of Biblical theology and make them relevant to our contemporary society.

## **Application**

Interpretation in much of the Bible is often quite easy because it is simply accepting what the passage says. However, application is often more frustrating because the social, cultural, political, economic and religious conditions that created the original statement no longer exist. Therefore, the person applying the scripture must take the conclusions of Biblical theology and attempt to make them relevant in a different context, in a different language, in a different time period, with different sociological, cultural, political, economic and religious conditions. Do we always apply a passage in exactly the way that the original readers of that passage would have applied it? Are there applications of this passage based upon the principles of the passage that go beyond what was envisioned in the original statement? These are the types of questions that one making application must answer.

## **Illustration of Ephesians 5:18**

For example, Ephesians 5:18 says, “*Do not get drunk on wine.*”<sup>14</sup> The interpretation of this passage is simple. To accurately interpret it, you need to know three words. You need to know what wine is. Wine was a drink made from the juice of grapes that was processed in such a way that it contained about 10 percent alcohol. You need to know what “drunk” is. To be drunk is to have ingested enough alcohol or other substance to alter a person’s physical and mental processes. Often when people are drunk, their speech slows down; their bodily

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<sup>14</sup> See McCain and Keener, p. 4

reactions slow down and their thinking even slows down. You need to know what the word “do not” means. That simple means that one should abstain from that activity.

However, some smart person might come along and say, “The Bible says that I should not get drunk on wine. It does not say anything about beer. If I get drunk on beer I have not violated any scriptural command.” Evangelical theologians believe that although the Bible only mentions getting drunk with wine, the principle that is established in the passage means that we should not get drunk on wine or beer or vodka or rum or champagne or whisky or *burukutu*.<sup>15</sup> In fact, the application of this passage teaches that you should do nothing to weaken your physical, emotional and mental state. Therefore, this passage would even extend to smoking Indian hemp or using other drugs that would alter the thinking and reaction processes. Although many of our modern abuses are not specifically mentioned in the Bible, they are included when one attempts to apply the principles of the Bible.

### **Differences between Interpretation and Application**

Once we begin applying Scripture, we enter a new arena of theology than what we have observed earlier. Though some of these overlap a bit and others are a bit oversimplified, the following are some of the differences between interpretation and application:

- Interpretation focuses on the past. Application focuses on the present.
- Interpretation tells what a passage says. Application tells what it means to us.
- Interpretation deals with theory. Application deals with practice.
- Interpretation deals with the mind. Application deals with the will.
- Interpretation is often relatively simple. Application is often very difficult.
- Interpretation is often agreed upon quickly. Application is often controversial. It affects the lives of people and thus becomes much more controversial.
- Interpretation focuses on the original meaning. Application focuses on how the original meaning fits into modern culture.
- Interpretation is the job of the theologian. Application is the job of the preacher.
- Interpretation is always first. Application is always second.
- Interpretation is necessary. Application is just as necessary.<sup>16</sup>

The thing that makes application difficult is that application may vary from culture to culture or from generation to generation. Although God’s eternal principles do not change, the application of those principles does change. We even have a New Testament example of this.

### **Illustration of Eating Meat Offered to Idols**

At the Jerusalem Council, the Christian leaders proposed four guidelines for the Gentile believers, one of which said, “*You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols*” (Acts 15:29). There is no question about the interpretation of that passage or even its original application. However, less than five years later, the Corinthians wrote to Paul and asked him about eating meat offered to idols. The issue was that all the meat available in Corinth had earlier been sacrificed to some pagan god and then sold in the public market. If the Corinthians could not eat meat offered to idols, that would basically mean that they would have to give up meat. Paul wrote to them and said in 1 Corinthians 10:25, 27:

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<sup>15</sup> *Burukutu* is a locally made alcoholic beverage in northern Nigeria.

<sup>16</sup> Adapted from PowerPoint presentation of my University of Jos hermeneutics class; slides 14-17.

- “*Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience.*”
- “*Eat whatever is put before you without raising questions of conscience.*”

Amazingly in this situation, Paul essentially reversed or at least modified the specific instructions given by the Jerusalem Council. Why did he do that? I believe this was an issue of application. In the first case, the primary reason the Jerusalem Council had directed the Gentile Christians to observe those Jewish food taboos seems to be because of the principle of respect. At that time, 100 percent of the Christian leaders were Jews who would have abhorred anyone eating meat with blood in it, or meat that had been strangled or offered to idols. Although they released the Gentiles from circumcision which was a more overt physical act rooted in Jewish history and culture, they insisted that the Gentile believers respect their church leaders by observing these dietary guidelines. For the Gentiles to flaunt their food liberties would be to disregard and disrespect those who had brought them to Christ. However, in Corinth, in a different situation, where all or at least the majority of the church leaders were Gentiles who did not have these sensitive consciences about food, there was a different application. Obviously, they were still to be sensitive to the consciences of the unbelievers but they no longer had to worry about sensitive consciences of their church leaders. Eating this kind of meat would not have bothered them. Thus, an application that was designed to keep from being disrespectful no longer had any meaning and therefore, did not need to be enforced.

### **Contemporary Examples**

When we start thinking about making different applications than were made in the Biblical days, many evangelicals get nervous. We have high respect for the Word of God and we never want to put ourselves in a situation in which we accept or reject something in the Word of God based upon our own preferences or prejudices. And we do not want to get sucked into the post-modern theory that there are no absolutes. I agree with David Jackman who writes “the text of the Bible is not plastic; it cannot mean contradictory things.”<sup>17</sup> However, all of us make a distinction between interpretation and application. I will now give three contemporary illustrations that show how we Christians separate interpretation from application.

#### ***Illustration One***

Nearly all African Christians ignore a command given five times in the New Testament: “*Greet one another with a holy kiss*” (Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:26; 1 Peter 5:4). When I ask my African students why they do not practice this, they nearly always say, “That is not our culture.” Most African Christians believe that when they have shaken hands or greeted in a cultural appropriate way, they have fulfilled the principle behind that command, even if they have not fulfilled the letter of the law. In this case the application is clearly different from the original command. Almost no one would insist on a literal fulfillment of that command.

#### ***Illustration Two***

There is a second way that interpretation is separated from application in our contemporary Africa churches. Note these verses:

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<sup>17</sup> David Jackman, *Opening Up the Bible*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2003, ,p. 194

- 1 Corinthians 14:33-35: “Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.”
- 1 Timothy 2:11-12: “A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.”

Although some interpreters have made attempts to show these verses actually say something other than what they plainly state, one does not have to be an expert in theology to understand these passages. Paul did not allow women to teach or have authority over men in church. In fact, Paul declared it was “*disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church*” (1 Corinthians 14:35). Yet, many churches in Nigeria and around the world allow women to speak in church. Some even allow women to pastor churches and be heads of ministries. This is obviously a different application than the original application. How do we justify that?

Some attempt to change the teaching by comparing Scripture with Scripture. For example, in 1 Corinthians 11:5 Paul describes a woman who “*who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered.*” It is also stated that Philip had four daughters who prophesied (Acts 21:9). Prophecy was normally a public vocal function designed to strengthen, encourage and comfort (1 Corinthians 14:3). Therefore, these and other scriptures suggest the prohibitions that Paul gives in 1 Corinthians 14:33-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-12 were not absolute.

However, the most effective arguments for allowing women to participate in the teaching and leadership of the church are based upon principles of application rather than interpretation. The argument usually goes something like this:

- Women were uneducated in those days and had no chance to develop their minds.
- Those who had not developed their minds were disqualified from teaching and leadership positions. Hence, Paul’s prohibition of women teaching and leadership.
- Today women are equally as well educated as men and have had abundant opportunities to develop their minds.
- Since the circumstances that required women to be silent no longer exist, the application must also be different. Therefore, women who have developed their minds and their skills should be allowed to participate in leadership and teaching.

Those who reason this way believe that the real principle Paul was insisting on here was not male superiority and domination but order and structure in the church service which would have been compromised by allowing illiterate women to participate in leadership roles. They do not accept that Paul believed that there was anything inherently inferior about women but for the sake of the church, refused to allow women to lead in the church due to their limited development. However, now that the context is different and the reason for their required silence has been removed, there is no reason for them to be silent in church again.

This line of reasoning is accepted by some evangelicals but not by others. However, it is very similar to the argument Africans use to excuse themselves from greeting one another with a holy kiss. A different context requires a different application.

### ***Illustration Three***

There is a third application of this principle that makes practically all evangelical Christians not only nervous but angry. The Old Testament demanded that if a person had sexual

relations with a person of the same sex, he or she was to be put to death because this was an abomination to God (Leviticus 18:22; 20:13). Paul declares that homosexuality is an evidence that God has given people over to shameful lusts:

*Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion (Romans 1:26-27).*

However, there are thousands of Christian interpreters today who reason this way: In the days of the Bible, it was thought that homosexuality was an abnormal physical and moral condition. However, now that we understand the phenomenon of homosexual orientation—which means that some people have natural tendencies to be attracted sexually to those of the same sex—those scriptures that condemn homosexuality should be re-applied. We now live in a different context with a different understanding of this phenomenon. Surely the God of love would not prohibit people from expressing love in the way that is most natural for them, especially when they have no control over their sexual orientation.

Though not identical, this argument is similar to the other two.<sup>18</sup> It attempts to separate the original interpretation from the contemporary application. This position argues that we live in a different context with a different world view and a more “realistic” understanding of a human condition. Thus, we are free to make a different application of a scripture related to homosexuality than was originally made in the Bible. Most evangelicals would believe that this is taking this line of reasoning much too far.

I share these three illustrations to demonstrate that when we start down the road of separating application from interpretation, it is a slippery slope that can lead in directions we would not want to go. However, even though there are abuses of this principle of separating interpretation from application, it is still a legitimate exercise. It is based upon Biblical authority, and must be cautiously pursued if we are to develop evangelical Christian theology in Africa.

### **Observations about Creating Application**

Because there was seldom any difference between interpretation and application in the Bible, we are not given many guidelines for creating application in the Bible itself, particularly when it is different from the original application. Theologians and Bible teachers and preachers often talk about application but there is not nearly as much focus on how to do application as there is how to do interpretation though application is the part that most directly affects us. Darrell Bock and Buist Fanning state that “few modern listeners possess the exegetical and theological controls to guide them to an appropriate application.”<sup>19</sup>

The pitfalls of doing application extend to two extremes: Some assume the interpretation and the application are identical and, thus, attempt to literally apply every Biblical passage to the contemporary situation exactly as it was applied in the Bible. Others

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<sup>18</sup> Obviously, there are many approaches within Christendom to defending homosexuality. Many if not most of these would not have an evangelical understanding of the Scriptures. However, some who claim to have a high view of scripture still justify homosexual activity based upon a different application in a different context.

<sup>19</sup> Darrell L. Bock and Buist M. Fanning, *Interpreting the New Testament Text*, Crossway Books, Wheaton, 2006, p. 294

assume that the Holy Spirit will make the appropriate application or they depend upon some other subjective experience to direct them to the right application without giving much personal thought to the process. Neither of these is satisfactory.

How do we make application? What should be the principles that guide us in creating appropriate application? In reviewing six books on hermeneutics, I found that all six made some attempt to talk about application.<sup>20</sup> However, although they talk about application, there is not as much specific guidance given on how to do it. In his book, *Applying the Bible*, Jack Kuhatschek complains about the same thing when he says that application is often assumed but the process is not well articulated.<sup>21</sup> Zondervan's *NIV Application Commentary* makes a good attempt to address the issue of going from interpretation to application by proposing and demonstrating a three-fold process.

- Original Meaning. This is basically exegesis.
- Bridging Contexts. This extracts “timely and timeless” principles from the passage.
- Contemporary Significance. This section attempts to make the timeless principles relevant to the modern world.<sup>22</sup>

A common expression one reads in nearly all of these books is the phrase “general principle”<sup>23</sup> or “generic principle”<sup>24</sup> or “enduring principles.”<sup>25</sup> Bernard Ramm says the Bible focuses on “moral and spiritual principles”<sup>26</sup> The *NIV Application Commentary* says that there is a “universal dimension in the problems” of the world that is addressed in the Bible by the “timeless aspects of the text.”<sup>27</sup> However, again, there is only limited assistance given in how to legitimately identify those general and timeless principles.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Darrell L. Bock and Buist M. Fanning, *Interpreting the New Testament Text*, Crossway Books, Wheaton, 2006; David Dockery and George H. Guthrie, *Interpreting the Bible*, Broadman and Holman Publishers, Nashville, TN 2004; Dorothy L. Johns, *Understanding the Bible*, International Correspondence Institute, Brussels, 1991; J. Robertson McQuilken, *Understanding and Applying the Bible*, Moody Press, Chicago, 1983; Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1970; T. Norton Sterret, *How to Understand Your Bible*, Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL 1974

<sup>21</sup> Jack Kuhatschek, *Applying the Bible*, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, 1996, p. 9

<sup>22</sup> Terry Muck, Editor. *The NIV Application Commentary*, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, 1998. For a description of the methodology of the commentary, see the introduction of any commentary in the series. For example, see the *Acts* commentary, by Ajith Fernando, pp. 9-12.

<sup>23</sup> Kuhatschek, p. 51

<sup>24</sup> McQuilken, p. 258

<sup>25</sup> McQuilken, p. 248

<sup>26</sup> Ramm, p. 186

<sup>27</sup> Fernando, p. 10

<sup>28</sup> David Jackman gives three “diagnostic questions” which help focus on application:

- What aspects of unchanging human nature do we find explained or illustrated by this passage?
- What can we learn from this passage about covenant people in their relationship with God?
- What timeless principles does the author intend to stress? pp. 197-198

Dockery and Guthrie suggest the following approach to develop application:

- Write a summary of the original situation or problem being addressed by the passage.
- Write down the general principles in the passage.
- Note how the principles address the original situation.
- Think of situations in a modern context that parallel the original situation.
- Identify various areas of modern life to which the passage might apply.
- Make applications to your own life and target audience. p. 78

Craig Keener and I, in our book *Understanding and Applying Scriptures*, devoted three of our thirty chapters to issues related to application. We attempted to address the issue of how to extract core principles from a passage with the following questions:<sup>29</sup>

- What is the core truth being taught in the passage?
- Is the core truth being taught appreciated in the local culture?
- Is the application of the core truth consistent with other scriptures?
- Are there examples of the practice being “violated” in other parts of the Bible?<sup>30</sup>
- Is the practice repeated in multiple contexts, particularly Jewish and Gentile contexts?
- Are there examples of exceptions to this practice in the Bible?
- Are there examples of cultures that have no understanding of this practice?
- Are there examples of different cultures expressing the principle in a different way?<sup>31</sup>
- Does a local practice abuse anyone? Does the strict application of the Biblical practice abuse anyone in a different culture?

However, though we have attempted to give some guidance on discovering core principles, I am not satisfied with our efforts. I believe that the body of Christ in Africa needs some more serious thought and energy invested in this important issue.

As we continue to think and interact with one another, I believe the following principles must guide the attempts of evangelical theologians to create more objective and more authoritative application:

1. All parts of the Bible are inspired and profitable for doctrine and application (2 Timothy 3:16).
2. All application must be solidly rooted in proper exegesis (2 Timothy 2:15).
3. Legitimate application must be consistent with the overall teachings of the Bible and must not contradict the clear principles of the Bible. (Matthew 22:29; Mark 12:24; Acts 17:2, 11.) This was a principle that was used in establishing the canonicity of the Bible, another extra-biblical Christian doctrine.<sup>32</sup>
4. Proper application must be consistent with the general teachings and practices of the Church throughout history. Even taking into consideration modernization and rapidly changing cultures, it is unlikely any Christian will come up with a totally new application that has no precedent in the past, at least in principle (Ecclesiastes 1:9).
5. Some applications will vary from person to person or culture to culture and that is consistent with the Christian faith (Romans 14).
6. Application should have the general consensus of the church leadership (Acts 15:25-29) Just as certainly as no inspired scripture came about by the “*prophet’s own*”

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<sup>29</sup> McCain and Keener, pp.307-308

<sup>30</sup> For example, the prohibition on women speaking publicly is not entirely consistent. See 1 Corinthians 11:5 and Acts 21:9 for examples of women speaking publicly. On the other hand, the principle of respect for authority is consistent. It was practiced by David, even when it was to his personal detriment to do otherwise.

<sup>31</sup> This can be illustrated by the way different African cultures express respect for elders. When greetings elders, Igbos bow slightly; Yorubas prostrate completely. An example of African and American cultures viewing things differently is the issue of bodily functions. Bodily functions are viewed as quite normal in Africa. For one to relieve himself discreetly in public is not uncommon. However, bodily functions are considered very private in America. For one to relieve himself in public would be considered rude and immodest. Greetings are considered very important in Africa. Before one can address problems, there must be appropriate greetings. Time is considered important in America. Thus, greetings are limited. When you visit someone, you get to the point immediately. This kind of impersonal approach to things is considered rude and improper by Africans.

<sup>32</sup> Sinclair Ferguson, *New Dictionary of Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, Leister, England, 1988. p. 628

*interpretation*” (2 Peter 1:20), no application should be encouraged that does not have the general consensus of the church leadership.

7. Caution must be taken against overusing and abusing the “application” issue. Though culture changes, human nature does not change and much of the Bible was written in language that is directly applicable to all human beings, regardless of culture or time period (See Exodus 20:12-16; Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 5:27; Acts 16:31; Ephesians 5:18).

## **Conclusion**

Doing exegesis and creating Biblical theology are procedures that have been developed over hundreds of years. However, they are not so permanently developed that we cannot get new insights into interpretation, especially by people whose worldview is similar to the worldviews reflected in the Bible. Fortunately, most of us have a reasonable understanding of how to do exegesis. In addition, most of us, especially the preachers among us, naturally and almost instinctively make application based upon our exegesis. However, because of the fallen nature of humanity and because of improper cultural practices that have become a part of our worldview, we must work harder and we must work together at developing principles related to application that are evangelical, Christian and appropriate for Africa.

If we are going to develop evangelical Christian theology in Africa, we are going to have to focus much greater attention on making application to our contemporary African context a priority in our theology making process. Developing evangelical Christian theology in Africa involves taking the unchanging Biblical principles that have been extracted from the Bible through exegesis and making them relevant to the church in Africa. This is the task of all Christian leaders who are serving God in Africa.



# Appendix

## Theological Outline of Kingdom from Matthew

### A. Spreading the Kingdom (Expanding the Kingdom)

1. The kingdom is spread through preaching (4:17; 10:7).
2. It is appropriate to pray that the kingdom will come (6:10).
3. The kingdom has been spreading since John the Baptist (11:12).
4. The message about the kingdom can be heard and understood (13:19).
5. Some will not understand the message of the kingdom (13:19).
6. The kingdom starts small, grows slowly and gets big (13:31-33).
7. The kingdom is explained through teaching (13:47-50).
8. Humans are involved in spreading the kingdom (16:19).

### B. Entering the Kingdom

1. Prerequisites
  - a. Repentance (3:2; 4:17; 21:28-31)
  - b. Righteousness (5:20)
  - c. Humility (5:3)
  - d. Doing the will of the Father (7:21)
2. Seeking for the kingdom is appropriate (6:33).
3. Humans have some control over who enters the kingdom (16:19; 23:13).
4. It is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom (19:24).
5. Prostitutes and tax collectors may enter the kingdom (21:32).
6. You can reject the invitation to enter the kingdom (22:1-14).
7. Many are invited but few are chosen to enter the kingdom (22:14).

### C. Moral Characteristics of the Kingdom

1. Goodness (4:23)
2. Obedience to the Law (5:19)
3. Righteousness (5:10; 13:43)
4. Humility (18:3-4)
5. Forgiveness (18:23-35)
6. Compassion (25:34-36)

### D. General Description of the Kingdom

1. Kingdom is associated with health (4:23).
2. There is a hierarchy in the kingdom (5:19-20; 18:1-4).
3. The kingdom belongs to the Father (6:10 – Lord’s Prayer; 26:29).
4. God’s kingdom has blessings associated with it:
  - a. Healing (4:23)
  - b. “*Other things*” (6:33)
  - c. Good News (9:35; 24:7)
5. Kingdom is to be a priority in the lives of the disciples (6:33).
6. Not everyone will enter the kingdom (7:21). Even some Jews will not enter the kingdom (8:12)
7. There are secrets associated with the kingdom that were given to and known by the disciples (13:11).
8. The communications about the kingdom can be lost or misunderstood (13:19).
9. The kingdom is very valuable (13:44-45;) and worth great sacrifice (19:12).
10. The kingdom of heaven is like little children (19:13-14).
11. The kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven are the same (19:23-24).

12. Reward in the kingdom is not based upon human understanding of reward (20:1-15)
13. The kingdom can be taken away (21:43).
14. The kingdom was prepared from creation (25:34).
15. You can drink wine in the kingdom (26:29).
16. There will be celebration in the kingdom (26:29).

**E. Time of the Kingdom**

1. The kingdom has not come (6:10)
2. The kingdom has come (10:7; 12:28)
3. John the Baptist helped push the kingdom forward (11:12)
4. The Son of Man is coming in his kingdom (16:28).
5. The kingdom will come unexpectedly (25:1-13).

**F. People Associated with the Kingdom**

1. Occupants
  - a. Patriarchs (8:11)
  - b. Non-Jews (8:11; 21:43)
  - c. Great people (11:11)
  - d. Forceful people (11:12)
  - e. Good and bad (people) (13:24-30; 13:41)
    - 1) Bad people will be removed (13:41, 47-48)
    - 2) The good will remain (13:41, 47-48)
  - f. Children (19:13-14)
  - g. Jesus (26:29)
2. Promoters of the Kingdom
  - a. John the Baptist (3:2)
  - b. Jesus (4:17)
  - c. Opponents (5:10)