THEY'LL DO IT OUR WAY

Posted on October 31, 2018 by Eddie

I get the impression from some writers and opinion formers in the West that they won't respect church leaders in Africa (and elsewhere) unless they are fluent in Western (generally, Reformed) theology. In other words, unless Africans think and talk like us, we won't listen to them.

Category: Africa

I don't know how many times I've heard the suggestion that the church in Africa is "a mile wide and an inch deep". I may, to my shame, even have said it myself at some point. There are a few reasons why I find this statement offensive:

- Let's face it, without putting to fine a point on it, it's racist. It's a generalisation about people in another part of the world made from a position of assumed superiority.
- As a generalisation, it is inaccurate. There are places in Africa where the church is far from a mile wide (try Northern Nigeria, under Boko Haram), and how, exactly, is depth being measured?
- Who are we to criticise? The church in the UK is far from a mile wide and, in many ways, it doesn't have a great deal of depth either.

Of course, Africa does face a problem in that many church leaders have only minimal training. Sometimes people end up pastoring churches with no Bible training at all. This sorry state of affairs is a consequence of the rapid growth of the church, it is hard to train leaders fast enough to keep up with the spread of the church. If only we had that problem, here! However, the situation is not as simple as it is sometimes presented. There are a number of excellent institutions providing a high level of training for African pastors and teachers - it's just that there aren't enough of them. It's also true that the problem is exacerbated by colleges and seminaries in the West (the US, in particular) poaching the best trainers from Africa. It is very hard for someone teaching in Africa to resist the call of an amazing salary, great working conditions and the opportunity for their kids to grow up as Americans, rather than struggling on in Africa.

All this is to say, that there is very much a place for Westerners to teach theology and Biblical studies in Africa. The need is there and is likely to remain there for at least a generation or two.

However, I do have reservations about some of the initiatives that I have seen. It seems that some people feel that the African church needs a lot of teaching about the Reformation or about the struggles against modernism. The thing is, important though these issues are, they are our history, our struggles, not theirs. Africa has a very different cultural, social, economic and (yes) theological history to Europe and theology teaching in Africa needs to reflect this. The Ghanaian theologian, Kwame Bediako, suggested that West African Christians would gain far more from studying the early Church Fathers than they would gain from the Reformers. For Bediako, the Church Fathers reflected a worldview much more like the one he saw in Ghana than did Luther, Calvin et al. The first task for would-be theology teachers in Africa is to listen and learn, not to apply ready-made solutions and curricula from a very different context.

I'm not writing anything new, here. I've said similar things in the past. However, let me just turn thing around. I get the impression from some writers and opinion formers in the West that they won't respect church leaders in Africa (and elsewhere) unless they are fluent in Western (generally, Reformed) theology. In other words, unless Africans think and talk like us, we won't listen to them. (I

may be exaggerating slightly - but only slightly.) Now there is a problem here; if we will only listen to people who share our views and our theological background, we will never learn anything new. The whole reason that Westerners have something to contribute to the church in Africa is that they have a different background and experience which allows them to help expand the boundaries of the life of the church. Yes, Westerners have to contextualise their teaching and make it relevant to the African situation - but their formation and experience are what is important. Likewise, African teachers who have experienced life in a very different, multi-religious, multi-cultural, rapidly expanding church have something to teach us in the UK. Of course, they need to contextualise and shape their teaching to apply it to our context.

Our different backgrounds and experiences cause us to bring different questions to the Bible and to see insights that other people could never gain. We can only benefit and help each other when we respect, understand and value our different backgrounds. It is not just Africa that loses out when we apply ready packaged solutions from the West to their situation, we potentially lose out too!