

## THE EXCLUSIVE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE AND AFRICAN ANTI-FOUNDATIONALISM: THE BYANG KATO LEGACY

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### ABSTRACT

In the African context, anti-foundationalism started gaining currency when some African theologians began to clamor for a reconstruction of local theology in Africa that gives room to some African beliefs and practices in addition to Scripture as sources for doing theology. It is within this context that Byang Kato labored to establish solid biblical theological foundations for the church in Africa. On this account, a theological conflict ensued between Kato and his contemporaries who stood on the other side of the divide. Though he did not write much, it is very evident in some of his works that he was an astute orthodox evangelical theologian. As the anti-foundational philosophy is increasingly clamoring for wider acceptance in African Christian theology, this writer highlights the importance of Kato's legacies and argues for a sustainable evangelical Christian faith in the context of growing rebellion against the historic confessions. In conclusion, African Christian theology and African theology are two different strands of theology due to their sources, and we should not conflate their distinctions. Theologians of African traditional religion too should make their religion stand on its own terms with its own non-biblical scripture, as do other religions; however, any attempt to merge African traditional religion with Christian theology is fraudulent and counterproductive.

### INTRODUCTION

*Anti-foundationalism* refers to a philosophical and theological rebellion that arose within the postmodern culture against the foundations of the Christian faith. This especially focused on the inspiration and sole authority of Scripture and the accepted confessions of the church that were developed from scriptural witness. Since its emergence in the eighteenth century following the Kantian revolution, this development influenced global Christianity as theologians of different regions began to agitate for their local theologies with their additional socio-cultural twists. In Western theology, agitations were to change meanings of texts and concepts or reinterpret them in order to accommodate socio-cultural attitudes and behaviors. In Africa, anti-foundationalism has taken a shape that is uniquely African, syncretism wrapped in Christian terms. It was originally advanced mainly by African Roman Catholic theologians. In the African context, anti-foundationalism started gaining currency when some African theologians began to clamor for a reconstruction of local theology in Africa that gives room to some African beliefs and practices in addition to Scripture as sources for doing theology. It is within this context that Byang Kato labored to establish solid biblical theological foundations for the church in Africa. On this account, a theological conflict ensued between Kato and his contemporaries who stood on the other side of the divide. Though he did not write much, it is very evident in some of his works that he was an astute orthodox evangelical theologian. As the anti-foundational philosophy is increasingly clamoring for wider acceptance in African Christian theology, this writer intends to highlight the importance of Kato's legacies and argue for a sustainable evangelical Christian faith in the context of growing rebellion against the historic confessions.

### THE NATURE OF THE CONFLICT

In Kato's time, some of his contemporaries like John Mbiti, Bolaji Idowu, and Kwame Bediako, as well as current theologians like Benezet Bujo, sought to develop Christian theology in Africa based on

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biblical and non-biblical sources. This is where the line of distinction was drawn between Kato and other African theologians. The theological opponents of Kato just named argue that Africans knew God before the coming of Christianity, and thus integrity must be warranted to African traditional religions.<sup>2</sup> Mbiti, explaining theological concepts in Africa, gives the impression that theology in African traditional religions develops from reflections that are “influenced, naturally, by geographical, historical, cultural and social-political factors.”<sup>3</sup> These factors therefore, become sources for doing theology. This view can be traced back to Thomas Aquinas, whose theology elevated natural theology by the instrument of reason. Foullah even lists nature, traditional cultures, Islam, African traditional religion, and society as sources of African theology, although he rightly concludes that “there are so many features in them that are totally unacceptable to orthodox and even Evangelical Christianity.”<sup>4</sup> Be that as it may, such cannot be properly called Christian theology, as Mbiti and his allies would want us to do. Mbiti argues,

We often find both Christianity and African Religion *side by side*. In many ways African Religion prepared the way for the conversion of the African peoples to Christianity. But their conversion does not mean that they have abandoned all their former religious ideas and traditions. Often their religious life shows a combination of African Religion and Christianity, but there are some who endeavour hard to forsake everything from African Religion, believing that in doing so they are more faithful to their newly found Christian faith.<sup>5</sup>

Mbiti seeks to indict Kato for overzealousness even though the latter rejected religious syncretism. Mbiti tries to justify his own position because he believes that God has already revealed himself to Africans. This view implies that the coming of Christianity was only an addendum to what was already on the ground. However, when Mbiti insists on this, the question that becomes pertinent to pose is what it means to be a new creature in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). The concept of new creation in Christ is sure to be in conflict with cultural tenets that contradict the stipulations of Scripture concerning Christian faith and practice. Spurgeon suggests that this idea requires “the believer must then have been the subject of a *radical change*” or “a most sweeping change.”<sup>6</sup> This change involves cultural, moral, and spiritual dimensions of life, personal and corporate. Creation or re-creation is an exclusively divine activity, and its effect is comprehensive in scope. All of creation was stained by sin, and only God can cleanse and nurture it. If other parts of African culture do not need the redemptive transformation of the gospel, then it cannot be categorized as new creation. It must be totally and comprehensively subjected to Christ. Just as the clay cannot dictate how the potter can frame it, African culture cannot decide which of its parts may be retained alongside Christianity without change and which may be transformed. Calvin repudiates any human excellence that refuses to come under the renovative power of Christ.<sup>7</sup> According to Paul, the transformative power of Christ forces the “old things” to pass away and be replaced by the new. For African Christianity

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<sup>2</sup> Emeka C. Ekeke and Chike A. Ekeopara, “God, Divinities and Spirits in African Traditional Religious Ontology,” *American Journal of Social and Management Sciences* 1, no. 2 (2010): 208.

<sup>3</sup> John S. Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa* (London: SPCK, 1970), xiii.

<sup>4</sup> Leopold A. Foullah, “Sources of Theology in Africa,” *EzineArticles*, <http://EzineArticles.com/1375616>, accessed on January 21, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> John Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1975), 30 (emphasis mine).

<sup>6</sup> Charles Spurgeon, “Sermon,” no. 881, July 18, 1869, cited at <http://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons/the-believer-a-new-creature#flipbook/>, and Charles Spurgeon, “The Believer a New Creature,” <http://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons/the-believer-a-new-creature#flipbook/>, accessed on January 30, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Albany, OR: Ages Digital Library, 1998), 118.

to be enriched, flourish, and be well informed in a redemptive way, it must undergo this comprehensive spiritual surgical renewal. This is the point that Kato sought to defend.

It is very important to be aware that the African worldview prepared the ground so that Christianity could flourish. But in the redemptive scheme of God, instruments of preparing the way for the gospel are never placed on a par with the gospel itself. All the prophets from the Old Testament to John the Baptist who prepared the way for the arrival of the Messiah receded to the background. John the Baptist clearly asserted that he could not be equal with Christ but rather must acquiesce (John 1:27; 3:30). It is therefore a theological flaw to place African traditional religion side by side with Christianity just because it prepared the ground for the germination and growth of Christianity.

Kato insisted that Christian theological development in Africa must be based on the Bible alone as its source. This does not neglect the application of the biblical message to the prevailing contextual challenges in Africa. Yet those who believed that Kato missed the point argued that even Western theology was not based on the Bible alone, but Western cultural sources also played into developing what is called Christian theology. Hence, it was justifiable for the anti-Kato to also do a theology that drew from African cultural practices. This viewpoint, however, failed to recognize that the Reformation resisted Roman Catholic theology because it was built on many extra-biblical socio-cultural sources that led to much deception and many unbiblical practices.

The question is, why was Byang Kato seen by other African theologians as a dissenter in African Evangelical Christianity? Mbiti was cited by Bediako as saying that Kato had “insufficient understanding” of some of the issues; when Mbiti met and discussed those issues with Kato, Kato apologized and promised to correct them in subsequent writings.<sup>8</sup> Theologians are bound to clash in their interpretations, more especially if they come from different theological traditions that influence their exegetical approaches and conclusions. It is unclear whether this “insufficient understanding” referred to biblical hermeneutical inability on Kato’s part, but Kato’s writings certainly show no such conclusions.

Mbiti’s precise view does not place Scripture at the center of theological development. Bediako quotes him in *African Theology en Route*:

As long as African theology keeps close to the Scriptures, it will remain relevant to the life of the church in Africa and it will have lasting links with the theology of the church universal. African theologians must give even more attention to the Bible than is sometimes the case. As long as we keep the Bible *close to our minds and our hearts*, our theology will be viable, relevant, and of lasting service to the church and glory to the Lord to whom be honour, dominion, and power unto the ages of ages. Amen.<sup>9</sup>

In this quote, Mbiti shows awareness of theological ambivalence in African theology that resulted from the drift in the central source of doing theology that was manifest in the agitation for the kind of African theology that they were advocating. But even his attempted solution of keeping the Bible “close to our minds” is problematic. First, it makes the Bible not really *central* to the development of African Christian theology, but rather only something to be kept *close* as an added source. The further implication of this position is that if the Bible is not central as our source of theology, it is not clear how Christ will also be central in Christian theology, since the whole of Scripture is a witness to Christ. Second, it could not have been an oversight that Mbiti never qualified theology in Africa as “Christian,” instead categorically avoiding such qualification, probably given that he was paving the way for a marriage between the theology of African traditional religions and Christian theology. Third, his encouragement to African theologians to

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<sup>8</sup> Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 425.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 424, citing Mbiti in *African Theology en Route*, ed. Kofi Appiah-Kubi and Sergio Torres (New York: Orbis, 1979), 91 (emphasis mine).

pay more attention to the Bible than they were prone to do was an indictment of African theologians for making African traditional sources more central and only using the Bible to back up their positions.

Bediako saw Kato as disruptive of Christian identity in African Christianity, arguing, It is in this postulate of radical discontinuity between African tradition and Christian faith that Kato's real significance as a dissenting voice in modern African theology lies. For, by conceiving of the relationship between Christianity and the African religious past in such starkly negative terms, Kato reproduced an important ingredient in the nineteenth-century missionary view of Africa, a view which, as we have already noted, was crucial in the making of an *identity problem* for the African Christian conscience of modern times.<sup>10</sup>

Bediako must be commended for analyzing the struggles of early Christianity in Africa and African traditional culture. The struggle was how the Christian gospel could relate well with African culture in such a way that Christianity will take a shape of African Christian identity. He disagrees with Dickson's claim of an established relationship between early Christianity and African cultural identity.<sup>11</sup> The crux of Bediako's point is an interpretation of Christian essentials in such a way that there is mutual relationship with African cultural cosmic perspective.<sup>12</sup> This is an adaptation of the Gospel to any culture that it finds itself in just as was the case in early Christianity especially in the fourth century.

This portrayal of Kato is as if he were completely against relating African culture to Christianity. This is not entirely true. William Dyrness similarly got it wrong in seeing Kato as opposing culture.<sup>13</sup> This is indeed a misrepresentation of what Kato stood for. Kato's point was not a total variance of Christianity and African culture. His concern is what should concern every one of us who desires to be considered a faithful biblical Evangelical. He argues, "It is God's will that Africans, on accepting Christ as their Savior, become Christian Africans. Africans who become Christians should therefore remain Africans wherever their culture does not conflict with the Bible. It is the Bible that must judge the culture. Where a conflict results, the cultural element must give way."<sup>14</sup>

Bediako thought that emphasis on the centrality of the Bible and rejection of mixing the "old and new" was Biblicism, and this defeated the "quest for a unified framework for dealing with culturally-rooted questions [which] meant that Kato's particular perspective could not provide a sufficient foundation for a tradition of creative theological engagement of the sort that the African context seemed to be requiring."<sup>15</sup>

The problem with Bediako is his with his overly cultural and human anthropological concerns that he could not criticize the fallacies in such fourth-century Christian theologians as Tatian, Tertullian, Justin Martyr, and Clement of Alexandria.<sup>16</sup> He thinks, however, that his view does not necessarily amount to syncretism.<sup>17</sup> He fails to recognize the apologetical reasons for which Justin employed the universal concept of Christ in all human cultures. Helleman is right to observe that "universal and pre-Christian knowledge of God was not primarily significant for Justin for establishing a more positive approach to the Greco-Roman cultural heritage, but to indicate that those who persecute Christians are without excuse, even if they have not personally been exposed to the gospel: access to truth was never denied."<sup>18</sup>

Accordingly, the linking of African pre-Christian traditions and Christianity offers "the most hopeful signs for the development of a sustainable tradition of an African thought into the future, having

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<sup>10</sup> Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, 391 (emphasis mine).

<sup>11</sup> Bediako, 2.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>13</sup> William Dyrness, *Learning about Theology from the Third World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 6.

<sup>14</sup> Byang H. Kato, "Theological Issues in Africa," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 133, no. 530 (1976): 142-152.

<sup>15</sup> Kwame Bediako, "Understanding African Theology in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century," *Themelios*, vol. 20 (1994), 14-20: 16.

<sup>16</sup> Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, 428.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 431.

<sup>18</sup> Wendy Elgersma Helleman, "Justin Martyr and Kwame Bediako: Reflections on the Cultural Context of Christianity," *African Journal of Evangelical Theology* 24.1 (2005): 14.

firmly taken on board the critical notion that the Christian faith is capable of ‘translation’ into African terms without injury to its essential content.”<sup>19</sup> A number of problems surface from this view. First, this denies the divine potency of the gospel and its independence, its ability to flourish without cultural augmentation. It assumes that Christianity is a human philosophy that needs certain cultural ingredients for its sustainable growth in Africa and indeed in all human cultures. Second, the idea of “African terms” here is ambiguous because it can mean different things. Whether this refers to how Africans can properly understand the gospel or constructing a variant form of Christianity in Africa is unclear. Certainly, Kato made it very clear, as previously noted, that he was not against understanding the gospel in the African way, but where such understanding and practice conflicts with the gospel, African culture must surrender its terms.

It is quite surprising that Bediako’s view of Christian identity can be more cultural than biblical. Although Christianity appeared within the context of Greek culture, the Christian identity is spelled out away from Greek culture to Christ. In a number of places, Paul defines our identity absolutely in terms of our newness of life by faith union with Christ: “We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:4). Perhaps the strongest of such Pauline assertions is this: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20). As Christians who have a spiritual rebirth and whole-life transformation, “We have no ethnic or geographic or political identity. We are ‘aliens and exiles.’”<sup>20</sup> While our racial identities remain with us, the identity of which we should be proudest is our new life in Christ. It is therefore absurd to diminish our unique identity in Christ by elevating our racial identities. Paul assures us that we are raised with Christ and seated with him in the heavenlies even as our lives are hidden in him for the eternal revelation on the last day (Eph. 2:5-6; Col. 3:3). Any serious believer will seek identity of faith not within cultural or social boundaries but strictly on the apostolic foundations of faith. Bediako fails to recognize the antithesis that consistently stands in the Bible between the old and new. God’s paradigm is always a move from chaos to orderliness, the old Adam to the new Adam, the old man to the new man, and the climactic declaration of God, “Behold, I am making all things new” (Rev. 21:5).

Kato warned against the surge of liberalism in African theology, a sort of Cultural Revolution against biblical Christianity: “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.”<sup>21</sup> This so-called experience, which is cherished for its systematization, is linked to African gods, shrines, and other practices. This is the exact point of departure for Kato from African theology. This experiential theology is subjectivism, which cannot truly bind together all theology in Africa.

Whatever the details of Kato’s other arguments against the positions of other African theologians had been, the main thrust of his perspective deserves our continuity with it. He was not against African Christian contextual theology; rather, what he contended against was a development that could eventually set aside the authority of Scripture in African Christianity. As he said,

The noble desire to indigenize Christianity in Africa must not be forsaken. An indigenous theology is a necessity. But must one betray Scriptural principles of God and His dealing with man at the altar of any regional theology? Should human sympathy and rationalism override what is clearly taught in the Scriptures? Many voices in Africa and outside the continent are answering these questions in the affirmative. Their number is increasing rapidly. That is why I wish here to alert Christians to these pertinent dangers.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Bediako, “Understanding African Theology in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century,” 16.

<sup>20</sup> John Piper, “What Does the Slaughter of the Amorites Mean?” <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/what-does-the-slaughter-of-the-amorites-mean>, accessed May 5, 2017.

<sup>21</sup> Byang Kato, “Africa’s Battle for Biblical Christianity,” *Moody Monthly*, November 1974, 53-56.

<sup>22</sup> Byang Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa* (Kisumu: Evangel Publishing House, 1975), 16.

The point of concern for Kato is God's special dealing with specific individuals, which became a universal message to all humanity. The fact is that the takeoff point for any true Christian theology is Scripture, God's special redemptive revelation, rather than general revelation. The attempt to make an entry point of general or natural revelation compounds issues, for theology proper as God's special revelations and his attributes cannot be delineated from nature. Nature finds its explanation in Scripture and does not add meaning to Scripture; Scripture defines nature, not the other way around. Therefore, a good and sound Christian theology has its definitive source in Scripture alone.

A number of African scholars have attempted to vindicate Kato. Nystrom argues that "Kato did not mean that African Christians should rid themselves of cultural practices and adopt Western culture along with Western faith."<sup>23</sup> Contrary to the claims of Bediako, Bowers attests of Kato as "an innovative implementer of fresh vision."<sup>24</sup> Precisely, "What Kato was *doing* was attempting to engage the theological issues of modern Africa's intellectual life."<sup>25</sup>

Arguably, "Kato certainly did not believe in an utter discontinuity between traditional religion and Christianity in the absolutist degree attributed to him by Bediako."<sup>26</sup> Kato's labors were geared toward "cultivation of a biblically defined evangelical identity on this continent."<sup>26</sup> This cultivation sought to establish two principled facets of enduring gospel: Christianity should be "truly African," and African Christianity should be "truly biblical."<sup>27</sup> While he enjoined contextualization, his goal was to avoid extremes that could jeopardize the gospel in Africa.

The problem of culture and theology has been contested by various scholars, some insisting that culture plays a vital role in hermeneutical and theological development. When it is not clearly defined how culture can relate to the message of Scripture without dampening it, then a number of problems may surface. Usually, the cultural and social dimensions of theology tilt in the direction of relativism when they become the dominant factors in determining how theology should go.

The actual theological issue that drew contention among African scholars was "the question of salvation in African traditional religions and the uniqueness of Christ for salvation."<sup>28</sup> This question has always been a point of departure for conservatives and liberals, and it usually forces disputing scholars to go back to the foundations or sources of theology: should Scripture alone be taken into consideration, or should socio-cultural sources be included? On the battlefield of African scholars, the "primary objective of Kato's Theological Corpus vis-a-vis that of his opponents was to develop a biblical foundation for proclaiming Jesus as the only valid, authentic and unique Saviour of the whole world and Mediator between God and man."<sup>29</sup> The question is whether it is the centrality of the Bible or a mixture of traditional cultural sources that defines authentic African Christian theology. The sin of Kato stemmed from his unyielding stand on the centrality of the Christian Scripture.

The concerns of many African theologians are the manner that the Bible has been made out to be only confrontational to African culture rather than also dialogical. While such concerns are appreciable the problem is when the Bible and culture are presented as coequals and complementary to one another. Culture can never be coequal with Scripture as the word of God, though it may also be qualified as the word of man. In other words, culture has nothing with which to enrich the Bible, given that what God has revealed

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<sup>23</sup> Carolyn Nystrom, "Let African Christians be Christian Africans," <http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/2009/june/let-african-christians-be-christian-africans.html>; accessed on March 12, 2016.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Bowers, "Byang Kato and Beyond," *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 28, no. 1 (2009): 14.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Yusufu Turaki, "The Theological Legacy of Byang Henry Kato," *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 20, no. 2 (2001): 134.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

for our salvation is complete. As a matter of fact, culture can only be a servant of the word of God, answering to it and providing ground for its flourishing. Theology is not about human culture but about God and what he has done and is still doing in human culture and society, which is reconciling the world to himself through Christ and in Christ (2 Cor. 5:18).

There have been growing concerns about the nature of a biblical hermeneutic that takes into view the peculiar circumstances of Africans. The struggle to find a consensus contextual approach has been the challenge of Christian theologians in Africa, which in part owes to the divide between Catholic theology and Protestant theology. Those who are of Roman Catholic orientation are more liberal in accommodating extra-biblical African sources, even from African traditional religions. While indeed “effective biblical interpretation in Africa must rest on the biblical text, the African context and appropriation”<sup>30</sup>—a laudable concern and an important direction for effective gospel communicators to proceed in—caution needs to be exercised in order that the text not be fed into from external sources. Rather, it is the gospel that is answering to the general and specific need of Africans. Therefore, the most appropriate biblical hermeneutic should be an inside-out approach.

### WHY SCRIPTURE ALONE SHOULD BE THE SOURCE OF OUR THEOLOGY

Our theological argument is not about the knowledge of God that is intuitive or evident in nature. Certainly, Africans knew the creator God before the coming of the gospel to Africa. As a matter of fact, the Jews also knew God before the advent of Christ. But there is a difference between the natural knowledge of God and the redemptive knowledge of God. Scripture clearly attests that creation reveals God and he can be known (Ps. 19:1; Rom. 1:19-20), but it also affirms emphatically that sin has been a great inhibitor to this knowledge, so that it can no longer make us have any fruitful knowledge of him because of the futility of the human intellect (Rom. 1:21). This is the ground for the necessity of the special revelation of the knowledge of God, and the goal of this knowledge is redemptive. Christ made it clear that it was the occasion for his coming when he said, “And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:3). Eternal life is here placed within limits; it is the knowledge of God that is exclusively through Christ. Again, Christ adds force to the first statement: “I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world” (John 17:6). The redemptive name was not evident among the Jews, even though they were the custodians of the Mosaic revelations and were also expecting the Messiah. Here Christ was alluding to “the manner of bestowing life” whereby “we possess him by faith, and, therefore, we also enter into the possession of life; and this is the reason why the *knowledge* of him is truly and justly called saving, or bringing salvation.”<sup>31</sup> What was not natural to the Jews could not have been natural to Africans either, except by special redemptive revelation, which is found only in the testimony of Scripture.

We see the same thing in Matthew 11:25-27:

At that time Jesus declared, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”

Here Christ makes it too plain that redemptive knowledge of God has not been a common possession of all humans, including Jews and Africans, except through Christ, according to the mercies of God. The mystery that was enclosed in Christ is redemptive and special and an exclusive reserve to those whom God wills to unveil it. Our true and redemptive knowledge of God is in Christ, and our source of

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<sup>30</sup> Mbengu D. Nyiawung, “Contextualizing Biblical Exegesis: What Is the African Biblical Hermeneutic Approach?” *HTS Teologiese studies/ Theological Studies* 69, no. 1 (2013), accessed at [www.hts.org.za](http://www.hts.org.za) on March 20, 2017.

<sup>31</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John* (Albany, OR: Ages Digital Library, 1998), 560.

redemptive knowledge is Scripture alone. Even the Prophets who were anticipating the coming of Christ never looked out into human cultural, socio-economic, or natural sources to discover him.

The Apostle Peter confirms that Scripture is the only source for certifying all God's special revelation, saying,

Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look (1Pet. 1:10-12).

In this passage, the apostle uses three key words, *evxexh*, *thsan* (inquire), *evxhrau*, *nhsan* (find out), and *evraunw/ntej* (search or examine), in the aorist active and progressive, concerning how the prophets who received the special revelation of God within their cultural setting handled them. These words carry with them the intensive and extensive sense; that is, the prophets employed their human faculties in trying to examine and understand the revelation they had penned concerning the accuracy and consistency of time in respect to the Messianic person whom God had revealed to them for their salvation without going beyond that revelation. Although social and cultural trends formed the context, the actual ascertainment of the fulfillment hinged mainly on the qualities and attributes of the person of the Messiah, plus the sacrificial task that he would perform in order to actualize the mission for the people of God. Their approach did not give room to speculative theological trajectories. Christ himself authenticated his divine mission by appealing only to Scripture because of its divine source (Matt. 21:42; 22:43-45; Luke 4:17-19; 24:25-27). The Berean Jews who were believers in Christ also grew in their knowledge of God, not through human cultural sources but by searching the Scriptures, which they believed were special divine revelations (Acts 17:11). Even Herod, when he heard about the birth of Christ, summoned his scholars to search the prophetic writings to determine all truths about the Christ (Matt. 2:4-6). In line with Scripture, Calvin rightly states that "God bestows the actual knowledge of himself upon us only in the Scriptures."<sup>32</sup> And through Scripture, "God rendered faith unambiguous forever, a faith that should be superior to all opinion."<sup>33</sup> This knocks off our cultural and natural environments as sources of our personal and mutual encounter with God.

The written word of God is an infallible guide in our faith and thus has no equal or alternative. This is the self-attestation of Scripture. "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Ps. 119:105). The Psalmist may not have completely depreciated his own culture, but he did realize that spiritual and moral darkness has enveloped human society and culture, and for that reason only the word of God can give meaning to our life and conduct and personal relationship with God. By this testimony, Scripture does not warrant any augmentation or attenuation, whether church traditions or natural observations. In our fallen nature, which affects our whole personality, Scripture gives us the best guide to transforming our spiritual and physical conditions.

The question again is how much of culture we may trust to provide us with infallible perspectives into Scriptural interpretation, considering the nature of the magnitude, intensity, and exclusive impact of sin over all humanity (cf. Gen. 6:5). The ethical, noetic, cultural, scientific, and artistic versatility of humanity have all been affected by sin, and the word of God addresses this condition in the most comprehensive and radical manner. The hope that culture can take precedence over Scripture is ironical, for "if it is human culture which brings us into a new age where the old biblical law is not valid, then it will be human culture that saves us."<sup>34</sup> Human culture without God and godliness is not only vanity but also hurtful to security and happiness, as Genesis 6:5 attests, pointing to the vices present in godless human

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<sup>32</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960), i.vi.i, 69.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, i.vi.ii, 71.

<sup>34</sup> Noel Weeks, *The Sufficiency of Scripture* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1998), 89.

society. Van Til rightly refutes the hope of cultural sources for theology when he argues, “Man is not only out of touch with God and his world, he is also a stranger to humanity; that is to say, there is a chasm of misunderstanding and hatred that separated man from his neighbor. This has a deleterious effect culturally.”<sup>35</sup>

Similarly, Karl Rahner could not have sacrificed the exclusive Scripture as the source of theology: “If the church in every age remains bound to its origins in its faith and in its life; if the church as the community of faith in the crucified and risen Jesus is itself to be in its faith and in its life the eschatological and irreversible sign of God’s definitive turning to the world in Jesus Christ, a sign without which Jesus Christ himself would not signify God’s irreversible coming into the world and would not be the absolute savior; and if this church of the beginning objectifies itself in scriptural documents at least in fact, and also does so necessarily given the historical and cultural presuppositions in which the church came to be, then in all of this together we have a point of departure for understanding the essence of scripture.”<sup>36</sup>

Rahner hits a very critical point by emphasizing historical continuity as being essential in the life of the church. The objectivity of the contemporary church, whether in Africa or elsewhere in the world, is definable solely on the basis of the behavior of the apostles. And furthermore, as the church bases its objectifications on scripture, it “recognizes these objectifications as so pure and so successful that they are able to hand on the apostolic church as a norm for future ages.”<sup>37</sup>

## THE NATURE OF THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

Scripture does not answer or address everything exhaustively, as we may expect. How then does its authority square up? Weeks argued that since all things have been established by the command of God, and that Christ is also the creator of all things, as attested by Paul in Col. 1:15-17, this question of authority turns on the person of Christ.<sup>38</sup> By centering on Christ, the authority of Scripture is not strictly restricted, but its universality and comprehensiveness derive from that principle. The cosmic role of Christ and the nature of his comprehensive redemptive character, according to the universal effect of sin, presuppose the universality of his work and words. All of Scripture is about Christ; being the word of Christ, who is himself God, warrants its authority and scope. In this sense, there cannot be areas of restriction for God’s word, as it speaks all God’s wisdom and will for the entire creation. Paul’s whole point is to dispute claims of authority based on human wisdom that is derived from the creation. We may appeal to science, philosophy, tradition, or common sense, but their authority cannot be on par with the authority of Christ, since Christ is supreme over all these aspects of reality.

In order to understand ourselves properly and our dignity as Africans, we need to turn only to Scripture, and with the illumination of the Holy Spirit we can appreciate better the redemptive love of God. It is only the person who is led by the Spirit of God who accepts or understands the things of God (Rom. 8:7-8; 1 Cor. 2:14). Scripture holds its divine integrity in its own right, but only the regenerate heart can apprehend spiritual things. This cannot be attested in African traditional religions. Just as the objective existence of God cannot be established on the basis of the opinion of the atheist, so also the objective divine origin, authority, and infallibility of Scripture cannot be subjected to the conclusions of liberal theologians.

Scripture is absolutely unique, and with this comes its authority to which all cultural beliefs must be subjected. First, as Christians, we cannot buy into liberal scholarship that seeks to undermine Scripture as the word of God and by extension the basis of our faith. Murray contends, “We must not deceive

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<sup>35</sup> Henry R. Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 62.

<sup>36</sup> Karl Rahner, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, cited in Alister E. McGrath, ed., *The Christian Theology Reader*, 4th ed. (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 128.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Weeks, *Sufficiency of Scripture*, 18-19.

ourselves as to the darkness and confusion that would be ours if there were no Bible. We depend upon the message of Scripture for every tenet of our faith, for every ray of redemptive light that illumines our minds, and for every ray of hope against the issues of time and eternity. Christianity for us today without the Bible is something inconceivable.”<sup>39</sup> What Murray says here is not only true of Western Christianity but it is also of Africa and indeed the whole world.

He further argues the uniqueness of Scripture on the basis that it is the means that God has chosen to reveal all that he has revealed to us.

It is unique because it is the only way whereby we come into relationship to God in the redemptive revelation of his grace, and the only way whereby Christ in uniqueness that belongs to him as the Son of God incarnate, as the crucified, risen, and ascended Redeemer, comes within the orbit of our knowledge, faith, experience, and hope. We have no encounter with God, with Christ, and with the Holy Spirit in terms of saving and redeeming grace apart from Scripture. It is the only revelation to *us* of God’s redemptive will. That is its uniqueness.<sup>40</sup>

If Scripture is God’s truth to us, then it proceeds from and shares in the divine ontological attribute of trustworthiness. Though “the Bible is not God, it is his Word,” so its whole corpus rests on God.<sup>41</sup>

The question of the authority and infallibility of Scripture does not rest on our subjective view of what the Bible is. Many scholars have reasonably argued that the authority of Scripture is qualified inherently, not by external assertion. It is not the reader who assigns authority to Scripture; rather, Scripture owns its authority. The attempt by liberal scholars to separate the work of Jesus from the words of God in Scripture lacks congruency, as John Frame argues: “A sound theology will not only treasure the work of Jesus, but it will also treasure the means God has appointed for us to know about Christ, namely, the written Word, the Bible.”<sup>42</sup>

### **SHOULD THE POSTMODERN CULTURE FORM OUR INTERPRETIVE PRINCIPLE?**

This question is valid for all cultures in our global religious world today. The question arises whether we should be sensitive to our postmodern challenges. The point of postmodern culture is to see truths in history merely as “literary genre[s] possessing distinctive philosophical objectives.”<sup>43</sup> This is an attempt to relativize meanings and authority so that nothing holds exclusive authority over anything else; that is, whatever has been established as truth is purely perspectival and a variant. Enns has recently argued that “there is no absolute point of reference to which we have access that will allow us to interpret the Bible stripped of our own cultural context.”<sup>44</sup> In other words, our cultural environment becomes the point of reference, which means that we should be willing to make shifts in our Scriptural doctrine in the event of new cultural extra-biblical evidence. But the question is, what evidence do we allow, and what makes such evidence to be more authentic, and in a sense grants it some absolute authority, as to warrant it to be our reference point in our attitude to shift? Enns’ cultural relativism is more evident when he says, “By faith, the church confesses that the Bible *is* God’s word. It is up to Christians of each generation, however, to work out what that means and what words work best to describe it.”<sup>45</sup> In other words, if Christ and the

<sup>39</sup> John Murray, *Collected Writings* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1976), cited in Peter A. Lillback and Richard B. Gaffin, eds., “John Murray,” *Thy Word is Still Truth: Essential Writings on the Doctrine of Scripture from the Reformation to Today*, ed. Peter A. Lillback and Richard B. Gaffin (Phillipsburg: P & R, 2013), 969.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> John M. Frame, *Salvation Belongs to the Lord* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2006), 59.

<sup>43</sup> Alun Munslow, *The Routledge Companion to Historical Studies*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2005), 83.

<sup>44</sup> Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 168-169. See a similar argument made before Enns in J. A. Stone, “Is a non-relativist post-modernism possible? The attempts of William Dean and Wentzel van Huyssteen,” *HTS* 49/3 (1993), 447.

<sup>45</sup> Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation*, 168 (emphasis his).

apostles regarded Scripture as the word of God in the literal sense, it is up to us to see it differently from the way they saw it. Enns thus deprecates the human value for heritage.

However, John Stott, who lived in this period of postmodern revolutionary agenda, insists on the unmitigated integrity of our Christian faith. “The contemporary Christian, who is anxious to respond sensitively to the challenges of the modern world, nevertheless may not jettison the authority of Jesus Christ in order to do so.”<sup>46</sup> Certain hermeneutical approaches arising from social and cultural revolutions influence believers into pessimism that not only dishonors God but is incompatible with Christian faith.<sup>47</sup> Despite the postmodern pressure, “we are not to bow down before the prevailing trends of society, its covetousness and materialism, its relativism, and rejection of all absolute standards of truth and goodness. Instead, we are to continue faithfully in the Old and New Testament Scriptures.”<sup>48</sup>

Does modernity or postmodernity have the warrant to edit the gospel? Stott replies, “We have no authority to edit their [the Apostles’] gospel. Our calling is rather to preserve it like stewards, proclaim it like heralds, and argue it like advocates.”<sup>49</sup> And our preservation of the gospel can only be possible if the church “recovers its confidence in the truth, relevance and power of the gospel, and begins to get excited about it again.”<sup>50</sup>

Stott does not dismiss the concerns of the postmodern culture, which struggles with the Bible as archaic, incompatible, and distant from the contemporary global culture. He confesses his own susceptibility to the tension of relating past biblical events with some contemporary scientific issues. However, he “sought to resist the temptation to withdraw from either world by capitulation to the other.”<sup>51</sup> The Christian has to make a choice, which is the “liberty to surrender neither to antiquity nor to modernity.”<sup>52</sup> This is not sitting on the fence, but rather a deliberate choice, which he “sought with integrity to submit to the revelation of yesterday within the realities of today.”<sup>53</sup> This perspective is of critical importance because it maintains that the word of God is ever relevant as it stands within the perimeter of yesterday, today, and forever (Heb. 13:8). This underscores how critical the integrity of the Christian faith is in our contemporary world. Stott’s slogan for holding forth such integrity of Christian faith is “to live under the Word in the world.”<sup>54</sup> This means our total submission to the authority of the Bible as our rule of faith and conduct. This is also the precise standard that Kato insisted upon and that became anathema to some of his contemporaries.

If the word of God is living, it must bear this character in all generations. This means that while our hermeneutics sits on the original historical context of the texts, there must also be a connection to the present reality. However, taking into consideration the ever-changing world with its complex issues should not be a cause for abandoning past legacies that have laid the foundation for our confessions today; instead, “Evangelical believers live in the biblical world” all the time because “we are essentially biblical people.”<sup>55</sup> The word of God is intended to be our guide to life. When God commanded Joshua to be “strong and courageous” in his faith and obedience to God’s written word, it was an all-time structure of life that was embedded in the statement, which was anchored in the Book of the Law (Josh. 1:6, 7, 8, 9). He was never to depart from it, no matter the cultural, socioeconomic, political, and religious upheavals that they would encounter, but pass it on to future generations. The church can only be spiritually vibrant if it remains

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<sup>46</sup> John R. Stott, *The Contemporary Christian* (Leicester: IVP, 1992), 91.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, *Our Social & Sexual Revolution* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 232.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, *Contemporary Christian*, 166.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 183

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 184

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, *Our Social & Sexual Revolution*, 7.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, *The Living Church* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2007), 99.

faithful to the biblical and apostolic faith that was once delivered to us (Jude 3). The church can be actively cultural and social if it derives its theology from the cultural and social conditions, but we can be sure of its spiritual emptiness, as its confessional and ethical life will be no longer be in consonance with the word of God. While we witness the combined surge of modernity and postmodernity in our time, we are encouraged to “articulate the unchanging gospel of the crucified and risen Christ in ways that engage with the people of our day, and in which we can most assuredly seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>56</sup>

The prophet Daniel foresaw a time of spiritual drift in every generation and asserted that while unfaithful covenant breakers would despise the authentic word of God, “the people who know their God shall stand firm and take action” (Dan. 11:32). This is a classic statement of fact in the entire redemptive history in which two distinct groups of religious people would emerge. The knowledge of God here is covenantal redemptive knowledge that determines our faith action in times of cultural and social revolutions. We possess our natural knowledge of God through nature, but redemptive knowledge comes to us through his word. Christ is the last spoken Word of God, and he has revealed God to us in a redemptive way (Jn. 17:3).

## CONCLUSION

Though God has revealed himself in various ways to different people, only his inspired word carries authority. We cannot develop any Christian theology with authority that is based principally on culture or nature. We must be wary of clever Western philosophies that deny the existence and special revelation of God, as well as those that arise out of social and cultural rebellion against the word of God. Though God has revealed himself in nature to Africans, only his word carries authority in matters of faith and salvation. This is the precise point made by Byang Kato, for which he was vilified by other African theologians. Today we stand on the same foundation on which Kato stood, which is Scripture as the infallible and authoritative word of God as our rule of faith. For this reason, we cannot develop a Christian theology for Christians that is authoritatively based on nature. African Christian theology and African theology are two different strands of theology due to their sources, and we should not conflate their distinctions. Theologians of African traditional religion too should make their religion stand on its own terms with its own non-biblical scripture, as do other religions; however, any attempt to merge African traditional religion with Christian theology is fraudulent and counterproductive.

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<sup>56</sup> Geoffrey W. Grogan, *The Faith Once Entrusted to the Saints?* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2010), 217.

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