

# How I Encountered Calvinism in Africa

*by Ben Dixon*

In 1898 Abraham Kuyper came to America to give his famous Stone Lectures on Calvinism at Princeton Theological Seminary. Coming from the "old European Continent," he noted the fresh currents of Christianity that distinguished the new nation he had traveled to. Referring to himself in the third person, Kuyper said: "Compared with the eddying waters of your new stream of life, the old stream in which he was moving seems almost frost-bound and dull; and here, on American ground, for the first time he realizes how so many divine potencies, which were hidden away in the bosom of mankind from our very creation, but which our old world was incapable of developing, are now beginning to disclose their inward splendor, thus promising a still richer store of surprises for the future" (Kuyper, 9).

Traveling to Africa for the first time as part of my college's semester-in-Ghana program, I came to know a bit how Kuyper felt. The global South has rapidly become the new world of Christianity, and the West in comparison is turning into a frostbound stream. What has sprung up in Africa is amazing, and on the surface this fresh Christian expression looks quite different from that of the old Western waters. The power of spiritual forces in Africa, and especially the emphasis on the Holy Spirit there are aspects of Christianity that have to some extent been lost in the currents of Western Christianity.

Over the course of my four months in Ghana I was stopped on the street and evangelized more times than I ever have been in America. Universities in the West are often considered strongholds of secularism, but at the University of Ghana you can walk around campus on a Sunday and hear a student-led worship service in just about every building available. I had conversations with my Ghanaian roommate about the power of spiritual forces (the belief in witchcraft is widespread in Ghana, even among highly educated Ghanaians), and I realized that those forces are a fact of life in Ghana. We visited a church in the hills of Akropong, north of Accra, where members rely on the power of the Holy Spirit for healing--for visitors too.

Of course, world Christianity is one of the hottest topics around, even though the discussion surrounding it has been ongoing for some time. Heavyweight scholars such as Robert Wuthnow and Mark Noll have recently released books on the subject, “ While I was awed by the saturation of the gospel in Ghana, I could not help but compare it to the type of Christianity I

was familiar with back home in America: Calvinism. ” and Philip Jenkins has been writing on the theme for a decade. The first time I encountered the rise of global Christianity was in a history course my first year in college; but, while the notion was intriguing, I didn't really comprehend the vibrancy of the movement until I experienced it firsthand. That came when I traveled to one of the hotbeds of world Christianity: Ghana.

Ghana is one of the most overtly Christian nations in Africa. Bible verses are ubiquitous on the back windows of taxis and tro-tros, and if you sit in one place long enough someone will eventually walk by giving an impromptu sermon. While I was awed by the saturation of the gospel in Ghana, and the African flavor of its expression, I could not help but compare it to the type of Christianity I was familiar with back home in America: Calvinism. After reflecting on my experiences down these two branching rivers of Christianity, in Grand Rapids and Ghana, I was struck by the continuity between the streams.

In his book *African Pentecostalism*, Ogbu Kalu says, after the Indian scholar Mathias Mundadan, "the history of Christianity is the history of the encounter of Jesus's gospel message with different people" (Kalu, 16). By the time Kuyper came on the scene in nineteenth-century Amsterdam, the gospel had a long history with the European people. Kuyper inherited a Christian tradition that stretched back four hundred years to the Reformation and well before John Calvin back to the world of antiquity. Calvinism was the result of the impact of Jesus on people's lives, and Kuyper saw it to be alive and well in the West.

### **Present before the Divine**

In his Princeton lectures, Kuyper made sure to stress that Calvinism was an expression of Christianity that sprang from the work of God Himself, not from mere human imagination. "Calvinism has neither invented nor conceived this fundamental interpretation" of the gospel, Kuyper said; rather, "God Himself implanted it in the hearts of its heroes and its heralds. We face here no product of a clever intellectualism, but the fruit of a work of God in the heart, or, if you like, an inspiration of history" (Kuyper, 24). For Kuyper, John Calvin was a witness to God's work in history just as Abraham and David had been; they were all part of the history of God's relationship with humankind.

Just as Kuyper began his lecture by tracing God's work in history, so also Kwame Bediako, another herald of the Christian faith, makes the history of God's presence a major point of entry. But Bediako is concerned with God's presence on the African continent, not in Europe or North America. In his

revelatory book *Christianity in Africa*, Bediako begins by confronting the initial obstacle that the faith there seemed to be the product of white imperialism and not of God. By this standard many Africans thought that to give your life to Christ amounted to giving your life over to white culture.

Bediako's main concern is to show that this conception of Christianity is only possible if one ignores that God was already present in Africa long before a white missionary ever set foot on the continent. Africa had its own "heroes and heralds" of God's presence, he insists: "The countless incidents in African missionary histories of prophecies which were given within the pre-Christian religion, pointing to a Christian future of Africa, assume a new importance and show that in the African context too, God did speak 'to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways'" (Bediako, 225).

In sum, Bediako and Kuyper share the fundamental conviction that Christianity is the true continuation of God's revelation in human history, and on their two respective continents they point to the witnesses who testified to this revelation over the centuries. “ The expressions of Christianity that have blossomed in Africa are outgrowths from this conviction of everyday transcendence. ” The theologies that stem from this common insight also share some crucial convictions about human life. I think these convictions capture the heart of what the gospel means to us; by comparison, differences over dancing and tongue-speaking fall into the theological background.

What first drew me to the Calvinist understanding of the Christian life, and what keeps me following it, is what Kuyper calls its "fundamental thought." He explained how it arose: "Thanks to this work of God in the heart, the persuasion that the whole of a man's life is to be lived as *in the Divine Presence* has become the fundamental thought of Calvinism. By this decisive idea, or rather by this mighty fact, it has allowed itself to be controlled in every department of its entire domain. It is from this motherthought that the all embracing life system of Calvinism sprang" (Kuyper, 25). One implication of this "mother-thought" is that there is no separation between the sacred and the secular. God created the cosmos, and nothing in this world exists outside the divine presence. And since this is God's world, we have what Kuyper calls the "fundamental interpretation of an immediate fellowship with God" (Kuyper, 24).

Likewise, when Bediako explains the African traditional worldview, he notes its prime "conviction that man lives in a sacramental universe where there is no sharp dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual" (Bediako, 95). Along the same line as Calvinism's mother-thought, the traditional African

worldview believes that humans and the spiritual world are fundamentally intertwined. Bediako sees that the coming of Christ both revealed and affirmed this conviction: "The revelation of God in Christ is therefore the revelation of transcendence. The process is, however, not so much that of God coming to mankind, but rather, as the primal imagination perceives it, it is like the rending of the veil, so that the nature of the whole universe as instinct with the divine presence may be made manifest, as also the divine destiny of man as an abiding divine-human relationship" (Bediako, 102).

### **The Present Spirit**

The "divine destiny of man" that Bediako proclaims registers in John Calvin's words as the "revelation of transcendence," meaning that transcendent experiences of God could happen outside the Roman Catholic Church. For professors at my Calvinist college, this means that God is just as present and transcendent in a classroom as in chapel. For Bediako, this revelation of transcendence confirms part of the African spiritual worldview, and the expressions of Christianity that have blossomed in Africa are outgrowths from this conviction of everyday transcendence.

Pentecostal expressions of Christianity have boomed in Africa because Pentecostal theology centers on experience. In charismatic theology, Ogbu Kalu writes, "beliefs are not derived from understanding but arise from intense experiences of encountering God" (Kalu, 268). This premium on experiencing God is a reflection of the African traditional worldview: we know God because we experience Him as part of this world. And Jesus has allowed Africans to experience him and his power here and now.

Bediako offers the crucial observation that Africans' ability to live out the implications of the Kingdom is due to the spirituality of their traditional worldview. He writes, "the New Testament speaks in the idiom of the primal imagination when it declares that 'Now God's home is with mankind.'...The primal imagination is able to grasp this reality and we see evidence for it in the bold expectation with which Christian churches that are alive to their primal world-view anticipate and do experience 'transcendent' happening like visions, prophecies and healings" (Bediako, 103).

The West has in some part lost that "bold expectation" of transcendence. Certainly that became clear in the various exchanges I had with Ghanaians about speaking in tongues. One Ghanaian, after I told him I was a Christian, asked me if I spoke in tongues; when I replied that I had never done it before, he basically told me that I needed the Holy Spirit. Whereas it seems the majority of churches in Ghana encourage speaking in tongues, North American Christians, outside of devoted Pentecostals, put much less

emphasis on the point. I have never heard of a congregation in my college's host denomination (the Christian Reformed Church) that regularly has members speaking in tongues.

But I don't want to hold up tongue-speaking as the litmus test between Western Christianity and Christianity in Africa. The Bible shows that speaking in tongues is a spiritual gift not every Christian has, and that your lack of it does not mean that you lack the Holy Spirit. The issue does represent, however, the bold expectation of the transcendent that Bediako writes of. That many Ghanaian Christians prize tongue-speaking reveals their theological emphasis on transcendence here and now. And while Kuyper held "immediate fellowship with God" (Kuyper, 24) to be the bedrock of Christian faith, the modern--and postmodern--West is relatively weak in actually living this out.

Western people--not least the Calvinists among them--are great at thinking about God. But too often Western expectations of God are too low. A major reason for this is the influence of science, technology, and the West's material comfort. We think we don't need God, and consequently we easily fall into the trap of just thinking about Jesus but not actually expecting him to act in this world, right now. Or we can famously compartmentalize our lives: Jesus on Sundays, secular stuff that he doesn't have much effect on for the rest of the week.

In large part, Africans don't have this problem of sacred and secular separation because, Bediako argues, the connection between African Christianity and its traditional spiritual worldview is strong. Jesus is the affirmation and culmination of spirituality on earth. Bediako writes: "The primal imagination may help us restore the ancient unity of theology and spirituality" (Bediako, 105). This very unity is the bedrock of Calvinist theology, but Western temptations have made it easy for Western Christians to live as practical atheists.

### **Calvinist Pentecostalism**

Calvin College philosopher Jamie Smith reflects on this issue by way of his experiences with Pentecostalism in his essay "Teaching a Calvinist to Dance." Smith thinks Pentecostalism actually shares a lot in common with Reformed theology. True, he acknowledges, on the surface a Pentecostal worship service and the intellectual theology of Abraham Kuyper look very different, much like the difference between a charismatic African church service and a CRC service. But he continues: "I would suggest that being charismatic actually makes me a better Calvinist; my being Pentecostal is actually a way for me to be more Reformed" (Smith, 1). This is because

Pentecostals succeed at living out the belief in God's sovereignty, a tenet Calvinist theology prizes. In this connection Smith, just like Kuyper and Bediako, notes the importance of our expectations of God. "Pentecostal spirituality and charismatic worship take the sovereignty of God so seriously that you might actually be *surprised* by God every once in a while. You are open and expectant that the Spirit of God is sometimes going to surprise you, because God is free to act in ways that might differ from your set of expectations" (Smith, 1).

So what are our expectations of God? We Western Christians, particularly we Calvinists, can learn a lot from Pentecostal spirituality in North America and in Africa. African Christians really do live their lives in the divine presence--so much so that they expect transcendent experiences and depend on Jesus for things like healing, power, and sustenance. As Calvinists, we need to keep Kuyper's "mighty fact... that the whole of a man's life is to be lived as in the divine presence" (Kuyper, 25) in the forefront of our minds. But we cannot just keep it in our minds, we need to live it out. Jesus didn't bring the Kingdom just so we can sit around and think about it.

How do we live it out? Should I be praying for the Spirit at next Tuesday's chapel service so I can speak in tongues? I think Jamie Smith gets it better: "The heart and soul of that Pentecostal spirituality is not the manifestations, but rather the courage and openness to see God in those unexpected manifestations, and to say, 'This is what the Spirit promised'" (Smith, 2). The manifestations of the Holy Spirit may come in the form of tongues, or they might come in the form of epiphany sitting in a religion class on my Grand Rapids campus. The main thing is to have that courage to look at this world and say: this is all God's and He is here--from Amsterdam to Africa.

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