

The Theological Task of the Church in Africa, by Tite Tiénou. Achimoto, Ghana: Africa Christian Press, 1982. 54 pp. no price, paper.

This little book bears an importance out of proportion to its size. Originally prepared as the Byang H. Kato Memorial Lectures, and delivered at ECWA Theological Seminary in Igbaja, Nigeria, on April 17-20, 1978, these pages analyze evangelicalism in Africa and offer balanced critique and a call to pursue some specific objectives.

The book is important for three reasons. The first lies in who wrote it. Born in Mali, Tite Tiénou was reared and educated in Upper Volta, then studied at Nyack College and at the Faculté Libre at Vaux-sur-Seine, France. He has served as executive secretary of AEAM (Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar) since 1977 and on the WEF (World Evangelical Fellowship) Theological Commission since 1976, while serving as a pastor in Upper Volta. He is currently pursuing doctoral studies at Fuller Theological Seminary. These lectures are therefore not only the work of someone with wide experience, broad training, rich linguistic competence and mature theological reflection, they are something more: they are the heart-beat of an evangelical African leader and scholar as he addresses the church in Africa. That combination is still all too rare; but those of us who lack his breadth of experience will profit by listening in.

That raises the second reason why this booklet is valuable. Tiénou is addressing African evangelicalism. Although he offers both plaudits and criticisms of western missions and western theology, he is not simply firing off to the west another salvo of shallow praise or cheap shots: his concern is *African* Christianity. Similarly, although he interacts a little with liberal forms of Christianity in Africa, his tangential remarks in this regard are not simply negative sideswipes, since his desire is to lead African evangelicals on, not simply tell them what to reject. In all this, there is a refreshing poise, a commendable maturity that succumbs neither to formulas learned in the west nor to African pressures toward syncretism. He does not forget his aim; and his aim is good.

The third reason why this booklet is valuable stems from this same point. Tiénou reflects a healthy catholicity: he draws from western and African writers, conservatives and otherwise, without in the slightest veering from his biblical moorings. His little book is divided into four chapters. In the first, he defines terms and sketches the history of evangelical theological strategy in Africa, finding 1973 to be a turning point, as it witnessed the founding of the Theological Commission of AEAM and the appointment of Byang Kato as its Executive Secretary. The Theological

Commission strove to develop graduate theological education (and, partly as a result, in 1977 the French-speaking Bangui Evangelical School of Theology opened its doors) and to raise theological standards by establishing ACTEA (Accrediting Council for Theological Education in Africa) and by founding ETSA (Evangelical Theological Society of Africa) to work on an assortment of theological questions. In the second chapter, Tiénou targets two or three issues in the theological task in Africa today (while frankly acknowledging there are not a few others): the relationships between biblical Christianity and African culture, and between biblical Christianity and African religion; and the nature of and need for proper contextualization of theology in Africa today. In the third chapter, titled "Threats and Dangers for Evangelicals," instead of listing "outside" dangers (he mentions syncretism, secularism, ecumenism, universalism and pluralism), he focuses attention on dangers *within* the evangelical camp. He raises four: a mistrust of theology; the persistent tendency of African evangelicalism to follow its leaders blindly without thinking biblically and theologically and thereby calling in question or contributing to the leaders (this error Tiénou calls "sacerdotalism"); the danger of "an a-historical faith"—in which Tiénou treats in part the grounding of the biblical revelation in history, and more particularly insists on the need for some awareness of two thousand years of Christian tradition and reflection; and finally denominational individualism.

But it is the last chapter which finally issues the call "Towards an Evangelical Theological Strategy." The first and central challenge is the need to develop a "positive theology." By this Tiénou means that African believers must not merely criticize other developments, or merely follow leaders African or western but think through "God's definitive revelation" *for themselves*, in the context of Africa, without sacrificing the authority of Scripture or the counsel of tradition, but equally without adopting, undigested, theological formulations that bear no consciousness of Africa and her needs, cultures and categories. Citing Barth, Tiénou next insists that this theological reflection takes place in the context of prayer. Thirdly, African evangelicals, Tiénou urges, must aim for balance "between theological unity and denominational and personal identity and freedom." Tiénou briefly encourages African evangelicals to advance their own numbers in the developing departments of religion in the new universities, instead of withdrawing; to establish two or three more graduate schools of theology; to proceed cautiously with TEE programs; to befriend wherever possible the leaders of the many independent churches in Africa, in the hope of influencing their direction; to strengthen ACTEA and ETSA; and more.

One could quibble here and there about small points; but this little booklet deserves thoughtful reading both in Africa and elsewhere. I met Tite Tiénou recently at a study unit sponsored by WEF. In his presentation, designed to assess hermeneutically some of the theological reflection of the African theologian Harry Sawyerr, he simultaneously drew out what was insightful and helpful in Sawyerr's work (things that western eyes might well have missed!) *and* delineated the shortcomings of Sawyerr's proposals, as assessed from a biblical perspective. Such measured re-

sponse is in short supply everywhere, but especially in many third world countries where most learning is by rote, offering little incentive to develop critical faculties. Tiénou's call is therefore not only further evidence that many "younger" churches have come of age, but that far-sighted Christian leadership is springing up all around the world.

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