The Surprising Good and Terrifying News of Missions in Africa [1]

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Mention “Africa”, and many people will likely immediately think of poverty. For a long time, the continent of Africa has been the quintessential picture of being primitive and backwards, lacking and needing even what is basic in terms of healthcare, nutrition and luxury. Images of starving people in drought ravaged lands have been burned into the minds of people all over the rest of the world. Africa was (and in some places is) in need of peace because of brutal wars and oppressive regimes. The popular perception is that Africa needs money, because the people are simple and unable to build economies and manage wealth. Africa needs schools and hospitals. Africa needs exposure: the association with only poverty needs to be dispelled by showcasing its vibrant cultures. And, of course, the pagan nations of Africa need the gospel.

Africa Today

Africa indeed has many challenges, and many needs. But it should not be overlooked that it has come a long way [2]. When I was young, in the early late 1980s and early 1990s, Africa was ravaged by many wars; now, few (although still brutal) conflicts remain, and it is more democratic. Africa is organising through trade blocs, such as the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the East African Community (EAC); the latter of which is actively working towards a single currency1.

Africa will continue to face and navigate much difficulty: it is no exaggeration that European-drawn borders has caused ethnic friction, restricted access to natural resources, and caused decades of conflict. But slowly, the continent is working towards a more peaceful and more prosperous future (despite a second wave of economic colonisation by China).

The Surprising Good News

For a long time, Africa was also an obvious destination for missionaries. Missionaries such as David Livingstone and Andrew Murray worked with great zeal to spread the gospel in the continent, and their legacy has endured to today.

A few years ago, a friend of mine desired to become a missionary. Her heart was set on working in Africa, particularly Kenya. But while seeking council about the matter, she was told of a jarring reality. Firstly, she was told that the gospel has already taken root in Africa: churches and seminaries on the continent are able to train, equip and reach people in their own countries and of their own ethnicities. They no longer exclusively need *mlungus* (white people) to come in from outside and teach them2.

Instead, my friend was told to look at what gifts and privileges she specifically had, and then be guided by that. She had a European passport. Europe today is arguably more in need of the gospel than Africa, thus my friend (who was born in Africa; and despite her deep love for Africa), set off to Europe.

That is the surprising good news of missionary work in Africa: that the work of many generations are bearing fruit! Of course, it has had fruit for a long time, but it is becoming self-sustaining. Instead of only needing to receive, Africa has started to give back. One dramatic example was last year when the United Methodist Church (UMC)—which has a reputation for being a liberal and progressive church which has eschewed many of the traditional values of the Christian church—voted to retain the traditional view of marriage [3] (one man and one woman). This happened despite a strong push from north American churches to overturn the traditional stance. They were thwarted, largely, by the representatives from Africa. This is remarkable for a number of reasons, not the least of which that Africa has become a *transformed* society, in that it has traditionally (and sometimes still is) polygamous.

Africa has been transformed in the same way Europe was transformed in the first millennium AD. Most people are unable to even imagine Europe without a Christian influence. For example, today we call the Crusades abhorrent, because there is a clear contradiction between what the crusaders did and what they professed and ought subsequently to have done. However, we do not nearly judge the Romans or the Vikings as harshly for their brutality, because there was no “ought” restraining them: they really ought not have done differently. Their deities were their own, and their values simply different. Similarly, it is especially disturbing to think of the clergy who participated in the Rwandan genocide, because they ignored the *imago Dei* of their countrymen (even though many other of the clergy did help, hide and protect people from harm). But many brutal clashes between different tribes are not judged in the same way at all. As in Europe, Africa transforms because of the gospel, and is held to a higher moral and ethical standard as a result.

The Terrifying News

I have heard someone say that living in a developing country is like “playing life” on “hard mode” (referencing video games where once can select the difficulty of the game). It is more comfortable to live in “easy mode”, where people expect much and little is expected of them. People *expect* water to flow out of the tap when they open it (even though indoor plumbing and running water was unknown to or inaccessible by most people throughout most of history). People *expect* the light to come on when they flip the switch (even though electricity has only been part of most people’s lives for roughly one hundred years). People *expect* infrastructure (like roads and railways) to simply work, without giving much thought to how expensive and logistically complicated it is to maintain and expand such infrastructure. People *expect* the economy to grow (not so much to reduce poverty as for their own affluence to increase), even though the world now has a smaller percentage of people in absolute poverty than ever before (and even though fortunes and affluence have greatly ebbed and flowed through human history). And so, living in a developing country (where there might be water restrictions, such as during the recent drought in South Africa [4]; where electricity might need to be rationed; where infrastructure often is in disrepair; where the economy grows at a snail’s pace or is even in recession) is *uncomfortable*, because people are always looking at what the person has in front of them in the line.

In South Africa I have witnessed mass emigration. The first wave was from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s (mainly due to political uncertainty and increasing violence). Even though emigration slowed down after that, a new wave started up in force in the past few years (possibly as a result, ultimately, of economic hardship brought on by rife corruption over the past decade).

But it is not South Africans who emigrate to Canada, Australia or New Zealand whom I see. One does not have to look far to find (in South Africa) Zimbabweans, Namibians, Malawians, Congolese, Somalians, Nigerians, Zambians, and many others.

Whether it is South Africans exchanging their homeland for one of the other Commonwealth nations,

or people migrating down to South Africa, it is all for the same reason: to look for better opportunities. I have often heard Europeans praise South Africans for how hard they work. I can also attest to how hard immigrants to South Africa work: not only to build their own wealth (as paltry as it may seem to some), but to also send money home, where the situation is desperate. They bring skills (such as being chefs or artists) and sell it in South Africa below market value, as long as they can earn something (but, of course, to the anger of locals who lose their jobs to these underpaid foreigners).

Whether one's idea of wealth and affluence is measured in thousands or millions, one thing is true: one never has enough money. No amount of water which flows into the ocean will ever fill it.

The pastor of our church recently said in a sermon (on Luke 4:1–13), that Jesus had been "led by the Spirit into the wilderness" (Luke 4:1), but that the devil wanted to take Jesus "out of harm's way, and surround Him with comfort". Speaking in the context of many people emigrating from South Africa, he said

> Sometimes when people say "God is calling me to this!", I want to say, really? Because when the Spirit leads us, He tends to lead us into more difficult situations than we are in already; He tends to take us out of our comfort, not into comfort. You have a lot of people, and they are pastoring churches in South Africa, but now the Lord has called them to pastor a church in Canada or Australia. Is this the Lord who is leading you? Really?

Another pastor, preaching from 1 Kings 17:1–16 to a particularly affluent congregation on anxiety about material security in the current economic climate, said

> I find great hope in the story that God's intention is not just that the rich are meant to be generous, but even the poor with their little, can become part of God's provision for others. … I have prayed this publicly in this building before, … that God would take away what you have, because if He did, you find your trust and faith in Him grow. Somebody once said it like this: you will never understand that Jesus is all you need until He is all that you have[3].

And herein lies the terrifying reality of missions in Africa: you are needed here to *live* the gospel. We typically think that being a missionary is to *speak* and *teach* the gospel in some faraway place. But that is not all that missions are. I find the model of *mission trips* (where a group of people travel to a remote place for an intense, but brief, period of preaching, kid's clubs and workshops) to be unhelpful: the group swoops in, works some magic, and then leaves with a sense of fulfilment and satisfaction of a job well done. But we do not think of love (in its fullest sense) as having a great conversation with a stranger while waiting in line at the grocery store. Love is walking a road with someone: carrying their burdens, as well as having yours carried by them (if they are able). Love is the church of Macedonia giving generous to their brothers and sisters in need in Judea despite their own needs (2 Corinthians 8:1–15). Love is patient, not fleeting.

Instead, once a church has been established, that church needs to be nurtured, fostered and grown. This when Paul established a church, he would leave people behind to do these things for the church. He would also remain involved in that church through letter writing, addressing questions and disputes as they came to his attention. For any community, only ever doing word ministry is not enough. Instead, there is a need to come alongside people in everyday life: in helping others to overcome their impediments (whether alcohol dependence, drug or porn addictions, or poverty). Through this, we seek to grow the Kingdom of God here on earth. If you are part of an established church, this is very likely your purpose [5]. It is to share—generously—your wealth, knowledge, time, training, and talents with your church and your community. This is the need, not only of missionaries, but of people who are in the churches, of Africa.

This also means that "mission" is for everyone: whether you are a lawyer, engineer or artist. Your skills, knowledge and talents are needed, even if you are not materially rewarded for them.

A friend of mine shared the concern of a doctor she knows. He spoke, visibly emotional, asking, “What if my son, when he has grown up and there are no opportunities for him here, looks at me and asks why I didn’t do anything about it”. I do not know whether this person is a Christian or not. But as a Christian with a Kingdom outlook, I find his concerns unconvincing. Do we think of missionary parents, who have their children grow up in some of the most rural places on earth, as bad parents? Do we not know of children of missionary parents who grew up to be level-headed, grounded and successful? I do, and am thankful for precisely who they are without ever thinking who they “could have been”. The problem with reasoning such as this doctor’s is (if you are a Christian), fundamentally, a lack of trust in God’s provision, and a denial that Christians working for the Kingdom of God can have any success in their societies.

When addressing the question of how much Christians should give, C. S. Lewis wrote

> I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare. In other words, if our expenditure on comforts, luxuries, amusements, etc., is up to the standard common among those with the same income as our own, we are probably giving away too little. If our charities do not at all pinch or hamper us, I should say they are too small. There ought to be things we should like to do and cannot do because our charitable expenditure excludes them.
>
> C. S. Lewis, Mere Christianity

I believe he would have agreed that the “standard common” would also extend to what one *might* earn as a doctor or engineer in a more affluent country.

Conclusion

As with my friend who wanted to become a missionary, there are legitimate reasons for Christians to relocate to Europe, or other first world countries. Her journey led her on a completely unexpected path, and she is precisely where the Lord wanted her to be in this time. We are entering the era where Africa is starting to send *out* missionaries4. Praise God for that! However, then people need to be single-minded about that mission, and not fool themselves by using that as an excuse when they, in reality, only want a materially more comfortable and stable life.

It is, of course, natural to fear and worry about the future, *particularly* if one has a family (1 Corinthians 7:33–34). If one acts out of fear without regarding God’s purposes and promises, that is not an unforgivable sin. However, one must also be cognisant of dangers and implications: if one moves to a country which is secular or a community which is hostile towards the gospel, and you do not act with God’s Kingdom in mind, then do not be surprised if, for example, those influences will turn your children away from the Lord.

- 1. Which I personally and sincerely hope will be called the “Afro”.
- 2. Of course, there are many ongoing and necessary missions in Africa, and new ones will begin. But the purpose is sometimes different than a hundred years ago, and the lands are no longer devoid of Christianity.
- 3. This was no prosperity gospel being preached: no promise was given that giving away one's wealth would result in more in the future. It also was not asking for money to be given to the church. Instead, the sentiment was that people would be stripped of wealth so that they could trust God more fully, through whatever means.
- 4. This is similar to, how pagan Ireland once was a mission field for Britons, and later Irish monks flooded mainland Europe after the collapse of the Western Roman Empire and the Middle Ages [6] began. This helped keep the faith and scholarly pursuits alive on the continent.

- . Photo credit: South African Tourism [7]. Used with permission [8].

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