

**KWAME BEDIAKO: CONSIDERATIONS ON THE
MOTIVATING FORCE BEHIND HIS *THEOLOGY AND IDENTITY***

Kevin Howard

Kevin Howard took his master degrees from TEDS and GCTS. He has served overseas for several years in both Asia and Africa with his wife and children. He may be reached at: talkbackhere777 [at] gmail [dot] com.

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Running randomly into a forest in Africa without knowing what is there could be ill-advised, to say the least. It is always better to have a guide, someone who knows the trails and the terrain. Perhaps Bediako could be our guide in African Christian theology.¹

Kwame Bediako was born on July 7, 1945 and was a Ghanaian with Presbyterian roots who held two doctorates, one in French literature from the University of Bordeaux and another from Aberdeen where he studied under the formidable Andrew Walls. In the early 1970s, he married Gillian Mary, a fellow student from England. While he spoke English and *Ga*, the language of Accra, Ghana, his mother tongue was *Twi*.

He contributed to *Themelios* and the *Africa Bible Commentary* and was the author of a few books, including *Theology and Identity* and *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*.² He was the founder and director of Akrofi-Christaller Institute of Theology, Mission and Culture (www.acighana.org) in Akropong, Ghana. He died on June 10, 2008.

HIS BOOK *THEOLOGY AND IDENTITY*

Based on his Ph.D. dissertation at Aberdeen in 1983, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa* is significant in its scholarly contribution to African theology and in its key idea that African Tradition Religion (ATR) has more continuity, rather than discontinuity, with the gospel. It is Bediako's desire that more African theologians turn to the patristic writings for guidance on present-day identity issues, since the Greco-Roman situation provides a similar cultural-religious backdrop for believers of the second century as ATR does for Christian Africans today. His book is laid out in

¹We might define African Christian theology here as biblical interpretation and application done by African Christian scholars for African believers specifically and the Church universal.

²For a more thorough listing of Bediako's publications up to 2000, see Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa: History and Experience* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 121-124. It was formerly published as *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel in African History and Experience* (Akropong, Ghana: Regnum Africa; Carlisle UK: Paternoster Press, 2000). *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa* combines other works of Bediako and is a great source for a summary of his ideas.

two parts, first the patristic period (represented by Tatian, Tertullian, Justin, and Clement of Alexandria) and secondly the modern African situation (represented by Idowu, Mbiti, Mulago, and Kato). Bediako does not think the two settings parallel each other exactly in every way, but in some important helpful ways. Tertullian most strongly represents the discontinuity position between the gospel and the prevailing Greek culture. Justin and Clement argue for continuity. Accordingly, in the modern setting, Idowu, Mbiti, and Mulago represent, in various shades, the continuity between the gospel and ATR, with Kato being the one dissenting voice for discontinuity. Of course, with Idowu, Mbiti, and Mulago stands Bediako. It is important for him that the gospel find "a place to be at home" in Africa or any culture.³ The gospel must encounter, interact, and build upon a given culture's understanding of God, for he is already there at work.

For Bediako an inevitable by-product of a process of Christian self-definition is the development of theological concern and the formulation of theological questions. How Christians view themselves (identity) will affect the kind of questions they ask and the kind of answers they seek. Thus he can say that "...theology is called to deal always with culturally-rooted questions."⁴

THE MISSIONARY ENTERPRISE IN AFRICA

Bediako saw problems with missionary presence in Africa, or at least with much of their methodology.⁵ He appreciated some of what they did—for instance, Bible translations⁶—but some of their attitudes and methods were questionable. We find ourselves agreeing with Bediako that the missionaries were wrong, at least to some extent, in how they approached ATR. It deserved serious consideration rather than to be quickly written off as pagan and therefore something to be discarded in its entirety. And the positive attitude taken towards ATR by African theologians is significant because as cultural insiders, they have deeper insight into ATR and see that not everything should be abandoned. Even if sometimes using categories inherited from the Christian West, the agenda and content for African theologians are, according to Bediako, African.⁷ It is not an agenda set by outsiders but by Africans themselves.

³See *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa* (Oxford, Oxford UK: Regnum, 1999 [1992]), pp. xvi, 8, 32, 47-49, 71, 88-89, 160, 182, 240-241, 249, 350, 355-356, 360, and 439.

⁴Ibid., xv.

⁵Western Protestant work began in South Africa in the early 1700s and in West Africa around the 1750s, but the larger influx of missionaries to Africa took place in the 1800s and early 1900s. Some scholars, including Bediako, have referred to this surge as the third opportunity, indicating that what happened in the 1800s and early 1900s was the third wave of missionaries to Africa, not the first (pp. 235, 250, 252, 304, 386). In other words, third-opportunity missionaries did not bring the gospel to the continent but were the continuation of a larger story, the unfolding of Christian history (pp. 271, 331, 409).

⁶Bediako, "Understanding African Theology in the 20th Century," *Themelios* vol. 20, no. 1 (October 1994): 18; "Cry Jesus! Christian Theology and Presence in Modern Africa," *Vox Evangelica* vol. 23 (April 1993): 9-10, 22 (also see *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa* pp. 4-5, 16).

⁷*Theology and Identity*, 2, 5.

The following statements help us get to the heart of what bothered Bediako about the missionary enterprise and also help us sympathize with his position:

"A natural effect of the missionary outlook of modern times was a certain tendency to confuse their institutionalized Christianity with Christ, to make the former the bestower of salvation.... By fastening so intently on the 'sheer paganism' and awfulness of African 'heathen superstitions' Western missionaries were considerably less conscious of the 'heathen' as men with their utterly *human* fears and joys, hopes and disappointments, and yearnings for salvation."⁸

It was unfortunate that some missionaries confused their Western version of Christianity with Christ, such as by having Africans worship in a less emotional way or dress in Western clothes. Accordingly, many of them sometimes saw the local Africans as those within a larger *system* of belief (paganism) rather than fellow *humans* with sinful shortcomings. Bediako points out the missionary weaknesses when he writes:

"In failing correctly to apprehend and follow the apostolic precedent in their understanding of African 'heathenism', our modern missionaries, by the same token, deprived themselves of the means of recognising and articulating the universal nature and activity of Christ among the 'heathen' they encountered."⁹

The "apostolic precedent" here means using the noble philosophical and cultural elements of the primal religions already present as a stepping stone toward the gospel. The primal religions (thus, memory) are essential.¹⁰ Without memory, Bediako says, people lose connection with their past and, therefore, do not know who they are. Memory is part of our identity as humans. It is integral with what we are and what we become. Memory provides continuity with our past, especially in the case of Africans, their ancestors and their traditions. According to Bediako the missionary era did not allow Africans to keep any positive memories of their religious traditions. They were thus robbed of their self-identity and self-consciousness. Missionaries should not have suppressed the African primal world view but redeemed and integrated it.¹¹ Bediako favorably quotes Desmond Tutu, who thinks that the African religious experience was not illusory but

⁸Ibid., 244. Also see pp. 227, 250, 254, 269 where he makes interesting comments on third-opportunity missionary motivation or the missionary enterprise itself.

⁹Ibid., 245.

¹⁰See the stress on primal religions in Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa*, 21-23, 35-36, 40, 59, [67-68, 70-72], 78, 81, 85-91, 92-95, 101, 104, 108, 118 [pp. 67-68, 70-72 are found in *Theology and Identity*, 431, 433, 435-436, 438].

¹¹See Bediako, "Understanding African Theology in the 20th Century," 15, 18. See Andrew Walls's seminal chapter "The Gospel as the Prisoner and Liberator of Culture," in *The Modern Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Andrew Walls; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 13. Walls first published this chapter as an article in *Faith and Thought* 108, no. 1-2 (1982), 39-52; it also appeared in revised form in *Missionalia* 10, no. 3 (1982).

showed a real apprehension of God, and that ATR "...should have formed the vehicle for conveying the Gospel verities to Africa...."¹²

As key to his understanding, Bediako cites two of Walls's works.¹³ Bediako admits through the words of Ali Mazrui that the thrust of African theology in the twenty years leading up to the time of Bediako's completion of *Theology and Identity* was "...to demonstrate that the Christian God had already been understood and apprehended by Africans before the missionaries came...."¹⁴

Bediako wanted to show Christianity compatible with Africa; for him it is an acceptable African religion. As a non-Western religion Christianity could comport well with the African soul. But according to Bediako it needed to be stripped of its Western garb, brought naked before the tribe, and then clothed with proper African colors. While Bediako is obviously disturbed by the ethnocentricity of the missionaries, we will seek to discover if this same force plays a role in his own thinking.

AFRICA AND THE FATHERS: CHAPTER ELEVEN OF *THEOLOGY AND IDENTITY*¹⁵

By turning to his concluding chapter, we quickly encounter what was most important to Bediako and feel the driving spirit behind his thoughts. ATR has plenty of negative elements but mostly provides a positive base for Africans to build the gospel upon and to find their true identity. He shows himself fair when he speaks of a methodological problem with African theology, in not dealing adequately with African blemishes.¹⁶ While Bediako's impassioned argument for

¹²*Theology and Identity*, 2.

¹³*Ibid.*, 8, references Andrew Walls, "Towards understanding Africa's place in Christian history," in *Religion in a Pluralistic Society: Essays presented to Professor C. G. Baëta* (ed. J. S. Pobee; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976), 180-189; and "Africa and Christian Identity," in *Mission Focus* vol. 6, no. 7 (November 1978): 11-13.

¹⁴*Theology and Identity*, 9, references Mazrui's epilogue contribution in Okot p'Bitek, *African Religions in Western Scholarship* (Kampala: East African Literature Bureau, 1970), 125. Bediako goes on, in a later work ("Understanding African Theology in the 20th Century," 17), to quote Lamin Sanneh saying that through Scripture translation the central categories of Christian theology transported into African languages suggested that "Christianity had been adequately anticipated" [L. Sanneh, "The Horizontal and the Vertical Mission—An African Perspective," in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* vol. 7, no. 4 (October 1983): 166]. The idea of heart languages plays an important role in Bediako's thinking although not emphasized in *Theology and Identity*. That God's Word can be translated into heart languages proves continuity to Bediako, in that God is already present in language and culture, forming bridges to the Bible's message.

¹⁵The chapter is titled, "Africa and the Fathers: The Relevance of the Achievement of Early Hellenistic Christian Theology for the Theological Enterprise in Modern Africa."

¹⁶*Theology and Identity*, 437. Here Bediako acknowledges that African theology may need to be a little more self-critical and revisit the Tertullian-Kato model, but then adds about the latter, "...even if his own solution was far from adequate." Regarding African blemishes, see also John Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa* (London: SPCK, 1982, [1970]). Mbiti's gives accounts in African culture of human (sometimes child) sacrifice (pp. 180, 183, 188, 191, 256) and other

continuity implies many positive elements, we are left to wonder about the blemishes within ATR, such as human sacrifices. Ferdinando notes that Bediako fails to adequately deal with African problems.¹⁷ Bediako chides theologians in general, who had made little to no use of the patristic writings. And such seems to get to the heart of Bediako's work, that the Patristics can greatly aid the modern African theological situation concerning identity and culture. "It is, however, the history of Christian theological thought, and the early patristic phase of that history in particular, which most adequately clarifies its intuitions and illuminates its insights." The gospel was, for the patristic Fathers, a "...key for discerning the religious meanings inherent in their heritage so that they could decide what to accept and what to reject..."¹⁸

Bediako does not find himself guilty of syncretism. Rather, he says, "...a positive evaluation of the pre-Christian tradition and an attempt to derive insights from it for the declaration of Christian convictions need not imply a theological syncretism."¹⁹ Building on some positive elements from any existing system can be a good thing. He is trying to show the positives and thus the continuity in the African traditions. This is how he and Africans in general will stay connected to their past. Such a connection to the past need not equal unbiblical. According to Bediako, "...no Christian theology in any age is ever simply a repetition of the inherited Christian tradition; that all Christian theology is a synthesis, an 'adaptation' of the inherited Christian tradition in the service of new formulations of the problem of 'the life of the universe and the life of man considered in their relation to the will and purpose of the Creator'—which is the subject matter of theology."²⁰ Theology in the African context must connect with the African past and build on the foundations that Christ has already built there. We agree with Bediako that the African context will require at least the questions and intellectual framework to differ from Western situations, but do not agree with all that he assumes of ATR.²¹

He ends his hefty book with an approving quote from John Mbiti on culture and its interplay with identity in Christ:

"Cultural identities are temporary, serving to yield us as Christians to the fullness of our identity with Christ. Paradoxically, culture snatches us away from Christ, it denies that we are His; yet when it is best understood, at its meeting with

horrid practices, such as where a virgin woman dies, she must have her virginity broken at death by an elderly woman (p. 254). Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, 246, also mentions human sacrifice.

¹⁷Keith Ferdinando, "Christian Identity in the African Context: Reflections on Kwame Bediako's *Theology and Identity*," *JETS* 50.1 (March 2007), 126.

¹⁸*Theology and Identity*, 438, 439-440.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 431.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 432. Towards the end Bediako is quoting from J. V. Langmead Casserley, *The Retreat from Christianity in the Modern World*.

²¹*Ibid.*, 434.

Christianity, culture drives us to Christ and surrenders us to Him, affirming us to be permanently, totally and unconditionally His own."²²

At times throughout *Theology and Identity*, Bediako speaks of culture as essential to who we are in our deepest being, and at other times as something more temporary. It is part of who we are, but it is a minor issue when considered in light of the larger picture of God's story unfolding among humanity.²³ By ending with Mbiti's quote, Bediako shows the problem that culture poses in *snatching* us away from Christ even as it acts similarly to the law's role as *paidagōgos* in Galatians, as something that "*drives* us to Christ and *surrenders* us to Him." Bediako seems in conflict by stressing continuity because there are serious negatives in the African traditional past—and negatives within any culture—that cannot be built upon positively. He feels real discontinuity and thus cannot completely reconcile it with his paradigm which largely assimilates the African traditional past positively.

BYANG KATO: CHAPTER TEN OF *THEOLOGY AND IDENTITY*

The section that most concerns us is chapter ten, "*A Variety of African Responses: Byang Kato, or Theology as Bibliology I. The emergence of a dissenting voice.*" This chapter clearly shows what drove Bediako in this discussion of identity. Byang Kato was Nigerian and took his doctorate from Dallas Theological Seminary in the early 1970s. He felt that Christianity called for a radical break with much, if not all, of ATR. He is considered the father of evangelical African theology and his most notable work is *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*. Unfortunately, he drowned at the age of 39.

In chapter ten of *Theology and Identity*, Bediako seeks to "...understand Kato's thought in terms of his [Kato] own theological presuppositions and commitment, and to assess his contribution towards an African theological tradition that engages seriously with the question of identity faced by the modern African Christian conscience."²⁴ The theme of identity is key to all that Bediako says throughout this chapter, as is indicated by the subject of his tome. In fact, identity may be the key that unlocks much of what he wrote elsewhere too. Bediako provides us with a clear summation of his chapter towards its end when he writes, "Not only was his [Kato] negative and unsympathetic posture towards the African pre-Christian religious heritage based on outdated assumptions about the nature of African 'traditional' religion, but also his very attitude rendered him incapable of appreciating and discerning some of its crucial and positive dimensions."²⁵ Absorbing this statement will grant the reader a firm grasp on what Bediako thinks of Kato's approach to ATR.

²²Ibid., 441. John Mbiti, "African Indigenous Culture in relation to Evangelism and Church Development," in *The Gospel and Frontier Peoples: A Report of a Consultation* (ed. R. Pierce Beaver, December 1972; Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1973), 94.

²³*Theology and Identity*, 441. He also links Christian Africans to the larger Christian story in *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa*, 20-33, 119.

²⁴Ibid., 415.

²⁵Ibid., 414.

Bediako's own words serve as the best summary of his thoughts for Kato's theology: "...there is little in his [Kato's] outlook which does not stem from his deep roots in the conservative evangelical tradition—particularly the North American variant—of Christianity."²⁶ Bediako constantly uses the word "negative" in reference to Kato's views towards ATR. One quote ought to suffice to show how Bediako consistently assumes that a positive outlook on ATR is the only possible option in which to consider African religions: "...Kato shows no awareness of the effect that his fundamentally unsympathetic and even disdainful attitude to 'non-Christian religions' may have on his understanding of those religions, including his own religious past."²⁷ Bediako teased out his whole chapter arguing this way, while never indicating that perhaps his own overly positive assessment of ATR or overly negative assessment of Kato would lead him into the abyss that he thinks Kato has fallen.

Bediako wishes Kato had realized that theology must be about so much more than the sheer limits of Scripture. When Kato applied Scripture he was theologizing—by the very nature of the task—outside the bounds of the Bible, even if the principles he was theologizing about were biblical. "For Kato, the content of the Bible constituted not only 'the basic source', but also virtually the only subject-matter of theology."²⁸

Bediako writes, "Whilst one can readily understand Kato's concern not to reach beyond the boundaries of the explicit declarations of the Scriptures, the effect of thus absolutising Biblical incidents in themselves was to render Kato incapable of appreciating the nuances of the very Scriptures he was so intent on safeguarding."²⁹ Further he says, "Kato did not recognize that there could be other concepts of salvation which had just as much validity within the overall teaching of the Scriptures."³⁰ After this statement, Bediako discusses Luke 4:18-19 to show how Kato failed to deal with the hermeneutical problem it posed in this matter. Bediako agrees with Kato that man's fundamental dilemma is sin, but thinks Kato minimizes certain social concepts of biblical salvation.³¹ Bediako focuses on the aspect of redemption that reaches beyond the mere saving of the soul, to social concerns such as poverty, captivity, blindness, etc. That Kato focused on the aspect of salvation as the New Testament usually emphasizes is not surprising, and is no real failure on his part. This passage in Luke must be understood in light of what Jesus says in verse 27 ("And many lepers...*none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian*") and the remainder of chapter 4, especially verse 43 which says, "preach the kingdom of God." Jesus's preaching the kingdom of God did not always include healing and feeding miracles. It was sometimes simply "Repent, believe, and be baptized" (Matt 3:2; Mark 1:15; Luke 13:3), because that message got at the real reason for his purpose—the forgiveness of sin for the glory of God. Even the story about the healing of the paralytic (Matt 9, Mark 2, Luke 5) shows the heart of Jesus's ministry—the forgiveness of sin and the Son of Man's ability to do so. The emphasis is on salvation—that is, justification before God and the forgiveness of sin, as Matt 1:21, Acts 4:12, 1 Pet 1:9, 3:18, and other passages demonstrate.

²⁶Ibid., 386.

²⁷Ibid., 387.

²⁸Ibid., 398; also see p. 400.

²⁹Ibid., 404.

³⁰Ibid., 406.

³¹Ibid., 388.

Commenting on Rom 5:15, Kato writes that Christ was available to all men but "its effectiveness applies *only to those who receive the offer*."³² Bediako rebuffs the last phrase by saying it "...brought [Kato] perilously near to saying that it [gift by grace] needed human authentication for the divine act in human redemption to become effective."³³ This is an odd way for Bediako to argue since it sounds like he is placing aside the importance of *faith*. He speaks of faith often throughout his writing, but here he is not consistent with Rom 10:14, 17 or Heb 5:9 and other passages.

Bediako cites Paul Bowers's statement about Kato doing a "ground-clearing exercise,"³⁴ and that Kato's *Pitfalls* should not be seen as the paradigm through which to do evangelism in Africa. Bediako rejoices that other Africans are already doing the positive work in their theology and evangelism by encountering the African traditions rather than rejecting them.³⁵ (See end of this section.) For Bediako it is in this encountering that one connects with his African past, including ancestors, and discovers a continuity on which to find his true identity.

It is interesting that Bediako accuses Kato of having a canon within a canon,³⁶ yet seems unaware that his guide for what is biblically acceptable is his philosophy of identity and continuity, including ancestral connectedness. If his critique of Kato was accurate, at least Kato's canon was within the confines of Scripture.

The statement that Carl F. H. Henry makes about Charles Kraft could easily be made of Bediako: "...Kraft assumes [in *Christianity in Culture*, 1979] that special divine revelation continues beyond the Bible...."³⁷ Henry, with his gift for concision and clarity on bottom-line issues, warned his readers three decades ago of what seems applicable to Bediako and his methodology:

"Kraft extends revelation, as does Barth, beyond its apostolic inscripturation to the continuing 'discovery of revelation' in subjective response, so that not only prophets and apostles, but we also, like them, are recipients of revelation.... While Kraft urges an unabridged missionary proclamation of the Gospel calling for faith in God, he does not rule out the possibility that God may even now reveal himself specially and directly to individuals in different cultures, as he did to Abraham and Melchizedek (ibid. 256). If revelation continues within a range of

³²Ibid., 405, references Byang Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, 180-181.

³³Ibid., 405.

³⁴Ibid., 416, references Paul Bowers, "Evangelical Theology in Africa: Byang Kato's Legacy," *Evangelical Review of Theology* vol. 5, no.1 (April 1981): 38. Along this same line, Scott Moreau writes: "Keep in mind Kato was clearing out the underbrush and was taken home before he could begin his own constructions, and certainly would have continued to learn and grow in his thinking had he more time.... I'd suspect that Kato would be closer to Bediako than the Kato we know from 1975!" (November 15, 2010, personal email correspondence; used with permission.)

³⁵Ibid., 416.

³⁶*Theology and Identity*, 405.

³⁷Carl Henry, "The Cultural Relativizing of Revelation," *Trinity Journal* 1.2 (Fall 1980): 157.

variation, why may not Muhammad and Joseph Smith and Charles Kraft then be God's updating prophets?"³⁸

Bediako likewise left the door open wider for God's revelation than Scripture would allow. He worked with the same weakness in this theology that Kraft did. As Kraft assumes that salvific revelation—the kind which could lead to salvation—continued chronologically after the canon's completion and could occur apart from the Bible, so Bediako assumes that the same kind of revelation was working among those cultures, in this case African, without any Old Testament writings and before the first coming of Christ.³⁹ It looks as if Kraft's assumptions went forward in time and Bediako's backwards. Along the lines of Henry's reasoning, Matthew Cook, an American professor in Africa, says, "Consider the importance of the 'direct word from the Lord' in the African culture. That could easily be the equivalent to a Barthian invigoration of the Bible so that it becomes the 'Word of God.'"⁴⁰ Kato thought that ATR was totally absent of anything salvific or truly connected with the gospel, and that view troubled Bediako. Kato speaks for himself best when he says, "The beliefs of African traditional religions only locate the problem; the practices point away from the solution; the Incarnate risen Christ is the answer. Christianity is a radical faith and it must transform sinners radically."⁴¹ Bediako expected this kind of view from a Westerner, but not an African.

At times, Bediako seemed influenced by an interesting hermeneutic—"Kato would not allow that there could be a reverse current, bringing African insights and experience to bear on the interpretation of the Scriptures."⁴² No one denies that people will read Scripture with presuppositions or with insights (or prejudices) from their culture, but recognizing that such will happen is different than encouraging this sort of practice as instrumental in one's hermeneutic. This is complex because there are advantages of people from differing cultures sharing their cultural insights of Scripture. A person doing this may well recognize and affirm, as Keith Ferdinando says, "...that Scripture is absolute truth while also understanding that aspects of that truth may shine out more clearly for those from this or that cultural background."⁴³ Nonetheless,

³⁸Ibid., 158.

³⁹Regarding revelation, see pp. 5, 125, 202, 283, 345, 351, 375, 401. (See note 65 below.) Note in *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa*, 38-39 [originally published as "How is Jesus Christ Lord? Evangelical Christian Apologetics amid African Religious Pluralism," in *Exchange* 25 (January 1996): 27-42], where Bediako elaborates on his idea of revelation. He says "... it becomes possible to describe the entire biblical revelation as a witness, in other words, a witness that is borne by God, and especially to Jesus Christ, but also borne by those who, in response to the divine initiative, become partakers, by their recognition, in the truth of the divine witness" (p. 39). Interestingly, in the same article Bediako writes, "...Christian content, strictly, is Jesus Christ himself" (p. 44). In *The Modern Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 11, Bediako's mentor Andrew Walls asks, "...is not the sourcebook of all valid theology the canonical Scriptures?"

⁴⁰Matthew Cook, October 1, 2010, personal email correspondence; used with permission.

⁴¹*Theology and Identity*, 389, references Byang Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, 38.

⁴²Ibid., 407. See p. 155 where history is read "backwards."

⁴³Keith Ferdinando, December 28, 2010, personal email correspondence; used with permission.

while culture may make us aware of certain aspects of the Bible, Scripture must ultimately judge our theology.⁴⁴ And Kato tried as best he could to theologize from Scripture.

Bediako ends chapter ten by citing Tite Tiénou's article as a more positive way than Kato's for letting the gospel encounter African tradition.⁴⁵ Maybe Bediako resonates with the de-emphasis Tiénou places on traditional (Western?) concepts of God like omnipotence and the emphasis of event-related revelations for knowing God. Perhaps Bediako likes the stress on "knowing God personally" not conceptually because this aspect supports his experiential (non-canonized) theology. Also favorable to Bediako's perspective, Tiénou often refers to all events and revelation as occurring in a particular "context." They are a part of history, the unfolding events of God relating to his human creation.

Salvation in African Tradition

Does a concept of salvation exist in ATR? If so, what is salvation in the traditional context of Africa? To answer these questions, we turn to Tokunboh Adeyemo, an African theologian who also graduated from Dallas Theological Seminary. He writes, "In African traditional religions (ATR), salvation is portrayed as cosmic equilibrium and community acceptance of individuals."⁴⁶ Furthermore, Tite Tiénou gives us valuable insight into ATR when he says,

"The examination of African religious ceremonies and narratives reveals that they focus on the importance of affirming life. A basic assumption seems to be that life is essentially good.... Since evil forces, visible and invisible, destroy life, people need to find ways to protect themselves and maximize life. This seems to be one of the foundational principles undergirding African religious practices. It provides the basis for understanding the purpose of religion as the prevention of misfortune and the maximization of good fortune.... Mediation between God and humans is the chief religious role of the minor deities. They share this role with the ancestors, the elders, and the various religious functionaries of African societies."⁴⁷

So the concept of salvation in the traditional African milieu exists and is something like *harmony with others and the world around you*. A major issue in grassroots African Christian theology

⁴⁴See Kwame Bediako, "Scripture as the Interpreter of Culture and Tradition," in *Africa Bible Commentary* (ed. Tokunboh Adeyemo; Nairobi: WordAlive/Zondervan, 2006), 3-4. While Bediako at times affirms the authority of the Bible in this article, in the end he seems to say Scripture affirms what or who we are (our traditions).

⁴⁵*Theology and Identity*, 416, references Tite Tiénou, "Biblical Foundations for African Theology," in *Missiology* vol. 10, no. 4 (October 1982): 435-448.

⁴⁶Tokunboh Adeyemo, "Ideas of Salvation in Other Religions," in *Africa Bible Commentary* (ed. Tokunboh Adeyemo; Nairobi: WordAlive/Zondervan, 2006), 1353. Also see his work *Salvation in African Tradition* (Nairobi, Kenya: Evangel Publishing House, 1979).

⁴⁷Tite Tiénou, "African Traditional Religions," in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions* (eds. A. Scott Moreau, Harold Netland, and Charles van Engen; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 46-48.

concerns the "...fundamental fears of witches, sorcerers, and spirit attack which occupy the center ground of religious attention for very many."⁴⁸ Therefore, it seems fair to say that it is important for the African to have power over the forces around him, whether the forces are spirits, the living dead, or sorcerers.

On page 390, Bediako agrees with the Ibadan Consultation of African Theologians in 1965 which affirmed the continuity of ATR with the gospel:

"We believe that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Creator of heaven and earth, Lord of history, has been dealing with mankind at all times and in all parts of the world. It is with this conviction that we study the rich heritage of our African peoples, and we have evidence that they know Him and worship Him.

"We recognize the radical quality of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ; and yet it is because of this revelation that we can discern what is truly of God on our Christian heritage: this knowledge of God is not totally discontinuous with our people's previous traditional knowledge of Him."

The phrase "not totally discontinuous" is ambiguous enough so that it is hard to reject. Yet the phrase "we have evidence that they know Him and worship Him" asks us to accept too much of ATR, which we will discuss later. Bediako felt that Kato wrongly spoke against ATR by saying Jesus was not the fulfillment of ATR or any other non-Christian religion.⁴⁹ According to Bediako, Kato's negative assessment of ATR had reproduced a major element, namely negativity, in the methodology of the third-wave missionary's view of Africa. Third-wave missionaries, and Kato, ministered on the assumption that new believers of a given culture could build their theology on a blank slate (*tabula rasa*). It was this negativity toward a target culture and the assumptions of the need to begin with *tabula rasa* that stripped Africans of their true identity, says Bediako.⁵⁰ In his estimation, Kato was guilty of "Western value-setting."⁵¹

Scripture, Salvation, and Damnation

Several times Bediako notes that Kato's most valuable contribution on the African theological scene was his insistence on the centrality of Scripture, but most every time Bediako serves this as a prerequisite for an attack against Kato. Most often it amounts to something like this: *Kato helped us keep our attention on the central role of Scripture in theology, but that same view kept him from thinking outside the box.*⁵²

Occasionally, the clouds roll back and Bediako lets in the sunshine of praise for Kato. At least twice he refers to Kato as keen on issues such as unity, and keen on the material and other

⁴⁸Ferdinando, "Christian Identity in the African Context," 142.

⁴⁹*Theology and Identity*, 390.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 391.

⁵¹See Walls, "Africa and Christian Identity," 12.

⁵²*Theology and Identity*, xviii, 391 398, 404, 413-416.

resources in possession of the "ecumenicals,"⁵³ those whom Kato was at odds with. Although this last comment seems more of a criticism than a true compliment, Bediako goes on to describe Kato as "practical, wise and pastorally concerned."⁵⁴ Yet all the while, Bediako seemed to be setting up the reader to see Kato in a dim light. Yes, Kato had an "essentially *practical* mind," but this will later turn into a weakness. Bediako often gives what looks like a compliment only to use the compliment as a vulnerability later, as he uses Kato's *practical* mind to show that he was not *philosophical* enough. One thinks that Kato would probably have been proud of Bediako's characterization of the former as "deeply mistrustful of speculative thinking."⁵⁵ The apostle Paul certainly seemed to mistrust it. Colossians 2:8-9 says, "See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (ESV).⁵⁶ Whatever we say about Kato's strengths and weaknesses, he seemed consistent by keeping Scripture central.

When Bediako mentions a prophetess whom Kato had talked about in strictly negative terms (because she was demon possessed), he thinks Kato has not done an adequate job explaining it by reducing it to satanic. Can all she did be justly chalked up to demon possession? Rather, her predictions included positive elements, and Bediako thinks Kato overlooked them. In other words, all her ATR activity cannot be evaluated as demonic; some good happened too, so why does not Kato factor that in?⁵⁷

In the last paragraph of chapter ten, Bediako gets at the motivating factor in his views of continuity with ATR—his ancestors. In a statement again indicating that Kato is unfit to evaluate ATR appropriately, Bediako says that Kato "...even went so far as to pontificate on the state of those who died without having heard the Gospel...."⁵⁸

In African culture, ancestry is inseparable from one's identity while living. Ancestry touches the heritage of the living, their tribe, their status among other Africans during this life. Understanding this, we can perhaps feel the intensity of Bediako's angst against some of Kato's views.⁵⁹ Another scholar discusses the deceased as part of the present day family or clan:

⁵³Ibid., 392. According to Bediako, "ecumenicals" in Kato's estimation were those in the World Council of Churches and those who felt a theological kinship with such. Ecumenism consisted of those who would have stressed unity over doctrine.

⁵⁴Ibid., 392, 396, 412.

⁵⁵Ibid., 413.

⁵⁶See p. 435 in Bediako's following chapter where he indicates that Christians reminded Clement of this same danger, but Clement, according to Bediako, insisted that the apostle Paul meant not all philosophy just the Epicurean kind which had no room for God.

⁵⁷One response to Bediako might be that Pharaoh's magicians in Exodus could do impressive acts that did not always harm others, yet their practices were not good or neutral. Also see Lev 20:26-27.

⁵⁸Ibid., 416.

⁵⁹See Jack Partain, "Christians and Their Ancestors: A Dilemma of African Theology," in *Christian Century* (November 26, 1986), 1066, but now available online <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1078> (accessed May 2010), and Yusufu Turaki, "The Role of

"In Africa this means that western notions of material and technological 'progress' are often avoided or resisted, for fear of offending the ancestors. At the same time, achieving personal power confers status not only on oneself but also on one's ancestors. Understand this and you are some way toward understanding much of the history of post-colonial Africa."⁶⁰

Ancestry also has deep implications, in ATR, for the person's relationship to the living dead—the spirits of those who have died within the last few generations yet who dwell close by. Bediako's distress over Kato's views shows us how deeply the first felt over the possibility that his ancestors might be in hell.⁶¹ Bediako also is "pontificating" about the eternal state of those who died without hearing the gospel. By taking an inclusivist position Bediako is no less making a stand on the issue, and his argument seems driven by his deep-seated sense of identity and defense of his African past. Kato was an African too, a real African, who had personal experience in ATR. His study in America would not have totally divested him of it. He likely would have experienced some angst also in thinking through the implications of the gospel for his ancestors who had not heard, but he tried to side with Scripture despite the negative implications for him as an African. Bediako unfairly dismisses him as though condemning ATR could neither be a biblical position nor remain an African option.

Even the well-balanced evangelical African scholar Tite Tiénou cannot seem to resist the urge to leave the door open, at least a little, for what looks like the hopeful possibility of the salvation of his ancestors.⁶² In a discussion about general and special revelation he says, "Ultimately the question is not, What kind of revelation do you have? but Do you know God and do you follow him in humble service?" Then he continues, "If the question is, does general revelation save? the answer is no. Revelation does not save, Jesus Christ does. Yet Scripture never rules out the possibility that some might come to a saving knowledge of God through general revelation." The question Tiénou asks "does general revelation save" is wrongly framed. The question, "Can one

the Ancestors," in *Africa Bible Commentary* (ed. Tokunboh Adeyemo; Nairobi: WordAlive/Zondervan, 2006), 480. With the movement among some African theologians to couch Jesus in terms of their great ancestor, see Timothy Palmer, "Jesus Christ: Our Ancestor?" *African Journal of Evangelical Theology* 27.1 (2008): 65-75, where he disagrees with this model, at least for Nigerians. Basically the same version of it is online at http://www.tcn.org/index_files/Page422.htm (accessed December 2011). For Bediako's views on Jesus as ancestor, see *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa*, 14, 30-31, 44, 78-79, 90, 94, 101-103. Or see his *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997 [1995]). See Bediako, "Biblical Christologies in the Context of African Traditional Religions," in *Sharing Jesus* (ed. Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984 [Indian ed. 1983]), 113-121.

⁶⁰Mathew Clark, "Asian Pentecostal Theology: A Perspective From Africa," *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 4.2 (2001), 184.

⁶¹*Theology and Identity*, 404, 416.

⁶²Tite Tiénou, "Eternity in Their Hearts?" in *Through No Fault of Their Own? The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard* (eds. William Crockett and James Sigountos; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1991), 214-215.

know Christ through general revelation?" gets to the issue at stake. And the only way to prove the validity of his statement that "Revelation does not save, Jesus Christ does" is through special revelation (i.e., the Bible). As spiritual as Tiénou's statement sounds, it does not help much, but it does show how difficult it can be for an African to consider his foregone ancestors in hell.

Constructing an argument that will show his ancestors pardoned from hell, Bediako works hard to demonstrate how Kato was misguided in saying there was nothing salvific in general revelation.⁶³ If Bediako were to lose this battle, he would lose the whole war. He would have to concede that his ancestors are forever lost in hell and that continuity, that real connection with his past, would be gone with them. Bediako speaks condescendingly of Kato's views (general revelation not salvific), and even though acknowledging the view's place in historical theology, speaks as though it could not be right because, referencing Rom 1:18ff, what may be known of God has always been plain to all who love rather than suppress the truth.⁶⁴ By arguing from general revelation and stressing the Logos's pre-incarnate work, Bediako feels he cannot rule out the possibility that some who lived without hearing the gospel were saved.⁶⁵ Also Bediako assumes he has made a solid argument against Kato's position by critiquing the Western chronological (or linear) concept of time.⁶⁶ Because Kato only thought of Christ's redemptive work in linear concepts, he viewed the Savior's saving work as limited to the actual incarnation of the Christ-event when the Lord lived on the earth.

While reading this section of Bediako's chapter it is easy to think of a breed of universalists (or whatever name we must give them) such as Barth and some of the theologians that rose up in the wake of neo-orthodoxy, like Pannenberg and Moltmann.⁶⁷ At times it seems that Bediako was more influenced by theologies such as those, or at least shared such methodologies for deriving theology, than by Scripture itself especially when he used phrases like "the universality of the revelatory and redemptive work of Christ."⁶⁸ Barth wrongly denied general revelation but he did

⁶³*Theology and Identity*, 401.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 400-401. It is difficult to read Bediako's description of Kato's acceptance of special and general revelation as "traditional Protestant Reformed categories" and not also think that such Western categories, in Bediako's mind, equaled wrong categories for Africans (p. 400).

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 402-403; also see 436. His idea of the pre-incarnate work of the Logos is often intertwined with his concept of revelation (pp. 5, 125) and the universal significance of Christ (pp. 160, 178). See also notes 39 above and 68 below in this paper.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 402. For an interesting article on time in African thought, see Scott Moreau, "Africa and the Future: An Analysis of John Mbiti's Concept of Time," in *Issues in African Christian Theology* (eds. Samuel Ngewa, Mark Shaw, and Tite Tiénou; Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1998), 306-319.

⁶⁷Moltmann writes "For me, from the start theology has been an adventure with an uncertain outcome, a voyage of discovery into an inviting mystery. My theological virtue has not been humility, but only curiosity and imagination for the kingdom of God," in *How I Have Changed: Reflections on Thirty Years of Theology* (ed. Jürgen Moltmann; Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 20.

⁶⁸*Theology and Identity*, 402. See also pp. 146, 158, 160, 176, 178, 180, 185, 192, 199, 203, 207, 242, 247, 249, 283, 356 for a few important places where he uses "universal" or the concept. Sometimes he simply means that Christ is universal or global in the sense that he was

it for a good motivation—the fallenness of man and the uniqueness of the incarnation. Yet Bediako rightly accepted general revelation (although not distinguishing it from special revelation) but for the wrong reasons—that his ancestors who practiced ATR might be in heaven, or at least not in hell.⁶⁹

If religion for Bediako is primarily a "...matrix in which men and women experience and respond to the sacred..." and not about exclusive systems then we have a context without rigid doctrine ("assertions") but rather affirmations that people in other religions can recognize and respond to.⁷⁰ Here Bediako is dealing with the earthly life of Jesus Christ. Bediako's emphasis on the Holy Spirit where Justin and Clement would have talked of the Logos gets at Bediako's inclusive bent (and may also show a development in his theology since the writing of his dissertation). At this point where Bediako is dealing with the earthly life of Jesus, he may be arguing backwards on behalf of his ancestors, or merely discussing how Christianity encounters those of other beliefs since the time of Jesus Christ. According to Bediako, people of other religions encounter a fuller message of the life of Christ (incarnate) and they recognize and resonate with the message and his life—"This is what I've been waiting for." It seems the conversion experience would, for Bediako at this point, consist more of continuity than sharp discontinuity because the emphasis he puts on religion has to do with their nature of response. Before they heard of Christ they were responding to God's working, and they *further responded* when they heard about the God-man himself. Deducing from Bediako's approving quote of Cragg, conversion is not primarily a sharp break but a movement onward toward Christ.⁷¹

Final Thoughts on Chapter Ten of *Theology and Identity*

Bediako wishes that Kato had appreciated the works and ideas of theologians such as Idowu, Mbiti, and Mulago. Yet Bediako does not seem to appreciate Kato's context or the type of liberalism that American evangelicals were responding to in the early 1970s, or what the latter wanted to warn African churches of. Why does Bediako affirm the Catholic Mulago more than the fellow evangelical Protestant Kato?⁷² His criticisms are muffled concerning Mulago when they should be sharp against his tendencies to exalt Mary to an unjust status. But the positive assessment that Mulago makes of pre-Christian African past is greater than the many other doctrines Bediako holds in common with his Protestant brother Kato.

offered for all without distinction, and at other times Bediako seems to mean more, like he saves all without exception. (See note 65 above.) Also see Bediako, "Biblical Christologies in the Context of African Traditional Religions," 116.

⁶⁹See where Bediako uses Justin and Clement to support his view of salvation for those who never heard the gospel (p. 435).

⁷⁰*Jesus and the Gospel in Africa*, 39-40. See also Bediako, "Scripture as the Interpreter of Culture and Tradition," 3-4.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, 44. See D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 349-350 and 548 where Carson challenges Bediako's views at this point. See Bediako, "Biblical Christologies in the Context of African Traditional Religions," 115-117, and "Scripture as the Interpreter of Culture and Tradition," 3-4.

⁷²*Theology and Identity*, 365-366.

Bediako wants to show those in ecumenism to be open-minded and not as contentious as the conservative evangelical kind like Kato. But notice how exclusive Bediako is.⁷³ This disregard for Kato's position climaxes towards the end of the chapter when Bediako surmises Kato to having an "essentially unspeculative mind." Kato lacked adequate philosophical sophistication for Bediako, otherwise creativity would have led Kato to side with other African scholars such as Idowu, Mbiti, and Mulago. For Bediako, creativity and a positive evaluation of ATR are the traits of giftedness.

Relevant to Bediako's pronouncement on Kato in chapter ten is a telling statement in the book's preface, "The weakness for me of the 'purely' Scriptural orientation is the assumption that the historical tradition of the Church has little value in interpreting the realities of our modern Christian existence." From this statement, we can deduce several of Bediako's assumptions: 1. Church history supported his methodology.⁷⁴ 2. Anyone with another view may not care for or understand church history as well as he does.⁷⁵ 3. His methodology looked more scholarly, community-oriented, and more progressive than Kato's. While surely Bediako would have cautioned against certain modern-day conclusions, his methodology opened a dangerous door. He leans too heavily on Justin, Clement, Idowu, Mbiti, and Mulago. Contrary to Bediako's thinking, a canonized or *inscripturated* revelation is the only safe approach. In his need to throw out the toxins of Western culture that had been mingled with the biblical message by missionaries, he went too far and discarded a valuable ingredient that many of them would have treasured—a canonized revelation.

ANCESTORS, CONTINUITY, AND DIVINE COVENANTS

While we talked briefly already about African ancestry, we need to deal with it here as it relates to Bediako's understanding of covenants and continuity with African identity. In some African theology, ATR—or at least the more noble components of ATR—serves as a type of covenant. Regarding a theological conference in Africa, professor Matthew Cook writes about the African tendency to embrace a theology that argues to show how some of their ancestors were never sentenced to eternal damnation:

"...The African traditions functioned like an Old Covenant for Africans and could allow them a means of relationship with God until they heard about Christ. My thesis was that [such] might have been true (I only said 'might') before the death of Christ, but the transition from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant (and the associated accountability in the eyes of God of explicit faith in the crucified son of God) happened at the death and resurrection of Jesus and *not* at the epistemological transition of hearing about Christ for the first time...."⁷⁶

⁷³Ibid., 415.

⁷⁴See Ibid., 400-402 where he cites Kato building on historical theology yet still criticizes him.

⁷⁵This was similar to the same kind of two-categorizing he accuses Kato of, Ibid., 397.

⁷⁶Matthew Cook, October 1, 2010, personal email correspondence; used with permission.

It is an understatement to say Bediako also cared about these issues in his African heritage.⁷⁷ While it may not be fair to say that Bediako, in adherence to the continuity of ATR, directly presents another gospel, it seems fair to say that Jesus is minimized even if indirectly or unintentionally. By default Jesus becomes a *better* way to God, not the *only* way. While the scholar Bernard Van Den Toren would not agree that Jesus becomes a better way to God in Bediako's system, the former sees something that leans that way when he says, "A few times Bediako suggests that the development of an apology for Africa and of an African Christian identity presupposes not only that the pre-Christian experiences should be integrated, but also that they must be integrated positively, as part of the saving activity of God (1992: 237f)."⁷⁸

If God commanded his chosen people to kill the Canaanites (Deut 2:34, 7:1-5, 1 Sam 15:3) because of their false gods, would he not have Africans deal ruthlessly with the pagan aspects of their culture? Is that an unreasonable deduction? Bediako evaluates African tradition more positively than Baal worship. But on what grounds? Psalm 106:34-39 comments on this era when the Israelites were to possess the land:

"They did not destroy the peoples, as the LORD commanded them, but they mixed with the nations and learned to do as they did. They served their idols, which became a snare to them. They sacrificed their sons and their daughters to the demons; they poured out innocent blood, the blood of their sons and daughters, whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan, and the land was polluted with blood. Thus they became unclean by their acts, and played the whore in their deeds." (ESV)

If other cultures have salvific revelation in them, or the pre-incarnate Logos has worked among them in a saving manner, why did God command the children of Israel to wipe out the Canaanites? Were they so different than other existing or future idolatrous cultures? Even if Bediako countered by distinguishing between the pagan elements of ATR and the true underlying aspects within ATR (God is real; spirits are real; harmony with others is important), the argument falters since Scripture as a whole does not do this with other cultures.

Van Den Toren argues that there is more discontinuity in Bediako's theology than meets the eye: "We saw that the discontinuity in Bediako's view appears on further consideration to be much greater than his rather massive language about continuity suggests. Jesus Christ continues to be proclaimed as the only Saviour, the unique Lord, the unsurpassable revelation of God and our

⁷⁷See *Theology and Identity*, 247, 326-327, 374-375, 402, 404-405 for some key references to ancestors and pp. 37, 182, 200, 201, 245 for references to his idea on covenants God made with Greek or non-Jewish cultures.

⁷⁸Bernard (Benno) Van Den Toren, "Kwame Bediako's Christology in its African Evangelical Context," *Exchange* 26.3 (1997): 230.

first source of identity as Christians."⁷⁹ Discontinuity is there in Bediako's mind because he cannot ignore it.⁸⁰ But it stands too far in the background to help his theology.

While Bediako sees continuity between ATR and the gospel, has he given enough weight to the discontinuity the Bible makes even for the Hebrews and their true God? Genesis 17:19-20 shows something important about the covenant God made with Abraham. If the divine covenant was not with Ishmael's offspring, a descendant of Abraham, then it demonstrates how exclusive this covenant was; thus, the more noble parts of ATR could not be considered a type of Old Testament covenant and neither would the noble components within Greek philosophy.

For good reason God deals with idolatry at the beginning of the Ten Commandments (Exod 20). If the monotheistic Jews were so prone to idolatry, how susceptible are the rest of us? In Exod 34:13-14 the Israelites are to destroy the religious cultural heritage of the ethnic groups (Amorite, Canaanite, Hittite, Perizzite, Hivite, and Jebusite) inhabiting the Promised Land. See Ezek 11:12, 13:20-23, 14:5-6, 16:30, 16:43, 16:63, 18:31 where, during the exile in Babylon, God is upset at the idolatrous practices and customs of the leaders in Jerusalem. In Ezek 36:24-32 the emphasis is away from self (identity) and towards loathing the old ways. Emphasis is on a new heart for the exiles. In Amos 2:4 judgment will come upon Judah because of the gods and lies of their ancestors. In Zech 1:2 God is angry with the Jewish forefathers. The phrase "how sick is your heart" in Ezek 16:30 opposes some of Bediako's presuppositions on the Logos working in these pre-Christian cultures.

In Jesus's mind, the Golden Rule is locked into the Law and Prophets, not in his pre-incarnate working apart from what is revealed in the Law and Prophets (Matt 7:13). His narrow-gate argument in verse 14 shows that people are more likely not to make it into the kingdom, even among those who saw the incarnate Jesus in the flesh. Jesus warned the leading religious people of his day following the tradition of their elders, those with God's special revelation, that they had a "fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish [their] tradition" (Mark 7:9). Their traditions were no good if they did not obey the special revelation that God had given them.

Peter says, "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Also, in Acts 24:14, Paul makes a connection with his ancestors, but it is important not miss that he ties worshipping the God of his fathers with "...believing everything laid down by the Law in the Prophets."

Bediako does not show us the continuity of ATR with the gospel through a careful study of the Bible, at least not in *Theology and Identity*. He assumes too much from Acts 14 and 17 and Rom 2:11.⁸¹ As we saw earlier, Bediako chides Kato for "absolutising Biblical incidents in

⁷⁹Ibid., 228; also see pp. 219, 224.

⁸⁰See *Theology and Identity*, 46, 107, 145-147, 149, 195, 281, 354, 369 where he or others indicate there are elements in any given culture that are compatible with the gospel and elements which are not.

⁸¹Ibid., 247, 264, 283, 355, 429, 442. We hope to deal with this more thoroughly in a forthcoming paper.

themselves"⁸² but has done the very thing with Acts 14 and 17, and Rom 2:11. From what we have already witnessed in the Old Testament, we do not see much in the way of God's prophets affirming people's primal instincts and cultures.⁸³ In fact, the Bible teaches the opposite of what Bediako assumes.

While some have drawn wrong conclusions about Greek philosophy from Paul's sermons in Acts 14 and 17, Paul is easy to understand in the straightforward passages where he has time to elaborate about past Gentile life. He says, "...at one time...separated from Christ, alienated...strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope without God in the world...once were far off brought near by the blood of Christ" (Eph 2:11–13). If there is still any doubt, in 3:6 he says now they are "partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel," assuming beforehand that they were not. In 4:17–18 the apostle declares that Gentiles walked "in the futility of their minds...darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart."

The Old Testament has taught us how easy it is to think we are worshipping the one true God when in reality we are idolaters, and the New Testament does the same. In Eph 5:5–6 we learn that no idolater will inherit the kingdom of Christ and God. Instead, "the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience." Paul says our past state can rightly be described as "darkness" (5:8).

First Thessalonians 4:5 seems to demonstrate that Paul believed all, not just some, Gentiles did not know God. Perhaps he could have been talking about those in particular given over to lustful passions, but it is unlikely he would have distinguished between *lustful* and *pure* unconverted Gentiles. Other passages come to mind such as 1 Cor 1:21 and Rom 10:8-17.

While Bediako often reaffirms in *Theology and Identity* his commitment to the trustworthiness of the Bible, his methodology betrays a man possibly more bedazzled by church history. If some missionaries brought any good thing to Africa besides Bible translations, it was a healthy view of Scripture. Bediako would have been well served to have incorporated this robust view of Scripture deeper into his methodology. Church history should aid us and educate us but never function at the same inspired level as Scripture, which Bediako seems to do when he uses Justin and Clement.⁸⁴ Bediako theologizes in much the same way as the neo-orthodox theologians of Europe and those who followed in their wake. A revelation that is not inscripturated leaves open too many doors for theological thieves. Kato warned of this and Bediako did not heed him at this point. By not making the distinction between special and general revelation Bediako can make all revelation salvific. By such reasoning he makes possible the salvation of his ancestors and

⁸²Ibid., 404.

⁸³Contra Bediako Ibid., 249 where he says that apostle Paul was facilitating and enabling (affirming) what was already there among the pagans to whom he preached with no sharp discontinuity. Also see Bediako, "Biblical Christologies in the Context of African Traditional Religions," 117.

⁸⁴Ibid., 125. Note pp. 201-202 where he says Clement's position did not equate Greek philosophy with biblical revelation; from this perhaps the reader is supposed to conclude that neither does Bediako himself equate biblical revelation with ATR and church history.

leaves the African informed of God prior to the missionary invasion. But at the same time Bediako, perhaps unintentionally, diminishes the importance of Christ's work on the cross.

Bediako's theology has a detrimental man-centered focus.⁸⁵ By emphasizing the pre-incarnate work of the Logos in ATR, unintentionally he takes away some special quality with Jesus's physical presence on earth during the first century.⁸⁶ Galatians 4:4 says that "when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law...." There was something extremely important about his advent, his coming in the flesh as God with us. While Bediako would agree with this last sentence, his theology subtly yet significantly chips away at this proposition. Galatians 4:4 leads us to believe that the timing of Jesus's coming mattered too (also Titus 1:2-3 and Heb 1:2). Any view that makes Jesus's first advent just another part of God's working must be scrutinized. With the stress that Matt 1:20, Acts 4:12, 1 Cor 1:17-18, 2:2, 15:3-4, Gal 6:11-15, 1 Pet 3:18, and many other passages, place on the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ for the forgiveness of sin, we must approach cautiously theologies that place the emphasis somewhere else.

Despite Bediako's Presbyterian background, he rarely, if ever in *Theology and Identity*, incorporates into his theology the doctrine of depravity.⁸⁷ Perhaps his presuppositions have skewed his vision to see only the sinfulness of the missionary enterprise without carrying over that same critique to ATR itself.⁸⁸ He seems so bent on proving the pre-incarnate Logos worked in Africa that he forgets the preparatory work Satan has done keeping cultures blinded. God is more powerful than Satan, but the latter's power must not be undermined. He is a formidable foe, at least to mankind (Job 1:7, Matt 4:3, 13:19, John 8:44, 12:31, 14:30, 16:11, 2 Cor 4:4, 11:14, Eph 2:2, 1 Pet 5:8, Rev 2:13, and 12:9-10). Surely we must factor Satan's activity into the assessment of a pre-Christian culture.

CONCLUSION

Bediako has done a great job covering his topic thoroughly with immense scholarly detail. His study has been fascinating and a worthwhile endeavor. We cannot read his dissertation without appreciating his fine mind. As we ponder the missionary task, some of his methodology can help us take seriously the existing view of God that is already in a given culture.⁸⁹ We can approach

⁸⁵Bediako would not likely appreciate this distinction between God-centered and man-centered (see *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa*, 92) but the distinction seems warranted.

⁸⁶Ibid., 403, 436. Yet in *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa*, 40, he stresses the importance of Jesus's earthly ministry.

⁸⁷He deals more with sin in "Jesus in African Culture: A Ghanaian Perspective" originally published in 1990; it appears as chapter 2 in *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa*.

⁸⁸See Ferdinando, "Christian Identity in the African Context," 143, where in his concluding remarks he says that Bediako's approach "appears to take less than adequate account of the radical state of human fallenness as it emerges in the Christian Scriptures."

⁸⁹See *Theology and Identity*, 315, 353, 371 where he supports the idea of Africans not having to divest themselves of being African in order to follow Christ. Christianity needs a recognizable face to the African, or for that matter to any other ethnic group. On p. 145, he endorses Justin's

other cultures humbly as learners, look for pre-existing bridges to the gospel, and use a discerning spirit to distinguish between Christ and our cultural form of Christianity. These are no small points that we glean from his work even if we cannot accept all of his conclusions.

When Bediako favorably quotes Desmond Tutu, we agree with Tutu that the African religious experience was not illusory, but we cannot fully agree that they "...should have formed the vehicle for conveying the Gospel verities to Africa...."⁹⁰ We are not arguing that religion came to Africa when the white man arrived, as Tutu and Bediako accused some third-wave missionaries of presuming.⁹¹ But we are questioning the *type* and *accuracy* of that knowledge of God. To what extent we can agree with Tutu and Bediako in saying Africa had, through ATR, a "genuine knowledge of God" is questionable. Knowledge of God does not mean true biblical knowledge. Here we have to agree with Ferdinando that such beliefs in a God, even in a supreme being, "...does not mean that the one they worshipped can be simply identified with the God and Father of Jesus Christ."⁹²

Ferdinando thinks Bediako's methodology overlooks the religious focus it should in fact shed light on. "Belief in a supreme being may have been one such element [of religious focus] for most, if not all, African peoples, but it is not the only one nor is it necessarily central for any of them. The point is to determine where the center of religious belief and activity actually lies."⁹³ That an awareness of God is a part of ATR does not necessarily mean that enough elements of biblical truth are there to constitute a solid foundation on which to build the gospel. Maybe more discontinuity exists between ATR and the gospel than does continuity.

We can go along with some of what Bediako says, but where is there a sense of God's wrath against sin and unrepentant sinners? There are, unfortunately, some real weaknesses with his approach. While he constructs his house with the Bible in mind, he nonetheless stands away from the text in most of his construct. This is evidenced by endnotes often bearing actual Bible references, rather than the body of his writing doing so.⁹⁴

thoughts acknowledging that cultural distinctions cease to be relevant when they come under the larger rule of Christ.

⁹⁰Ibid., 2.

⁹¹Ibid., 2, references Desmond Tutu, "Whither African Theology?" in *Christianity in Independent Africa* (eds. Edward Fasholé-Luke *et al*; London: Rex Collings, 1978), 366. There is no reason to doubt John Mbiti when he writes that, "African peoples are not spiritually illiterate, but the word 'Faith' in its technical sense seems something foreign to them. To assert, however, that they have 'no faith' in God, would be absolute nonsense..." (*Concepts of God in Africa*, 219).

⁹²Ferdinando, "Christian Identity in the African Context," 127.

⁹³Ibid., 128. According to Ferdinando it is important to "...identify what people actually do in terms of religious activity, what or who concerns them most, where the center of gravity lies," and ATR is, at its heart, "concerned with human life and wellbeing by whatever means may be achieved" (p. 129). "Wellbeing by whatever means" does not support continuity with the Christian gospel.

⁹⁴See *Theology and Identity*, 435, 443 for examples.

With the exception of Kato in chapter ten, it seems like the subject or feature person of each chapter constitutes a type of "ancestor" or "elder" whom Bediako looks to for guidance. Bediako allows the consensus of the African voices (in this case, African theologians—Idowu, Mbiti, and Mulago) and a few Bible passages to settle the matter of a positive evaluation of African pre-Christian tradition.

Bediako's need to venerate so much of ATR as evidence of the Logos's work before Western missionaries arrived, coupled with his need to construct an argument that would provide him peace of mind that some of his ancestors are not in hell, are driving forces behind his *Theology and Identity* and serve as his theological outlook in general. This is why he responds so strongly to Kato; Bediako would rather Kato conform to the African consensus within the theological community. Since Kato cannot recant he must be cast from the theological community, while perhaps a bit of his Tertullian methodology could still remain useful. Sometimes even in the community-oriented African perspective a renegade member must be excluded for the good of the larger community, which includes the ancestors who died before Jesus's first advent.

At times Bediako's approach is itself ethnocentric, even though he often calls attention to the ethnocentricity of Westerners. The presumption that ATR functioned on the level with the Old Testament covenant and offered (or signified) true knowledge of YHWH is misguided. If his criticism of Western value-setting is to have real power, his method must stand free of the same shackles. An African theologian has warned of replacing one wrong focus with another just as faulty:

"For us in Africa our battles in this sphere would be in vain if we reject European Christianity for being non-Christian only to replace it with an African Christianity which is so overlaid with our own cultural matter that it fails to meet the tests of true Christianity when it is subjected to close scrutiny. To wind up with the type of end product that is African at the expense of being Christian would be self-defeating as all the endeavours of our exercise would boomerang in our very faces."⁹⁵

From the few examples we saw in the previous section of this paper, we conclude that a method working outside the bounds of what we now call our Bible is drifting into dangerous territory. Despite some concerns that Van Den Toren has with Bediako's theology, he considers his theology stable and safe from syncretism: "...Bediako's Christocentric approach is theologically valid, particularly because of the central place he gives to conversion: all continuity is discovered and evaluated from the new identity and the new perspective the African Christian receives in Christ."⁹⁶ We are not so confident as Van Den Toren; some aspects of Bediako's theology give reason for concern.

⁹⁵Watson Omulokoli, "The Quest for Authentic African Christianity," in *Issues in African Christian Theology* (eds. Samuel Ngewa, Mark Shaw, and Tite Tiénou; Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1998), 34.

⁹⁶Van Den Toren, "Kwame Bediako's Christology in its African Evangelical Context," 219; 230.

In agreement with Bediako, we do not give up everything that we are at conversion. Our skin color stays the same and so does our sex and many of our cultural habits. But something on the inside changes, which affects the outward. Conversion means, among other things, radical transformation.⁹⁷ Therefore, disagreeing with Bediako, Ferdinando says the "...retention or renewal of an ennobling cultural identity does not depend upon rehabilitating the former pre-Christian religion; identity is reaffirmed or recreated, and completed too, through the gospel." Rather, our identity is to be founded in the "three-personed God" of Christian faith.⁹⁸ It is sad to say that too much of African, as well as American, "Christian" experience and practice lacks the vital element which makes us distinctive—the triune God whom we trust and worship.

Since it is true that the "World in its own wisdom did not know God" (1 Cor 1:21; see also John 1:10), then where does that leave worldviews, systems of life and religion, philosophies, individuals and communities not derived primarily from Scripture, not protected by the exclusiveness of a canonized revelation? It leaves Bediako's theology, in particular, on questionable ground.

One other contention we have with Bediako is his lack of clarity on the gospel itself. Perhaps he would confess an orthodox version of the gospel, but he never takes the time in his dissertation to state clearly the details of the good news of Jesus Christ.⁹⁹ Most of the time, he assumes that we are all on the same page with our understanding the gospel. Maybe that was his ecumenical bent giving people the benefit of the doubt, but his work would have been stronger had he fleshed it out.

We suppose this evaluation of Bediako's theology can be easily dismissed as more "Western value-setting." This would be the most convenient approach. But our challenge to all Christian Africans interested in serious theology is to critique Bediako's theology with the Bible open. Bediako's views must not be embraced simply because he was intelligent or an African. He and his works can be appreciated without being wholly adopted.

The forest Bediako beckons us to venture into is interesting, but possibly dark and threatening. For the philosophical spirits that move through his writings are not always friendly, and the theological owls that live there seem to commune more with the dead than the living. One of the most damning things we can accurately say about Bediako's theology and methodology is that they diminish the importance of Christ's first coming, namely his death and resurrection. In the face of such a statement, he surely would have protested and stressed how valuable Christ was,

⁹⁷See Ferdinando, "Christian Identity in the African Context," 134-135, where he discusses Luke 3:8, 26, Acts 14:15, 26:18, Eph 2:1-6, 2:12, 5:8, Phil 3:7-8, 2 Cor 4:4-6, 5:17, 1 Thess 1:9, and 1 Pet 2:10.

⁹⁸Ibid., 137-138.

⁹⁹See *Theology and Identity*, 122, 180-181, 185-186, 189, 192, 196, 198, 247, 248, 305, 329-330, 334, 354, 369, 394, 402, 404-405, 435, 439-441 for a few places where he discusses some aspect of the gospel or salvation. Also see Bediako's article, "What is the Gospel?" *Transformation* vol. 14, no. 1 (Jan/March 1997): 1-4.

but Bediako's need to hold on to his identity—his ancestors—at all costs could be too high a price to pay. This is why Christians should approach his theology with caution and discernment. While much good may be gained by walking into the bushes with Bediako, some danger may lurk in the shadows, and perhaps something deadly.¹⁰⁰

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