ADVANCE THROUGH STORM IN AFRICA

For centuries Europeans confined themselves largely to coastal ports and trading posts in Africa. The interior remained relatively untouched by European powers. During the period of 1840 and 1878, while many missionaries were busy opening up new mission stations in Africa, other Europeans were active in Africa too. Many traders and explorers came to Africa, not to bring the gospel but to find wealth or fame for themselves. European powers also began to take an active interest in "dark" Africa. With the dawn of the industrial age, they looked for resources for their industries and markets for their products. In 1879 more than 90% of the continent was ruled by Africans. The Berlin conference of 1884 ushered in a major change as European powers scrambled to extend their rule over much of the African continent.

Colonial powers undermined and disrupted the existing social and political structures in African societies. African culture was disregarded. The exploitation of some people, as in the Belgian Congo from 1895 to 1908, was incredible. By the end of 19th century, the European traders began to import liquor, especially gin, in large quantities. Large numbers of people, especially in the cities, became addicted to alcohol. A British government Inquiry into the Liquor Trade in Southern Africa in 1909 found no evidence of demoralization resulting from imported liquor. However, an editorial in the Missionary Record of the Free Church of Scotland noted "the disproportionate prominence" given in the report "to what is favourable to the maintenance of the liquor traffic, and disproportionate pains taken to discredit points in the evidence led against it."

By 1919, the whole of Africa had been divided among the European powers. Ethiopia and Liberia were the only exceptions. In some ways, colonialism created favourable conditions for missions. It permitted them to enter some regions where the people had not been friendly. Tribal wars were not as numerous as before and communications, such as roads and the mail, were established. However, colonial powers also hindered mission work. In many instances, missionaries were told where they could and could not work. For example, while the independent Empire of Ethiopia allowed missionaries to work among the Muslims, France, Germany and Great Britain prohibited missionaries from planting churches in areas where there was a large population of Muslims.

German colonists were suspicious of any missionary who was not a German citizen. Baptist mission schools, which had been operating in the Cameroons for more than forty years prior to the 1884 German occupation, were required to change to German as the language of instruction.

Today the work of missionaries is often discredited by secularists. The latter do not seem to know that missionaries struggled against murder, ritual killings, opposed witch doctors, often fought exploitation of natives by Europeans, and adamantly opposed slavery and the slave trade. Domestic slavery was a practice in many African societies. For example, slavery was deeply embedded in the Hausa social fabric in Nigeria. For more than four centuries (1450 -1880) Arabs and Europeans robbed Africa of its people. Some writers estimate that the total number of slaves which landed alive outside Africa

was about 100 million. Missionaries also stood firm against polygamy. A missionary, writing in 1923, described it as "universal throughout pagan and Mohammedan Nigeria." However, the use of excommunication as a disciplinary measure in the case of Christians who took more than one wife was deplored by some missionaries.

The world view of Africans is foreign to the West. The traditional African social unit is the village, made up of families and ruled by a chief or an elder. Africans are committed to their family in extended form, consisting both of the living and the dead ancestors. The departed dead continue to exist in a different form in another realm. Hence the custom of burying food, clothing and other belongings with the dead. The ancestors are believed to possess powers or divine energy through which they can exercise control over the living. Dreams are considered important by Africans. They are believed sent by ancestors. People act according to the interpretation of the message they feel they have received. Objects like rocks and trees, etc., have been deified. For example, no Ashhanti farmer (of Ghana) would till the soil without first asking permission by offering sacrifices. Africans also have different values. They are people-centred, reverence nature, believe in the sacredness of life, are holistic in their outlook, respect old age – unlike the West with its youth idolatry. They have a deep sense of community. Communal life takes precedence over individual priorities and concerns in the African tradition. Africans also have a deep regard for history. African Christians love the Old Testament as it reflects a culture familiar to them.

In 1960, the British Prime Minister, Harold MacMillan, coined a new phrase on the African situation - "the winds of change." In Africa, a new world was struggling to be born. The winds of change gathered into a storm. The African elite began to agitate for increasing autonomy and finally for independence. Often the leaders of the African independence movements were mission-trained. Whether ready for it or not, one colony after another became a sovereign state. The end of the colonial era began with the independence of Sudan in 1956. By 1968, the majority of African colonies had become independent countries.

The twentieth century saw an explosion of Church growth. By 1900, Africa contained an estimated 9.9 million Christians of all traditions, confessions, and degrees of commitments. By mid-1970, the number of Christians had grown to 143 million (40.6 percent of Africa's population of 351.8 million). In 1960, Billy Graham embarked upon a "safari for souls" across the breadth of Africa. But the great expansion of Christianity came as a result of people movements. For example, a people's movement began in the Tiv tribe in Nigeria. In 1957, there were 1500 Tiv church members, 11,000 within ten years, while total church attenders increased from ten thousand to two hundred thousand. African independent churches also made a significant contribution to Church growth. Some independent groups came into existence through the personal interest of one individual and represents only a family or clan. Other independent churches report a membership exceeding one million. Statistics in the World Christian Encyclopedia show that Christianity grew faster than its rival, Islam. A large percentage of Christians in Africa are young and enthusiastic about their faith. Church growth has come at great cost. The severe persecution of Christians in Sudan, Ethiopia, Angola, Nigeria has

resulted in unprecedented growth. There is no African country without its martyrs. Someone commented, "One's faith has to be solid to ensure that one is willing to suffer and even to die for it!" By mid-1999, African Christians totaled 333,368.000. This figure means that Africa can claim to be called a Christian continent.

Christian missionary endeavor brought great benefits to millions of Africans. Millions were brought from the kingdom of darkness into the Kingdom of Light. Thousands of churches, schools, and hospitals were established at great personal sacrifice. In the colonial period, education along European lines was left almost entirely in the hands of missionaries. Yet the latter viewed their calling primarily as that of evangelists, entrusted with the gospel of personal salvation. They had an individualistic interpretation of the Gospel and did not take the holistic, all-embracing, African world view seriously because they regarded it as superstition. Missionaries alienated Africans from their holistic perspective on life. Students in mission schools received a secular and religious education as missionaries divided life into two spheres. The spiritual sphere included prayer, reading the Bible, evangelism and church attendance. The secular sphere included such things as science, politics, economics, etc. Consequently, Africans got the impression that Christianity was something separate from ordinary life. Dr. Stuart Fowler notes in his study, *The Oppression and Liberation of Modern Africa; a Critical History*, that the reduction of the Gospel to a message of private, individual salvation left the African church ill equipped to provide the leadership it might have given for the social transformation that Africans needed to meet the challenges of a modern age. The Reformed South African scholar, B.J. van der Walt pleads with Christian educators to provide Africans with a coherent, all-encompassing Christian view of life – a way of seeing, understanding, interpreting the totality of human life from a Biblical perspective. At the end of this century, the African church faces many challenges. Militant Islam is a major threat. Poverty, overcrowded cities, lack of basic health care, government corruption, tribal rivalries, and warfare make great demands on the spiritual and material resources of the Church. A variety of Eastern cults, such as Hara Krishna, revived interest in traditional tribal religions. Western secularism, different forms of African socialism, and even hard-line Marxism compete for the African soul. The vast growth of the Church has nominalism as its shadowy side. Many "converts" are Christian in name only. Most spiritual leaders point to the great need among Christians to obtain better knowledge of the Scripture. They also plead for trained leaders, not only in the Church, but also in the fields of law, economics, and business. Christian colleges, universities, and quality theological schools are desperately needed. The African Church also requires literature, focusing not only on the family and prayer, but also on the social, political, and economic problems facing Africa today.

At the end of this century, many are asking whether there is still hope for Africa. Some are calling it a dying and lost continent. The phenomenal advance of the Christian Church in this century gives hope for the future. I believe the time will come when African Christians will assume responsibility in bringing the Gospel to many nations throughout the world.

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