**African Christianity - Outline**

Introduction: Why Africa?

In Acts 8, one of Jesus’ Apostles runs into a kingdom official from Nubia, a Kingdom in eastern Africa. Phillip opens the Scripture and tells the man about Jesus, and baptizes the African official, who then goes on his way, presumably to his homeland. History doesn’t tell us if he was the first African convert, but he certainly went home to one what would become one of the oldest Christian communities on the African continent.

Historian Mark Noll, recently highlighted the changes in Christian adherence around the world. In Africa the numbers are telling: in 1900 there were only 8.8 Million Christian adherents. In 2008 that number jumped to 423.7 million (or roughly 47.7%) of the population. What this reflects is a significant shift in the population center of Christian adherence. No longer is the population center in North America or Europe, but in Africa and South America.

Today, I want to give you a 30,000 foot view of the story of Christianity in Africa. Time doesn’t permit us to dig too deeply, but my purpose to to provide a broad framework for understanding African Christianity today and in particular how we as a local church can pray and help in Gospel in Africa.

**Roman North Africa, Copts, Ethiopia and Nubia**

The story begins in the first century, some of the earliest Christian believers were part of the Roman Empire in North Africa. In fact Christianity’s intellectual center was North Africa, especially in the city of Alexandria. Theologians and pastors like Tertullian, Cyprian, Athanasius, Augustine, Origen. These men and churches were leading thinkers and leaders on matters of Christian doctrine, particularly the person and work of Jesus Christ. There are numerous accounts of Christians dealing with persecution as well.

In Egypt and Ethiopia, from the 3rd century until even today, there have been a group of churches that have existed through much change in the region. These churches were monophysite in belief. Monophysitism is a doctrine that holds that Christ only has one nature, not two. Which may seem like a small matter, but when you combine the divine and human nature, you lose the human nature. Therefore Jesus only “appears” human, it is not clear how he can empathize with us in every way but be without sin. The term came about after the Council of Chalcedon (451) which confessed a one person Christ, of two natures. I should note that while those who hold to a one-nature view of Jesus, would consider themselves Christians. In a historical sense, we would certainly make that distinction as opposed to traditional african religions or Islam, we (along with the Eastern Orthodox and the rest of western Christianity would say: Christ to be one Person in two natures, the Divine of the same substance as the Father, the human of the same substance as us; these are united unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, and inseparably).

In 610, a trader from Mecca named Muhammad felt called to deliver a new message by God. Preaching an uncompromising monotheism, Muhammad gathered a group of followers that would explode over the next 50 years, and continue in that growth. In Africa, the Maghrib and to the south and east of Ethiopia. Ethiopia battled Muslims for many years, and Islam would shape a large portion of the continent even to today.

It is important to mention these churches because they represent some of the earliest churches in Africa. I know I am just glancing over them, but there are numerous good resources on the early church in Africa. I would commend *The Early Church* by Henry Chadwick as a resource to dig into this region and time period.

**Age of Exploration**

It seems odd to skip such an expanse of years, but we really don’t know of Christian expansion in Africa until the age of exploration. The Renaissance saw western Europeans taking a great and renewed interest in the world beyond Europe. This renewed interest would lead to an explosion of Christianity beyond its traditional borders. As we have seen there are already far-flung churches in Asia, China, Sudan, but now European-style Christianity was being exported and transplanted into distant countries. It happened in two ways: 1) missionaries went out and sought to convert the people they found; 2) colonists went and settled in the newly discovered lands, bringing their religion with them more or less incidentally. [Not mutually exclusive; mission = africa and asia (Catholic); colony = Americas (protestant)]

The Portuguese were leaders in this exploration, especially in Africa. They battled Muslims in the Maghreb for many years, but in an effort to find a way to India, started exploring the African coast in 1497 (Vasco de Gama). Explorers would open up the African coast, build forts and trading posts, and then settlements. 1482, a fort was built in what today is Ghana, and Catholic missionaries arrived there and began to preach to the indigenous people. Africans convened to Christianity, often as the chiefs or kings of tribes converted and had all their followers baptized at once. Yet it was often a rather ephemeral affair. Most of the missionaries spoke little of the local languages, and they did not explain much about Christianity to their prospective converts.

I should make a note, similar to before with regards to the earlier churches, I am mentioning these early Roman Catholic missionaries because this is the first interaction many African people would have with Jesus. So you would have for the next century or so predominantly Roman Catholic missionaries across the African Continent. From the Gold coast to Congo and even to West Africa, Africans adopted what they receiving from the Roman Catholic priests, but they often saw it as a supplement to their traditional religions. With this you begin to see one of the features of African Christianity: syncretism. We will touch on this more, but syncretism is simply a blending of beliefs, that may even be contradictory.

Thought varied in different locations, the early Catholic efforts achieved much. Capuchin (offshoot of Franciscans) missionaries would often find a king or local chief persuade him to be baptised, and then he would order his people to follow suit. So vast numbers were baptized, by the late 17th century the Capuchins baptized 50,000 people. In Congo by 1543 there were roughly 2 million Roman Catholics -half the population. Nevertheless, nothing became deeply established, everything relied on the Europeans, and you saw irreversible decline, especially driven by the slave trade.

**[**The international slave trade would decimate the economy and people of Congo, and many other people groups in Africa. Roughly 4000 people were being stolen from Congo alone for slavery a year. The slave trade quickly became central to the economies and burgeoning power of many european countries.]

**Protestant Arrival**

The first non-Catholic to arrive on the continent were the Dutch. Their aim wasn’t missionary in effort but trade. And they settled in Cape Town, South Africa. By the 18th century, the protestant powers--the Brits and danish as well-- had forts set up along the Western African coast line. These small settlements were primarily for trade. But the later half of the 18th century saw the first protestant missions to the Africans themselves. They were, at first, tentative. The first Anglican Missionary in Africa was Thomas Thompson, sent by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG f.1701) in 1751 to Cape Coast Castle (Ghana).

The new missionary impulse was, for the most part, organized not by the European churches themselves, but by new societies expressly founded for the purpose of mission. There was an enormous number of these, mostly set up and run by lay people, often of relatively low social status. One of the first was the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS), founded in 1792 by William Carey. More important was the London Missionary Society (LMS) a non-denominational group

founded in 1795. That spurred some evangelicals within the Church of England to establish the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in 1799.

At least to begin with, these societies had nothing to do with secular imperialism: missionaries were sent to Europe or America as well as Africa, with the simple aim of preaching the gospel; and indeed the evangelical (and often Dissenting) nature of these societies made them suspicious in the eyes of most churchmen. Thus they were, if anything, counter-cultural rather than imperialist lackeys. One leader in the CMS was Henry Venn. He believed that the priority of missionaries was to train local clergy to run the churches themselves, and the churches should not be carbon copies of european churches.

**African Mission Efforts to Africans**

This idea was helped by the important work missions to Africa by Africans. Protestant Christianity had become widespread among slaves and former slaves in the USA and Canada, and also Britain. May were keen to bring Christianity to their continent of origin, and so we have some of the first African protestant missionaries to Africa.

One of the first was Jacobus Capetein. Ordained in Holland, left for Elmina (region in South Ghana) where on behalf of the Dutch Reformed Church he preached to his fellow Fante. He translated the Lord’s Prayer, the Ten Commandments and a reformed catechism into Fante.

Another was Philip Quaque, who succeeded Thomas Thompson at Cape Coast. He was trained in England and became chaplain to that community until his death in 1816. He was the first African to be ordained by the Church of England.

The efforts of these African missionaries were aided migration into Africa of large numbers of Christians from overseas. These were the freed slaves and their descendants, coming to start a new life in what they still saw as their home continent. In 1792, fifteen ships full of former slaves from all over North America arrived in Freetown, Sierra Leone.

The new settlers were, for the most pan, fervent evangelicals of the kind we saw in the last chapter- indeed, the preachers David Ash and Moses Wilkinson were among them. As they marched off the ship clutching their Bibles, one group sang the hymn: “wake and sing the song of Moses and the Lamb'- for they regarded this return to Africa as a new exodus to a promised land. As this suggests, Christianity played a central role in the life of the new colony. And it wasn’t too long until these new settlers took the Gospel to indigenous folks.

In 1807, The Slave Trade Act passed in Britain. The government tried to enforce by policing the West African coast and seizing illegal cargoes of slaves. They were taken to Freetown and freed. The population of the Colony swelled by 2000 to 3000 people, many from Nigeria. They were convinced by their experience that the god of their old indigenous African religion had abandoned them, and they were receptive the the God of the Freetown evangelicals.

Freetown was a considerable influence on the Western Coast of Africa. And one of the top schools was formed there. Many people returning from slavery, would come to Freetown for a time and then return to their original homes, often taking the Gospel with them.

Similar to Sierra Leone was Liberia, to the southeast. This coastline was settled by former slaves from the USA in the 1830s and 40s, and the country achieved independence in 1847 (hence the name 'Liberia', for its inhabitants were proud that, in their view, they were the only Africans to be both free and civilized). Mission here was a serious concern, and as in Sierra Leone it was primarily an Anglican affair. A succession of Bishops established a large number of mission centres in the area, with considerable success, although they did not reach as wide an area as the missions of Sierra Leone.

Other black Americans were evangelizing further along the coast, especially in Cameroon, where there was a thriving Jamaican Baptist mission overseen by the English Baptist Alfred Saker. One of his proteges was joseph Merrick, a brilliant linguist who translated parts of the New Testament into lsubu. He was also a printer, able to print his own translations, giving a huge boost to both the Christian mission and to the spread of literacy - for, as throughout much of history, the two went hand in hand.

One of the most significant figures of this era was Samuel Ajayi Crowther. Born in what is now Nigeria in 1806, Crowther was Yoruba, of a large group of people to the west of the old declining state of Benin. He was enslaved, and then rescued, and sent to Freetown. Educated at the school there Fourah Bay College. Ordained in the Church of England, where Henry Venn was his mentor. In 1845 he returned to Yorubaland, and preached to large crowds. He opened schools. His effort was joined by more than 2000 Yoruba, who were enslaved and many were evangelical, who came back to Africa (1851). In 1864, Crowther was made bishop.

I mentioned the idea of syncretism earlier. I should note now that African indigenous religion, while not uniformed, shared a value of pluralism. Meaning many Africans were happy to add the Christian God to their religious practices.

**European Missions, Part II**

In the latter half of the 19th century there was an explosion of European Mission to far more of the African Continent. Robert Moffat (1795-1883), a Scottish missionary who together with his wife was sent by the LMS to Kuruman, in the interior of what is now South Africa in 1821. Johann Krapf (1810-81), a Germen sent by CMS to the eastern side of the continent, spent years in Ethiopia, hoping to use it as a base for further mission but he was expelled; in 1844 he went to the trading post island Zanzibar, and then based his work out of Mombasa (Kenya), working for many years to translate the NT into Swahili.

There was a sense among Europeans to connect these missionary efforts. But this mission ideal was being combined with a new idea of European exploration and dominance of Africa. The famous Scotsman, David Livingstone (1813-73). trekked from one coast to the next. His journal set off a flurry in Europe, he described the continent as ripe for exploration, where “commerce and Christianity” might be imported together. What begins is the period of colonialism, where European missionaries would see to impose European customs and culture mixed with Christianity too.

Crowthers were the old way; european colonialism was the new way. In 1885, the Congress of Berlin divided the continent artificially, ignoring the people, geography and culture.

Moving into the 20th Century, various missionary efforts across the continent took hold, in Buganda, Congo, Zaire basin and in South Africa, mission efforts were led by protestants of varying stripes, who often followed Catholics into these regions.

**Modern Era**

In 1914, the Eastern side of the Continent was rocked by Europeans fighting with one another. Germans v French v the British. In the first part of the 20th century, Roman Catholicism exploded all over sub-Saharan Africa, Protestant church efforts were only tolerated and received little help. Even though their numbers were less than the RC counterparts, there numbers were still remarkable, by 1960 there were 2m baptists in Kenya. Much of the success was through evangelical efforts to set up Bible schools.

The 20th century also witnessed the growth of African pentecostalism and prophetic churches. These “prophets” helped swell the ranks of various churches, but also represented a new and highly african understanding of Christianity.

Prophet Harris (1865-1929) a Grebo- indigenous to Liberia- brought up methodist but converted to the Church of England. He had a vision from archangel Gabriel who instilled an unshakeable faith as the Prophet of Africa. In 1913 he crossed into Ivory Coast to preach, speaking to crowds of thousands imploring them to turn away from idols to God. His message was uncompromising, and he did not accommodate traditional African religions. People responded in droves; 100K in a year; many were baptized by Harris himself.

Simon Kimbangu (1889-1951), in the Congo region. Born in Nkamba, he became a baptist at a young age and taught at a mission school. In 1918, he began to preach, and became disturbed by supposed visions of Jesus. In 1921, he supposedly healed an ill woman, and the stories of his “healing power” spread. His followers grew into a church that reflected a growing charismatic or even pentecostal nature of African Christianity, and started new ‘denominations’.

Most European missionaries had believed in miracles described in the Bible, but they thought of them as a special 'biblical era' events and did not expect to see them replicated. But many Africans did not distance themselves from the text in this way and this led to quite new problems.

After World War II, the continent again was thrown in upheaval. Fueled by a complex number of things, many Africans believed they could handle their matters better than their colonial powers. The Pan-African Congresses, called for Africans to allowed to govern themselves. Ghana was the first sub-saharan country in 1957 (under Kwame Nkrumah). The successful handover of power led to independence for most African countries in the 1960s: Nigeria, Gabon, French and Belgian Congo (which took on a variety of names but now the Republic of Congo and the Democratic Republic of Congo) in 1960, Tanzania in 1961, Kenya in 1963, Zambia in 1964 and so on. [Ugandan indp in 1962, Idi Amin coup in 1971]

This would cause some turmoil for churches, but the churches would also bring stability in some sense as new African leaders would be Christians themselves. Probably the most bitter struggle was the events that led to apartheid in South Africa. Apartheid where you had a minority white ruling people and a subjugation, discrimination and segregation of the black majority. I don’t need to spend too much time on this, but it significantly impacted church life, as congregations, regrettably were segregated. Although, there were some Anglican Christians in South Africa who spoke out against apartheid, one individual Trevor Huddleston, wrote a diatribe calling apartheid a “unchristian” evil. He was expelled from the country.

For throughout this whole period, the Christian center of gravity was shifting in south Africa from the traditional, institutional, largely white-led churches, to a new kind of church --spontaneous, local, and black-dominated. These were the AICs or African initiated or (sometimes indigenous or independent) churches and the rise.

Christianity’s story during this time period reflects other parts of the world: 1) passing of authority from established churches to Africans; and 2) the establishment of churches by Africans on their own. Many of these we have looked at already with Kimbangu and Harris. The later AICs, don’t have great ‘prophets’ like those early ones. They certainly have charismatic founders. There is disagreement about how to characterize AICs but their importance and impact on African Christianity should not be understated. In 1985, it was estimated that there were some 12,000, with some 33 million members.

General characteristics: They served their communities, as opposed to new congregations within established denominations. There is some distinction between the churches too. There are churches that are known as Zionist that are heavily influenced by pentecostalism. But this isn’t all AICs. One of the AIC defining feature is their local flavor. There may be large gatherings but mostly there are smaller gatherings of a couple dozen or so. One feature, that we have seen recur throughout this time is the adoption of traditional religious beliefs and customs. Healing ceremonies, prayers for dead, and several other practices lead to a syncretism, or combining of beliefs. This syncretism has made such false teachings as the American prosperity Gospel an easy belief to take up, and it has exploded in many AICs.

The success of traditional denominations in Africa, and the spread over seas of the AICs and related churches, both mean that Christians and Europe and America are being forced to take account of African Christianity in a more fundamental way than before. The leadership of the traditional denominations is still based in Europe and the USA but they're real power bases with them their character and direction are increasingly found in Africa.

**So what?**

So what ways can we as a local church be praying and working alongside our African brothers and sisters to see the Gospel spread in Africa and abroad.

1. Pray and talk to Africans. We are blessed to have a number of African brothers and sisters in this church. Talk to them about their experience of Christianity as Africans. (Merob....)
2. Think of the pastors we have sent out and that work in Africa. Ken in Kenya; Gustav in South Africa.
3. Pray that the prosperity gospel would stop growing in Africa.
4. IMB
5. 9 Marks continues to think of ways to get ecclesiology to the hands of pastors in Africa.