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Review

God's Design for the Church: A Guide for African Pastors and Ministry Leaders.

Mbewe, Conrad, Crossway, Wheaton, IL: 2020, ISBN 9781433566424, 288 pp.
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Statistics show that Christianity's point of gravity is shifting to the Global South. Especially the church in sub-Saharan Africa is impacting the church's narrative. In many African villages, towns and cities, churches of various stripes and shades colour the landscape. On the other hand, there have also been rising cases of various deformities in the Church's life in Africa, from false teachings, pastoral malpractices and syncretistic beliefs. Dr Conrad Mbewe, the "Charles Spurgeon of Africa" as he is affectionately called by some, is senior lecturer at African Christian University and pastor of Kabwata Baptist Church in Lusaka, Zambia. He has written the book *God's Design for the Church: A Guide for African Pastors and Ministry Leaders* to try "to get the Church in Africa to be more biblical" (p. 16). Mbewe notes the Church's influence in African societies from the provision of healthcare services and its status as a symbol of the divine. However, Mbewe also observes that while African Christianity illustrates great zeal, he borrows Paul's description of a "zeal that lacks knowledge" (p. 17).

What is commendable is that Mbewe appreciates the debates surrounding gospel and post-colonial contextualization. However, what I find encouraging is that he seeks to remain biblically grounded by observing that the calling of the Church from different nations – Greek and Jew – is to form one body in Christ, which may have different expressions depending on the context. However, Christian principles are the same, even though they may be "applied differently" in varied situations (p. 16). Mbewe then discusses a litany of important doctrines of the church, while at the same time utilising illustrations

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and concepts in African thought and life, and thereby makes the book applicable to Christian leaders working in the church in Africa.

The topics that Mbewe addresses include the nature of the church, the mission of the church, the gospel and the church, membership in the church, discipline in the church, ordinances or sacraments in the church, pastoral training in the church, the relationship between church and state, among many other important topics. These are important explorations that would seek to widen the understanding of the church among Christians in the continent. For one, I found the discussions on membership, money and discipline of importance. On membership, I commend Mbewe's serious reflection on the place of conversion within the life of the church when he argues "Church leaders should jealously guard the door into membership in the local church. Only those who repent of their sins and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ should be allowed to come into the church's membership" (p. 73). To illustrate his African contextualization, he utilises the African matrilineal system of inheritance to reveal how it is central in ensuring a pure line of relationship for the purposes of rightful inheritance. He then uses this illustration to unpack the spiritual significance of conversion to the life of the church, and the inheritance of the saints in Christ.

Mbewe is also not afraid to wade in the waters of "tithing", which occupy much of African ecclesiology. Weaving his own personal narratives, he returns to unpack the practice of tithing in the Old Testament and applies it within contemporary practice when he notes that "through the symbiosis of the tithe system, the New Testament church is sustained in all its ministries just as the Old Testament church was sustained" (p. 143). Mbewe expands on this ministry-focus by exploring the importance of financial stewardship for the maturity of the African church in taking "its place in the missionary movement that will usher in the Lord's return" (p. 146). This connects giving to the African church's growing role in reverse missions. Additionally, this missional-focus offers a corrective to the "men of God" who utilise the principles of tithing to fleece the people of God, and to enrich themselves. In his discussion on discipline, I find Mbewe's delineation of formative discipline and restorative discipline helpful (p. 178-180). While formative discipline is more positive in its formation of Christian character through preaching, for instance, restorative discipline is more corrective and is applied where there is spiritual

malnourishment. These are helpful distinctions to make, especially where the practice of church discipline is misunderstood as unnecessary, or practised in ways that harm the flock of God rather than seeking the spiritual wellbeing of the entire body of Christ.

While Mbewe discusses pertinent issues that unpack “God’s design” for the church in Africa for a new generation (p. 275), as a Presbyterian in the reformed tradition, I would critique some finer points. For instance, Mbewe’s call for leaders to jealously guard the membership of the church by examining conversion, if taken to an extreme, could water down the doctrine of grace, which is central to Reformed theology and practice. Within the Reformed Presbyterian tradition, we distinguish between visible and invisible members of the Church. Visible members are all those who would associate with a local church, both converted and unconverted, while invisible members are all those who belong to Christ by faith in him through grace alone, through conversion. Membership in a Presbyterian Church is to all who profess faith in Jesus Christ. While elders examine these professions of faith, salvation is an act of God by his unmerited grace. Thus, we welcome those who profess faith, knowing that “jealously examining” does not equal to members describing the doctrine of justification by faith. This critique passes on to Mbewe’s understanding and practice of baptism. Baptism in the Baptist tradition is limited only to adults with immersion as the valid mode (p. 115). I would argue, both from biblical exegesis and historical theology, that this is a narrower interpretation of Scripture, given the unanimous practice of the Church in history and particularly among the Reformed churches, to which Mbewe belongs. While Reformed Churches agree with Baptists on adult baptism, they widen the recipients of Baptism to children of believers. In this understanding, Baptism is not a profession of belief, as such, but it is a sign of the Covenant of those who belong to God – synonymous with the practice of Circumcision in the Old Testament, which was commanded by God to the covenant heads of families (such as Abraham in Gen 17). In my view, such an expansion properly places Baptism within the foundation of God’s gracious relationship with his Covenant People, as opposed to man’s imperfect professions to God’s revelation.

Outside of these “finer points”, Mbewe’s book provides significant help to leaders seeking to shepherd their congregations God’s way. In my assessment,

Mbewe does a great service to the Church in Africa by offering broad principles that explore God's design for the Church from both biblical interpretation but also with the relatable African imagery and illustrations. While many of us have been blessed by the work of systematic theologians writing for the North American context, Mbewe's voice is much needed to those who minister within noisy villages and buzzing cities, as well as among postmodern millennials and convinced traditionalists, realities that are a mark of the life within much of African societies.