Towards a Biblical Theology of Missions in Western Africa

Jiofack Kana C. Jésus
Cameroon Baptist Theological Seminary

Abstract

This article suggests a paradigm for a biblical theology of missions in Africa. The research was prompted by the observation that previous theological designs and models have laid emphasis on effectiveness and issues of identity. Then too, Africa is marked by a renaissance of African Traditional Religion, pandemics, and societal problems. The paper hypothesizes that African theologians are better positioned to articulate a biblical theology of missions that addresses the continent's contemporary realities. The methodology combines soteriology and symbolism. The findings indicate that an African theology of missions is anchored on indigenized theology, functional Christology, and relational Christology. These results illustrate the need to engage biblical authority, theology, and anthropology for a missional theology in Africa. The present research may be situated within the current commitment of African scholars to develop contextual theologies for the Global South.

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1. Introduction

The term theology of missions ordinarily has strong affinities with missiology, which is a related discipline. David Bosch (1991, 9) says, "Missiology, as a branch of the discipline of Christian theology, is not a disinterested or neutral enterprise; rather, it seeks to look at the world from the perspective of commitment to the Christian faith." Missiology is therefore a continuous reflection on the practice of missions across history. This entails the study of propounded models (old and new) and their impact on the mission fields, and the dissemination of new theories through teaching and publications (Moreau 2000, 633). On the other hand, the task of a theology of missions is to provide a biblical framework for facing current challenges

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About the Author
Dr. Jiofack Kana C. Jésus is an ordained minister of the Cameroon Baptist Convention. He is a missionary and linguist. He holds a Ph.D. in Missiology from the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary. He also earned a *Maîtrise* in Linguistics and African Language and a Master of Arts in Applied Linguistics from the University of Dschang, in Cameroon. His areas of research include African missiology, contextual theologies, African philosophy and ethics, and applied linguistics. He has written articles for theological conferences and completed major research works including "Ethical and Missiological Thoughts on African Single Women's Longing for Children through Sperm Banks," "Descartes' Teleological Argument and African Eschatology: A Comparative Analysis for Contextual Apologetics," and "A Critical Analysis of the Discourse of Femininity among the Yémba Christian Women in the West Region of Cameroon (M.A. dissertation). Jiofack Kana is married to Jacqueline and they have four children. He is currently a lecturer in the Department of World Missions and Intercultural Studies of the Cameroon Baptist Theological Seminary.

Email: charlesjesuskana@gmail.com

and doing missions in a changing world (Ott, Strauss, and Tennent 2010, xi–xii). For the sake of brevity, it can be said that while missiology pays attention to new developments in mission models and practice, there is a need for a theology of missions that can give biblical direction to this endeavor. It can suffice, however, to note that worldviews play an important role in theological reflection. Grenz (1997, 94) contends, "The church has continually sought to express its affirmation of faith in the context of the specific historical and cultural situations in which it has lived and witnessed to the revelation of God in Christ." We might not want to endorse Grenz's overall aim with his book *Revisioning Evangelical Theology* since its post-modern undertone might not lead to good biblical hermeneutics. However, Grenz's point about the influence of culture on the theological expressions of the Christian faith strikes a necessary balance between worldviews and theological discourse.

Veeneman (2017, 10) concurs that "the story of Christ tells us about God breaking into history in a particular time and place. Because we also live in a particular time and place, we must take that into consideration. Taking the time and place or location of the theologian into account will result in some theological questions being the same, while others will be different." Talking about the dynamic function of worldviews, Conn (1984, 15) remarks that they constitute "culturally oriented beliefs that take precedence over, and therefore serve as criteria for, other beliefs." Corroborating Conn, Hesselgrave (1991, 164–165) adds that worldviews provide people with the cognitive, affective, and evaluative foundations on which cultures are built. These definitions suggest that in cultural anthropology, worldviews are seen to be conceptual frameworks from which people give meaning to their worlds. An African Christian theology of missions is therefore a theology of missions that is articulated in the worldviews of the African people.

Today, the African continent is facing several issues including urbanization, the growing influence of African Traditional Religion, the threat of post-modern relativism, new theories on gender, and the threat of pandemics, just to name a few. These issues raise the question of the importance of an African Christian theology of missions that will be biblically sound, relevant, and practical. This article takes as a given that the task of developing the most appropriate theological framework to guide gospel proclamation and disciple-making on the continent in the twenty-first century is the responsibility of African theologians and missiologists.

The approach of this paper combines soteriology and symbolism—bearing the African worldview in mind. According to Peterson (2013, 272), Thomas Aquinas, the Christian theologian of the Middle Ages, defined salvation as an "intimate friendship with the triune God, which finds its ultimate expression in our beholding of God for eternity, that is, the 'beatific vision.'" The sense in which salvation is defined in Aquinas's soteriology suggests a relationship that culminates in a blissful life in God's presence. Citing a Church Father, Waldow (2019, 276) observes that "Origen provides a clear definition of 'redemption': it is a payment which is made to enemies in order to acquire the liberation of those whom they hold in captivity." This definition lays emphasis on Christ's redemptive work that made the relationship between a holy God and sinful humans possible. Hunsinger (2019, 247–248; 260–261) argues for a sense of wholeness in soteriology; meaning that salvation is past, present, and future. In other words, Christ's redemptive work took place in history, we are presently in communion with Christ as he sustains us despite a remnant of our old sinful nature, and Christ is coming back for us so that we can be delivered forever from the influence of sin. On his part, Yoakum (2021, 124) remarks that "holistic gospel ministry proclaims the truth

of end-time salvation even as it demonstrates how the kingdom of God has broken through to present-day realities through ministries of mercy." The implication of Yoakum's emphasis is that salvation goes beyond a relationship with God in view of a blissful life in the future, to incorporate God's works of restoration in the life of the believer now as well.

In Systematic Theology, the doctrine of salvation is another term for the doctrine of the application of redemption. In terms of their doctrinal orthodoxy, the definitions of salvation mentioned above emphasize the wonderful relationship between sinful human beings (graciously saved by Christ Jesus) with the Triune God. However, theologians differ among themselves concerning the other outcomes of salvation. This diversity in common orthodoxy becomes important for the present discussion. They highlight the importance of soteriology in contextual theologies of missions, by indicating that the implications of redemption may not be the same for people of all cultures.

Symbolism is another important factor in theology. Mulolwa (2018, 18) contends that "à travers les symboles s'expriment des vérités profondes: l'explication des phénomènes cosmiques, le fonctionnement du psychisme humain etc" (deep truths are expressed through symbols, including the explanation of cosmic phenomena and functioning of the human psyche). He goes on (29) to state that "le langage symbolique dans le Nouveau Testament a l'avantage de présenter une réalité rationnelle, en une image tirée de la vie ambiante" (in the New Testament, symbolic language has the advantage of presenting rational reality in the form of an image drawn from everyday life). In other words, symbols are used in the New Testament because they enable people to see what the speaker is saying. In agreement with this function of symbolic language, du Plessis (2016, 6) adds that "Symbols and metaphors evoke strong emotional, psychological and intellectual responses because they are the lenses through which people perceive reality." The power of symbolism can be explained by the fact that it crystallizes in the human psyche concepts that would have required several hours to communicate.

By way of conclusion on the method of this research, soteriology and symbolism provide a good theological and anthropological foundation for discussing the prospects for an African Christian theology of missions. This research might appear to contain generalizations from which specific missiological principles may be further investigated for in-depth analysis or applied with some degree of variability in the mission field. This point is conceded. However, the purpose of this research is to suggest a tentative framework for such enterprises. The scope of its application suggested in the present analysis is evangelism and discipleship, considered as the two-fold task of missions.

The first section of the paper discusses the biblical foundations for an African Christian theology of missions. The second examines the relevance of the African worldview for this enterprise. The third section discusses the features of what should be considered a biblical theology of missions for Africans. The last section highlights some points of application of this African Christian theology of missions.

2. Biblical Foundations

The scholastic origin of theology as an academic discipline shows that the study of God is inseparable from its target, which is specific local cultures (Conn 1984, 217). Another way of putting it is to underline that God's Word is addressed to human beings within their cultural and historical contexts, and in languages they are familiar with. Two examples can serve as analogies pointing to the importance of an African theology of missions: the gospel traditions and the early Christian missions.

2.1 *Gospel traditions*

The theological formulations of the authors of the four gospels suggest varied approaches to Christology. Matthew traces Christ's roots back to Abraham (Matt 1:1–17). This arrangement of the material suggests an awareness of the Jewish audience, who equally traced their roots to Abraham. Luke traces Christ's genealogy from Adam (Luke 3:23–37) and addresses this gospel to "most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught" (Luke 1:3–4 ESV). Here, Jesus's genealogy comes after the account of his miraculous conception and birth. Carson and Moo (2005, 212) note that at that time, "the new and tiny Christian movement was competing with a welter of religious and philosophical alternatives in the Greco-Roman world." On the other hand, John's Gospel underlines the divine nature of Christ, while Mark emphasizes Jesus's miracles, to present Christ as "the good news of salvation" (186). Commenting on Christological pluralism, Péroukou (1995, 26) submits that this was unavoidable and, more importantly, necessary due to the variety of cultural settings and individual mentalities. Thus, differences in the presentation of Christology as it appears in the gospels have missiological intent.

2.2 *Early Christian missions*

Two major events in the early church can be mentioned shortly as illustrative of the importance of an African theology of missions. The first major conflict in the early church, while they were all still in Jerusalem, was linked to ethnicity. The Hellenistic Jews, that is Greek-speaking Jews, complained that their widows were neglected during the daily distribution of food (Acts 6:1). To address the problem, seven other leaders were chosen to minister to the concerned, while the Apostles continued their duty of the ministry of the Word and prayer (Acts 6:2–7). This election of a new spiritual leadership shows that the Apostles were able to think in a missiological manner, in order to tackle issues in the mission field without straying from the Scriptures. From the perspective of the Apostles (Hebraic Jews) who were chosen by Jesus Christ as the leaders of the newly established church, it was necessary to put in place a new leadership (Hellenistic Jews) that would address the ethnic crisis of this assembly. On this particular matter, the Apostles were able to blend spiritual authority that is grounded in the Bible and cross-cultural leadership skills.

Secondly, when it became obvious that God had given the Holy Spirit to non-Jews, the challenge facing the church was to decide whether the latter had to follow Jewish festivals and traditions. The Jerusalem Council was then convened to address this theological issue (Acts 15:1–6). It appears that this meeting was requested by Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:1–2). The aim was to be sure that missionaries were preaching the gospel accurately, and to contextualize this gospel for non-Jewish cultures. The main point in the agenda was the salvation and incorporation of non-Jews into the church (vv. 4–6). Having examined the Scriptures, the council arrived at two important resolutions: (1) salvation is God's free gift that cannot be earned through ceremonial laws (vv. 7–11), and (2) non-Jews who had believed the gospel had only to abstain from eating foods offered to idols, from sexual immorality, from eating the meat of strangled animals, and from consuming blood (Acts 15:19–29). As a result of this meeting, there was growth in the mission work among non-Jewish people: "So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily" (16:5 ESV). This move can be described today as a theological reflection in new missionary contexts.

3. The Importance of the African Worldview

Three components of the African culture will be used to highlight the relevance of the African worldview in the formulation of an African Christian theology of missions: African anthropology, African spirituality, and African ethics.

3.1 African anthropology

Africans conceive the human person as a whole being, including the body, soul, and mind. The concept of *orthokardia* (right love towards God and the neighbor), as expounded by Isaak (2016, 43), sheds some light on African anthropology. He underscores that to an African, the soul connotes the whole person, and not simply an invisible part of the person. He further remarks that this perception entails the rejection of any philosophical dualism between body and mind, as propounded in Western anthropology. While Western theology engages in complex and abstract scholastic speculations around dichotomy and trichotomy, the African worldview conceptualizes the human person in concrete terms—in terms of *wholeness*.

Another peculiarity of African cultures is the notion of personhood. Africans generally define personhood in terms of one's relationship with the community. Among the Yémba, a people group of West Cameroon, the term for a person is *Niŋnon*, which literally means "person in the human race." This designation suggests that every individual views themselves in relation to other individuals in society. This view of personhood is similar to what many people groups in Sub-Saharan Africa—especially in Rwanda, Burundi and South Africa—refer to as *Ubuntu*. Qangula (2019, 10) explains that "uBuntu involves caring, sharing, respect, compassion and ensures a happy and qualitative human community life in the spirit of family, communality, oneness, cooperation." *Ubuntu* is a Zulu and Xhosa term, as it appears in the writings of many scholars of South African origin. According to Mnyaka and Motlhabi (2005, 217), "Ubuntu is not only about human acts, it is about being, it is a disposition, and it concerns values that contribute to the well-being of others and of community." It can therefore be argued that in the worldview of Africans, personhood is perceived as the state of being a human among other human beings. This view of personhood also relates to African spirituality, which is discussed below.

3.2 African spirituality

African Traditional Religion (ATR) is marked by the belief in spiritual forces that allegedly affect the destiny of humans, for better or for worse. It is believed that certain substances contain a power that humans can tap into to help the community (Onunwa 2005, 143). The Cameroonian theologian and philosopher Kifon Bongmba (2001, 27) submits that among the Wimbum people of North-West Cameroon, there are two types of *tfu* (witchcraft). He uses the Limbum term *tfu yibi* (bad witchcraft) to refer to the secret powers some people in the community use to eat human flesh. The term *tfu yebu* (good witchcraft) is used by some particular people to supposedly unveil the activities of bad sorcerers (29). It is worth noting that because of this belief, Africans are often reluctant to renounce magical practices and charms. Many of them live in constant fear of negative spiritual forces. Even the COVID-19 pandemic was interpreted in some religious milieus as a spiritual attack, which should not be treated as a simple disease. In fact, religious leaders and self-proclaimed prophets give written imprecatory prayers, stickers, water, and other artifacts to their clients, supposedly to protect themselves against all spiritual contamination.

Another aspect of African spirituality is ancestral veneration. The longing of adherents of ATR is to attain the status of an ancestor. This prospect of becoming an ancestor is tantamount to salvation in the

religious system. It is believed that the departed ones can now serve as intermediaries between the Supreme Being and the living. Talking about this relationship between the living and the dead, the Cameroonian philosopher, Ela (1973, 19) affirms emphatically, "in Africa, the dead are part of the family. Offering one's dead a meal is a simple act of filial piety." This emphasis puts in place the link between personhood, community, and African spirituality as already mentioned above. Furthermore, it indicates to what extent ancestral veneration relates to soteriology in the African worldview.

The dream of practitioners of ATR is to become ancestors after their demise and continue in the spirit realm to relate with relatives through dreams and communal worship. In this sense, life as a whole is embedded in an eschatological world. McLean (2003, 66) is therefore right when he observes that, "Spiritually, it means that growth and fulfillment are earthly realities and have their epiphany in the present…." While many Christians tend to emphasize the afterlife as that blissful moment in God's presence, practitioners of ATR emphasize life as a whole. Mbiti (1986, 201) concurs that this celebration of life can be seen in "the large numbers of rituals, festivals and ceremonies which are carried out in African Religion." In a nutshell, African spirituality reflects people's desire to achieve wholeness.

3.3 African ethics

An exhaustive discussion of African ethics is beyond the scope of this paper. So, for the sake of concision, only marriage and procreation will be mentioned here as aspects of African ethics. In Africa, procreation is first of all a cultural issue. Howe et al. (2020, 187) assert that "Social concerns about death and legacy factor heavily in discussions of infertility in Zambia, where people often die young and unexpectedly." This is not typical of the Zambian cultures alone. Even among some tribes of West Cameroon, people who die without biological children are buried with a stone in their hand, as a means of exorcising the curse of childlessness from the community. In the same vein, Kofon (1992, 52) states that in the Bafut culture of North-West Cameroon, "people marry because they want to have children…. There is no marrying simply for personal fulfillment or for mutual pleasure of the spouses." Mbiti (1986, 81) clarifies that to most Africans, marriage and childbearing have spiritual implications because they enable people to "achieve something of the original immortality; and when they die, it is believed that their spirits continue to survive even if there is no special bliss for them in the hereafter." Mbiti's explanation substantiates the fact that African ethics is grounded in African spirituality.

Unlike in the West, Africans value childbearing above the need for a life-long partner and sexual pleasure. Kunhiyop (2008, 196) draws a parallel between this attitude and the Jewish context, where infertility was also feared. He further stresses the influence of such a view on Christianity: "Rather than endure the shame of infertility, people will go great lengths to try to conceive. Even Christians will consult witch doctors and all sorts of medicine men and women in an attempt to solve the problem, regardless of the cost." These cultural beliefs about marriage and childbearing require a theological response from missiologists and ministers of the gospel.

In a nutshell, in the African worldview, there seems to be a confluence between spirituality, anthropology, and ethics. These three areas of human life are believed to be subjected to forces that people have to reckon with. Thus, some Christians trust Christ for eternal salvation but maintain their magical practices as solutions to daily existential struggles. Referring to the Kenyan situation, Sesi (2009, 30) submits that "theologizing is weak and faith is maintained as a shallow expression of people's Christian identity." These realities suggest the need for an ongoing effort to develop biblical principles for greater missionary impact in Africa.

4. Features of an African Theology of Missions

4.1 Historical roots

As a start, this paper contends that African Christian theology and African Indigenous Churches (AICs) have made some attempts that are close to the theme under consideration. African Christian theology came as a reaction to three theological designs propounded by Western missionaries: conversion theology, church implantation theology (or *plantatio ecclesia*), and the theology of the local church. The proponents of the first design considered conversion and Christianization of "pagans" as the primary goal of the church. Those who advocated for the second design focused more on establishing Western churches in Africa; with no regard for the culture of the people. One of the first proponents of the third design is the Roman Catholic Church. Through Vatican II, it presents Christian witnessing and preaching in local churches, as the main purpose of the church (Mushete, 1979, 24–26).

Two major trends in African theology have challenged these three claims: the first trend, which is the liberal approach, was pioneered by African theologians like Idowu Bolaji (1962) and John Mbiti (1970). The conservative trend is represented by Byang Kato (1975; 1985). The former use ATR and cultures as standards and defining elements of theology (Mbiti 1971). The latter suspects his counterparts of syncretism and argues that the starting point for theology in Africa should the Bible, with culture being a vehicle for communicating biblical truths. He goes further to contend that African Christians and theologians are running the risk of drifting away from the supra-cultural truths of Scripture. The point of agreement between these two strands of African Christian theology is their commitment to addressing the gaps left by a sort of Eurocentric theology that seemed to have little regard for the realities of the African peoples. Their lack of unanimity was at the level of methodology.

From the preceding, it seems obvious that African Christian theology aims to enable Africans to understand divine revelation in the context of their worldview. Although some of its discussions touch on certain concerns of an African Christian theology of missions propounded here, the two are different. The latter focuses primarily on mission practice, and in that light, has more commonalities with the orientation of African Indigenous Churches (AICs), which this analysis now turns to.

Founders of AICs were mostly leaders who did not conceptualize missionary models or theological designs but focused more on the actual practice of missions. Some of their concerns are remarkably similar to the preoccupations of this research. Although Tippet (1987, 200) described these churches as sects or syncretistic groups, noting their departure from biblical and historic Christianity, he did acknowledge that their founders were motivated by the desire to fill the cultural void left by Western missionaries who preached the gospel in modern Africa. On the other hand, African scholars argued that Europeans' disregard for African cultures and religion, and their ignorance of African psychology made this development inevitable (Nmah 2010, 485). AICs incorporate elements of African cultures such as emphasis on prophecy, healing, and sometimes the adoption of polygyny.

In Cameroon, many of their practices such as laying hands on people to declare blessings, or raising up hands and praying aloud during church gatherings are familiar to many Africans. In addition to this symbolism borrowed from the indigenous religions of Cameroon, the spontaneity that members of AICs exhibit in prayers is a feature of African prayer. African advocates of AICs consider these practices as a positive development in African Christianity (Ositelu 2002, 16–26). Although this optimism

can hardly be endorsed in an absolute sense, AICs exemplify useful missionary principles. They corroborate the fact that "we cannot avoid a serious engagement with the religious and spiritual issues which African traditional religions raise for us; since they form the cultural background of the Christian faith of most African Christians" (Bediako 1996, 31).

At this point, it can be said that while African Christian theology advocates for a Jesus who resembles Africans, AICs want an African church. More missiological in focus, the current research directs attention to the importance of an African Christian theology of missions in the fulfillment of the Great Commission for the transformation and eternal salvation of Africans. As has already been pointed out, the research is concerned with the theological trends discussed above, especially regarding the cultural distance between Western theology and African realities. However, it has different presuppositions, and it employs a different methodology. The result of this theological investigation is a framework for a contextual theology of missions for twenty-first-century Africans that will be both biblical and culturally relevant.

4.2 A contextual biblical theology of missions

The Bible, the worldview of Africans, and historical precedents suggest the need for an African Christian theology of missions that will be Christ-centered, and sensitive to the particular questions that twenty-first-century Africans ask in their own contexts. The main prospect of this contextual theology of missions is that it will be mindful of the global communion of believers in Christ that has been called, in the Reformed tradition, the universal Church while maintaining the fragrance of African cultures. The highlights of this theology of missions are outlined below. It is characterized by an indigenized theology, a functional Christology, and a relational Christology.

4.2.1 Indigenized theology

The genesis of the concept of indigenization in theology is often associated with the indigenous theology of Mar Thomas, former Director of the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society (Hesselgrave and Rommen 1989, 73). He reportedly argued for an Indian Christian theology that "must recognize God's past and present workings in the Hindu renaissance and in the incursion of secularism in India and work for the realization of his future purpose" (74). The orientation of Thomas's theology seems to be anchored on religious pluralism, which defeats the very purpose of missions. In the sense of this research, however, an indigenized theology incorporates biblical teachings that address Africans' preoccupations with salvation. It expresses theological concepts using popular language including symbolism, which is a familiar way of communicating spiritual realities in ATR. An indigenized theology presented as a feature of African Christian theology of missions also seeks to respond to questions specific to the African worldview like preoccupation with the spirit world, divine healing, welfare, marriage, childbearing, and pandemics as genuine concerns.

In this way of theologizing, abstract theological concepts are translated into symbols that project into the mind of African Christians and religious seekers the mysteries of God's relationship with humans through Christ. A few examples in the New Testament corroborate this thought. Jesus uses the language of the kingdom to depict the relationship between God and believers. He taught and preached that the Kingdom of God (Mark 4) or Kingdom of Heavens (Matt 7) is God's dwelling among his people. Entering that kingdom was another term for salvation, which he also described as "eternal life" (John 3:16). In Matthew 13, Jesus uses a series of images in parables to refer to this kingdom including the

mustard seed, the yeast, and the hidden treasure. Parables were images taken from everyday life to point to spiritual realities. Jesus Christ offered an eloquent illustration of the type of indigenized theology that is propounded in this analysis.

4.2.2 Functional Christology

Functional Christology is a description of Christ that emphasizes his works rather than his nature and person in the Godhead. Folarin (2003, 302–303) distinguishes three types of Christology: the *kenosis* Christology that stresses the emptying of Christ of divine attributes prior to incarnation, which is considered a heresy; the *skenosis* Christology that emphasizes the correlation between God in-dwelling humanity in Christ Jesus and Jesus's obedience to the Father in his humanity without losing his divinity; and functional Christology that stresses the works of Christ. The author argues for complementarity rather than exclusiveness between an ontological and a functional Christology. He suggests that Christ should be known both as God who became man and as the mighty liberator and healer (304). However, it can suffice to note that African Christians hardly refute Christ's divinity. The spiritual crisis that African Christians often face relates to a faulty understanding of what Christ can do in the lives of people who have put their trust in him.

This author has met only a few Africans in Cameroon (his native country) and in Nigeria (the neighboring country) who believed that the miracles of Jesus ended with the last Apostles. These few had in common the fact that they were seminary graduates who were trained by European missionaries. A typical African has little difficulty believing that Christ is God. Consequently, he or she expects Christ to act as God in the life of his followers. It is useful to note that functional Christology provides a biblical backing for African Christians to engage in spiritual warfare against Satan and his demons, and against witches and wizards who use evil spirits to torment people and entire communities. The favorite lyrics of many African Christians in the midst of these existential crises would be "Because He [Christ] lives, I can face tomorrow! Because He lives, all fear is gone" (Gaither and Gaither 1971). Emphasizing the works of Christ in the life of believers strengthens hope in the midst of uncertainty and produces steadfastness amidst the difficult journey of the Christian faith.

The imagery in the lyrics of the aforementioned song expresses people's conviction about Christ's ability to *do*; rather than just being there as Lord, Savior, and God in the life of Christians. Such conceptualizations as ontological Christology and functional Christology are useful in theological language for the sake of clarity and precision. In practice, however, they are not a true reflection of the African worldview which, as already argued, is more holistic. In real life, people hardly isolate *being* from *doing*. For example, the Christian theologian is perceived by the public as first of all a man of God or a woman of God. As a matter of fact, any immoral behavior jeopardizes one's identity as a theologian. The functional Christology argued for in this research is embedded in Christ's nature as God-Man.

4.2.3 Relational Christology

The concept of relational Christology draws from Péroukou (1995), although he does not use this particular term. He reports his uncle's answer concerning Christology as follows:

> In Uncle's statement, the initial Christological datum bears less on the being of Jesus Christ as such (sometimes called his 'nature' or his 'person') than on the kind of relationship that his coming establishes with the human being for the 'destiny' of that human being. In this

> perspective, we are dealing not with titles, but rather with a type of relation, function, or activity of Jesus Christ. (Péroukou 1995, 24–25)

Based on this answer, the author posits that many professing Christians revert to magic and sorcery because they have difficulty understanding the person of Christ. He suggests a Christology that has relationship as the foundation, as a way of overcoming the pitfalls of faulty Christologies, or a form of Christology that emphasizes only the nature or the deeds of Christ (25–26).

The relational Christology propounded in this paper stresses Christ's lordship as the main relationship between Christ and believers. This lordship emphasizes Christ's sovereignty. The term for Lord among the Yémba of West-Cameroon is *Ndi* meaning "Owner." This research argues that the Lordship of Christ is the basis for our union with Christ. Our union with Christ is understood to mean an ongoing relationship with God through Christ. Paul makes the following injunction to Christians: "So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Rom 6:11 ESV). This privileged relationship is the evidence of salvation and the ground for Christ's works in the life of believers. Gaffin (2016, 283) is therefore correct when he affirms that, "Without union, the benefits that flow from it (i.e., salvation) are otherwise non-existent or irrelevant." Without this emphasis on union with Christ, salvation may look like mere religious emotionalism to many African converts from ATR.

In the Bamileke communities of Cameroon, just like in many other ethnic groups in Africa, people withdraw their allegiance from a particular deity only to submit to the lordship of another deity. It becomes biblically and contextually relevant to emphasize Christ's lordship in relation to the salvation experience in Africa. As a matter of fact, it is when Christ is acknowledged as Lord that he can then become the husband to African single women and widows. This symbolism is backed up by the gospel, where Jesus puts himself forward as the bridegroom to all his followers, designated collectively as the bride (Mark 2:19–20; John 3:29–30). The same figurative language is echoed in Ephesians 5:22–28, where marriage is presented as the picture of that eternal relationship between Christ and the Church. In John 18:21–29, the terms *bridegroom* and *bride* are used figuratively to refer to Jesus and the Church, respectively. Relational Christology reflects the African worldview in which an individual is "existentially a being-in-relation" (Nihinlola 2018, 79).

The features of African Christian theology of missions indicate that it takes biblical authority as the basis for theological reflection. It takes biblical authority as the basis for theological reflection and engages the Bible and the worldview of Africans to suggest contextual principles for doing missions in contemporary Africa. As such, it goes beyond the quest for identity or originality, to propose biblical models for evangelism and discipleship in context. In this theology of missions, the human person is seen both as a spiritual being and a person of feelings in search of genuine fulfillment and happiness in this life and in the afterlife.

5. Areas of Application

The discussions in the previous sections have outlined a theological framework for an approach to missions that will address the realities of Africans. However, missiology is tested in the mission field through praxis. Two areas of application for an African Christian theology of missions are suggested in this research: evangelism and discipleship. These two areas constitute the subject matter of the section below.

5.1 Application to evangelism

It was explained above that relational Christology propounded in this theological discussion emphasizes the relationship between Christ and believers. This suggests that in evangelism, the preacher or teacher will present the need for commitment to Christ as a covenantal relationship. This methodology seems more relevant and biblically grounded than the idea of *accepting* Christ into one's heart. The expression "accept Christ in your heart" that many evangelists use today is borrowed from evangelistic materials that were contextualized in the West. During our family Bible study, my ten-year-old son asked me a question about the surgeon's ability to *remove* Jesus Christ from somebody's heart and bring him back after the operation. This question echoes the struggle faced by many Africans in understanding some of these popular expressions that have no reference in their worldview.

On the other hand, relational Christology emphasizes lordship as the all-encompassing relationship that Christ has with believers. Correspondingly, contextual evangelism that is faithful to this scriptural truth will present Jesus Christ as the only one who reigns over all. Therefore, the question addressed to the respondents would not be "who wants to surrender his (or her) life to Christ?" This sounds like a mimic of the Western pattern of evangelism that matches the individualistic worldview of Europe and America. The question of the African preacher would rather be "who wants Jesus Christ to reign in his or her life?"

Then the gospel will be heralded as the good news that brings significant change in the life of individuals and communities. Putting it another way, it is necessary for the respondents to understand other implications of salvation like deliverance from witchcraft, demons, and the power of curses for a fruitful life as exemplary and godly citizens. Ijatuyi-Morphé (2011, 597–600) underlines the necessity to include in religious discourse what Africans are saved *for*, instead of merely emphasizing what they are saved *from*. This approach can help solve the problem of dual allegiance.

One strategy of gospel proclamation that resonates with the Ubuntu spirit is for the church to operate as a community of grace and mercy through genuine acts of compassion. In practice, it means that Christians bear witness to Christ's salvation by sharing the good news while sharing the rich blessings of Christ in terms of love, care, and generosity. It will seem a contradiction for onlookers that someone shares the good news of Jesus but is insensitive to the physical needs of their neighbor. Jesus made the following statement about the crowd who had just listened to his message: "I am unwilling to send them away hungry, lest they faint on the way" (Matt 15:32 ESV). This calls for the church to become a family of refuge for the homeless and rejected. As a witnessing community, African Christians need to show love towards one another and towards their neighbors and translate this love into acts of generosity. This is even more acute in a context where people live in fear of being excluded because of their social status or because of existential crises. COVID-19 was also a big isolating factor. The paper now turns to the second area of application of this theological framework.

5.2 Application to Christian discipleship

The importance of symbols advocated for in this theological framework cannot be overstated. They are useful for the communication of religious knowledge. In discipleship, they will be used to express some major doctrines of the Christian faith by integrating appropriate analogies drawn from culture, songs, and proverbs. The missionary will break down the complex (and somehow abstract) language of scholasticism into concrete images through the use of symbols, to equip disciples who can confidently

share the hope that they have in Christ (1 Pet 3:15) and make other disciples of Christ. The term *grassroots reflections* (Oyinloye 2003, 265–268) has been used to refer to the outcome of this method of discipleship. Another term that seems appropriate is *grassroots theology*. This can be produced by the masses that have been properly discipled and are able to express their faith in an accessible manner.

In keeping with the contemporary realities of African societies, discipleship will be orientated towards transformation in all spheres of life. Accordingly, the teaching on the implications of redemption will include deliverance from negative spiritual influences and curses and the responsibility of every Christian to work for the development of the community and country. This entails the need for a curriculum that enhances both spiritual and social transformation. Tienou (1997, 96) seems to concur with this missional approach to discipleship when he submits that "Christian mission in Africa will need to be more than Christian activism if it is to contribute to make qualitative and permanent impact on African Christianity." Adeyemo (2009, 95–121) adds that for this holistic transformation to take place, the church has to overcome the dichotomy between the sacred and the secular and keep her prophetic voice and priestly role, as well as her kingly function while pursuing godliness and fruitfulness, with excellence, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The impact of functional Christology on discipleship has been mentioned above, especially concerning the equipping of Christians to affirm Christ's supremacy over demons and all the powers of darkness. Believers should trust Jesus's good hand in their pursuit of godliness and excellence. On the other hand, relational Christology becomes a biblical and contextual tool for giving hope to single or childless men and women. They will find comfort in knowing, for example, that Jesus is the *Groom* of the Church. As such, he has brought about a new humanity (children of God born of the Spirit; John 1:12–13), and a new kind of parenthood (which is the ability to make children of God through the seed of the gospel; Col 1:6).

Relational Christology also suggests the importance of teaching about salvation as a communal experience. Mantilus (1989, 45) states that community life in the African worldview includes the living and the dead since it "comes from the consciousness of continuity with the departed who left the communal legacy which keeps everybody alive." African Christians who have lost their loved ones due to COVID-19, other diseases, aging, or other factors of the broken world, need some assurance that will help them cope with the loss. To address this felt need, discipleship should include eschatology that stresses the beauty of the large family of God's people that includes all those who have preceded their fellow brothers and sisters in God's presence. Applied to soteriology, it stresses the communal implication of individual salvation. This second emphasis is reflected in Peter's sermon at Pentecost when he stressed that as a reward of faith in Christ, salvation is God's promise "for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself" (Acts 2:39 ESV). This teaching of eschatology has the potential to provide a biblical and missiological response to ancestor veneration.

6. Conclusion

In the final analysis, it appears that an African Christian theology of missions provides a biblical orientation for presenting the gospel as the good news that brings about salvation and beneficial changes in all areas of human life. In this respect, soteriology includes not only liberation from the power of sin and hell, but also deliverance from the harmful influence of curses and the spirit world on people's lives. Symbolism and metaphors play a central role in this theology of missions, to impart biblical truths and beliefs in the hearts and minds of the people. Consequently,

African theologians play a pivotal role in this enterprise, because they best understand the realities of their contexts. This theology has the potential of causing the church to blend doctrine, spirituality, and involvement in the affairs of the community. This contextual theology of missions stresses a holistic approach to Christian missions, whereby the human person is looked upon as a unified whole within the community, where the church exists as the sign of God's *shalom*.

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