

# **The notion of independence and rendering of service to the African Independent/Indigenous Churches.**

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## **Abstract**

As a participant observer within the African Churches, the author has observed that these churches are not only a challenge to the established churches but also to the established and non established theological institution.

The future Bill of Human Rights of South Africa will include a clause to the effect that all religions are equal. Thus the African Independent/Indigenous Churches have an important role to play in this regard in terms of their numbers, unfortunately weak in quality. Hence, the author makes an appeal to theological institutions to help these churches.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

'How can we sing a song to the Lord in a foreign land' – in a foreign language and a foreign thought? This is a basic question that is being asked by the African Independent/Indigenous Churches. They wish to serve the Lord in their own situation, for nothing less than the future of the church – even more the kingdom of God – in Africa is at stake.

The concern of these churches is to create a synthesis between African culture and Christianity, but in an informal way. They also attempt to use African concepts and African ethos as a vehicle for the communication of the Gospel in an African

context. They are engaged in a massive attempt to synthesize the Apostolic kerygma with authentic African insight, based on the Biblical criteria from a vernacular translation of the Scriptures.

The idea or notion of 'independence' is misleading, if not confusing, for these churches were founded by Africans for Africans. It was a spontaneous movement responding to the needs of the Africans, especially in the area of worship, and in particular – divine healing. They generally call themselves *Amabandla ama-Afrika*, *Dikereke tsa ma-Afrika*, meaning African churches; or *Ikonzo zabantu*, *Dikereke tsa batho*. Literally this means the churches of the people; or *Ikonzo zomoya*, *Dikereke tsa moya*, meaning spiritual churches. They have an all-African membership as well as an all-African leadership. They differ widely in style, organization and attitude, just as they vary in size of membership.

For the sake of the classification of these churches as 'Independent' or 'Indigenous', I shall outline the notion or idea of independence, the rendering of service to these churches, community development and the future of these churches.

## 2. THE NOTION OF INDEPENDENCE

The term 'independence' probably first appeared in print in an address in Johannesburg in 1904, to the first General Missionary Conference, where the sub-title 'Independence – a recent development' was used. 'Independence' in ecclesiastical usage implies that the individual congregation or church is an autonomous and egalitarian society free from any external ecclesiastical control (Barret 1968:49).

The notion of independence broadly means 'not under the control of anybody else; not having to rely on somebody/something'. May I say at the outset that independence does not mean isolation or self-sufficiency for, in the past few decades, we have come to realize the increasing ease with which we come into contact with one another all over the world. Hence there is an increasing interest in the question of ecumenics. Independence or freedom means responsibility, accountability and obeying the powers that be.

Both the Eastern Orthodox and the Western Latin halves of Christendom had been drifting apart long before the breach became permanently open in 1054, due to doctrinal controversies, and political and cultural differences (Biggs 1965:73). The second major schism was that the Protestant Churches and the Roman Catholic Church during the sixteenth century. The Reformation movement was divided within itself, and thus failed to present a solid front against the Roman Catholic Church. The influence of Calvin and Zwingli proved troublesome, especially in regard to the doctrine of the Lord's Supper, while theological discussion revolving around detai-

led credal statements not only divided scholars but tended to take the place of the living faith of earlier days. This scholasticism, with its cold and barren atmosphere, was to lead in the next century to one reaction in the form of pietism, and another in the form of rationalism (Biggs 1965:135). The Roman Catholic Church and Eastern Orthodox Churches remained fairly intact but the Protestant Churches divided and subdivided in an unprecedented way.

Furthermore a minor schism occurred within the Anglican church whereby the separatists saw the process of reforming this church from within as long and tedious, if not entirely hopeless. This group, therefore separated from the Anglican church and became known as Separatists or Dissenters. In the matter of church government they believed that each local church or congregation was complete within itself, but also that no church should have anything to say about any other church; they believed that all local churches should be independent of each other. These churches were called Congregationalist or Independent (Kuiper 1984:251).

As far back as 1854, Henry Venn, the prescient secretary of the Church Missionary Society in London, had spoken in terms of the aim of mission being the calling into existence of self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating churches, and of the euthanasia of a mission. Later experience has placed many question-marks against Henry Venn's formulation. But the former Bishop of Uganda, A R Turker (1890-1908), drew very much nearer to the true solution of the problem. He envisaged a church in which an African and a foreigner would work together in true brotherhood and on the basis of genuine equality (Neill 1980:260).

The question of an independent indigenous ministry in Africa can no longer be ignored or shelved hence we see the African Independent/Indigenous Churches rising in great numbers in the twentieth century. It seems that most of the missionaries in the nineteenth century never had a vision of an independent indigenous church in Africa; perhaps they expected to govern the church in Africa for ever. Therefore the leaders of the African Independent/Indigenous Churches took it upon themselves to Africanize the church because the missionaries had failed to do so. The purpose of Africanization is not the abandonment of Christocentric worship in its essential aspects, but it is an expression or ordering of the essential aspects of Christian worship, so that the African worshipper can understand and be deeply moved as he or she worships.

### **3. RENDERING OF SERVICE TO THE AFRICAN INDEPENDENT/INDIGENOUS CHURCHES.**

Jesus Christ is the basis for our ministry. He came, not to be served, but to serve

(Mk 10:45). His body (the church) continues his ministry. And for this ministry of Jesus, Hans Küng (1972:39) says, no other word can be used than that 'completely ordinary, non-religious word with somewhat humble flavour that suggests no connotation of officialdom, authority, domination, position of dignity or power – the word *diakonia*, service (more exactly, service at table). Jesus Christ washed the feet of his disciples, as a servant, and encouraged his disciples to do the same (Jn 13:1-20). It was he who 'gave gifts to mankind'. He appointed some to be Apostles, others to be Prophets, others to be Evangelists, others to be Pastors and Teachers. He did this to prepare all God's people for the work of his service, in order to build up his body (Eph 4:11-12).

To be a servant means to come nearer to your fellow, and nurture his or her ability to share in or take responsibility for maintain himself or herself. The servant should be able to extend the ability of a peer to cope with his or her situation for example by being the eyes, ears hand and mind of the unconscious. Furthermore, it means a servant should be understanding, useful, unselfish, self-sacrificing, self-disciplined, self-assured, supportive and sustaining the one he or she serves.

If one is willing to accept the call (vocation) of a servant, he or she must count the cost, for Christ warned against failure to count the cost (Lk 14:25-33), for it has become too fashionable for men and women to move in and out of ministry at will. Moreover, among those who continue in pastoral work, there is often too much looking back after having put one's hand to the plow. Earlier missionaries laboured in Africa under the assumption that Africans were without any religion, education or culture, and that Africans provided a virgin field in which they could sow the seeds of Christianity and Western civilization. Such notions must be put aside by anyone wishing to serve the African Independent/Indigenous Churches.

The African Independent/Indigenous Churches are like a motor vehicle which is not serviced. It should be taken to a garage for service, repairs, fuel and oil; it was not meant to stand in a garage, but to be on the road by day. In similar vein these churches and their leaders should not 'park' themselves in their separate churches all the time but brave the dirt roads of everyday life for the greater part of their available time.

Any established Christian institution is welcome to render service to the African Independent/Indigenous Churches, who will take them very seriously. They should be prepared to offer elementary theological education – for example, knowledge of the Bible and church history, in particular the history of the African Independent/Indigenous Churches. Furthermore, they should be prepared to identify themselves with Africans and at the same time respect the indigenous African culture and view of life.

These churches are looking for a theology born in Africa – through the African and for the people of Africa – which will fully address the fears and hopes of its people, for example the problems of witchcraft and ancestors. They further believe that their experience should be part and parcel of the normal life of all Christians in all the nations today. It is their greatest desire therefore, to see all the supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit renewed and properly functioning in the lives of contemporary Christians.

What an African needs is a theology which is at the same time true to the Scriptures and relevant for Africa. It should be one hundred percent Biblical and yet fully address the needs and problems of the African. It should be founded in God's revelation, but one should be able to clearly hear Christ talking to one directly, within one's specific situation.

Another solution is that theological education should penetrate to the foundation, the hard rock of African culture. It is only when we have taken the traditional view of life and religion seriously, and have indicated to the African how the gospel can answer to his fundamental religious and cultural questions that we will be able to have a truly authentic African Christianity which addresses the whole of one's being.

All groups of people in society need leaders. The church is no exception to this rule. As a good quality of leadership is highly valued, much attention has been paid to the education of leaders in the various fields of life. Throughout the history of the church, the education of church leaders has been an important activity of the church. Whether at the ancient catechetical school at Alexandria, the monastic or cathedral schools of the Middle Ages or the nineteenth century teacher, education for the ministry in particular has been regarded as central to the life and witness of the church. The higher the quality of church leaders, including the pastors, the better will members be equipped for their witness and the upbuilding of the church. Theological education 'is the process of equipping men and women to be equippers of the entire people of God' (Zorn 1975:X).

It should be recognized, however, that natural leadership, which is often the only skill found in these churches is not enough. Methods to make it effective can be taught, and the mistakes that can spoil it can also be pointed out. These churches are desperately in need of a theological education, for they realize its value and indispensibility. In addition, according to Daneel, 'one of the most profound motives for aspiring for theological education is the hope that it will earn them respect and recognition from the historical churches' (Daneel 1987:163).

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#### 4. COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

The African Independent/Indigenous Churches exist as churches of the poor. The term 'poverty' in the New Testament is distinguished from need (*chreia*) without being poor (*ptochos*). All people have needs and are indebted to others for help. The needs may be short-term or long-term. They may be slight or desperate. They may be physical or spiritual. As physical they are usually temporal. One may be sick today and, if well cared for, healthy tomorrow. It was need in this immediate sense that the apostles met with the contributions of the believers in the earliest church (Ac 4:35), as spiritual needs are always permanent.

Poverty has more than one form. It usually has an economic component. The physical means of survival are in short supply; to find them is a continual struggle. The Hebrew word *ebyon*, translated sometimes as 'poor' and sometimes as 'needy', expresses this. But it is the institutionalization of this condition in a system which enforces and intensifies economic need that gives poverty its social character; for this the Hebrew word *ani* has the connotation of being victimized or oppressed. The third dimension of poverty is rooted not in external circumstances but in the person: a weakness, disability and incapacity to carry the full burden of life is connoted by the Hebrew word *dal*.

The action of the church in the world is at one and the same time 'mission' and 'service'. The two cannot be separated at any time without falsifying both. It is a reality of God's economy which is at issue, the economy by which the churches live and which is intended for the world.

A sharing of resources takes place today in the African Churches as something deriving from African tradition, though the reasons behind it and its meaning may be outside the experience of the faithful. Its development and application, however, vary within the various contemporary African church communities. It does not everywhere have the same importance or dynamism. In those churches which are the direct product of Western Christian missionary effort and where Westernization has gone hand in glove with this effort, the practice of sharing is secondary to the subsistence and development available to them through the parent organization, despite the quest for indigenization or inculturation; outside aid is also very evidently significant.

It is in the African Independent/Indigenous Churches that sharing of resources is really organized on a more or less systematic institutional basis, to ensure not only subsistence but also equipping needs. Joy in giving is great and it is compounded by the enthusiasm and sense of fellowship which binds members of the congregation together and, above all, by the awareness of responding to an appeal of the church and of the authority who is present with them and who recognizes each of the faith-

ful givers. They will give several times during a single night vigil and various groups will compete, each undertaking to give more and making every effort to do so through the repeated contribution of their members. At the end of a night vigil, totals are counted and the results are announced to the congregation, with congratulations to the groups achieving the highest figures.

It is clear that the economic environment of black communities in South Africa is indeed grim with its rapidly increasing unemployment and social disintegration. Against this development the African Independent/Indigenous Churches stand as a positive factor in their attempts to withstand the dislocating influences on individuals, families and communities. The survey undertaken by the Centre for Social and Development Studies at the University of Natal and the Research Unit on African Independent/Indigenous Churches at the University of Zululand reached the conclusion that the African Independent/Indigenous Churches 'are involved in assisting their members towards a better standard of living through healing improvement, careful budgeting, time management and through their support of stable family life in general, often in the face of great difficulties in keeping a family together' (Evans & Cross 1992; Bekker & Oosthuizen 1992:1).

Sharing of resources or redistribution and reciprocity is the African traditional political economy. This essentially embraces both solidarity and the principle of community. Consequently it can be said that Africans redistribute their products and in so doing create structures of productive reciprocity which are themselves in turn a motivation for production. It is evident that for both the African Independent/Indigenous Churches and the established churches, community upliftment is a preferred goal for church activity. A holistic approach to development is the only way forward.

## **5. THE FUTURE OF THE AFRICAN INDEPENDENT/INDIGENOUS CHURCHES.**

The African Independent/Indigenous Churches can no longer be regarded as bridges back to traditional religion. They must rather be seen as churches in the making, as bridges to the future for a truly indigenous Christianity in Africa (Kailing 1988:40). These churches face the future with full confidence in the Lord and they are ready and willing to increasingly fulfil their calling in this part of the world.

It is very clear that these churches have challenged the theological schools or Bible Colleges in South Africa to take traditional African values more seriously. These schools or colleges should also acknowledge the fact that the spiritual world for an African is real and not a creation of the mind. Furthermore they must allow

the gospel to take root in African culture because to ignore African culture is to ignore an important part of theology. The situation which is emerging in South Africa demands that a start should be made in this direction, at least in the field of worship. It is never too late for change.

Despite the negative criticism by the misinformed and uninformed, these churches are growing by leaps and bounds, in number and strength. According to Kritzinger (1992:11), 46% of the black population of South Africa belonged to the African Independent/Indigenous Churches in 1991. These churches offer spiritual and supernatural protection to their members through the help of prophets or spiritual leaders. Nobody can wish them away; they are here to stay in South Africa.

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