

Response

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Rev Clement Djedje is to be commended for a job well done. It is such a wonderful thing for him to raise relevant issues concerning the doctrine of holiness in Africa. Of particular significance is Djedje's articulation of how the aspects of African cultural and religious practices bear upon the message of entire sanctification.

If I were to summarize his article, I would say Rev Djedje is very much concerned about what scholars of the Theology of Contextualization frequently refer to as "syncretism". The meaning of this word has always attracted heated debates among concerned scholars, but this is not the time to go into that. However, to put it too simplistically, syncretism, in most evangelical circles, has invariably been understood as the blending of aspects of the gospel message with other religious and cultural beliefs, to the extent that the gospel becomes totally coloured or encapsulated by the receiving religion and culture. Even though syncretism can be understood neutrally as a sort of fifty-fifty inter-borrowing between two or more religious and cultural systems, evangelicals prefer the earlier explanation I have given, in which the gospel message is totally overwhelmed by the receiving context. This evangelical understanding, therefore, places syncretism diametrically opposite to contextualization. In other words, contextualization is a positive word while syncretism is negative.

In Djedje's article, I see a staunch evangelical, who wants the gospel message to transform culture and traditional religion. In this important respect, I agree with Djedje. It appears that some Africans never quite get over their former religious beliefs, including those cultural practices that are contrary to the message of the gospel in regard to entire sanctification. In some instances, especially in African independent churches, it is true that much of what they do is nothing more than a replication of their old beliefs. For example in my country Zimbabwe, we have seen situations where someone, who used to be a witchdoctor in the world, became a miracle healer, purportedly after being filled with the Holy Spirit.

This reminds me of an insight that my former college principal and professor, Dr Enoch Litswele, gave about the attitude people seemed to have towards the Holy Spirit in my country, which was evident in our worship services. He observed that whenever we started a worship service, the worship leader would encourage people to sing so vigorously “in order for the Holy Spirit to come.” If people were not cheerful in the service, they were chasing the Holy Spirit away, or rather, He would not show up. This attitude was a direct replication of our traditional religious practices. When our people gather for a ceremony to do rituals that invite the ancestral spirits to come, they begin by chanting in song and dance. If they do not do it properly, the spirits do not show up. It is through the vigorous chants, dances, songs and ululating that the spirit mediums are transported into the world of the spirits, paving the way for those spirits to possess them. The spirits can then deliver the message. Usually, the message is about protection from “evil” and good luck to the needy. Rev Djedje is therefore correct in attempting to warn evangelical Christians in the holiness tradition, to not duplicate these practices.

I beg to disagree with Djedje, however, on some points he raises in his relevant article. My main concern is on some sweeping statements he makes, and some seeming contradictions and some presumptions.

First, it is not clear how Djedje employs the word “church” in his article. Even though his is too short a theological treatise to pay attention to such scruples as defining special terms, etc., I think his use of the word church is too loose. It is especially so when we think of the sweeping statement he makes on the first paragraph, that, “The Church is neither a centre of charlatans nor a hospital.” This statement leads us to ask what church he is talking about? I submit: From an evangelistic and missional perspective, the church is very much like a hospital as much as it is full of charlatans. This simply means that the church is full of people who are at various stages of grace; some are sick, some are halfway recuperating, while others are well enough to be doctors. I think our goal is not to stop the church from being a hospital, but rather, to ensure that this hospital is still giving people the cure they need. In fact, I think the more people find a cure for their spiritual ailments, the more they come to this hospital.

Secondly, even though Djedje’s intention is to not let the Holy Spirit be equated with talismans, fetishes and so on, I think there is a need to

critically examine this African practice more, without undue biases. The African, like any other Christian in the whole world, desires to be protected from evil forces that endanger their lives. It has often been the case that, in trying to discredit the African's replication of their religious practices in Christianity, we go to the other extreme of emphasizing the Holy Spirit as one who cleanses from sin, but does not provide protection. I believe the message of the protecting power of the Holy Spirit is as much a message of holiness as the emphasis on entire sanctification. Is it not ironical though, that de-emphasizing the "protection aspect" does prevent African Christians from receiving the "second blessing" sooner?

Towards the end of his article, in a paragraph with the subtitle, "A Christianity of Miracles," I am not sure what Djedje is trying to do. Is he trying to merely draw analogies between Christian exorcisms and those that are found in African traditional religions, or is he trying to invalidate Christian exorcisms because they have duplications outside Christianity? Judging from the tenor of his whole essay, I think Djedje is deliberately prejudiced against everything found in African traditional practices. I believe that, if there is anything that needs to be emphasized and practiced in our churches as much as holiness and entire sanctification, it is the exorcism of demons.

In conclusion, I need to point out that the Christian concern against syncretism as demonstrated in Djedje's paper will forever be legitimate and relevant. In Romans 12:2, Paul says, "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind...." Djedje's paper raises very important issues in regard to the transformation of our lives by the gospel. My recommendation is that this article should be discussed in light of the meaning of the Incarnation, so that, while we deal with issues of syncretism, we will not forget that the gospel message needs to be truly contextualized. The Incarnation (the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us – John 1:14) helps us to ask, "How would Jesus preach the gospel to Africans?" Entire sanctification, therefore, does not just need to be defined by Orton Wiley⁷⁵, but by Africans who have come to know what it is really like, first hand.

⁷⁵ Djedje, Rev Yao Clement. "Gifts or Holiness: An Attempt to Explain the Difficulties of Proclaiming the Doctrine of Entire Sanctification in Black Africa, Côte d'Ivoire as a Case Study" pg 2