

The Need for the Biblical World and Life View to Reform African Culture

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Religious pluralism is endemic to African traditional religion (ATR). It animates the social and cultural conditions not only of African religion but also of many cultural forms throughout the continent. More specifically, religious pluralism is having a direct effect on the ways in which Christianity is understood and practiced in most areas of Africa. It is the worldview of religious pluralism that must be challenged in order for biblical Christianity to emerge and take hold of Africa. This challenge cannot be addressed by a narrow evangelistic model but by a rigorous biblical theology focused on the teaching of the Christian world and life view. With the firm rooting of biblical theology, the Christian worldview can supplant the prevailing pluralistic worldview of ATR. Adding more converts into a system that is systemically pluralistic in its understanding of life is not helpful. Contrary to the tenants of religious pluralism (all roads lead to God) there is need for a wholesale renaissance in many African's thinking that can provide fertile soil for the growth of a true understanding of the uniqueness of Christ and of his salvation and transform African life.

What are the particular ramifications of religious pluralism in African nations struggling to define an African expression of Christianity? How can biblical Christianity address the problem of religious pluralism and help bring true and lasting reformation to Africa? I will address these questions under three headings: 1) The problem of African religious pluralism; 2) The five sources of religious pluralism in Africa; 3) The Christian answer for African religious pluralism.

1. The Problem of African Religious Pluralism

Man is by nature a creature with great religious interest (Rom 1:20). This interest seems to be on the incline globally. I am reminded of my own perspective that the problem in Europe is not one of postmodern thought, if in fact we are to define “postmodern” as a mindset in direct opposition to religion. Rather, the postmodern mind in Europe is increasingly open to the practice of spirituality on a number of different levels. Europe may be post-Christian but it is not post-religious. Far from being secular and anti-religion the future world is one in which hyper- religious movements will flourish. A challenge to the Church is to ward off the trend toward a new world order that tackles international trade agreements, arms reduction and innovative planetary politics according to a global ethic entrenched in syncretistic religion.

What precisely is religious pluralism? P. J. Buys offers a straightforward definition. “In order to create this new god that is acceptable as widely as possible, religious pluralism in its essence claims that there is not one truth, but that truth is different for every person and therefore all truths should be accepted.”¹ Buys further observes, “Promoters of pluralism say it is applicable in all situations, including religion. Pluralism to them is an absolute, and anyone, such as Jesus, who is so narrow-minded as to say his religion is the only way to God, is convicted of intolerance”²

Long before Europe dabbled in the fusing of various gods and goddesses, and likely coterminous with the ancient Greek predilection toward the same, African tribal culture was already well-established in syncretistic religious pluralism. There are some startling statistics regarding the fabric of contemporary religious pluralism in its spread across the

¹ P. J. Buys, “A Christian Reformed perspective on religious pluralism in Africa – Response to the paper of Prof. JM Vorster.” 20).

² Ibid.

African continent. John S. Pobee, of the World Council of Churches in Geneva, expresses the opinion that we can discern at least five sets of religious pluralism in Africa.

First, in some areas Islam dominates—as in Senegal (91%), Mali (80%), Sudan (73%), and the Gambia (84%). Second, in other areas Christianity dominates—as in Ghana (62%), Kenya (73%), the Uganda (78.3%), Republic of South Africa (79.2%), Namibia (96.3%), and Zimbabwe (58%). Third, in still other areas, traditional religions have an edge on others—as in Burkina Faso (Upper Volta), with traditional religions (44.8%), Muslims (43%), and Christians (12.2%). Forth, in areas like Nigeria Christians and Muslim are about equal in numbers... To be fully comprehensive, I would like to add a fifth scenario where the state declares itself to be atheist, as in the case of Ethiopia under Mengistu Haile Mariam.³

Buys provides a condensed analysis as to why so many sects flourish in Arica. These different scenarios have different dynamics in relationships, which dynamics are also very much determined by non-religious factors such as inherited power structures and misperceptions. For example, sometimes what is denounced as religious discrimination may well be an attempt to correct injustices done in earlier times, and people, especially the beneficiaries, not wishing to see a change in the status quo. All these factors have strong influence on religious pluralism and in some places make it desirable and easily acceptable.⁴

³ John S. Pobee, "Africa's Search for Religious Human Rights Through Returning to the Wells of Living Water," in *Religious Human Rights in Global Perspective: Legal Perspective*. John Witte, Jr. & Johan D. van der Vyver eds., 1996. (Boston, London: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1996), 396.

⁴ Buys, 21

1.1 War and poverty: a turning toward a religious solution

It is an astounding fact that most of the world's wars are fought on the continent of Africa. One source of African warfare is religion. Differing religious interests play a fundamental and abiding role in almost every tribal and political debate and conflagration. Conversely, the overwhelming and vicious civil, tribal, and religious wars in Africa have opened the flood gates to increasing religious pluralistic attitudes. So we find an endless cycle. In the end, the series of tribal, political, and religious turmoil has left scores dead and many land masses devastated. These human disasters are well documented.⁵

⁵ Patrick Johnstone, Robyn Johnstone, and Jason Mandryk in the monumental 21st Century edition of Operation World list the following hot spots of Africa: The Great Lakes War became Africa's first major international conflict where tensions between the Hutu and Tutsi peoples in Rwanda and Burundi have led to civil wars and periodic genocidal massacres over the past four decades. The Rwanda genocide of 1994 triggered a chain reaction of war and waves of refugees affecting surrounding countries. This interlocked with the wars already being fought in Angola, Sudan and between Ethiopia and Eritrea. The impact on Congo has been devastating for much of the country and continues to affect millions of people. The Horn of Africa was the scene of terrible events in the 1990s. a) Somalia descended into anarchy with humiliating failures for the UN and the USA in finding solutions. b) Ethiopia and Eritrea's unexpected, unnecessary war in 1998-2000 between two largely Christian nations led to heavy casualties. An uneasy cease-fire prevailed in 2001, but lasting peace, restoration of trust and reopening of trade are needed. The West African debacle of Liberia's civil wars in the last decade has resulted in the immense destruction of lives, property and mass exploitation of children as soldiers. This conflict spilled over to Sierra Leone and Guinea with even worse atrocities and has drawn in West African and UN forces who have vainly tried to impose a measure of peace. The conflict has had deep impact on surrounding nations and an ending of the fighting and of the reign of the warlords looks distant. A whole generation has been deeply scarred. The Maghreb conflicts — the Algerian civil war with its unending bloody massacres of civilians, and the unresolved conflict about the future of the Western Sahara occupied by Morocco since 1974. Sudan's 40-year civil war with its Islamic jihad overtones in which the Muslim north is seeking to subjugate the largely Christian south and impose shari'a law and Islam. According to the statistics of the UN there is a growing amount of Sudanese refugees flocking into Ethiopia and Kenya and surrounding countries. War has driven 85% of the southern population of Sudan from their homes. The international evangelization group AD 2000 and Beyond, said "Ongoing persecution, war, and hunger make Sudan the country facing the greatest calamity in the world today, "... A seemingly endless civil war and persistent famine are destroying the country. More than 1.9 million people reportedly have died in the 20 year war and tens of thousands have starved to death. The Islamic regime in Khartoum has tried to subjugate and destroy the Christian and animist south. Muslim troops reportedly have attacked and burned churches, killed unarmed civilians, and enslaved woman and children. An estimated 3 million people—many of them Christians—have died since the military junta in Khartoum declared "holy war" against non-Muslims in 1992. One news service reports: "Soldiers plunder the villages, rape the women and torture or kill the men. Some victims have been burned alive, while others had their ears or genital organs amputated. More than 10,000 women and children have been kidnapped and sold as slaves." The Muslim-Christian fault-line stretching from Senegal across the Sahel to Ethiopia and along Africa's Indian Ocean seaboard created a potential for widened conflagrations and confrontations because of increasingly aggressive Islamist movements and African Christian evangelism gaining converts from within Muslim communities. Only

Despite the religious nature of much civil and tribal warfare an amazing fact has emerged: people are now looking to religion for an answer. According to Dr. Buys, “All these civil, tribal and religious wars have led to a widespread concern that religions should make a major contribution to democracy, peace and stability.”⁶ In other words, people are now looking to religion, Christianity in particular; to make a difference in the face of what appears to be a never-ending series of conflicts.

Poverty is another factor driving many Africans to look to Christianity for answers. Africa is a land of overwhelming poverty and suffering. Kibari, Kenya is the third worst slum in the world. Here 700,000 people live in overcrowded conditions in an area 3.3 kilometres in size. Malaria, dysentery, HIV, AIDS, diarrhea, and more are rampant in Kibari. Over 80 percent of Kenyans live in poor conditions such as this. If the HDI is considered as a measure of the quality of life of 174 nations it is important to note that of the bottom 40 in this list, 33 are in Africa. The average income/person is \$660 (2% of USA). Only 1.7% of the world’s GNP is generated in Africa although Africa is one of the largest continents on planet earth.

So it would appear that the Christian churches are now in an unprecedented position to speak prophetically to a nation in need. Problematically, and here lies the crux of the problem, *the African expression of Christianity is itself rife with religious pluralism*. The pluralistic nature of ATR keeps the distinctive Christian voice muffled. The Christian message must shake itself free from the ancient worldview so it can offer solutions to Africans suffering from unremitting war and poverty.

in Sudan and Nigeria has this led to war or mass violence, but Guinea-Bissau, Côte d’Ivoire and Chad are in danger of trouble (this material is from P. J. Buys , “A Christian Reformed perspective on religious pluralism in Africa—Response to the paper of Prof. JM Vorster”).

⁶ Buys, 23

What are the underlying causes of the syncretistic relationship between Christianity and the religious pluralism of ATR?

2. The Five Sources of Religious Pluralism in African Christianity

2.1 Political correctness

Political correctness is a modern term that dates to the European Enlightenment when men of goodwill tried to find a way to end the religious debates of their own day and settle on a set of ideas upon which all could agree. The result was the doctrine of Deism. In Africa, the social problems are such that pastors feel it incumbent to set aside religious differences in order to deal with the problems of AIDs, war, and famine. The problem is that politically correct agendas have a way of globalizing hermeneutics to a point on unintelligibility. The result, as D.A. Carson has pointed out, is an amalgamation of liberation theology, a radicalized theology of women; a vague set of leftist economics, praxis-driven contextualization in missions, and religious pluralism. Ironically, then, in an effort to address religious pluralism that is said to be a prime mover in numerous religious wars in Africa pluralism resurfaces. The evolutionary downward spiral only continues.

Political correctness as a forum for problem solving is furthered by liberal theologians who stress continuity between the Christian faith and ATR. As one theologian has noted, this stress is in part the result of a low view of Scripture and a high opinion of the potentiality of man's moral character to save himself. Although continuity does exist between man and God, in that the *imago Dei* (image of God) has not been totally lost in man, and also because general revelation gives to all men some knowledge of God, we must not forget the discontinuity between the Creator and his creatures due to man's

sinful rebellion against God. The ravages of war and poverty will not quell if all we can do is to point to man's hidden potential to overcome these hurdles through the use of his natural knowledge of God given through nature and conscience.⁷ Our hope lies in God's potential, not in our own.

2.2 Cobelligerency and human rights

The search for a suitable forum for the establishment of human rights also enforces religious pluralism in Christianity in Africa. In arguing for consensus building to help Africa, Pobee underlines the importance of a pluralistic tactic.

Since the two most populous religions of Africa, namely Christianity and Islam, are missionary religions, the quest for religious human rights must also search for models of mission which from start to finish, respect and foster human dignity. I opt for a model of mission that builds communities that are guided by the values of God's rule, namely sacrificial love, truth, righteousness and justice, freedom, reconciliation, and peace. Religious human rights can be fostered when the unique claims of each and every religion are taken seriously and engaged. This means a rejection of the temptation to define the other only on one's own terms, and an ecumenical acceptance of religious pluralism.⁸

Pobee's reference to "ecumenical acceptance" of religious pluralism as a ready means to integrate the values of "sacrificial love, truth, righteousness and justice, freedom, reconciliation, and peace" is a general concept without recourse to the express doctrines of sin and salvation. Obviously sacrificial love, truth, righteousness and justice, freedom, reconciliation, and peace" can come in different shades of meanings and expressions and

⁷ For further thoughts on this point, see Richard J. Gehman, *African Traditional religion in Biblical Perspective* (Kijabe, Kenya: Kesho Publications, 1989) 268.

⁸ Pobee, "Africa's Search for Religious Human Rights Through Returning to the Wells of Living Water."
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bring with them different moral systems that go along with the different worldviews that are associated with the different religions at play.

Pobee's appeal to the existence of different religious groups working hand in hand to foster human dignity is naive. One is reminded of the age-old question, "Can two walk together, except they be agreed" (Amos 3:3)? Practically speaking, human rights initiatives that have failed to consider human responsibility before the living God of the Bible have inevitably birthed moralistic platitudes that have failed to deliver the goods. While the doctrine of cobelligerency⁹ is often needed, it is a necessary evil and one to be watched carefully. To embrace it as a first gesture in cross-religious dialogue without proper doctrinal recourse to the depraved nature of man is an invitation to "unity for unity's sake." The world over, let alone Africa, has witnessed the massive deficit of success among religious organizations that attempt to tackle abuse of human rights and other problems without a clear doctrinal bell to follow.

2.3 The syncretistic tendency of African traditional religion

It is highly typical for Africans to identify their tribal customs and traditions with Christianity. The contemporary stress on gospel contextualization, for all of its positive intentions, has done little to challenge this dilemma, but in fact has in many case only furthered it. Buys is very correct, when he states that

...underlying both Muslim and Christian religious profession in Africa is a value system steeped in the old ways of Traditional African Religion—fetishism, ancestor worship, idolatry, etc. Personal, tribal and national crises reveal this in reversion to the old ways and efforts "contextualization" of the Christian message to fit into the

⁹ The idea of cobelligerency is that people with diametrically opposing views on certain critical issues should nonetheless join together to fight a more treacherous common enemy.

frame of reference of the African traditional religion and worldview is perhaps one of the major factors that gives rise to the African face of religious pluralism. The question why Christianity and the message of the Gospel have had so little influence to prevent the terrible events in Africa which have so impacted many nations in recent years cannot be understood without understanding syncretism and religious pluralism.¹⁰

Certainly there is the problem of mingling older practices associated with tribal rites into the Christian faith but the problem is actually larger than this. In many areas of Africa we find a one-to-one identification of tribal and traditional ways of life with biblical Christianity. This has resulted in Muslims becoming Christians but who face Jerusalem five times a day to pray. This is not a Christian practice but is a prime example of “works righteousness” that Paul so vociferously challenges in most of his letters, Galatians especially. No doubt, many cultural practices are of the nature of *adiaphora* (1 Cor. 8)¹¹ and ought to be left untouched and it is a matter of seeking God for wisdom to know which practices associated with ATR are commensurate with Scripture and which are not. The castration of young women is one example of a practice that yet survives in many Christian quarters in Africa but which must be condemned and abandoned as a diabolical practice.

¹⁰ Buys, 23

¹¹ A theological term that arises in connection with Paul’s discussion in 1 Cor. 8 is *adiaphora*. It comes from the Greek, ἀδιάφορα—“indifferent things.” *Adiaphora* in Christianity refer to matters not regarded as essential to the faith, but nevertheless as permissible for Christians or allowed in church. What is specifically considered *adiaphora* tends to depend on the specific theology of a Church in view. But many cultural practices must be challenged by bringing the truth of God to bear in love as a means to transform traditions and customs that run counter to the Word of God.

2.4 Universalism

Related to religious pluralism is the doctrine of universalism: the idea that all people find a place in the life of God simply by virtue of their humanness. Historically, the theory has been espoused in many versions: from ancient Greek philosophy, to the Neo-orthodoxy of Karl Barth (who attempted a modified version of it by bypassing the eternal decrees), to the anti-metaphysicians of our day.

In Africa, universalism finds expression in the form of animism. Animism refers to a belief in numerous personalized, supernatural beings endowed with reason, intelligence and/or volition, that inhabit both objects and living beings and “animate” their existence. More fundamentally, it is the idea that *everything* is conscious and has a soul. Now there are differences between universalism, as it is understood in the West, and animism as it has been practiced on the continent of Africa. The former stresses the fatherhood of God in the life of all men. The later stresses the active presence of spiritual beings in the material world. Nonetheless, these differences represent only a matter of degree, not of substance. To say that the non-rational world is imbued with living beings calls for our acceptance of all religious affirmations. Animism and universalism are therefore cut from the same scrap of pagan cloth.

Without mentioning animism in particular, Prof. Buys’ observation on the strength of universalism in ATR is noteworthy.

The most important theological issue in the concept of salvation in African Theology is that of the equality of all religions. This view ultimately leads to pluralism and parity of all religions. The theological premise in this area is the acceptance of universal grace without Jesus Christ. Some African theologians and scholars assert

that salvation is not the exclusive reserve for Christianity only, but there is the possibility of finding salvation outside of the church and Jesus Christ and, in this case, in the traditional religions. The theology of African intermediaries asserts that God had mediators between Him and the Africans, thus affirming the plurality and parity of salvation. The unique Christ for salvation as claimed by Christians seems to make no sense to them. This ‘universal grace’ is located within the traditional religions.¹²

Many Africans who profess Christianity do not naturally see or even adopt Christianity as unique among the religions of the world (even if one were to view Christianity as a “religion”) but as one option among many—a way of salvation of another kind. Many Africans, even those who attend local evangelical churches with strong support from overseas churches and mission agencies struggle to distinguish Christian teaching from the parity assumed to be shared by other religions. Often, and unfortunately, the attraction to a Christian church is not based in the supremacy of Christ: that he is the way, the truth, and the life, but in the ability of churches to make food and other resources available to the needy. This last feature may be a harkening back to the older animist spirituality that is more focused on addressing practical exigencies (such as health, food, and other practical needs) than on solving abstract metaphysical quandaries.

2.5 Theological pragmatism over orthodoxy

Over concern with cultural issues tends to lessen concern with orthodoxy (and thus with praxis) and enhances the role of religious pluralism. It seems that the struggle to find answers for the urgent matters of the day: political discrimination, dehumanization, tribal and religious civil wars, oppression, hunger and devastation, easily delude many African

¹² Buys, 24

Christians to limit theological reflection to the arena of pragmatism. Concentration on cultural issues according to social relevance or “what works” is characteristic. So it is that relevance drives orthodoxy rather than orthodoxy speaking in a relevant manner.

There is an added impetus to look to pragmatism in solving African suffering. Likely due to the animist theory that metaphysical spirits inhabit the concrete realm there is an inbred tendency among Africans to discard abstractionism in favour of thinking in terms of concrete reality. There is an *earthiness* to African social consciousness that is reminiscent of the ancient Hebrew prototype in which we find a lively expectation of God’s covenant promises to deliver immediate blessings or curses. Thus, we find a consistent proneness on the part of theologians of African descent to appeal to “culture and nature” as a grid through which “Scripture and the Spirit” are to be visualized.¹³ In this regard, Prof. Buys aptly remarks, “That is why a theologian like Kato, who used the Bible and Evangelicalism as his presuppositions and not culture or religious heritage, is treated with theological repugnance by Bediako’s theological analysis.”¹⁴

The challenge, then, is for an African theology to confirm the Bible, not nature¹⁵, tradition, and custom, as the nature of first things in theology for the purpose of apologetics, evangelism, and ongoing discipleship.

3. The Christian answer for African religious pluralism

Thus far, we have that in the face of civil, tribal and religious wars, and unrelenting poverty, many African people are looking to Christianity to offer real and lasting

¹³ Yusufu Tukari argues that the emphasis of African Theology on the theology of creation has not been equally balanced by emphasis on the Biblical theology of the fall, sin and redemption. See *In Christianity and African Gods: A Method in Theology* (Potchefstroomse Universiteit 1999), 28.

¹⁴ Buys, 24

¹⁵ Here I am not thinking of natural law as defined by the Bible but of nature of a personal force in the animistic sense.

solutions. But a predicament is hindering the process. While Christianity is indeed spreading rapidly throughout Africa, political correctness, overemphasis on the doctrine of cobelligerency, the merging of African tribal customs into the Christian faith, universalism (animism), and theological pragmatism, has leavened Christianity with the pluralistic presuppositions of ATR. As a result, the Christian message is not salt and light in a culture in need of the power of the gospel to transform it. Christianity in Africa must be purged of everything infecting it with pluralism or else it will remain impotent to help. In fact, it will not be Christianity at all.

More and more international relief agencies and churches are coming to the realization that the long-term answer for Africa will not be found in increasing development aid programs and U.N. sanctioned sustainable development initiatives. *The answer lies in ideas*. Ideas have powerful consequences. We can give a man a fish or teach him how to fish.

Superficially, we must evangelize and build churches but also we must disciple the nations of Africa in the *deep truths* of Jesus Christ—to teach them all that he taught us (Matt. 28:18-20). As I have argued elsewhere, great strides have been made to touch many African nations with the truth of the gospel but not nearly enough has been done to launch a true and lasting transformation of the minds of people, which in turn can transform the fundamental structures of African society. The full counsel of God is not being taught. Until we do this we shall continue to give men a fish without teaching them how to fish. And as long as we continue down this path, concerned Africans will not clean their cultural and social fish tanks.

Far too often, Christian teachers, missionaries and aid agencies have only presented the external facts of Christianity and its promises of a better life without altering the pluralistic mindset that keeps African corporate life in darkness. At heart, pluralism is egalitarian: it fosters what is called in the West, “The flat earth society.” The egalitarian speaks of equality among all people—a welcoming thought to people who suffer from inequality—but in the end he seeks to dominate people through the use of raw power for the express purpose of keeping people down so that equality can be enforced. Animism, which I have argued is essentially an underlying cause of religious pluralism, is egalitarian at its core. It is all about the misuse of power to manipulate the masses. It keeps people in fear, trepidation, and forever dependent on the witch or shaman to provide deliverance. No one discovers personal worth or matures himself as long as the Animist is there to keep him in check. Personal responsibility, growth, national development, entrepreneurship, and cultural progress flow from a deep-rooted and practical worldview of God’s love, grace, and mercy which free us to be all that God created us to be; to develop ourselves and the natural resources that surround us to his glory. Biblical values such as ingenuity, resourcefulness, avant-garde creativity, hard work (a biblical work ethic), and honesty can function and restore just and prosperous societies.

These ideas do not exist in a vacuum but are part of the larger STORY of the Bible. It is the story of how God planned redemption before the foundations of the world, the creation, the Fall, and restoration in Christ that provide the essential framework of a biblical world and life view. What I am arguing for is that rather than attempt to evangelize Africans with a message that only covers over their pluralistic/animistic

worldview we must see evangelism as a simultaneous task of a biblical theology that rips away the false worldview of conventional African heterodoxy. We can then build upon this foundation a true understanding of sin, justification and holiness—the core elements of the gospel. I comprehend biblical theology as a discipline committed to the “whole council of God.” Biblical theology reveals the basic doctrines of Scripture in the first eleven chapters of Genesis, followed by the branching out from there into a series of developments, until all God’s truths climax in the final pages of the Book of Revelation.

Asking Africans questions such as “Are you saved?” and “Do you know for sure that you are going to heaven?” are important. But to ask Africans questions of an eternal nature without challenging the nature-bound worldview within which they think and live is to put new wine into old wine-skins. The whole manner in which ATR has conditioned most Africans to think must be refashioned according to the biblical narrative. To do less is to offer superficial answers (not superficial from the standpoint of the Bible but according to how many Africans are prone to perceive the questions).

What is needed is to expose Africans to the plotline of the Bible, its “Big picture.” Unless the gospel be firmly set and presented in the context of a biblical worldview most Africans will continue to perceive it as one message among many and Christianity will not provide the help African people need and for which they are now eagerly seeking. A failure to act on this stratagem is to permit a romanticized tolerance to all moral and metaphysical ideas to persist under the rubric of Christian brotherhood. It is to promote a Christianized animism that leaves the contemporary African *weltanschauung* unaffected. And if Miller is correct that animism actually *causes* poverty then the failure to confront

animism (and ATR generally) with a Christian worldview is a cruel irony perpetrated on the African populace we claim to be helping.¹⁶

Jesus said to “disciple the nations” (Matt. 28:18-20). We cannot begin and end with evangelism. Evangelism is the start for how else will people hear of Jesus? But at the same time our strategy must be to think of evangelism as a *subset* of discipleship—in this case as a step toward the larger goal of bringing every thought captive to the obedience of Christ *vis-à-vis* the biblical worldview. Any evangelism that fails to purge itself of ATR and actually crack its backbone will only serve as an impediment to change and will fall very short of our Lord’s Great Commission and Cultural Mandate.

¹⁶ See D. L. Miller, *The Power of Truth to Transform Cultures* (Seattle: Ywam Publishing, 2001).