

Volume 34.1 2015

Africa
Journal
of Evangelical
Theology

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ISSN 1026-2946

Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology

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Subscription Information: Subscription rates and ordering procedures are published on the inside back cover. Information can be downloaded from our website: www.scott.ac.ke. Or email: ajetjournal@scott.ac.ke

Purpose: *AJET* is published twice a year by Scott Christian University, a chartered private university in Kenya, in order to provide theological educators and students with evangelical articles and book reviews related to Christian ministry in Africa.

Publisher: Scott Christian University, the publisher of *AJET*, has been accredited by ACTEA since 1979 and was chartered as a private university by the Commission for University Education (CUE) Kenya in November 1997. Scott Christian University now has three schools operating under its umbrella: the School of Theology (formerly Scott Theological College), the School of Education and the School of Professional Studies.

AJET is indexed in *Christian Periodical Index*; *New Testament Abstracts* (Cambridge MA); *Religion Index One: Periodicals*, published by the American Theological Library Association, Chicago; *Theology in Context* (Institute of Missiology, Germany); and in *DIALOG Abstracts* (Cambridge MA). *AJET* is indexed in the ATLA Religion Database, published by the American Theological Library Association, 300 S. Wacker Dr., Suite 2100, Chicago, IL 60606, E-mail: atla@atla.com, Website: <http://www.atla.com/>.

AJET is now on-line at: http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ajet-03.php

Changes and Choices

Interactions with African people have always had a profound influence on Western missionaries, changing them, requiring them to re-evaluate how they think, speak, and act in relationships, making them face choices about right and wrong on issues they've never encountered before. Like Christians everywhere, missionaries haven't always re-evaluated correctly or made good choices, but the former and active missionaries who contributed to this issue look for ways to overcome some of these past problems. They ask profound questions about biblical approaches to hermeneutics, baptizing polygamous converts, paying taxes to less than perfect governments, and the possibility of connecting God, theology and African doxology to church, community and national development. So while these articles are not related to one another through a specific theme, they all share certain things in common, besides being written by thoughtful Westerners with significant African experience.

Firstly, as indicated above, they recommend improvements on the past. Stephanie Black shows how Western methods of biblical interpretation have generally been unable to help African Bible college graduates preach in a way that captures the attention of the people, and she suggests changes. Stefan Höschele discusses the history of his denomination's struggle to deal biblically and compassionately with polygamous converts and suggests that one solution does not necessarily fit all situations. Rodney Reed addresses the perennial and universal question of paying taxes and applies biblical and Western traditional thinking to suggest how Christians, including African Christians, should approach this difficult issue. Gregg Okesson explains why Westerners, including evangelical Christians, with a worldview plagued by the material/spiritual dichotomy, have not harnessed the spiritual potential for material development whereas the experiences of African doxologies points towards a possible profitable link between doxology and development.

Secondly, the solutions suggested are influenced by the authors' African experiences and research, and so are more or less different from past Western evangelical thinking. Okesson's suggestions for change are more towards the African cultural end of the spectrum while Reed's is much more towards the Western side, probably because of the nature of the issue.

Thirdly, readers are asked to make a choice between the ways they are used to thinking, and new ways of: 1) thinking about hermeneutics; 2) applying the Bible to cultural issues such as baptizing polygamous converts; 3) suggesting how Western approaches to universal issues, such as paying taxes, might also apply in different cultures; 4) linking sociological realities to theological/doxological realities as Okesson tries to do.

Fourthly, the authors base their suggestions on their understanding of how the Bible should be interpreted to deal with the issues they address. These are challenging articles because the authors were challenged by their African experiences. Reading them may help change you or not, but it's your choice.