



African Initiated Churches of the Spirit and Pneumatology

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The independent African “churches of the Spirit,” perhaps the majority of African Initiated Churches (AICs) today, like worldwide Pentecostalism, practice gifts of the Spirit like healing, prophecy, and speaking in tongues. Because of their “Spirit” manifestations and pneumatological emphases and experiences, earlier studies of these churches considered them “syncretistic,” “post-Christian,” and “messianic” groups. Understanding the pneumatology of these movements is crucial, as part of the problem that Western observers had with the churches of the Spirit had to do with their understanding of the Holy Spirit.¹ This was often seen as accommodating the pre-Christian past, and was thought to be particularly linked with divination, ancestor rituals, and the like. Some European observers spoke of these churches as having “misunderstood” the Holy Spirit.²

MANIFESTATIONS OF THE SPIRIT IN AFRICA

African churches of the Spirit, however, emphasize the active and manifest presence of the Spirit in the church. They have gone a long way towards meeting

¹More detail on this subject is found in Allan Anderson, *Moya: The Holy Spirit in an African Context* (Pretoria: University of South Africa Press, 1991), and more recently, idem, “Stretching the Definitions? Pneumatology and ‘Syncretism’ in African Pentecostalism,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 10/1 (October 2001) 98-119.

²Allan Anderson, *Zion and Pentecost: The Spirituality and Experience of Pentecostal and Zionist-Apostolic Churches in South Africa* (Pretoria: University of South Africa Press, 2000) 241-242.

African theology has pointed to the African Initiated Churches as the “raw material” for a contextual theology in Africa. The African Spirit churches retain much in biblical pneumatology that Western churches have missed.

physical, emotional, and spiritual needs, offering a solution to *all* of life's problems and a way to cope in a threatening world. They proclaim that the same God who saves the soul also heals the body, and that God also provides answers to the fears and insecurities inherent in the African worldview. The God who forgives sin is also concerned about poverty, oppression, and liberation from afflictions. It is this message that makes this form of African church attractive. The Spirit manifests his presence and power personally in these churches, making a dynamic relationship between God and his people possible.

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The African worldview does not accommodate the Western tendency to separate physical and spiritual, natural or supernatural, personal and social—their interpenetration is presumed. For African Christians, the Spirit pervades all of life, and not just the “spiritual” part of it.³ African theology has pointed to the AICs as the “raw material” for a contextual theology in Africa, but African theology itself has not really addressed the specifically African issues raised in pneumatology. Instead, it has been involved in describing how to theologize in Africa. This has left many unanswered questions, for African theology has tended to move largely within the parameters of Western theology.⁴ The resulting theological vacuum has been addressed by the incarnated, grassroots theology of the churches of the Spirit. This is theology from the underside, a people's theology. These churches have made possible a dialogue between the African thought world and Christianity at an existential level. Theology based on a European model has missed much in biblical pneumatology that speaks directly into the world of Africa—and in fact into the worldview of almost everyone except Western peoples.

In many African languages, the word for “spirit” means wind, the movement of air, as well as having a broad range of meanings analogous to biblical meanings. The “spirit” or “wind” is that which a person receives from God and has in common with him, the personal life force that gives being and life, strength and power, harmonizing a person with the rest of humanity and the universe. Speaking of the Hebrew word for Spirit, Reformed theologian Alasdair Heron says that “*ruach* is used to speak of God as present and active in the world and in particular among human beings.”⁵ The Greek word for power (δύναμις) refers to “power, ability, physical or moral, as residing in a person or a thing” as well as “power in action.”⁶

³Anderson, *Moya*, 15-18.

⁴Ibid., 19-25.

⁵Alasdair I. C. Heron, *The Holy Spirit* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983) 7.

⁶W. E. Vine, *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1981) 11.

This concept is similar to “power” in Africa, where the word conveys forcefulness, strength, and ability. It carries with it the idea of dignity, authority, and power over oppression. It also refers to power in action and has its ultimate source in God. This African concept is almost identical to the biblical concept of power that is sought for and claimed through the Holy Spirit.⁷

The presence of the Spirit is often linked to the gift of leadership in the Bible. A leader is seen as a person with more “power” than those being led. In the Bible, this power has its source in the Spirit. Moses was recognized as one on whom was the Spirit. God placed the Spirit that was on him on seventy of Israel’s elders, causing them to prophesy (Num 11:17, 25). This is equivalent to the African church’s concept of the Spirit passing from one person to another, such as through the laying on of hands or through other symbolic ritual acts. Heron says that these instances are “something very different from unusual gifts, skills or wisdom. It is a violent and temporary possession of a person by a force rushing upon him from without, manifested in an ecstatic form comparable with that associated with some kinds of prophecy.”⁸ This is how the coming of the Spirit (or seizing by the Spirit) is often conceived and experienced in African churches. Continuity with the biblical record is claimed, and there are striking parallels. In African churches, the leadership patterns that sometimes follow African patterns are often also biblical patterns, when the leader is a man or woman upon whom the Spirit has come.

The African concept of an unpredictable and unknowable Supreme Being brings a host of unresolved questions, and in part has contributed to the preponderant beliefs in the spirit world, especially in the ancestors. When trouble or affliction strikes, the paramount questions are, *who* caused the problem and what must be *done* to rectify it. The diviner has answers to these questions, which invariably involve the performance of a ritual act aimed at placating an offended ancestor.⁹ In keeping with the holistic worldview, the whole of the African environment is given religious meaning. Too often theologians, including African theologians, have downplayed the importance of the spirit world—not so the Spirit churches. In the person of the African prophet they have provided a very real and ostensibly biblical solution to the questions relating to tangible physical needs and the persistence of affliction in the midst of woefully inadequate health care. The dominant characteristic of the prophets of the African churches is that they are people “of the Spirit.” Their following is often determined by the extent to which the people perceive the prophets’ pronouncements to be the utterances of the Spirit and by their ability to demonstrate the power of the Spirit by meeting concrete human needs in times of sickness and other afflictions and evil disturbances. It is true that in some of these churches, at least, the outward determining factors sometimes overshadow the inner graces of the Spirit; but this problem exists in churches all over the world. The

⁷Anderson, *Moya*, 63-67.

⁸Heron, *Holy Spirit*, 13.

⁹Anderson, *Zion and Pentecost*, 201-203.

similarities between the healer/diviner and the prophet arise precisely because both provide answers to the same questions. In combating evil forces, both will seek to neutralize the harmful use of sorcery. Radical differences emerge in the solutions offered to these problems. Whereas the diviner points to maintaining ancestor

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rituals, the prophet’s solution is usually aimed at confronting beliefs in witchcraft and providing an acceptable alternative to facilitate a deepening of Christian commitment. The source of God’s power is found in the Holy Spirit. Prayer and speaking in tongues during prophetic consultations serve to establish the presence of the Holy Spirit.¹⁰ Instead of pre-Christian rituals and medicines, the prophet lays on hands, exorcises evil spirits, and uses ritual objects, symbolic representations of the healing power of God.¹¹ Some of the biblical prophets were consulted in much the same way as African prophets are consulted today. Yet all these prophets, Israelite and African, would uncompromisingly reject any “illegitimate” divination. The sources of their “revelation” are not seen as the same as those of the healer/diviner, even when their methods are similar, and these two different sources are opposed to each other.

RELATION TO THE OLD TESTAMENT

Old Testament prophets were men and women “of the Spirit,” people on whom the Spirit had come in a special way to enable them to speak the word of God fearlessly in the midst of a corrupt and oppressive society. In the lives of the Hebrew prophets, the presence of the Spirit was recognized by all. African prophets are perceived as having similarly special talents and abilities, which enable them to function effectively within the holistic world in which they are immersed. Indeed, without these perceived abilities they would have no followers. Throughout biblical history, we read of the Spirit “coming upon” different prophets, causing them to declare the words of God. This too is a prominent result of the Spirit “coming upon” men and women of Africa. Although emphasis is often given to meeting physical needs, African prophets are also people who declare the words of God to people, and proclamation is a very important part of their function.

The ministries of both Elijah and Elisha were characterized by miracles and healings, more than any other Old Testament prophets. On one occasion, Elisha is reported to have prophesied after a minstrel played (2 Kgs 3:15)—an interesting analogy to the use of music and dancing in some African Pentecostal churches to create an atmosphere for prophesying. The natural love and talent that African

¹⁰Marthinus L. Daneel, “Communication and Liberation in African Independent Churches,” *Missionalia* 11/1 (April 1983) 87.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 88.

people have for rhythmic music and dancing makes this type of liturgy more attractive. It is very significant in the African church context that the charismatic prophetic leadership of Elijah and Elisha was characterized by frequent recourse to symbolic ritual acts, a feature also common in African Spirit churches. Symbols used in some African churches—robes, staffs, ropes, beards, and so on—are delib-

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erate attempts to demonstrate continuity with the biblical tradition. The coming of the Spirit is directly linked to what is seen as an extraordinary ability to prophesy. This is regarded as the main manifestation of the Holy Spirit. When the prophet Joel (2:28) predicts the outpouring of the Spirit upon all humankind, the proof that this has happened will be “your sons and daughters will prophesy.” The coming of the Spirit would also remove sexual and social discrimination. This, too, forms a biblical analogy to the corporate power concept in Africa, where the Holy Spirit is perceived as not for individual empowerment only but for the overall good of the whole community. This community orientation is one of the significant lessons for the West to learn from Africa.

RELATION TO THE NEW TESTAMENT

Luke (1:15, 17, 41, 67) tells that both John the Baptist and his parents were “filled with the Holy Spirit,” that “the Holy Spirit was upon” Simeon, and that the Spirit revealed things to him and moved him (2:25-27). There is continuity here with the best Hebrew prophetic tradition, and there are parallels in the African churches of the Spirit. All four gospel writers record the words of John the Baptist that Christ would “baptize with the Holy Spirit.” Luke 4:1, 14 records that Christ was also “full of the Holy Spirit,” and that after his temptation he returned to Galilee “in the power of the Spirit.” Matt 4:23 here adds the signs that authenticated the presence of the Spirit, including “healing every disease and sickness among the people.” The power of the Spirit is given so that all a person’s needs and powerlessness can be addressed. This is the emphasis of the African churches, showing that the Spirit is indeed present in the church. On the day of Pentecost, Peter proclaimed that “Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs” (Acts 2:22). The supernatural ministry of Christ authenticated him as the Servant of Yahweh, the Messiah on whom the Spirit had come “without limit” (John 3:34). The miracles of Christ were also devoid of the Western distinction between the salvation of the soul and salvation from illness, for several times the word “save” is used to refer to deliverance from physical sickness. It is this type of holistic salvation that is often proclaimed by the Spirit churches in Africa. The

power of the Spirit is to be demonstrated in Africa today by healings and deliverances from evil affliction and oppression. In the book of Acts, the promise of the power of the Spirit by Christ before his ascension (1:5, 8) was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost, when the disciples “were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them” (2:4). This manifestation of the Spirit was of such a strange and unruly nature that some accused them of being drunk (2:13, 15). Peter counters this accusation by saying that it was the fulfilment of Joel’s prophecy, where the emphasis of the outpouring of the Spirit is the manifestation of revelations, especially prophecy (2:16-21). A visit to an African Pentecostal church service by an uninformed Western observer may have a similar effect to that on the skeptics on the day of Pentecost. The manifestations of the Spirit, the noise, the tongues, the prophesyings, perhaps the dancing, the jumping, and even the music—all this will convince one that these people are not in complete control of their senses!

THE SPIRIT AND POWER

Connected to the issue of biblical power concepts is the question of the pervasive awareness of a lack of power. All people have a need for power when they feel powerless, whenever their existential needs are unfulfilled. In African pre-Christian religions, God as the ultimate cause of creation is seen as the absolute source of all power. He provides enabling power, the force of being and existence that has its origins in him. This has significance for African Christian concepts of the power of the Spirit. The Spirit’s power is identified with the same force of being and existence that is the enabling power of God. The power of the Spirit enables Africans to become all that God intended them to be, dignified human beings created in the image of God. This African concept of power is a largely positive preparation for the message of the power of the Spirit. One reason for the success and prevalence of African diviners, even in modern African cities, is because they are seen as “powerful” and able to impart power to their afflicted and powerless clients. The longing and continual quest for power, and the preoccupation with the spirit world, are the African manifestation of a universal human need. The need for power is never fully satisfied in religious observances by themselves, and this applies equally to African religions. The people whose powerlessness remains seek a power greater than that of the spirits, the diviners, and the sorcerers—a dynamic, life-giving power that meets “this-worldly” needs and responds fully to culturally-based religious aspirations. The message of receiving the power of the Spirit of God, the greatest power of all, is that which fulfills these needs. The African quest for power thus becomes fertile ground for a Christian pneumatology incarnated in Africa. The omnipotence of God is revealed through the Holy Spirit.

In Cyprus, Paul, “filled with the Holy Spirit,” identifies Elymas as a sorcerer and speaks a predictive word that God will temporarily remove his sight. This im-

mediately happens, resulting in the conversion of the Roman proconsul (13:8-12). In rituals for the detection of wizardry, some African prophets identify people who have practiced witchcraft. The results are equally devastating. At Philippi, a spirit in a slave girl enabling her to predict the future is exorcised (16:16-18). This incident reminds us of the continuity-confrontation tension that exists in African Spirit churches between the Spirit of God and all other spirits claiming allegiance. In Ephesus, "God did extraordinary miracles through Paul," including healings and exorcisms through cloths he had touched (19:11-12), a rather interesting example of a symbolic ritual that has many parallels in African churches, such as the use of blessed water, cloths, staffs, ropes, and paper for healing purposes.¹² Another symbol widespread in Africa was practiced in Ephesus: the ritual burning of objects associated with sorcery (19:19). Regular burnings of objects associated with African witchcraft are vivid demonstrations of a total break with past dependencies and of a new dependence on Christ. It seems that predictive, personal prophecy was a common occurrence in the New Testament church. In some African churches, people go to a prophet for direction, in much the same way that they would visit a diviner. It seems that, on occasions, Paul received specific prophetic direction by the Spirit on his missionary journeys (Acts 13:1-4; 16:6-7). That there were no gender restrictions to prophecy is indicated by Philip's four unmarried daughters "who prophesied" (21:9). The prominence of women prophesying in African churches has biblical parallels.

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Paul encourages the Corinthians to "eagerly desire" the gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy (1 Cor 14:1). Contrasting prophecy with speaking in tongues, Paul says that prophecy is speaking to people for their "strengthening, encouragement and comfort," to build up the church (14:3-4). There is a clear reference here to the pastoral function of prophecy, such as is often found in African churches. In this respect the African prophet is able to meet the existential needs of people arising out of their particular situation. The prophet, in giving, through the Spirit, a word from God for a given need, is providing pastoral care and oversight that is often inadequate or even entirely absent in a "mission church" context. Paul states that prophecy is given for "edification," which Montague indicates is "anything that contributes to the increase of faith, hope, love and unity in the community."¹³ This is often the function of prophecy in African churches. The context of these verses shows that "prophecy" is the utterance of a direct revelation from God

¹²Anderson, *Zion and Pentecost*, 290-291.

¹³G. T. Montague, *The Holy Spirit: Growth of a Biblical Tradition* (New York: Paulist, 1976) 174.

through the power of the Spirit. Among African Spirit churches there is a marked consciousness that they are practicing these gifts in their worship and daily life. Personal, predictive prophesies may be referred to in 1 Tim 1:18; 4:14. It seems that some gift of the Spirit was imparted to Timothy through the laying on of hands, much as is experienced in African Pentecostal churches. The fact that the power of God is imparted to believers through a symbolic act such as the laying on of hands is of great significance in Africa. Many such symbolic acts abound in the Spirit churches, resulting in God's "power in action" being revealed in the alleviation of physical and emotional needs.

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE AFRICAN SPIRITS

The fact that so many manifestations of the Spirit encountered in the Spirit churches have parallels in pre-Christian religion should not unduly alarm us. When a spirit possesses a medium, there are often accompaniments such as the working up into a trance-like state through repetitive singing, clapping, dancing, and drumming. Many of these outward forms are also found in "receiving the Spirit" in the African churches and indeed, in global Pentecostalism. Nevertheless, the Holy Spirit has sanctified for his use religious expressions that were found in pre-Christian Africa. If we grant that there may often be spurious and, sometimes, counterfeit manifestations of the "Spirit," we must never forget to distinguish between the outward form of the religious ritual and its inward meaning, and to view these phenomena from the point of view of the participants. Even though there are similarities in the form of these manifestations, a distinction is usually made in their content (and especially in their intent) by the African Christians themselves. The meaning is believed to point to a confrontation with old practices rather than to a continuation of them. This is the predominant view of African Spirit churches. In contrast, the prevalence of ancestor rituals in the personal lives of members of the older "mission churches" and in some independent churches would suggest that the view here is that there exists no real conflict between this and Christian beliefs. Here it is believed that the ancestor rituals are an exclusively African (and personal) affair that can legitimately exist side by side with Christianity. They belong to two different worlds, and yet they also can be reconciled.

In the practices of the Spirit churches, whether the functions of the ancestors have been taken over by the Spirit cannot be proved conclusively. The point is that if the ancestors are no longer an acceptable solution for the existential needs of African Christians, it does not follow that these needs no longer exist. We must, therefore, welcome any attempt by African Christians to find solutions to these real problems, and admit that very often the causes of sickness and other afflictions are dealt with more substantially in the African Spirit churches than they are in any other church context. The confrontation between the African spirit world and the Holy Spirit in these African churches incisively penetrates the African worldview

and makes Christianity relevant there. African expressions of the Spirit must be interpreted in the light of the biblical revelation, the African spirit world, and universal Christian experiences of the Spirit.¹⁴

The power of the Spirit liberates from the oppression of both the spirit world and Western “colonial” forms of Christianity. The fact that no less “unusual” manifestations of the Spirit were experienced in biblical times means that these manifestations must be accepted as genuine responses to the working of the Spirit among ordinary African people. Sometimes there may be play-acting and manipulation through a bogus “manifestation of the Spirit”—but Christianity throughout the world has false prophets and people using religious sanctions to enforce their own will. And yet, as I have elsewhere written, a criticism often justifiably levelled at Pentecostals is that sometimes a theology of success and power is expounded at the expense of a theology of the cross. There are not always instant solutions to life’s problems, and spirituality is not to be measured in terms of success.¹⁵ If charges of “syncretism” are levelled at African Spirit churches, then the same criteria must be used for churches in the Western world that have unconsciously absorbed elements of the surrounding secular, materialistic, postmodern culture and worldview. Indeed, one might even say that such contextual syncretism has always existed and is absolutely essential for communicating the Christian message effectively. ⊕

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¹⁴Anderson, *Moya*, 124.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 72-73.