Building Bridges within the Community of Faith

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Christ is the mystery of God and in him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and understanding. The challenge of the gospel is to make this mystery known (Colossians 2:2–3). It makes sense then to propose that most of Africa’s problems can be located in the lack of the knowledge of Christ. The solution to those problems lies in the knowledge of Christ. Knowledge of Christ, however, means different things to different people.

Most people pre-occupied with the burden of the unreached people confuse the knowledge of Christ with the churchification of an area. Others confuse the knowledge of Christ with the numerical growth in their churches. The Bible advocates something more than either of these views. The great commission stipulates this clearly. Jesus Christ commissioned his followers to make disciples of all nations, teaching them to obey everything that he had commanded (Matthew 28:19–20). The commission is to make disciples and not converts, to Christianise and not to churchify. Tite Tienou (1990, p. 51) observes this clearly:

For the great commission cannot be considered fulfilled unless and until there is teaching and discipleship.

When people become Christ’s disciples, their deeds, thoughts and speech are renewed as God in Christ leads them in the scripture through the power of the Holy Spirit. In this state, Christians become the salt and the light of the world (Matthew 5:13–16).

It is to this end of making disciples that scholarship in Africa should be geared. This means that a great task lies ahead for African evangelicals. In order to see clearly the nature of this task, we need to have a look at the current problem in Africa.

The Current Problem in Africa

Though Africa is afflicted by the problem of illiteracy (as far as reading and writing is concerned), it is afflicted even more by the problem of Christian illiteracy—that is, an ignorance of the fullness of meaning of the Gospel. More and more Christians are entering institutions of Christian higher learning, such as theological colleges and Christian universities, yet this Christian illiteracy is on the increase.

The reason is the gap that exists between those who obtain these academic qualifications and the people of God who do not have them. It is unfortunate that this gap is widening at an alarming rate thus opening room for more gaps.

Tite Tienou, a well-known African evangelical theologian struggles with this alarming gap and suggests possible measures to curb it. This paper is to a certain degree a response to his call. I propose that the challenge of African evangelicals is to address themselves on how this gap must be bridged.

In the current development of theology in Africa, there is, in fact, a gap between academic and popular theology (Tienou, 1990, p. 40). He distinguishes between academic and popular theology suggesting that academic theology is theology written for international readership. Popular theology, he notes, is well expressed in hymns, preaching, ordinary counsel given by pastors and other spiritual leaders on a day to day basis (Tienou, 1990, pp. 49-50).

What is saddening to us is that much is taking place at the popular level while at the academic level little is happening that has significant practical impact at the popular level. Partly as a result of this, popular theology is not always grounded in and governed by the Scripture (Tienou, 1990, p. 50).

It has to be acknowledged, of course, that academic theology is not automatically grounded in and governed by the scripture. Yet the lack of effective communication between believing academic theologians and the rest of the people of God, deprives popular conceptions of the faith of important input.
We observed earlier that the knowledge of Christ is the key to most of Africa’s problems. The great commission must be fulfilled in Africa if the prophetic mission of the church to be the salt and the light of the world is to be fulfilled. But what shall we accomplish when the avenue is blocked by the gap we just explained?

This gap is not something that we can comfortably stay with. It is not something we can just assume and pretend that we can continue with our scholarly endeavours without taking note of it. It demands our urgent attention. Secularism is finding fertile ground in this gap. Shorter and Onyancha (1997) warn us in the following terms:

*So, far from the African being inherently, if not “notoriously” religious, secularism is rapidly becoming a more generalised phenomenon in the African continent, spreading from a small circle of privileged individuals to a whole society that is undergoing a spectacular evolution.*

More than this, other religions, such as Islam and African Traditional Religion, are taking advantage of a secularised Christianity to extend their hold in Africa. This means then, that the bridging of this gap is imperative.

**Causes of the Problem**

The causes of this problem may be many and varied but we limit ourselves to four major causes: the academic circle, lack of contextualised Christianity, lack of interest in reading and lack of adequate recognition by the Christian academic community that God speaks equally to non-academic members of the body of Christ.

**The academic circle**

As noted earlier, we would expect that with more and more trained personnel in the Christian field, the gap should be narrowed. With more going into the churches from academic institutions we would expect the fruits of academic reflection to be penetrating more effectively. Yet the reality is that the gap is widening.

A major factor in this is what we may call the academic circle. The academic circle is just this; a person trained in an academic institution proceeds immediately to further studies, and then proceeds to train others with little, if any, experience of actualising what is being learned in the world of everyday life—see figure 1.

To be effective in the field, what is learned in academic institutions needs to be tested in the field. The trend we are observing in the current field of Christian scholarship does not respect this principle. People with academic training in pastoring are becoming trainers of pastors without adequate experience of what the actuality of pastoral ministry entails. Theologians are teaching “contextualised” theology without a feel for or understanding of the context which this theology is to address because their own understanding is shaped by an academic learning without adequate experience of the actualities of the context.

In our Christian training institutions, students are busy looking for scholarships in the final years of their undergraduate training to enable them to proceed to postgraduate training for a field of ministry without knowing what that field looks like. Some of these students entered undergraduate training directly from high school. When such persons complete their postgraduate training, they become lecturers to train others for ministries of which they have little knowledge except what they got from books. This process is dangerous, but seems to be the favoured path for many of those pursuing scholarly callings within African Christianity.
Admittedly, it is not always easy for the Christian scholar in Africa who wants to pursue scholarly endeavours within the context of the daily life of the churches. Sometimes, withdrawal into the seclusion of an academic institution can be a welcome relief from the pressures of the field. While addressing a seminar organised by Nairobi Fellowship of Theological Colleges (NFTC), Tite Tienou was asked why he was addressing the subject of the theological task in Africa while he himself was working as a lecturer in an institution outside Africa. He answered that he was taking a break or leave from frustration.

For whatever reason further study is sought, as long as it is detached from the field, it helps to deepen or increase the problem of the academic circle. “If the mouth is not wide enough to swallow a pill can it swallow a mango?” If the first level of study has never been communicated effectively to the people it was intended for, there seems little chance that increasing the amount of learning with a second or third level will lead to greater effectiveness.

Under such circumstances, what is called further studies is not actually furthering of studies but just accumulation of studies. This type of exercise will not have a practical impact in our continent. This I take as one of the reasons contributing to the existing gap between the community of scholars and the non-academic community.

Since the non-academic community cannot stay in a spiritual vacuum, they are forced to develop their own ways of doing things. Tite Tienou calls this a popular approach. Once the popular way of dealing with issues establishes roots, it becomes more and more difficult to penetrate with the fruits of Christian scholarship. The result is an increasing widening of the gap. The type of scholarship provided in the environment of the academic circle has no power to penetrate the community at the popular level and to help bridge the gap. Our challenge in the new millennium is to address ourselves to what we must do in our scholarship in order to have a practical impact at the popular level.

Does this mean that we are to belittle the continuation of study? By no means. Rather we must know what continuation of study calls for. The best way to continue study, I suggest, is to merge what is acquired in training and what confronts us in the field and establish a practical way of standing our ground and effecting changes in the world. In doing this, we must strain to be biblically accurate and culturally sensitive.

In this respect, we should note that the continuation of study can be either through the formal curriculum of an institutional agenda or by following a private agenda of study. It can also be done either on campus or off campus, with the latter preferable where possible.

**Lack of contextualised Christianity**

Due to the existing academic circle, it is becoming exceedingly difficult to achieve contextualised Christianity in our continent. This is sad when we consider the words of Victor Cole in his effort to define contextualisation. He notes: “I see contextualization as a task that all churches around the world must engage in themselves as they allow the Bible to speak to their particular contemporary issues. The message of the Bible is a constant; our particular situations are variables.” (Ngewa et al., 1998, p.13).

The contextualisation of Christianity is nothing more than the process of interpreting Christian truth in terms of and applying it “to the real life issues arising from the social cultural context within which the interpreters live” (Imasogie, 1993, p. 7). With only a superficial view of Africa’s social-cultural structures it is impossible to develop a sound biblical hermeneutic relevant to the African context. The situation is made worse when scholarship is divorced from the field and particularly when it is done abroad.

Firstly, when study is done abroad, it is pursued in a context, and within a world view, that is not that of Africa or appropriate to the African situation.

Secondly, such study is done under those who have a limited view of Africa’s social and cultural structures and whose perspective of African culture is, in many cases, not positive. This makes it difficult, if not impossible, for such scholars to develop a hermeneutical approach that is biblically sound as well as culturally sensitive and suitable for Africa.

A word of caution is needed here. It does not mean that it is wrong, in itself, to study abroad. However, in doing so we need to be sensitive to the fact that the context is different from that of Africa. This difference in context inevitably shapes the study in ways that are not always appropriate to Africa.
When the people of God wait patiently for a contextualised Christianity to come from the academic community and fail to see it, they will look for their own alternative. They will turn a deaf ear to the voice of the academic community because its lack of authentic contextualisation makes it irrelevant to the realities of their situation. Thus the gap widens.

**Lack of reading interest**

An important way in which the academic community can communicate to the people of God at large is through appropriately written literature. However, to be effective this literature must be read.

The reality of the present time is that there have no interest in reading except for reasons of securing jobs. Or when they read, they do not read the works that stimulate and challenge to serious thought but read newspapers, news magazines and, in the case of youth, romance and fictional literature.

KBC (Kenya Broadcasting Corporation) television presented a panel discussion from the University of Nairobi on 18 October 1999. In this panel, Professor Chacha Nyaigoti Chacha (Secretary of the Higher Education Loans Board of Kenya) was asked to comment on Kenya’s reading status. He noted that reading was equated to getting jobs. Once the job is acquired, in most cases, the reading stops. He appealed to the University community and Kenyans at large, to make reading part of their living experience.

To most Africans, reading is not a priority. They have other pressing things to think about such as, medical care, shelter, food, cost of educating their children and so on. This is done in most cases in a state of extreme poverty that leaves little time, resources and interest are left for reading.

This lack of interest in reading is another reason why, even when the academic community makes the effort to communicate in an appropriate way, its message is not reaching the non-academic community. In simpler terms they actually do not know what the academic community is doing. All they know, is how to do things in their own way. This helps to widen the gap between the two communities.

**Failure to recognise that God speaks directly to all**

So far, it may appear as though the stage is being set for a one way communication from the academic community to the rest of God’s people; that the insights that the church in Africa needs must come to the people of God from the academic community.

The Bible does not support this line of thinking. It supports a two-way communication. Academic training does not give special access to God, denied to others, giving those with academic training special authority to speak on God’s behalf. It is God’s anointing that gives one authority to speak as his servant and not academic training. God has poured out his Spirit on all and by his Spirit he leads all in the way of righteousness (Romans 8:9–17). What needs to be emphasised is that the leading of the Holy Spirit comes to us in the community of faith where all contribute according to the gifts and insights God has given to each one (Ephesians 4:11–16).

This is supported in several ways in scripture. Firstly, God pours out his Holy Spirit on all believers and teaches all by his word through the Holy Spirit. What the Holy Spirit illumines to the believer, must be shared and this sharing is only possible when all in the community of faith are willing to learn (Romans 8:9-17).

Secondly, the Holy Spirit gifts every believer with gifts to enable them to minister to one another. The teaching on spiritual gifts discourages independency and encourages interdependence (1 Corinthians 12:1-14:1-4).

Thirdly, the body of Jesus Christ is joined and held together by every supporting member and it grows and builds itself up in love as each member does his or her work (Ephesians 4:16). This is not possible when some members assume special access to God that others do not have. While more is expected from some, this does not mean special access. If one who is not a scholar has wisdom, the scholar must be willing to learn, and on the basis of such wisdom to change his or her views that do not measure up to God’s word.

Fourthly, we find in the Bible examples of God using people who were not scholars. For instance, the understanding that led to the defeat of Goliath in the days of Saul came through David, an insignificant shepherd youth (1 Sam. 17:1-58). It was not to the High Priest Eli that God revealed the wrath on his family but to the boy Samuel who was Eli’s trainee.

Fifthly, there is clear indication in scripture that those who filled the role of the modern scholar, frequently led people astray. In the Old Testament those recognized as prophets sometimes brought wrong messages to the people.
In the New Testament, the scholarly Scribes and Pharisees had a wrong view of the Messiah and they led people astray, opposing Christ himself and causing the persecution of Christians. They even appealed to scripture as their authority for doing so.

All this leads us to two conclusions. Firstly, that God uses all believers whom he has anointed with his Spirit and secondly, that the scholarly community is as likely as any other to get the message wrong. Clearly, in matters of faith scholars are not the only ones, or even the primary ones, to be listened to. God speaks through the whole community of faith. The recognition of this makes two way communication between the academic community and the rest of the body of Christ a biblical imperative.

When one community within the body of Christ assumes special access to God and authority to speak authoritatively on God’s behalf, others within the body are liable to react negatively because they are also certain that God is speaking to them, since they too have access to him.

Schisms in the church that result in African independent churches are largely the result of reaction to mission churches. At least some of this reaction is due to the tendency of the academic community to elevate its authority as interpreter of God’s word over that of other Christians.

In other cases, however, the gap is not so readily evident. The formulations of the academic community are accepted superficially but, in the daily practice of the people of God, people follow what they believe God is communicating to them without paying much attention to the academic formulas.

As scholars, we need to recognise that, like any other person, we may embrace faulty assumptions and world view beliefs that condition our formulations. In addition to the compelling evidence of scripture, this is also supported by recent secular scholarship. This has made it clear that the formulations of scientists and scholars do not have the status of objective purity they were once thought to have. The prior beliefs, assumptions and prejudices of the scientist or scholar inevitably play a part in shaping these formulations.

In the world of the natural sciences, we may think of the work of Kuhn (1962) in identifying the role of sets of concepts or beliefs, which he called paradigms, in that they provide a framework of scientific endeavour. In the human sciences, we can think of Gadamer’s (1976, p. 9) argument that what he calls our “prejudices” are not groundless biases but the necessary rational framework of “our openness to the world”.

Theology is no exception. Theologians, like any other scholar, use systematic procedures, but there is no theological method that guarantees the true interpretation of scripture. The formulations of theologians are human formulations, with all the limitations that implies.

Imasogie (1993, pp. 25-45) presents a case for a relevant Christian theology in Africa. In doing so, he underscores the fact that theology is always contextually conditioned, so that theology developed in one context should not be regarded as the authority for another context, as has often been the case with Western theology in Africa.

On this ground of presuppositions in scholarly formulations, it is valid to argue that the work of the scholarly community, including that of theology, must be seen as human work that, like any other human work, is always limited and subject to error. This provides a case for a two-way communication.

Scholars can, and should, speak to the rest of the body of Christ but they should also listen just as carefully to what the members of that body outside the academic community are saying to them. They ought to teach and also wait to be taught by others.

The Lord speaks to the body of Christ as one community by his word through the Holy Spirit, according to the gifts given to each. As a result, the scholar can contribute insights not given to others but, equally, others can contribute insights not given to the scholar. A faithful hearing of the word of the Lord requires each one to listen to each of the others.

Factors to Consider in Bridging the Gaps

One may ask, is the situation now hopeless? Before we despair, let us listen to what Tite Tienou says concerning this (1990, p. 56):

*It may yet prove, however, to be providential that there is a gap between academic and popular theology within African Christianity, for the solution to that situation, I suggest, lies uniquely within the reach of African evangelicals. They are, in fact, strategically positioned to assume the theological initiative in Africa by*
implementing a third way in African theology. A way which remains restricted neither to mere scholastic discussions nor to poorly rooted popular theology.

In developing a third way, which gives us hope for bridging the gap, we need to examine three factors that need to be taken into account: the nature of the gaps, the social-cultural factor and the hermeneutical factor.

**Different kinds of gaps**
When we talk of gaps, we are dealing with a very broad subject. The gap between the academic community and the rest of the body of Christ is not the only gap to overcome. We can talk of tribal gaps, a generation gap, a denominational gap, an economic gap, and gaps created by our political affiliations.

These many gaps that are present in the body of Christ make it difficult for Christians to realize the fellowship and unity that are the key to the church’s ministry in the world. Each gap is complex and requires a comprehensive analysis.

This paper attempts to deal only with the gap between the academic community and the rest of God’s people. It is not by coincidence that this gap is dealt with. It is hoped that a solution to the problem of this gap will work to some extent to provide solutions for the other gaps.

**The social-cultural factor**
Victor Cole in his development of “Africanizing the faith” sees culture as the total way of life of a people; it embraces thought patterns, and world and life views (Ngewa, Shaw and Tienou, 1998, p. 20). Complementing this, Albert M. Wolters offers this brief but pregnant definition of a world view. He defines world view (1985, p. 2) as:

_The comprehensive framework of one’s basic beliefs about things._

“Things”, in this definition, covers whatever it is possible to have a belief about, including God and human persons. Beliefs are considered not as feelings or opinions but as making cognitive claims. Framework implies a pattern of beliefs that are not adopted arbitrarily but as providing a coherent framework (Wolters 1985, pp. 2-3).

Following from what Wolters brings to our notice, we come to appreciate the fact that each person has a world view. Culture seems to knit world view beliefs together and gives us identity in the social sense. Though we speak correctly of cultures in Africa, there is a sense in which we can speak of an African culture.

Byang H. Kato (1985, p. 40) makes the following observations:

_It is estimated that between eight hundred and a thousand ethnic groups exist in Africa. Admittedly, certain characteristics may distinguish Africans from non-Africans, such as the former’s practical approach to problems, solving problems more often by compromise than by conflict, and the emphasis on communal life as a family or tribe. But in addition, major differences exist between Africans themselves, such as in language, taboos, marriage pattern, and religions. It is, therefore, difficult to speak of ‘African Culture’ as such. Nevertheless, there are enough similarities to warrant this homogeneous description._

Just as there is this African culture, so there is a European culture, an American culture, and so on. To attempt an understanding of any people using the framework of a world view or culture other than their own is a futile attempt. To understand an African, an understanding of his or her world view and culture must be made a priority just as it must be for understanding Europeans or Americans.

An authentic Christian ministry in Africa, therefore, cannot be one designed within the framework of some other world view or culture considered to be superior because of historical links with Christianity, or for any other reason. It must be one that ministers to Africans within the framework of their own culture and world view.

The situation of many Africans may be likened to the prodigal son, who went on feeding on pig’s food when at home there was more than enough. It is assumed that an African must disregard her own culture and world view and adopt another world view and another supposedly superior culture. This assumption is not only made in the academic field, but it is also made in political, social and economic agendas.

The call to Africans, especially those in the field of African Christian scholarship, is ‘to come back home’. There is plenty at home, in our own cultural traditions, and there is no point in straying to feed on pig’s food—garbage from secularised Western culture. Problems in Africa such as HIV/Aids and the political dilemmas that plague us cannot be solved by borrowing solutions developed in a different cultural context. We may learn from others, of course, but cannot look to others to provide solutions to our problems.
Having said this, it should be emphasized that we are not talking of a return to a world view or culture founded in African traditional religion. It is not a backwards looking recovery of an ideal African past that we need. We need a world view that is governed and grounded in scripture but developed within the unique context of the African tradition and experience.

Imasogie (1993, p. 47) contrasts what he calls the quasi-scientific world view, which influenced the missionaries who came to Africa in the 19th century, with the African world view. He sees traditional Christian theology as being ineffective in Africa because it was conditioned by a quasi-scientific world view which blinds it to, and thereby makes it unresponsive to, the reality of the African’s self-understanding within his own world view.

He explores the African world view by considering four areas namely, the earth, man, man’s place and his utilization of what he considers to be divinely ordained provisions for coping with the uncertainties of life.

It is clear that we cannot accept, without qualification, as valid the African world view that he describes. On the other hand, we cannot ignore it if the Gospel is to penetrate deeply into the life of the African people.

We must do what Christians are called to do with any cultural tradition. We must critically transform it in submission to the biblical revelation of creation, fall and redemption in order to establish a Christian world view suited to the African context. It must be a transformation of the African culture and world view and not its replacement with a foreign product.

The hermeneutical factor

Then there is the need for an appropriate hermeneutic. We cannot afford to take it for granted that the hermeneutic that we have inherited is necessarily the most appropriate one for ensuring that we hear the word of God clearly. We must take a careful look at what we are doing in this area.

Modern philosophical thought has produced a wide range of views in this area. Palmer’s survey of the modern development of hermeneutics (1969, pp. 33-45) traces its beginnings to the practice of a relatively uncritical biblical exegesis. From these beginnings it has broadened into a general theory of interpretation. This had led to successively different approaches.

To name just some of these, hermeneutics has been developed as a general classical philology, as a science of linguistic understanding, as the methodological foundation for the humanities in general, as the historically embedded understanding of our being as humans, and as systems of interpretation, both recollective and iconoclastic, used to reach the meaning behind myths and symbols.

Fokkema and Kunne-Ilbsch (1977, p. 136) summarise this development in three paradigms. The first paradigm is shaped by positivism and views the text as a linguistic document. In this paradigm the interpreter plays no part except to apply the relevant method of interpretation.

The second paradigm views the text as a monument where the linguistic document is only the outer part of the text, and the inner aspect is the culturally defined meaning that is embodied in the text. By applying the appropriate academic method, the interpreter in a different cultural context in a different historical community is able to recapture this inner meaning. The method thought of here is one appropriate to humanities only. In the third paradigm, the text is seen as a sign that signifies, or represents, meaning.

In the first two paradigms, the interpreter plays no role in interpretation other than applying the relevant method to get one universal meaning for all times. In the third paradigm, both the subject and the object are seen as historically defined: That is, they are defined by the historical/cultural context. Here, the interpreter shapes the meaning of the text. The interpreter does not reproduce meaning but produces meaning from the text. The interpreter is actively constructing meaning.

We see from this very limited survey that the hermeneutical factor is a complex one. Even evangelical scholars are divided about the appropriate hermeneutic for interpreting scripture. Some continue to hold the view that a proper hermeneutic method enables us to extract one universal meaning from the text of scripture. Others, with equal respect for the authority of scripture, maintain that the interpreter has a necessary role in shaping meaning from the text in ways that are appropriate to particular historical and cultural situations.

What is certain is that we should make every effort to ensure that we have a proper hermeneutical approach if we are to bridge the gap that this paper is addressing. An authentic Christian ministry in Africa calls for a hermeneutical approach that is sensitive to the African context.
We can only give some brief indications here of the kind of hermeneutic we need. While it needs to be one that is sensitive to the African context, it must not be one whose religious roots are grounded in any part of the created order. As a hermeneutic grounded in the revelation of God in creation, it must assign a significant role to the leading of the Holy Spirit in the interpretive process.

The current HIV/Aids epidemic, that is decimating the African population, illustrates the urgent need for such a hermeneutic. Most of our African Christian training institutions remain insensitive to the epidemic in their teaching programmes.

In Kenya, the Medical Assistance Programme (MAP International), has been developing curriculum material on this issue. It is trying to convince theological and pastoral institutions to adopt this curriculum on the ground that it is absurd for pastors to get into the field unprepared to address this most relevant issue. So far it has had little success. The reason, I believe, is not lack of interest but the lack of an appropriate hermeneutic that would enable these institutions to respond effectively.

**The Way Forward in Bridging the Gap(s)**

It is now important that we focus our attention on how to bridge the existing gap between the academic community and the rest of the body of Christ. As noted earlier, this gap is an important factor in the other gaps that divide the community of faith. The five point proposal that follows is not intended to be exhaustive, but as a stimulus towards what can be done.

**A joint effort by all of God’s people**

As it was noted earlier, scholarly training does not give scholars special access to God that others do not have. As important as this training is, it is still a human endeavour with limitations. It does give scholars insights that others do not have but others also have insights gained from their own experiences that scholars do not have. We all need each other.

For this reason, scholars cannot build the bridge alone. The rest of God’s people cannot trust such a bridge. They will fear that it will break and cause them to drown in the river. If the scholars come together with the rest of the Christian community to look together for the materials to construct the bridge, and labour together in the construction, they will all trust the bridge and agree to use it. In this joint effort of constructing the bridge, no one should assume the superior role.

For this to happen, scholars must act with genuine humility. They must come in the spirit of learning more about God’s message through the rest of God’s people. These people may not express their insights in the sophisticated language of academic life, but in the language of everyday life. Yet they will have a wisdom that does not, and cannot, come from academic endeavour.

Because they have to put aside their academic language, scholars should not think they are coming down to a lower level. They should see themselves as participants in the communion of saints in which all share in accordance with the gifts that God has given to each. In that communion, scholars will help others to recognize unbiblical ideas that shape their world view while others help scholars to recognize unbiblical ideas in the scholarly world view.

This working together should lead all to a humility that, with fear and trembling, acknowledges the role of the Holy Spirit in interpreting scripture. The bridge that we have in mind is not one achieved by human effort alone. This will not work. The bridge that is in view here is one which God by his Spirit enables a weak humanity, with scholars working side by side with others, to build, as guided by his Word in submission to the authority of Christ.

**Christian scholars must break the current academic circle**

It was observed earlier that scholarship developed within the environment of the academic circle has little practical impact at the popular level. In order to overcome this problem, I propose an interaction view of scholarship. This is illustrated in figure 2. On one side we have the training institutions at the undergraduate level, on the other side is the field, and at the top of the triangle, we have training at postgraduate level.
In this interaction model of scholarship, the field interacts with both levels of training. The field as it were, updates the different levels of training with the field actualities. The different levels of training respond to the questions which the field asks. A person training at any level interacts with the field.

In this view, no study is done for its own sake. It always responds to particular needs of the field. For instance, institutions of Christian training, especially theological and pastoral institutions, would have been highly sensitive to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, if this view of scholarship had been followed.

In the interaction view of scholarship, Christian institutions of training may even facilitate study outside their formal curriculum as long as the study is responding to particular needs in the field. It overcomes the danger that academic study will deal with pseudo-problems developed within the environment of the academic circle while leaving the real problems of human life in the world unattended. Absurd though this is it does, unfortunately, happen.

The interaction view gives us great hope of bridging the gap between the academic community and the rest of God’s people. As scholars we are always in consultation with the rest of God’s people in our pursuit of our scholarship.

Community training programmes
The All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) convened a symposium at Mombasa in November 1991 to tackle the subject of “problems and promises of Africa towards and beyond the year 2001”. Here it was observed that education for all was needed:

*What then should be expected of ‘education for all’? The present classical training in theology is based on a hierarchical pyramid in which pastors are trained first with the expectation that they may in turn train lay members of the church. Community education for all, however, focuses on all God’s people in the church and is carried out by the trainer team comprising both lay members and pastors. The training should be held in parishes, lay training centres, in seminars and through Bible studies at all levels (Karamaga 1993, p. 19).*

This is exactly the kind of educational programme that we need in Africa. We may call them “community training programmes”, meaning educational programmes that train people in the context of the communities where they live and work. Such programmes have been carried out for some time under such names as Theological Education by Extension, Biblical Education by Extension, Vocational Bible Study and so on.

What we need to do, however, is to stop making the community training programme a department of other institutional structures. Instead we should regard other forms of training as servants of community training programmes.
When community training programmes function as departments of other institutions, they tend to be choked up by other concerns of these institutions to the extent that little or no support goes to the community programme. In my interaction with the national coordinators of community training in two key denominations, I have found them concerned that such important programmes are not a priority in the agendas of their churches.

It is for this reason that I propose that community training programmes should be the primary responsibility of autonomous organisations dedicated to this task. The educational priority for the Christian community should be community training with other programmes serving this endeavour. We can illustrate this in the three diagrams in figures 3 and 4.

This does not mean that academic institutions no longer have a valuable place. Our continent may be proud of the network of Christian academic institutions. All these are still needed and deserve the continuing support of the churches.

However, the time has come to direct our resources, manpower, and effort to the establishment of effective community training programmes as necessary partners of the existing training facilities. This will help us in three ways:

Firstly, it will encourage scholars to appreciate the many opportunities for service that exist in the body of Jesus Christ outside the framework of academic institutions.

Secondly, it will enable training at all levels to develop the needed practical relevance. In doing so it will enable penetration of the wider community and contribute to bridging the gap between the academic community and the rest of God’s people.

Thirdly, it will ease the scramble for teaching positions in the existing Christian training institutions, which now seems to be the trend, by opening other opportunities for teaching ministry.

Community training programmes fit very well in the environment of the interaction view of scholarship. They provide a context of interaction in which the academic community can come together with the rest of the body of Christ in the recognition that God deals with all and God uses all.

We should get books out of the shelves
We noted that most of our African brothers and sisters have a low interest in reading, especially works that stimulate thinking. If literature is to have any real impact on the church at large, we must get it out of the library and book store shelves.
While publishing more books suitable to a popular audience is important, double effort is needed to ensure that the published materials reach the people. Materials with depth of insight should be written in a manner accessible to all. Where technical terms are essential, they need to be defined in accessible ways.

To encourage more reading, firstly, we can encourage reading clubs. This means we look for a community of people, create an interest in them, assist them to prepare a list of literature, then commit them to read from the list and finally to meet together for evaluation and discussion.

Secondly, our people should be kept informed of the useful available resources, their contents, and price and how they can easily get these materials. These resources should be presented in a way that will appeal to people.

Thirdly, we should encourage the equipping of libraries in our local churches for the sake of those who may have interest in reading but cannot afford to buy such books.

Fourthly, we can transfer the content of some of the materials to radio and videotapes. This is important because many of our people may be better listeners and viewers than readers.

Fifthly, we need to encourage mobile Christian book stores and libraries. Creating a reading interest in our people and getting books out of the shelves is a very difficult thing to do, but if this can be a way of bridging the gap, it must not be left untried.

**Different academic callings are equally callings for service**

The idea of sphere sovereignty and sphere universality as developed by the Dutch Christian philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd can assist us in recognizing the importance of different callings of academic life.

The principle of sphere sovereignty in social relations, developed originally by Abraham Kuyper, is that each kind of societal structure—family, church, state, school, etc.—is a unique sphere of relationship with a unique structure and unity and with an authority to govern affairs within its sphere. Dooyeweerd developed this idea further with his modal theory that analyses the structure of reality in terms of fifteen modal aspects, or spheres.

Applying this modal theory to social structures leads to the recognition of a modal founding function and a modal qualifying, or leading, function for each of the sovereign spheres of society. For example, the family is founded in the biotic modality—the modality of organic life—and qualified or led by the ethical modality.

The complementary principle of sphere universality, specifies that each of the modal spheres has an internal structure that reflects the whole of created reality in all spheres. Applied to societal structures, this means that, while each societal type is qualified or led by a specific modality, each kind of structure also functions in all possible modalities. For example, the family though qualified by the ethical function, or modality, also functions in all other modal aspects such as juridical, historical, economic, social, faith aspect and so on (Kalsbeek, 1975, pp. 91-109).

However, Dooyeweerd’s modal theory is not merely a tool for analysing societal structures. It is an analysis of the fundamental structure of created reality. The different modal aspects, or spheres, are aspects of created reality. As such they are significant for understanding the academic disciplines. As theoretical disciplines, each academic discipline is qualified by one or another of the modal spheres on which it focuses its attention. However, the principle of sphere universality means that the internal structure of a discipline reflects the whole of created reality in all spheres.

Although each discipline reflects the whole of reality, the coherence of reality is not given in the formulations of any discipline. It is a religious coherence that is expressed in every discipline but is given by the Word of God, the Creator and Redeemer, to whose authority every discipline alike is subject.

Unfortunately, Christian thought has too often embraced a dualism that denies in practice both the religious coherence of reality and the subjection of all academic thought to the authority of the Word of God. On this dualist view, theology, together with any disciplines closely allied with it, is the academic discipline that deals with sacred reality where the authority of the Word of God is paramount. Other disciplines are regarded as dealing with secular reality governed by secular human authority.

We may think of a Christian professor of history in a university. As a secular calling, the study of history, while a valid activity, is not one through which we can expect to meet God. For this, the professor of history must go to church to be led to the knowledge of God through the professional work of a theologian. The history professor is therefore supposed to leave his or her history uniform at the university and put on in the church the uniform of theology, designed by the theologian, in order to meet God.
One of the consequences of this is that the theologian does not meet the history professor as an academic peer with whom there can be interaction that mutually advances the understanding of their common faith. In church, the history professor is just another one of the people to be instructed in the faith by the theologian.

A second consequence is that the instruction in the faith that the history professor received in the church has little relevance for his or her calling in history. As an instruction tailored by a theologian in the categories of a theological discipline, it is not suited to the quite different academic discipline of history.

What we experience here is a gap between two members of the body of Christ who both follow an academic calling. Because they are not suited to the quite different needs of the historian, the products of academic theology will have, at best, a limited impact on his or her academic life. Because of this gap the professor of history is likely to take up and use, without critical examination, tools that are currently being used in the secular academic environment.

Among other dangers, this leaves the professor of history open to the adoption of an historicism that absolutises history, sees it as the source of the coherence of meaning for secular reality. The principle of sphere universality explains how such a view of history is possible when history is cut off from subjection to the authority of the Word of God. Since its internal structure reflects the whole of reality, it can be thought that the unity of history is the unity of reality.

A helpful contribution to our better understanding of this issue is that of Al Wolters (1985). Jerram Barrs of L’Abri Fellowship, says of this work:

A most powerful book. An excellent introduction to a biblical world view. Al Wolters develops the biblical themes of Creation, Fall and Redemption and shows us the need to subject all our thinking to them so that we may be those who truly live under Christ’s Lordship (from the back cover).

Wolters’ reformational view recognizes different academic callings with theology as one of these callings. God is at work in all disciplines and is reconciling all to himself. As these disciplines are directed to God, they become holy, when they are directed away from God, they, including theology, become worldly.

The recognition of different callings helps to bridge the gap created by the dualistic view of reality, enabling Christians to effectively penetrate the wider community with the salt and light of the gospel.

Taking our example of the Christian history professor, then, he or she does not need to put on the outfit of a theologian in order to meet God. Like the theologian, God encounters the historian in the practice of the academic discipline of history as the historian’s heart is directed towards God in submission to the authority of Christ in this practice. In doing so, God sanctifies the historical study, so that it is as much a holy study as theology.

When the history professor who pursues his or her calling in this way as a holy calling meets the theologian in the body of Christ, the historian is able to help the theologian as a fellow academic to recognise false views of history that are shaping the theologian’s world view. At the same time the theologian is able to help the historian as a fellow academic to recognise idols that shape his or her historical study.

The relationship here within the body of Christ is not that of master/servant but of servant/servant under the mastery of Christ. Both parties recognize their limitation and the need for each other in their different callings in the service of one Lord. The gap is bridged when each recognizes the need for the other.

A Practical Attempt at Bridging the Gap

At this point it is appropriate to briefly introduce the Community Penetration Christian Ministry (CPCM) as one attempt to deal with this problem. CPCM is a newly founded Christian organisation based in Kenya that aims to help Christians fully appreciate God in Christ by establishing ministries focussed on bridging the gap between Christian scholarship and the community of believers. The goal is that the community of believers will be equipped to penetrate contemporary society with the salt of the gospel.

Those who wish to know more about this ministry can do so by visiting the website at: http://amani.org.au/cpcm or by sending an email to: isabecpcm@africaonline.co.ke

References


**Endnote**

I acknowledge the contribution of my friend and colleague, Stuart Fowler, in assisting with my understanding of these concepts. He is not responsible, however, for any deficiencies there may be in my use of them.