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Ubuntu as a Corrective in Mission[1]

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Abstract

The modern mission movement had a heavy emphasis on the 'lostness' of the unreached. However, this emphasis goes astray when it produces pride, as if the missionary comes with the gospel and has nothing to learn from the people they live among. One way to correct this error is to integrate insights from Desmond Tutu's ubuntu theology, which emphasizes that the individual grows in humanity through relationships. In biblical terms, each person is made in God's image, and only together does each person or community become who God intends them to be. Thus, this article proposes that mission needs to consider ubuntu alongside the emphasis on 'lostness'. Such an approach requires humility and vulnerability on the missionary's part.

Résumé

Le mouvement missionnaire moderne avait fortement mis l'accent sur le caractère « perdu » des laissés-pour-compte. Cependant, cette insistance s'égare lorsqu'elle engendre l'orgueil, comme si le missionnaire arrivait avec l'évangile et n'avait rien à apprendre des gens parmi lesquels il vit. Une façon de corriger cette erreur est d'intégrer les idées de la théologie *ubuntu* de Desmond Tutu, qui met l'accent sur le fait que l'individu grandit en humanité à travers les relations. En termes bibliques, chaque personne est faite à l'image de Dieu, et ce n'est qu'ensemble que chaque personne ou communauté devient ce que Dieu veut qu'elle soit. Cet article propose donc que la mission prenne en compte l'*ubuntu* en même

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temps que l'accent mis sur la « perte ». Une telle approche exige humilité et vulnérabilité de la part du missionnaire.

Resumo

O movimento missionário moderno enfatizou muito a "perda" dos não alcançados. No entanto, esta ênfase desvia-se quando produz orgulho, como se o missionário viesse com o evangelho e não tivesse nada a aprender com as pessoas entre as quais vive. Uma forma de corrigir este erro é integrar as ideias da teologia ubuntu de Desmond Tutu, que sublinha que o indivíduo cresce em humanidade através das relações. Em termos bíblicos, cada pessoa é feita à imagem de Deus, e só em conjunto é que cada pessoa ou comunidade se torna aquilo que Deus pretende que seja. Assim, este artigo propõe que a missão precisa de considerar o ubuntu juntamente com a ênfase na "perda". Tal abordagem requer humildade e vulnerabilidade da parte do missionário.

Keywords

ubuntu, Desmond Tutu, mission, *imago Dei*, humility, interdependence

Mots-clés

ubuntu, Desmond Tutu, mission, *imago Dei*, humilité, interdépendance

Palavras-chave

ubuntu, Desmond Tutu, missão, *imago Dei*, humildade, interdependência

Introduction

The history of cross-cultural missions is a mixed one. Frequently when a missionary serves cross-culturally, the missionary — consciously or unconsciously — attempts to impose their own culture in the process of sharing the gospel with their hearers.[2] This mixing of the gospel message and the missionary's culture has far-reaching consequences. At times the gospel has

[2] For instance, from a Kenyan perspective (specifically Kikuyu) prior to Kenya's independence, Mary Nyambura Muchiri describes her own experience: "the missionaries insisted that one chose a Western name for baptism, 'in order to radically cut oneself from traditional values and identify oneself with the new community of Christians'." Muchiri, "The Significance of Names to Christians in Africa: A Preliminary Investigation," 2. In Kenya the names taken at baptism are often referred to as 'Christian names,' even if they are Western names like 'Susan' or 'Fredrick.' Muchiri likewise clarifies, "I have used the term 'Western' deliberately because I do not think there is anything inherently Christian in a Western name;" p. 7.

positive, transformative effects on the receiving culture, and other times the missionary's culture is arrogantly, destructively imposed upon the hearers. The ubuntu theology of Desmond Tutu (1931–2021) offers a much-needed corrective for missions.[3]

The Problem of Condescension in Missionaries

The modern evangelical mission movement has heavily emphasized the 'lostness' of the unreached. The passion to share the gospel with those who are lost in sin compelled many missionaries to travel far from their cultures, sacrificing the comforts of home for the sake of the opportunity to tell others about Christ. The Bible does indeed teach that the state of humanity after the Fall in Genesis 3 is one of slavery to sin, and that the effects of sin are far-reaching and deadly.

However, the Bible also demonstrates that humans were originally created good, bearing God's image, and this image, though damaged, endures even after the Fall (see Gen 5:1–3 and 9:5–6). An over-emphasis on the destructive power of sin and its effect on humanity goes astray if isolated from other biblical teachings about humanity and their cultures: if the *imago Dei* is forgotten or treated as secondary, a dangerous imbalance arises. Or, one group of people might deny that another group also bears the *imago Dei*. One danger of this overemphasis is pride. It can seem as if the missionary teaches others the truth of the gospel and yet believes they do not need the other, having nothing to learn from them.

Such a perspective produces condescension, as seen when missionaries refer to non-Christians in derogatory terms. Unfortunately, John S. Mbiti's 1972 article, "African Indigenous Culture in Relation to Evangelism and Church Development," published fifty-three years ago, still resonates today. Mbiti's piece catalogues some of the derogatory terms used: "'heathen,' 'pagans,' 'primitives,' 'wretched,' 'savages,' 'children of Ham,' 'the lost souls,' etc. were household words in the lips and pens of western missionaries and some of the African converts, describing African societies and their ways of life."[4] Unsurprisingly, in light of such views, the converts were taught to step away from their indigenous culture and embrace the missionaries' western cultures[5] — they were pushed to become proselytes. Mbiti condemns such whole-sale rejection of indigenous cultures.

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[3] *Ubuntu* is a view that continues to be much discussed and applies to various issues, such as recently by Harvey Kwiyani on the topic of nationalism in his "Christian nationalism, tribalism, and ubuntu in African Christianity."

[4] John Mbiti, "African Indigenous Culture in Relation to Evangelism and Church Development," 80.

[5] Mbiti, "African Indigenous Culture," 82, 83.

> Missionary culture told Africa in effect that 'unless you are (culturally) circumcised, you cannot inherit the Kingdom of God.' So, unless they mutilated a large portion of their cultural foreskins, unless they became culturally westernized, and then Lutheranized, Methodistized, Anglicanized, Roman Catholicized, Presbyterianized, Africans could not inherit one centimetre of the Christian Faith. We were told that if we wanted Christianity (and this we had been persuaded passionately to want), we had to pay the price: we had to lay down our cultures, despise them as the missionaries did, condemn them as the missionaries did, and run away from them since missionaries had declared them to be dangerously demonic.[6]

To speak of culture is to speak of a complex relationship of beliefs, values, and practices that provide unity and commonality to a group of people. Culture is not static but changes with time, and therefore Christians in any culture need to constantly assess what is happening in their context and how to respond.

From Mbiti's perspective, western missionaries saw nothing of value in indigenous culture and sought to replace it with their own. Mbiti repeatedly insists that not everything in indigenous culture is good or worthy of bringing into the church; however, his point is that the missionary rejection of indigenous culture as a whole was wrong and seriously damaged the church's foundation.[7] Regarding the relationship of culture to Christianity, he concludes,

> Christianity seems to lose in the long run whenever it becomes too intimately linked with any given culture. Its very universality forbids it to become too strongly allied to any local culture. We may legitimately Christianize culture — and that is what one hopes may be done in Africa — but we are moving in the wrong direction once we reverse the order and begin to culturalize Christianity.[8]

To Mbiti, what Christianity needs is a thoughtful, careful analysis of culture, in order to know what aspects of culture the church can embrace and which it should reject, because "no community of people can exist without a culture."[9] At this juncture, it also helps to note that Jesus enters into the Jewish culture to reveal himself, and indeed redeems aspects of culture to communicate God's nature and plan. The Incarnation makes it clear that God takes on flesh — which includes culture.

Mbiti appeals to biblical anthropology, noting it "would seem to be against a total rejection of one's culture since God loves man within the cultural context. Therefore the Christian Faith cannot redeem indigenous peoples minus their cultures — a meaningful redemption of man presupposes the

[6] Mbiti, "African Indigenous Culture," 82.
[7] Mbiti, "African Indigenous Culture;" e.g., 79, 81, 82, and 83.
[8] Mbiti, "African Indigenous Culture," 84; see also 88.
[9] Mbiti, "African Indigenous Culture," 89.

redemption of his culture as well."[10] In short, theological examples can be multiplied to show that God works within and through culture, sometimes rejecting elements and other times redeeming elements of cultures. Therefore, to have a reductionist or simplistic approach to culture simply will not do.

In Ogbu Kalu's view, "a crucial aspect of missionary attitude to traditional culture was that in spite of the biblical doctrine of creation, 'the missionaries' image of the non-Europeans blended with the existing cultural arrogance and with the pseudo-scientific argument for racial superiority' which characterized the 19th Century."[11] Writing from a Kenyan perspective, Mbiti contends that, "Almost everything in African culture was tabooed in the course of evangelism. Sin, rather than grace, became the central pass-word in evangelism and Church development."[12] What Kalu describes of that era in Igboland fits well with Mbiti's statement that western missionaries tended to look down upon their host cultures.[13]

Mbiti and Kalu raise the issue of the relationship between Christianity and culture, which relationship has not always been carefully conceived in mission efforts. Kwame Bediako's magisterial *Theology and Identity* demonstrates that Christianity and culture are in a constant interplay; this is a vital, continuous aspect of a culture coming to terms with Christianity and making Christianity properly 'at home' in that culture without domesticating it.[14] The Christian response to any culture should not be total embrace or total rejection, but thoughtful analysis and response. As Andrew F. Walls highlighted, "It is the basic missionary experience to live on terms set by someone else,"[15] and yet this foundational truth is where many missionaries failed. They were often

[10] Mbiti, "African Indigenous Culture," 89.

[11] Ogbu U. Kalu, "Missionaries, Colonial Government and Secret Societies in South-Eastern Igboland, 1920-1950," 79–80; citing P. D. Curtin, "Scientific Racism and the British Theory of Empire," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 2, no. 1 (December 1960): 40–51, p. 48.

[12] Mbiti, "African Indigenous Culture," 82.

[13] Kalu, "Missionaries, Colonial Government and Secret Societies," 80.

[14] Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa*, Regnum Studies in Mission, Oxford, UK: Regnum, 1992. I am indebted to Joshua Barron for informing me that the 'at home' phrase originated with Frederick Burkewood Welbourn and Bethwell A. Ogot, *A Place to Feel at Home: A Study of Two Independent Churches in Western Kenya* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966). Andrew F. Walls argued for the necessity of "making Christianity at home in the life of a people: rooting the gospel in its culture, its language, its habits of thought — indigenizing it in fact, making the church 'a place to feel at home';" Walls, "Towards Understanding Africa's Place in Christian History," 188.

[15] Andrew F. Walls, "Africa in Christian History: Retrospect and Prospect," 96–97.

unwilling to live on their hosts' terms and failed to treat their host cultures with respect and humility.

Roland Allen's *Missionary Methods: God's Plan for Missions According to Paul* assesses modern missions and concludes that much of it does not adopt Paul's method, in part because

> We modern teachers from the West are by nature and by training persons of restless activity and boundless self-confidence. We tend to assume an attitude of superiority towards all Eastern peoples and point to our material progress as the justification of our attitude. . . . We are accustomed to an elaborate system of church organization and a peculiar code of morality. We cannot imagine any Christianity worthy of the name existing without the elaborate machinery we have invented. We naturally expect our converts to adopt from us not only essentials but also accidentals. We desire to impart not only the gospel, but also the law and the customs.[16]

In other words, there is a form of self-deceit which can lead missionaries to assume their own culture is superior to others. This yields a variety of problems. One of those problems is a failure of ubuntu: a failure to appreciate the other for who they are, for their own culture, and a realization of human interdependence. It is the suggestion of this article that there is therefore a theological reason for this distorted attitude: an over-emphasis on the doctrine of sin to the virtual exclusion of the doctrine of the *imago Dei* and its impact on cultures.

The *Imago Dei*

A strong emphasis on sin in individuals and in culture, while true, is not the entire or even the first truth the Bible teaches about human beings. The creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2 start by describing humanity as part of God's good creation, bearing a special dignity by virtue of God's gift of the *imago Dei*. This image is both a divinely-bestowed gift and a responsibility or calling. Furthermore, the *imago Dei* has a relational aspect to it: Adam and Eve *together* reflect God.[17] As mentioned, this image is damaged but not destroyed by sin, as Genesis 5 and 9 demonstrate: even after sin has entered the scene, wreaking havoc, Adam still passes on the image to his son Seth, and murder is expressly prohibited because it is an offense to the God whose image humanity bears.

The *imago Dei* is a foundational doctrine. It portrays humanity as unique, the crown of creation. This means that humans have an inherent dignity conferred upon them by God. Genesis 1 establishes that God's design is for male

[16] Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: God's Plan for Missions According to Paul*, xviii.

[17] For more on this topic, see Joshua Robert Barron, "Mutual Submission, Mutual Respect: Reciprocal *enkanyit* in Ephesians 5 in the Maasai context," 7–8.

and female together to reflect the triune (relational) God; therefore, the image contains a relational aspect. David Kirwa Tarus emphasizes the force of the Old Testament teaching, noting, "There is a radical difference between the Genesis account and the ancient Near East account of the image. While the ANE limits imaging to kings, Genesis opens up the image to all humanity. Men and women, kings, priests, and ordinary people, are all image bearers of God."[18] The fact that in the Bible *all* people are image bearers is particularly significant for the discussion that follows.

The presence of the image is one reason that human cultures cannot be discounted as entirely evil or beyond divine redemption. By an act of divine grace, the image remains and God's common grace restrains the full effects of sin. Further, general revelation bears witness to God, so human cultures retain traces of goodness and aspects that point to God. The New Testament testifies to redemption and the restoration of the warped image for those who are in Christ. Revelation in particular highlights that God will not destroy cultures at the end of time, but instead bring into the new Jerusalem the redeemed people along with worthy cultural aspects. This clarifies God's plan includes the redemption of cultures, bringing their 'treasures' into eternity.

Imago Dei and *Ubuntu*

Sin, which entered the biblical narrative after creation, has at times dominated missiological praxis to such an extent that the image of God has been neglected, leading to detrimental misunderstandings of individuals and cultures. The doctrine of the *imago Dei*, clarified by ubuntu theology, provides an enriching perspective that can mitigate against this particular flaw, for the sake of the present and future practice of missions.[19]

Tutu's ubuntu theology teaches that humans develop in relationships, not in isolation.[20] A person is not a person alone; rather, the individual grows

[18] David Kirwa Tarus, "*Mtu ni Watu* ('A Person is Persons'): The Contribution of an African Traditional Anthropology to an Understanding of the Christian Doctrine of the Imago Dei," 5.

[19] C. Banda is concerned about the looseness with which *ubuntu* is used, so here I have focused on Desmond Tutu's definition specifically. Banda provides a helpful overview of ubuntu's usage and argues that ubuntu must not be limited to "virtuous-communitarian terms for promoting social cohesion as is the current trend" but also address "an existential perspective of human flourishing or human wellbeing;" Banda, "*Ubuntu* as human flourishing? An African traditional religious analysis of *ubuntu* and its challenge to Christian anthropology," 205. I suggest that Tutu's actions show his commitment to human wellbeing as part of his belief in *ubuntu*.

[20] Tutu is one of the most well-known proponents of *ubuntu*, but he is certainly not the only Christian theologian in Africa to build upon the African view of humanity as relational.

in humanity through relationships with others. Similarly, Malawian theologian Augustine Chingwala Musopole describes the chiChewa term *uMunthu* as "authentic human character." Musopole argues that what makes *uMunthu* "critical to African philosophy (ways of wisdom) and religion (ways of relating with reverence) is the fact that for both to be credible, they need to be embodied. In other words, both must be lived, made incarnate in one's life for a community-in-communion."[21] What is clear from Musopole is that *uMunthu* grows and reveals itself in relationships. It cannot remain purely interior or individualistic.

Ubuntu involves flourishing and wholeness in the context of interdependence.[22] In Tutu's terms, "Our humanity . . . is caught up in one another's."[23] However, it is obvious that interdependence and valuing differences among humans is not always the reality. There is an important critique to note: sometimes the concept of ubuntu is misused to privilege some persons over others. For instance, Musa Dube et al. examine how ubuntu and patriarchy interact in Botswana.[24] They ask, "How do we explain the beautiful ideal of *botho/ubuntu* and its co-existence with patriarchy?"[25] After examining some specific rituals — marriage preparations and preparing for a new baby, for instance — they conclude that "*botho/ubuntu* activities and spirituality, therefore, have the potential for providing a feminist space of affirming and caring for human life. . . . The examined cases, however, indicate that *botho/ubuntu* co-exists with patriarchy, which creates and maintains gender inequalities."[26] The authors believe that women can use the *botho/ubuntu* ethic to empower themselves within this context, and that they could attempt to re-write patriarchal norms, but the conclusion seems to be that patriarchy indicates a failure of ubuntu.

Ideally, in ubuntu, characteristics like compassion, hospitality, and warmth towards fellow humans are prized.[27] This view of humans focuses on the relational aspect of human life.[28] Because it is relational and values differences

[21] Augustine Chingwala Musopole, *uMunthu Theology: An Introduction*, 30.
[22] Tutu and Tutu, *Made for Goodness*, 47.
[23] Tutu with Abrams, *God has a Dream*, 25.
[24] Musa W. Dube et al., "*Botho/Ubuntu:* Community Building and Gender Constructions in Botswana," 5, 6, and 7.
[25] Dube et al., "*Botho/Ubuntu*," 7; emphasis original.
[26] Dube et al., "*Botho/Ubuntu*," 19; emphasis original.
[27] Tutu, *God has a Dream*, Kindle locations 314, 316, and 321; Tutu, *In God's Hands: The Archbishop of Canterbury's Lent Book 2015*, Kindle location 257.
[28] A practical, accessible introduction to *ubuntu* can be found in Mungi Ngomane's *Everyday Ubuntu: Living Better Together, The African Way*.

among individuals, ubuntu "does not denigrate individuality," but places it within the context of community.[29] Indeed, Battle argues,

> To become a healthy person we must be fully human both as a person in community and as a self-differentiated person. My argument, however, is that the very act of self-differentiation is itself the beauty of Ubuntu. You cannot know you are unique or beautiful or intelligent without the reference point of a community in which such attributes become intelligible.[30]

Therefore, ubuntu prizes both individuality and community.

While ubuntu is focused on the inherently relational nature of humans, it also teaches that an individual's own level of ubuntu can change, in the sense that the individual can increase or decrease in those qualities which mark humanness — they have the potential to become more or less humble and caring, for instance. A person may not recognize their interdependence and treat other humans poorly, and therefore they lack ubuntu. Referring to God's declaration in Genesis 2 that it is not good for man to be alone, Tutu declares, "that is the point of the story. It is that none of us could ever be human in isolation, in stark solitude. I need other human beings to *help me to become human* in my turn."[31]

In biblical terms, each person is made in God's image, and only in relationship with God and one another can each person or community become who God intends them to be. Therefore, rightly understood, an ubuntu perspective inculcates humility, because in this perspective, humans need one other to help each other become more fully human.[32] Tutu contends,

> None of us can be totally self-sufficient; the totally self-sufficient one is in fact sub-human, so we are meant to celebrate the fact that we don't have everything. I don't have all the attributes: I lack in many areas, so that I can know my utter need of you and all that you bring.[33]

To put it starkly, "We are made with inbuilt insufficiency so that we can know our desperate need of the other, of the one who makes up what is lacking in

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[29] Michael Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*, 42. He elsewhere clarifies that *ubuntu* is about "symbiotic and cooperative relationships — neither the parasitic and destructive relationships of codependence nor the draining and alienating relationships of competition." Battle, *Ubuntu: I in You and You in Me*, 2.

[30] Battle, *Ubuntu*, 8.

[31] Tutu, *In God's Hands*, 33; emphasis added.

[32] For more on intellectual humility, see David Tarus, "The Significance of Intellectual Humility for Theologians Today;" Stephen T. Pardue, *The Mind of Christ: Humility and the Intellect in Early Christian Theology*.

[33] Tutu, *In God's Hands*, 34–35.

me."[34] It could be said that the goodness humans were created with includes this 'inbuilt insufficiency,' as paradoxical as that might sound.

In Tutu's writings and his legacy, he showed not just his commitment to a relational view of humanity, but his outworking of that relational view

> A person with *ubuntu* is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are.[35]

He immediately reaffirms, "What dehumanizes you inexorably dehumanizes me."[36] In the face of the horrors of apartheid and those who perpetuated it, the Archbishop still clung to the belief that "In the process of dehumanizing another, in inflicting untold harm and suffering, inexorably the perpetrator was being dehumanized as well. I used to say that the oppressor was dehumanized as much as, if not more than, the oppressed . . .."[37] Tutu's commitment to justice, specifically restorative justice, comes through clearly here. In his view, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) requirement that a person who pled guilty would receive amnesty meant the person must take responsibility for their wrongdoing: it was an act of taking accountability for an offense.[38] It also affirmed the belief that the "perpetrator can act differently," that they can change and do what is right.[39]

This is not to suggest that the TRC was perfect, but it was nevertheless vital and significant. However, neither in Tutu's view nor others' views was the TRC without its flaws and significant failures regarding ubuntu. For instance, Jaco Barnard-Naudé argues that the TRC did not provide sufficient reparation to victims. He argues that even when apologies were offered within the TRC context, what was communicated was that the apology was always going to be accepted and acceptable. This would therefore indicate that the apology was superfluous, and that shame (linked to the apology) was not addressed. Barnard-Naudé asks, "What sort of instance of the Law *constrains*, instead of promotes, the experience of shame for wrongs done?"[40] In his view, the failures of the TRC continue to haunt South Africans.

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[34] Tutu, *In God's Hands*, 38; see also Kindle location 323.
[35] Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, 31; emphasis original.
[36] Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, 31; see also 54–55.
[37] Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, 103.
[38] Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, 54–55.
[39] Tutu and Tutu, *Made for Goodness*, 103.
[40] Jaco Barnard-Naudé, *Spectres of Reparation in South Africa: Re-Encountering the Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, 64; emphasis original.

Others have criticized or rejected ubuntu on the basis that it is sometimes appealed to by those who reinforce patriarchy. On this issue, Lillykutty Abraham and Krishna V. P. Prabha conclude that

> we can be assured that *ubuntu* is not an impractical philosophy of life. It is possible that adherence to *ubuntu* can transform a male-dominated society into an egalitarian one, recognizing the space of every individual. This would probably be a possible solution to the increasing violence against women and girls. If *ubuntu* begins to be practiced, the hegemonic masculinity that considers it normal for women to be treated as objects will be broken.[41]

In other words, their conclusion is that when properly applied, ubuntu would not support patriarchy: "an *ubuntu*-filled mind is the seat of solidarity and care. This, in turn, would aid in the establishment of an egalitarian society in which dehumanized girls and women have a place and their angst is transformed into contentment and pride in being women."[42]

Acknowledging failures of the TRC and misuses of ubuntu, it is still argued that Tutu's ubuntu theology offers transformative power. One implication of it is that the individual need not be fearful of or threatened by the differences in others, but rather can choose with humility to celebrate and be enriched by them. Tutu describes this as an 'exhilarating' discovery that the other person is differently gifted by God.[43] Indeed, the many differences among humans "make for a rich diversity to be celebrated for the sake of the unity that underlies them. We are different so that we can know our need of one another, for no one is ultimately self-sufficient. The completely self-sufficient person would be subhuman."[44] Since ubuntu assumes interdependence, it therefore presupposes a willingness to acknowledge one's need for others and — particularly pertinent in conversations about missions — to learn from others with humility and the understanding that I need that person just as much as they need me, so that together we may grow in imaging God, in the ubuntu for which God designed people.

Along with humility, vulnerability is necessary for ubuntu. Battle emphasizes, "ubuntu, for Tutu, is the environment of vulnerability that builds true community."[45] Vulnerability is not peripheral to but is necessary for the practice of ubuntu, because "'the scripture says, people are made for togetherness, people are made for fellowship.' And we are made for fellowship

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[41] Lillykutty Abraham and Krishna V. P. Prabha, "The Angst of the Dehumanized: *Ubuntu* for Solidarity," *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 9; emphasis original.

[42] Abraham and Prabha, "The Angst of the Dehumanized," 10; emphasis original.

[43] Tutu, *In God's Hands*, 39. Tutu was aware of the danger of prioritizing harmony without consensus, which could bring about abuses; Battle, *Reconciliation*, 51–52.

[44] Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, 265.

[45] Battle, *Reconciliation*, 40.

because only in a vulnerable set of relationships are we able to recognize that our humanity is bound up in the humanity of others."[46] To cooperate with others, instead of competing, requires openness and a willingness to think of others. As Battle puts it, "ubuntu reorients our vision. In our individual consciousness, we must learn to see self in the other — the greatest other being God."[47] So ubuntu requires a humble, vulnerable mindset.

Tutu provides a biblical example of one whose view of the 'other' was transformed. He recounts Paul's encounter with Christ on the Damascus road, followed by God commanding Ananias to assist the former persecutor.

> Ananias remonstrated with the Lord, quite aghast that he should do anything to help that so-and-so who had come from Jerusalem to wreak havoc with the Lord's followers. The reluctant Ananias was persuaded to go, however, and what I have always found intriguing is the greeting with which Ananias saluted the formerly predatory Saul. Quite amazingly, really staggeringly, Ananias addresses him as 'Brother Saul' (Acts 9:1–19).[48]

In this account, Ananias recognizes that Saul is now a follower of Jesus and a 'brother' in Christ; this realization requires vulnerability and humility on Ananias's part to change his view of the former persecutor.

However, does this apply to non-Christians? After all, Ananias is addressing a fellow Christ-follower, and thus the label 'brother' applies, as hard as it must have been for Ananias to adjust his thinking about Saul. In other words, does *ubuntu* only apply to those within one's own group, while outsiders remain sub-human? Should Christians apply an ubuntu perspective only to fellow Christians? Tutu's emphatic response is 'no', because the creation account shows that all humans are created in God's image. Therefore, Tutu speaks of the one 'human family' to which all humans belong, without exception.[49] The teaching that all humans bear this image and have inherent, God-given dignity is one of the doctrines that inspired Tutu's fight against apartheid and leading the TRC after Nelson Mandela became president.[50]

The desire to bring victims and perpetrators together, asking the offenders to confess their wrongs and thereby give some release and dignity to the victim, was naturally a painful, difficult process. Tutu confesses freely that, "frequently we in the commission were quite appalled at the depth of depravity to which human beings could sink and we would, most of us, say that those who

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[46] Battle, *Reconciliation*, 40–41; quoting Tutu, sermon at Birmingham Cathedral, 12 April 1988, p. 3.

[47] Battle, *Ubuntu: I in You and You in Me*, 13.

[48] Tutu, *In God's Hands*, 43.

[49] Tutu, *In God's Hands*, e.g., 35, 40, 42, 97, and 98.

[50] Nelson Mandela (1918–2013) was South Africa's first post-apartheid president (1994–1999).

committed such dastardly deeds were monsters because the deeds were monstrous."[51] The commission heard terrible stories of the depths of human depravity which could have left them quite pessimistic toward those confessing. Were such people monsters?

Despite the disturbing reports he heard, Tutu rejects that: "Theology reminded me that, however diabolical the act, it did not turn the perpetrator into a demon." He reasons thus: if the offenders were considered monsters,

> then we were thereby letting accountability go out the window because we were then declaring that they were not moral agents to be held responsible for the deeds they had committed. Much more importantly, it meant that we abandoned all hope of their being able to change for the better.[52]

Choosing to forgive the offender was an act not of forgetting a wrong, but rather of liberation and restoration of the divinely-given ability to create new relationships and self-narratives.[53] Tutu's stance in the TRC reveals the foundational nature of his belief that each person bears the image, and that even a horrible person can change and reflect that image more fully.

In part because of the Bible's teaching on the relational, interdependent image in all people (which aligns with ubuntu's claim), Tutu rightly reads the Bible as a radical, subversive book; the doctrine of the *imago Dei* is a prime example.[54] He claims, "The missionaries placed in the hands of Blacks something that was thoroughly subversive of injustice and oppression."[55] He repeats,

> The last thing you should give to those whom you want to subjugate, to oppress, is the Bible. It is more revolutionary, more subversive of injustice and oppression than any political manifesto or ideology. How so? The Bible asserts . . . that each one of us, without exception, is created in the image of God (the *Imago Dei*). Whether you are rich or poor, white or black, educated or illiterate, male or female — each one of us, exhilaratingly, wonderfully, is created in the image of God.

Our worth is intrinsic; it comes, as it were, with the package.[56]

This image applies to all humans. Tutu insists that: "what endows you and me with worth, indeed infinite worth, is this one fact: that we are created in the

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[51] Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness*, 83.
[52] Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness*, 83.
[53] Tutu and Tutu, *Made for Goodness*, 150–151.
[54] Tutu, *In God's Hands*, 20.
[55] Tutu, *In God's Hands*, 10. See also Lamin O. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*. Sanneh makes the argument that the translatability of Scripture served to undermine colonialism.
[56] Tutu, *In God's Hands*, 19–20; see also Tutu and Tutu, *Made for Goodness*, 194.

image of God. Our worth is something that comes with the package. It is intrinsic and universal. It belongs to all human beings, regardless."[57] This stance rejects attempts to divide humanity into different classes, whether by the myth of 'race' or levels of value.

This core belief was one impetus for Tutu's fight against apartheid and resulted in the TRC, because "The first step as Tutu saw it — and in some ways the only step — was that ubuntu would humanize the oppressors in the eyes of blacks and that a sense of common humanity would form: 'We will grow in the knowledge that they [white people] too are God's children, even though they may be our oppressors, though they may be our enemies.'"[58] Standing firm in this knowledge led Tutu to fight apartheid while offering opportunities for redemption to the oppressors.

The Bible is also subversive in its description of God's undeserved love to humans, shown in bestowing upon them the image. Tutu repeatedly highlights that God's love is not earned but graciously, wondrously free.[59] The reality is that "God does not love us because we are lovable. We are lovable precisely because God loves us."[60] This aspect of God's nature — his unfathomable grace and love — were also important in Tutu's approach in the TRC. While frequently brought to tears and sickened by the confessions he heard in the TRC, he still felt compelled to offer forgiveness and reconciliation to the offenders in the knowledge that, "In this theology, we can never give up on anyone because our God was one who had a particular soft spot for sinners."[61]

This view of humanity's God-given value then applies in the realm of daily life, inclusive of socio-cultural and political realities:

> If we really believed what we asserted — that each human being without exception is created in the image of God, and so is a God-carrier — then we would be appalled at any ill-treatment of another human being, because it is not simply unjust but also, shockingly, blasphemous. It really is like spitting in the face of God.[62]

Thus Tutu concludes that apartheid did not just dehumanize the oppressed blacks in South Africa, but also dehumanized their very oppressors.[63] It is the

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[57] Tutu, *In God's Hands*, 20; see Tutu and Tutu, *Made for Goodness*, 15.

[58] Battle, *Reconciliation*, 47, quoting Tutu, "Where Is Now Thy God?," public address given at Trinity Institute, New York, 8 January 1989.

[59] Tutu and Tutu, *Made for Goodness*, 24.

[60] Tutu and Tutu, *Made for Goodness*, 21.

[61] Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness*, 84; see also Tutu and Tutu, *Made for Goodness*, 2–3, 103. Bryan Maier evaluates dangerous ways in which forgiveness theologies can be applied. See Maier, *Forgiveness and Justice: A Christian Approach.*

[62] Tutu, *In God's Hands*, 21–22.

[63] For example, Tutu, *God has a Dream*, loc. 542, 543; see also Tutu and Tutu, *Made for Goodness*, 85–86.

same Bible and its teachings about the image — in Tutu's theology inseparable from ubuntu — as well as the loving God of Scripture that grounded Tutu's efforts in opposing apartheid and later offering reconciliation to oppressors.[64]

He repeatedly points to biblical mandates for God's people to pursue justice.[65] The God-bestowed dignity of humans comes with a special responsibility: "God asks us to be co-creators with God, to be those who promote flourishing, not promoting death."[66] When accused of mixing politics and religion, Tutu says, "We would quote with happy abandon from the books of prophets such as Amos, Jeremiah, Isaiah and others to show that real authentic religion was no exercise in escapism. No, it was earthy and thoroughly relevant to the business of human living, speaking to how we conducted our politics."[67] Tutu's claim is clear: his political actions were a result of his theological convictions.

Ubuntu also links in with eschatology, in that the goal toward which God is taking his people is an intentionally diverse community, where the variety of cultures are respected and the 'glories' of each nation become a part of the new Jerusalem (Rev 21:24, 26). One person needs another, and indeed the various ethnic groups need one another.

> God is smart, making us different so that we will get to know our need of one another. We are meant to complement one another in order to be truly human and to realize the fullness of our potential to be human. After all, we are created in the image of a God who is a diversity of persons who exist in ineffable unity.[68]

Tutu speaks of this 'dream' of God which is yet to come, but on its way. "Elsewhere the prophet Isaiah, echoed in identical words by the prophet Micah, speaks of a time of universal peace, when we will 'beat our swords into pruning-hooks', and all humankind will march to the Holy City to be, once again, one community living in peace and harmony (Isa. 2:4)."[69] Tutu lived his own life as one who sought to work toward that dream of God, and taught others that "God's invitation to wholeness is *ubuntu*."[70] The method and the goal were both permeated by ubuntu and the firm hope of God's dream being fulfilled. These themes of the image of God, and God's nature and plan for humanity are the deeply-held beliefs which led Tutu on a life-long crusade against injustice,

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[64] Seeking reconciliation in no way condones or excuses wrongs. Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness*, 85.

[65] Tutu championed restorative, not retributive, justice. E.g., see *No Future without Forgiveness*, 54–55.

[66] Tutu, *In God's Hands*, 17.

[67] Tutu, *In God's Hands*, 55.

[68] Desmond Tutu, *An African Prayer Book*, xiv–xv.

[69] Tutu, *In God's Hands*, 111.

[70] Tutu and Tutu, *Made for Goodness*, 47; emphasis original.

inspired him to fight to overturn apartheid, and to continue to work for a united, reconciled South Africa.

Ubuntu as a Corrective in Mission

Tutu spoke frequently about God's dream — the goal which God had at creation and which God continues to work towards even after sin warped all creation. As Tutu expresses it,

> God can keep reminding us, 'I have a dream that one day my people will know that I created them to be a family; I created them for togetherness; I created them for complementarity; I created them for a delicate network of interdependence where each makes up for what is lacking in the other'.[71]

This dream of harmony and flourishing in all creation links with the topic of this conference,[72] the place of vulnerability in missions.

How can Christian mission address the problem of condescension in missionaries? While there is no single panacea, I propose that a deep commitment to ubuntu would assist in addressing this failure. What specifically does ubuntu offer in the context of cross-cultural mission? As mentioned earlier, ubuntu cultivates an attitude of humility and vulnerability, in recognizing that an individual must open themselves to relationships, recognizing their need of others. Ubuntu cultivates humility in learning to adjust to other individuals and cultures, realizing that the diversity of others is not a threat but a gift to be treated with care and respect. This humility to adjust oneself is expressed in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23, where Paul says that he is willing to become like a Jew to the Jews, like a Gentile to the Gentiles, and like a weak person for those who are weak. Paul is willing to adjust his ways for the sake of those he wants to share the gospel with, and this means a careful study and imitation of their ways.

Living well cross-culturally requires willingness to become like a child who needs to learn language and culture. Further, it is to hold the expectation that the missionary is arriving in a place where God is already at work. Therefore, the missionary should expect to see the Holy Spirit preparing hearts for the gospel, providing general revelation, and teaching the missionary, if they have the eyes to see and ears to hear.

To be specific to my own context, missionaries involved in theological education in Kenya can practice ubuntu by making changes to course content and required readings. There are many publications by African scholars available for theology students to engage with, and those works are better at addressing local contexts than works written by those with no awareness of

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[71] Tutu, *In God's Hands*, 110.

[72] I.e., "Mission as Vulnerablity in the African Context;" see footnote 1, above.

either the Kenyan context or other related African contexts. Why are the questions, the key topics, and the required readings still primarily drawing on a Western context? It is unnecessary and shows no respect for the church in Kenya. Instead, the lecturer ought to assist the learners to see the God-given strengths in their own context, and built on those to develop their own theological voice.

Ubuntu in mission calls for a deep identification with those whom the missionary seeks to serve. It requires learning to love diversity, instead of assuming one's own ways are superior or the standard for other cultures. In the Old Testament, Rahab the Canaanite serves as a warning against false assumptions that individuals from so-called Christian cultures are better than those they are to be witnesses to. Rahab was neither ethnically nor culturally Israelite, but when she saved the Israelite spies and confessed her faith in YHWH, she revealed a stronger trust in God than many ethnic Israelites. And in the end, Rahab became a follower of God and ancestor of Jesus. Rahab is a reminder that God can and will use anyone, whether from a supposedly 'pagan' culture or not; she is also a reminder that God's followers can expect to see the Holy Spirit at work in other people and cultures, if they are willing to look with faith.

Conclusion

As mentioned at the beginning, missions has a sadly checkered history which includes wonderful testimonies of the transformation that the gospel brings, but also testifies to failures and debilitating blind spots of missionaries. One such area has been an overwhelming emphasis on the 'lost' state of non-Christians that in turn led to pride and blindness on the part of missionaries, who sometimes forget that their potential converts are also created in God's image, and that a delicate network of ubuntu links the missionaries with their host cultures. Missionaries have opportunities to value the dignity of their hosts, to see that there are areas of goodness, worthy of redemption, in those host cultures, and indeed that missionaries have much to learn from their hosts and from what the Holy Spirit is already doing in that context.

To reiterate: the proposal at hand is that missions, in both theology and praxis, needs a strong foundation on ubuntu as a corrective. Such an approach requires humility on the part of the missionary, the honesty and vulnerability to see their own need of the other (in this case, those they seek to share the gospel with), and has the potential to be produce greater effectiveness in mission work through producing believers who are linked together in a diverse unity which demonstrates the glory and wisdom of God (Eph. 3:1–11)!

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