

Part 2: Listening Intently to an African Preacher¹

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One of the toughest spiritual disciplines is *listening* – to God, to another believer, to a seeker or a skeptic. It’s also hard for Western Christians to *listen* to believers from the non-Western world. By *listen*, I mean take them seriously with the intention of learning and even being guided and counseled by a non-Western believer. Recently I attended an immigrant African church in a Chicago suburb, and I decided to try listening intently to the preacher. The preacher was a Nigerian church planter who recently graduated from Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology in Kenya. He and his wife, also a graduate, were visiting Chicago-area churches planted here by their African denomination. I was one of the only non-Africans in the service. He preached in a style the congregation understood and enjoyed. I’m sure I missed many of the finer points in his sermon.

I was impressed with the intimacy he had with the Bible. He referred to stories, historical events and sayings of Jesus and the apostles as if he was speaking of his own past. Indeed, the characters of the Bible were people with whom he felt great kinship. Their experiences were directly relevant to his own. How God related to Abraham – his main text was Genesis 15:7-18 – was how God related to him.

Many Westerners have noticed how comfortable and enthusiastic African Christians are towards the Old Testament. They feel at home in that part of the Bible. It’s no wonder, because in both cases we have an agricultural society with strong tribal and family-based cultures. While parts of the Old Testament can feel strange to Westerners, Africans know exactly what’s going on and embrace the text with great joy.

The preacher told the congregation that when he was preparing the sermon, he asked God for a revelation from the text. What he received was a challenging word for the congregation. In the text, Abram waits for God to reveal himself through an animal sacrifice. God eventually

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manifests his glory in the night; but while Abram waits, his challenge is to be alert and to persevere in obedience. Keep doing the right things. God will show up when the time is right. Don't slack off was the message.

Lest anyone think he was encouraging the idea of "salvation by works", the preacher quickly reviewed Abram's faith in God's promise that was counted as righteousness. God was not waiting for Abram to achieve some level of righteousness before he could be blessed. There is a connection between persevering and blessing, but it's not about our standing before God or our identity as followers of Jesus.

Receiving God's promise of blessing was a major point of the sermon, and it raised the issue of the "health and wealth" gospel often associated with the African church. (Actually, it was and continues to be exported to Africa by Western Pentecostal preachers.) After the service, I spoke to the preacher about this issue. He agreed there is a problem in Africa with a false doctrine of expecting financial wealth as a result of personal faith that false teachers exploit for their own gain. His message was to counter that bad teaching by emphasizing the importance of perseverance and consistent obedience even when life is hard.

I had to admit my own hypocrisy as one who already lives with great financial and educational blessings and then criticizes, even gently, the yearning of African believers for similar blessings. The fact is that God does intend to bless His people and to bless abundantly. The Bible is full of such promises. This particular African church, mostly made up of African immigrants, is only too aware of their great blessings, which is why their praise services go on for hours and why they keep emphasizing to each other what God expects them to do with those blessings.

The pastor of the church told me their goal is not to be an African church but to be an American church with African immigrants racing out to un-churched Americans of all backgrounds. They have a long way to go to attract non-Africans, but I appreciate the goal. I hope and pray the Gospel they import into the United States will show us how to manage the wealth God has given us better than we have. Consumerism has devastated our faith and our corporate life as churches, and we probably need African preachers among others to guide us back on to the right path.

I pray that I am willing to listen and to obey.