

THE EAST AFRICAN REVIVAL: LESSONS FOR THE CHURCH TODAY

John M.M. Senyonyi

CANON DR JOHN M.M. SENYONYI SHARES ABOUT THE IMPACT OF THE EAST AFRICAN REVIVAL AND WHAT VALUABLE INSIGHTS THE CHURCH CAN LEARN FROM IT.

'To be broken is the beginning of revival ... It is being 'Not I, but Christ' and a 'C' is a bent 'I'... it is dying to self and self-attitudes.' Roy Hession.

'When self is on the throne, it is conspicuously out of place ... Revival begins by putting a line through the 'I' which is at the centre, and turning it into a cross.' Festo Kivengere.

'If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another ...' 1 John 1:7.

The East African Revival is unmatched in modern times for its impact and endurance over decades in the 20th Century. It imparted peculiar beliefs and practices to its adherents evoking godly fervour in them. Today's church has much to learn from this revival.

It is noteworthy that the revivalists (more commonly called Balokole) did not see revival as an event, but as a daily experience of the work of the Holy Spirit. They generally guarded against a legalistic approach to what they believed and practiced, as this is a ubiquitous danger in the Church.

The centrality of Jesus was probably the most prominent theme among Balokole. As a prominent revival preacher, William Nagenda, put it, the focus of 'revival' preaching was 'Jesus', not 'revival'. Revival theology was simple: sin alienates from God, from fellow man/woman and even from oneself, as evidenced by the willing engagement in self-destructive evil acts. The Son of God appeared as the divine answer to the problem of sin.

Jesus was preached as the crucified one; for the Saviour Jesus and the cross are synonymous. 'There is life for a look at the Crucified One - Look! Look! Look and Live' they proclaimed. Revival preaching was centered on the cross of Jesus Christ, soliciting repentance and faith. So, if our preaching digresses from proclamation of the crucified Jesus, we are not preaching the gospel at all. In him we find our satisfaction and to him we point everyone who seeks salvation.

Secondly, the East African Revival expressed an unwavering aversion for sin, for the first work of the Holy Spirit in a sinner is to create hatred for sin and terror of its consequences. It was not uncommon for believers to confess openly and with regret their sins, of course without intentional exaggerations. Yet when a believer openly confessed his or her sin, brethren paid less attention to the sin confessed than to the work of forgiveness wrought by Christ. They showed this by bursting out in the

renowned Luganda revival song of praise, Tukutendereza Yesu ('We praise you Jesus ...').

Believers frequently held weekend conventions in various places, at which the first subject of exposition was sin. The word for sin in Luganda is ekibi, which can be transliterated loosely as 'bad'. It was used to mean the totality of all that is bad and detestable. So at the Kako convention of 1938, Simeoni Nsibambi, a leader in the revival, aptly summarized revival abhorrence for sin with his strong insistent voice 'Ekibi kibi nnyo!', which forcefully translates as 'Sin is exceedingly bad'.

The contemporary church has often caved in to secular 'politeness' about sin, which labels any mention of sin from the pulpit judgmental. In popular Christian sermonizing, it is more fashionable to reinterpret salvation in social or economic terms. Yet unless the church detests sin, there is nothing to be saved from.

The result of this aversion to sin was 'moral transformation'. The revival Christocentricity, coupled with hatred for sin, resulted in moral transformation. Indeed, this was the most remarkable manifestation of conversion among the revivalists. It was incomprehensible that one should profess the name of Jesus without any visible change from a sinful lifestyle.

Moreover, revival was the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit 'wakens, ... revives, ...



The East African Revival is unmatched in modern times for its impact and endurance over decades in the 20th Century



gives the burning heart, and he lights up the faces of men and women to be truly Christ-like'. Balokole were fired by the Holy Spirit for Jesus. So, in Rwanda, those who were revived were at first given the name Abaka; literally 'those aflame'.

The Holy Spirit's initial work involves conviction of sin but only so that we may run for refuge to the Saviour, for he shows only Jesus. He turns our hearts in obedience to the Christ. At conventions, the Balokole urged people to 'ask the Holy Spirit to show you only Jesus ... calling you to come and drink', for the work of the Holy Spirit is to glorify Jesus.

Another remarkable feature of the revival was their fellowship or, to put it differently, the unity of the Holy Spirit among them. Salvation meant friendship superseding racial, tribal, denominational or other differences that ordinarily divided their contemporaries. White missionaries gladly shared their life with Africans; men respected women as fellow heirs of the kingdom of God.

It was the Balokole who introduced weekly, monthly and tri-monthly 'fellowship meetings' in addition to their conventions. To date, they continue these meetings regularly. The format of their weekly meeting is: general prayer, sharing of personal testimony and the reading and exposition of God's word. This is followed by responses to the word to draw out practical messages before ending with prayer relating to the message. Thereafter, they stay around briefly greeting each other before departing for their homes. As a result, the brethren grow to know each other more, better than the superficial knowledge that characterizes today's church.

Any discussion of the East African Revival is woefully wanting if it does not mention the exalted position of the Bible among the Balokole. There is no book of

greater worth or with a truer message to a Mulokole (singular for Balokole) than the Bible. It is the most prized possession they have, and they read it. They carry it to church and to fellowship meetings. Not even poverty denies a Mulokole the treasure of owning and reading the Bible.

There are several theological debates on the Bible, particularly in the western church, that would make no sense to Balokole. When they read the Bible, they hear the Word of God and receive it as the truth. So convinced are they of the divine voice in the scriptures, that even unbelievers are counted to be under its authority, for the Bible tells of the Saviour of all mankind.

No Balokole fellowship meeting is complete without a reading from the Bible. They open it as they listen to the speaker opening their minds to the understanding of God's Word. They want more than finding the Bible at church; for that reason, their own Bible is often worn out, as a result of frequent reading. As the dictum goes, 'a Bible that is worn out usually belongs to someone who isn't'.

Repentance, brokenness, walking in light and 'putting things right' are common topics in revival meetings. They gained particular prominence and added a unique flavour to the common life of believers.

The Balokole never understood themselves as being sinless. Otherwise they would have done away with their strong teaching on repentance even among the Balokole. Their aversion to sin earlier alluded to was counterbalanced by the strong teaching of repentance. I will not belabour the definition of repentance understood as a turning 'from idols to serve a living and true God ...' (1 Thessalonians 1:9). In the East African Revival, repentance is a moral act. Repentance before God is followed by an actual turning from dead works and by 'putting things right' ('okulongoosa' in Luganda) with fellow men and women.

'Putting things right' was the common term for restitution, although it was more than material infractions. It could be a theft, or an inappropriate exchange of personal items in an unmarried relationship, or even injurious speech of any sort. Respectability cannot work the righteousness of God. It was argued

that as long as stolen goods still lie on our shelves, the believer's soul was plagued with guilt. A break with past evil influences necessitates some 'clean-up' work for the new Christian to have 'a clear conscience toward God and toward man' (Acts 24:16). Therefore, the principle of putting things right was generally applied in relationships.

Often the church is scandalized by bad relationships among believers as a result of Christians failing to make amends with each other. The revival brethren thus exemplified the secret of harmonious relationships among Christians.

Lastly was the teaching of 'walking in the light' in revival language (Luganda, 'okutambulira mu musana'). Walking in the light refers to transparency with each other. The Balokole discovered that real fellowship with each other is impossible while Christians wear masks before one another.

In conclusion, while they did not generally require these foundational stones of their fellowship legalistically, it is beyond dispute that fellowship with the Balokole would be at best superficial for any who ventured to live otherwise. The very high moral standards did not deter, but indeed attracted unbelievers to this faith. The Balokole too were relentless in calling unbelievers to the Lord with the full implications of that decision. The church today has much to gain from emulating God's work through the East African Revival.

The Revd Canon Dr John M.M. Senyonyi is former Vice-Chancellor of Uganda Christian University, having retired in August 2020 after 10 years of service in the role. He retires in the midst of Covid-19 related government orders of education shutdowns.

