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EDUCATING FOR SERVANT LEADERSHIP IN AFRICA¹

Isaac Zokoué

Before addressing the theme of educating for servant leadership in the church in Africa, let me consider two preliminary questions. The first is, are we here addressing questions that people are not asking? Are we spending time on an issue of pastoral theology that is not really a preoccupation of our churches? I raise the question in regard to the changes in perspective that our African churches are in the process of experiencing. In the socio-economic area, all our churches are increasingly interested in development programmes to the extent that foreign observers are beginning to fear that the pendulum is swinging toward an exclusive focus on social action. After having criticized the ecumenicals for many years for propagating a social gospel to the detriment of evangelization, evangelicals are in the process of catching up in this area, while at the same time seeking to maintain a proper emphasis on verbal evangelism. For the All Africa Conference of Churches, "the socio-economic crisis in Africa" was recently the subject of a meeting in Angola, which resulted in a document entitled: "The Declaration of Luanda — Christians facing the 'War Against the Dispossessed.'" In many ecclesiastical situations in Africa, that is the agenda. In the theological arena, there is growing confrontation between the West and the Third World; and Africa is certainly engaged in it. You are acquainted with liberation theology in Latin America, a form of liberation theology in Asia, and black theology in the United States. On the African continent things are moving too. Everywhere voices are being raised to say that Africa should not continue any longer to do "borrowed theology." People are firmly claiming the right not only to contextualize the Gospel but also to do theological reflection and theological production that are authentically African. That is where we are now. Evangelical African theologians, such as Byang Kato, have not been closed to this kind of change, even if they use somewhat different terminology from others, remaining faithful to the heritage of the evangelical world. In view of these preoccupations, have we chosen the wrong theme? Certainly not, as I hope to show shortly.

The second question that I would like to raise briefly is more subjective, I might say existential: does my ministry as an educator really reflect what I am going to talk about? I would like to avoid treating a subject like this in a detached

way. Those of us who are theological educators must be personally challenged by this theme. Before we talk about training others to have a servant attitude, let us ask ourselves whether we have learned to manifest the same spirit. Let us avoid being theoretical and instead let us be weighed in the balance so that, where necessary, the Lord might transform us for the task. I say this in earnest. If we want to remain on our pedestal and train others as servants, we will do it poorly, and worse still, we will be nothing better than tyrants.

1. Titles and Honours

Preparing servants of God with a servant attitude is a continuing task because one cannot get permanent results in this area. This means that, faced with the false models that society offers, we must maintain a constantly renewed vision of service which reflects Biblical values. We are called to discern the values of our societies in order to see which ones are compatible with our calling as servants.

First of all, let us put the problem in context. The majority of our theologians cite pride as the original sin committed by Adam. Augustine sees in original sin many sins including sacrilege, murder, spiritual adultery, theft, and greed; but he places pride at the head of the list. Nearer to us, Tillich refers to pride by its Greek name "hubris," and he finds that "hubris manifested itself most clearly when the snake promised Eve that to eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil would make man equal with God." Pride is to want to be more than one is in reality.

One of the manifestations of pride is the desire to have titles and honours, the constant temptation to elevate oneself above others, which is contrary to the principle of service. "Hubris" exists in every person. It cannot be overcome except by the work of the Holy Spirit in one's life. In Africa also, people desire titles and honours. I would like to give a few reasons for this adulation in our African churches: it involves our traditional values, the political model, and elitism.

a) Certain aspects of African culture tend toward domination. The priority due to the oldest person, the fear of the sorcerer, the servile submission to the chief, and the power of the healer are values that are projected onto the pastor or leader. In the majority of our churches the pastor is considered to be the one who simultaneously plays the roles of elder, chief, healer, etc.

In his presentation at PACLA, Tom Houston commented on this situation saying, "People will try to make you bigger than you are. They will project on to you an image of leadership that is not true. They will blow you up like a balloon . . . People will project on to the pastor an image of omnipotence. You are the man who can do everything. 'Do you have a legal case? Go to the pastor. Are you sick? Go to the pastor. Have you something that needs

attention? Go to the pastor.” Cultural uprooting has also led Christian Africans to search for a model. They find it in the person of the pastor.

An off-shoot of this problem is what Tite Tiénou denounces as “clericalism.” The African enjoys celebration, which is a time to exhibit titles and receive honours. “This aspect of traditional religion,” Tiénou observes, “makes the majority of African Christianity clerical – including the evangelical movement. In this evangelical clericalism, the pastor directs, and the people follow all that he says, often accepting everything uncritically.”

So, there exists a traditional context that does not favour the spirit of service, and that instead promotes the exaltation of “Me.” We all carry titles. Some of our former students are promoted to the position of president of their associations of churches only a little while after the completion of their studies. But let us ask ourselves the question with Tom Houston, “What is my attitude with respect to my title? Are we always conscious of the constant pressure that is put on us to elevate ourselves higher than we are?” Our work as educators consists of drawing the attention of our students to this subtle danger that lies in wait for the servant of God on every occasion, so that our students may prepare themselves to act differently.

b) African political models often attract church leaders. It is not rare to find in the churches the same structures as one finds in political life, even with the same titles. There has not yet been any debate in the evangelical African world on the position of the churches regarding political realities. All our institutions are apolitical. Nevertheless, we note that political life with its ceremonies and honours exerts a great attraction on church leaders.

Sometimes we are happy to remind ourselves that the pastor is also a “minister.” Of course we mean a minister of God. But if one wants to play on the Latin etymology of “minister” and translate “minister” by the word “servant,” we find ourselves faced with a contradiction, because a minister in the government is not treated as a servant; he is the first to be served. Society has here accomplished a reversal of meaning so that being a “minister” has little to do with service, but implies power and authority. This being true, why does the pastor compare himself with a minister and ask to be given the same respect? It is because the pastor himself is also hungry for power. It is not that he aspires to political power – even though that is occasionally the case – but that he is hungry to have authority and to be seen as important in society.

Jesus condemned such an attitude in the Pharisees; they “love the place of honour at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them ‘Rabbi.’” And the Lord concluded, “But you are not to be called ‘Rabbi,’ for you have only one Master and you are all brothers” (Matt. 23:6-8). Paul’s exhortation to the Thessalonians complements this truth. He writes, “Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and

who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work" (1 Thess. 5:12-13). Notice that Paul does not ask the Thessalonians to place their leaders on pedestals, but to recognize their ministry and to surround them with esteem and affection. Elsewhere Paul indicates that leaders must be cared for materially (Gal. 6:6). These passages do not allow us to use the reaction of Jesus to humble unduly the servant of God, nor to use Paul's exhortation to unduly elevate him. Jesus' word, "You are all brothers," is the norm.

c) Elitism is one of the traps for the servant of God in Africa. This problem does not exist in the same measure in the developed countries, because university degrees impress practically no one, and the Church is no longer the center for the dissemination of knowledge. It is the opposite in Africa where, in many countries, the literacy rate is still very low. Elitism is often a handicap to service in two ways. In the first place, Christians themselves discriminate between the poorly educated servant and the one with a higher level of education. They copy this from the world around them, where a degree is equivalent to social promotion.

But this discrimination also has its roots in the early missionary era. For example, in some African countries the Christians consider an evangelist as inferior to a pastor. This comes from the fact that the first missionaries, needing African co-workers, trained individuals for just a few months who then carried the title of "Evangelist." Later, schools were created where men were trained for at least two years to become "Pastor." After their training, they started ministering in the churches. But the pastor was on a lower level than the missionary. Several decades later, the same hierarchy continues to prevail, not on paper, but in the mentality of the Christians, which is more deep-rooted: the evangelist is inferior to the pastor and the pastor is inferior to the missionary. I know of a case where a national who works in his own church is called "Missionary," because the title of pastor would lower him, in view of his high level of education. Those whom the Lord entrusts to us for training will enter the hierarchy at various levels, even if it is not by their own choice. The problem that we encounter here is that some Christians "dare not" go to see a certain servant of God because they do not consider themselves to be high enough up in the hierarchy to approach him. How often have you seen a farmer making an appointment with the top leaders of the church? Let us teach our leaders to find ways to break free from this hierarchy in order to serve God's people.

The second handicap in elitism affects the servant of God himself. If the farmer does not make an appointment with top church leaders, it is also because these leaders do not necessarily look for contacts with him. One of the criteria to know if a servant of God has been well trained for Africa is if he can put himself on the same level as the person to whom he is talking, whether that person is an intellectual or a farmer. I remember a woman who said to me, "My pastor's

messages are over my head because I don't understand what he says. Once he suggested a book for us to read . . ." You see! This pastor was not able to communicate the Gospel in a language adapted to his audience. He recommended a book to read, which made things even more difficult.

The Church of the twentieth century in Africa resembles in many respects the church in the first centuries of the Christian era. The early Church Fathers are, for the most part, examples for us. They were capable of defending their faith against philosophers and gnostics and at the same time they fed the flock of God. Talking with an eminent theological professor in France, I remarked to him that the churches of that country are becoming empty because their theology has failed. His response was, "No, it is because there is a lack of popularizers between the theologians and the mass of Christians," a lack of people gifted in making theology understandable to the Christian public. By saying that, he incriminated elitism. Are we ourselves going to continue to create a group of the elite, so that one day we too will need "popularizers"?

2. Jesus Christ – Master and Servant

In choosing to explore the theme of servant leadership, we do not set aside the preoccupations of our day and context; rather we touch upon a fundamental point in the life of the churches in Africa. Before turning to the holy Scriptures where Christ is given to us as an example of a servant, I would like to clarify what I understand by "service" or "to serve." I am not using these terms simply to designate "social service," a ministry to temporal needs, but I include in it all Christian ministry. It is true that the apostles made a distinction between ministry of the Word and ministry to practical needs. But we know that it is a question here of two complementary ways of "serving" God. The many uses of the word in the two Testaments show that "to serve" or "service" designate all that man thinks, says and does for God. It is in this way that Christ was the model of a servant.

There is something paradoxical in the example of Jesus: during his earthly ministry he acted both as Master and as servant, depending on the circumstances. He kept in harmony two functions which, especially in the society of his time, could not be exercised by the same person.

a) Jesus as master. To his disciples, Jesus was the Master. In fact, they were an ambulatory school with a curriculum. To begin with, disciples had to be recruited, but not just in any way. After his baptism, Jesus did some evangelism. Many disciples followed him, and from this number he chose twelve. On the evening before his death, he revealed to them the reason for this choice, and we see in his explanation the unfolding of the divine plan for the church (I have emphasized the salient words): "You did not choose me, but I *chose* you and *appointed* you to *go* and *bear* fruit – fruit that will *last*. Then the Father will *give* you whatever you *ask in my name*" (John 15:16). Once he had chosen them,

Jesus spent his time training them. He had come to fulfill a mission and he did everything possible to ensure the success and the continuation of that mission.

In this Master-trainer we see qualities that Chandapila of India enumerates as follows: 1) the quality of selectiveness; 2) the quality of concentration; 3) the quality of communicativeness; 4) the quality of transparency; 5) the quality of availability; 6) the quality of practicality; 7) the quality of appreciation; 8) the quality of steadfastness. These qualities, which appear in all the Gospel accounts, show the strong link which united the Master to his disciples. Their relations were full of gentleness and humanness. His objective was to build them up, to edify them. To achieve this, he taught them night and day. His teaching started from the events of daily life, that is, from a concrete base and not from theory, and he led them toward the discovery of the things of the Kingdom of God. Jesus never tried to attract attention to himself, but always to the Father who had sent him and in whose name he did everything. The disciples were struck by his teaching and amazed by his works. But Jesus himself did not get the glory.

The fact that his teaching leaned on daily experience allowed the disciples to understand that the realities of the Kingdom of God are not only for the future, but can already be lived out in this life. The disciples could see the relationship between the Kingdom of God and the present world. Thus they could understand the meaning of the Master's words, "You are the salt of the earth . . . You are the light of the world" (Matt. 5:13-14). In these conditions they were prepared to exercise a ministry which could not be disincarnated. Jesus was not Master in order to command, nor to dominate, nor to have his own way, but to train his disciples to serve. He himself did the will of the Father, and even in the face of death, he said again, "Not my will but Thine be done".

In the following statements we see the two roles of master and of servant come together: "I am the good shepherd," the one who leads the flock; but he adds, "The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep" (Jn. 10:11). The leader of the sheep assures at the same time their salvation by his sacrifice. In this metaphor we are brought to understand that there is no discrepancy between the fact that he is master and the fact that he is servant.

b) Jesus as Servant. The Son of Man wanted to be considered as a servant and to train his disciples in the spirit of service. The request of Zebedee's sons for the place of honour near Jesus in heaven made the Master indignant and he declared, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you." Jesus' reaction is surprising. The request of two brothers was not for now but for the future reign of Christ. Jesus brought them back to the present because their request reveals their state of mind here and now: they wanted to command. The fact of having made this request shows that they already considered themselves superior to the other disciples. They were already aspiring to the first place. Jesus is going

to break their pride and confuse them by this unexpected declaration, “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mt. 20:28). The sacrifice of Jesus is the foundation of service. In the incarnation, there is a dimension of service. The epistle to the Hebrews underlines this: “For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham’s descendants. For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way” (Heb. 2.16-17).

Every Christic event unfolds in the sense of “serving”: serving God and serving men, or, more precisely, serving God by serving men. Just as loving God and loving your neighbour go together, so it is with Christian service. There is this double plan. Let us look again at the passages where Jesus declares that the works that he does are the works of his Father, ordered by his Father, willed by his Father, and that he did nothing on his own (for example: Jn. 5:36; 9:4; 10:25, 32, 37; 14:10). But notice that all the works in question were actions for the benefit of man. For Christ, to heal the sick was to serve God; to feed the hungry was to serve God; to deliver the demon-possessed was to serve God; to comfort the afflicted in raising their dead to life was to serve God; to announce the Good News to the poor was to serve God. His coming was a mission of salvation “for us,” and he demonstrated this abundantly during his earthly ministry, as the Gospels testify. His resurrection is a victory over death; but the Son of God did not need this for himself; in his humanity it is a victory for our benefit. Now that he is seated at the right hand of the Father and has been glorified with the glory that he had before the foundation of the world, he is interceding “for us.” And he will come back “for us,” so that, where he is, we may be also. This is how God shows his love toward us. “That is why,” writes Paul, “I bow before the Father . . . that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being . . . that you . . . may have the power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God” (Eph. 3.14-19). This is where the secret of being a good servant of God is found; it is when we are so touched inwardly by the love of God for us in Jesus Christ that we are driven to serve God in return.

The relationship between love and service is made obvious when Jesus washes the feet of his disciples. The Gospel writer does not start his report by describing the scene, but starts out by explaining the reason for Jesus’ action: his exceedingly great love. “Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed the full extent of his love . . .” (John 13:1ff). The washing of the feet teaches a practical lesson of great importance. Jesus knew that “the Father had put all things under his power”; in other words, he was aware that he was exalted above all things. And it is in this consciousness of his universal sovereignty that he takes the position of the person who is at the very bottom of the social ladder, that is, the slave. In his exceedingly great love for his

disciples, he wanted to leave them this example (13:15). This tells us how important it was to Jesus that his disciples understand their calling to be servants. The message is as clear as can be: in Christian ministry there is no place for opportunists. We have been called to train servants.

3. Training Servants

The men and women that our churches need for leadership must be educated to have a servant spirit. The crucial question, therefore, is whether the curricula of our seminaries take this objective into account, and whether those curricula are adequate for this purpose. I have two criticisms to make.

My first criticism concerns the dichotomy so often established between theory and practice. Our traditional training method is often considered to be in two parts: the theoretical phase, and then the practical phase. More and more, the shortcomings of this system are being recognized. It is a model with which the Third World is not satisfied, resulting in numerous reforms of the educational system in African countries. We want to change the system inherited from the colonial era. This system also creates problems in the West. For example, when someone is recruited for a position, he is required to have had a number of years of experience, because (and rightly so) it is recognized that an academic degree indicates theoretical knowledge more than practical knowledge. Most of our schools operate on the same model: theoretical teaching is largely developed to the detriment of practice. In certain institutions, after a time of theoretical training, the student is required to go back to his church for a year of practical work, before returning to finish his studies. By this and other means, several institutions have tried to maintain a balance between theory and practice, but such a balance is not easy to attain.

The heart of the problem is that at one time the Church felt obliged to start creating institutions for training the servants of God. These institutions sometimes resemble a ghetto, isolating from society those who are being trained to help society. And this is contrary to the experience of Jesus and his disciples. As the disciples were confronted with everyday life, they had many opportunities to put into practice what they were learning. Our seminaries lack such opportunities, and this lack creates a gap between theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge. The solution to this discrepancy consists in identifying all the opportunities for service that exist on the campus, in the churches and in the community at large, and then in helping the students to put into practice the theory they are learning. Seminary should not be a period in the Christian life that is in parentheses, so to speak, but rather a time during which the student develops his gifts and grows spiritually. Then, and only then, will we produce "servants" for our churches.

My second criticism stems from my first. Tiéno puts it as follows, "In the training of leaders, the curricula have been taken from elsewhere without

making any changes, as far as both content and form are concerned. As will be seen from studying the pedagogical principles in the Bible, a good curriculum . . . must be personalized, functional and balanced.” Today a good curriculum for theological training in Africa must meet the needs of the African churches. Many people think about that need, some are concerned about it, but only a few are working at it.

Just a short time ago, evangelicals of continents having historic links with Africa were scandalized when they heard of such a thing as “African Theology.” They were saying, “There is only one theology,” meaning implicitly the one being taught in Europe and North America. The same model had to be reproduced everywhere. Thus, the inviolability of the Biblical message was being confused with the form of communication of the message, which necessarily should vary from one country to another. It is now time to put an end to this unjustified conservatism. How is it possible to train servants of God for Africa without taking into consideration African life styles and ways of thinking? It is not just a question here of filling our libraries with books on Africa, nor even of writing into the curriculum several courses dealing with specifically African subjects. We need to rethink the entire curriculum, taking into account our cultural and socio-economic realities, in order in the best possible way to gear our theological training to fit our needs.

I am not dreaming. In the United States a very unconventional seminary has recently been founded. It has neither a campus nor dormitories and operates following a non-traditional model. Courses are taught only one day a week. This seminary is very original. Its aim is not to try to be different from other seminaries, but to try to meet the real needs of the churches in the area. This is a very daring attempt on the part of these people who have had the firm conviction that only a radical reform will be able to correct the prevailing imperfections in the traditional training of servants of the Lord. If we do not come up with and implement new ideas as to how pastors and theologians should be trained in Africa, we will no longer be equal to the task.

There are two phenomena that should be a warning for us. The first is the change that is taking place in the area of hymnology: our churches are abandoning imported tunes. Sometimes they keep the words of the hymns, but sing them to African melodies. We have reason to fear lest this phenomenon of rejection also spreads to our training institutions because our curricula are also considered contextually too insipid!

The second phenomenon is much more disturbing: the success of the cults. The churches provide the cults with most of their adherents. A certain number of cult members keep ties with their church of origin. This means that they attend both cult and church meetings. Why? Because the cults offer them what they do not find in the traditional churches. They love Christ and want to keep him wherever they go; but they find satisfaction for some of their aspirations

outside of the church. If our churches are what they are, it is partly due to our training schools. This is easy to understand, as the churches are the place where what is taught in the schools is put into practice. This phenomenon goes in both directions: the churches send students to our seminaries; in return, the seminaries provide our churches with leaders, and so the cycle continues. It follows from this that if our churches are not meeting the needs of their members, then the seminaries training the leaders for the church obviously share in the responsibility.

The difficulties of the churches should be a challenge for us, a serious summons to action. The theological institutions are meant to serve the church. For Christ did not say, "I will build my seminary," but, "I will build my church" (Mt. 16.18). We should constantly be looking at how our churches are functioning, check their "spiritual temperature" and listen to their criticisms. Here in Africa we want the ties between the churches and the school to be strong.

Given this, how can we train pastors to have a servant spirit? The answer can be found in the unique example that Christ left, the model that he gave us to follow. But we need to be more specific. Watchman Nee lists the qualities of the "genuine servant of God": he should be a hard worker, stable, love everybody, be a good listener, measure his words, he should not be subjective, he should be master of his body, be willing to suffer, faithful in money matters, uncompromising with respect to truth. All these qualities are biblically based, and we should help the students to develop them during their training period. However, these qualities are much more personal. They are internal qualities that the individual should possess in order to succeed in his Christian ministry. According to the New Testament, every Christian should have them. A complete profile of a servant of God can be found in Paul's first letter to Timothy (3:2-7). He should be "above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect." He must be spiritually mature and have a good reputation with everybody. These qualities are related to marriage, the family, society, professional life (able to teach others), to morals, to spiritual matters, to ethics, to the intellect, to pedagogy and so on. In one word, they include all areas of life. These qualities show up in interpersonal relationships. It is in personal encounters that they become reality. Thus they can rightly be called qualities of service. The qualities listed by the apostle Paul in this text can be used as the basis for a complete theological curriculum.

It deserves emphasis that among all the ministries that the New Testament mentions (e.g., apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers – Eph. 4:11) only the pastoral ministry is described in detail. It is just one step from that truth to the thought that the pastorate is a central ministry in the body of Christ. And I take this step by comparing the pastoral ministry with the role of a

shepherd. The shepherd guides the flock, takes care of the sheep twenty-four hours a day. The task of the shepherd, therefore, corresponds to the pastoral ministry. Now as we all know, the most common image that the Bible uses for a leader is that of a shepherd. Jesus, who is the Head over all things, calls himself the "good shepherd." We can thus consider the pastorate to be a foundational ministry, and therefore understand better why the apostle Paul gives it particular attention. If that is so, we should create training programs specially geared to the training of pastors. Moreover, we should make pastoral training compulsory for all of God's servants, and consider all other ministries as specialized branches of this pastoral ministry. Theological training must be diversified in order to take into account the diversity of ministries in the church. However, this diversification should be a natural outgrowth from the center, which is the pastoral training. This is how we can hope to educate servants of God who have a genuine spirit of service.

ENDNOTE

¹Given as the keynote address at the ACTEA All-Africa Conference of Theological Educators, held 30 May to 3 June 1990, at Limuru, Kenya.