

Editorial: Three things the global church is telling the American church

March 7, 2019

Note: This editorial is part two, read [part one here](#).

A subtle undertone of the progressive response to the African Delegation during and following the United Methodist Church General Conference raises an ironic question.

Are some on the progressive side of church life in the United States—Methodist and elsewhere—so intent on full acceptance of non-heterosexual sexuality that they cannot accept African (and other) readings of the Bible?

I'm not an expert on church history, but I know this: Christianity was in Africa before it was in Europe. Christian theology in Africa predates the Enlightenment, the glory of Europe from which sprung newer interpretations of Scripture informing modern progressive theologies. Even more, Christian theology produced in Africa is the foundation of so much Enlightenment thought.

Even if none of that history existed and if it was true that everything Africans know about Jesus and the Bible comes from Europeans and Americans, how ironic would it be for Americans to despise Western doctrine when it doesn't accommodate progressive values?

But [Dr. Jerry P. Kulah](#) doesn't need my help making this point. He handles it very well on his own.

We define sexuality traditionally.

Kulah said:

“[P]lease hear me when I say as graciously as I can: we Africans are not children in need of western enlightenment when it comes to the church’s sexual ethics. We do not need to hear a progressive U.S. bishop lecture us about our need to ‘grow up.’”

When Kulah takes a “progressive U.S. bishop” to task, conservative Baptists may think, “Amen, brother! Thank goodness we don’t have to deal with that anymore.”

To conservative Baptists, I say, “Hold on.”

Progressive Baptists may bristle at Kulah’s charge, an ironic response suggesting criticism of what progressives have championed for so long—a place at the table for the marginalized.

While the conclusion of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship [Illumination Project](#) was disagreeable to progressives and conservatives alike, those who labored over it came face to face with the same problem confronting United Methodists—how to accommodate progressive *and* traditional interpretations of the Bible, the former held largely by the American church and the latter held by the majority of the global church.

In response to the global church, the Illumination Project acknowledged full affirmation of non-traditional sexuality did not “reflect and respect the practices of the overwhelming number of its global partners,” and therefore will not send to those locations field personnel who do not adhere to a traditional sexual ethic.

The CBF’s solution, while perhaps not perfect, demonstrates one thing is certain: Whatever happens with regard to denominational positions on

sexuality, it won't be the American church calling the shots.

We don't need your money.

Kulah said:

"Unfortunately, some United Methodists in the U.S. have the very faulty assumption that all Africans are concerned about is U.S. financial support. Well, I am sure, being sinners like all of you, some Africans are fixated on money.

"But with all due respect, a fixation on money seems more of an American problem than an African one. We get by on far less than most Americans do; we know how to do it. I'm not so sure you do. So if anyone is so naïve or condescending as to think we would sell our birthright in Jesus Christ for American dollars, then they simply do not know us."

Conservatives, progressives and those between are all brought up short by Kulah's second charge, that the American church is fixated on money.

Indeed, how many times have disputes over theology and political control been reduced to questions of money? Consider the formation of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Consider how often finding, sending, taking and receiving money continues to be at or near the front of our discussions about denominational connections.

Consider how many of our institutional discussions center around how we're going to *fund* the thing rather than how we're going to *do* something.

Closer to home, consider how much of our congregational mission and relief efforts outside the United States are summed up in the transfer of funds—i.e. writing checks.

We tend to think everybody else needs our money to survive because we think *we* need our money to survive.

Kulah said, in essence, Africans are not as fragile as Americans think (and perhaps as Americans *are*), which is not to say they don't want to partner with Americans, but that Americans need to see the relationship as a partnership and not as one-way benevolence.

We will finish the race.

Kulah said:

"Friends, not too long ago my country was ravaged by a terrible civil war. And then we faced the outbreak of the Ebola virus. We are keenly familiar with hardship and sorrow, but Jesus has led us through every trial. So nothing that happens over the next few days will deter us from following him, and him alone.

"We will persevere in the race before us. We will remain steadfast and faithful. And someday we will wear the victor's crown of glory with our King Jesus."

American Christians, many of us have considered ourselves superior to all others. And we have done so for far too long. In so doing, we have allowed our national pride to supplant our identity in Christ.

Whenever we allow anything else to take the place of the centrality of Christ in us, we distract ourselves from the race set before us.

Global Christians do not want us to run the race for them or to help them run the race, and they don't want to run the race without us. They want to run the race with us.

And—as much as power and politics are in play—what global Christians

already know and hope American Christians figure out is that they are in the position to extend the invitation to us, not the other way around.

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