

Why Is the Charismatic Movement Thriving in Africa?

Scripture: Acts 8:9–23

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Two years ago this week, Grace to You hosted the Strange Fire conference at Grace Community Church. Coinciding with the launch of John MacArthur's book Strange Fire, the conference featured a comprehensive critique of the charismatic movement and the blasphemous abuse of the Holy Spirit that goes on under its purview. While the response to the conference was overwhelming, many of the issues that were raised have yet to be seriously acted upon. Our goal is to fan the flames of this important discussion and continue the call for discernment and discipline in the charismatic movement. To that end, we want to rerun some of the important articles from before and after the conference, and encourage you to visit the [Strange Fire website](#) for all the sermons, articles, and videos from that landmark event. –GTU Staff

Many explanations have been given for the explosion of the Charismatic movement in Africa. Many have seen this as a powerful visitation of the Holy Spirit. Whereas there is probably more than one reason, I want to add my own observation to this for what it is worth. In this blog post, I do not refer to the old conservative form of Pentecostalism once represented by the Assemblies of God churches. I have in mind the current extreme form that is mushrooming literally under every shrub and tree in Africa. How can one explain this phenomenon?

I think that one reason why the Charismatic movement in Africa has been like a wild bushfire is because it has not challenged the African religious worldview but has instead adopted it. It has simply baptised it with Bible verses and Christian words that previously meant something totally different.

The African Spiritual Worldview

Let me explain what I mean. The African spiritual worldview consists of four tiers.

1. God
2. Angels and demons
3. Ancestral spirits
4. Human beings

It is because of this reality that Africans do not question the existence of God, as is the case with many people in the Western world. To an African, God is there. He is the Creator and ultimate Governor and Benefactor of the whole universe.

Rather, in our spiritual worldview, although God is there he is very far away. Between him and us as human beings lie two layers in the spirit world. One is that of angels and demons (i.e. bad angels) and the other—which is even closer to us—is that of the spirits of the departed.

So, although God is a benevolent, loving, and caring Being, unless the beings that dwell in these two layers that lie between him and us are appeased, his blessings cannot reach us. It is, therefore, important to appease the ancestral spirits and defeat the demons. Only after that will God's blessings come upon us.

This is where in African traditional religions witchdoctors come in. They are the people with the mysterious power to break through these two layers. They tell us what we must do in order to appease the spirits of our forefathers. They also engage the demons for us through their midnight trances, dances, and incense.

So, a person who is beset with perennial illnesses, failing to get a job, failing to find a spouse or to have children, whose business is failing to thrive, etc., simply goes to the witchdoctor who alone has the key to look into the spirit world. He is told that it is either a deceased person or an evil spirit who is frustrating him.

Sometimes the enemy is a person who is alive. However, the reason why this living individual seems to have a mysterious hold over your life is because he has plugged into those two layers (of either dead ancestors or evil spirits) and you have not. With the help of a powerful witchdoctor you can outsmart him in those two layers, and the blessings of God can once again begin to flow into your life.

Whichever way, the power of the witchdoctor is not in explaining truth but in mindless frenzy. His grip upon the popular mind is his eerie mysteriousness and his capacity to knock you out of your senses and then pronounce you delivered. Of course, this is never done by benevolence. You pay for his services.

The Charismatic Movement's Rendition

I do not mean to be unkind, but what the modern Charismatic movement in Africa has done is to simply take this entire erroneous superstructure of African religious worldview and baptise it with wrongly applied Bible verses and Christian language. The only difference is that the layer of dead ancestors and evil spirits is now one hotchpotch of confusion. This is why the nonsense of demons becoming spirit husbands and wives, and wrecking havoc in marriages, is taken for granted! This is also why the heresy of generation curses has become so popular. In our minds, bad luck can be passed on from that layer of dead ancestors.

In the African Charismatic circles, the "man of God" has replaced the witchdoctor. He is the one who oozes with mysterious power that enables him to break through those two impregnable layers, which us lesser mortals cannot penetrate. So, when blessings are not flowing our way despite our prayers, we make a beeline to his quarters or his church for help. This explains the throngs in these circles. The crowds are not looking for someone to explain to them the way to find pardon with God. No! They want the "man of God" to pray for them.

This also explains the stranglehold that "men of God" have on the minds of their devotees in these circles. In the Evangelicalism of a former generation "men of God" were primarily preachers of the word of God, but in the new setup they are primarily priests who enter the inner sanctuaries to bring down blessings to us.

This also explains why the answer to almost any problem that you take to these “men of God” is “deliverance” and “breakthrough”. God wants to bless you, but you need to break through these impregnable layers before those blessings can reach you. The prayers of the “man of God” will bring deliverance because at the overnight prayer meeting or on the hill he will bring about a breakthrough. Who can doubt that these two phrases have become the key words of this movement?

This also explains why prayer in the modern Charismatic movement in Africa is literally a fight. In fact, the people praying are called “prayer warriors”. Although they begin by addressing God, within the first few seconds they divert from God and begin to fight the spirits in these impregnable layers with their bare knuckles. The language is almost always, “We bind every unclean spirit in Jesus’ name! We loose the Spirit that breaks the yoke in Jesus’ name!”

The “prayer warriors” scream at the top of their voices and chant the name of Jesus. They sweat as they put up a gallant fight with these spirits, straining every muscle of their beings until they prevail (so they think). That is when they reach through to God and his blessings begin to flow. This is nothing more than the African traditional religious worldview sprinkled with a thin layer of Christianity.

Notice also how teaching is not the strength of the modern Charismatic movement in Africa. Its chief proponents survive on a few, well-worn, tortured verses: “By his stripes we are healed,” “We are not the tail but the head,” etc. There is absolutely no effort to properly exegete Scripture. Rather, by chanting phrases and making people drop under some trance, in witchdoctor fashion, they are holding sway over the popular mind. The people love it and are paying for it! The “men of God” are becoming stinking rich as the crowds just keep on coming.

This Is Not Christianity

What worries me is that this is so obvious that I am wondering why we are not seeing this. Or if we are, why we are not warning Christians against this. For the love of crowds, we have allowed African traditional religion to enter the church through the back door. Like the Arabian camel, it has since kicked out the truth. This is why I am not excited by the multiplication of churches—or ministries—under this banner.

We need to sound the warning that this is not Christianity. I know that this approach is filling our church buildings and classrooms to overflowing, until we have to multiply church services in order to accommodate the crowds. But this is not Christianity. It does not lead to heaven. It is a thin coating over the religion that has been on African soil for time immemorial, which Christianity was meant to replace. We have lost the Christian faith while we are holding the Bible in our hands and using some of its words. This is really sad.

The religion of the Bible does not teach a God who is so far away from us that unless some powerful humans come in and give us a breakthrough he cannot bless us. No! The Bible teaches a God who is near us. The only barrier between God and us is our sin, and Jesus has dealt with that by his death on the cross.

When we pray, we are in the throne room of divine grace talking directly to God. We do not need to address demons and ancestral spirits before we break through to him. We do not need to chant and

jump around like witchdoctors around their fire under the midnight moonlight. God is our heavenly Father. Only our sin can hinder our prayers.

Listen! Angels and demons exist, but they are not an impregnable spiritual strata that needs someone reeking with anointing to breakthrough their layer before we can access God's blessing. They are simply beings that either carry out God's commands or the devil's commands. They are not between God and us!

Finally, we do not need "men of God" to lay hands on us every Sunday (or at Friday overnight prayer meetings, or on hills in the outskirts of our cities) in order for us to know God's blessings. There is only one Mediator between God and us—it is the man, Christ Jesus. All others are imposters and must be rejected with the contempt they deserve.

Conrad Mbewe is the pastor of [Kabwata Baptist Church](#) in Zambia, Africa.

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