

CHAPTER 22: FINDING GOD

Noise, cheers, confusion and even abuse, seemed normal at bus stations around this part of Africa. Everyone was after making a living. People came up with all kinds of ingenious ways of making money. Three foreigners, white no less, were bound to draw significant attention.

That day this was certainly the case. Young men were shouting at us from all directions. Often, we couldn't understand what they said. They would use their bus-station-English to call us. Some of what they said, only Philo could get. Even Philo was not familiar with all the languages around! In addition to the various people interested in our travel, all kinds of businesses were being pursued. Salesmen of everything from hair brushes, nail clippers, dried fish, sim-sim cakes, drinks, biscuits, and you-name-it, every knick-knack imaginable, was available and proposed to us. There were plenty of offers from all directions.

Philo considered himself responsible for leading us through the chaos, through the barrage of verbal abuse, and through the invitations to divert to this side or that. He had to keep guiding us so that we ended up in the right vehicle. As we ducked and weaved our way through, a fellow wearing a black suit grabbed Philo's hand. I thought he was a super-super high-pressure salesman. It turns out he was a friend of Philo, and that was his only sure way, in the crowd, of making sure he got Philo's attention.

Philo indeed gave his friend his full attention. Neither Richard nor I could understand a word. This friend was clearly very enthused. "Special church gathering tomorrow at his home. We are welcome," Philo interpreted for us. Philo's friend addressed us in Holima English. "Welcome to the fellowship at my home tomorrow at 9 a.m.," he added. We nodded. I wasn't sure what the plan was for the following day. I looked at Richard, who was looking at me.

"I guess so," I told Philo. Philo carried on talking in the local tongue.

"Let's get in that bus, it has lots of room," suggested Richard.

"But, if it has lots of room, and they'll wait to fill it, we'll end up waiting for ages before we begin our journey," Philo replied, strategizing as he was as to which was the right transport for us to use. The key for boarding a bus was to find one that was full, or almost full. Eventually we found our candidate. As we climbed in, Philo was repeating a certain word. Probably that was the price that we would pay—to make sure the price did not go up once we had sat on the bus, I thought. There must have been some order in the chaos. Philo handed over our money to what seemed to me a rather rough looking fellow. He took our money, and that of others, then handed

out change. He was obviously sub-contracting. He then had to explain all the sums and who paid what to the bus's actual conductor. We waited five more minutes, enjoying the chaos all around as, finally, the driver boarded and off we went, crammed in as we were in the back, like sardines.

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Later that evening, now at Philo's home, I asked him, "What was that fellow in the black suit inviting us to do?"

"Good question. I was just going to tell you." We were sat around a low table, each of us with a cup of tea in front of us. Tea in Holima, by default, has sugar added. It is also milky—although that is hardly new to Brits. What is unconventional for Brits, is that the tea is boiled with the tea leaves after the milk has been added. That does make sense though, Philo explained, because it ensures that milk is properly boiled. That was the kind of tea we were drinking in the dim light of a solar torch. For years, Philo had used paraffin lamps in his home. Then his household graduated to D-cell battery-powered LED torches, variously adapted for room lighting. Then it graduated to solar-powered lamps—each with its solar panel on the roof. He eventually installed a wired solar system using a twelve-volt deep cycling lead-acid battery to power LED lights.

"The person who spoke to me there at the bus station is called Anton. He's a member of a local church called 'Enchanted the Way,'" Philo explained.

"A church called Enchanted. That sounds a bit mystical. And a bit dubious if you ask me," said Richard.

"Sure does," Philo and I said in unison, in one of those strange coincidences that sometimes happen in life. Both of us laughed as Richard goggled at us.

"We'll call it Ench for short," Philo added. "Anton is a member of Ench. I hadn't known before, but the church evidently has a meeting at a home near Anton's place."

"What kind of meeting?" I asked.

Philo wasn't too sure. "Some kind of crusade, I guess?"

"A crusade held at someone's home?" I reflected. "Shouldn't crusades be in a market square or something?" I also realized that there are many reasons people might want a crusade to be at their home. I am glad that Philo did not try and explain this time! There are depths of mystery and levels of mystery underlying the lives of Striden people that are very hard for Western people to grasp at all. I am certainly not sure that Richard would have understood had Philo spent a month of Sundays trying to explain what he himself barely grasped!

“You’ll see, that is, you’ll see if we go. What do you think?”

“Mum dragged me to church, years ago,” Richard answered. “I want nothing to do with it now.” His words had a way of finality about them: *That is it. No way whatsoever* To avoid clashing with Richard, we changed the subject of conversation. Even so, Richard remained particularly quiet. He hardly contributed, so that the conversation ended up being between Philo and myself. Can’t even remember what it was about. Maybe the kinds of crops that people in the area were planting. In due course, one of the children staying with Philo came to tell us that the evening meal was ready. Philo, Richard, and I sat around the dinner table. Also around the table were five of Philo’s boys. That was somehow incredible. For us it was a one-off. For Philo, such arrangement for mealtimes was very normal. Every evening at home, he sat around the dinner table with a group of five or six Holiman boys. The girls and women sat eating in the kitchen on the floor and on low stools. That’s a way in which women show their love for the men.

I can’t help but think that Richard was impressed by the devotion he observed around him. After eating we sat in a circle, this time with all the children and the housemother. They joined us, one at a time, after completing their duties, clearing the table, and so on. There we sat and we sang. Many, if not all, of the songs must have been unfamiliar to Richard. Very few were in English. Something, however, evidently spoke to Richard through that singing. Watching the children sing perhaps. Maybe it was the beat of the improvised drum (a twenty-litre plastic-drum). Something happened that evening. If I am not mistaken I even saw a glistening of tears in Richard’s eyes. Perhaps, I thought, just perhaps his heart was softening. There is something wonderful about African children’s singing. That night, I understand, God spoke to Richard. But Richard was still fighting his own battle.

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“Do you mind breaking off just for a moment?” Julie said at that point. She went to visit the restroom. The shade of the tree had shifted considerably as we had been sitting there. We moved our chairs to make sure that we were going to stay in the shade. Some women walked by. They were heading for their homes, buckets of water on their heads. Always an incredible feature of African life that, I thought to myself. When Julie came back I asked her if I should carry on telling the story, or if she had had enough.

“Please carry on,” she said, “the story you are telling is fascinating.”

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After we had finished that time with the children, when the three of us were left alone again, Richard said, "Let's go."

"Let's go what?" Philo asked. It was late at night, where did he want to go?

"To Ench tomorrow," Richard said, "that the fellow at the market invited us to."

"Are you sure you want to go?" asked Philo.

"If you chaps want to go, then I'm more than happy to join you," Richard said.

"Okay. It's not too far away, so let's leave at 10 a.m. We can easily walk there."

"But you said that Anton told you the meeting started at 9 a.m.," Richard asked, looking puzzled.

Philo looked a little bewildered. "That's why I said, let's leave at 10 a.m.," Philo was apparently oblivious to the inherent contradiction in his words.

"Then, we'll be late!" Richard emphasized.

"I doubt it Oh, okay," Philo suddenly understood the issue. "You are thinking that Anton telling us that the meeting will start at 9 a.m. means that it will start at 9 a.m."

"All that concept of time is a bit confusing," Richard said.

"You mean 9 a.m. not being 9 a.m.?" said Philo.

"Yes."

"I should have said 11 a.m.," Philo added.

"But what time did Anton tell you?"

Philo laughed. "Three o'clock," he answered. Now Richard really did look confused.

"Okay," I said. I was aware that when not using English, people gave the time differently from English time. That is, the clock in African languages in East Africa goes on biblical time, where midnight is 6 o'clock, so 9 a.m. is the 3rd hour, i.e. 3 o'clock.

"But when people say 3 o'clock, i.e. 9 a.m., they generally mean something like 11 a.m., so perhaps I should just have said 11 a.m.?"

"But what if Anton had known English and heard you saying 11 a.m. instead of 9 a.m.?" I asked.

“Well, that would have been a problem, because it would have looked like I was trying to postpone the meeting to 1 p.m., which would have been much too late for Anton’s liking. I would have had to have said 11 a.m. to you after Anton had gone out of earshot.”

“No wonder.... Wow! Indeed, language and translation are confusing!” I said.

“You mean,” Richard said, “that whenever someone says the time using local languages, including Swahili, they adjust what they say to a twelve-hour clock, that is six hours out of sync with our clocks?”

“Yes,” I said.

“That is amazing,” he said, while looking duly amazed! “And you mean also, that people will say that a meeting will start at 9 a.m., i.e., 3 o’clock in their own language, when it will actually start two hours later? That’s very confusing!”

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The following morning it was as if we had a spring in our step as we set off for the gathering of Ench. It felt like we were three adventurers embarking on some maiden voyage of discovery, or setting out to push back frontiers! Little did I know at the time everything we would have to face that day.

What was to determine the tune of the rest of the day, began before we even reached the meeting place. I assume by coincidence, as I am not aware that Philo had planned it, we met up with Anton on our way to the gathering. Anton started walking with us. Then, as we were walking, and not actually very far from our destination, he suddenly recalled a certain sick person nearby.

“So and so is sick, Philo,” he evidently told Philo. “Can we go and pray for them?” he added.

Philo thought about that question. I even saw him look at his watch. He turned to us. He said, pointing with his chin, “There is a sick man in the homestead over there. Anton suggests that we go and pray for him. What do you think?” Philo overseeing our program, there wasn’t much we could say. We didn’t know if we were late, or how late we were, or what was entailed in praying for someone who is sick. We nodded in agreement.

As Philo talked to Anton, acknowledging that we were ready to make the diversion, I heard Richard whispering a question in a low voice, “What good are prayers going to do for someone needing medical attention?” I was surprised that Richard would be so vocal in expressing such an opinion, even if he had the right to do so. Philo, it seemed, did not hear.

We filed into a small, dingy and very untidy hut. It was already hot in there, due to the iron sheets receiving the full force of the mid-morning sun. We didn't see anyone sick. "Come through," we heard a voice from the sleeping area of the hut.

I had been in huts like this before, but I had never graduated to a visit to the sleeping area. I didn't know what people's bedrooms were like around here. I was to learn that day. I assumed that for us to be invited into the sleeping area, the man concerned must be very sick. Otherwise, he would have come to us in the sitting room.

We entered the bedroom. Philo led the way, then Anton followed, then Richard, then me. Until our eyes adjusted, we could hardly see a thing. In due course, we observed that there was a bed of some sort against the back wall, but we couldn't see anyone in it. Instead, what came to my attention was a dishevelled blanket. Gradually as our eyes adjusted, we saw what appeared to be the skeleton of a man lying on the bed partially covered by the blanket. The skin of his gaunt face seemed to cover only bones. It was almost as if his whole body could be mistaken for a skeleton, so emaciated was he. Partly covered by that blanket, his feet stuck out at the end. His eyes were closed, and his face apparently permanently contorted as if he was crying in pain. Also, striking to me, was an extremely pungent smell. I wondered for how long this man had had his urine stored right there in the hut, or whether that bed had become his permanent toilet? Neither of the latter were very likely in fact. His wife was devoted and helping him and cleaning him, at least her testimony was to that effect. The smell was pungent, nevertheless. She sat, wearing a long red dress, poised on the edge of the bed near his head. Although rather short and skinny herself, her face was round. Seeing her, one could picture her in better days as a friendly, jolly, welcoming person. Looking after her husband in his failing health in this dank hut had no doubt taken its toll on her.

Glancing at Richard, I could only guess that this experience of visiting such a sick man in his village hut was creating deep culture shock in him. As soon as we had entered that bedroom, Anton indicated to Philo that he should pray aloud. Philo began to do so. People appreciated prayers in that part of the world that were noisy. Noisy prayers indicated a bold declaration of God's purpose and power at resolving the issue being addressed. Philo, standing as were the rest of us alongside the bed, proceeded with his prayer. He prayed in a language only a few words of which I could get. As he prayed, I was mystified, and then I guess horrified by another sound simultaneously coming from the other side of me. The person making that sound was Richard.

As Philo prayed, here is what Richard was saying: “Prayer is useless. What this man needs is not prayer, he needs help! Proper help. Can’t you see that calling on some non-existent God isn’t going to benefit him one bit. Someone around here needs to see sense, call a doctor, then diagnose and treat the fellow as per his malady.” Then Richard went silent.

Philo was still praying at that point. Eventually, he finished.

“Amen,” said Philo.

“Amen,” said the rest of us, except for Richard.

Philo must have heard Richard’s monologue. What on earth was he making of it, I asked myself? I started to wonder if there was going to be a fight! Richard seemed to be doing his best to upset Philo. I looked at Richard. From what I could see, given the dim light and the fact that his face was turned away, he was unmoved by Philo’s prayer. His words were harsh and unrepentant. I looked at Anton’s face. It was even more difficult to see his expression, but he appeared to be bewildered. Then there was Philo, from whom at any time I expected a string of expletives putting Richard in his place and condemning him for his crude blasphemy. Philo said nothing. That is—he said nothing about the situation regarding his tempestuous colleague Richard. He was talking with the sick man. He got out his Bible. That Bible was not in English. He was reading from it. Then, presumably, he expounded on what he read. Anton was nodding, apparently appreciating what was being said. The sick man’s eye’s flickered. Both he and his wife, perched on the bed beside him, seemed to be lapping up what Philo said. For a while, Richard was silent.

“What on earth are you doing, telling this man who needs help, fables about angels and a man you call Jesus?” said Richard, assuming he knew what Philo was saying. Philo stayed quiet, allowing Richard to complete his sentence. Then Philo said something else, apparently ignoring Richard’s acid comment.

Angered through being ignored, Richard raised his voice higher. “Stop this stupid practice!” he almost shouted. Philo followed with a sentence of his own, his voice also appearing to be raised, but still seeming to ignore Richard’s drift. Now Richard began a tirade. Some of what he said I shall not repeat. He attacked Philo for his folly in becoming a missionary. He attacked me for being Philo’s friend. He attacked the church. He said the Bible was stupid. So, he went on, tirading ... at an ever-rising pitch!

I stood absolutely flummoxed between the two men, as a few seconds into Richard’s non-stop tirade, Philo began his own tirade! He was going as fast as was Richard, so fast that I could not get a word of what he was saying.

He was anyway definitely not speaking English. Amazingly, Anton then started his tirade! Three tirades, each at high volume, by people in the same small room simultaneously! This continued in unison for a few minutes. Although I was doing nothing but listening, I found my whole body covered in sweat, so much so that my clothes were dripping! "What is going on?" I asked myself.

When Richard's tirade ended a few seconds later, Philo's ended a little while later, then so did Anton's. Richard walked out. Philo carried on talking to the man for another minute. He then asked me to pray for him. I did so—with Philo translating. We shook the hands of the man and his wife, and then the three of us walked out. We blinked as we emerged into the glaring sunshine.

As we walked out, there was Richard standing in the shade under a tree a few yards away looking towards us. Uncharacteristically, Philo let out a long wheeze as he walked; "pppp hhhh heee uuuuu uwwww www www."

Richard looked at him strangely. Philo was still wheezing as we walked away together. He turned around and waved goodbye to the lady of the house, now standing in her doorway. She was too poorly to walk with us. Philo waved, but said nothing. He was still wheezing, "pppp hhhhh heee eeeee uuuuu uuuuu uuww wwww ww."

We carried on walking. Philo carried on wheezing! After two hundred yards, now well clear of the house, Philo couldn't help himself any more. He broke out into a fit of giggles! That's more than I expected from a man of over fifty. Whether I wanted to believe it or not, it was happening; Philo was engulfed in a violent fit of laughter! He almost fell over. Then his giggling infected the rest of us, until we were all giggling—including Richard. Four grown men, three white and one black, standing on the side of an African village path, engrossed in violent giggling!

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"Is that really what happened?" Julie asked.

"Yes!" I said.

"Yes," Philo confirmed, "even if it was hard to believe. That is what happened." The memory of the event almost had Philo and me in giggles again. I composed myself and carried on.

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We ended up sprawled on the ground in fits. Anton was the first to stop giggling and got his composure. Then Richard. Philo was the last.

"What was all that about?" I asked Philo. We had all been infected by Philo.

“Keep walking and I will tell you,” Philo said.

“Tell us here!” I insisted.

“No. While we are walking away,” he replied. We didn’t have much choice as only Philo knew the secret we were wanting to hear about. Now that Philo might be very angry due to Richard’s outbursts, we might have understood. But why the giggling?

As we walked, Philo explained.

“Richard, you are incredible. In the middle of my prayers you start blaspheming God. Wow! I didn’t expect that even from you.” However, Philo was still having trouble controlling his giggling. Judging from Richard’s face, Richard was perplexed, frustrated and angry in one go. “I just kept praying. And you know what the old man and his wife thought you were doing?”

Richard looked by that point to be totally dumbstruck. “No,” he said.

“They thought you were praying!” Philo exclaimed. Richard stood dead in his tracks. “Let’s ask Anton,” Philo suggested. Anton was having trouble following what was going on. Philo talked to him in his best Holiman English: “At the time when I was praying, Richard also prayed?” Philo asked him. We assumed that Anton understood what we said. He seemed to agree.

“Yes, Richard prayed,” Anton replied. For the benefit of the Holimans, whose English was not too strong, Philo managed to turn Richard’s aggressive tirade into a belligerent prayer session! Anton and the old couple assumed he was praying for the old man to be healed, as were Philo and Anton!

“So that’s what you were laughing about,” I said.

“I haven’t finished,” Philo said. I gave him a quizzical look. “Later when I was teaching and encouraging the old man,” Philo added “Richard came back on again with a renewed vigor. So—I made out that I was translating. While Richard was busy criticizing prayer, and blaspheming as strongly as he could, that dear old couple thought you were a saint,” Philo added, looking at Richard.

By the time we got to the location of the crusade, it was 10.45 a.m. Sure enough—nothing had yet started happening. People were milling around. There were enough people to give us a warm welcome. We were sat at a table in one of the houses in the homestead, and served with ample tea, bread, drop-scones and roasted ground nuts. The smiling ladies who served us were dressed in long skirts, and had their heads covered by

carefully-tied cloths. This gave us time to continue to discuss what was happening around us and our responses to it. Richard was rather nonplussed by the interpretation that had been put on his words in the sick man's home! He felt rather outnumbered by Christians. "I am sure," he thought to himself, he told me later, "that had we been in England, where Christians are seen by some to be in the minority, then the boot would have been on the other foot."

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"I wonder," Julie interrupted, "if Richard realized the general truth of the fact that even if he had true and important things to say, he could not communicate them there in Holima? That is a problem with clever English thinking—it does not translate. Even when millions of Africans spend decades learning English—it is still the church that grows more than secularism."

"Good point," I said. "The message about Jesus communicates much more easily and instantly, and in a more profound way, than do efforts at communication of so-called secular values."

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The three of us were, in due course, left alone to continue with our own discussions. Then Richard spoke up. "Look folks. I just want to say some things. Firstly, I must say I don't blame Philo for laughing as he did when we emerged from the home of that sick old man. It was a classic. I wouldn't want him to feel in the least that by laughing he might have offended me. But now, what happened there has now really got me thinking." I was glad that Richard made that confession. I was intrigued as to where he was going now. What was he going to say, now that he had made his apology? "Seems I have a lot of apologizing to do, also for the way I went contrary to Philo's advice in my talking to Fred back there at the funeral," Richard added. "I am just beginning to see things after my three days here, that I had never seen before. Basically, I am seeing that things that I know or thought I 'knew' don't necessarily make sense in this context. In fact, they may not even exist! How can we in Britain be so sure of things that we know, if the same things are way beyond the comprehension of people who are flesh and blood like us, in a different part of the world? When we visited that sick man, I thought I had important things to say. What was happening made no sense to me, where I come from culturally. Yet my behavior was farcical! 'Sense' as I know it in the UK made no sense at all! This is forcing me to think very hard. I came here thinking that, as a European, I knew better ways of doing things and better ways of living than do Africans. Well—now I realize—that those ways aren't even comprehensible to them."

Are we in Britain 'better' than are people in Holima, just because we think things that make no sense to them, while meanwhile they are thinking and doing things that make no sense to us? Although I must say—perish the thought! Are we Brits better, or not?"

"At the end of the day, only God can know that," I said.

"What!" Richard came straight to me on that. He didn't like people talking about God. "If there is a God, yes," he said after a pause.

"Let's reverse that," Philo suggested, "to say; that which makes that assessment, whatever or whoever, is God." Richard was quiet for a while. "So, because there's no rational basis for saying one way of life is absolutely better than another, in the absence of God, whoever or whatever he is, comparison is disqualified."

"That's right," I said. "Anyone comparing is drawing on a knowledge of God, whether they know it or not."

Philo added, "The problem in the UK is that UK people have outdated notions of superseded Christian explanations about God. When they reject such notions, they think then that God is not there at all. But if God is not there at all, that leaves us unable to say that any way of life is better than another. That means in effect, that whenever we suggest that one way of life is better than another, we are declaring belief in God."

"In effect then," Richard said, "the West coming to Africa and telling Africans what they are doing right or wrong, is rooted in an understanding of God that the West denies having."

"That is hypocritical," I said, "and misleading behavior. The West tells Africa what to do. But they conceal the foundations from which they are speaking, foundations that are firmly rooted in biblical Christian faith."

"It is alright for you, Philo," Richard added. "You've been working through these issues for years. And you are a declared believer. I went to church many years ago as a child—then ditched it. I did not like church the way we did it there in the UK."

"So, someone has to like something for it to be right?" I asked.

Philo went on to say the following: "The problem today, let's say, is that people think coming to Christ is an optional extra. It is not. It is the essence of life as we know it. When people pretend that it is not so, they end up telling us the same in Africa. A big difference is, that whereas European people have centuries of momentum of devoted Christian belief behind them, folks here in Africa don't have that same culture. This means that the need for Christ tends to be much clearer here. In your face if you like."

“Tell you what,” Richard added, looking at Philo, “you need to share some of these insights you have acquired with people in Europe.”

“That’s a thought,” Philo responded! He looked at me. It is something we had talked about in recent weeks—and at some length. Now Richard—the arch-enemy of all that Philo was doing—was suggesting the same! We did not tell him that his idea was not original. I think both of us were realizing that we were receiving confirmation of plans for a trip to the West.

“In the meantime,” Richard asked, “do I have nothing to say in Africa?”

I responded “No,” at the same time as Philo said “Yes.” We all three laughed.

“Okay you go first,” Philo said to me.

“Well, there’s something here that seems to illustrate our problem,” I said. “In European English, a negative answer would be affirmative of your question. In African English, a positive answer would be affirmative. That may be the total of my ‘disagreement’ with Philo.”

“What are you on about?” Richard asked.

Philo responded, “If you ask, *do I have nothing to say?* then in England, if someone wants to agree with you they’ll say no, meaning no, you are right indeed you have nothing to say. Here in Holima someone wanting to agree with you will say yes, i.e., yes, you are right, indeed you have nothing to say. So, in this case, the meaning of *no* in England is the same as the meaning of *yes* in Holima.”

“Wow, this gets more complicated every moment,” Richard grimaced.

“So then Philo, tell us,” I added, “do you think Richard has anything to say in Africa?”

“Yes,” Philo replied.

“Okay. Please explain,” I said to Philo.

“We had already discussed the fact that there is no ultimately legitimate basis for evaluative comparison between cultures without recourse to understanding God,” Philo said. “That implies that of course there is such a legitimate basis for evaluative comparison providing someone is being guided by God. This is traditionally the role of the prophet. The prophet declares that God says X, Y, Z, and the fact that God declares something is the basis for the legitimacy of his words. Therefore, Richard has something to say to folks in Africa, in so far as he is able to connect with God, and to receive words from God.”

“Okay, fair enough,” I said, “and I agree with you. But the second question pertains to the language that Richard will use in communicating whatever insights he has that he wants to share. How can God, except through the gift of tongues, give Richard insights into a way of life that uses a language he does not understand? That is—if God wants to use the intelligence of a person, rather than bypass it and just give him words to say that he himself may not understand?”

“You mean like words in another tongue that have no translation that Paul talks about?” Philo asked.

“Yes!”

“I think I am starting to follow you,” Richard told me. “Carry on.”

“Okay, let’s take an example. In the UK, I may be given a word from God to say that men should pay more attention to loving their wives. That would be on the basis, presumably, that UK men are paying too little attention to their wives. Does it follow that men in Africa are paying too little attention to their wives in the same way? Presumably not. What exactly is meant by *pay attention* anyway? In the UK, there may be an understanding of that. But that understanding may well not carry over to Africa. Then what of polygamy? If a man has more wives, should he pay more attention to all of them? A polygamous household can run on very different dynamics than monogamous households after all. Because of the option of polygamy, monogamous households in Africa tend to operate in a way that would allow room for an additional wife. Then there is the massive question of the interpretation of the term ‘love.’ In the UK and other European nations, understandings of this term arise very much from the Christian message and the Bible taught over many centuries. It is to do with the sacrificial self-giving of oneself for others. Of course, that may be just a small part of European people’s total understanding of love. The point is though—that whatever African term is used to interpret love may have very different meanings to the British-English equivalent. So then, how can a prophet, when he says that men should love their wives to British people, be at all sure how he will be understood in Africa?”

“Ah, so,” Richard came in, “actually a prophet is a translator.”

“As we saw in radical terms earlier today,” Philo added.

At that point, a lady came and spoke to Philo. “We are welcome to join folks outside in the tent,” Philo told us. “They want to start their meeting.”

“Look,” Richard said, “we won’t understand what is going on. How will you help us?”

“I can try and translate, or at least summarize for you.”

“So, if people will anyway expect us to be listening to your whispered interpretations, then instead of just translating what the person says, you should give us a commentary, and respond to our questions,” Richard said.

“We can try that,” Philo responded.

Moving out, we found a group of about fifty people gathered under the canvas. The bishop and his colleagues were there. The bishop was a large man. Not particularly old, probably somewhere in his early fifties, and dressed in flowing, brightly-colored robes, he had a warm affectionate face but with somewhat piercing eyes. Sitting alongside him were similarly clothed men on either side. All of them were dressed in dark suits. Their shoes were polished to a tee. It was an impressive sight, to see those young men looking so sharp and so alert in preparation for our joint gathering.

Philo went to talk to the bishop. He had arranged for chairs to be set up for us next to where he was sitting. Philo explained that he would be doing whispered interpretation. Hence, he suggested that we sat at a less prominent place, so as not to be a distraction. That was agreed, and our chairs were relocated.

By the time we sat, people had begun singing. Philo sat between the two of us. Around us were green fields and trees. We could hear birds when the gathered crowd under the tarpaulin wasn't singing. There were probably, in due course, one hundred or more people in the tent. The majority were women, dressed in long dresses and head-scarves, as had been the ladies who had served us our second breakfast. Apart from the canvas under which people were sitting, houses with rusty iron roofs surrounded the periphery of the homestead, which occupied perhaps a third of an acre.

“That singing is amazing,” Richard whispered. “These people seem to believe whatever it is they are saying.”

The men leading the meeting were sharp, and co-ordinated. Already two languages were being used. Philo told us they were the Striden and Swahili languages. Men sat segregated from women. Probably they had decided it of their own accord.

“Why do men sit separate from the women?” Richard asked me. I signalled to Philo, and he answered him. He could have explained that in many ways. He said simply and frankly, that people are there to worship God. They do not want to be distracted by either sexual temptations, or issues, like wondering, “Where is my wife?”

“Many folks in most UK churches would find that wrong,” Richard informed me. I knew that. Richard’s comments reminded me of my time with Martin many years before, when Philo first came to Holima.

“Who is the pompous fellow wearing the bright clothes in the middle?” Richard asked.

“What makes you think he is pompous?”

“You have to be pretty pompous to wear clothes like that in a crowd.”

“Or brave,” Philo said. “Would you dress like that?” he asked Richard.

“No way!” he said.

“You’re scared?” Philo asked.

Richard laughed. He had not thought about it that way before. This bishop looked brighter than the pope. I was struck by Philo’s analysis. Just like Richard, I would not have wanted to dress like that. It would not have been far off, either, to say I was scared! Someone dressing like that is a marked man. Just imagine someone coming and saying, “We’re going to shoot all Christians.” Others might pretend that they weren’t Christians, but only here through curiosity. The man in the robes would get shot!

“People here have great respect for what we might in England called priestly robes,” Philo said. “Presumably so did other people around the world at one time, or we wouldn’t have the same traditions in the Catholic, Orthodox and other churches. Wearing priestly garb may appear pompous in some ways. In another way, it is pure dedication and commitment.”

Philo hadn’t said who he was, so Richard asked again. “But who is he?”

“Oh, sorry. I didn’t say,” Philo responded. “That is the bishop.”

“Tell me, Philo,” I asked, “when you look at those pastors and the people in the congregation, they seem to be very dedicated. I mean—they seem to be so enthusiastic and totally committed. You know them. At least you know them better than we do. Is that correct? Are they so dedicated? Or is it just an appearance? Are they putting on a show?”

As we continued our whispered conversation, trying to understand what was going on, the men in front of us were speaking, and the congregation sat quietly, attentively listening.

Philo laughed at my question. I guess it wasn’t easy to answer. The preacher was then totally invested in his message; he made many gestures, and in the heat of the day that made him sweat profusely. His translator vigorously imitated his every move. The crowds sitting there, especially the women, seemed to follow every articulation and gesticulation with care and

attention. They frequently declared “Amen” in unison. This was no sleepy Sunday morning service in a UK church, with people looking at their watches to make sure things weren’t going over time. These people seemed to be totally committed, and incredibly focused.

“Hang on a minute,” Philo said, and he went to the front. The other translator stepped aside. Philo took over. For a while, he translated into that other language, whatever it was. Then he summarized into English for us. He had obviously been called to the front for that purpose. “We welcome the visitors ... especially Philo who we all know ... but also his two colleagues who have come with him today ... we feel very privileged to have them in our midst ... Philo will introduce them to us.” At this point, Philo took over speaking in English while the other person translated. He introduced us. Then he translated for each one of us in turn as we stood up, and announced our names and background. In due course Philo re-joined us. The others carried on as before.

“Here’s the response I can give you, Dave,” Philo said, speaking to myself and Richard simultaneously. “People are as committed and dedicated as they appear. It is something very impressive, and very much to be learned from. It comes from something amazing that God is doing in their hearts. They also know, more than we Brits, what it is like to live without God. They do not have all the social safety-nets that we have, which have been put into place by our Christian predecessors. They are emerging from a society dominated by witchcraft fears. A Christian gathering is to them a wonderful experience. Let’s say it is a breakthrough experience—resolving numerous issues that used to trouble them before. Jesus, thus, is very important to them, and they are very committed to him.

“I suppose I can also add,” Philo went on, “that does not mean they are not human. Don’t think these people are some kind of giants. They are very human, and as liable to human failings as are we. Do remember also that they are African. While I can I think, helpfully say, using English, that they are very committed and devoted—such commitment and devotion does not turn them into Brits. And we should not expect it. That is to say—if we try to understand what we think we are seeing according to what we perceive as Brits, then we will be wrong. Even the very term ‘commitment’ might be misleading; are they committed? Whatever it means in (British) English to be committed, they do not know about. So, yes, they are very committed, in a Holiman way.”

“This is an interesting and helpful way of putting it,” said Richard.

“Very often,” I interjected, “we have assumed that once someone becomes a Christian, he should become like us British or French or American Christians. You are saying that need not be the case at all, Philo, right?”

“Right!”

Richard was nodding pensively.

The meeting carried on. Philo would not translate everything. The translation work was extremely tiring. He kept us up with the gist of what was going on. An additional thing he told us was that this church was truly indigenous. That is to say—it had no foreign missionaries, bosses, or donors. People guiding the church, and making the decisions about it, were entirely local.

The bishop himself, in due course, stood up. By this time, it was around 1 p.m. The crowd did not seem to notice the time go by. Neither did we. Two hours at this service went by very quickly! The bishop spoke for about forty minutes. He spoke about deliverance from oppressive powers. Philo explained that in the worldview of people around us here, life was all about overcoming powers that were oppressing you. That is, success in life was believed to be actioned by hitting the bad, rather than by building the good.

Philo’s words might have seemed a little empty for a while—but not for long! We were about to get a live demonstration of just what he meant. We were about to discover that, whether it was saving people from their problems and illnesses, or if it was to help them achieve socio-economic development, as it would seem, both were considered to happen through the overcoming of untoward spirits of their forefathers!

Although neither Richard nor I could understand the language, we both became aware of a build-up in levels of what is in British English called “emotional tension.” I looked at Richard. At that moment, he was looking at me. Then his eyes went back to the congregation in front of us. The tone of the bishop’s voice was changing. He was speaking more quickly. The translator into that other language (presumably Swahili) was having trouble keeping up with him. Suddenly, one of the women in the congregation started crying. Then a man left his chair and rushed to the front, in the space between the congregation and the leaders. In no time at all, almost everyone was responding to the bishop’s message in this way. Moments later, the whole congregation was on their knees, bowed to the ground, crying loudly! Most people had moved to the front. The empty space that had been left between the preacher and the other leaders, and the chairs of the congregants, was filled with people kneeling and crying loudly. When I say “loudly,” I mean: very loudly. As they cried, tears flowed from the eyes of many. They cried, and cried, and cried in loud

voices. If Philo hadn't looked so unperturbed, we might have been panicking. What on earth was going on in front of us?

The leaders at the front, including the bishop, seemed totally unperturbed by the chaos and din happening in front of them. They were beginning to respond to it. Many had raised their hands heavenwards, and were engaged in fervent prayer. Gradually, the ten or so men doing so, the leaders who had been at the front, moved amongst the crowd of people who were on their knees. As they did so, they touched the heads of those concerned. Although there was a predominance of women, many men were also amongst the crowd of people knelt low, crying loudly. The noise continued, it seemed, unabated probably for five minutes. Then gradually they all went back to their seats. They sat down again calmly. Once they had calmed down, one of the leaders of the service said something else. Philo didn't translate. I guess we didn't think to ask him to do so, so taken up were we by what was going on in front of us.

Then many members of the congregation began singing. Some, however, went right back to where they had been minutes before, back onto their knees, and back to crying loudly. The first time everyone came forward. This time they seemed to be only those who faced terrible issues, I thought. The leaders at the front went back to praying for them. This time, also, it seemed they prayed with a renewed gusto. Some of the singers moved further forward. They were clapping loudly as they sung. Those praying were moving their hands from head to head, blessing those knelt in front of them. Some of the people being prayed for stood up and joined the singing crowd, presumably singing to God and searching for his mercy. Two of the ladies who were kneeling, fell. They fell from their knees onto the ground almost simultaneously, perhaps just a second or two between them. They were a few metres apart. They began convulsing and writhing on the ground. Another lady rushed to one of them to cover her legs with a cloth, presumably so that the men attending would not be distracted by seeing her legs.

By this time, we had realized what was going on. Demons were being prayed out of these women. The smartly-dressed men were pointing their fingers at the women's faces while shouting loudly for the demons to come out. Sometimes their fingers came very close to touching the ladies' faces. One of the women appeared to want to vomit. We assumed that she was trying to vomit out her demon. The other was more engaged in rolling around on the ground, thus her dress was now filthy. Suddenly, the one rolling on the ground sprang up. I saw Richard starting. He started moving towards her, as if to go and help the other men to stop her from running away. He stopped himself, and sat down again. Three men quickly grabbed

hold of her arms. Doing so, they wrestled her back onto the ground. They continued their noisy prayers. Another five minutes elapsed, before peace finally returned to the congregation. Everyone returned to sit quietly back in their seats. That included the two women, who by now seemed to feel that the demons had been successfully removed from them.

In due course, a ten-minute sojourn was announced. This gave us opportunity to turn to Philo. "Now you have seen exorcisms in action," Philo told us.

I had some inkling of what was going to happen. I think the whole experience was entirely new for Richard.

"What was troubling those women?" Richard asked Philo.

"Ancestors."

"What do you mean, ancestors?"

"Long story," Philo said. "People have troubles. I guess we all know that, all around the world. Here troubles are largely believed to be caused by what we could, in English terms, call 'ancestors.' That is, perhaps way back in a family's history, something happened. Perhaps someone did something bad, like killing somebody in cold blood, incest, or whatever it was. That bad act, the nature of which is no longer known, is held responsible for the family's misfortune to date. That's why *families' fortunes* differ, and it is considered the source of people's problems. That kind of 'generational curse' is almost insurmountable by conventional means. The coming of the good news of Jesus, combined with the kind of prosperity brought by the white men, the early colonialists and missionaries, and now even people like you and me, has given people real hope. Hope, that is, that somehow, they may be able to overcome those things that have troubled them for generations. In Europe, we feel that we have individual problems, over here these problems are interpreted in a large context, referred to as family and ancestors: it is more embraced collectively. It is the hope in Christ that makes people so determined."

"You mean, our example is what they are aspiring to?" Richard asked.

"Yes, partly at least."

After the recess, we came back to order. The bishop was still the one speaking. He motioned to Philo to come up to where he was standing. This time it seems he wanted Philo to translate into English. Philo translated for us. This appeared to be something that the bishop was particularly proud of. "Our church," he said, "takes economic development very seriously." The gist of the message was that Ench, through its recognition and dealing

with ancestral spirits in such an overt way, had uncovered secrets to progress, that Philo translated into 'socio-economic development.' Now they were to build on their discoveries to provide their members, and their anticipated growing membership, with material prosperity of a kind, greater than that provided by any other competing church.

The day finished well. We enjoyed ongoing fellowship with people in Ench over a good meal, after the event was formally closed. Everyone there very much appreciated what Philo was doing in the community.

We found that everywhere we went—people were very supportive of Philo. Not because of anything that he did. Philo had no big projects. He had not done anything mega, at least that he had told us about. So, what did they appreciate him for? In short: one could say, for loving them, that is, for accepting them for who they were, for coming on board, for identifying with them in non-pretentious ways, for walking with them, and talking to them, and for doing all of that over a long period.

That's what struck me about the way they treated Philo.

