
A Congolese Response: “Biblical Hermeneutics Must Be Added to the ‘Essentials’”

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In his essay on Anabaptist missiology, Calvin E. Shenk articulates certain prolegomena of mission theology with eight essential themes: incarnation, kingdom of God, Christology, pneumatology, ecclesiology, soteriology, religions, and eschatology. Shenk analyzes each of these themes biblically to help people engage in mission. Almost three decades after his presentation in January 2000, this insightful missiological perspective sheds a bright light on a broad Mennonite understanding of mission theology. It opens our minds to think theologically and to strengthen our relationship with Jesus Christ through the scriptures. We commend the author for calling our attention to missiological themes that are confronting us as Anabaptists.

We Underestimate the Significance of Good—and Bad— Hermeneutics

I suggest adding one essential theme to the eight above: biblical hermeneutics. I believe this should be included in Shenk’s theological list. In particular, a biblical interpretation of the scriptures could assist a certain ethnic group in avoiding misreading and misunderstanding God’s urgent call to make disciples of all the nations. The Mbala Kipuka people in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

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have wrongly applied the curse on Ham/Canaan to their genealogy: “Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers” (Gen 9:25).

This curse on Canaan the son of Ham is interpreted in the Mbala mindset as the explanation of their black skin and slavery. The issue of the Ham/Canaan curse is a serious missiological matter among the Mbala Kipuka people in the DRC, and it impacts their ethnic worldview. It lies deep within their consciousness and causes harm to the local church in Kafumba spiritually, emotionally, and psychologically. In 2024, when the Kafumba church was celebrating its centennial and I was invited to preach, I thought about this acute problem facing many Mbala people—a problem needing an appropriate Anabaptist response to correct this grievous wrong.¹

Revisiting the Genesis Text Could Correct a Devastating Misunderstanding

A study of cursing and blessing in Gen 9:20–27 as a coherent unit is timely and of the highest importance. The passage portrays Noah’s relationship with the land, on one hand, and with his family, on the other hand. This literary unit links verses 18 and 19 to form the opening passage for the entire section. Then follows verses 20 to 27, which focus on Noah. The two last verses conclude the narrative with his death.

Gen 9:20–27 is unique in the biblical record of primeval history. It is the only literary unit involving a curse in which someone other than the Lord appears explicitly as the author of an *arar* curse formula. Another feature of this unit concerns the drunkenness of Noah. Nowhere else in the entire scripture do we have an echo of either Noah’s intoxication or Canaan’s curse. These critical issues are found only in this unique literary unit. This points to the need to examine the sin of Ham.

According to verse 22, “Ham, the father of Canaan, saw his father naked and told his two brothers outside.” He saw but did not cover his father’s nakedness, but Shem and Japhet walked in backwards and covered their father’s naked body. In Habakkuk, nakedness is a result of drunkenness: “Woe to him who gives drink to his neighbors, pouring it from the wineskin till they are drunk, so that he can gaze on their naked bodies” (Hab 2:15). To see the nakedness of someone was considered irreverent and shameful. It was conceived as a disgrace.

Lam 4:21 says, “Rejoice and be glad, Daughter Edom, you who live in the land of Uz. But to you also the cup will be passed; you will be drunk and stripped naked.”

1 It should here be noted here that whenever words such as “Africa” or “the DRC” are mentioned in this essay, I am referring to the Kafumba and Kikwit areas, except where otherwise noted. The Mbala people are also known as Bambala’ a Kipuka (i.e., “Mbala people from Kipuka county”).

When Noah became aware of Ham's visual transgression, he uttered an evil wish upon Canaan: There would be brokenness of relationship between Canaan and his siblings. He would be the servant of servants, experiencing the disgrace of servitude. Canaan must submit to his brothers.

According to the Old Testament, the Canaanites inhabited Palestine, not Africa (Gen 10:18; Josh 5:1; Exod 33:2). To identify the curse of Canaan with the present state of the Black populations in Africa seems unbiblical and inadmissible. Any attempt to establish a direct "cause-and-effect" relationship between Canaan's curse and skin color today is absurd, and very wrong. The text does not suggest color-boundedness. To identify the Mbala with the curse uttered on Canaan appears to be a mere ethnocentric speculation.

An Anabaptist biblical and Christocentric hermeneutic could enable messengers of Jesus to interpret a text in its biblical context instead of imposing a given cultural perspective from their *milieu de vie* as a normative interpretation of a biblical text.

By becoming "a curse for us" (Gal 3:13), Jesus Christ becomes the one who fulfills the promise of universal blessing given to Abraham (Gen 12:3; Acts 3:25–26; Gal 4:14). Now that Jesus has voluntarily sought to become an object of the divine curse for all Jews, he has removed forever the obstacle that separated Gentiles from faith. On the cross Jesus made it possible for the Mbala people to receive the Holy Spirit and be transformed (Gal 3:14). Faith in Jesus is the only way to enter into a relationship with God and become the light of Jesus locally and globally.

Bad Hermeneutics Exclude the Mbala from Participating in God's Mission

The book of Genesis does not mention a change of Ham's skin color. It is wrong to link the black skin color of the Mbala people with Noah's curse on Canaan. There is no biblical text that supports the absurd association of black complexion with evil. This confusion needs to be vigorously addressed in order to help the Mbala people understand that the Bible does not consider black skin to be the result of Noah's curse on Canaan. Unless a clear biblical hermeneutic is proclaimed denouncing the myth of the irreversible curse on Black people, world evangelization will be interpreted as a task of white Anabaptists.

This flawed understanding that associates obedience to the Great Commission with skin color is unbiblical and wrong. As a Congolese Anabaptist, I am convinced that this skin-color mission paradigm should be confronted and biblically re-interpreted. We need an Anabaptist biblical hermeneutic able to deal with this missiological problem of dark skin and the curse on Ham/Canaan in a healthy biblical way (Gen 9:25–27). In my humble opinion, this thematic misinterpretation should not only be spoken but also written in commentaries:

The one being cursed by Noah is not the ancestor of Black people. Neither is the curse expressed in this text either irreversible or unusual in the Old Testament. Professors, teachers, and lecturers dealing with the curse motif in Genesis must make sure that their audiences understand this concept well enough so that even if it were possible to identify Canaan's descendants today, all would recognize the sinfulness of selling them, exploiting them, or denying them leadership positions on the basis of this text or any other.

There is no linkage between Canaan and the Mbala people. Even if it were possible to identify all the Canaanites in today's world, Christ would have compassion on them, listen to them, and heal those who believe, just as he shared his blessing with the Canaanite woman and healed her daughter (Matt 15:21).

Congolese Anabaptists Are Blessed Black Ambassadors of the Lord

At our missiological university center in Kinshasa (in the DRC), a great effort must be devoted to understanding the Great Commission as the divine imperative dealing with love for God and our neighbor, beyond our spiritual and physical barriers.

Jesus Christ looked at himself as a servant (John 13:16; Acts 3:13, 26; 4:27, 30). He was introduced to the first known African Christian, an Ethiopian, as the suffering servant (Isa 52:2–53:12; Acts 8:26–29). Congolese Anabaptists are called to be filled with the Holy Spirit and faithfully serve the Lord in world mission as blessed Black ambassadors of the Lord. “Envoys will come from Egypt, Cush will submit herself to God. Sing to God, you kingdoms of the earth, sing praise to the Lord, to him who rises across the highest heavens, who thunders with mighty voice” (Ps 68:31–33).

In order to be faithful to the scripture, and to avoid mistakes similar to the above, it is critical to add biblical hermeneutics to Calvin E. Shenk's list of essential themes of an Anabaptist theology of mission.