

Sons of Tiv

by Eugene Rubingh

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Swat! Swat! Swat!

If anyone were to ask me what struck me most when reading Eugene Rubingh's thesis *Sons of Tiv*, I would reply by referring to the million and some flies that pestered me throughout the reading of it. You see, I spent a few days in a village along the Taraba River, a fairly wide waterway in the Middle Belt of Nigeria, an area that is only recently being evangelized. I put up in the compound of the chief of Mallam Yaro, the village where Ibrahim Nyajo, the evangelist for the entire Taraba area lives. It was towards the end of the dry season and the river had shrunk to little more than a shallow creek. Its sandy bed was now being occupied by nomadic Fulani cattle folk whose cattle were responsible for the flood of flies that daily descended upon the village. These flies were not beyond taking unpleasant liberties even with the guest in the chief's compound. And so there I sat between paragraphs – swat, swat, swat! That remains the outstanding experience which I remember of the time I read *Sons of Tiv*.

The fact that this unpleasant experience made greater impact on my memory than the book itself is more of an indication of the level of discomfort I had to endure than a reflection on the contents of the book. The book, in fact, is a considerable pleasure to read and that for more than one reason. There is the fact that Rubingh is a master of English composition, a fact which often makes one linger over certain passages with a great deal of relish. Occasionally I could not escape the temptation to more fully absorb the music embedded in the prose by resorting to oral reading.

An important feature of Rubingh's thesis is his clear awareness of the specific context in which the mission of the Christian Reformed Church is working hand in hand with the Tiv church. There is a strong sense of urgency found throughout the book as indicated by such phrases as "this hour" and "this context of rapid change" (p. 11). Rubingh asks what the task of the church is in "this fractured land" that is "presently reeling from an agonizing civil war" (p. 12). The book displays an acute awareness and appreciation of the critical nature of the present in Nigerian history and, though the book was published before the end of the civil war, the author realizes

full well that the country is facing a new stage in its history and that the church must be ready to contribute to the building of a new Nigeria in a new, imaginative and responsible way.

The third and probably most important reason for having enjoyed reading *Sons of Tiv* is Rubingh's constant refusal to fall into the pits of various false dichotomies posed by missiologists. Any attempt to play traditional evangelism off against structural evangelism is, in principle at least, firmly rejected. A Christian community will engage in both if it seeks to be faithful to the Biblical description of the Kingdom of God and present a practical witness to the *shalom* that the reconciling Word of God is designed to establish eventually on That Day. A representative passage is the following culled from the chapter entitled "Touchstones:"

This involves an invitation into the immediate problems of ignorance and disease through schools and hospitals, through literacy and orphanages, but with these institutions Mission has not exhausted the reach of her imperative. Here lie the vast challenges yet confronting Mission, to manifest the Kingdom of God in the areas of man's work, his manner of government, and his esthetic development. None of this militates against the urgent necessity for individual conversion, yet the Biblical view of salvation allows no restriction of Mission to that line alone (p. 24).

The wide scope of this task is determined by the width of God's salvation, a salvation which is as wide as God's world itself. The argumentation supporting this position contains little innovation that would require explication in this brief review: it is by and large the type of argumentation familiar to the constituency of the International Reformed Bulletin.

When Rubingh pleads principally for a cosmic approach to missions, he insists on the independence of non-ecclesiastic mission activities such as education and healing from the church. Schools, hospitals, and presumably others as well, are not merely church supportive, but they have their own independent tasks in introducing signs of God's *shalom* into the world. And though Rubingh places the church and evangelism in the forefront of mission priorities, he never makes the fatal mistake of identifying the church with the Kingdom of God: "... the Church must take shape because *she also* is a token of the Kingdom of God (p. 34), a sentence in which the one word "also" is probably the most significant. The church, important as she is, is only *one* of the *many* manifestations of this Kingdom. Looked at in its totality, the Christian mission has a program – or ought to have – that "staggeres the imagination," according to Rubingh. Rubingh expresses my deepest experience when he relates "the sense of despair and lack of accomplishment that follow ..." from this staggering program. And indeed it is true that "the reduction of the vision becomes truly frightening. Yet to act now according to the Biblical principle is the one imperative One is reminded of the words of Alexander Duff, 'We are only playing at missions'" (p. 25).

One should think that a mission such as Rubingh's, coming as it ostensibly does with a total vision, should fairly well "click" with the Tiv Christian community, since the Tiv, in fellowship with all of black Africa, are wholistic in their view of life, a tendency inherited from their Pagan fathers. Yet Rubingh indicates that as a matter of fact there has not always been full agreement between mission and church as to the *agent* of this total approach. The mission, true to her Christian Reformed background, has generally insisted that the task of the church is primarily that of bringing the Word of Life and that it is up to individual Christians to apply that Word to the structures of society. I am referring, of course, to the distinction between the church as organism and organization, a distinction that the Tiv church rejects as a needless restriction of the church's voice. It is the church that seeks a seat on the local government council, not some individual Christians. The church is the most likely agent to represent the Christian cause, according to the Tiv church leaders. Why prevent her from exercising her right and duty? (pp. 172-173).

Though the church insists on being the proper agent for Christian social action and is therefore ready to operate its own schools, its medical facilities and agricultural projects and, as Rubingh shows, will even engage in ferrying people across rivers in order to bolster the church's meager income, it has steadily refused to become enmeshed in politics with the exception of seeking a seat on local government. As the result of unhappy experiences with Christians succumbing to various political temptations, the Tiv church warned strongly against political involvement by "affirming that Christians had nothing to do with such matters of the world, but belonged instead to 'the party of Jesus'" (pp. 164, 180) – in my estimation a disappointing stance and surely unexpected from an allegedly wholistic community. Could it perhaps be that the form in which the Gospel was brought to the Tiv people was something less than total and that this resulted in reducing the Tiv understanding of this Gospel as also something less than wholistic? It is only a question

In view of most of the foregoing, one would expect Rubingh to express great impatience and even irritation at any mission program that is anything less than total in this hour of reconstruction in Nigeria when she faces a choice of several directions. One would expect Rubingh in his own gently forceful style to chide the Tiv church and, perhaps even more, the missions that have been the Holy Spirit's hammers in the building of this grand ecclesiastical edifice in Tivland known as NKST, for neither church's nor the mission's program is total. This mission, of which Rubingh remains an active participant in leadership capacity, generally follows the traditional mission pattern of engaging in the three main areas of evangelism, education and medicine, while only recently agriculture has been hesitatingly added. Within these areas of activity the mission follows the traditional patterns already set by other missions, patterns often set by groups sometimes referred to as fundamentalistic, but upon whom the African

situation and psychology *forced* an approach wider than their theologies would lead us to expect them to adopt.

There is another sense in which this mission's program fails in total performance. Nigeria after the civil war, is in the throes of reconstruction, a re-building not only of damaged buildings, bridges and roads, but of her economy, industry, commerce, government and related areas. *There is no doubt that it is not the ecclesiastical structures that will determine the future course of the newly emerging nation;* neither will rural health and other rural programs – important as they are, let that be understood! – but the important decisions with respect to Nigeria's future lie increasingly with governmental structures, commerce, technology and *higher* education. These are the crucial areas where the laws of God must be brought to have salvic influence, for these are the areas pushing Nigeria on to tomorrow and it is therefore imperative that the evil spirits imported by an increasingly universal secularism be challenged concretely and practically by the Holy Spirit. Rubingh indicates very clearly his theoretical awareness of *this* imperative.

The discussion has brought us to an important question. In view of Rubingh's insistence on a wide approach to mission and in view of his recognition of the critical nature of the present hour in Nigeria how could he escape expressing strong criticism of the Christian community under discussion, one that includes mission and church, for failing to live up to the total challenge? Even allowing for the probable fact that Rubingh has greater patience and more grace than I possess, this restraint leaves me quite puzzled, for failing to bring a total Christ at this hour in Nigeria is, in my opinion, to fail totally.

Rubingh expected the question, obviously. His answer is that *limitations of staff and finances force the community to adopt priorities*, to be selective and thus to leave certain aspects of Nigerian culture without the regenerating influence of the Gospel or to hope that someday individual Christians will bear the burden where these limitations prevent the mission or church from becoming the Holy Spirit's witchdoctors (p. 35). Writes Rubingh: "Obviously a particular church or mission cannot do everything. It must select" (p. 37). The alternative to adopting priorities is to engage in a "wide-ranging program with pitifully inadequate depth." And again, "To enter a wide spectrum of activities in a superficial manner which fails to manifest the quality of God's kingdom is an insult to the Lord" (p. 35).

Rubingh provides us with yet an additional rationale for the Christian community in Tivland's failure to embrace the total approach: for a foreign group to launch any sort of program of social reform

In developing lands such as Nigeria is fraught with the greatest peril Local Christians, nourished and inspired by their own churches, are the agents for changing the social and

political structures The assistance of the older churches may be requested by them if the delicacy of the situation allows such assistance (p. 35).

The above two considerations force the mission to adopt among its primary aims the planting of churches “which will themselves drive believers toward modification of the macrostructures,” according to Rubingh (p. 35). In the remaining paragraphs we will address ourselves to these considerations and the alleged conclusion to which they force the mission.

It is, in my opinion, highly questionable as to whether Rubingh’s rationale or defense of his – and my – mission is true to fact. Her limitations and her delicate situation prevent her from what would otherwise be a total program geared to the Nigeria of tomorrow, a program that the mission would be more than eager to embark upon and is now thoroughly disappointed and frustrated because of the obstacles. I know this mission and I detect little disappointment or frustration on this score among my colleagues. It is more true to fact that the mission by and large does not recognize this total approach to be particularly desirable or legitimate for the mission to adopt. At any rate I have never heard any of my colleagues discuss its desirability with anything like a passionate sense of frustration for being prevented – with the exception of Rubingh in *Sons of Tiv!* Furthermore, in view of the fact that this mission has seldom displayed an innovative spirit and has largely been a follower among missions rather than a leader – except where her superior resources allowed her to outstrip sister missions – one would not expect this mission to entertain even a vision for such needs unless others had shown her the way. Thirdly, the Christian Reformed Church constituency sponsoring this mission is herself only now becoming aware of the Christian imperative to introduce the Holy Spirit into the increasingly oppressive superstructures of her own homelands. Rubingh correctly describes this church as one “on the way,” (p. 35) and one could probably not expect that her mission arm would have a more universal vision – or could one? In other words, I judge Rubingh correctly describes this church as one “on the way” (p.35). And incorrect as far as the mission goes. Perhaps it explains the reason for his personal lack of insistence, but I do not recognize it to be that of the mission.

However, for the sake of discussion, let us assume that Rubingh’s explanations are true to fact. Then it becomes a great enigma that Rubingh does not raise a strong protest against denominationalism in a mission situation. After all, he describes the needs as staggering the imagination and quite necessary for a reconstructing nation. If indeed denominationalism is one of the basic factors preventing a total program for the entire nation, then Rubingh’s lack of criticism on this point is nothing short of amazing. Then denominationalism is not merely a disadvantage, but the cleverest tool ever devised by the devil to prevent Nigeria’s bowing before the cross. And it probably is! It is true, the Nigerian church cannot experience church history vicariously (p. 231), but surely at least missions should have done all within their power

to combat it from the very beginning. Alas, this is mere hindsight. By the time the mission began to recognize the disadvantages of denominationalism, the pattern had already been fixed. It was too late. Reader, did you take note? I said it was *too late*. TOO LATE! Oh, God!

Rubingh opposed a wide-ranging approach that cannot be properly administered as tending to bring shame to Christ. True enough. However, what is so virtuous about an eclipsed approach no matter how effectively carried out, that leaves the *main* direction-giving structures to secularity? Has the mission not yet learned the lesson of Christian history in North America, a history stacked with ecclesiastical structures and activities, but little or no Christian reforming activities within the directing structures? Has it not yet become unequivocally clear that feverish rounds of ecclesiastical activity do not inevitably modify the macrostructures, but that, in reality, such activities can easily serve to absolve the Christian from his responsibility by assuring him that teaching in Sunday Schools or preaching in senior citizen homes are sufficient evidences of the Holy Spirit in his life? And is the evangelical community of North America not only recently beginning to realize the fatality of the traditional recipe that once the church has been established, the necessary social reforms will automatically follow? Marxists, Neo-Marxists and theological liberals have had a greater sensitivity to institutionalized sin and the need to present alternatives than has the Evangelical community. And now we are still to operate with this recipe that has proved ineffective as a means of bringing nations to their knees?

It is true, a foreign mission has severe limitations placed upon it. It is in no position to pursue public programs for reforming the macrostructures of the host country. Nevertheless these necessary concerns should be transferred to the churches planted not as some subsequent *addendum* after a measure of growth has been achieved, but as part and parcel of the basic message. It may be true that the traditional Tiv has a wholistic view of life, but Nigeria is not governed by traditional Africans: it is governed by modern Africans who have drunk deeply from the traditional *Western* dichotomy between spirit and material, who are often as secular as their Western counterparts. It will be a long time before the *traditional* tribal church will ever be able to cope with the *modern* structures and modern spirits governing the country. This is not a battle to be decided at the ecclesiastical front so much as in the various fronts within the macrostructures by the *modern* Nigerian Christian. This is a battle that will be decided at the Nigerian university and at government level – and these are the exact areas from which the mission has excluded itself.

It is perhaps futile, but nevertheless interesting, to speculate what the Nigerian Christian community and even the nation as a whole would be like today had the missions in Nigeria from the very outset embarked on a total program. I suspect that today we would either have a vital regenerative force operating concretely throughout the country and greatly influencing the

macrostructures, or missions would have been banned on the day independence was declared in 1960 on the grounds of missionary colonialism and on the unstated ground of her threat to unjust structures. As it is, the government of Nigeria endures the presence of foreign preachers and other religious advocates most likely because their presence also means valuable help in health and secondary education. After all, religion itself is harmless enough. I dare say that the Nigerian government does not recognize the implied threat of the Gospel to the all-too-obvious oppressive structures in the nation, and I dare add that it does not recognize this implied threat because it has seldom if ever been made concretely explicit in a positive sense. Who but the foreign missionary has ever had any experience with these modern structures as they are slowly betraying their true nature in the homelands through a process of ripening? If the mission cannot openly explicate these criticisms and present Christian alternatives, it should at least instruct the university-trained sons and daughters of the Tiv church in these matters. Or perhaps the mission should begin placing teachers in the universities, men and women with grand but realistic Kingdom visions. Such a program might *in the long run* prove much more effective than the present rural program pursued by the mission. Fortunately the alternatives are not mutually exclusive; they could, rather, be mutually supportive.

Rubingh concludes his book in a poetically optimistic vein, but it is optimism I cannot share. To be sure, Rubingh is in the great company of a majority of evangelical missiologists who point optimistically to the millions of Africans turning to Christ and who forecast an even greater harvest in the near future. Africa, we are enthusiastically told, is ready for Christ. This may be true for traditional Africa, but of the modern African too many are developing indifference or even disdain for the Gospel for a variety of reasons, but one of which surely is that the Gospel they hear is inadequate for their situation in that it has been presented only partially. It cannot carry them through these critical times.

I rejoice at every baptism into the Body of Christ. If Christ should return within the next few decades – as He well may – I would expect large crowds of Africans joyfully welcoming Him as their Lord. But in the event that He should tarry for another century or so I personally doubt that He will find anything like a large and vital Christian community in Africa. The secular university and secular government and technology with its superficial glamour are proving themselves severe combatants in the cultures to which they are indigenous, and they are that even more so on African soil where the educated Christian has only two alternatives: a Gospel geared largely to the *traditional* African or a bare modern secular approach to life and he all too frequently hopes for the latter.

Is it any wonder that in the quietness of my office I occasionally break into tears of despair?