

Book Review

Mirror to the Church /Emmanuel Katongole

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Mirror to the Church, written by Emmanuel Katongole in 2009, presents a deep reflection of thoughts on how the Western-imposed bad theology and tribalism resulted in tension and division between the Hutu and Tutsi people, which eventually led to the genocide in Rwanda in 1994. Taking us through the history and development of modern Rwanda as a product of European colonialism, Katongole explains how the formation of tribal identity shaped by Hamitic myth, and reinforced by repeated storytelling has helped transpire the tragedy of Christians killing other Christians in Rwanda. Using Rwanda as a mirror that reflects the brokenness of the universal church, Katongole points to the Gospel as the only hope that can transcend racial, political, social, and economic assumptions and exhort the faithful to live out the radical new identity in Christ, bearing witness to the world.

According to Katongole, the highly evangelized country of Rwanda is made up of two major tribes of people, the ruling Tutsi minority and the Hutu majority. Based on the anthropological myth from the Europeans, Tutsis were imagined as the descendants of the Semites and the foreign invaders from Ethiopia, while the Hutus were the inferior descendants of the cursed Ham. The imposed tribal identity by the Europeans has created an increasing tension between the two tribes that eventually led to the Rwanda genocide in 1994, triggered by the assassination of President Habyarimana, a Hutu by ethnicity. Katongole points out that the Church and the Western missionaries not only failed to correct the false tribalism in Rwanda, they were also guilty of betraying the Christians and abandoning the country during the genocide. Katongole suggests that "the tragedy in Rwanda, however, was but a mirror reflecting the deep brokenness of the church worldwide."¹ He challenges the church to "engage in mission to establish

friendships that lead to the formation of a new people in the world."² By doing so, Katongole believes the gospel can truly make a real difference across the globe and in the community we live in.

Katongole takes us through the story behind the genocide in Rwanda with three intertwined themes: Mirror, Memory, and Mission. By learning the story of Rwanda through the three Ms, Katongole hopes to achieve something bigger - that is, Christians should begin to understand they were made to embody the hope of a new creation. Only when we recognize our new identity in Christ, we can be set free from the captivity of the old identity shaped by race, tribe, culture, politics, and social and economic conditions. First, the tragedy of Rwanda is considered as a "**mirror**," reflecting the broken state of the global church. Since Rwanda is a highly Christianized country in Africa, and the genocide involved Christians killing other Christians living in the same community, then, Christians community as a whole must be as broken as those of Rwanda. Jewish Holocaust in Germany, Native Americans killed by European settlers are but a few tragedies from the past that resemble the failure of Christianity in Rwanda. More devastating is the fact that the genocide would have been prevented had the UN and the United States taken action to stop it at the onset of the tragedy. Apparently, the international politics of "self-interest and self-preservation" ruled over Christian moral values and ethics in the face of crime. Second, "**memory**" is powerful when we remember who we are in Christ as a new creation. According to Katongole, Rwanda was once a homogeneous society where the Hutu and Tutsi lived peacefully together until tribalism was formed over the Hamitic myth introduced by the Europeans, creating division and animosity between the two tribes that eventually led to the genocide in 1994. Katongole argues that the lesson learned from Rwanda's tragic story should

challenge Christians to confront their embedded identity shaped by their social and political institutions. He believes that the Gospel has the power to set the captivated mind free from the "natural" identity when we allow Christ to renew our minds and form a new identity in us. Katongoles argues that this is possible because "Jesus announced and established a new political order in this world and called it "the kingdom of God." The kingdom of God, which Jesus proclaimed, is among us when we trust and obey his commands.³ Katongoles is convinced that "the good news of God's kingdom will force you to question social norms...interrupting the world as it is in ways that make even pious people indignant."⁴ He cited the account of Mary's interruption at a dinner party in Bethany to anoint Jesus in Matthew 26:13 to bring home his last theme, "**mission.**" Mary's act of devotion against the social norm of her day illuminated the meaning of the gospel and continues to inspire those who dare to question the established social, economic, and political assumptions of our day when we pledge our allegiance to the kingdom of God. Beyond social engagement in bringing efficiency, order, and prosperity to the society, the mission of the church is to bring radical inner transformation that bears witness to the world as a new creation in Christ. And the practical application to live out the new creation within us is by "defying the powers of evil and resisting the divisions society imposes on us"⁵ even to the point of death as it was illustrated in the story of Nyange, Rwanda where students were killed when they refused to identify themselves as Tutus or Tusits but only Rwandans under militia attack. If what Katongole said was true, then we can safely conclude that the gospel that can defeat tribalism can also overcome prejudices, discrimination, and oppression and other forms of evil expressed in our society today when we dare to live up to the true meaning of the gospel.

I agree with Katongole's assessment that the tragedy in Rwanda was a mirror reflecting the

3 Page 110- 111

4 Page 116

5 Page 149.

deep brokenness of the universal church for the following three reasons. First, let's look at it on a societal level. Although Rwanda was considered a success as a highly Christianized nation, enjoying social efficiency, order, and economic growth, the church and Western missionary by large had failed to transform the imposed identity of tribalism to Christian. The condition in Rwanda can be implied to Christianity worldwide as the Gospel also fails to bring deep changes in the body of Christ. Take America for example, we are a nation found on Christian beliefs and has the largest Christian population in the world⁶, yet one can argue our identity as a new creation in Christ is not reflected in our day-to-day life in the market place and family life. Christian divorce at roughly the same rate as the world is a well-known fact.⁷ The gospel is not making a significant social impact on racism, prejudice, and inequality, just as evangelism failed to make a difference on tribalism in Rwanda. While racism is illegal, institutional racism "expressed in the practice of social and political institutions...reflected in disparities regarding wealth, income, criminal justice, employment, housing, health care, political power, and education, among other factors" is still painfully felt in United State, according to Jeff Nesbit from U.S News & World Report.⁸ Second, let's look at it on a congregation level. Church discipleship has not resulted in deep inner transformation, the way that is promised in the bible. People come to church for years and do not experience growth and maturity. Divisions, arguments, jealousy, and sin are as relevant as in today's church as it was in the Christian community in Corinth. With over 33,000 distinct denominations in 238 countries⁹, divided by traditions and doctrinal differences, church unity is a far cry from reality. It makes one wonder when Jesus' prayer in John 17: 21 will be ever fulfilled. Third, let's look at it on a personal level.

6 In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace, Pew Research Center, 2019

7 FactChecker: Divorce Rate Among Christians, CHRISTIAN LIVING, September, 25, 2012

8 Institutional Racism Is Our Way of Life, By Jeff Nesbit, May 6, 2015

9 World Christian Encyclopedia by Barrett, Kurian, Johnson (Oxford Univ Press, 2nd edition, 2001).

Christian, as a people called out by God, do not live a life radically different from the rest of the society except on Sunday. Take consumerism as an example. It influences the Christian lifestyle as it is for the rest of the world. Christian author Skye Jethani understands the Christian identity crisis well when he said: "We find ourselves in a culture that defines our relationships and actions primarily through a matrix of consumption. We assign value to ourselves and others based on the goods we purchase. One's identity is now constructed by the clothes you wear, the vehicle you drive, and the music on your iPod. In short, you are what you consume."¹⁰ Instead of anchoring our identity in Christ, Christian is trapped in a consumer culture that defines our identity and value. In a sense, we are a people just as confused as the world who has no relationship with God. Indeed, everywhere we look, we are reminded that the tragic story of Rwanda is a mirror reflecting the deep brokenness of the worldwide church, and we should be concerned. No. We didn't murder our brothers and sisters by using machetes. But do we often kill by holding anger and are unwilling to forgive our brothers and sisters who have wronged us? Is our faith making a difference in the community we are in? Is the gospel transforming our lives in a way that our neighbors and coworkers start noticing it; and curious to ask about our belief? If the answers are no, then we have not experienced the deep inner transformation to the extent that we can change the world.

So, what lessons have we learned from the genocide in Rwanda since 1994? I would not have read that book if it was not required as a text for this class. Rwanda's genocide has been a distant and obscure memory that was considered irrelevant to Christianity and my relationship with God. In a sense, the world has moved on since then, and church discipleship remains pretty much the same in our generation. But the fact that God has put me in seminary at ATS goes beyond my

¹⁰ Immeasurable: Reflections on the Soul of Ministry in the Age of Church, Inc.

wildest imagination has given me hope for real change in the life of a believer. From a career-driven manager in banking to a seminary student preparing for a full-time missionary in Asia, it takes nothing less than the miracle of the Holy Spirit to have changed the direction of my life. So I am not here to promote any discipleship models or missional programs promising to make impacts on the world. If there is any model that will bring lasting changes, it is the model of a supernatural work of the Holy Spirit that can actually transform lives. But I don't believe there is a formula out there guaranteeing the supernatural work must happen. Missional programs and charity works will not make it happen as we have seen it in Rwanda and the church worldwide. On the other hand, there are specific prerequisites that are required for anyone to experience the deeper work of the Holy Spirit.¹¹ First, Confess and repent of all known sins and offer our lives fully to God (1John 1:9; Rom. 12:1; Gal 2:20). Second, entirely rely on God for power to live a Christian life (Rom 8:13; Gal. 2:20; 3:2-3), and Third, to fully obey the Lord's commands in our lives (1 John 2:6). Fourth, ask God to fill us with the Holy Spirit daily (Eph. 5:18). When our lives are filled with the Holy Spirit, we will experience the ever-deeper transformation we have always desired and thus bear witness to the world a new identity in Christ. But the hunger for the deeper work of the Holy Spirit is by itself a work of the Holy Spirit. God is never late, and he always has a plan for the church and for the individual believer alike. The awakening will come when the conditions are met. It happened to me three years ago, and it will happen to anyone who he has chosen before the foundation of the world. "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." (Ephesians 2:10).

Bibliographies:

¹¹ Grudem, Wayne, Systematic Theology, page 779.

Grudem, Wayne, Systematic Theology

Jethani, Skpye, Immeasurable: Reflections on the Soul of Ministry in the Age of Church, Inc.