

Are We Preachers or Witch Doctors? (Conrad Mbewe)

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

Code: TM13-13

Strange Fire Conference

Well it's a joy to be back here, this morning, and to bring God's Word to you. And I thank you for those words of commendation, Phil. What I'll do this morning is basically answer the question, "Are we preachers, or witch doctors?" Now that's sounds strange, I know it, to the American ear, but that's a very relevant question for my own situation back home because that's a matter that I have raised, it's something I have dealt with in my blog because it's a pertinent question. There's been clearly a shift in the way in which "evangelicals," I keep putting that in quotation marks, relating to the pastoral ministry.

To get us going, I want us to begin by reading 2 Timothy chapter 3. The passage that clearly demonstrates before us something of what a true preacher of the Word of God ought to be occupied with. Second Timothy chapter 3 and verse 16, while you're getting there, let me quickly say something of what I said two evenings ago, that it will be a broad sweep that I'll be giving you across what's happening back home in Africa. Invariably some people will be caught up in that broad brush that may not completely fit into the description, but I trust you'll appreciate that I only have so much time with me. So clearly that's at least something you can bear with in order to achieve the greater good.

Second Timothy 3 and verse 16, the Apostle Paul writes, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness so that," there's the famous phrase, "the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of His appearing and His Kingdom, I give you this charge, preach the Word. Be prepared in season and out of season, correct, rebuke and encourage with great patience and careful instruction."

I'll end my reading there. This is the last surviving epistle that the Apostle Paul wrote on the eve of his own departure. As the last chapter goes on to say his conscience of the fact that he will soon leave this scene of his labors, more or less the way in which the Lord Jesus Christ in the Upper Room discussed was also speaking and ending with the prayer that we quoted last time. Both of them are conscious that they are living but with their departure will not come the end of the Christian church and so there is a defining moment in which they are saying this is what you ought to concentrate on. The Lord in His prayer, the Apostle Paul in a direct exhortation.

And as you notice from these few words that we have read, the Apostle is quick to...to...to clarify in Timothy's mind the primary instrument that he is to use. It's divinely inspired and it is sufficient for all the work the man of God is required to do so that he might be thoroughly, completely, adequately equipped for every good work. The second based on the first is that he puts a charge upon him, a hair-raising charge, invoking the name of God the Father, God the Son, pointing to the coming judgment and he says to him, "Not only that you are to preach, but that you are to preach the Word." You are to expound these scriptures that I've spoken about. And thirdly, not only when you've got an audience that's willing and ready and looking forward to hearing what we have to say. But even when men and women are stopping their ears, preach it. Be patient but preach it. Do all you can to ensure that this happens.

Let me read to you, two newspaper clippings from back home. And they will be referring to three "evangelical" preachers. Again, notice my fingers, I'm putting that in quotation marks. Both of them were this year. The first is July the eighth and this is what it says. "A Lusaka based clergyman who in 2012 alone impregnated at least ten women among his followers has finally been divorced by his long-suffering wife. Bishop Emmanuel Chika of the Restoration Deliverance Church was sued by his wife for divorce after his skirt evangelism was published in the media in September 2012. His wife, Alice, decided to end the marriage after seeing for herself the number of children the pastor has sired within the church. And at the local court, the wife also revealed the witchcraft Chika uses."

The second it was also in the same month in a different part of the country, and I'll skip a lot because it's a longer newspaper article, but I just want you to catch something of the flavor. The Chipata Magistrate Court has heard how two clergymen sexually assaulted two women whom they paraded naked in the hills while casting out demons. Their names are mentioned, the first is referred to as a prophet and the second as a pastor. The lady recounts prophet Ngalande toward me, my sister, my sister-in-law to carry a pulpit to his house and then from there it was to write down our prayer requests and then from there taken to the hills for prayers. The following day, April twenty-fifth, they made us lie down with our bodies facing up and asked us to remove our tops. I could go on. The whole thing gets dirty, I'll spoil your morning if I read the details. Suffice it to say they were sexually abused on those mountains, rather on those hills.

How can this be happening so frequently among so-called evangelical churches today, right across Africa? These are two newspaper clippings from the month of July this year. The answer I will give and I hope to prove the point to you this morning, is that it is due to the seismic shift that has taken place in the popular understanding of who a pastor is across a large section of Africa. What we read in the Bible a few minutes ago is not what is in the popular mind back home. The pastor is someone who faithfully studies the Bible, preaches it in its context, applies it in the context of God's people. No. And what you need to appreciate is that the Charismatic Movement in Africa has evolved further than its American counterpart, especially in its portrayal of the person often referred to as the man of God.

Going back some 30-odd years, this title was very rare. I was already a Christian then. I hardly ever heard a pastor being referred to as such. Today it is the popular phrase. I don't know how many times a day I'm called "man of God." Pastors then were seen primarily as preachers and teachers. Their prominence hang on their levels of giftedness in explaining the Word of God. That has largely changed. And one cannot help but recognize why this changed. The initial Pentecostalism that's visited the shores of Africa did not directly aim to move the Word of God off center stage. I mentioned that two nights ago. Rather what it did was to apparently add the miraculous phenomena of the extraordinary gifts without subtracting the original perception. And consequently, I already went through that, you went to such a church and you would hear some effort at exposition. It's just that after the exposition there would be that extra time for those of you with all kinds of problems to come forward to be prayed for.

However, like the story of the Arabian camel, human fascination for the mysterious has caused one thing to lead to another until preaching in the popular charismatic circles across Africa has lost content and is largely nothing more than motivation of platitudes followed by a lot of shouting and chanting. I think that much, you need to turn to your own television channels with your popular Charismatic preachers and I'll say, what you're seeing this, just change the skin color and it could be back home. Apart from, of course, the nice buildings you have here.

But largely that's what you have. Nice phrases, perhaps a quotation from the Bible here or there, often tortured out of what it's really saying. And then the height of the preaching is really the preacher looking like he's now demon-possessed or something. Becoming crazy, if not looking mad.

But often, back home now, what is important is what follows after that. And that's where the man of God rested out of the context in which we saw Timothy being referred to as such, the man of God then takes on the role only equivalent to that of the village witch doctor. And let me explain. Timothy was being told here, your job is that of preaching, preaching the Word. That which has just been described in the earlier verses as being God-breathed, as being useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness. Timothy, major in that.

Well the situation back home is that in fact the work begins after the motivational talk is over. That was but the beginning. And it begins therefore with the laying on of hands as the multitudes begin to come forward, though they hardly even listening to that talk, they were waiting for this person who is reeking with power to do his work. This is often during prolonged church services overnight prayer meetings and all day prayer times on the hills. And when I say on the hills, I hope your mind goes to that newspaper clipping. It's a regular phenomena. You're going to the hills and you find the men of God busy praying, at least they claim.

The sad thing is, there is no effort at biblical counseling when people come with their problems, no effort. If a person says, "You know, I've been in and out of jobs," there's nothing like, "Okay, let's talk about your work ethics. Are you hard-working or lazy?" When a couple comes forward and says they have serious marital problems, there's nothing like, "Okay, man, do you love your wife as Christ loved the church? Are you working in that direction?" "Madam, would you say that about your husband? And, madam, do you submit to your husband's leadership in the home as a church submits to Christ." And so, does she do that to you? There's nothing like that. We're having marital problems, come forward, I'll pray for you. In fact, often when I'm driving long distances, I try to listen to the radio and every so often you come across one of these pastors and he's got a radio broadcast with someone else is reading letters to him and he's responding, you can guess what the answer is going to be almost invariably. And it's something like this. "We've got marriage problems. Blah, blah, blah, so, Man of God, what can you say to that?"

"Madam, come for our open night prayer meeting. This Friday we'll be having it and we'll pray for you. You need to be delivered. Next?" "Having problems with conceiving, it's been years, and so on. Man of God, what's your answer?" Come for the open-night prayer meeting. You need a breakthrough in that area of your message. Come Friday, we'll be having it at such-and-such a place." That's the panacea for all their ills. "There will be deliverance, come."

There are no moral questions asked. Rather it's precisely what the witch doctor in the village does. Two things show the similarities. First of all, it is the claim towards spiritual discernment after a lengthy time of prayer in which the "man of God" seems to have secret dealings with God. God is somehow communicating to him what you have absolutely no knowledge of. And then having as it were heard from God, he then tells you what the problem is. That's exactly what the witch doctor does. You tell him what your problem is, he goes into a little corner somewhere, goes into some form of trance, moves a few pebbles around and then announces to you that your problem is that your neighbor has managed to get through to your dead uncle and your dead uncle is the one who is now obstructing this pregnancy from taking place. Exactly the same.

But the second especially with respect to healing, is that like the village witch doctor, the African Charismatic preacher sees a conventional medical doctor as a competitor. That's very much that's what you might have here. To go to a hospital after being prayed for is a betrayal of trust and a lack of faith. You are undoing what the man of God has done. It's exactly what the witch doctor does as well. I've done this for you, don't go for the white man's medicine, otherwise what I have done for you will lose its potency.

The result of this is that many people have died of illnesses that can be cured by conventional medicines. Often they go to hospitals when it is too late. I've got doctors in my own church and every so often this is the frustration they express. Once upon a time they came too late and when they took off their garments, they found the etchings all over their bodies and they knew why these people

came late, it's because they had been to the witch doctor and he had told them they were cured. Now, especially with city folks, those markings are not on their bodies. But upon being asked, it soon becomes evident, especially when they ask the relatives the reason why this person took so long is because he had been up the mountain with a bishop, a prophet, an apostle so-and-so. And sadly, often it's too late and the people die.

Now, we must be ready now to answer the question I asked at the beginning of my message. How can this be happening so frequently among so-called "evangelical" churches? That a wife should know that my husband has been sleeping around with girls in the church and she still zipped her mouth. Sits there and listens to him preaching and apparently reeking with power. How can individuals be so ignorant as to follow these pastors into the middle of the bush, up a mountain, alone with them for prayer? Why can't they pray in that house where they were?

On to repeat it's the seismic shift in the way the public views and African Charismatic pastor, it has resulted in blind loyalty, especially among the followers. That phrase "man of God" is the equivalent of the phrase "the village witch doctor." There is some eerie mysteriousness around this individual. Let the village witch doctor, this individual has keys that unlock the mysterious world that enables him to know things in the Spirit world that we lesser mortals know nothing about. Therefore, to oppose such a person, or to expose such a person is to bring a curse upon yourself. And you can't miss it in the village context when a person comes from visiting a witch doctor. And you say, "Tell me what happened there? Tell me." You hardly have anything concrete. Because if I say anything here and it makes its way back to that witch doctor, he can put a curse upon my life and say anything. I know nothing.

I never can imagine a context, as I said two days ago, where this book is closed. You're dealing with ignorance. And consequently when this so-called man of God begins to say and do things that are obviously bordering on the immoral, there's no premise on which you can blow the offside whistle. And it's shocking to me, the number of women that finally come to the end of the road, come and when they share this story, you say, "But, madam, when this guy began to do this, when it just begun, didn't you realize the whole thing was wrong, it was immoral, it was unbiblical?" And the answer is often, "Well, you know, I thought of the man of God he knew what I didn't know and therefore I trusted him, until it became too much."

And hence, that newspaper clipping of a pastor's wife who finally gets tired of the whole thing, with no less than ten women in the church, have children from her husband. That's in Lusaka the capital city of the whole country of Zambia. This wife had been destroyed for such a long time until finally she said, "Enough is enough."

Now, brethren, I wish this was just about cults. I wish this was about some traditional African religion. But I'm speaking here about what is fast becoming the face of evangelical Christianity to the outside

world. It's a far cry from what we read in 2 Timothy chapter 3 and chapter 4. Often, these individuals would be flashy in their dressing, like worldly pop music idols, with a feigned American accent. Of course, the African accent is so strong that you can still detect it within that imported accent. I've already said their sermons are not worth listening to twice. There is absolutely no exposition of Scripture. There is an observable absence of a display of the unsearchable riches of Christ. Repentance is conspicuous by its absence and there is no effort at working towards the people of God conforming to the image of Christ. It is all about how you can get so much that you are looking for to spoil yourself with.

As I was preparing this, I looked at a few of the statements coming from a number of them and I picked one which represents everything else. "I declare prosperity on your life in Jesus name." Why should his declaration be more powerful than mine? I might as well be declaring prosperity on my own life in Jesus' name, why his? He is the man of God. There is power behind his words so when he makes that declaration, something is supposedly happening. Hence the frequent irreverent repetition of "in Jesus' name...in Jesus' name...in Jesus' name...in Jesus' name...in Jesus' name." The way in which the witch doctor in the villages also repeating some canned phrase all over the place. Exactly the same thing.

In reality, nothing is really happening that's worth talking about. A few years ago because of people knowing my position with respect to all this, I was invited to a live radio broadcast, the second most...in fact, the most popular private radio in the whole country, and the subject was miraculous healing today. The four of us, it was supposed to be the panel: a Roman Catholic priest, two famous Charismatic pastors, and myself. One of the Charismatic pastors, a well-known healer, couldn't make it. He said he was sick. (Laughter) Well he lied because immediately after the whole broadcast was over, I met him at the shopping mall pushing a trolley full of goods together with his wife, heading out to the car park. But that's beside the point.

As the interview went on, the Roman Catholic priest was always trying to be on the two sides of the argument, every so often trying to show that yeah, there's something you said here that makes sense, and something you said that made sense. It was the Charismatic person and myself that basically locked horns. Since it was a live broadcast and people could call in, I made the challenge. I read the passage of Scripture where John the Baptist disciples had inquired of Him whether He was the one and Jesus said, "Go and tell John what you have seen. The dumb talking, the deaf hearing, the lame walking, the blind seeing." And I said on that broadcast, "If there's anyone of you who fits this description and you have been healed by any of these, please call. That went on for well over an hour. I became a New Testament Elijah cause I kept taunting (applause). Now remember that this is in a country where literally every weekend churches are having these healings, every weekend. Literally every month you've got pastors all over your city from one prophet, another Apostle, this bishop and everything else conducting these healing crusades, to the point where you...you just want to tear them off the walls or trees because it's overwhelming. And all of them claiming these things

are happening.

Over one solid hour of waiting and discussing, and with me repeating that invitation, two phone calls came through. One was a gentleman who said that eight years ago he took a neighbor's daughter whose legs were not quite equal to this faith healer and the legs became equal after praying for her. And I remember saying, "Eight years ago?" And he would say yes. I said, "Eight years ago," he's not appreciating my point. I mean, first of all, I questioned the issue of short and long legs, but that's not the point. But if it's happening every weekend, that testimony must be stale. Eight years ago?

The second caller was a lady, clearly agitated, encouraging the man of God not to listen to me because I am a dead theologian. But what does it got to do with me? I'm asking for testimonies. Those were the only two calls that pretended to have anything in support of this in a whole nation of over ten million people...with healing crusades every weekend.

Well the gentlemen who was doing the interview finally turned to the pastor on the other side and said, "Well, you know, we sort of waited for a while, nobody is calling in." This was his answer. "I think they are shy."

The poor soul, he had a stroke not too long after that, he was in a coma for a while, at least for about a week until he finally died. Why didn't his fellow faith-healers rush in there and raise him from that bed? It's because they knew it was fraud, it was a lie. (Applause)

One more point and I must hurry on. In Zambia we have an organization by statutory instrument that looks after the wellbeing of the handicapped and physical challenged. It's called Zambian Council of the Handicapped. When this phenomena became too much, they made a public statement to this effect. "Those of you who are blind or crippled or deaf, dumb, stop going to these meetings that are claiming that they are healings because according to our records, there's not been a single individual who has been healed from those meetings."

Now if there were to be an organization, surely that ought to have independent verifiable information, it's them. But here are charlatans, half-converted cowboys going all over the place drawing in crowds in the name of doing the miraculous when they know deep down their souls nothing like that is really happening. They claim to have gifts they don't have. What is that but fraud, iniquity, wickedness, sin? That's why it is. They have not only abandoned the work they were told to do, they are claiming to do what they're in fact not doing. Simply to draw the crowds and get their money.

Let me hurry on to close. First of all, an apparent apology. I know I've spoiled your morning. This is not the kind of message you want to listen to with a cup of coffee in one hand and a doughnut in the other. I wish I could be more positive. I wish I could say that this is something that happened here and there once in a while, or as I said earlier on that it's in some extreme fringe corner of Christendom.

Yet I want to repeat that this is a growing phenomena back home. It is fast becoming the face of evangelical Christianity to the outside world, the modern-day successful “evangelical pastor,” I put that in quotation marks again, is simply a witch doctor who is apparently using cleaner and perhaps more potent power to bring about deliverance, bring about healing, bring about breakthroughs in the lives of the people. That’s the concept.

Now in the light of what we read in 2 Timothy, what concerns me is the silence, the silence in addressing this matter, in locking horns with it. I’ve done a blog post on this, I think it’s entitled something like, “Our criminal evangelical silence.” Simply because when I was writing it down, it bothered me. If you were to look at the membership list of the evangelical fellowship of Zambia, ninety percent of the membership are these same ministries. I saw the list myself. I know what I’m talking about.

So what’s my appeal? First of all, if you ever do come across to Zambia or to Africa, generally, emphasize 2 Timothy 3:16 to chapter 4 verse 2. Call the pastors back to what their work is, (Applause) What sets me apart from my congregation is not that I have some backdoor entry into God’s presence that bypasses the ancestral spirits and demons and I can therefore bring the blessings to you. No. There, there is the priesthood of all believers. It is the fact that I have gifts and a calling that enables me to preach this Word to you. (Applause)

Secondly, pray and keep on praying for those who are fulfilling 2 Timothy chapter 4 verse one and two. Pray for them that they might be faithful and that they might increase in number so that this tide may be stemmed by the Word of God itself bringing to light into the darkness. Pray for us, if I may dare include myself there.

And then thirdly, provide truth, especially through books, that clarifies the issue, that clearly sounds the warning, that when you open the door slightly to so-called extra-ordinary revelatory gifts in Africa, without the benefit that was there in Bible times which was the presence and regulation of the Apostles themselves, this is where you land. It’s a matter of time because I want to repeat this is not just some grouping that’s on its way out there, full of mad guys, this is an entire spectrum. It’s a continuum, different shades but following each other, or like the mice listening to the Pied Piper, continuing and continuing. Now those who are clever somehow are able to stop somewhere along the way and just remain open to the possibilities of these things, but the common guys who are just remaining open. He is putting into practice the full implications of things. And the next, and the next, and the next and before you know it, it’s the Arabian camel story. The Bible is there for just a few platitudes, a few favorite verses, rather than regular, full-orbed, Christ-centered exposition. I’m saying, let’s continue providing the truth so that God’s people can know how rich this book is, that it teaches us the whole counsel of God, that it is adequate for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness. There were seeds all coming from there.

And then lastly, support the training and the work of true preachers and the planting of churches. These lampstands, churches that represent New Testament Christianity. Support them whichever way you can. Africa needs your partnership. Let's pray.

Our Father in heaven, these are sad and sobering realities, yet they only point to the fact that the archenemy of God is real and where the light of Your Word is not shining forth in the brilliance of the noonday sun, darkness soon takes over. For the sake of Your church, O God, visit our continent, for the sake of Your church, O God, salvage the situation. For the sake of Your church, O God, call the clarion call to be heard from south to north and east to west until those who are servants of the evil one clothed in sheepskin may be seen for who they are. O God, visit us, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.

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