

Dr. Menzies' Review of My Book

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Emmanuel Kwasi Amofo. **Stand Up for the Gospel: Getting the Church Back on Track**. George, South Africa: Oasis International Publishing, 2022. xiii + 1205 pp. \$ 14.99. Paperback. ISBN: 13: 978-1-59452-851-4.

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This popularized version of Emmanuel Kwasi Amofo's PhD dissertation is an exposition of Jude applied to Evangelical and especially Pentecostal churches in Africa. With unambiguous language, skillful exegesis, and vivid illustrations, Amofo applies the message of Jude to his readers in contemporary Africa and beyond. Although Amofo's application is rooted in his extensive research of African Pentecostal churches, this book is immensely valuable for the global Christian community. His insights into the biblical text and his analysis of its relevance for African churches will be beneficial to Christians everywhere and serve as a model for similar contextually based projects in Asia, Latin America, and elsewhere.

One of the great strengths of this book is its sensitivity to the African and Pentecostal contexts. Amofo writes as an insider. He grew up in Ghana and has lived and ministered for many years in Kenya. Additionally, Amofo spent considerable time interviewing key leaders of Pentecostal churches in Africa. He has also ministered widely in Anglican and Assemblies of God circles and completed his Ph.D. studies at the Pan-African Theological Seminary, an Assemblies of God institution. From this rich background, Amofo describes with clarity the worldview reflected in African Traditional Religions (ATRs), which sees "the natural world of rocks, trees, mountains, rivers" as being "inhabited by spirit beings that control every aspect of human life" (33).

This worldview produces tremendous fear: “People are afraid because they are subject to the whims of spirit beings, which can do them good or harm” (33).

Amoafo goes on to explain how an over-emphasis on fear of evil spirits has pushed many African churches to adopt unhealthy practices. These extremes coalesce in a fixation on the prosperity doctrine, the most prevalent false teaching found in contemporary African churches. The prosperity gospel tends to feature Old Testament promises of material blessings for God’s people; and then, on this basis, it claims that “God’s mission today is to ‘make [his] people rich’” (68). In response, Amoafo challenges the hermeneutical foundation of this false teaching, rooted as it is in the literal application of OT promises. Amoafo asserts, “we are no longer living in the times of Solomon, where God dwells in a Temple and brings the nations to one central location to worship him.” Rather, we live “in the times of the apostles, where God sends us out to the nations without even an extra shirt so that we depend on the generosity of others” (Matt 10:9-10) (69). “In the NT, Jesus changes the mission strategy from ‘come-see’ to ‘go-tell’” (68).

Amoafo acknowledges that Africans are susceptible to the prosperity message due to the lingering influences of the ATR worldview. As a result, prosperity-oriented churches often feature “loud and lengthy prayers” (167) and the use of “objects one might call talismans to get their healing or deliverance or breakthrough” (149). This leads to an unhealthy focus on the authority of church leaders.

By over-emphasizing “the fearful power of demons and overcomplicating the deliverance process, leaders keep people dependent on them for protection and security” (147). According to Amoafo, the antidote for this unhealthy syncretism is a renewed emphasis on the gospel. “When we put our faith in what [Jesus] did for us on the cross, we can stand before God, free” from fear, shame, and guilt (39).

Rather than focusing on the power of malignant spiritual forces, we need to reassure people that Christ is more powerful. “Our churches need to proclaim that we have been redeemed, forgiven, born again, and delivered from Satan’s power by God’s work through Christ” (36).

The result will be life changing. As Amofo notes, “Many Christians in Africa testify that when they submitted their lives to Christ, they moved from their earlier fear of evil spirits to the peace that comes from a relationship with God through Christ” (88).

Amofo helpfully points out how Western presentations of the gospel that focused on “sin in terms of...individual guilt” (36) did not address the intensely felt needs of many Africans. Nevertheless, Amofo argues for sound biblical perspective. Sin has “damaged our relationships with God, others, and ourselves” and thus sin causes us “to feel fear, shame, and guilt” (37). So, Amofo suggests that “the church in Africa needs a balanced view of the gospel,” one that addresses fear and shame as well as guilt. Amofo correctly emphasizes that the gospel deals with all three of these problems that plague humanity: fear, shame, and guilt (36-39).

Amofo insists that a return to the gospel, by definition, will redirect our focus toward repentance and the Lordship of Christ. Amofo sees contemporary relevance in Jude’s rebuke of false teachers in his day, who “wanted Christ to meet their needs without telling them what to do” (71). Amofo draws apt parallels between these false teachers and those in African churches who “recite the name of Jesus as a kind of talisman that we should expect to bring us good fortune.” By misusing Jesus’ name in this way, “we ask him to submit to us and our will. But Christ is our Lord.... It is we who must submit to him and his Word” (73).

Finally, a return to the gospel will help us view our lives considering eternity and God’s redemptive plan. Although Amofo speaks of the African context, here he illuminates a problem that characterizes most Evangelical and Pentecostal churches around the globe: “Many of our churches today rarely teach about the Second Coming of Christ.”

The reason for this lacuna is not hard to find: our “focus is on church members pursuing a perfect life of health and wealth in the here and now in this fallen world” (172).

Sadly, the prosperity doctrine “encourages churchgoers to happily settle for the best this world can give them” (172). While there is a certain truth to the notion that God delights to bless our lives in every way (Gen 1:27-31; Rev 21:3-4; 22:1-5), it is important to recognize that he blesses us so that we might engage in his great mission (not simply for our personal well-being) and, when we do, in this age persecution is the inevitable result (2 Tim 3:12). Indeed, any theology that fails to recognize that spiritual growth comes, in part, through suffering is seriously deficient (Rom 5:1-5).

Our experience of persecution and pain more broadly is the natural consequence of our location in redemptive history: we live in between the first and second coming of Christ. Thus, Amofo wisely affirms that presently we only experience in part the impact of God’s blessing and reign. Yet, this African brother’s fine exposition of Jude also reminds us that “by building [ourselves] up in [our] most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit,” we can remain “in God’s love as [we] wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring [us] to eternal life” (Jude 20-21). Indeed, our Lord can keep us from “stumbling and to present [us] before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy” (Jude 24 NIV 2011).

Pentecostals may be disappointed with Amofo’s analysis of Jude 20. He fails to note that the language Jude uses here, “pray in the Holy Spirit,” parallels closely Paul’s usage in 1 Corinthians 14:15-16 and Ephesians 6:18. Thus, as Towner and Harvey observe, “there is a strong consensus that here Jude means prayer in a Spirit-given tongue (glossolalia)” (Harvey and Towner, Jude, 225). Additionally, some may point to the powerful presence of the kingdom of God in Jesus and wonder if the NT approach is better summarized with the phrase, “show and tell” rather than “go and tell” (many thanks to Bob Stefan, who suggested this phrase).

Nevertheless, Amofo, with good reason, chooses to focus on the urgency of our mission and the central issue: the need for the church to get back on track by faithfully proclaiming the “good news”—a message that has been handed down to us through the ages. Amofo’s intentions are clear, and, like the epistle of Jude, I am confident that this book can encourage readers to stand up for the gospel.