



## AFRICAN PARADIGM SHIFTS

**Bible Engagement and Discipleship  
in Africa: Are we on the right track?**

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**Questions and Ideas from 30 Years  
of Work in Africa**

**ARTICLE 6    AFRICA TO  
THE WORLD!**

“THE AFRICAN IMPACT ON  
GLOBAL CHRISTIANITY ISN'T  
JUST A MATTER OF OPENING NEW  
CHURCHES AND  
RE-EVANGELIZING THE WEST.”

– Matthew Elliott, PhD



## AFRICA TO THE WORLD!

Some years ago, I sat in church as the pastor talked excitedly about his plan to support a new church plant in Liberia. To me, he seemed under the impression that Liberia had few churches.

At the time, I had just visited Liberia. Oasis was helping open the first Christian bookstore after a long, brutal civil war. The streets of the capital were still full of white trucks with the letters “U.N.” on the side.

In the areas I visited, there was no shortage of churches. But Liberia’s 80% unemployment rate meant there was also no shortage of well-meaning “church planters” desperate for anyone who could pay them in American dollars.

I wondered if this pastor had ever visited Liberia and if he knew what I knew about the country. Liberia needed help appropriate to its situation, help that went beyond planting an American church’s flag at “the ends of the earth.” This pastor’s church-planting movement crumbled a few years later as his leadership was exposed as self-serving and disingenuous.

Church planting efforts can be a great blessing. But we can make wrong choices if we do not know the ground by visiting and spending time understanding the needs of the people we hope to serve.



In many parts of Africa, the most pressing need is for healthy churches that deepen the faith of believers. As many as 70% of Nairobi, Kenya’s residents attend church. However, many of these churches struggle to lead new Christians to maturity (just like many churches in my area, as well, I might add). In these places, might we not need more churches but churches that grow people deep in faith to meet their own local challenges with biblical solutions?

Africa is the one continent with a rapidly growing population. And Africa is the largest Christian continent, set to be 40% of Christians within 30–40 years. As Africa grows more educated, prosperous, and influential, Africans will be church leaders around the world.

Right now, 2 million immigrants from Africa live in the United States and as many as 5 million live in Europe. About 50% of African immigrants in the U.S. have a college degree. Some of Europe's largest congregations are African. African denominations have planted thousands of new churches across the globe, taking their commitment to prayer and evangelism with them. African mission agencies train and send missionaries into unreached areas of the world.

(See Oasis's amazing book, *I'd Rather Die on the High Ground*.)

The African impact on global Christianity isn't just a matter of opening new churches and re-evangelizing the West. Africans exert biblical and orthodox influence on some of the world's largest Christian denominations. The United Methodists, Lutherans, Anglican, and Catholic communities in Africa affirm orthodox theology and morality while standing strong against the Western drift toward theological liberalism. African church-plants from many Western denominations grew so fast that they came to vastly outnumber their fellow denomination members in Western countries.

Once, I spoke with the archbishop of one of the largest national chapters of a mega denomination in an African country, approaching 20 million members in his country.

When we first met, he scowled at me, and immediately questioned our books and theology. Were we Westerners here to pervert the true faith with modern ideas and morals?



Understandably, it took some time to find shared connections, friends, and theological interests before he warmed to our conversation. While few African leaders I've met with shared his demeanor, many have shared his skepticism of unbiblical ideas infiltrating the church from Western sources.

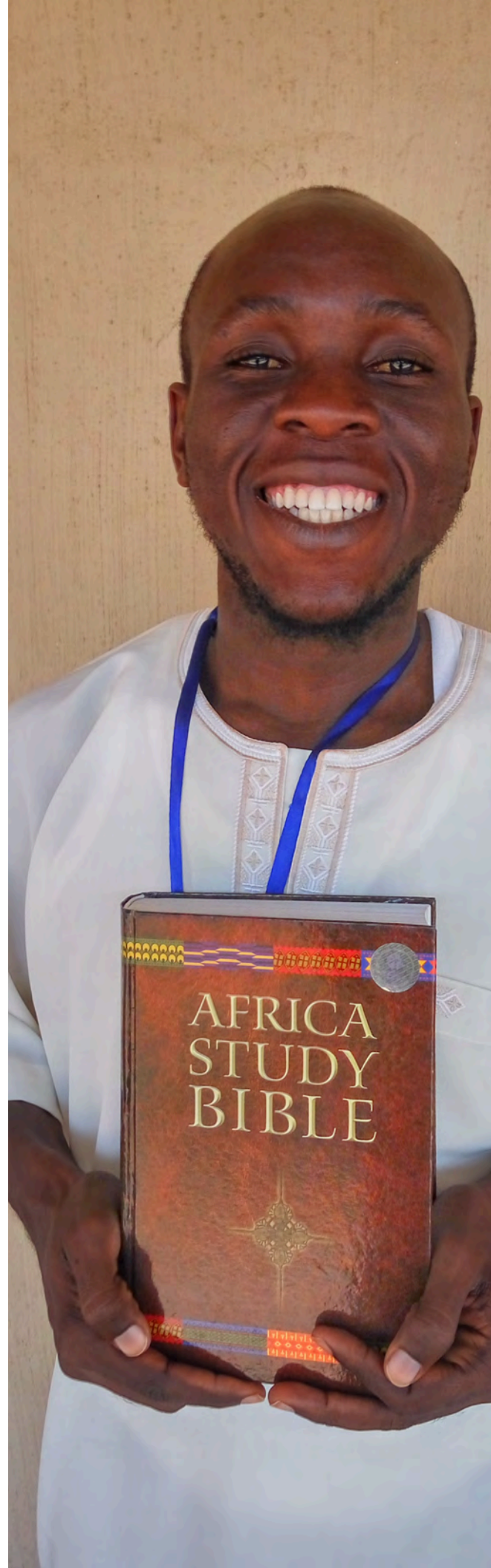
Africa's depth of discipleship and the strength of its biblical teaching will greatly affect the entire future of the global church. Africans will go out as missionaries, students, and businesspeople throughout the world. Today, African churches multiply as Western churches shrink. The majority of African Christians attend church regularly, while Western "Christians" are often cultural Christians who only attend church for holidays, weddings, and funerals.

God has done amazing work in Africa. You can see our timeline of God's Work in Africa in the *Africa Study Bible*! But there are warning signs as well. What kind of Christianity will Africa bring to the world? And that question will be answered, largely, by how we choose to re-prioritize and invest in discipleship.

In Zion, Illinois, a cathedral with an iron fence stands at the center of the community less than 100 miles from my hometown. The church's leader founded the town of Zion to build a Christian community, and the community sent missionaries to Africa.

In Zion, the church had its ups and downs and eventually, it recalled workers and lost influence in its African church plants. But the churches planted in southern Africa exploded in numbers. Some estimate that Africa now has 20 million Zionists. But many of these believers mix Christian theology with African traditional religions and promote a gospel of prosperity and blessing. The rise of the African church might export this kind of "Christianity" too. But it doesn't have to be that way.

My close friends and co-workers helped pioneer an evangelical reform movement among Zionist Christians. They introduced practicing pastors to the true gospel of Jesus and disciplined them as they grew in faith. Movements like these can lead whole denominations closer to God, and Western funders would be wise to promote them. But this tiny reform movement has little money and can hardly afford *Africa Study Bibles* for a few thousand pastors. What if, for example, we reprioritized just \$1 million according to Africa's current situation and context, to disciple Zionist leaders? We could train and equip 50,000 Zionist pastors with a study Bible or Bible in their reading language. With one equipped pastor for every 400 Zionist church members, this initiative might help grow the faith of 20 million church members.



The *Africa Study Bible* was written with plans like these in mind. Evangelical reform movement Zionist leaders served on our *Africa Study Bible* leadership and writing teams, so Zionists could call this amazing theological resource their own.

20 million lives changed by God's Word might change entire nations. If Western believers help their Zionist brothers and sisters in Christ, the great movement of African Zionists can become a beacon for the light of God's truth. How might God use that love to change the world?

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**Article by Dr Matthew Elliott,  
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