

SHARING THE GOSPEL WITH ADHERENTS OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

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I became interested in sharing Christ with devotees of African traditional religion several years ago through my investigation of the practice of slavery or ritual servitude in some shrines of that faith. As I met the priests and priestesses and other devotees of ATR, at first I only thought of them as horrible idolaters. After all, they were worshipping stones and grotesque images that Christians call idols. They were deceitful, they were exceedingly cruel to their slaves, they were self-centered, they preyed on young children. My every impression of them was only that of wickedness.

A strange thing began to happen to me somewhere along the way, however. I began to know some of the priests and priestesses by name and to think of them as human beings like me. I began to see that they were themselves enslaved every bit as much as the girls they kept in their shrines. I began to care about their salvation as much (well, nearly as much) as I cared about the salvation of their slaves. I began to understand that although most of them knew something about Jesus, no one had ever personally and carefully shared the Gospel with them. I began making a point of doing so as I had opportunity, and to my surprise, I found that most of the time, I received a gracious hearing. The interest they showed seemed to be genuine.

So, in the past seven years, I've shared the Gospel with many who are deeply involved in the leadership of African traditional religion. By God's grace, and through the witness of many of my African brothers and sisters in addition to my own, one head priest has come to Christ as well as several devotees of different kinds. Many more, I believe, are on the verge of doing so.

This is true in spite of the fact that many individuals and some groups are fiercely promoting ATR under the banner of Afrocentricity and of the equality of all religions. African traditional religion seems like a solid wall that the church has not so much penetrated, but I believe there are cracks up and down the whole length of the wall. With care and with effort, I believe many more African traditionalists could come to Jesus Christ.

Last year I was sharing Christ in a shrine in Ghana. An old woman who had spent her life in the shrine joyfully and freely came to Christ. After she prayed, I turned to a man standing nearby whom I suspected might be the priest, although he was not dressed in his priestly garb. "What did you think of what we discussed?" I asked.

Thoughtfully, he responded, "Well, I am the priest of this shrine. I'm not ready yet, but in time I know I am also going to turn to Jesus."

He also shared with me some information that I took very seriously. "I like the way you talked," he said. "You preached Jesus, but you showed respect. You didn't ridicule us. You are not the first one to come here," he said. "But others have only wanted to laugh at us for worshipping idols. You showed that you cared."

I thought a lot about what he said. I knew that Elijah had mocked the prophets of Baal. Maybe there's a time and a place for doing that. But Paul used a gentler approach with the Athenians. I had spoken clearly that idolatry was in essence Satanic, yet he felt that I had been respectful. I have found the best approach is almost always to be friendly and respectful, avoiding ridicule, and talking personally with them, letting my concern for them be seen.

As an American, I am an outsider to African culture, even though our family lived in DR Congo for nine years and learned a local language. I have found that people like to talk about their local culture, their history and beliefs. They like to have me listen and even take notes on what they say, so I have found this is usually a good opening.

There was a village in Benin that we had heard still had walls cemented with human blood. We just showed up at the village and asked to talk to the elders. The chief, elders, and several priests of various shrines assembled. We simply said something like, “We were going by and we noticed your village. It looks very interesting. We would love to learn something about your culture and your history and your beliefs.” They were thrilled. When I merely listened, they instructed me to write it down so I would be sure to remember it and get it right. For some time we listened intently as they freely and without prodding told us that the ancient walls of the town had been cemented with the blood of their enemies.

After a very interesting time of listening, they asked what we had to say. I told them we were believers in Jesus Christ and asked if we might tell them something about Him. They agreed, so carefully and in considerable detail we shared the Gospel with them. Sitting practically in the shade of those ancient blood walls, they were quiet and respectful as we shared with them the wondrous story of love. We had listened to them; now they listened to us. When we were finished, they asked when we could come back again and tell them more. I have found that this approach almost always gains a hearing for the Gospel, and sometimes people seem sincerely interested.

As I share the Gospel, I always begin with common ground. It’s somehow easier to discuss differences once we’ve found something we can agree on. This is very easy with adherents of African Traditional Religion, because they all, even idol priests, believe in a Supreme God who created everything. I once asked a priest if he believed God even created the spirits they worshiped in the shrine. “Oh yes, of course,” he said. “He’s the creator. He made everything.” They usually like it when I, a Christian, say that I agree with them. Like them, I also believe in a great Creator who made everything—everything material and every spirit.

I don’t find it especially helpful to present the basic facts of the Gospel in the usual way. Most devotees of ATR have heard that Jesus is the Son of God, died for our sins, and rose again. Some of them even accept these facts, yet they don’t worship Jesus or give allegiance to Him. There are a few details we don’t usually tell, in the interest of being succinct, that make a huge difference toward helping ATR devotees understand the Gospel.

First, I find it very helpful to let them know that God who created us wants and demands and deserves all our worship and our love. In ATR, God is seen as far away, uncaring. He made everything there is, but then He committed the administration of His creation to lesser spirits He had created. They are like intermediaries between us and God. Most ATR devotees cannot see their sin until they understand that God wants our worship, and that they have given it to other spirits instead.

A few years ago I noticed some unusually beautiful paintings on the walls of a shrine in Ghana. Some of them were of biblical scenes. On the front of the shrine, over the entrance where sacrifices were offered to the gods, was a painting of Moses receiving the Ten Commandments. As my coworker and I were discussing what this could mean, the shrine owner came along. (The shrine owner is the owner of the idol, different from the priest who leads the worship of the idol.) We honestly complimented the beauty of the paintings, and then asked. “You have a picture of Moses receiving the Ten Commandments on your shrine. Do you know what the Ten Commandments are?”

“Well, no.” But she was sure they must be something good.

“Would you like to know what the Ten Commandments say?” we asked.

She would, so we began sharing them with her. She was shocked. She did not know God commanded us to worship Him alone. She did not know He commanded us not to make images to worship. She said she’d have to really think about that.

This kind of ignorance is typical of ATR devotees. Most of them have honestly never realized that God wants our worship, love and obedience. They believe in Him, so when they realize this, there sin is immediately apparent.

I also find it helpful to talk about the origin of Satan and the evil spirits. Some ATR groups teach that Lucifer or Satan is good, but when ATR adherents realize that Satan led a rebellion against God, it is easy for them to see they need to get on a different path. Passages like Isaiah 14:12-15 and Ezekiel 28:2-17 are helpful in this regard.

Remember the old lady I led to Christ in the shrine while the priest looked on? It was the teaching of the origin of Satan that caused her to see her need of Christ. Usually I give ATR adherents time to think things through carefully, but when this woman learned of the origin of Lucifer, it all became clear to her. She said something like, "Then that means we've been worshiping the devil, then that means we need to repent!" She saw it so clearly that I asked her right then and there if she'd like to do so. She would, and she did. Holding both hands in the air, she prayed a beautiful sinner's prayer, declaring her newfound faith in Jesus Christ. I've learned several different Gospel presentations, but as far as ATR adherents are concerned, I believe this is the missing link in them.

Another concept I find helpful in sharing with ATR adherents is the concept of Jesus being the perfect sacrifice that God accepted. In my own culture, sacrifice is not something we normally think about, at least, not the concept of substitutionary sacrifice. Yet sacrifice is a common concept readily understood in traditional African culture. Animals are offered, and historically human beings have been offered as well. Even the modern concept of shrine slaves is one of sacrifice. An innocent virgin girl is chosen by the family to make atonement for someone's misdeed. However, even after she has given her whole life, the atonement is not achieved. If she dies or runs away, another girl from the same family must be given. One priest told me that once a crime is committed, it has to be atoned for until the end of time. Like the animal sacrifices that were offered over and over, this shows clearly that the sacrifice was insufficient to truly atone for sin.

Jesus' sacrifice was different because it was the perfect sacrifice that God accepted to end the payment for our sin forever. Many details about the crucifixion show how important it was, how different from the thousands upon thousands of sacrifices that had been offered before. Some of these details show that God did accept His sacrifice as full atonement for our sin forever.

In my Gospel presentations to ATR adherents, I find it helpful to draw attention to these details. The earth shook. Rocks broke in two. The sky became dark at noontime. The veil of the temple tore in two, from high above to below, opening the way into God's presence.

ATR adherents understand about the veil, because their shrines, too, have two chambers or courts where only priests and designated devotees can enter. The inner court is also shut off with a veil. Although the veil in shrines of ATR is light and hangs low in comparison to the veil of the Jewish temple, it still gives the same basic idea. As I elaborate on the details of Christ's death, most devotees of ATR grow in conviction that Jesus truly was offering the perfect sacrifice for our sins and God was doing everything possible to draw attention to that fact.

After I share some teaching, usually I ask what the person thinks of what I've said. Their response tells me what they have understood, what they may be struggling to understand, and where I need to go from there. Their response tells me whether they are ready for the question.

Leaving idolatry is a serious matter. Usually there are family and community implications. I am looking for people who are seriously and permanently tied to Christ, so I always allow time for serious consideration. It is rare that I ask them if they would like to receive Christ on the first visit, but as I have already shared, that has happened sometimes. Those who are trying to bring people to Christ just need to be led by the Spirit of God.

May God use these simple ideas from my experience to help you share Christ more boldly, more consistently, and more wisely with adherents of African traditional religion.

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