

CHRISTIANITY IN AFRICA

Ancient Roots, Missions, Independent Churches, and Pentecostal Expansion

The Genealogy of Christian Division

A Historical and Biblical Study of Schism, Reformation, and the Making of Modern Christianity

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Open Christian Press

A Publishing Imprint of Open Christian University and Center for Faith and Work

Book DOI: <https://doi.org/10.65655/ocp.m26>

Chapter DOI: <https://doi.org/10.65655/ocp.m26.c93>

Chronological scope: First century to present, with emphasis on the nineteenth to twenty-first centuries

Recommended citation: Sangwa, S. (2026). Christianity in Africa: Ancient roots, missions, independent churches, and Pentecostal expansion. In The Genealogy of Christian Division. Open Christian Press. <https://doi.org/10.65655/ocp.m26.c93>

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Abstract

Africa is not a late appendix to Christian history. The continent appears in the New Testament world, supplied some of ancient Christianity's most consequential intellectual and ecclesial centers, preserved continuous Christian traditions in Egypt and Ethiopia, sustained medieval Christian kingdoms in Nubia, received and reshaped Catholic and Protestant missions, generated African-initiated churches, and became one of the principal centers of global Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity. This chapter reconstructs that long history from the first century to the present, with particular attention to the nineteenth through twenty-first centuries. It distinguishes ancient continuity from later re-entry, mission transmission from colonial domination, denominational transplantation from African appropriation, schism from reform, and foreign influence from indigenous theological agency. The narrative follows Alexandria and the Coptic tradition; Latin North Africa; Aksum, Ethiopian and Eritrean Tewahedo Christianity; Nubia; the Christian Kingdom of Kongo; Catholic and Protestant mission expansion; Bible translation, schools, medicine, and African clergy; Ethiopianism and ecclesial independence; Zionism, Aladura, Kimbanguist, and other prophetic movements; the East African Revival; classical Pentecostalism; and the rise of neo-Pentecostal, prosperity, deliverance, megachurch, media, and network Christianity. It argues that no single genealogy explains African Christianity. Multiple ancient, mission-founded, revivalist, independent, Pentecostal, and network lineages coexist and continually interact. A *Sola Scriptura* assessment affirms African Christian agency, vernacular Scripture, evangelism, prayer, spiritual gifts, healing, and accountable contextualization while testing sacramental claims, extra-biblical authority, syncretism, prophecy, prosperity teaching, spiritual warfare, and founder-centered government against the apostolic Scriptures. The chapter concludes by showing how Africa's demographic and missionary weight now reshapes global Christianity and prepares the focused national genealogy of Rwanda.

Keywords: *African Christianity; Coptic Christianity; Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo; African Initiated Churches; Christian missions; Pentecostalism; contextualization; prosperity theology*

1. Introduction: Africa Is Not a Late Mission Field

The history of Christianity in Africa is often told from the wrong chronological starting point. If the story begins with nineteenth-century European missionaries, Africa appears to enter Christian history as a passive recipient of a religion created elsewhere. That narrative is historically untenable. Egypt, Libya, Cyrene, and the kingdom south of Egypt conventionally described in Greco-Roman sources as “Ethiopia” already belong to the geographical horizon of the New Testament. Alexandria became one of the most important intellectual centers of ancient Christianity. Carthage, Numidia, and Hippo produced Tertullian, Cyprian, the Donatist controversy, and Augustine, all of whom permanently shaped Western theology. The Aksumite kingdom adopted Christianity in the fourth century and developed the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo tradition. Christian kingdoms flourished for centuries in Nubia. Long before the scramble for Africa, the Kingdom of Kongo adopted Catholic Christianity through a negotiated encounter with Portugal. The nineteenth-century missionary movement therefore entered a continent with Christian histories already measured in centuries, even though those histories had not produced continuous Christian presence in every region (Bediako, 1995; Etherington, 2019; Hastings, 1996).

At the same time, the correction must not become a new simplification. Ancient Christianity in Egypt, the Maghreb, Ethiopia, and Nubia does not mean that all modern African churches descend institutionally from those ancient communities. Christianity disappeared or became marginal in much of the Maghreb; medieval Nubian kingdoms eventually ceased to be Christian polities; and large portions of West, Central, East, and Southern Africa encountered organized Christianity principally through later Catholic and Protestant missions. The historically responsible claim is therefore more precise: Africa has multiple Christian beginnings, continuities, interruptions, re-entries, and indigenous re-formations. Some traditions possess ancient institutional continuity. Others descend from European or American missions. Still others emerged through African secession, revival, prophetic movements, Pentecostal networks, or new independent ministries. Many contemporary churches combine more than one of these genealogical streams.

The preceding chapter traced the movement from classical Pentecostal denominations to charismatic renewal, media religion, megachurches, and independent networks, ending with the recognition that by 2000 some of the most dynamic centers of charismatic Christianity were located outside the North Atlantic world. Africa requires a continent-wide treatment precisely because the late twentieth-century network revolution did not arrive on blank ground. Charismatic and neo-Pentecostal forms encountered Coptic and Tewahedo antiquity, Catholic and Protestant mission institutions, African prophetic traditions, indigenous revivals, national churches, urban evangelicalism, and postcolonial states. What looks from a North American perspective like “the globalization of Pentecostalism” was, in African settings, also a story of African Christians selecting, refusing, modifying, translating, and exporting religious forms (Kalu, 2008; Meyer, 2004; Wariboko, 2017; Sangwa, 2026a).

The chapter's governing question is therefore genealogical rather than merely demographic: how did the Christianities of Africa come to exist in their present plurality? Answering that question requires attention to routes of transmission, local social worlds, language, race, political power, theology, ecclesial authority, healing, education, economic change, and the agency of African believers. It also requires a theological distinction. A practice may be genuinely African without being biblical, just as a European missionary practice may be old without being apostolic. Conversely, a belief does not become unbiblical because it has been contextualized into African music, naming, social forms, or languages. Historical origin, cultural location, and scriptural truth are related questions, but they are not identical.

2. Sources, Terminology, Chronology, and Method

The evidence for African Christian history is unusually diverse. For antiquity it includes the New Testament, patristic writings, conciliar records, martyr narratives, inscriptions, papyri, coins, church architecture, monastic remains, and later ecclesiastical traditions. In Egypt and Nubia, archaeology has transformed knowledge of communities that written sources once rendered fragmentary. Aksumite inscriptions and coinage supply material evidence alongside ecclesiastical narratives of Frumentius and King Ezana. For the early modern and missionary periods, royal correspondence, mission archives, Bible translations, catechisms, school and medical records, travelers' accounts, African-authored writings, denominational minutes, colonial documents, oral history, and local church archives become important. For twentieth- and twenty-first-century Christianity, the archive expands again through sermons, radio and television, recorded crusades, denominational constitutions, social media, websites, demographic surveys, and ethnographic scholarship (Brooks Hedstrom, 2021; Etherington, 2008; Tsakos, 2021; Tribe, 2023).

The sources carry predictable biases. Missionaries often described African religious life through categories designed for evangelization or fundraising; colonial administrators could reduce churches to problems of social control; independent church histories can turn founders into heroic or prophetic figures whose remembered biographies are difficult to disentangle from later institutional identity; and polemical critics may interpret all healing, prophecy, or deliverance through categories of fraud or superstition. Contemporary prosperity ministries may publish spectacular testimonies more readily than audited financial or medical evidence. Accordingly, this chapter distinguishes a documented claim from the truth claimed by the source. That a church reports a healing establishes the report; it does not, by itself, establish the medical cause. That a founder claims a vision documents the founder's self-understanding; it does not exempt the claim from biblical testing.

Several labels require care. “African Independent Church,” “African Instituted Church,” “African Initiated Church,” and “African Indigenous Church” have all been abbreviated AIC, but each foregrounds a different feature. “Independent” emphasizes freedom from mission control; “Instituted” and “Initiated” emphasize African founding agency; “Indigenous” emphasizes local rootedness, although every Christian tradition also participates in translocal histories. The World Council of Churches itself notes that the terminology covers a wide variety of traditions and that independence alone is an inadequate classifier once mission-founded churches become juridically self-governing (World Council of Churches, n.d.-a). This chapter therefore uses African Initiated Churches as a broad analytical category while naming particular movements more precisely whenever the evidence permits.

“Pentecostal” and “charismatic” are similarly layered terms. Classical Pentecostalism refers to early twentieth-century churches that organized around Spirit baptism, gifts, healing, mission, and related doctrines, often with formal denominational structures. Charismatic renewal refers principally to Pentecostal-type practices within historic churches. Neo-Pentecostal or neo-charismatic describes later independent churches and networks that emphasize spiritual gifts, healing, deliverance, prophecy, prosperity, spiritual warfare, contemporary worship, or apostolic leadership without necessarily sharing classical Pentecostal initiation doctrine. These categories overlap, and African actors frequently move across them. Genealogy therefore cannot be inferred merely from worship style.

The chronological scope is intentionally long because later African Christianities repeatedly invoke older histories. The chapter begins with the first-century evidence, follows ancient and medieval continuities, then expands substantially from the nineteenth century onward. Dates are exact where the evidence allows and approximate where traditions or scholarship differ. The guiding method remains the method of the wider volume: reconstruct the history first, distinguish continuity from influence or new formation, represent traditions from primary or authoritative sources, and only then conduct biblical-theological evaluation under *Sola Scriptura*.

Table 1. Selected chronology of African Christian history

Date / period	Development	Genealogical significance
1st century	New Testament references to Egypt, Cyrene, Alexandria, and the official of the kandake	Africa is present in the apostolic horizon; evidence must not be stretched into later institutional claims.
2nd–3rd centuries	Alexandria and Latin North Africa become major Christian centers	African churches generate biblical scholarship, theology, martyr traditions, and ecclesial models.
4th century	Aksumite monarchy adopts Christianity under Ezana; Frumentius tradition	Ancient Ethiopian trajectory takes durable institutional form through relationship with Alexandria.
451 and after	Chalcedon rejected by large sectors of Egyptian Christianity	Coptic/Oriental Orthodox institutional identity becomes distinct from Chalcedonian imperial Christianity.
6th century	Nobadia, Makuria, and Alwa become Christian kingdoms	A major medieval Christian civilization develops in Nubia.
7th century onward	Muslim rule in Egypt; Arab-Muslim expansion across North Africa; Baqt stabilizes Nubia	Coptic Christianity survives; Latin Maghrebi Christianity and Nubian polities follow different long-term trajectories.

Date / period	Development	Genealogical significance
1491	King Nzinga a Nkuwu baptized in Kongo	Major African royal appropriation of Catholic Christianity before high European colonialism.
16th–17th centuries	Portuguese–Ethiopian alliance and Jesuit Catholicization crisis	Ecclesial reunion efforts become entangled with military alliance, rite, and political coercion.
1704–1706	Beatriz Kimpa Vita and the Antonian movement in Kongo	An African prophetic reinterpretation emerges from within a long-established Catholic environment.
18th–19th centuries	Catholic and Protestant mission societies expand	Mission-founded denominations, schools, translation, medicine, and printing spread unevenly across the continent.
1864	Samuel Ajayi Crowther consecrated Anglican bishop	African clerical leadership and translation become visible within a mission-founded communion.
1885–1887	Persecution of Christian converts in Buganda; indigenous church councils emerge	Mission-founded Christianity becomes increasingly African-led through martyrdom, local leadership, and institutional adaptation.
1892–1901	Ethiopian Church in South Africa; African Church in Nigeria	African ecclesial independence challenges racial and missionary control while often retaining inherited doctrine.
1908	Apostolic Faith Mission Pentecostal work begins in South Africa	Classical Pentecostalism develops through interaction of international and African religious networks.
1910s–1930s	Harrist, Kimbanguist, Aladura, Zionist, and related prophetic movements expand	African-initiated prayer, healing, prophecy, and institutional innovation reshape Christian practice.
1924	Engenas Lekganyane founds the Zion Christian Church	Southern African Zionist and Pentecostal influences converge in a durable African-initiated church.
1930s	East African Revival spreads from Rwanda–Uganda networks	Evangelical renewal crosses mission-denominational boundaries without necessarily producing schism.
1937–1962	Anim–McKeown phase and later Church of Pentecost in Ghana	African initiative, missionary partnership, doctrinal dispute, and institutional independence converge.
1952 onward	Redeemed Christian Church of God develops in Nigeria	A movement with AIC background becomes a major African Pentecostal and global missionary denomination.
1959	Abuna Basilios becomes first Ethiopian patriarch	The patriarchal stage of Ethiopian autocephaly is completed within Oriental Orthodox communion, not through doctrinal rupture.
1960s–1990s	Pentecostal, evangelical, and neo-charismatic growth accelerates	Urbanization, youth, media, migration, and indigenous leadership create new transnational networks.
1998	Abune Philipos enthroned as first Patriarch of Eritrea	New autocephalous Tewahedo structure emerges after Eritrean independence.
2020	Sub-Saharan Africa contains about 697 million Christians	The demographic center of global Christianity has shifted decisively toward Africa.

AFRICAN CHRISTIAN HISTORY: SELECTED MILESTONES

First century to the present



Selected transitions; chronology and Table 1 preserve additional regional and genealogical detail.

Figure 1. African Christian history: selected milestones from the first century to the present.

Note. Dates identify major transitions; many developments unfolded gradually and unevenly across regions.

3. Africa in the New Testament and the Earliest Christian Horizon

The New Testament does not narrate a systematic mission to “Africa” as a modern geopolitical unit, but several African locations and persons belong to its world. Jesus’ family fled into Egypt during Herod’s violence, making Africa part of the infancy narrative even before the public ministry of Christ. At Pentecost, Luke names visitors from Egypt and “the parts of Libya near Cyrene” among those who heard the apostles’ proclamation. Simon of Cyrene carried Jesus’ cross, and Cyrenian believers later appear among those who carried the gospel beyond Jerusalem. Lucius of Cyrene served among the prophets and teachers at Antioch, one of the most consequential missionary centers of the apostolic age. Apollos, an eloquent Jewish believer from Alexandria, became an important teacher in the Pauline mission world. These references do not prove organized first-century churches in every named region, but they demonstrate that the earliest Christian movement was embedded in Mediterranean networks that included the African shore.

The episode of the Ethiopian eunuch is especially important because later African Christian memory has often treated it as a first-fruits story for the continent. Acts describes an official of a kandake, a title associated with the rulers of the kingdom of Kush or Meroe south of Egypt. In ancient Greco-Roman usage, “Ethiopia” commonly referred to regions south of Egypt and should not simply be equated with the later Aksumite state or the borders of modern Ethiopia. The official’s baptism therefore provides firm evidence of an African convert connected to a Nubian-Meroitic political world, but not firm evidence for a first-century Ethiopian national church. The distinction matters because theological significance does not require historical exaggeration. The narrative already makes a powerful claim: the gospel crossed geographic, ethnic, and social boundaries through Scripture-centered proclamation and baptism ([Acts 8:26-40](#)).

Alexandria’s earliest institutional Christian history is more difficult. Coptic tradition identifies Mark the Evangelist as the founder of the Alexandrian church, and Eusebius, writing in the early fourth century, reports that Mark was the first to proclaim the gospel in Egypt. The contemporary Coptic Orthodox Church appropriately treats Markan origin as part of its ecclesial self-understanding. Modern historical analysis, however, notes that direct first-century evidence for Mark’s Alexandrian ministry is lacking and that the surviving elaborated accounts are later. This is a case where denominational memory and the limits of historical demonstration should both be stated plainly. It is historically secure that Christianity was established in Egypt by the second century and that Alexandria rapidly became a major Christian intellectual center; the precise first-century institutional sequence cannot be reconstructed with equal confidence (Coptic Orthodox Church, n.d.; Eusebius, 2004; Hamilton, 2006; Meinardus, 2010).

The Egyptian evidence also reveals diversity before later confessional boundaries solidified. Greek-speaking urban Christianity, Coptic-language communities, Jewish-Christian intellectual contacts, ascetic groups, teachers associated with Alexandria, and texts later judged orthodox or heterodox circulated in the same broad environment. The discovery of early Christian papyri in Egypt demonstrates the wide use and copying of Christian writings, but surviving manuscripts do not by themselves identify the complete ecclesial theology of the communities that used them. The strongest conclusion is that Egypt was not peripheral. It was one of the environments in which Christian Scripture, exegesis, asceticism, theological controversy, and ecclesial organization developed at an early stage.

4. Alexandria, Coptic Christianity, and the Making of an Ancient African Communion

Alexandria’s importance in early Christianity arose from more than episcopal prestige. It was one of the Mediterranean world’s great intellectual cities, marked by Greek education, a major Jewish community, and long traditions of textual scholarship. By the late second and early third centuries, Clement of Alexandria and Origen helped make the city a center of Christian biblical interpretation and theological reflection. Origen’s textual scholarship, allegorical exegesis, theological speculation, and massive literary output shaped later Christianity even where later generations rejected some of his positions. Alexandria thus demonstrates an enduring pattern in African Christian history: African churches were not merely receiving theology from abroad; they were generating categories, controversies, and interpretive traditions that the wider church could not ignore (Meinardus, 2010).

Egypt also became a principal cradle of Christian monasticism. Antony, whose life was famously narrated by Athanasius, became an emblem of solitary asceticism, while Pachomian communities developed organized cenobitic life. Egyptian desert traditions influenced Palestine, Syria, Cappadocia, North Africa, and the Latin West. Monasticism was not a separate denomination but a cross-cutting institutional innovation that reshaped spirituality, leadership, education, manuscript preservation, and missionary imagination. Its strengths included disciplined prayer, simplicity, Scripture meditation, hospitality, and resistance to worldly status. Its dangers, visible in later Christian history, included the temptation to regard celibacy or ascetic severity as intrinsically superior to ordinary Christian vocation. The African origin of major monastic forms is nevertheless indispensable to any global history of Christian institutions (Athanasius, 1980; Meinardus, 2010).

The Christological conflicts of the fifth century transformed Egyptian ecclesial identity. The Council of Chalcedon in 451 confessed Christ as one and the same Son acknowledged in two natures without confusion, change, division, or separation.

Large sectors of Egyptian Christianity rejected the council, in part because they judged its language vulnerable to a division of Christ and in part because the conflict was bound to rivalry among sees and imperial politics. The Coptic Orthodox Church came to articulate a miaphysite, or more precisely Cyrilline, confession of the one incarnate nature of the Word, while Chalcedonian communities in Egypt remained aligned with imperial structures. Modern dialogues have shown that some historic disputes involved terminology and mutual suspicion as well as substantive disagreement. The enduring institutional result, however, was real: the Coptic Orthodox Church became one of the principal Oriental Orthodox communions rather than part of Byzantine Chalcedonian Orthodoxy. The conciliar record itself confirms that theology, episcopal jurisdiction, and imperial politics were intertwined in the council and its reception (Price & Gaddis, 2005).

The Arab-Muslim conquest of Egypt in the seventh century radically changed the political context but did not eliminate Egyptian Christianity. Coptic Christians lived under successive Muslim regimes, experiencing periods of relative toleration, taxation and legal restriction, administrative change, localized persecution, and occasional severe repression. Arabic gradually displaced Coptic as the dominant everyday language while Coptic remained liturgically important. Over centuries, Christians became a minority, yet the church retained its hierarchy, monasteries, liturgy, saints' traditions, communal institutions, and identity. This survival sharply distinguishes Egypt from much of the Latin Christian Maghreb, where indigenous ecclesial continuity eventually became far more attenuated. It also refutes any narrative that ancient African Christianity simply vanished with the arrival of Islam.

Modern Coptic identity combines ancient continuity with modern institutional renewal. The Coptic Orthodox Church understands itself as the church founded through St. Mark and remains a major Oriental Orthodox communion with a large Egyptian and global diaspora presence. Twentieth-century Sunday-school renewal, monastic revival, migration, and expanded global dioceses transformed its social form without dissolving its ancient liturgical and episcopal identity. Genealogically, the Coptic church is not a daughter of European mission Christianity. It is an ancient African communion whose history intersects with later Catholic, Protestant, and evangelical missions in Egypt without being derived from them. That distinction is essential for the master genealogy of world Christianity.

REPRESENTATIVE AFRICAN CHRISTIAN CENTERS

Ancient and modern layers



Figure 2. Representative ancient and modern African Christian centers.

Note. The map is illustrative rather than exhaustive. Ancient circles and modern squares identify selected centers discussed in the chapter; they do not imply territorial dominance or one line of descent.

5. Latin North Africa: Tertullian, Cyprian, Donatism, and Augustine

West of Egypt, Roman North Africa developed a different Christian culture, increasingly associated with Latin rather than Greek. The precise date of Christianity's arrival in Proconsular Africa is uncertain, but by the late second century it was visible enough to produce martyrs and sophisticated theological literature. Tertullian of Carthage became the first major Christian theologian to write extensively in Latin. His formulations concerning Trinity, Christology, discipline, baptism, martyrdom, and church life supplied vocabulary that later Latin Christianity would develop further. His later association with the New Prophecy also illustrates that African Christian intellectual influence was never confined to positions later judged catholic (Tertullian, 1977; Rebillard, 2008).

North African Christianity also enters the historical record through unusually important martyr texts. The Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs, dated to AD 180, preserves one of the earliest surviving Latin Christian documents, while the Passion of Perpetua and Felicity, associated with Carthage in AD 203, preserves the remembered witness of catechumens and martyrs

across social status, gender, and legal vulnerability. These texts show that African Christianity was forming its theology not only in schools and episcopal correspondence but under the pressure of public confession, imprisonment, and execution. Martyr memory later became a powerful resource in North African disputes over holiness, apostasy, reconciliation, and the character of the true church (Musurillo, 1972; Rebillard, 2008).

Cyprian, bishop of Carthage from 249 until his martyrdom in 258, gave Western Christianity one of its most influential early episcopal ecclesiologies. The Decian persecution and the problem of Christians who had lapsed under pressure forced African churches to decide how grave post-baptismal sin could be reconciled. Cyprian emphasized the unity of the episcopate and the visible church while resisting attempts by Stephen of Rome to impose Roman judgment in the rebaptism controversy. North Africa therefore contributed simultaneously to strong claims for episcopal unity and to evidence against the idea that third-century Roman jurisdiction was already received everywhere as universal and uncontested. The same region that strengthened catholic ecclesiology also preserved examples of robust regional resistance to Rome (Cyprian, 1984-1989).

The Donatist schism after the Great Persecution revealed how theology, memory, social location, and imperial power could combine. The immediate dispute concerned contested episcopal legitimacy and accusations that clergy had surrendered Scriptures during persecution. Donatists emphasized the holiness and integrity of the church and its ministers; their catholic opponents defended the validity of sacramental acts independently of the minister's moral worthiness and appealed to transregional communion. Imperial intervention, confiscation, legal penalties, and later Augustine's evolving defense of coercion turned a North African ecclesial conflict into a major precedent for church-state enforcement. The Donatist controversy cannot be reduced either to Berber nationalism or to sacramental theology alone. It was a complex schism with genuine theological claims, regional solidarities, social conflict, and political enforcement (Augustine, 2019; Frend, 1985).

Augustine of Hippo, who lived from 354 to 430, became the most influential Latin theologian of late antiquity. His writings on grace, original sin, the will, Scripture, the church, the sacraments, the Trinity, history, and the Christian life shaped medieval Catholicism and later Protestant debates. His conflicts with Donatists and Pelagians became especially important for the genealogy of Western doctrines of church and salvation (Augustine, 1997, 2019). It is historically misleading to treat Augustine as a "European" theologian accidentally located in Africa. He was a Roman North African bishop whose intellectual world was shaped by the cities, controversies, languages, and institutions of African Christianity, even as his Latin writings entered the wider Western tradition.

North Africa was also a major laboratory of conciliar government. Regional synods at Hippo in 393 and Carthage in 397 participated in the late-fourth-century convergence around the biblical books received in the Latin West; the Conference of Carthage in 411 became the decisive public and imperial adjudication of the Donatist conflict; and African councils in 418 condemned Pelagian positions concerning sin and grace. These assemblies did not possess the same status as the ecumenical councils, but they demonstrate the density of African episcopal networks and the extent to which African churches shaped questions later inherited by Western Christianity. They also reveal the recurring danger already visible in Donatism: theological deliberation could become inseparable from imperial enforcement once church judgments acquired civil consequences (Augustine, 2019; Rebillard, 2008).

The decline of Latin Christianity in the Maghreb after Augustine was not caused by one event. The Vandal conquest beginning in 429 disrupted Roman institutions and introduced rulers aligned with Homoian Christianity; Byzantine reconquest in the sixth century restored imperial Chalcedonian structures without recreating the old social world; Arab-Muslim expansion in the seventh century transformed political sovereignty and religious incentives; and over subsequent centuries Islamization, Arabization, migration, institutional weakening, and the loss of dense episcopal networks altered the religious landscape. Scholars disagree about the relative weight of these causes and about the longevity of surviving Christian enclaves. Evidence confirms that some communities survived well beyond the initial conquests, so the narrative of instant disappearance is false. What is clear is that the Latin African church did not maintain the kind of continuous institutional presence preserved in Egypt and Ethiopia (Jensen, 2013; Prévost, 2007).

This disappearance had an important genealogical consequence. Augustine's theology survived globally even where the local church that produced him did not. North African Christianity became a case in which doctrinal influence outlived institutional continuity. Later Catholic and Protestant traditions inherited Augustine through texts, schools, councils, and theological systems rather than through a direct surviving Maghrebi denomination. Genealogy here is therefore intellectual transmission rather than institutional descent.

6. Aksum, Ethiopia, and Eritrea: An Ancient African Christian Civilization

The Christianization of the kingdom of Aksum in the fourth century created another major African Christian trajectory. The traditional narrative, preserved by Rufinus and later Ethiopian memory, centers on Frumentius, a Christian from the eastern Mediterranean who became connected to the Aksumite court and was eventually consecrated bishop by Athanasius of Alexandria. Archaeological and numismatic evidence independently confirms the adoption of Christianity by the Aksumite monarchy under King Ezana in the fourth century, including the appearance of Christian symbols on coinage. The convergence

of literary tradition and material evidence makes Aksum one of the earliest securely documented Christian kingdoms in the world (Rufinus of Aquileia, 1997; Tribe, 2023).

Ethiopian Christianity developed in sustained relationship with the Church of Alexandria but acquired distinct linguistic, liturgical, monastic, biblical, and cultural forms. Ge'ez became the classical language of Scripture and worship. Traditions associated with the Nine Saints, whether reconstructed in all their later details or not, express the remembered importance of monastic and translation activity in the consolidation of Christian culture. The Ethiopian tradition received the Christological inheritance later called Tewahedo, “being made one” or “unity,” within the Oriental Orthodox family. It also integrated biblical imagery deeply into royal ideology, liturgical calendars, fasting, architecture, sacred geography, and collective memory.

The Ethiopian biblical canon deserves particular precision. Popular summaries often state simply that the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church has an “81-book Bible,” and official sources do use the number 81. Scholarly work, however, shows that identifying one universally fixed table of contents behind that number is more complicated. Different enumerations, manuscript traditions, and distinctions between narrower and broader collections have existed. Books such as 1 Enoch and Jubilees have special importance in Ethiopian tradition and survive completely in Ge'ez even where they fell outside most later Western canons. Historical significance and canonical authority are separate questions: the Ethiopian tradition preserved texts of immense value for Jewish and Christian antiquity, while a *Sola Scriptura* evaluation must still ask what evidence establishes any book as divinely inspired rather than merely ancient or ecclesiastically valued (Asale, 2016; Assefa, 2022).

Ethiopian Christianity also survived periods of extraordinary pressure. Medieval Islamic polities, shifting dynasties, internal conflicts, and the sixteenth-century campaigns of Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi placed the Christian kingdom under severe strain. Portuguese military assistance helped alter that conflict, but the subsequent Jesuit encounter exposed the danger of confusing Christian fellowship with forced confessional Latinization. Emperor Susenyos' formal alignment with Roman Catholicism in the early seventeenth century and the uncompromising policies associated with Patriarch Afonso Mendes generated violent resistance. Susenyos eventually restored religious freedom and abdicated in 1632; his successor Fasilides expelled the Jesuits. The episode demonstrates that an encounter between Christian traditions can become destructive when political power is used to impose disputed rites and jurisdiction (Hastings, 1996).

For many centuries, the chief bishop of Ethiopia was appointed or consecrated through Alexandria, making the relationship with the Coptic patriarchate constitutive of Ethiopian ecclesial order even as Ethiopian Christianity developed its own liturgy, monastic culture, law, and political institutions. Modern autocephaly therefore emerged by stages rather than through a sudden doctrinal rupture. A 1948 Coptic-Ethiopian settlement permitted a larger indigenous episcopate and established the pathway toward an Ethiopian chief hierarchy; Abuna Basilios became the first Ethiopian archbishop in 1951; and the 1959 protocol with Coptic Pope Cyril VI culminated in Basilios becoming the first Ethiopian patriarch. The result was an autocephalous Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church that remained within Oriental Orthodox communion. Genealogically, this was jurisdictional maturation and national ecclesial self-government, not the founding of a new religion (Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, n.d.).

The independence of Eritrea produced a further ecclesial reorganization. After Eritrean statehood, the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church became autocephalous in a process conducted with Coptic participation, and its first patriarch was enthroned in 1998. This later branch shares the same ancient Alexandrian-Aksumite and Oriental Orthodox inheritance while possessing its own hierarchy. Contemporary political conflicts in the Horn have at times placed intense pressure on church institutions, but those modern disputes should not be collapsed into the ancient doctrinal genealogy. The important genealogical point is that Ethiopia and Eritrea represent living African continuities of ancient Christianity rather than nineteenth-century mission creations (Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church, 2008).

7. Christian Nubia: Kingdoms Between Egypt and the African Interior

Between Egypt and the regions further south, medieval Nubia became one of the most remarkable Christian civilizations of Africa. From the sixth century, the kingdoms commonly identified as Nobadia, Makuria, and Alwa adopted Christianity. Archaeology has revealed cathedrals, monasteries, wall paintings, inscriptions, manuscripts, cemeteries, and urban Christian life that complicate older narratives in which Christian Africa jumped directly from Egypt to Ethiopia. Nubian Christianity drew significantly from Byzantine Egypt and later from the Coptic patriarchate, but it developed local political and artistic forms rather than functioning merely as an Egyptian mission outpost (Tsakos, 2021).

Makuria's ability to resist early Muslim military expansion produced the famous Baqt, an arrangement negotiated after conflict in the seventh century that stabilized relations with Muslim Egypt for centuries. The treaty did not isolate Nubia. Trade, diplomacy, ecclesiastical connections, migration, and cultural exchange continued across the frontier. Faras and Old Dongola became major Christian centers, while Soba served as a principal center of Alwa. The religious landscape was not static: theological loyalties, languages, political centers, and church relationships changed over time.

The eventual decline of Christian Nubian kingdoms was gradual. Internal dynastic instability, economic and political change, Arab migration, Mamluk intervention, shifting trade routes, and increasing Islamization weakened older Christian political structures. Evidence for Christian rulers and communities persists into the later medieval period, and the final

disappearance of Christian Nubian polities cannot responsibly be reduced to a single conquest date. By the early modern period, however, institutional Christian continuity in Nubia had been substantially broken (Obluski, 2021; Tsakos, 2021).

Nubia matters for the genealogy of Christian division because it illustrates a trajectory that is neither Roman Catholic, Byzantine Orthodox in the later narrow sense, nor Protestant. It belonged to the broader Alexandrian and Oriental Christian world while developing in African kingdoms with distinctive languages and institutions. Like Latin North Africa, Nubia also demonstrates that historical importance does not require uninterrupted modern institutional survival. Its archaeology has restored to Christian memory a major African civilization that later denominational maps can easily obscure.

Table 2. Ancient African Christianities: continuity, interruption, and legacy

Region / tradition	Principal historical formation	Continuity to present	Genealogical significance
Egypt / Coptic	Early Alexandrian Christianity; monasticism; post-Chalcedon Oriental Orthodox identity	Continuous, though under changing political conditions	Ancient African communion; not derived from modern European mission.
Roman North Africa	Carthage, Numidia, Hippo; Tertullian, Cyprian, Donatism, Augustine	Institutional continuity largely disappeared after late antiquity/early medieval centuries	Enormous textual and theological influence without direct surviving regional institutional descent.
Aksum / Ethiopia	Fourth-century royal conversion; Alexandrian episcopal relationship; Tewahedo tradition	Continuous; autocephalous Ethiopian patriarchate since 1959	Ancient African Orthodox communion with distinctive Ge'ez, liturgical, monastic, and canonical heritage.
Eritrea	Shares Aksumite/Tewahedo inheritance; distinct national hierarchy after independence	Continuous; autocephalous patriarchate established in 1990s	Jurisdictional reorganization within Oriental Orthodoxy, not a new doctrinal religion.
Nubia	Nobadia, Makuria, Alwa; sixth-century Christianization; medieval churches and monasteries	Political-ecclesial continuity eventually broken	Demonstrates a major medieval African Christianity often omitted from modern denominational narratives.
Kongo	Royal Catholic adoption from 1491; African elite and clerical appropriation	Changed and fragmented, but Catholic legacy endured	Shows early-modern African reception before the nineteenth-century mission boom.

8. Early Modern Bridges: Kongo, Ethiopia, and Christian Encounters Before the Missionary Century

Between the medieval African churches and the nineteenth-century missionary expansion stands an early modern history that prevents another common simplification. The Kingdom of Kongo encountered Portuguese Christianity at the end of the fifteenth century in a context of diplomacy, trade, elite strategy, and religious exchange. King Nzinga a Nkuwu received baptism in 1491, and his son Afonso Mvemba a Nzinga subsequently promoted Christianity more extensively. Kongo elites did not merely imitate Portuguese religious life. They appropriated Christian titles, symbols, schools, letters, confraternities, and political theology within Kongolese institutions, while also negotiating, disputing, and resisting Portuguese interests. John Thornton and Carlos Almeida have therefore emphasized African agency in the formation of a Kongo Catholic church (Almeida, 2021; Hastings, 1996).

The Kongo case also reveals the ambiguity of Christian contact with expanding European commerce. Christian teaching entered a court that was simultaneously entangled with the Atlantic slave trade. Afonso famously protested Portuguese slaving practices that destabilized his kingdom, even as Kongolese political structures themselves participated in forms of slavery and warfare. The history cannot be sanitized into either a pure missionary triumph or a simple story of European imposition. Christianity could be sincerely appropriated while the economic and political system around it violated Christian moral teaching. That tension would recur in later mission-colonial relationships.

Kongo Christianity also generated one of Africa's most important early prophetic movements long before the nineteenth-century missionary era. In 1704, Beatriz Kimpa Vita, a baptized Kongolese woman, began the movement commonly called Antonianism after claiming a revelatory relationship with Saint Anthony. Her preaching called for the political and spiritual reunification of a kingdom fractured by civil war and for the restoration of Mbanza Kongo, while reinterpreting Christian figures and sacred history through Kongolese categories. The movement was therefore neither a simple survival of pre-Christian religion nor an ordinary Catholic reform. It arose inside a society already shaped by more than two centuries of Christian encounter, yet it substantially reworked received Catholic teaching and authority. Kimpa Vita was executed in 1706 with the cooperation of royal and Capuchin authorities, but the movement's history demonstrates that African prophetic reinterpretation,

institutional conflict, and contest over who could authorize Christian meaning were already present centuries before modern African Initiated Churches (Almeida, 2024).

Ethiopia's sixteenth- and seventeenth-century encounters with Portuguese soldiers and Jesuit missionaries likewise predated the high age of European imperialism. Ethiopian rulers sought military assistance in an existential regional conflict, while Catholic missionaries sought ecclesial reunion under Rome. The short-lived Catholicization under Susenyos showed how quickly cooperation could turn to coercive confessional transformation. The resulting rejection of Jesuit authority was not rejection of Christianity; it was defense of an older African Christian tradition against a rival Christian jurisdiction. This distinction is genealogically crucial because it prevents all resistance to European missions from being interpreted as resistance to the gospel itself.

Other early Catholic contacts occurred along the coasts of West, Central, and Eastern Africa through Portuguese and later European networks. Their depth and durability varied widely. Some produced baptized elites or mission settlements without creating stable mass churches; others became embedded in local political structures. The later nineteenth-century mission boom therefore expanded existing cross-cultural encounters rather than opening an entirely new epoch from nothing.

9. The New Missionary Century: Catholic and Protestant Expansion

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries transformed the scale of Christian mission in Africa. Moravian, Anglican, Methodist, Congregationalist, Baptist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Reformed, Catholic, and other missionary societies entered different regions through different routes. The London Missionary Society, Church Missionary Society, Baptist Missionary Society, Wesleyan missions, Paris Evangelical Missionary Society, White Fathers, Spiritans, Jesuits, and numerous national Catholic institutes built stations, schools, printing presses, clinics, seminaries, and churches. Mission geography often followed coasts, rivers, caravan routes, colonial roads, and new administrative centers, but it also extended beyond effective European political control through African evangelists and local networks (Etherington, 2008, 2019).

The mission movement must be located in the same century as European imperial expansion without simply identifying the two. Missionaries sometimes preceded colonial conquest and supplied geographic or linguistic knowledge later useful to empire. Some celebrated imperial protection, benefited from colonial transport and legal systems, or shared paternalist and racial assumptions with colonial society. Mission schools could produce subjects suited to colonial administration, and mission land acquisition could entangle churches with coercive systems. Yet missionaries also protested specific abuses, defended communities against settlers or officials, translated African languages in ways that strengthened vernacular literacy, and sometimes clashed sharply with colonial governments. African Christians could use mission institutions to pursue goals missionaries had not intended, including political organization and ecclesial independence. The relationship was therefore structurally entangled but never reducible to one formula (Etherington, 2008).

Catholic mission expansion operated through a sacramental and hierarchical model shaped by Rome and religious orders, but it increasingly depended on catechists, teachers, sisters, brothers, and African clergy. Protestant missions varied more sharply by denomination. Anglicans transported episcopal structures; Presbyterians and Reformed churches organized presbyteries and synods; Congregationalists emphasized local church autonomy; Baptists emphasized believer's baptism and congregational life; Methodists combined connexional organization with revival preaching; Lutherans carried confessional and liturgical traditions. Missionary Christianity therefore planted not "Christianity" in the singular but a pre-divided set of European confessions. In many territories, colonial boundaries became landscapes in which Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Methodist, Baptist, Adventist, and later Pentecostal institutions occupied different educational and geographic zones.

Mission rivalry could encourage rapid institution building, but it could also make denominational division appear intrinsic to the gospel. African converts sometimes encountered missionaries who agreed that Jesus Christ was Lord yet refused common communion because of baptism, Eucharist, ordination, papal authority, or confessional inheritance. The result was a double inheritance: access to Scripture, schools, medical care, global Christian traditions, and disciplined congregational life, but also transplantation of old European divisions into African societies. This imported pluralism later interacted with indigenous disputes to produce an even denser denominational map.

East Africa provides an equally important example of mission Christianity becoming African-led under crisis. Protestant Church Missionary Society workers reached Buganda in the 1870s and Catholic White Fathers soon followed. Under Kabaka Mwanga II, a series of executions in 1885-1887 killed Catholic and Protestant converts at court, later commemorated as the Uganda Martyrs. The causes cannot responsibly be reduced to religion alone: royal authority, court discipline, fears of foreign influence, political rivalry, sexual resistance, and new religious allegiances intersected. Yet persecution accelerated local ecclesial agency. In July 1885, the Protestant mission formed a council of twelve baptized Baganda to sustain the church if missionaries were expelled, with a separate women's council also participating in the emerging leadership structure. The episode shows that African converts were not merely recipients of missionary Christianity; under extreme pressure they became teachers, organizers, martyrs, and institutional founders in their own right (Behrend, 2016; Teketwe, 2025).

10. Bible Translation, Education, Medicine, and the Growth of African Christian Agency

Bible translation was one of the most consequential missionary practices because it could outgrow missionary control. Translators had to take African languages seriously enough to produce grammars, dictionaries, orthographies, printed texts, and vernacular preaching. Translation inevitably required theological decisions: how should “God,” “spirit,” “sacrifice,” “covenant,” “sin,” or “ancestor” be rendered in a local conceptual world? Mistakes and cultural distortions occurred, and missionary linguistic work could participate in colonial classification. Yet vernacular Scripture also gave African readers a textual authority with which to judge missionaries themselves. Lamin Sanneh famously described this translatability as a dynamic by which Christianity could become locally appropriated rather than remaining permanently tied to a missionary language (Sanneh, 2009).

Samuel Ajayi Crowther exemplifies the agency made possible within and beyond mission structures. Born in Yorubaland, enslaved as a boy, liberated from a slave ship by the British anti-slavery patrol, educated in Sierra Leone, and later ordained in the Church of England, Crowther became a missionary, translator, linguist, and in 1864 the first African Anglican bishop. His Niger Mission depended on African clergy and teachers and represented a serious attempt at African ecclesiastical leadership within an Anglican framework. Later European missionaries undermined aspects of his administration and subjected African clergy to racialized suspicion. Crowther's career therefore embodies both the generative possibilities of mission education and the racial paternalism that helped produce later movements for ecclesial independence (Barnes, 2018; Oduntan, 2021).

Schools became another decisive institution. Mission education produced clergy, catechists, teachers, nurses, civil servants, writers, nationalists, and political leaders. Literacy enabled Bible reading but also opened access to wider intellectual worlds. The consequences were not always those missionaries expected. Students trained to read Christian claims about human equality could question racial hierarchy in church and state. Educated lay people could demand African bishops, criticize foreign financial control, or organize independent churches. Mission schools sometimes suppressed local languages or practices; elsewhere they preserved and standardized them. The legacy is therefore mixed but immense.

Medical missions similarly joined evangelism with practical care. Hospitals, dispensaries, maternal health services, leprosy care, and nursing institutions became highly visible Christian ministries. They saved lives and often won social trust, but they also became sites where missionary authority over African bodies could be paternalistic. The later growth of African doctors, nurses, Catholic religious sisters, and indigenous church health networks transformed these institutions from foreign mission projects into major components of African civil society. A balanced genealogy recognizes genuine service without turning medical benefit into proof of every missionary theology, and recognizes colonial entanglement without denying the sacrificial service of many practitioners.

The most important correction to a missionary-centered narrative is that African Christians rapidly became the principal carriers of Christian expansion. Catechists moved between villages, women taught children and organized prayer networks, traders carried Bibles and hymns, migrant workers formed fellowships, teachers planted congregations, and indigenous clergy led expanding parishes. Missionary archives often preserve European names more fully because Europeans produced the reports, but numerical growth frequently depended on African networks. The expansion of Christianity in Africa was therefore not simply the geographical success of foreign missionaries; it was increasingly the social reproduction of the faith by Africans themselves (Etherington, 2019).

Key-person profile. Samuel Ajayi Crowther (c. 1809–1891)

Historical path	Enslaved in childhood; liberated by a British anti-slavery patrol; educated in Sierra Leone; ordained Anglican minister; consecrated bishop in 1864.
Why he matters	His Niger Mission demonstrated the possibilities of African clerical leadership and vernacular translation within a mission-founded church.
Genealogical lesson	Mission transmission could generate African agency that later challenged missionary paternalism and racial hierarchy.
Primary scholarly guide	Barnes (2018); Oduntan (2021).

Table 3. Mission Christianity in Africa: before, change, and result

Field	What often existed before	Mission-era change	Long-term result
Authority	Local rulers, elders, ritual specialists, kinship systems; in some regions ancient churches	Mission clergy and denominational governance introduced new religious institutions	African clergy, synods, bishops, independent churches, and continuing debates over foreign control.

Field	What often existed before	Mission-era change	Long-term result
Language	Oral traditions and multiple African languages; Arabic, Ge'ez, Coptic and others in historic Christian regions	Grammars, orthographies, Bible translation, schools, print culture	Vernacular Scripture empowered local preaching and sometimes enabled critique of missionary authority.
Education	Indigenous apprenticeship and religious formation; limited literacy in many mission zones	Mission schools, teacher training, seminaries, universities	Formation of clergy, professionals, nationalists, theologians, and Christian intellectual publics.
Health	Local healing systems and family/community care	Hospitals, dispensaries, nursing, maternal care, leprosy work	Large church health networks alongside enduring debates over healing prayer, medicine, and cultural paternalism.
Politics	Diverse African states and societies, then rapid colonial conquest	Missions sometimes cooperated with, preceded, resisted, or depended on colonial power	Christian institutions became arenas of anti-racist protest, nationalism, mediation, and sometimes state legitimization.
Denominations	Ancient communions in some regions; no Christian institution in others	Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Reformed, Methodist, Baptist, Adventist, and other divisions transplanted	A plural landscape in which inherited confessional difference interacted with new African divisions and revivals.

11. Ethiopianism and the Demand for African Ecclesial Independence

By the late nineteenth century, many African Christians had accepted the gospel while rejecting the racial subordination embedded in mission governance. One expression of this tension came to be called Ethiopianism. The term drew symbolic power from biblical references to Ethiopia, especially the expectation that Ethiopia would “stretch out her hands to God,” and from a wider claim that Africans could lead Christian churches without foreign tutelage. Ethiopianism was not one denomination or doctrine. It was a family of ecclesial and racial-political impulses that sought African leadership, dignity, and institutional control while often retaining much of the theology and liturgy inherited from mission churches.

In South Africa, Mangena Mokone and colleagues withdrew from the Wesleyan Methodist Church in 1892 to form the Ethiopian Church, objecting to unequal treatment and restrictions on African ministers. In 1896 a major portion of this movement united with the African Methodist Episcopal Church, a Black American denomination whose own history of ecclesial independence resonated strongly with South African aspirations. That connection created a transatlantic Black Christian network rather than a simple indigenous rejection of all foreign influence. African independence could be built through international Christian solidarity as well as local secession (Campbell, 1995).

Nigeria produced related but distinct developments. The African Church, founded in 1901 through a dispute within Anglican mission structures over indigenous leadership, retained much Anglican doctrine and liturgy while establishing African governance. Its history shows why the word “independent” must not be made synonymous with doctrinal innovation. Some African-initiated churches separated principally over authority, race, finance, or leadership while preserving inherited creeds and sacraments. Others later developed substantially different prophetic, healing, or ritual systems (World Council of Churches, n.d.-b).

Ethiopianism therefore corrected a genuine ecclesiological injustice: the gospel does not assign permanent spiritual adulthood to one race and perpetual tutelage to another. Missionary paternalism could deny in practice the Christian equality missionaries preached in doctrine. Yet ecclesial independence, like any reform, did not guarantee theological faithfulness. A church can be African-led and still become authoritarian, syncretistic, prosperity-centered, politically captured, or doctrinally confused. The biblical criterion for maturity is neither foreign approval nor indigenous ownership alone, but fidelity to Christ and the apostolic Word.

12. Prophetic, Zionist, Aladura, and Kimbanguist Movements

The early twentieth century saw a proliferation of churches in which healing, prophecy, dreams, visions, prayer, sacred symbols, and deliverance became central. These movements arose from different parent traditions and should not be collapsed into one line. Some were direct secessions from mission churches; some emerged through epidemic crises and prayer societies; some drew on Holiness or Pentecostal currents; some developed around a prophetic founder; and some blended several influences. Their common significance lay in the claim that African Christians could address sickness, spiritual danger, infertility, community conflict, and divine guidance within a Christian framework that felt more immediate than many mission institutions allowed (Anderson, 2001; Hastings, 1996).

Zionist and Apostolic churches in Southern Africa developed in complex interaction with earlier healing movements, Holiness and Pentecostal influences, African ritual worlds, and racial segregation. Water, healing prayer, uniforms, staffs, holy places, dreams, prophecy, and disciplined communal identities could take on distinctive forms. Bengt Sundkler's classic typology of "Ethiopian" and "Zionist" churches helped early scholarship describe the field but could also oversimplify the fluid movement between independence, prophecy, and Pentecostalism. Later research has emphasized the creativity and theological diversity of these churches rather than treating them as merely transitional stages between "traditional religion" and mission Christianity (Anderson, 2001; Meyer, 2004; Sundkler, 1948).

Two durable southern African cases make this diversity concrete. Isaiah Shembe's Nazareth Baptist Church, or Ama-Nazareth, developed in the early twentieth century among Zulu-speaking communities into a distinctive Christian tradition with its own textual, liturgical, pilgrimage, healing, and authority practices. The Zion Christian Church, founded by Engenas Lekganyane in 1924, emerged through a different chain of Zionist and Pentecostal relationships, including contact with movements linked to the Apostolic Faith Mission. Neither history can be explained as a simple return to pre-Christian religion or as a straightforward import from American Pentecostalism. Both illustrate how transnational revival currents, African social worlds, biblical interpretation, founder authority, and local institution-building could converge into durable churches with identities of their own (Cabrita, 2014; Kgatle, 2025).

West Africa generated its own prophetic trajectories. William Wade Harris, a Liberian Grebo evangelist active especially in Côte d'Ivoire in the 1910s, preached repentance, destruction of idols, baptism, and Christian moral reform on a massive scale. Mission churches later absorbed many of his converts, while Harrist churches preserved a distinct lineage.

In the Belgian Congo, Simon Kimbangu, a Baptist catechist, began a brief but explosive public ministry in 1921 centered on preaching, repentance, and widely reported healing claims. Belgian colonial authorities interpreted the movement as a political danger, arrested Kimbangu, and imprisoned him until his death in 1951. His followers survived repression and eventually formed the Church of Jesus Christ on Earth by His Special Envoy Simon Kimbangu, which received legal recognition in 1959 and entered the World Council of Churches in 1969. The later church, however, cannot simply be treated as a frozen extension of Kimbangu's own 1921 preaching. Scholarship documents a major subsequent doctrinal development in which identification of Simon Kimbangu with the incarnate Holy Spirit became increasingly prominent and eventually institutionally normative in much of the church, alongside further claims concerning his descendants and the Trinity. After years of dialogue and a suspension process begun in 2016, the World Council of Churches discontinued the church's membership in June 2021 for theological reasons, citing incompatibility with the WCC's Trinitarian basis. This chronology is crucial: the founder's anti-colonial prophetic movement, the later denomination, and its mature doctrinal claims are historically related but must not be collapsed into one undifferentiated phenomenon (Mokoko Gampiot, 2017; Simon, 2023; World Council of Churches, 2021).

Among the Yoruba of Nigeria, the Aladura, "praying people," arose through prayer fellowships and revival during the influenza crisis of 1918 and subsequent decades. The Cherubim and Seraphim movement developed from the mid-1920s, the Church of the Lord (Aladura) from the 1930s, and the revival associated with Joseph Ayo Babalola in 1930 became foundational for the Christ Apostolic Church trajectory. Aladura spirituality emphasized fervent prayer, fasting, healing, prophecy, dreams, spiritual protection, biblical symbolism, and moral discipline. It answered questions that many mission churches treated as residual "superstition" by placing them inside an explicitly Christian vocabulary of prayer and spiritual power (Hastings, 1996; Peel, 1968).

The historical achievement of these movements should be recognized before theological critique. They demonstrated that African Christians did not need to choose between a missionary church perceived as spiritually distant and a return to pre-Christian religious specialists. They created African-led Christian institutions, vernacular worship, local hymnody, community discipline, and a strong expectation that God was active in ordinary suffering. At their best they opposed idolatry, alcohol abuse, exploitation, and social despair while mobilizing lay believers in prayer and evangelism. They also created new risks: founder charisma could become unchallengeable authority; ritual objects could acquire quasi-sacramental or magical functions; prophetic claims could bind conscience beyond Scripture; and Christian vocabulary could be fused with practices incompatible with biblical worship. The proper theological evaluation therefore cannot be "African equals syncretistic." It must test specific beliefs and practices.

Table 4. Representative African-initiated and prophetic trajectories

Movement / family	Place / period	Parent environment	Characteristic emphases	Genealogical classification
Ethiopian Church / Ethiopianism	South Africa, 1890s	Wesleyan / mission Protestantism	African leadership, racial dignity, ecclesial independence	Schism / reform
African Church	Nigeria, 1901	Anglican mission setting	African governance with substantial Anglican doctrinal and liturgical continuity	Schism / indigenous reorganization
Harrist Christianity	West Africa, 1910s	Protestant encounter plus prophetic evangelism	Repentance, baptism, anti-idolatry, prophetic authority	Prophetic revival / new institutional forms

Movement / family	Place / period	Parent environment	Characteristic emphases	Genealogical classification
Kimbanguist movement	Congo, from 1921	Baptist/mission Christian environment	1921 preaching and healing movement; later distinctive theology of Kimbangu and the Holy Spirit	Prophetic movement -> denomination -> later doctrinal development
Aladura families	Nigeria, 1918 onward	Anglican/Protestant prayer networks	Prayer, fasting, prophecy, healing, biblical symbolism, spiritual protection	Revival / secession / new church formation
Nazareth Baptist Church (Ama-Nazareth)	South Africa, early 20th c.	Mission-Christian, holiness, biblical, and Zulu religious-cultural environment	Scripture, healing, pilgrimage, liturgy, founder authority, communal identity	African-initiated church formation
Zion Christian Church	South Africa, from 1924	Zionist and Pentecostal networks, including AFM-linked influences	Healing, prayer, disciplined community, pilgrimage, episcopal/founder lineage	African-initiated church with convergent Zionist-Pentecostal genealogy
Zionist / Apostolic AICs	Southern Africa, 20th c.	Mission, Zionist, Holiness, Pentecostal, local influences	Healing, prophecy, uniforms, ritual symbolism, community discipline	Multiple convergent genealogies

13. Revival Within Mission Churches: The East African Revival and Evangelical Renewal

Not every African renewal movement produced a new denomination. The East African Revival, emerging in the 1930s from networks in Rwanda and Uganda and spreading into Kenya, Tanganyika, Burundi, the eastern Congo, and beyond, renewed existing Anglican and other Protestant churches through confession of sin, assurance of salvation, personal holiness, testimony, lay fellowship, reconciliation, and intensive Bible-centered discipleship. Its adherents, commonly called Balokole, “the saved ones,” challenged nominal Christianity and social hierarchy while usually remaining within inherited denominations (Wild-Wood, 2021).

The revival's transnational character is important. African evangelists crossed colonial and ethnic boundaries through fellowship networks that were not controlled simply by mission headquarters. Testimony and small-group accountability became mechanisms of spiritual formation. Women and lay believers could exercise significant influence even where formal clerical office remained restricted. The movement also generated tensions over perfectionism, public confession, exclusivist attitudes toward Christians outside the revival, and strained relationships with church authorities. Nevertheless, it demonstrates that African ecclesial agency did not always take separatist form. Reform could occur as an internal revival rather than a schism.

Genealogically, the East African Revival belongs more directly to evangelical Protestant renewal than to classical Pentecostalism, although later charismatic and Pentecostal Christians sometimes appropriated its language of revival and salvation. This distinction matters especially for Rwanda, where the revival became a major force in Anglican and Protestant history and will require close national treatment in the next chapter. At the continental level, its importance lies in showing that African Christianity's twentieth-century dynamism included evangelical revival, holiness, testimony, and lay fellowship alongside the better-known rise of prophetic and Pentecostal churches.

14. Classical Pentecostalism in Africa: Missionary Connections and Local Origins

Pentecostal Christianity entered Africa through multiple channels rather than one missionary pipeline from Azusa Street. International revival networks, Holiness missions, returned migrants, periodicals, correspondence, African prayer movements, and foreign missionaries all played roles. South Africa became one major early center when John G. Lake and Thomas Hezmalhalch began Pentecostal work in Johannesburg in 1908, interacting with existing Zionist communities. The Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa emerged from this environment and became a major denomination. Its early history, however, also reflected the racial structures of South African society, including patterns of segregation that later generations had to confront (Nel, 2017).

Ghana illustrates even more clearly why African Pentecostal genealogy is polycentric. Peter Newman Anim encountered divine-healing and Pentecostal ideas through transnational print and correspondence before the arrival of James McKeown. McKeown, sent by the Apostolic Church in Britain in 1937, worked with Anim's movement but disagreements over divine healing and medical treatment contributed to division. Further constitutional conflict produced the Gold Coast Apostolic Church under McKeown in 1953, later renamed the Church of Pentecost in 1962. The resulting genealogy includes African initiative, foreign missionary partnership, doctrinal disagreement, institutional secession, and later deep Africanization. It cannot accurately be summarized as a British denomination simply transplanted to Ghana (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2005; Church of Pentecost, n.d.).

Nigeria developed overlapping Pentecostal and prophetic trajectories. Some Aladura churches incorporated or interacted with Pentecostal teachings; international Pentecostal missions established denominational structures; and new indigenous churches emerged from prayer fellowships, Holiness teaching, Scripture Union networks, and charismatic leadership. The Redeemed Christian Church of God, founded by Josiah Akindayomi in 1952 after his earlier involvement in the Cherubim and Seraphim tradition, later became one of the most internationally visible Nigerian Pentecostal denominations. Under Enoch Adeboye its global parish network expanded far beyond Nigeria. Here again, genealogy is not simple importation: an African-initiated prophetic background contributed to a denomination that later identified strongly with global Pentecostalism.

Zimbabwe provides another important case. Ezekiel Guti's ministry emerged from mid-twentieth-century revival networks and developed into Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa, later widely known internationally as Forward in Faith. David Maxwell's study shows how an indigenous Pentecostal movement could become transnational through mission, education, media, entrepreneurship, and migration while retaining a strong founder-centered institutional identity (Maxwell, 2006). Similar processes occurred across the continent as African Pentecostal denominations became missionary senders rather than merely recipients.

The power of classical Pentecostalism in African settings was partly theological and partly organizational. It emphasized conversion, Spirit empowerment, prayer, healing, evangelism, moral discipline, lay participation, and expectation of divine intervention. It often trained pastors through Bible schools that were less expensive and more rapidly scalable than older seminaries. Congregations could be planted in urban neighborhoods without the heavy institutional infrastructure of historic missions. Women and young people found avenues for testimony, prayer leadership, evangelism, music, and ministry even when senior formal authority remained male. Pentecostalism's adaptability to oral preaching, music, testimony, and itinerant evangelism helped it travel across languages and social classes (Kalu, 2008; Wariboko, 2017).

Yet Pentecostalism did not grow because Africans were uniquely "spiritual" or because the movement simply reproduced pre-Christian religious patterns. Such explanations can become reductive. Pentecostal growth interacted with urbanization, migration, youth populations, dissatisfaction with nominal church membership, political instability, economic aspiration, transnational media, education, and new forms of voluntary association. Its theology addressed spiritual causation and healing in culturally resonant ways, but believers also joined because of conversion narratives, biblical preaching, community, music, social mobility, family networks, and missionary conviction. No single causal theory explains a continent.

15. From Pentecostal Denominations to African Charismatic and Neo-Pentecostal Networks

From the 1970s onward, a new wave of African charismatic Christianity increasingly operated outside both historic mission denominations and older classical Pentecostal bureaucracies. In Ghana, independent charismatic ministries proliferated around leaders such as Nicholas Duncan-Williams and others who emphasized conversion, healing, deliverance, spiritual warfare, leadership, prosperity, and international mission. In Nigeria, ministries such as Deeper Christian Life began from Bible-study and Holiness networks rather than from a simple prosperity lineage, while later churches such as Living Faith developed strong Word of Faith and prosperity emphases. The landscape became too diverse for "neo-Pentecostal" to function as a doctrinal synonym (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2005; Meyer, 2004).

William Kumuyi's Deeper Christian Life Ministry, founded from a university Bible-study group in Lagos in 1973, illustrates this diversity. Its early and enduring emphasis has been Scripture, conversion, holiness, disciplined Christian living, evangelism, and divine healing rather than the conspicuous prosperity rhetoric associated with other later ministries. By contrast, some late twentieth-century networks explicitly linked faith, positive confession, giving, covenant blessing, entrepreneurship, and material success. Both could use contemporary worship, crusades, media, and large congregations while teaching different doctrines of sanctification, wealth, and spiritual power. Organizational similarity must therefore not be mistaken for theological identity.

African neo-Pentecostalism also became increasingly urban and professional. Churches planted in universities and cities attracted students, civil servants, entrepreneurs, migrants, and a growing middle class. English and French often served transnational communication while vernacular languages remained essential locally. Ministries invested in radio, television, publishing, recordings, schools, universities, conference centers, and eventually digital platforms. A successful church could become an ecosystem with specialized ministries for youth, businesspeople, families, professionals, media, and international missions.

The megachurch form intensified these developments. Large congregations could mobilize extraordinary resources for evangelism, education, humanitarian work, political visibility, and media production. They could also centralize authority around a senior pastor whose personal brand, family succession, or claimed anointing functioned more powerfully than a denominational constitution. The organizational question is therefore not whether large churches are inherently unbiblical. The New Testament sets no numerical ceiling on a congregation. The question is whether scale is accompanied by plural accountability, transparent stewardship, qualified leadership, discipline, and doctrinal testing.

African diaspora communities extended these networks into Europe, North America, the Middle East, and Asia. Nigerian, Ghanaian, Congolese, Kenyan, Zimbabwean, Ethiopian, Eritrean, and other migrant churches planted congregations in cities that had once sent missionaries to Africa. This “reverse mission” language can be useful if it does not imply a simple reversal of one-directional history. African Christians had always participated in transregional Christian networks. What changed in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries was the scale, confidence, and institutional capacity with which African churches intentionally planted congregations abroad (Bediako, 1995; Etherington, 2019).

Table 5. Selected African Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal trajectories

Example	Origin / key period	Main lineage	Distinctive historical significance
Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa	Johannesburg, 1908	Azusa-linked missionaries interacting with local Zionist networks	Early classical Pentecostal institutionalization in southern Africa; later confronted racial segregation.
Church of Pentecost, Ghana	Anim networks; McKeown 1937; name 1962	African initiative + Apostolic Church mission + institutional secession	Illustrates polycentric Pentecostal origins and subsequent Africanization.
Redeemed Christian Church of God	Nigeria, 1952 onward	Akindayomi; earlier Cherubim and Seraphim background; later Pentecostal consolidation	Shows movement from African-initiated prophetic milieu to global Pentecostal denomination.
East African Revival	Rwanda/Uganda networks, 1930s onward	Evangelical Anglican/Protestant renewal, not classical Pentecostalism	Important reminder that African revivalism and Pentecostalism are related but not identical genealogies.
Deeper Christian Life Ministry	Lagos, 1973 onward	Bible-study / Holiness / evangelical-Pentecostal environment	Large African evangelical-Pentecostal network centered on Scripture, conversion, holiness, and evangelism.
Independent charismatic ministries	Ghana, Nigeria and beyond, late 1970s onward	Global charismatic, Word of Faith, local prophetic, evangelical, and Pentecostal influences	Urban, media-savvy, transnational networks; highly diverse doctrines on wealth, healing, deliverance, and authority.
ZAOGA / Forward in Faith	Zimbabwe, mid-20th c. onward	Indigenous Pentecostal revival around Ezekiel Guti	Example of African-founded Pentecostalism becoming transnational and missionary-sending.

16. Prosperity, Deliverance, Spiritual Warfare, and the Reconfiguration of Religious Authority

Prosperity teaching is one of the most contested features of contemporary African Christianity. It did not originate in Africa, but neither is African prosperity theology merely an American photocopy. Word of Faith literature, televangelism, healing revivalism, business culture, local testimonies of poverty and upward mobility, patronage systems, and African notions of holistic well-being interacted to produce locally distinctive forms. Some churches teach modestly that God cares about material need and that disciplined work, generosity, and stewardship belong to Christian discipleship. Others construct stronger formulas in which financial giving is treated as a seed that predictably produces material return, positive confession is presented as a spiritual law, or wealth is interpreted as evidence of superior faith. These positions must be distinguished rather than placed under one accusation (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2005; Kalu, 2008).

The attraction of prosperity teaching is understandable in societies marked by unemployment, inequality, fragile safety nets, corruption, and economic uncertainty. A message of dignity, divine provision, entrepreneurship, and hope can challenge fatalism. Churches may provide business networks, employment information, savings practices, education, and mutual assistance. The theological problem arises when biblical promises are detached from literary context, suffering is treated as a sign of defective faith, the poor are pressured to give beyond prudence to enrich religious elites, or success becomes the practical test of anointing. The Christian gospel then risks being reorganized around acquisition rather than reconciliation to God and conformity to Christ.

Deliverance and spiritual warfare address another major field of African Christian concern. Many African societies possess robust languages for witchcraft, spirits, ancestors, curses, and invisible causation. Mission churches sometimes dismissed these concerns without replacing them with an adequately biblical account of spiritual evil. Pentecostal and prophetic churches often filled that gap by preaching Christ's victory, praying against demonic oppression, and rejecting recourse to diviners or magical specialists. In this respect, deliverance ministry can function as an anti-syncretistic claim that Christ is sufficient and believers need not fear rival spiritual powers.

Excesses arise when spiritual warfare becomes speculative demonology. Every illness, delay, infertility problem, political opponent, family disagreement, or financial loss can be attributed to demons or witches; leaders may claim secret revelation about enemies; vulnerable relatives may be accused; expensive “deliverance” rituals may be commercialized; and believers may

be taught that specialized prophets possess spiritual knowledge unavailable through Scripture. Such practices can reproduce the fear they claim to defeat. Biblical spiritual warfare is real, but it is centered on Christ's victory, truth, righteousness, faith, prayer, resistance to temptation, and steadfastness, not on an endlessly expanding map of invisible conspiracies.

The authority problem connects prosperity and deliverance to prophetic and apostolic networks. Where leaders are believed to speak direct divine instructions, an ordinary governance dispute can become resistance to God. Financial requests can acquire prophetic force. Political preferences can be sacralized. Personal succession can be defended as revelation. The New Testament recognizes gifts and leaders but never permits spiritual claims to bypass testing. African Christianity's charismatic vitality is therefore strongest when supernatural expectation is joined to scriptural restraint, accountable eldership, transparent institutions, and the freedom of believers to test what they hear.

17. African Theological Agency: Translation, Contextualization, Public Theology, and Critique

African Christianity did not merely indigenize worship; it produced theology. Twentieth-century African theologians asked questions inherited from ancient and modern Christian traditions while also addressing issues made urgent by African history: colonialism, race, ancestors, community, land, poverty, political violence, religious plurality, African traditional religions, women, family, suffering, liberation, and the meaning of Christian identity after missionary domination. The resulting field is not a single "African theology." Catholic inculturation, Protestant contextual theology, evangelical theology, Pentecostal theology, liberation theology, African women's theology, and independent-church reflection often disagree sharply with one another.

Kwame Bediako argued that the question of Christian identity in Africa resembles, in a new setting, the early church's struggle to confess Christ across cultural worlds. His work emphasized that Christianity can become authentically African without ceasing to be Christian because the faith is inherently translatable. Lamin Sanneh likewise highlighted the missionary significance of vernacular Scripture: translation can relativize the missionary's own culture by placing the biblical text in the language of the recipient community. These arguments help explain why African agency often intensified after, rather than merely against, mission translation (Bediako, 1992, 1995; Sanneh, 2009).

Evangelical theologians such as Byang Kato warned that contextualization can become syncretism if cultural categories are allowed to override biblical revelation. His critique was sometimes framed sharply, but the underlying question remains necessary: who judges whom? If Scripture is merely one symbolic resource inside a preexisting religious synthesis, Christianity loses its capacity to confront every culture, including African and Western cultures alike. Conversely, if "biblical Christianity" is unconsciously identified with imported European customs, missionaries can condemn cultural difference without biblical warrant. *Sola Scriptura* requires both cultural humility and theological boundaries (Kato, 1975).

African women theologians, including Mercy Amba Oduyoye and others associated with the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, drew attention to ways in which colonial, customary, and ecclesial patriarchy could converge. Their work expanded theological discussion of marriage, motherhood, widowhood, violence, economic vulnerability, leadership, and biblical interpretation from women's lived experience. Not every proposal within African feminist or womanist theology is consistent with a conservative evangelical reading of Scripture, but the historical contribution cannot be dismissed: Christian communities are required to hear the suffering of women, condemn abuse, and distinguish biblical teaching from patriarchal customs that use religious language without scriptural warrant (Oduyoye, 2001).

Public theology became another major arena. During apartheid, South African Christians stood on opposing sides of a political system that claimed theological justification from some churches and received theological condemnation from others. The 1985 Kairos Document, subsequently issued in a revised second edition, became a prominent ecumenical critique of "state theology" and inadequate "church theology," calling for prophetic resistance to injustice. Its political prescriptions remain open to evaluation (Kairos Theologians, 1986), but the episode demonstrates that doctrinal genealogy has social consequences. A church's interpretation of race, authority, nation, and obedience can legitimize or challenge systems of power. Similar questions arose in debates over dictatorship, genocide, corruption, ethnic violence, democratization, reconciliation, and human rights across the continent.

The deepest African theological agency may nevertheless be less visible than formal academic literature. It occurs whenever Christians read Scripture in local languages, compose hymns, preach through African rhetorical forms, create catechetical vocabulary, counsel families, test customary practices, organize prayer, confront corruption, translate theological terms, and form churches. The crucial distinction is between contextualization and syncretism. Contextualization communicates and embodies the same apostolic truth in a different cultural form. Syncretism reconciles claims that Scripture treats as incompatible. Every Christian tradition contextualizes; the theological task is to do so under the judgment of the Word.

18. Christianity and African Political Power: Colonialism, Nationalism, Apartheid, and the Postcolonial State

Christian institutions in Africa have repeatedly negotiated political power. Under colonial rule, mission churches could benefit from state protection while also criticizing particular abuses. At independence, many churches shifted from foreign leadership to African bishops, synods, and national conferences. Some clergy became prominent nationalists or mediators; others defended existing regimes. Catholic episcopal conferences, Protestant councils, evangelical alliances, and independent churches all developed public voices, but there has never been one African Christian political position.

The danger of political theology operates in more than one direction. Churches can become chaplains of the state, treating rulers as divinely protected and silencing criticism. They can also sacralize opposition movements, ethnic causes, or partisan identities and imply that political victory is equivalent to the kingdom of God. Prophetic leaders may offer electoral predictions or endorsements that convert spiritual authority into political capital. Governments, for their part, may seek church legitimacy, regulate religious organizations, co-opt clergy, or suppress dissent. These dynamics are not uniquely African, but rapid church growth and high public religiosity can magnify them.

A responsible genealogy therefore distinguishes Christian social engagement from political capture. Churches have biblical reasons to pursue justice, peace, honesty, care for the vulnerable, and accountability. They also possess a transnational identity that prevents nation, ethnicity, or party from becoming ultimate. The history of mission entanglement with empire and later church entanglement with nationalist or authoritarian power provides the same recurring warning: institutional influence is not evidence of theological truth, and political usefulness is not a mark of apostolic authority.

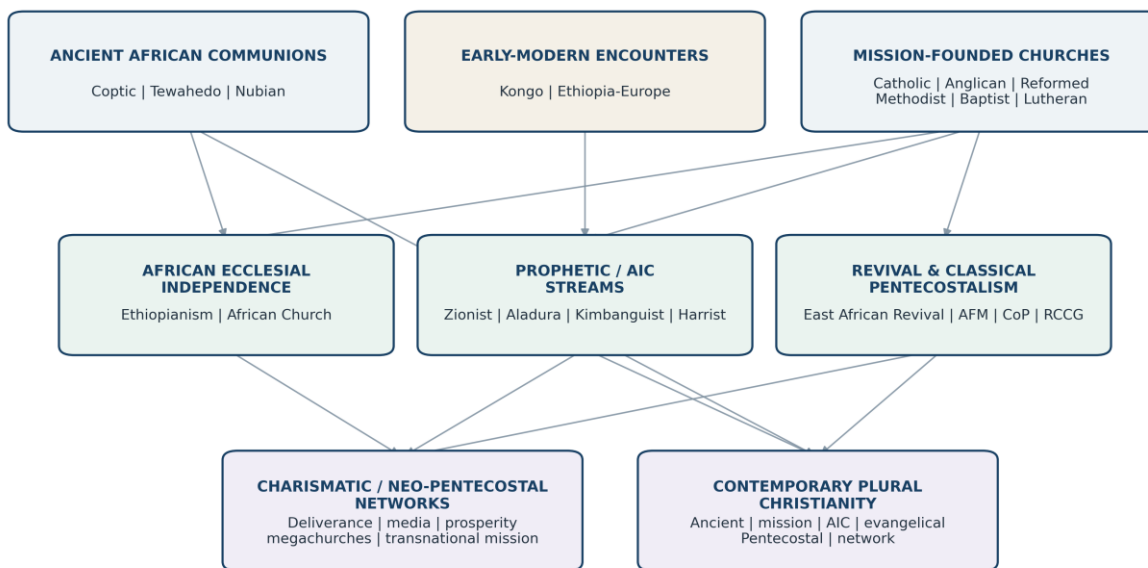
19. From a Tree to a Web: The Genealogy of African Christian Plurality

A conventional denominational family tree works only partially for Africa. Some branches are straightforward: Anglican dioceses generally descend from Anglican mission structures; Catholic churches belong institutionally to the Roman Catholic communion; Lutheran synods descend from Lutheran missions or later mergers; the Ethiopian and Eritrean Tewahedo churches share ancient Oriental Orthodox ancestry; classical Pentecostal denominations possess traceable institutional lineages. But many other relationships are best described as influence, revival, appropriation, or convergence rather than direct descent.

Aladura churches, for example, emerged in interaction with Anglican and other Protestant environments but developed prophetic and healing structures of their own. The RCCG arose through a founder with Cherubim and Seraphim background yet developed as a Pentecostal denomination. Ghanaian Pentecostalism combined Peter Anim's transnational print networks, Apostolic Church connections, James McKeown's missionary role, and later African leadership. Neo-Pentecostal ministries borrowed from American Word of Faith, global charismatic renewal, local prophetic practice, African revivalism, business culture, and mass media. Diaspora churches then exported these syntheses to other continents.

The genealogical map is therefore a web layered over several trees. Ancient communions form one set of deep trunks. Mission-founded confessional churches form another set of transplanted but increasingly Africanized trunks. African Initiated Churches create branches that sometimes preserve parent doctrines and sometimes introduce substantial innovations. Revival movements cross existing branches without necessarily leaving them. Pentecostal denominations form new trees with multiple roots. Charismatic and neo-Pentecostal networks create lateral connections through conferences, media, music, ministerial mentorship, ordination, and digital platforms. Accurate genealogy must name the relation instead of forcing every movement into a single parent-child sequence.

A LAYERED GENEALOGY OF AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY



Arrows distinguish direct development, influence, or convergence; they do not imply one uniform institutional succession.

Figure 3. A layered genealogy of African Christianity.

Note. The diagram distinguishes ancient continuity, mission transmission, schism, revival, influence, and convergence. It is not a claim that all contemporary African churches descend from one parent tradition.

20. Major Doctrinal Fault Lines in African Christianity

The first doctrinal fault line is authority. Ancient Orthodox communions locate Scripture within received tradition, episcopal succession, liturgy, and conciliar inheritance. Roman Catholic churches add the developed magisterial and papal system. Protestant mission churches generally appeal to Scripture through confessional traditions. Pentecostal and charismatic churches add claims of contemporary prophecy, visions, tongues, healing, and apostolic gifting. African Initiated Churches range from creedal, Bible-centered bodies to founder-centered prophetic systems. The practical question across these families is not whether Scripture is honored verbally but what happens when Scripture, tradition, bishop, prophet, founder, dream, culture, or institutional interest appear to conflict.

A second fault line concerns salvation and sacramental mediation. Coptic, Ethiopian, Eritrean, and Catholic traditions possess sacramental and liturgical understandings that developed across centuries. Protestant traditions vary from Anglican and Lutheran sacramental realism to Reformed covenantal models, Baptist ordinances, and Pentecostal symbolic or evangelical approaches. African church life can intensify these distinctions through baptismal practice, Eucharistic access, confession, fasting, holy water, anointing oil, pilgrimage, or healing rites. The historical existence of a practice must be distinguished from a biblical argument for its necessity or efficacy.

A third fault line concerns spiritual power. Most African Christian families affirm prayer and divine action, but prophetic, Pentecostal, and neo-charismatic churches often make healing, deliverance, dreams, spiritual warfare, and prophecy much more central to ordinary discipleship. This emphasis can recover neglected biblical themes. It can also produce new forms of religious dependency if believers are taught that access to God requires a specialized prophet, deliverance minister, or purchased ritual object.

A fourth fault line concerns prosperity and suffering. African Christians live amid both extraordinary economic dynamism and severe material vulnerability. Churches preach across contexts ranging from wealthy urban professionals to refugees, subsistence farmers, informal settlements, and conflict zones. A biblical theology of provision must therefore hold together God's fatherly care, work, generosity, justice, contentment, suffering, persecution, and hope. Any theology that interprets poverty as proof of unbelief or wealth as proof of divine approval contradicts both the experience of the apostles and the wider scriptural witness.

A fifth fault line concerns contextualization. Christians must decide what can be retained, transformed, or rejected from ancestral, familial, and communal practice. Naming ceremonies, marriage negotiations, funeral customs, respect for elders,

communal solidarity, music, dance, healing practices, oaths, ancestor relations, divination, sacred objects, and concepts of spiritual causation all require discernment. Missionaries often condemned too much because they confused European culture with Christianity. Some later contextual theologies risked accepting too much because they treated cultural authenticity as a theological norm. Scripture must judge both errors.

21. Biblical-Theological Assessment: African Christianity Under the Apostolic Word

21.1 Africa, ethnicity, and the universality of the gospel

Scripture supplies no theological basis for racial hierarchy in the church. The gospel moves outward to all nations under Christ's authority ([Matthew 28:18-20](#)), the Spirit creates a multinational witness ([Acts 1:8](#)), God shows no partiality among peoples who turn to him ([Acts 10:34-35](#)), and the redeemed multitude comes from every tribe, language, people, and nation ([Revelation 5:9-10](#)). The New Testament therefore condemns both missionary racism and any counter-ideology that makes ethnic identity a source of spiritual superiority. African ecclesial independence was biblically justified wherever it rejected racial domination and demanded that qualified believers be treated as full members and leaders of Christ's body. But African ownership is not itself the final test of truth; the church belongs to Christ rather than to any race.

The same principle corrects the "foreign religion" argument. Christianity's truth does not depend on geographical origin. Jesus was a Jew of Roman-period Judea, not a European; the earliest church was West Asian and Mediterranean; Africans were present in the New Testament world; and the gospel's own mandate is transnational. A faith intended for all nations necessarily crosses cultures. The biblical question is whether the message being received is the apostolic gospel, not whether the first messenger shares the recipient's ethnicity ([Galatians 1:6-9](#)).

21.2 Scripture, tradition, and ancient African churches

The antiquity of Coptic, Ethiopian, and Eritrean Christianity deserves respect, but antiquity cannot substitute for revelation. Jesus rebuked traditions that nullified God's command ([Mark 7:6-13](#)), while Paul commended the Bereans for testing apostolic preaching against Scripture ([Acts 17:10-12](#)). The apostolic writings present Scripture as God-breathed and sufficient to equip the servant of God for every good work ([2 Timothy 3:14-17](#)). A Sola Scriptura method therefore receives ancient creeds, fathers, liturgies, and councils as historically important witnesses whose authority is ministerial rather than magisterial over the Word.

This standard applies, for example, to invocation of saints, Marian intercession, icons, and sacramental claims inherited in ancient communions. Their defenders possess sophisticated theological explanations and should not be caricatured as simply worshipping created beings. Nevertheless, Scripture presents Christ as the unique mediator between God and humanity ([1 Timothy 2:5-6](#)) and invites believers to approach God's throne through him ([Hebrews 4:14-16](#)). Practices that function as necessary devotional mediation beyond Christ require a biblical warrant stronger than antiquity or ecclesial custom can supply. The same principle applies to every Protestant or Pentecostal tradition that elevates its own founder, confession, or practice beyond the text.

21.3 Canon and the Ethiopian broader collection

The Ethiopian preservation of books such as 1 Enoch and Jubilees is historically invaluable. The New Testament itself demonstrates familiarity with Jewish literature outside the later Protestant canon; Jude, for example, uses a tradition found in 1 Enoch. Citation, however, does not automatically canonize an entire work, just as Paul's citation of Greek poets does not canonize their writings. Canonical status requires a coherent account of prophetic or apostolic authority, reception, and consistency with the recognized scriptural corpus. The fact that a text is ancient, edifying, or quoted does not by itself establish inspiration.

A Sola Scriptura assessment therefore avoids two opposite errors. It should not dismiss Ethiopian textual traditions as worthless because they differ from Western collections; without Ethiopian preservation, important ancient literature would be lost. But it also cannot treat an ecclesiastical number such as eighty-one as self-authenticating. The church recognizes Scripture; it does not create inspiration. The controlling question remains whether a writing bears the authority God gave through his prophets and apostles.

21.4 Contextualization and syncretism

Paul's missionary flexibility provides a biblical basis for contextualization. He adapted himself to different audiences for the sake of the gospel without surrendering the gospel's content ([1 Corinthians 9:19-23](#)). At Athens he could begin with local religious language and poets while calling hearers to repent of idolatry in light of the Creator and the risen Christ ([Acts 17:22-31](#)). Cultural translation is therefore not compromise by definition. African languages, musical forms, clothing, architecture, storytelling, communal patterns, names, and social institutions can become vehicles of Christian faith without becoming less Christian because they are not European.

Syncretism begins where incompatible worship or truth claims are merged. Paul could accommodate food and social custom but not participation in idol worship ([1 Corinthians 10:14-22](#)). Christians are commanded to test everything and hold fast to what is good ([1 Thessalonians 5:19-22](#)). Practices involving divination, magical manipulation, invocation of other spiritual powers, ritual coercion, or fear-based dependence on intermediaries cannot be baptized merely by adding Christian vocabulary. The same judgment applies to Western syncretisms with consumerism, nationalism, materialism, or therapeutic individualism. Scripture confronts every culture.

21.5 Prophecy, dreams, and claimed revelation

The New Testament does not teach Christians to despise prophecy, but it never permits prophecy to become self-validating. Prophetic speech is to be weighed ([1 Corinthians 14:29](#)), spirits are to be tested ([1 John 4:1-3](#)), and claims that contradict the apostolic gospel are rejected even if presented with extraordinary spiritual authority ([Galatians 1:8-9](#)). The biblical pattern therefore allows openness to God's providential guidance and the Spirit's gifts while requiring doctrinal, moral, and communal testing.

African prophetic churches and neo-charismatic ministries are strongest when leaders refuse to use “God told me” as a shield against examination. Predictions should not be silently revised after failure; private guidance should not bind another believer's conscience as Scripture does; and no dream can create a doctrine absent from or contrary to the apostolic Word. Financial, sexual, or political exploitation under prophetic authority is not a charismatic eccentricity but an abuse of spiritual power.

The Kimbanguist case illustrates why founder history and later official doctrine must be distinguished before biblical evaluation. Kimbangu's 1921 ministry arose in a Baptist missionary environment and was remembered principally through preaching, healing, suffering, and anti-colonial mobilization; the later identification of Kimbangu as the incarnation of the Holy Spirit is a separate and much more far-reaching theological claim. Under *Sola Scriptura*, that claim cannot be treated as a legitimate development of apostolic faith. Jesus' promise of the Helper describes the Spirit whom the Father sends to dwell with and in Christ's disciples ([John 14:16-17, 26](#)) and is fulfilled in the apostolic outpouring at Pentecost ([Acts 2:1-4, 16-18](#)). The New Testament distinguishes the divine Spirit from the human witnesses whom he empowers and never authorizes a later founder or lineage to become a new incarnation of a divine person. Historical suffering, African agency, charismatic experience, or reports of miracles therefore cannot authenticate a redefinition of the identity of God. This conclusion concerns the doctrine itself, not the dignity or sincerity of Kimbanguist adherents, and it follows the same rule applied throughout this book to every post-apostolic claim of revelation or divine status (Mokoko Gampiot, 2017; Simon, 2023).

21.6 Healing, medicine, and suffering

Scripture commands prayer for the sick and presents healing among the Spirit's gifts ([James 5:14-16](#); [1 Corinthians 12:7-11](#)). African Christian movements that recovered confident prayer for healing corrected a real neglect where churches had reduced divine action to theory. The gospel also liberated many believers from fear of diviners and magical specialists by directing trust toward Christ.

Yet Scripture does not promise that every faithful believer will be healed immediately. Paul lived with a “thorn” despite repeated prayer ([2 Corinthians 12:7-10](#)), Timothy received practical advice for recurring illness ([1 Timothy 5:23](#)), and Epaphroditus came near death before recovering ([Philippians 2:25-30](#)). Medical treatment and prayer are therefore not enemies. Teaching that medicine proves unbelief, or that persistent illness necessarily reveals hidden sin or insufficient faith, exceeds Scripture and can cause grave harm. Healing testimony should be welcomed with gratitude and tested with honesty rather than used as marketing.

21.7 Prosperity, giving, work, and contentment

God cares for material needs, commands generosity, dignifies work, and promises to provide for his people. Jesus nevertheless warns against storing treasure as life's controlling aim ([Matthew 6:19-34](#)), and Paul condemns teachers who imagine godliness as a means of financial gain ([1 Timothy 6:3-10](#)). Wealthy believers are told not to place hope in uncertain riches but to be generous and rich in good works ([1 Timothy 6:17-19](#)). The apostolic collection for the poor in [2 Corinthians 8:1-15](#) and [2 Corinthians 9:6-15](#) presents giving as grace, equality, willingness, and thanksgiving, not a mechanism for purchasing multiplied wealth.

This biblical balance affirms preaching that encourages honest work, stewardship, generosity, enterprise, and hope. It rejects guaranteed formulas in which a donation obligates God to produce a financial return, the minister's wealth is treated as proof of anointing, or the poor are blamed for their condition. The cross does not promise exemption from suffering; it forms a people capable of faithfulness in abundance and need ([Philippians 4:10-13](#)).

21.8 Deliverance and spiritual warfare

The New Testament affirms personal spiritual evil and Christ's victory over hostile powers. Believers are commanded to stand in truth, righteousness, faith, salvation, the Word, and prayer ([Ephesians 6:10-18](#)) and to resist the devil while submitting

to God ([James 4:7-8](#)). Christ's triumph is decisive rather than precarious ([Colossians 2:13-15](#)). African churches that preach freedom from occult fear can therefore serve an important biblical purpose.

The biblical texts do not authorize a limitless demonology in which every misfortune is assigned to a named spirit through private revelation. Nor do they justify accusing children, elderly relatives, widows, or rivals of witchcraft without evidence. Spiritual warfare that produces chronic fear, violence, extortion, or dependence on a specialist has inverted the freedom it claims to offer. The Christian response to evil includes prayer and resistance, but also truthfulness, forgiveness, medical wisdom, justice, and recognition of ordinary human causes.

21.9 Apostles, prophets, and accountable church government

Ephesians speaks of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers as gifts for equipping the saints ([Ephesians 4:11-16](#)). The New Testament also assigns the foundational role of apostles and prophets to the church's establishment ([Ephesians 2:19-22](#)) and ties the Twelve's unique authority to their commissioned witness to Christ. Whatever terminology contemporary churches use for missionary pioneers or translocal leaders, no modern office can legitimately claim authority to revise the apostolic gospel.

Local church leaders must satisfy moral qualifications rather than merely display charisma ([1 Timothy 3:1-13](#); [Titus 1:5-9](#)), and shepherds are forbidden to domineer over those entrusted to them ([1 Peter 5:1-4](#)). Founder-centered networks therefore require the same accountability as old denominations. A title such as apostle, prophet, archbishop, general overseer, or spiritual father does not confer immunity from correction. The more authority a leader exercises over finances, appointments, doctrine, and private decisions, the stronger the need for transparent and plural accountability.

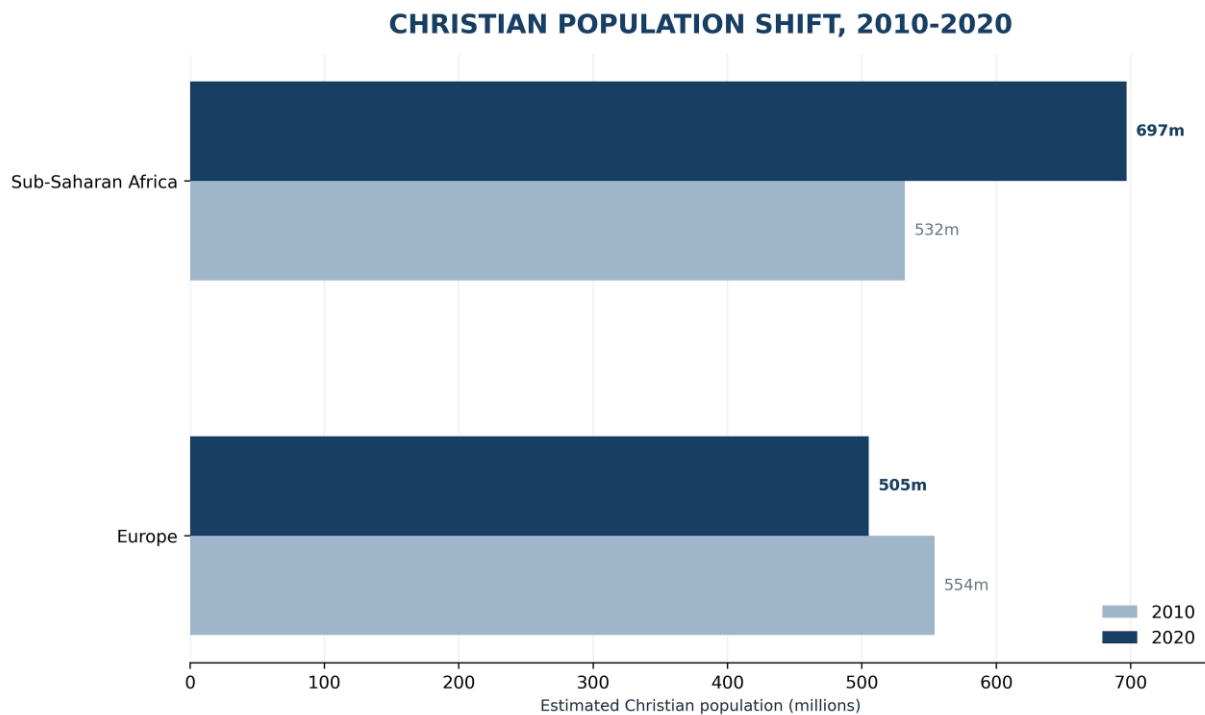
21.10 Mission, colonial coercion, and the nature of Christian power

The New Testament mission advances through witness, persuasion, suffering, service, and the work of the Spirit, not through forced conversion. Jesus contrasts Gentile rulers who “lord it over” others with leadership defined by service ([Matthew 20:25-28](#)). The apostles proclaim Christ while accepting suffering rather than calling the state to punish unbelievers. This does not require Christians to abandon public life, education, law, medicine, or political responsibility. It does prohibit identifying state coercion with gospel conversion.

Missionaries who defended Africans from abuse, translated Scripture, educated children, treated patients, and trained local leaders performed work that can be genuinely honored. Where missions participated in racial hierarchy, land injustice, cultural contempt, or coercive colonial systems, those practices require repentance rather than apologetic denial. African churches face the same test today when they seek political privilege or use state power against rivals. The kingdom of Christ cannot be authenticated by proximity to coercive power.

22. Contemporary Significance: Africa and the New Geography of Global Christianity

Africa's contemporary importance can now be stated demographically with greater precision than older estimates allowed. Pew Research Center's revised analysis of more than 2,700 censuses and surveys estimated that sub-Saharan Africa contained about 697 million Christians in 2020, representing 62 percent of the region's population and about 31 percent of Christians worldwide. Between 2010 and 2020, the sub-Saharan Christian population grew by about 31 percent, while Europe declined in absolute Christian numbers. By 2020 sub-Saharan Africa had surpassed Europe as the world region containing the largest number of Christians (Hackett et al., 2025). These figures measure self-identification rather than discipleship or doctrinal fidelity, but they accurately describe a historic geographical shift.



Source: Pew Research Center (Hackett et al., 2025). Estimates refer to 2020, not a 2026 headcount.

Figure 4. The shift in Christian population between sub-Saharan Africa and Europe, 2010–2020.

Note. Values are Pew Research Center estimates for 2010 and 2020. Self-identification measures population affiliation, not theological fidelity or church participation.

The shift changes mission. African churches now send missionaries and plant congregations across Europe, North America, the Middle East, Asia, and other parts of Africa. Catholic religious institutes recruit heavily from African countries; Pentecostal denominations operate global networks; diaspora congregations preserve language and culture while evangelizing host societies; and online ministries reach audiences unconstrained by national borders. Mission is increasingly multidirectional. The categories “sending church” and “mission field,” once mapped heavily onto Europe and Africa, no longer describe the actual flow of Christian personnel and influence.

The shift also changes theology and worship. African theologians, bishops, pastors, musicians, Bible translators, media ministries, and lay movements shape global conversations about family, sexuality, poverty, religious freedom, spiritual gifts, migration, suffering, interreligious relations, and public morality. Global denominations increasingly experience internal tension because African membership may hold theological or ethical positions different from declining Western provinces. These debates should not be interpreted through numerical triumphalism. Demographic growth does not make a doctrine true. It does mean that treating African Christianity as a secondary regional subject is no longer intellectually defensible.

Digital religion is accelerating the process. A sermon preached in Lagos, Accra, Nairobi, Kampala, Johannesburg, Kigali, Addis Ababa, Kinshasa, or Harare can circulate globally within hours. Worship songs cross denominational and national borders through streaming platforms. Prophetic claims and fundraising appeals travel just as quickly. Digital media therefore magnify both African missionary agency and the accountability problems discussed earlier. The same technologies that allow an African pastor to reach a diaspora community can allow false teaching, manipulated testimonies, or personality cults to scale rapidly.

The contemporary African landscape is thus simultaneously ancient and new. Coptic liturgy, Ethiopian fasting cycles, Catholic parishes, Anglican dioceses, Reformed synods, Baptist congregations, Adventist institutions, evangelical fellowships, AIC prophets, classical Pentecostal denominations, urban charismatics, prosperity megachurches, house churches, diaspora congregations, and digital ministries coexist in the same continent and often in the same city. The term “African Christianity” is useful only if this internal plurality is kept visible.

23. Genealogical Summary

Table 6. Genealogical summary of Christianity in Africa

Dimension	Synthesis
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Dimension	Synthesis
Parent traditions	No single parent. Ancient Alexandrian/Coptic, Latin North African, Aksumite/Tewahedo, and Nubian Christianities; later Roman Catholic and multiple Protestant mission traditions; Holiness, evangelical, Pentecostal, charismatic, and African prophetic environments.
Approximate emergence	First-century Christian horizon; secure institutional evidence from the second century in Egypt/North Africa; fourth-century Aksum; sixth-century Nubia; 1491 Kongo Catholic adoption; major mission expansion in the nineteenth century; AIC and Pentecostal multiplication especially from the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
Geographical origins	Multiple: Mediterranean Africa, Nile Valley and Horn, Kongo, Atlantic and Indian Ocean mission corridors, Southern African mission and industrial zones, West African cities and prayer networks, Great Lakes revival routes, and later transnational urban networks.
Principal actors	Ancient bishops, theologians, monks, rulers, catechists, translators, missionaries, African clergy, women prayer leaders, prophetic founders, evangelists, Pentecostal pioneers, theologians, bishops, pastors, media ministries, and lay networks.
Immediate triggers	Doctrinal controversy; political change; mission encounter; racial exclusion; demand for African leadership; epidemic and healing crises; revival; urbanization; migration; media expansion; dissatisfaction with nominal or bureaucratic Christianity.
Deeper causes	Translation and vernacularization; demographic growth; colonial and postcolonial restructuring; education; social mobility; spiritual-power questions; institutional autonomy; transnational religious exchange; youth cultures; technological change.
Authority structures	Range from ancient episcopal and sacramental hierarchies to synods, presbyteries, congregational governance, denominational executives, prophetic founders, general overseers, apostolic teams, and informal media networks.
Doctrinal distinctives	Highly diverse: ancient Oriental Orthodox theology; Catholic sacramentalism; Protestant confessional traditions; evangelical conversion and Scripture; AIC prophecy/healing; Pentecostal Spirit baptism and gifts; neo-charismatic deliverance, prosperity, apostolic-prophetic, and network emphases.
Immediate branches	Coptic/Chalcedonian division; later Ethiopian/Eritrean jurisdictional differentiation; mission denominational branches; Ethiopian and other secessions; prophetic/AIC movements; classical Pentecostal denominations; independent charismatic ministries.
Later descendants	Global African diaspora churches, transnational Pentecostal denominations, megachurch networks, universities, media ministries, mission agencies, and digitally networked congregations.
Present-day presence	Africa now contains ancient communions and almost every major global Christian family, alongside large African-initiated, Pentecostal, charismatic, and independent sectors. In 2020 sub-Saharan Africa had about 697 million Christians by Pew estimates.
Major biblical questions	What is the final authority: Scripture, tradition, prophet, founder, or institution? How should culture be contextualized without syncretism? How are prophecy and healing tested? What does Scripture promise about wealth and suffering? What makes leadership accountable? How should Christians engage political power without coercive capture?

The summary shows why Chapter 12 cannot be reduced to a single branch flowing from European mission Christianity. Ancient African communions precede modern European missions by well over a millennium. Mission-founded churches remain major traditions but were progressively Africanized through clergy, translation, revival, and national autonomy. African Initiated Churches arose through multiple forms of separation and prophetic innovation. Pentecostalism entered through both international and African networks, then generated major indigenous denominations. Charismatic and neo-Pentecostal Christianity further loosened older denominational boundaries and created transnational network forms. Modern African Christianity is therefore a layered historical ecology of continuity, re-entry, secession, revival, indigenization, and new institutional formation.

24. Conclusion and Transition: From the African Continent to Rwanda

Africa's Christian genealogy overturns two opposite myths. The first is that Christianity is simply a recent European import. That view cannot explain Alexandria, Carthage, Augustine, Aksum, Coptic survival, Ethiopian continuity, Nubian kingdoms, or Kongo Christianity before the high colonial age. The second myth is that ancient African Christianity makes modern missions historically irrelevant. Large regions encountered organized Christianity principally through Catholic and Protestant mission networks in the modern period, and those missions profoundly shaped education, health care, denominational geography, clerical formation, Bible translation, and institutional life. Both truths must be held together.

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries transformed recipients into increasingly autonomous agents. African catechists, translators, clergy, women, teachers, evangelists, prophets, revivalists, and theologians appropriated the faith, challenged racial control, founded churches, revived mission denominations, generated Pentecostal movements, and eventually sent missionaries abroad. These developments corrected real failures: missionary racism, cultural contempt, nominal Christianity, neglect of prayer and healing, limited lay participation, and foreign control. They also introduced or intensified errors that require biblical criticism: founder absolutism, ritual syncretism, untested prophecy, commercialized healing, prosperity formulas, speculative

spiritual warfare, politicized charisma, and accountability structures too weak for the power exercised by religious entrepreneurs.

The central theological conclusion is therefore neither romantic Africanization nor nostalgic missionary paternalism. The apostolic Word judges both. Scripture authorizes translation but not doctrinal mutation; spiritual gifts but not unaccountable revelation; prayer for healing but not contempt for medicine; generosity but not seed-faith transactions; contextualization but not idolatrous synthesis; African leadership but not ethnic supremacy; church influence in society but not coercive domination. Institutional antiquity, indigenous origin, mass attendance, miraculous testimony, foreign pedigree, or media reach cannot replace apostolic fidelity.

The continent-wide view now makes a national case study possible. Rwanda sits at the intersection of several trajectories traced in this chapter: nineteenth-century Catholic and Protestant mission expansion, the East African Revival, Anglican and other Protestant networks, Seventh-day Adventism, Baptist and evangelical missions, classical Pentecostalism, post-1994 church transformation, neo-Pentecostal and charismatic expansion, independent ministries, and contemporary state regulation of religious institutions. The next chapter narrows the lens to Rwanda in order to show, with local dates, routes, institutions, leaders, revivals, conflicts, and doctrinal genealogies, how global and African Christian streams became a distinctive national Christian landscape.

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