

Salvation and Works: A Dilemma of African Christianity towards a Reconstruction Theology of Salvation

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Abstract

The Reformers emphasized the theology of salvation by grace and faith alone (*sola gracia and sola fidei*). Yet the entire scripture teaches the correlation of works and salvation. The Reformers' skew has led to antinomianism and anxiety among its followers. The anxious faithful ask the question: do I work or do I not? Will my good works account to nothing in my salvation? Who is responsible if I am not saved at the end? Wesley does not omit the place of works in salvation but other Reformers, for example John Calvin, do. The Wesleyan theology of salvation proposes a three tier level in the concept of salvation: justification, sanctification and glorification. It is at the second level that works apply and not at the first. The Reformers understood Paul's theology as omitting works in the process of salvation. This article aims at reconstructing the Reformers' interpretation of the doctrine of grace and works. It aims at correcting the Reformers' erroneous hermeneutics through application of biblical exegesis in tracing the theme of grace and works from the Old Testament texts through to the New Testament scriptures. The article explicates the traditional African understanding of the place of works in salvation. It gives insights into African concept of salvation in which work is a key component in the process and means of salvation. The two perspectives are then juxtaposed against the *sola gratia* and *sola fidei* to develop a theology of salvation and works. A historical background to the doctrine of *sola gracia* and *sola fidei* is given so as to understand the reasons why the Reformers skewed their theology. A similar approach is given to the doctrine of grace as it develops through the scriptures. The research will be library based.

Key words: *Sola gratia, sola fidei, salvation, grace, antinomianism, justification, sanctification, glorification*

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1.0 Introduction

Historically, in the Graeco-Roman world, the essential meaning of the term salvation was wholeness of body, mind and spirit. According to Moreau (2011), to be saved, then, was to be restored to health, be it spiritual, mental or spiritual. Because doing usually proceeds from being, implicit in this healing is moral healing, which culminates in behavioral change, will follow the mental and spiritual healing that come after salvation. Philosophically, salvation can be broken down and viewed either negatively or positively. Negatively, it means removing a person from a situation that imperils him. It paints the picture of a person who is in a precarious situation and in grave danger, who is then removed from the dangerous situation and whisked to safety. Positively, salvation means to be bestowed with goodwill, security, and goodness. The ultimate state of salvation is being in an idyll state, happy and full of bliss.

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There are many ways to delineate the different soteriologies extant in different

religions or philosophical systems. For our purposes in this paper, we will point out just a few. Salvation can be distinguished by whether one saves one self, or is saved by another. That is, is salvation achieved directly by the seeker (auto salvation), or through a medium heterosalvation (Moreau, 2011). Further, salvation can be distinguished depending on the broadness of the scope of those being saved. Is it just a small group within humanity or the greater part of humanity who are actually saved; or is it something universal?

This means that the scope of salvation encompasses the entire cosmos, reaching the entire universe. In addition, one can break down salvation into where salvation will take place: Is it in this world, as immanent frameworks hold, or is salvation in other worlds, as transcendentalists hold? Additionally, salvation can be delineated in terms of its ultimate nature and source. That is, what is the nature of the alleged savior: is it theocentric soteriology, that is, accomplished by a God or gods, or it is anthropocentric, that is centered on man, and so to be accomplished by men? (Moreau, 2011). Finally, just what degree of salvation is attainable here or even in the hereafter? Is it partial, total, or is it something that is attainable in successive degrees?

Although it took some time, the disciples of our Lord Jesus eventually recognized him as the ‘saviour’ (salvator, sôter). Moreau (2011) is correct when he points out that even Jesus’ Hebrew word ‘Yeshua’, means ‘God saves.’

The message in his name was clear, that this is he who brings salvation (Greenaway, 2019). The primordial Christian writers expressed Jesus' salvific nature and mission in different ways. Some viewed salvation as healing from mortal sickness, others as a debt-ridden man suddenly forgiven of his debts, a slave freed forever from the yoke of slavery, never to go back to slavery again. Others saw salvation as a dead man raised from the dead, or a man on death row that is forgiven while on the verge of death. In using this picturesque language, these writers were using words and imagery that Jesus himself had used to describe his mission (Moreau, 2011).

Evidently, Christian salvation, is "salvation from elsewhere" (Moreau, 2011). That is, it requires an external savior. The Christian conceptual framework of salvation therefore pivots on a Savior from above. Implicit in this concept therefore is that humans must show receptivity or dependence on another in order to be saved. We can say Christian salvation requires divine agency (Pew Research Centre, 2017). This therefore means that humans must be receptive to salvation by faith and obedience.

The Christian idea of salvation borrows heavily from the Jewish idea of sacrifice. The idea of sacrifice in turn leans heavily on the ancient Old Testament concept of the sin offering. Looking at it that way, we can say that Christ offered himself to deliver us from sin and its diabolical consequences. That is to say, Christ offered himself as a sacrifice for the sins of mankind. The idea that Christ died and rose again for our sins is accepted by all

Christians. It is virtually uncontested in Christianity.

A major question as regards Christian soteriology is whether salvation is by works alone, or by grace alone, or by a synergy of the two. That is, can we earn salvation by our works alone? Are works necessary at all, and if so, where do they fit? The answer to that question has offered up all shades of opinion. Some Christian thinkers have pilloried Luther as the supreme advocate of free grace, while others have excoriated Wesley as the ultimate synergist. Luther is presented as the man who cheapened the *ordo salutis* (way of salvation) with his grace only dictum, while John Wesley, in his earnest desire to mix faith and works is viewed as one who denigrated God's grace by creating a mongrel cocktail. The main objective of this article is to examine salvation and works in the African context, and by so doing, formulate a reconstruction theology of salvation. Accordingly, this work is a prolegomenon, a foundation upon which others can build a Reconstructionist theology upon.

2.0 Materials and methods

The study uses a qualitative methodology, with secondary data collected from scholarly journals, books and other relevant materials. The researcher uses data from these secondary sources to re interrogate the old question of the synergy between faith and works in salvation, and their place in the African salvific discourse. In particular, the thought of Martin Luther and John Wesley, and their respective traditions will be re-examined. While these two titans of the Christian faith have been dead for centuries

and now form the bedrock of tradition, their works are still significant. Tradition is more than a mechanical transmission of a passive deposit, rather it presents a salient opportunity for transformative dialogue, between one living subject and another (Kim, 2011). Accordingly, through proper engagement, tradition can be transposed through the space-time continuum to impact the present. That is, in tradition, we can discover the living faith of the dead and use it to enrich the contemporary mind, and hence shape contemporary thought. The collected data has been analyzed by themes and patterns.

3.0 Discussions

Salvation by grace and faith alone as a doctrine has a long lineage. Scholars trace it to the Apostle Paul, although its praxis can be seen in the Old Testament patriarchs. For instance, God's grace imbues Patriarch Noah's narrative in Genesis 6. "*But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord*" (Gen 6:8). Evil was rife in the land, with depravity having taken over the whole world. Every sin imaginable was being committed, but God decided to show favour to Noah. Noah was imperfect in many ways, yet God decided to shield his and his lineage from the deluge. That was God's unmerited favour at work (Chay, 2017). Further, we see that the same divine grace protected, guided and provided for Abraham and his wife Sarah. Abraham is a curious man.

There are hardly more men who had more faults than him. He clearly lied about the status of his relationship with Sarah in Gen 20: 6 to King Abimelech. He tried to short

circuit God's plan by attempting to sire an heir with the substitute concubine, Hagar. Despite these moral turpitudes, divine blessing was bestowed to him, and he was told that blessings to the whole world would flow through him, a reference to him being the progenitor of the messianic line. In essence, such a flail man is made a spring of water from whom healing waters would quench the longing of the world. This was gloriously fulfilled by the Messiah, who came from Abraham seed. This is evidence of God's unwavering, unmerited grace. In addition, Moses was unsure of God's call (Exodus 4:13) and even killed a man to effect deliverance of the Israelites. Later, he showed bouts of anger and megalomania that made God bar him from entering Canaan. Yet God ignored all that and made him Israel's proto prophet. God put him in his work and mission, despite his soiled history. It seems that with God, the rougher the background, the clearer the picture. You just need to add some unmerited favour.

Additionally, Rahab bravely asked God to save her although she was involved in prostitution. She had an understating of God's grace, despite her colourful past. If grace is something one qualifies for, then Rahab would never have qualified. She was from the wrong tribe, wrong gender, wrong career, and yet God saved her, and together with Mary and Ruth, made her one of the grandmothers' of Jesus. Rahab is referred to as "the harlot" three times over in scripture. She was a body peddler; pervert unqualified for salvation. Yet God saved her from destruction, and made her one of the great grandmothers of the Messiah (Kurian,

George & Mark 2016). To use Nigel Hamilton's description of Bill Clinton, David had a 'groin demon,' he also stole, lied, and killed, but God, through the mystery of divine mercy and grace, forgave him time and time again. In another place, the psalmist was even more pronounced, saying, '*your loving kindness endures forever*' (Psalm 138:8); Idleman (2017). Noteworthy in these giants of the faith is that while grace found them wretched, and with very little good in them, after its work in their lives, they did lots of good. Noah built the ark and saved a remnant. Abraham raised a standard against polytheism, and for all his faults, never worshipped another God, other than the one who had appeared to him. Moses worked hand in hand with God, until the children of Israel left Egypt. He was the human agent for the exodus. Rahab held her faith until the end, and David, despite his many foibles, was a man after God's own heart. The point being that after the initial encounter with grace, works followed.

Isaiah viewed salvation as water that was available to anyone who was thirsty (Isaiah 55:1). But it is the Lord Jesus who laid the proper grounds for salvation by grace. He freely forgave people and then told them you are forgiven. To the abominable tax collector Zacchaeus, Jesus said, *today salvation has come to this house...* (Luke 19: 1-10). As he hung hopeless on the cross, the pilferer was told, '*today you will be with me in paradise*'... (Luke 23:43). The Apostles followed in the same vein, but it is Paul who came to own *sola gracia* and the *sola fidei* doctrine. In Romans 1:17, a verse that Martin Luther says played a pivotal role in his salvation

(Hillerbrand, 2021), Paul wrote that righteousness was attainable by faith alone. In Ephesians 2: 8, Paul wrote that salvation was by faith alone, he ruled out the salvific value of works at that point, for the simple reason that if works were to become the fulcrum for salvation, then boasting would ensue.

The Apostle James stoked the controversy. In James 2: 17, he says, *Faith without works is dead...* If the latter had remained with Paul, there would have been no ambiguity, and no cause for argument. However, his conclusion as to the paucity of faith without works upended Paul's *sola gracia* dictum. But what did James mean? Did he present a damning antithesis to Paul, and thus create a theological nightmare? It is a first principle of proper exegesis that scripture does not contradict scripture, and that scripture interprets scripture. Let's remember Paul's teaching. He did not oppose good works. In his epistles, his teaching can be distilled to this: because the grace has worked in your lives, now therefore do good. In sum, to Paul, good works should show the evidence of salvation.

To use John Wesley's words, a believer in the Lord Jesus must show holiness unto God, and then show social holiness by loving other people. To paraphrase the Lord Jesus, a tree should bear forth good fruit. The core message seems to be "faith alone saves" (Paul), but "faith that saves is not alone, it produces good works" (James) (Wijaya, 2020). In James 2: 17, the author confronted doctrinal aberrationists who were aching for antinomianism. They felt now that they were

forgiven, there was no need for works. James corrected this by showing that faith in Christ is a living organism that should stir and spur believers to a life of love, obedience and service. Vivally, Apostle Paul did not leave the *sola gracia* doctrine hanging. He went on to augment it by saying that we are saved by Christ for good works. What begins as faith goes on to bear the fruit of salvation. And if it does not bear the fruit, then it is not faith, or it began as faith then withered and died. Note that we must first be “created in Christ Jesus” before doing the good works (Wijaya, 2020).

Sola Gracia and Sola Fidei in the Church Age

After the demise of the Apostles, the patristic period saw the church fathers continue with the *sola gracia* and the *sola fidei* doctrine. During the early antiquity period, beginning with Augustine and Chrysostom and all the way to Anselm, *sola gracia* and *sola fidei* ruled supreme. This is not to say that works had no salvific value to these eminent theologians. Rather, they followed the tradition of the Apostle Paul who argued that good works should follow salvation. According to Richardson and Bwoden (2005), *sola gracia* and the *sola fidei* remained the vital prongs on which good works were moored.

During the filioque clause controversy which led to the Schism of 1054, the church split into two, the Western Church (the Roman Catholic Church) and the Eastern Orthodox Church. The two churches became increasingly different doctrinally. The Roman Catholic Church began to lean on

works as an antecedent and a precursor to salvation (Allen, 2010). That is, good works was not just a mere corollary to salvation, but rather that it was a *sine qua non* or integral part to attaining salvation. It is in this theological vortex that Martin Luther was born. One example will suffice. The pope had appointed a man to travel all over Europe selling evidences of divine pardon to those whose loved ones had died without forgiveness. Spending money on a piece of paper signed by the pope was enough to guarantee passageway to Heaven. To truly understand Luther and his books, one has to understand his context.

He is probably best understood as a polemical theologian. That is, he wrote to defend a certain way, against what he thought were attacks against orthodoxy. His books were, by and large, fiery arguments. Much like St. Augustine in late antiquity, Luther was a defender of the faith, against attacks from within the church. Most of his writings — such as *Bondage of the Will* against Erasmus and his polemic against Zwingli—were rebuttals and refutations and as such, are tempered with the heat of delicate argumentation. If they sound like positional papers, it is because Luther was articulating a position (Hillerbrand, 2021).

Luther’s salvation moment came to him after years of tortuous agony, in which he attempted to conjure up his own salvation through works, but it all ended in vain. Finally, while reading and pondering over Romans 1:17, which is the bible emphatic denouement of *sola gracia*, inner illumination

came to him, and finally he was free and the burden lifted from his shoulder. From there, there was no stopping him. To him, whether others doubted his experience or not, he had been converted and that is what was important. “It was as if the very gates of heaven had opened before me” (Moreau, 2011).

So, when Luther wrote the 95 theses and nailed them on the door of his church in Northern Germany in 1516, he was railing against what he saw as an utter aberration of true orthodoxy and a desecration of the *ordo salutis*. During the Protestant Reformation, Lutheran and Calvinist theologians generally believed the Catholic doctrine of the means of grace, which meant that salvation was attainable through a mixture of reliance upon the grace of God and confidence in the merits of one's own works performed in love, which they derogatorily called "legalism". These Reformers understood God as the source of salvation, who used the Holy Spirit to apply the salvation that Christ had gotten at the cross. (Moreau, 2011). However, they were empathic that the good works must come after conversion.

Accordingly, they argued that a sinner is not accepted by God on account of any good works, because no one merits salvation. Instead, they posited that God's grace, appropriated through faith, was the sole cause of salvation. But they avoided the extremes of antinomianism which argued that there was need for law keeping or good works after salvation, since they had ‘already nailed salvation’. John Calvin's five pillars, heavily

weighted on divine sovereignty and unlimited grace, borrow heavily from Luther (Pew Research Centre, 2017). The Eastern Orthodox churches reaffirmed Luther's view that salvation was by grace, not by works, and condemned the medieval Roman teaching that a human can build a treasury of merits, by means of which they would attain salvation.

By the time John Wesley begins his proselytizing in 1738, Arminianism had gained neon prominence as a theological and philosophical counterpart to Calvinism. Accordingly, his system of salvation is essentially a synergy. Consequently, Wesley upended Calvin's conclusion, that unconditional grace was the chief prong on which salvation was anchored. Instead, coming from the Wesleyan–Arminian soteriology, he rejected the principal thesis of unlimited and unconditional grace, which was the denouement of the Luther-Calvin salvation matrix. Crucially, he advocated a cocktail approach where God reached out to everyone on earth, with humans having the inherent ability to either accept or reject the grace to God. After that, works became the evidence for true salvation (Kurian, George & Mark 2016).

In late 1999, the Lutheran World Federation and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity issued the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" that said, "By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while

equipping us and calling us to good works” (The Lutheran World Federation et al., 2019). The Methodist World Conference followed in 2006, voted to adopt the 1999 declaration. On July 18, 2006, delegates to the World Methodist Conference voted unanimously to adopt the declaration (Moreau, 2011). The Methodists' resolution said the 1999 agreement "expresses a far-reaching consensus in regard to the theological controversy which was a major cause of the split in Western churches in the 16th century" about salvation.

Some right-wing Protestants still hold that the original differences between their views and those of the Roman Catholics remain in situ. Like squabbling couples staring at divorce, they aver that the differences between them are foundational and consequently, utterly irreconcilable. But this is a minority view. It seems that major denominations have by and large come around to the doctrine of salvation by grace alone, but with a major caveat, that works must follow true saving faith.

The Place of work in the African Concept of Salvation

H. W. Turner in his examination of salvation among the Aladura group of churches in Nigeria in the past century noticed a key difference between the understandings of salvation in Nigeria, as compared to his own Western understanding. His own understanding focused on salvation as being other worldly; something to be received when one died. But the Aladura Christians disabused him of that skewed understanding of salvation. These African Christians saw

salvation as encompassing the full human condition (Turner, 1965). To them, salvation was no theological abstraction, something up there to be thought about, but which has no bearing or impact here on earth. Indeed, salvation had to leave the clouds and come to the terrestrial and anthropological realms where the rubber of faith met the wheel of daily living. Turner notes that by this understanding, the Aladura extended salvation from the spiritual to the temporal and material spheres, thereby “manifesting the divine victory not only over human, but over the super human and the cosmic (Allen, 2010).” He noted, for example, that unlike in the West, salvation is about deliverance from illness, curses averted and catastrophes overcome. It is a highly practical affair.

In the same vein, the Kenyan scholar and theologian John Mbiti has noted that for African Christians, Salvation consists not just in answering questions of the Afterlife, but in redemption from physical dilemmas or evil forces and curses in the present day. This accent on deliverance from distress in the present life and material blessings in this world are, according to these studies, a common feature of the African understanding of salvation. In fact, this mindset laid the foundation for the ready reception of the prosperity gospel later received in Africa. With their emphasis on health and wealth, this kind of attitude was fertile ground for the sprouting of Prosperity gospel prophets. In her analysis of the understanding of salvation among the *ahonoki* sect in central Kenya, Hinga (1980) pointed out that new believers must work hard at their salvation by consistently living a life of fellowship and

love with other believers, fighting daily against evil, and working hard in their daily endeavors (Hinga, 1980). These tenets are exacerbated by the fact that in their belief system, one is not sure of being accepted into God's heaven until the very last day. Hence, one has to be alert and fight to the end, manifesting holiness in all that they do (Hinga, 1980)

Accordingly, African Christians believe in a synergy of work and grace. Take the Igbo of Nigeria for example. Their traditional belief is that life on earth is enmeshed, with the boundary between the physical and the spiritual often blurred. The balance is often on a hedge. This delicate equilibrium has to be carefully maintained, for if something goes amiss, things can go suddenly haywire. According to Ngeele (2017), the full schema of salvation for the Igbo pivots on making sure that there is social and spiritual homeostasis. Relationships must be maintained by strict observance of ritual and daily sacrifices and prayer. This maintenance of all spiritual relationships, also involves observances of sanctions and taboos. Breaking even one taboo or social stricture disturbs spiritual and social harmony, and so comes with a penalty. In this sense, there is an element of work, and use of force in ensuring the maintenance of all social and spiritual relationships in ITR, which then leads to achieving salvation. Accordingly, while there is grace and favor from the gods in ITR, the humans must play their role and work side by side at it, with grace (Moreau, 2011).

In his analysis of Mbiti's understanding of salvation, (Adelakun, 2011) concludes that Mbiti proves that Africans have internalized Christian beliefs to the extent that Christianity is now regarded as a homegrown religion (Adelakun, 2011). The implication here is that the same way Africans toil to make themselves accepted by the gods in ATR, is the same way they labor in Christianity, knowing that their labor in the Lord is not vain. If good deeds were meritorious in ATR, so are they in Christianity. He opines that because of being analogous to Christianity in terms of their view of works in the salvation process, African traditional religion contributed to the spread of Christian beliefs in Africa. Mbiti concludes that African Christians' understanding of salvation as total deliverance from sin, and then from all misfortunes and calamities, and whatever else would diminish life, is informed by the economic and social disenfranchisement in the continent (Idleman, 2017).

Ngong (2006) attributes the rapid rise of new Pentecostal churches in Africa to the failures of missionary Christianity. According to him, the Christianity preached by missionaries "saw ATR as the quintessence of the demonic," and "did not seek to respond appropriately to the existential needs of the African world-view" (Ngong, 2006). Going by Ngong's hypothesis, a continent awash with poverty, sickness and other malaise had to see the Gospel, which promises eternal life, health, wealth and a healthy body to enjoy them, as God-sent. He however advocates a middle ground, where the material realm is viewed as the penultimate,

rather than the ultimate, in African salvific discourse.

Both African Traditional Religion and the Christian religion accept God's unmerited favour to suffering sinful humans. Salvation for miserly humans can only come through this grace of God (Modiboa, 2011). Accordingly, we agree with Gehrman assessment that there is much more than a knowledge about God in Africa. There is a lot of *prima facie* evidence of God's unmerited favor working among traditional Africans (Gehman, 1987). In view of the foregoing, it is evident that God's grace is known and accepted by both African Traditional Religion and the Christian religion (Gehman, 1987).

Further, both ATR and Christianity believe in bearing fruit and doing good by adherents. A believer in ATR must do good, to show that he is indeed reformed. ATR adherents who convert to Christianity have no problem with James' words in James 2:17 that faith without work is dead. They know it for a fact that you just cannot say you believe in God and thereafter have nothing to show for it. That is, your works must accompany you. Further, African Christians believe strongly that the believers' works will count for much during judgment day. In other words, what I do after I convert will ultimately count either in determining my eternal destiny, or my reward.

Towards a Reconstructionist Theology of Salvation and Works

The forgiveness of sin, which results in regeneration is by *sola gracia*—by the grace of God alone, appropriated by faith. Yet, as

John Wesley showed, after forgiveness comes the second stage: sanctification (Chay, 2017). In this second stage, works are the currency, so to speak. Those theologians who quote Ephesians 2:8, and only see the words, 'we are saved by grace', should read the full text in 2: 8-10, and either integrate the full words into their theology, or stop piece mill interpretations all together. Our position as African Christians is: stop massacring bible verses. Exegete the whole verse or leave it alone. Dig deeper, and you will find the real gold. In essence, Ephesians 2:8-10 says that we have been saved by faith, so that we can do good works after salvation. Accordingly, far from provoking antinomianism in believers, this should lead to outpourings of worship and adoration to God our savior. It should lead us to forsake lives of license, legalism and moral recklessness. The grace of God in the gospel stirs us to pursue lives of consecration and holiness. It points us to sacrificial actions for the one who first loved us (Kim, 2011).

An African Christian Reconstructionist theology of salvation aims at recapturing the full biblical teaching of grace and works in salvation, and then express it through African forms, ideas and language. Beginning with Rushdoony, Reconstructionist believe that God calls on all Christians to "take dominion" over all spheres of human life (Mcvicar, 2015). An African Christian Reconstructionist theology is Christian salvation theology from the perspective of the African cultural context. This theology has no schism between secular and spiritual, is deeply communitarian, is based on victory over marauding forces, and insists on good

works following the initial contact with salvation. Anyone who believes that Africans were a religious ‘*tabula rasa*’ before Christianity came on the scene, are mistaken, as Bediako affirms (Bediako, 1989). In the words of Archbishop Tutu, this Reconstructionism must involve rehabilitating Africa's rich cultural heritage and religious consciousness. This cultural heritage believed in religious obedience, loving God and fellow man, and living every day with the conscious knowledge that God will judge us for every action that we do on earth. This anticipation of final judgement should spur us to good works. African Christians understand that Luther was reacting to the excesses in word and praxis in the Roman Catholic Church in the 16th

century. The sale of pardons was simply nauseating, and totally denigrated Christ’s work on Calvary. However, the words of African Christians to Luther is that *sola gracias* is good, but it is just a starting point. Left to itself, *sola gracias* will collapse. It will remain a high-sounding slogan with no legs. After *sola gracias* and *sola fidei*, now comes the part where we roll up our shirt sleeves and work our salvation with fear and trembling, standing on the foundation of grace. The full biblical message is grace and works, walking hand in hand together. That is the true biblical teaching, and African Christians need to heed the message if they are to infuse meaning into the Reconstructionism movement.

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