
Biography, Practical Theology

The Character of a Godly Student

Aaron Dunlop

Dr. Byang Kato, referred to as the father of evangelical theology in Africa, died fifty years ago this year. He was thirty-eight years old.

Kato's conversion story has been told and retold many times, from a child fetish priest to gospel preacher. His journey into theological education is equally remarkable and one that holds many lessons for those who would aspire to the Christian ministry.

In January 1963 Kato passed the advance level studies for his General Certificate of Education, his A-levels, in the British system.

After a long period of study, he was finally ready to apply for seminary.

The Sudan Interior Mission (SIM) and his church, the Evangelical Church of West Africa (ECWA) together decided to grant him a scholarship to study at the London Bible College, accredited with London University.

It was the most expensive scholarship they had ever given, but Rev. Harold Fuller, then editor-in-chief of the *African Challenge*, the SIM magazine published in Lagos, said,¹

We never questioned that it would be a worthwhile investment ... the thorough and intensive studies of the London University B.D. provided the disciplined groundwork that would benefit him in future preparation and ministry."

¹ Sophie de la Haye, Byang Kato: Ambassador for Christ, (Kisumu: Africa Christian Press, 1986), 35.

Kato's personal commitment to the gospel was exceptional and it had not gone unnoticed by the SIM and ECWA leaders. During his years of preparation there were four qualities of his character that became dominant, and that the Lord honoured, and that are a challenge to all who desire to honour God.

First, his prayer-life was detailed and methodical. Journal entries from that time show how he would list his prayer requests and the date that that prayer was answer.² In September 1961, for example, he prayer that his wife would have more interest in study and love God and his word. Three months later, he noted that she wanted to go to Girl's Christian Training Institute in Kwoi, which she did.

On January 14, 1962, also, he prayed for a bicycle. Two days later, January 16, he notes that the prayer was answered and includes a

² *Ibid*, 34.

Scripture reference, Philippians 4:19, *"But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus."*

Second, Kato had a tender conscience. One missionary teacher at the Igbaja Bible School, Mr. Al Classen, remembers one night when Kato turned up at his house in distress.³

Classen was in bed when Kato knocked on the door, wanting to talk to him about some issue of personal defeat. After reading with him and praying, Classen says, Kato went home with peace of mind restored, and Classen saw in him "the secret of a life that was to become a blessing to many, including myself."⁴

Third, Kato's Christian character was evident in his family life. From the time of his marriage, in 1957, Kato had been determined

³ *Ibid*, 28.

⁴ *Ibid*.

to raise a distinguished Christian family. One friend remembers,⁵

*"As young married people,
Byang and Jummai
demonstrated what a Christian
home should be like. From the
first day, they read the Bible
and prayed together. I never
saw them frown or talk harshly
to each other."*

By late 1960 he and his wife had three children: Deborah, born in October 1957, Jonathan in December 1958, and Paul in October 1960.

Kato would later leave his children to study abroad, and his work would take him from home for long periods of time, which had a negative effect, particularly on his older son,

⁵ *Ibid.*

Despite this evident fault, however, and his regrets, Kato had developed a biblical theology of family, and later wrote,⁶

The Christian home should be the first place for sound theological discussion. The old concept in Africa that a child should be seen and not heard does not promote parent-child discussion. This must change. The family altar should not be merely a dead ritual, but spontaneous discussion should mark the family get-together. The discussion around the Word of God should then be followed with sincere prayer.

⁶ Byang Kato, "Theological Trends in Africa Today," in Perception, Vol. 1, No.1, March 1974, p. IX. Cited in Christien M. Breman, *A Portrait of Dr. Byang H. Kato* in "Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology," February 15, 1996, 139, endnote 23.

A child exposed to the Word of God at home is prepared for any atmosphere he will find in later life. If his questions are not dealt with at home he will take them somewhere else where he may not get a sympathetic, biblical-based answer. This is the challenge that African leaders and parents must face.

A fourth characteristic of Kato's commitment to the gospel was his insatiable desire for learning, his diligence in study and love of books.

The story is told by SIM missionaries, William and Jessie Magill of one evening when Kato visited their home in Zabolo. When he entered the living room, they said, "he went straight for the bookcase, and falling down on his knees, said, "when will I have books like these."⁷

⁷ Sophie de la Haye, Byang Kato: Ambassador for Christ, (Kisumu: Africa Christian Press, 1986), 34.

He would learn patience in the process of education. When he had finished elementary education, guided by a general trend in Evangelicalism at that time, he skipped further education to pursue a basic Bible College course.

As time went on, however, Kato became persuaded of the importance of theological training, a conviction that would only grow stronger. He became convinced that the theological problems in the African church in his day were due to biblical ignorance and an "inadequate emphasis on theological education on the part of missionaries."⁸

It is a fact," he said,

"That most of the missionaries lack sound theological education. In some circles it has been felt that those candidates who could not qualify for higher

⁸ Byang Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, (Kisumu: Evangelic Publishing House, 1975), 15.

*level seminary studies could go to the mission field instead ... So a mammoth church has been established without the depth of theology that the church needs. Christian leaders are now vulnerable to the tactics of ecumenism with its basic universalistic premise..."*⁹

To pursue further theological training, Kato was forced to retrace his steps and sit his General Education Certificates (GCEs), ordinary and advanced level, or O-levels and A-levels. He pursued these with diligence and earned a scholarship to London Bible School and then to Dallas Theological Seminary.

There is, of course, the danger of excess in this area, for it is generally agreed that Kato was a "workaholic," and the theory that he died of exhaustion has been maintained

⁹ *Ibid.*

since the time of his death.¹⁰ One speaker at the memorial service in Kenya stated, “*one could almost wonder whether Byang Kato died of exhaustion.*”¹¹

At the Beginning of December 1975, Kato left Nairobi for a holiday with his family in Mombasa, after an exceptionally busy month with the Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar (AEAM) and a tense meeting with the World Council of Churches (WCC), for he disagreed with the WCC.

On December 16, Kato died in a mysterious drowning accident. The postmortem identified no indication as to why he drowned, and there was no evidence of attack or sting marks from poisonous fish

¹⁰ Aiah Dorkuh Foday-Khabenje, *Byang Kato: The Life and Legacy of Africa's Pioneer Evangelical Theological*, (Cumbria: Legacy of Africa's Pioneer Evangelical Theological, (Cumbria: Langham Publishing, 2023), 89.

¹¹ Cited in Christien M. Breman, *A Portrait of Dr. Byang H. Kato* in “Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology,” February 15, 1996, 150, endnote 53.

common on the Swahili Coast. His death remains a mystery.

Whatever the cause of the unfortunate and untimely death of this servant of God, Paul's words to young Timothy, "Keep a close watch on yourself," (1 Timothy 4:16) could have application beyond the spiritual and doctrinal, to include the physical, mental and emotional.