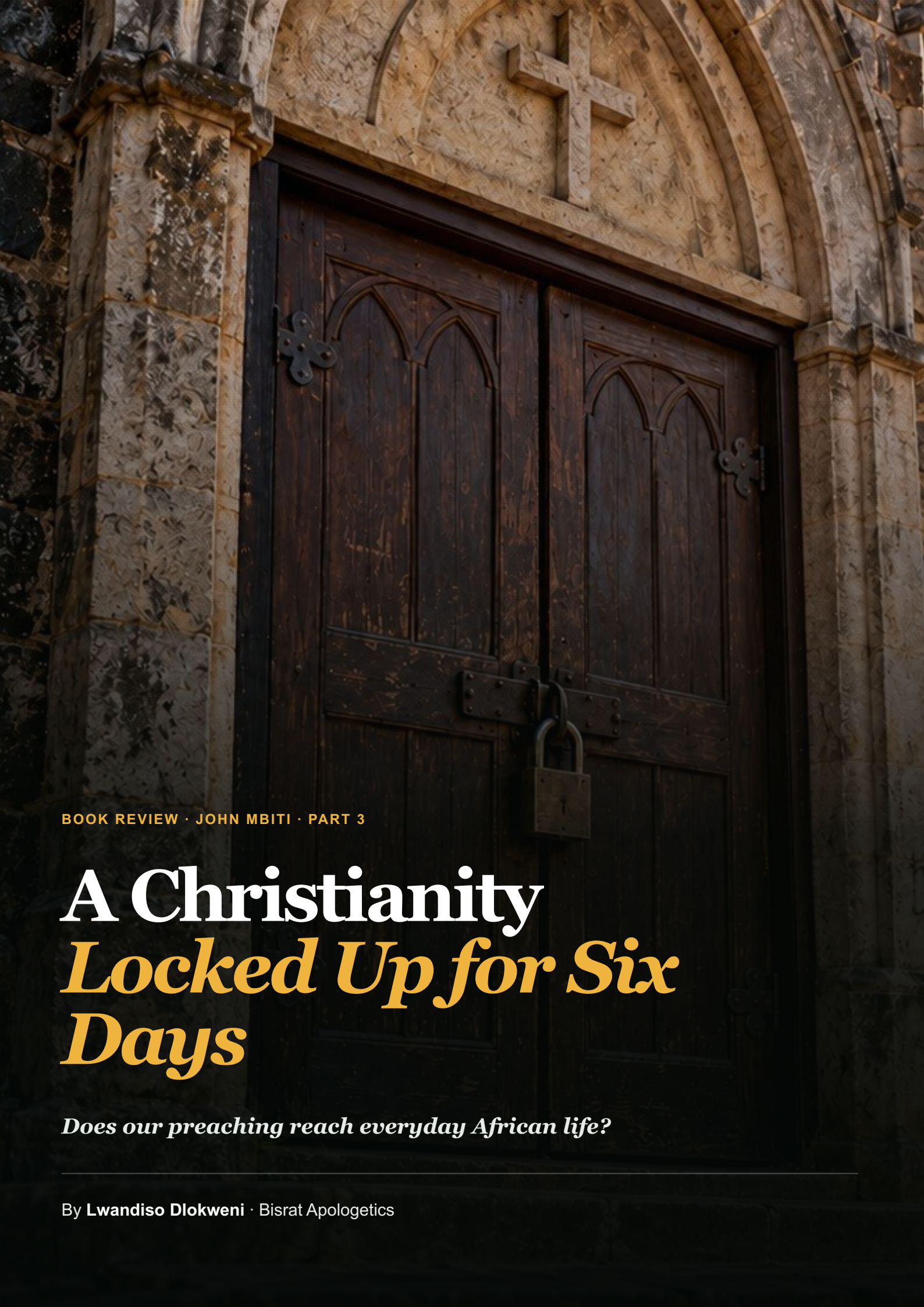

BOOK REVIEW · JOHN MBITI · PART 3

A Christianity *Locked Up for Six Days*

Does our preaching reach everyday African life?

By **Lwandiso Dlokweni** · Bisrat Apologetics

A Faith That Reaches the Whole Person

01

In African Religions and Philosophy, John Mbiti's criticism of missionary Christianity begins with the world its hearers inhabited. In his account of traditional African societies, religion permeates work, family, communal belonging, and people's understanding of the universe. It accompanies sowing and harvesting, celebrations and funerals. It shapes how people interpret both ordinary events and frightening disruptions (Mbiti, 1970, pp. 1–3).

Against this background, Mbiti describes a Christianity "locked up six days a week" (Mbiti, 1970, p. 305). People could acquire church membership, rules, and hope for the next world while their everyday fears remained largely untouched. His concern reaches beyond worship styles: had Christianity reshaped their understanding of the world and their place within it?

> **"It is a Christianity which is locked up six days a week"**
>
> JOHN S. MBITI (1970, P. 305)

Mbiti makes the failure concrete. Mission Christianity could bring foreign cultural expectations, church dues, and regulations without adequately engaging African spiritual outlooks. Citing S. G. Williamson's work among the Akan, he contrasts leaving a traditional environment with being redeemed within it (Williamson, 1965, cited in Mbiti, 1970, pp. 309–311). Christianity could change someone's cultural affiliations while leaving their deepest assumptions about life substantially unconverted.

This criticism also challenges a Westernised Christianity that accommodates a secular division: God speaks on Sunday; science explains the working week. If natural explanations make God irrelevant, why retain Sunday? Understanding how rain falls cannot remove the Creator who sustains it. A scientific explanation does not make providence unnecessary.

> **"A scientific explanation does not make providence unnecessary."**
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> LWANDISO DLOKWENI

Conversion, he argues, must embrace thought patterns, fears, relationships, and attitudes. Otherwise, people may return to older beliefs during emergencies (Mbiti, 1970, pp. 3–4). These are broad historical observations, not descriptions of every African or missionary. Yet the pastoral question remains: have we taught people how to live their whole lives before God?

02

Why Does Fishing Get More Patience?

We may criticise Africans for worshipping for four hours, then leave our ninety-minute service to fish for six. Some watch the clock when preaching overruns by a minute, yet grant leisure hours without complaint. Could our impatience suggest that fishing deserves more attention than gathered worship?

Four hours is not inherently holier than ninety minutes, and fishing is God's gift. Still, cultural preferences must answer to Scripture. An inflexible worship timetable can expose priorities when leisure receives patience we deny the congregation. The deeper problem remains Christianity confined to its Sunday slot.

03

When Life Sends People Elsewhere

What does Christianity say when my child dies? When work disappears? When my child struggles at school, or my relatives explain repeated disappointments as a curse? If our preaching never enters these questions, other voices will. Mbiti's account helps explain how deficient teaching and pastoral care can contribute to syncretism, without excusing divided allegiance.

Many traditional religious practices seek health, fertility, protection, and material wellbeing, alongside belonging and communal obligations. These concerns give prosperity teaching familiar points of contact. Its promises offer apparent answers to distress. That does not make the promises true: Christianity cannot be measured by its ability to secure the outcomes we desire.

We must reject guaranteed wealth and health while offering a biblical account of God's involvement in the circumstances those promises exploit. Nor is teaching alone enough. Mbiti describes people seeking communities where they can voice sorrow and bring spiritual and physical needs (Mbiti, 1970, p. 306). Our congregations must receive the grieving and support the needy.

04

Nothing Falls Outside Our Father's Care

The Heidelberg Catechism supplies language we should recover. Q&A 27 places rain and drought, health and sickness, riches and poverty under God's providence. All things come "not by chance but by his fatherly hand." Q&A 28 draws out patience in adversity, gratitude in prosperity, and confidence for the future (Heidelberg Catechism, 1563, Q&A 27–28).

> **"All things come not by chance but by His fatherly hand."**
>
> HEIDELBERG CATECHISM (1563), Q&A 27 · PRINCIPAL AUTHOR: ZACHARIAS URSINUS

This is theology for the hospital ward, the empty cupboard, and the disappointing school report. God sustains and governs the world in which these things happen (Hebrews 1:3). Medicine and science investigate real causes within his creation; they do not uncover a realm from which he is absent. A medical diagnosis and prayer belong together.

Even eating and drinking belong to God's glory (1 Corinthians 10:31). His claim reaches the whole week.

Providence does not give us access to God's secret purposes. We may know that he governs a loss without knowing why he permitted this particular loss. Jesus rejects an automatic connection between disability and a particular person's sin (John 9:1–3). We must not turn grief or poverty into evidence of a hidden curse. We can lament before the Father whose purposes exceed our understanding.

05

The Cross Has Implications for the Whole Universe

Colossians presents the Christ whom frightened people need to know. All things were created through him and for him, including invisible rulers and authorities; all things hold together in him (Colossians 1:16–17). These powers are creatures under his sovereignty. Believers have been transferred from darkness into his kingdom (1:13–14).

Then Paul brings forgiveness and victory together. God cancels our debt through the cross and disarms the rulers and authorities, displaying his triumph over them (Colossians 2:13–15). The cross is a public victory with cosmic implications. The Christ who reconciles us to God is head over every power and authority (2:9–10).

We should preach those implications. No ancestral mediator can improve our access to the Father. No protective ritual can complete Christ's saving work. The person forgiven on Sunday belongs to the reigning Christ on Monday. His lordship reaches the home and workplace as surely as the church gathering (Colossians 3:17–4:1).

06

Recovering the Language of Deliverance

Historic Protestant theology speaks directly about the spiritual enemies people fear. Heidelberg Q&A 1 joins Christ's payment for sin to freedom from "the tyranny of the devil." Its comfort embraces body and soul, life and death, under the Father's care (Heidelberg Catechism, 1563, Q&A 1).

Luther explains Christ's lordship in the Large Catechism: "He has redeemed me from sin, from the devil, from death, and from all evil." He describes the redeemed as brought under Christ's shelter and government (Luther, 1529, Part II, §§27–31).

> **"He has redeemed me from sin, from the devil, from death, and from all evil."**
>
> MARTIN LUTHER (1529, LARGE CATECHISM, II.27)

In his Institutes of the Christian Religion, Calvin likewise treats Satan as a real enemy, subject to God's rule, and directs believers to Christ's victory (Calvin, 1559, Institutes 1.14.13, 17–19). He writes: "God, therefore, does not allow Satan to have dominion over the souls of believers" (Calvin, 1559, Institutes 1.14.18, Beveridge translation).

> **"God, therefore, does not allow Satan to have dominion over the souls of believers"**
>
> JOHN CALVIN (1559, INSTITUTES 1.14.18)

These words can make the gospel intelligible within African contexts where spiritual danger is taken seriously. Their authority, however, comes from Scripture. We must explain what Scripture means by the devil, spirits, bondage, and deliverance, allowing it to correct inherited assumptions. Recovering this vocabulary should deepen confidence in Christ rather than multiply fears.

07

Does God Heal and Protect His People?

God hears prayer and can heal. James directs the sick to seek the elders' prayers (James 5:14–16). Yet Paul also recounts suffering that remained despite repeated prayer (2 Corinthians 12:7–10). We should pray expectantly, seek appropriate treatment, and care faithfully for sufferers. A delayed recovery does not prove deficient faith. Complete bodily restoration awaits the resurrection.

Can a Christian be bewitched? We must first ask what is meant. Christians can face malicious threats, deception, persecution, and spiritual attack (1 Peter 5:8–9). Scripture does not establish that another person's ritual can place a believer under an independent spiritual sovereignty. Job's suffering shows Satan's activity under God's limits (Job 1–2); Paul's suffering shows that belonging to Christ does not eliminate affliction.

Christ's protection therefore gives deeper assurance than immunity from pain. No hostile power can separate his people from God's love (Romans 8:35–39). We resist the devil through faith, truth, righteousness, prayer, and the Word (Ephesians 6:10–18). We need neither a diviner's diagnosis nor another sacrifice to secure what Christ has accomplished. Specific accusations require evidence; fear must never license blaming an innocent neighbour.

08

Christ Is Lord Throughout the Week

Scripture equips God's people for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16–17), without promising an explanation of every tragedy or an escape from every difficulty. It teaches us to bring finances, family tensions, grief, and fear before our Father. His church must accompany that teaching with generosity, companionship, and practical care.

Mbiti's challenge deserves a fuller Christian answer. The gospel announces reconciliation with God through the crucified and risen Lord; that reconciliation changes how we inhabit his world. We await the day when suffering and death are finally removed. Until then, the church doors may close on Sunday. Christ's lordship does not.

> **"The church doors may close on Sunday. Christ's lordship does not."**

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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