

# JUST FAITH AND ACTION: A BI-MONTHLY THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION FROM THE WASHINGTON OFFICE ON AFRICA

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## *Giving tests*

*I arranged for several of us to meet with Assistant Secretary of State for Africa Walter Kansteiner a few days ago, to talk about the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), which is the African government initiative – led by Presidents Mbeki of South Africa and Obasanjo of Nigeria – that envisions more accountable African governance and more thoughtful international support.*

*At the end of the conversation Mr. Kansteiner said he had a question for us. What do I say, he asked, when my colleagues in the G-8 (the major industrialized nations of the world) say to me that African proponents of NEPAD were given a test of their seriousness – Zimbabwe – “and they received an ‘F’?”*

*We probably said something appropriate. After all, he did have a point: the Mugabe regime in Zimbabwe does have a lot to answer for, as painful as it is for those of us who supported the liberation struggle to say so. What I wished I had said, however (where is your brain when you really need it?), is that even if the ‘F’ was deserved, the real question was who set the test, who gauged the result, and whether the ‘F’ applied to an assignment or to the whole course.*

*If the US is presuming to define the test and give the grade, well, American arrogance is alive and well. And we are playing a dangerous game. What if the rest of the world declares that the test for US seriousness in environmental protection is Kyoto? We've got a resounding ‘F’. What if the test for US concern for the victims of conflict is ratification of the landmine treaty? Another ‘F’. Or the AIDS pandemic: The test, support for the Global Fund. ‘F’ again. We could actually put together quite a list of failures. And I am confident that the Bush administration would say, Oh, no, this isn't fair. This so-called test is but part of a larger picture, and the issue is complex. Well, so it is for Africa too.*

*We do this in our churches all the time, of course, and have done so throughout history. Our communions are riddled with documents, creeds, confessions and repudiations of confessions, that seek to demonstrate that we are the “true believers,” and others, by definition, are not. They have failed to pass the test, whether it be ancient tests about what happens to the bread and wine at Holy Communion (or even what to call the Eucharist!), or more contemporary tests about national agenda being endorsed by God, or the community being inclusive or exclusive, where we essentially ask if God cares for those who differ from us.*

*So, Mr. Kansteiner was speaking of a practice well known to us in the faith communities. In the case he raised, the US looked at a situation, analyzed it on its own terms and by its own criteria, then – given the power it possesses in the world – set an exam. Africa cannot refuse to take it. It's there, waiting, and avoidance is itself failure. But the US does more than set and administer the test. It defines the consequences, how much the test is weighted, and whether it's the only grade for the entire course. The US is teacher, its pupil, Africa. The US is parent, Africa the child.*

*Even if sometimes we don't behave much better, we in the churches have come much further along in our relationship with Africa. I am writing this while attending the Presbyterian Church (USA)'s General Assembly, and the signs – concrete, active signs – of genuine and authentic partnership with Africa are here to be seen. There are many things still to be worked through. We all have a great deal to answer for. But positive relational signs are there as well.*

*I readily concede that the US may legitimately raise concerns with African nations, and as a partner in the world community, may define its priorities. But one thing is clear to me. We have no right to give Africa a test.*

*Yours faithfully,  
Leon Spencer*

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*If there are others you would like us to send these reflections to, please pass their names and addresses on to us. Alternatively, if these reflections are unhelpful, just let us know and we'll remove you from our list.*

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