

THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN A TURBULENT SOCIETY

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Abstract

We live in a society where 'change and decay' permeates every facet of our living. Happenings in our society like corruption, ethnicity, neo-paganism, occultism, deceit, hypocrisy, empty religion and worldliness etc most appropriately describe our society as turbulent. A society where our politicians appear to be confused, where our economy is unstable, our educational system disordered and our civil lives chaotic. A society where worldliness and hypocrisy have entered the society and there is turmoil because of insecurity. The society looks up to the church for direction. Therefore this paper discusses the role of church in a turbulent society, because the church is the light in the world.

Introduction

The word "church" is very meaningful in the context of Christianity and society. The Hebrew word for church "kahal" (assembly) "edhah" (congregation) is the equivalent of the Greek word "ecclesia". The Hebrew and Greek terms means "called out from the world" implies a higher responsibility for a better ethical behaviour. Adeogun (1986:72) explained the apostolic conception of the church as "those who received Jesus' message and proceeded to put it into practice".

The church is a community of people united with the risen Christ by the Spirit, and is truly and intimately linked with mankind and its history. The church is people, a community of believers, a family. The church is where God continues to make himself known in our history. Akukwe (1988:66) described the church as:

The sacrament of God in the world, a sign that God exists and is operating in the world. The church we are talking about here is not just an institution or visible society. The church is first a mystery before it becomes an organization. A people made one with the unity of the father, son and the Holy spirit. It is an organism and body of Christ.

Since the growth of Christianity in Nigeria it had been faced with a number of laudable roles and functions. The church of today should have sensitive awareness of the environment where it situates so that it will respond compassionately and constructively to people's plight and pains. It is expedient to note that what makes Nigeria an unjust society and in many ways sinful is not the mere fact of poverty. Its cause starts from glaring imbalance between the rich and powerful citizens and the poor, who compete at the same frequency and friction in the same open market of buying and selling, under the same environmental uncertainties in Nigeria. Thus our society according to Okolo (1985: 93):

Is fast becoming highly classist one conscious of very wealthy, propertied elites, 'the Akajiakus' in local parlance... who form part of the unjust society and through their shady actions in many ways unethical, create a life of misery, economic hardships and ecclesiastical anomalies for the masses.

The church in our time has become so classist and ambivalent under the guise of evangelical movements, and subsequently lost some of her basic focus. There had been serious global search for the relevance and need of major social formulations in society including the church. Many church leaders, individual Christians, Christian groups and theologians are so concerned with what should be the role of the church in society. According to Anderson (1968:29) at the end of the National Evangelical Congress:

We believe that our Evangelical doctrines have important ethical implications. But we confess to our shame that we have not thought sufficiently deeply or radically about the problems of our society. We are therefore resolved to give ourselves to more study of this crucial issues in future.

Variance analysis is a veritable instrument for assessing performance, discussing the causes of failure and charting a new course of action. In that understanding, Jesus asked his disciple "who do the people say that I am" (Luke 9:18). With the church in view, one may ask, how do people perceive the church? How far is the church discharging the charges of its founder and master, Jesus Christ? Is the church properly equipped for its social responsibilities? Although the church has in different ways and magnitude been contributing towards transforming God's word in accordance with His divine will, but public opinion is rife to the effect that is having problem in witnessing for Jesus Christ and bearing fruits accordingly.

Nigerian society is in a state of commotion and unrest, moving violently and unevenly. A state that is plagued with chaos and confusion. In that state, sanity and order need to be injected and the church is called to do that. No wonder Nwaokolo (2003:27) quoting Kalu, reiterated that "the church is the harbinger of social change". In the early church, to those whom Jesus chooses as his disciples and who would become the first leaders, Jesus promised all the help they need. He fully understood their frailty and fears and had no intention of leaving them to cope on their own. He would provide for his disciples the same power that had been given him " I am going to send you what my father has promised but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from high" (Luke 24:49).

Christians have a responsibility to make the slate better, politically by electing Christians who are tested and trusted, and will refuse to rig elections no matter the temptation to do so. They can do well by offering selfless services to the society and government. Refusing to give or take bribe and not being involved in other forms of corruption and improve societal morality. This is a synopsis to the role of church in a turbulent society, bearing in mind that the word of God is a contemporary message, changing every human situation, as its bearers seek to interpret it afresh, and no human institution escapes the radical change of the Gospel. Therefore the thrust of the matter in this paper is the examination of the role of the church in a society plagued with confusion, bitterness and rancour, like Nigerian society.

Participation in Renewal of Evangelism

The church should engage in evangelism renewal. According to Smith (1979) "if God wills the evangelization of the world, and you refuse to support the mission then you are opposed to the will of God". The work of the church is walking in the obedience to Christ. Our Lord said, " As the father has sent me so I am sending you" (John 20:21). In the words of Bowen (1979:13):

Evangelism describes the activity of making people disciple of Jesus Christ, often (but not only) the proclamation of the Gospel. This word is very commonly used by Protestants and those connected with World Council of Churches.

Evangelism describes everything the church does, considered in relation to its impact on society. Renewal is restoring the church to its original state, and arrangement for a continuation or continued validity. One way of reforming the church is to make sure that it holds in balance the different elements of the rule of God. The faith and life of work should be healthy in the three areas of renewal, evangelism and service. If they are healthy, then the church has a 'holistic' ministry, that is a ministry that is as wide in its scope as the ministry of Jesus was, and is concerned with every aspect of human life.

There is no doubt that a church that will be alive and meaningful in this turbulent society should have evangelism and renewal. The church has to announce that God has broken into history in Jesus of Nazareth, to witness to Jesus rule in the church and to pray and work to make his word effective for unbelievers. The power evangelism aspect of signs and wonders is often forgotten in our churches today.

Christians need courage to respond to the leading power of the Holy Spirit and to trust God to work in power in the streets and on the frontiers of the church. This may involve a healing ministry, but it may involve feeding the hungry, or giving money, or bringing a prophecy, or living a life of love for brothers and sisters in Christ. Dom Camera of Brazil says that Christians must stop pressing the absurd claim of being the best, and present ourselves as brothers and sisters for others.

Indeed no man is saved to be in isolation. Everyone is saved in serving others. Every time Christian ought to know that necessity is laid upon him to bring others into full reconciliation with God through our lord and saviour Jesus Christ, with the expectation of conversion.

The Church as the Salt of the Earth and Light of the World

From history and scripture I turn to expectation, which Jesus had for his church. He expressed it most vividly in the Sermon on the Mount by the use of salt and light metaphor:

You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled by men. You are the light of the world. A city in a hill cannot be hidden neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your father in heaven (Matt. 5:13-16).

These are images, which Jesus used to illustrate the influence he expects his church to exert in human society. Salt is a food preserver, which could be used to give flavour to any food. As Christians, it is our righteousness in the Lord that makes us salt of the nation. Our saltiness should be identified in our moral values and practices with others. No wonder Onwu (1996:13) reiterated that:

Thus, the church is called upon to engage in a power encounter (through prayer in the Holy Spirit) against these principalities and powers that thwart human efforts toward peace and holistic development and reconstruction. This dimension has been frequently ignored or given very little in the church's ministry to the society and the individual.

There is no doubt that the church should engage in aggressive involvement in the matters of peace and development of human society and to insistently enthrone all forms of virtues. The prophetic ministry of the church lies more on participation to build up, to reconstruct, to sensitize and to humanize people, movements and instigation that will recreate the community or society in which we live.

The individual Christians should participate in the use of power to create peace, provide basic needs of his people, promote human rights and check the rise of secular powers or dictatorial governments. This was precisely what the prophets did in Israel from biblical perspectives, during their days, and by implication, it is what we are mandated to do today as we confront this turbulent society.

The church must wage war against sin and evil in the society. We shall begin with ourselves as the contact point through individual 'metanoia' (repentance or conversion). This should be done because social vices are the outcome of inordinate desire for power and wealth. It is against such background, that we can appreciate the sober approach and social significance of the Christian metanoia. According to Onwu (1991) "Metanoia means a turning back to God. Its is a transformation that affects the whole person, firstly and basically the centre of personal life, than human behaviour, thoughts, words and actions." Metanoia is a central theme for the church today. A church whose thoughts and desires are for justice, peace and progress, will do her utmost to fight whatever tends to debase the human dignity, and promote whatever highlights same and human rights.

The church should stand to fight for the hopes, sorrows and anguish of the people, and make the people's burden the chief concern of her activities. The church should stand up against all that would tend to degrade the human person or lead to injustice, violence, racialism, wars and evils of all sorts. The church should advance for this purpose through peace, justice, prayers, international cooperation, bold-transformation of *evil* societal - structures, etc. the church should play her positive role effectively so as to avoid the denial of one's rights, justice and equity in Nigeria. The church should therefore be a preaching, teaching, caring, sharing, praising, united and corporate community. The church should always prescribe free and fair treatment to all and shun all forms of "divide and rule". However the church that will do this unfortunately dwells in significant packets of ecclesiastical anomalies and malpractices in our nation. According to Iwe (1985):

Some ecclesiastical superiors lord it over the lower clergy, who dare not take a stand or state their position in sincerity before such overlords who expects them not only to be blindly obedient, but also subservient, servile and at every inch and moment, obsequiously pliable.

There is no doubt that this drastically affected the functionality of the church in this turbulent society.

Harnessing the Potentialities of the Laity for Action in the Church

The word 'Laity' or 'Lay' is derived from the Greek word, which means people. The theology of the church has often been problematic in reflecting on the lay movement. According to Verna (1985:67) "the primary location of the laity is in society at large. It is important that the clergy and lay officials of the church should understand and respect the truth that most laity are only secondarily located in the institutional church."

More women and men are sharing with priests in pastoral ministries, participating more actively in church worships, and giving voice to their own reflections on the word of God and church teaching. The laity are gradually seeing their primary responsibility as being Christian witness in their secular tasks - as farmers, business people, politicians, factory workers, students and teachers, military or senior citizens. According to Keelcy (.1989:41):

The laity are appreciating that they are the essence of the church, not its second - class citizens. As people of God, lay Christians are responsible for their own faith, for the good of the institutional church, and for the evangelization of the world.

Indeed the laity is waxing stronger and stronger with a lot of challenges. In the period of missionary guidance, characterized by clerical paternalism, laymen made their greatest contribution through their devoted service in missionary institutions as teachers, nurses, artisans, etc. In another development Sykes and Booty (1988:248) were of the view that:

Every degree of people in their vocation, call and office, hath appointed to them their duty and order, some are in high degree, some in low, some kings and princes, some inferiors and subjects, Priest and Laymen, masters and servants, fathers and children, husbands and wives, rich and poor, and everyone³⁴ have need of others... without which no house, no city, no commonwealth can continue and endure.

Indeed, the church of this time should carry out its mission through the ministry of all its members. They engage in vast variety of church work. What is expected of the church is to coordinate them into meaningful mission to the advantage of the church. There is no doubt that their intellectual endowment can be utilized, and also their financial endowment can also be utilized in the furtherance of the gospel in this turbulent society.

Recommendations

At this juncture I wish to make my humble recommendations. The sense of commitment to the welfare of the people of God, will always inspire a creative church to do her best to combat effectively the evil of her immediate society. Some of our deep-rooted social-ills should be fought against. We should be unwavering in our words and deeds. We should not " rob Peter to pay Paul." Moreso, we shall remain in any positive denomination and still make heaven. What is needed most is the change of heart and not church. We should strive seriously to know Jesus and the power of his resurrection (Philippians 3:10). We should always be ready to serve others as well as our society in secular duties.

Furthermore, we should be reliable in an unreliable world, hard-working in an indolent world, responsible and trustworthy in an irresponsible world, careful in a careless world, honest in a dishonest world, inventive and creative in a supine and greedy world, unselfish and restrained. These things, small in themselves, are the tiny grains of preservative saltiness and a ray of light to the world,

which the church can use to fight corruption. The clearer, stronger and more constant Christians become in an inconsistent world, the greater the influence they will exercise in this turbulent Nigerian society.

Summary/Conclusion

In this paper a conscientious attempt had been to X-ray the role of Christian Church in a turbulent society like Nigeria. There is no doubt that this is God's world, not satan's much of it presently lies under enemy occupation. The church as the manifest presence of God in the world cannot stand aloof when God's world is being manipulated, exploited and ruined by sinister forces. All over Nigeria, irrespective of levels of development circumstances of living for most of the people are worrisome and dehumanizing.

Indeed, people are called to build a new community from devastations, hostilities, divergent philosophies and the secularism of the present age. We must be loyal to our Lord and his words about the society in which we live. We should keep our light burning and retain our 'saltiness'. All in all, we need a church of mercy and compassion, a church with loving and caring commitment to the welfare of the people of God, a just and sensitive church to react to the commotion of the present society.

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