

The Early Church and Nigerian Christian Church in the Post Modern Era: An Evaluation

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Abstract

The church in the New Testament, the early church as it is called in Acts of the Apostles had so much positive dominant influence and impact in the lives of the people which reflected in their morals, interactions, behavior, and lifestyle. This influence, however, is either declining or is no longer seen or felt or has lost its focus in this era in Africa particularly Nigeria. This study sought to evaluate the state of the church in the post modern era to examine if the Nigerian Christian Church in the Post Modern Era has lost its influence or relevance. Qualitative and descriptive research methods were used in this work. The paper discovered that the Nigerian Christian Church in this Era has declined in her influence in the society. This decline has given rise to proliferation of churches, deviation from biblical truth, quest for money, power, popularity and politicking.

Keywords: Early Church, Africa, Christian, Post Modern.

Introduction

The early church was the church that existed during the time of the apostles as recorded in the Book of the Acts of Apostles which is the foundation of Church history. It describes the early Church in the New Testament and the significant impact the church made in its community (Acts 2). The church saw unity in love as the ultimate value; it was the absolute resolution of life that Christ Himself had revealed to men. The Church was restoration of the unity that had been broken and torn asunder by sin and this unity was demonstrated in the active love through which each Christian was conscious that they belonged to all the brethren, and conversely, that they all belonged to God (Acts 4:32). The early Church exhibited active mutual support among Christians a care which was both material and spiritual (Acts 2:44f.). According to Attwater (1947) Benz (1963) and Chadwick, (1967) the early church made significant impact in her role, mission and message and in the community of her existence that positively influenced people around them. But there seem to be a decline or deterioration in Christians in this post modern era in Africa particularly in Nigeria. It appears that the pendulum has swung too far in the opposite direction in Africa, who in her developing stages is muddling with many problems, socially, religiously, economically and politically. Among the pressing problems of Africa is the state of the church which look as if it has given rise to indiscipline and corruption. Scholars like Waapela (2006), Akiode in Ogunwale (2006), Apenda (2006), Ejizu (2008), Parsitan and Mwaura(2010), Haverdine (2013) Nkonge and Maina (2014), and Nkonge (2014) has criticized, compared, and evaluated the 21 century church as it has to do with her role, mission, message and impact in the society in which it exist. They concluded that the church in the post modern era seem to be derailing, or misunderstanding her mission and Nigerian postmodern church is not an exception.

This state of the Christian Church and her practices which appear to be far apart from her mission as stated in the Bible has led to this evaluation with the church in the New Testament times, her mission, role, and impact in her society. This paper therefore, sought to inquire if the church in this post modern era in Nigeria is still in line with her mission or declining in her relevance and impact.

Brief Concept of the Church in the Old Testament

God's intention of creating a people for Himself who in faith and obedience respond to Him and be a source of blessings for all people is the interest of the bible from Genesis to Revelation. When God called Abraham from the Land of Ur, and the cases of Isaac and Jacob, it was His plan to design such a people for Himself (Gen.17:1-8), also was the calling of Israel. When Israel as a nation persistently sought to be self-sufficient, wanting to be like others around them in all they could see, God changed his plan into the calling of a remnant through whom His purpose would be fulfilled (Isa. 37:31; Micah 2:12; 5:7; Zeph. 3:13). This divine intent to create out of the nation of Israel God's people is its fulfillment in the early Christian community known as the Church. Jenkins (1955) posits that the whole root of the church can historically be traced to the covenant which God made with Abraham and his children. This however can be seen as "calling out" or "setting aside". This term can be referred to a gathering of men called for military duty (Num. 22:4; Ezek. 16:40), but in Christian history, it is used of those who worship God (2 Chro. 30:13) also used to describe the assembling of Israel before God at Horeb (Deut 9:10; 10:4; 18:16). *Ekklesia* in Christian parlance in the New Testament denotes "congregation" or community of those called by God, out of the world to be His people. It was society of those who were free but always conscious that their freedom sprang from obedience to their Lord. Discussing the beginning of the Church, Nwaomah (2012) adds that the church really has its root in the Old Testament but it flourished in the New Testament times.

Brief Concept of the Church in the New Testament

The English word “church” is a derivative from the Greek word *kuriakos* “that which belongs to the Lord.” Though it generally renders the New Testament *ekklesia*, from *ek* (out, or from) and *klesis* (to call), which is an expression used among the Greeks of a body of citizens gathered to discuss the affairs of state (Moulton, 1978). The word can also be traced to have gotten a discrete Christian connotation with a strong evidence of the connection existing between the old and the New Testament. The LXX uses *ekklesia* almost 100 times as a translation of *quahal*, “a meeting” “an assembly”, “those called out”. This is confirmed in many cases for instance “*ekklesia* of God” (1 Cor. 1:2; 10:32; Gal. 1:13; 1 Thess. 2:14; 1 Tim.3:5) (Moulton, 1978). Furthermore the church in the New Testament is qualified as church or churches “of Christ” (Rom. 16:16; Gal.1:22) or church “of the Lord” (Acts 20:28). Often this qualification is implicit, God in Christ is the authority that has constituted the church, it belongs to him because he has called it into being, dwells within and rules over it and all things must be done according to his prescriptions. He created the church for particular mission, roles, and impact in the society.

The Mission of the New Testament Church

The church is the body of Christ but it has not been called to exist as an end in itself, but to fulfill God’s purpose of influencing the world, to do what He would do if He were still on earth. This explains why, from that perspective, the church does not merely have a mission, the church is mission. While the church may not be primarily defined in terms of its functions, these are nevertheless most important. Throughout the Bible God is God of sending, of mission. His characteristic approach to humans is by sending someone to speak to them for Him. “From the day that your fathers came out of the land of Egypt to this day, I have persistently sent all my servants the prophets to them, day after day,” He said to the people of Judah (Jer. 7: 25; cf. 26: 5; 29: 19; 35: 15; 44: 4). In the fullness of time He “sent forth his son” (Gal. 4: 4), again with a clear purpose. The Son, in turn, “sent out” the twelve, and later the seventy with a message regarding the Kingdom of God (Luke 9: 1, 2; 10: 1, 9). To his mandate Christ added the post-resurrection commission recorded in Mathew 28: 19, 20; Luke 24: 46 – 48.

Make Disciples of All Nations”

The final instruction Jesus gave to His disciples was to “go...and make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28: 19; cf. Acts. 1: 8). As Christ was sent into the world by the Father, so He sent His disciples (John 20: 21). Their primary task, as well as that of the church, has always been the sharing of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the ends of the world. The members of the church have been called out of the world to be sent back into the world with a mission and a message. The call to evangelism springs from an unequivocal command of the Lord of the church. To share messages that transforms and directs lives to live in harmony with the character of Christ.

Instruct the Believers

The edification of believers is another mission or function of the church apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastors (Eph. 4: 11) “for the equipment of the saints, for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (verses 12, 13).

Those brought to Christ were “to grow up in every way into Him who is the head, into Christ” (verse 15). In the early church the task of teaching (*didasko*) required that the truth and the duties of the gospel be more deliberately unfolded and applied. Teaching took place publicly in the Temple and in homes, among Jews and in the assembly of believers (Acts 4: 2, 18; 5: 21, 25, 28, 42; 18: 11; 20: 20). Its intent was to apply Christ’s will to the daily life of the community as a word of instruction, of encouragement, and of consolation, to “live in Him” (Col. 2: 6; 3: 16; 1 Tim. 6: 2; cf. 1 Cor. 14: 3; 26) on the basis of “the word God” (Acts 18: 11), “the Counsel of God” (Acts. 20: 26, 27), or “the word of Christ” (Col. 3: 16).

Edification may take different forms as it occurs on various levels. It could mean indoctrination of the members of the church in order to expound “the way of God more accurately” (Acts. 18: 26), teach believers, the apostles’ “ways in Christ” (1 Cor. 4: 16, 17), or help them stand against heresies (Eph. 4: 14, 15). The content of the preaching and of the more elaborate instruction were necessarily often the same (Acts. 5: 42; 15: 35; Col. 1: 28) and at times the preacher was also a teacher, especially in the case of the apostles (1 Tim. 2: 7; 2 Tim. 1: 11).

Care for the Needy and Suffering

While the early church gathered for instruction and fellowship, it also understood the responsibility of caring for the needy and suffering. Jesus was known for His ministry of healing, even raising the dead on occasion. He expected His disciples to follow in His steps (Matt. 10: 5 – 8; Luke. 10: 1 – 12, 17) and clearly stated that acts of love done in His name would on the last day distinguish true believers from those who made empty professions

of faith (Matt. 25: 31 - 46). Time and again the apostles, likewise, underlined the importance of practical Christianity (cf. James 1: 27; 2: 1 – 7; 1 John 3: 15 - 17). Believers are “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world” (Matt. 5: 13 - 16). By their influence and testimony they are called to support those causes that promote the social, economic, and educational welfare of the human family. The primary mission of the church is unquestionably of God’s plan of salvation. Yet its members are invited to learn from the Lord, who helped to meet the physical, spiritual and other material needs, showed concern and took action on behalf of the needy and suffering.

Glorify God

The mission of the church is to give glory to the One who has created it through redemption in Jesus Christ. The words of the apostle Paul, that God has chosen sons and daughters unto Himself through Christ “to the praise of his glorious grace” (Eph. 1: 6), suggest that the ultimate purpose of the church is the worship of God. So amazing is the display of God’s purpose in creating the church and bestowing on it all blessings in Christ that the apostle exalts in an outburst of praise: This manifestation of His life reflected in their character, dressing, speech and actions. “To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. (Eph. 3: 21). Glorifying God is no mere duplication of teaching or edification. Whereas the edification focuses on the believers and benefits them, glorifying God focuses on praising and exalting the Lord. Though it is also intended to benefit the worshipers (Heb. 10: 25), it centers its attention on who and what God is. Glorification of God finds its most intense expression in the book of Revelation, where the vision of God calls a chorus of praise addressed to the thrice-holy God with whom the Redeemer-Lamb is associated (Rev. 4: 8 – 11; 7: 11, 12; cf. 5: 9 – 14).

Glory is brought to God in the church through a thankful response to His grace: “He who brings thanksgiving as his sacrifice honors [or ‘glorifies’] me” (Ps. 50: 23). Peter perceived the church as “a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2: 5). This worship involves declaring “the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (verse 9). God is further glorified with the lives of believers “filled with the fruits of righteousness which come through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God” (Phil. 1: 10, 11).

African Christians in the Post Modern Era: The Nigerian Experience

The church as a community of believers should deal with the relationship of man with God and man’s rejoinder in his worship of God and in his actions. As a result, the ethical prepositions, precepts, teachings and indeed moral standards that should flow from the church should influence the daily conduct of each believer as it was in the New Testament Church of the apostles. The reverse however is the case, the church has lost track on focus and mission. As a result Ugwueye (2002) describes what is happening in the churches today that

Christians have decided to overlook the moral precepts of the Church to become increasingly corrupt and materialistic in the practice of their religion. Church is now business which borders on Commercialization of financial endeavors in which the popular slogan now is prosperity, not poverty in God’s own house.

This chapter addresses the state of the Church from the leaders of the congregation who apparently have failed in their clerical duties. Carson, France, Motyer & Wenham (1994) posits that a great deal of damage has been done by those whose inconsistent living has been noticed and criticized by the non-Christian world.

Ethical Misconduct among Nigerian Ministers

So much atrocity and cheating are being committed today using the church as a means of achieving them. Looking at the national dailies, we see them replete with stories and news of pastors and prophets engaging in financial fraud, sexual immorality, duping people and robbing their victims of money and household property worth of millions of naira (Oke, 2012). There are scores of one misconduct or the other about ministers of the gospel in the recent time, Pastor patronizing an herbalist who uses human parts for spiritual power, and faking miracles. Mbang, cited in Oke, (2012) lamented that the Church has turned to a den of robbers; marketing God has led to high level of corruption, immorality and other forms of indiscipline in the society today. Many are ready to sacrifice their integrity and conscience at the promise of material gains. Some will be willing to change or abandon their call to service if it will not yield expected material benefits. People go to the Church in order to trade with God. They must receive material returns for their faithfulness and their sacrifice in cash and kind. These cases of moral failures on the part of ministers in Nigeria litter the air space of the electronic and the print media The Punch Newspaper of July 26, 2012 where Ihuoma Chiedozie writes about Pastor Princewill, the General Overseer of the Mountain Movers Fire Ministries International, Nyanya, a satellite town located between Abuja and Nasarawa State who was taken to court for having had carnal knowledge of two 14-year old

female members of his Church, one of whom had also aborted for him after lying to the Doctor that he was her Father. The pastor and his co-accused, Ms Paulyn Ode, were arraigned on charges of conspiracy, criminal impersonation, criminal intimidation, and assault. He was not even too bothered with the charges but was rather fighting for his International Passport. This shows the level of depravity in the lives of some ministers in the Nigerian society.

Some ministers, apart from sexual misconducts; also tell lies, cheat, and move about without shame on a consistent basis, as long as they can still preach powerfully. The Sun Newspaper of 27th November 2012 where two ministers of God, Prophetesses, sold day-old baby for N.3m at Aba (Sampson, 2012). The news which was hoisted on the front page and on the website of the Newspaper actually had it that they had to lie to the mother of the baby that her child died from a feigned sickness, went to the extent of threatening the mother not to ask for the baby again and when the matter was reported to the Police they had to relocate their ministries before being caught. According to the report: Luck ran out on the two women when following a fresh complaint by Grace, the police in Aba, led by one Rotimi with other security agencies, arrested the two prophetesses who confessed to the crime. They were said to have admitted selling the baby to a lady in Port Harcourt, Rivers State with the help of one Ijeoma, for N300, 000.

3.2 Nominalism /Apathy

This is another issue facing the Nigerian church. *Apathy* is defined as, “lack of interest or concern” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). When it comes to issues of God, there are a growing number of individuals that have become apathetic. Pantheists are just disinterested in issues pertaining to God. This situation is more troublesome today as it exists in the church. It appears that many church-goers have become apathetic when it comes to doctrinal truth. Others had rather “go with the flow” or simply do not care to know the truths of Scripture. (Craig 2013) all they are interested in is to be called Christians and have no serious commitment to it.

New Age Doctrine

A growing influence upon the church is that of New Age doctrine. Story (1997) defines the New Age movement as,

the resurgence of ancient occultism practices mixed with Eastern pantheism (in particular, Hinduism) in a recipe tailored specifically to feed the spiritual hunger of Western secularized man. The New Age movement is secular humanism with a cosmic ingredient. It maintains the humanist motto that man is the measure of all things and the humanist goals of global peace, prosperity, and unity, but, to make humanism more Spiritually palatable, it sugars it with God.

It is painful to notice that the church no longer frowns at such laxities and do nothing to bring in certainty and discipline but compromise to any teaching that creeps into the church in the quest to retain membership. This has rather destroyed the church.

Syncretism

The issue of syncretism is the tendency to serve deities, observance, and interpretations of one people or region with those of another. Men do not hesitate to alter or modify their religious orientation by adopting elements of belief or expressions of piety originally quite foreign or distinct from their own. This is evident through the type of worship music, dancing, worship expressions which are not in line with the bible teachings. Babblings in the name of speaking in tongues which is far from biblical explanations of tongues. Ancient folk religion could continue to survive beneath the veneer of a more sophisticated type of devotion all these have brought the integrity of the message under question. (Ekpendu, 2014)

The above mentioned issues raised in this work make it clear that the state of the church in this post modern era Nigeria and that of the New Testament times are far and opposite each other hence the loss of influence and impact in the society where it exists.

Impact of the State of Post Modern Era Church to the Society

The state of the church in Nigeria obviously has implications which have caused the decline in influence and loss of focus. It has led progressive forces to undermine the biblical prop of good character, diligence and receptive uniqueness. It has resulted in many children missing out on the guidance and limits which they need in order to develop a sense of responsibility, efficiency and productivity. It has further caused decline in discipline which has distorted families, schools, government and society. It is apt to aver that decline in discipline is the most powerful influence in the general decline of order in Nigeria. Little wonder Ugwueye (2002) said that the decay in the church is impending what should be the church’s proper message and purpose. The church is no longer concerned with maintaining purity of lifestyle rather, it sees herself as a voluntary association of autonomous members with minimal moral accountability to God, much less to each other. This decline increasingly manifests

itself in the amount of violent crime, robbery, bribery, injustice, gross immorality, and turning of churches into business. Although their founders and leaders postulate spiritual reasons for the emergence and expeditious growth of these religious movements, one could be forced to believe that the pivotal reason of their emergence is basically economic. When religious adherents go to see men and women of God who are assumed to have developed power, and could predict the future, explain the present and uncover the past, they pay for the supposedly religious services rendered. Strikingly, the poor pays to be free from poverty. Church is now one of the easy means of achieving riches rather than a means of making people better citizens for a healthier society in line with the doctrine of the New Testament; this is a clear case of decline. As a result, Onwu (2005) asks if the church has any reasonable role to play in our day and age since more people now believe that the church exists as a labour organization. Certainly, Jesus must have seen this tendency in man and promptly warned: freely you have received; freely you give (Matthew 10:8).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The central argument of this paper is that the church in this post modern era have completely derailed from her focus and mission hence lost positive influence but has perpetrated moral crisis among Christians in Nigerian in particular and Africa in general. The church in itself from the New Testament time has God given vision which include making of disciples, instructing the believers, caring for the needy and the suffering and glorifying God. But the church today is focusing on the ministers enriching themselves and committing atrocities under the cover of the church. Apathy, nominalism, new age doctrine are sweeping and eating up the church as a cankerworm every moment due to lack of biblical teaching. Syncretism is gaining ground due to compromise of the church and her leaders.

In the New Testament church, such were not the focus of the church and in instances where it raised its ugly head, the church dealt decisively with it. The danger in all these is that the present state of the church is distorting and disguising the kernel of Christianity. There is the need for Churches in Nigeria and Africa to sift the chaff from the kernel and to inculcate the kernel of Christianity in the society where they are domiciled. This will help Nigerians to recover from moral disillusionment. Hence, there is the need for Nigerian Christian churches to look at the kernel of Christianity and try to see how it can fit into the Nigerian meaning and experience. Authentic Christian values need to be acculturated into Churches and Christians. These values include:

1. Biblical teachings from the scriptures and scriptures alone without adulteration and compromise. (*Sola Scriptura*).
2. The focus of disciple making through fellowship, prayers and fasting should be revived.
3. There is the need to promote discipline in the church which will help build character and lifestyle of ministers and Christians to influence others.
4. Special care should be taken to minister to the needy to avoid making them easy prey for the enemy.
5. Immoral ministers should be removed from ministry as it bring reproach to the name of God.

There is the need to divest Churches and Christianity in Nigeria and Africa in general of all elements of nominalism, compromise, syncretism and wrong behaviors of ministers which it manifests in her state in this Century. As Nwaigbo (2008) writes: "The church in contemporary Africa stands as a sign of hope to the humanity of Africa and helps Africa to see the Christian faith, belief, symbols, and worship.

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