

ENHANCING THE CHURCH'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE QUEST FOR FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN RIGHTS

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Abstract

Comments from the international world state that despite the return of democracy for the past five years, the human rights record of Nigeria is still very poor. One cannot be unbothered about this development, more so, when the nation's President happens to be a Christian. It is against this background that one is forced to examine the role of the Nigerian church in the quest for fundamental human rights in the nation. The church's response in this area has been very minimal and consequently, the effect is not felt. One cannot but commend the efforts of the Catholic church and her various involvements through lectures and active participation. But for the Nigerian church to become more effective in promoting human rights in Nigeria, there has to be a concerted effort to remove all theological barriers hindering other Christian denominations from participating in the quest for human rights. This paper aims at awakening the conscience of the church by going down evangelical history to see what the heroes of the Christian faith have done in the area of human rights and also to examine the theological fallacies that have kept the church inactive to date with the aim of making the church leaders to realize that human rights quest is legitimate for the church. In conclusion, some practical suggestions are made in a bid to stir the church into action.

Introduction

It is getting more and more appalling that despite the fact that Nigeria has gone through the first four years of democratic rule in the Fourth Republic, we are still gasping under the bondage of abuse of human rights. One example is the arrest and the refusal of the Judiciary to grant bail to the arrested labour leaders on the issue of attendant hike in fuel price as a result of the deregulation programme of the Government. What is more appalling is that the church that is expected to be the voice of the voiceless has her mouth stifled and her voice cannot be heard. It is as a result of our belief that the church ought to be engaged in the quest for fundamental human rights that led to the writing of this paper. One of the four dimensions of church growth is incarnation growth. Incarnation growth is also divisible into two:

- a. The participation of the church in the afflictions of humanity, and
- b. The exhibition of the character of Jesus in the culture of the people where the church is planted.

The participation of the church in the afflictions of humanity is that section which has to do with fundamental human rights. The church has to participate in the afflictions of the common people by getting immersed in the fight for justice. It is unfortunate however that certain theological trends in the church have led to the low level of involvement of the church in the fight for fundamental human rights. One of the most prominent of this, is the belief that the present evil world is beyond redemption and that it will continue to deteriorate until Christ comes. It is also believed that the church, on the other hand is holy and heaven bound. The resultant effect is the conclusion that the church that is holy should be divorced from the evil world (Stott, 1984:8). This paper then is dedicated to the examination of historical precedents and theological perspectives that should stimulate the church to get involved in the quest for fundamental human rights.

The term human rights came into use after the World War II to replace the less favorable terms like natural rights which is deemed as very ambiguous. Defining human rights is however not a simple task. The following facts are however to be noticed:

- i. It represents individual and group demands for the shaping and sharing of power, wealth, enlightenment and other cherished values in community process. The bottom rock here-is the limitation of State Power,
- ii. Human rights is universal in character and in some sense equally possessed by all human beings everywhere including even the unborn. It extends in theory to every person on earth without discriminations and is irrelevant to merit.
- iii. Article 2.21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on December 10, 1948 includes the following:

Freedom from racial and equivalent forms of discrimination, the right to life, liberty and the security of the person,

freedom from slavery and involuntary servitude, freedom from torture and from cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; freedom from arbitrary arrest, detention, or exile, the right to fair and public trial, freedom from interference in privacy and correspondence, freedom of movement and residence, the right to asylum from persecution, freedom of thought; conscience and religion, freedom of opinion and expression, freedom of peaceful assembly and association, and the right to participate in government directly or through free elections. Also included is the right to own property and the right not to be deprived of one's property arbitrarily. It also includes equality before the law, right to equal pay for equal work, right to form and join trade unions, right to rest and leisure, right to an adequate standard of living and right to education (UN Commission on Human Rights, Britannica CD).

The Historical Appeal

Though the Bible is replete with several examples of the involvement of God's people in the quest for fundamental human rights, one needs not travel that far to draw an historical appeal, for very close to us-in the 19th Century, one could lay hands on several examples of the church's involvement in the quest for fundamental human rights.

The church's impact in the quest for human rights was so felt by the general populace that it drew comments from various quarters. Bready, one of those who commented on the change in Britain, has this to say;

Whence, then, this pronounced humanity? - this passion for social justice, and sensitivity to human wrongs? There is but one answer commensurate with stubborn historical truth. It derived from a new social conscience. And if that social conscience, admittedly, was the offspring of more than one progenitor,, it nonetheless was mothered and nurtured by the Evangelical Revival of vital, practical Christianity - a revival which illuminated-the central postulates of the New Testament ethics, which made real the • Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Men, which pointed the priority of personality over property, and which directed heart, soul and mind toward the establishment of the Kingdom of Righteousness .on earth (Bready, 1938:405).

It is from this period that some events would be drawn as part of the historical appeal.

1. The Clapham Sect

This sect was a band of well-to-do Anglican evangelicals who lived in the village of Clapham, three miles south west of Westminster and worshipped at the local parish church (Hanks, 1988:219). Those who were in the sect were members of the British Parliament and they were mocked by the press and the other parliamentarians. In fact they were called 'the Saints'. It is important, to note that this group used to meet for prayer and Bible Study at a private house in Clapham.

It was this sect that presented the bill to abolish the slave trade in the Parliament in 1791. the Clapham Sect presented the bill twelve times before the House of Commons passed the bill in 1807 by 283 votes to 16. It was this sect that suggested that a colony (now called Sierra Leone) be set up so that- the .estimated 14,000 slaves that were to be freed in England could be re-settled. Describing the sect, Howse (1953:26) says:

They planned and labored like a committee that never was dissolved. At the Clapham mansions they congregated by common impulse in what they chose to call their 'Cabinet Councils' where they discussed the wrongs and injustices which were a reproach to their country, and battles which would need to be fought to establish righteousness.

In compiling William Wilberforce's .biography. Howse (1953:27) comments that, 'it was, indeed,, a unique phenomenon - this brotherhood of Christian politicians. There has never been anything like it in British public life".

2. Anthony Ashley Cooper

Cooper was elected to the British Parliament in 1826. He dedicated his life to the plight of lunatics, child workers in the factories and mills, 'climbing boys' or chimney sweeps, women and children in the mines, and the children of the slums, more than 30,000 of whom in London were without a home, and more than a million of whom in the whole country were without schooling (Stott, 1984:4). Battiscombe (1974:334) says of him that "no man has in fact ever done more to lessen the extent of human misery, or to add to the sum total of human happiness".

3. Charles G. Finney

This great evangelist who turned America upside down in the 19th Century was very well convinced of the role of the church in building a virile society. In one of his write ups, Finney writes that "the church of Christ was originally organized to be a body of reformers. The very profession of Christianity implies the profession and virtually an oath to do all that can -be done for the universal reformation of the world" (Dayton, 1976:24). Many of those who worked to

build up human rights in the United States were mostly converts of Finney. These include, Theodore Weld who championed the anti-slavery struggle in America.

4. Janani Lumim

Having drawn examples from the Western world, it is important to come to the African continent because the continent is not devoid of heroes of faith in the church's struggle for fundamental human rights. Janani Luwum, one time archbishop of Uganda was one. When Uganda was being ruled by Idi Amin, Luwum was at the fore-front of protests against Amin's inhuman policies. When Amin expelled 55,000 Asians who held British passports and 58 missionaries coupled with the killing of hundreds of dissenting military officers in 1972, Luwum led the delegates of Bishops that protested to Amin. He also signed a letter of protest from the World Council of Churches.

Though he became a marked man and was eventually murdered by Idi Amin, he made an impact on history as one who led the Church of Uganda to take a firm stand in the quest for fundamental human rights. After Janani Luwum's death, the Ugandan church leaders made the following statement: "We confess that we have too often kept quiet when we should have identified ourselves with the suffering and persecuted peoples of the Continent of Africa and Uganda in particular. It only remains for good men to do nothing for evil to flourish" (Hanks, 1988:337). Though this statement came a little too late, it should serve as a deterrent to others that the church cannot afford to fold her hands while the rights of the common man is being trampled upon.

One cannot but conclude in the words of Bakole Wa Illunga, the Archbishop of Kananga, Zaire, that a true servant of YAHWEH is he who has experienced the liberation of God and has become an instrument in the hands of God for the liberation of other men (Illunga, 1984:69).

The Theological Appeal

At this point, we are going to look into the theological of the church and make appeal to some salient facts which the church cannot afford to close her eyes to if indeed she wants to remain the church of the Living God, *1. The Appeal From the Fatherhood of God*

The Lord of the universe that we claim to be our father and who indeed commands His children to be like him (God gave this commandment in Leviticus 11:44 and it was later renewed by Jesus in the New Testament when He said 'Be holy as your Father in heaven is holy'), is the God of justice as well as justification. The first two chapters of the book of Prophet Amos leaves us in no doubt about God's concern for justice. In these records of the denunciation of the nations by God, it is clear that God is concerned about justice not only among His people but also in the whole universe. Examining relevant verses will reveal this:

Damascus was condemned "because she threshed Gilead with sledges having iron teeth" (Amos 1:3).

Gaza was condemned "because she took captive whole communities and sold them to Edom" (Amos 1:6).

Tyre was condemned because she discarded a treaty of brotherhood (Amos 1:9). Ammon on her part "ripped open the pregnant women of Gilead in order to extend his borders" (Amos 1:13).

God's concern for justice among His own people becomes graphic as the prophet hands down the oracle on Israel:

They sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample upon the heads of the poor...

and deny justice to the oppressed" (Amos 2:6-7).

Later in chapter five, the prophet made them realize that God is not interested in their worship as long as they oppress the people but that they should "let justice roll on like a river and righteousness like a never-failing stream" (Amos 5:24).

In the face of all these evidences on God's concern for the welfare of the people He has created (that is, both the saved and the unsaved with Israel representing (he saved and the other nations representing the unsaved), it is ironical if the church will keep mute in the face of oppression in their country because silence means consent. This point will be summarized in the words of Gladwin (1979:125):

It is because this is God's world, and he cared for it to the point of incarnation and crucifixion, that we are inevitably committed to work for God's justice in the face of oppression, for God's truth in the face of lies and deceits, for service in the face of the abuse of power, for love in the face of selfishness, for cooperation in the face of destructive antagonism, and for reconciliation in the face of division and hostility.

2. A Holistic View of Man

Even from the biblical perspective, the nature and the various dimensions of man cannot be denied. The book of Genesis makes it plain that man is body and soul within a community. A good understanding of the process of creation is necessary here. Going by the first account, God first made the physical body of man and later breath into it His Spirit

(which made man to become a body-soul). The community dimension comes out when God said it is not good for man to live alone. It has to be understood that this statement came after the creation of all other things, thus technically then, man had not been alone for the animals and the rest were there. The fact is however that man needs someone like him for a meaningful existence. In the face of this truth, the church cannot but minister to the three dimensions of man if she wants her ministration to be meaningful. This is why Stott (1984:18-19) also concludes that:

For these human but godlike creatures are not just souls (that we should be concerned exclusively for their eternal salvation), nor just bodies (that we should care only for their food, clothing, shelter and health), nor just social beings (that we become entirely preoccupied with their community problems). They are all three. A human being might be defined from a biblical perspective as 'a body-soul-in-community'. For that is how God made us. So if we truly love our neighbors, and because of their worth

desire to serve them, we shall be concerned for their total welfare, the well being of their soul, body and community. And our concern will lead us to practical programs of evangelism, relief and development. We shall not just prattle and plan and pray....

A holistic view of man will make us to know that to minister to the whole man, ensuring his fundamental human rights is a must.

3. A Holistic Understanding of Christ

The person of Christ has been thoroughly misunderstood throughout history. In the church, there had always been divisions and it is also Christ's person that marks the sharpest doctrinal disagreement between Christians and Muslims. Though, here, one is not concerned about Christology, we need to examine the theological significance and the practical implications of the doctrine of incarnation.

John 1:1-14 is a very good passage that teaches the doctrine of incarnation. In John 1:1, it is stated expressly that the Word is God. In 1:14, it is also stated that the Word became flesh. Structurally, verses 2-13 can be regarded as a parenthetical passage because their omission does not obstruct the smooth reading of verses 1 and 14. Considering the usage of the word OK; (meaning 'as, like, after, approximately) in verse 14, one cannot but assert that the Johannine position is that the One we refer to as the Son of God is God Himself! If this is true, we assert that in incarnation, God became man.

What then is the theological significance of this doctrine? This lies not on our salvation but in the fact that: God did not stay in the safe immunity of His heaven. He emptied Himself of His glory and humbled Himself to serve.... He entered into our pain, our alienation, and our temptations. He not only proclaimed the good news of the Kingdom of God, but demonstrated its arrival by healing the sick, feeding the hungry, forgiving the sinful, befriending the drop-outs and raising the dead (Stott, 1984:21).

What then is the practical implication of this doctrine of incarnation? In sending the church out, Jesus said: "as the Father has sent me, I also send you" (John 20:21). This means that the church has to pattern her work on Christ's. Consequently, the church is expected to enter into people's "though world, and the world of their tragedy and lustiness, in order to share Christ with them where they are" (Stott, 1984). This has been described today as incarnational mission or enculturation. As Jesus was moved to action by compassion at the sight of needy people (bereaved¹, hungry, sick, harassed, helpless and ostracized) so His people are to be moved today with compassion to action.

4. A Holistic Understanding of the Church

Our view of the church is another area that needs to be cleared. The church has so much overemphasized the fact that the Christian is a citizen of two kingdoms today to the detriment of the maturational growth of the church. A lot of emphasis has been placed on the holiness of the church. As a result of this undue emphasis, it is often felt that in order not to corrupt the holiness of the church, the church must withdraw from the world as seen mostly in the church's position of nonconformity. The church however, has to come to terms with the fact that though the church is an assembly of holy people which, called out of the world, she is not immediately taken to heaven, but retained in that world so that she can engage in the process of transformation and reconstruction of the corrupt world. In Matthew 5:13-16, Jesus used two metaphors to describe the church in relationship to this concept.

a. The Church as the Light of the World

As the light of this world, the Lord expects the church to illuminate this world of darkness so that in the church's lifestyle, the model of the Lord would be seen. These words could also be pointing to the radical difference that is supposed to exist between the church (God's own chosen and redeemed people) and the world (the corrupted generation).

when they do, it would be the church's God given duty to stand by them and support them not only prayerfully (which is often the veil to cover the church's indifference) but actively. One has to remember that if the system is dirty; leaving the system to the dirty ones to continue controlling the system gives no one the moral right or justification to complain about the state of the nation.

4. Protecting the Believers Who Win Elections

One thing that the church has been guilty of is the indifference to the situation of the Christians who happen to win elections. Instead of rallying around them, counseling them and insulating them from the temptations that will definitely come their way, the church often leaves them to go all alone. What else does one then expect? Such Christians will crash-land in faith and join the bandwagon of corrupt politicians. There is the need for men of God who will continue to minister to such people not because of what they will derive from such position but because they want to be the watchman of their nation.

Conclusion

Today, we live in a country where injustice has become the order of the day, violation of fundamental human rights, political, ethnic and socio-economic slavery along with corruption seems to have been legitimized. A nation in which the plight and the view of the masses do no longer matter to the leadership. A nation where the Federal Government no longer has any integrity because she violates the agreement she signed with the various interest groups at will because she has the instrument of power to suppress and oppress.

If the church refuses to take her stand with the oppressed and take up the fight for fundamental human rights, the witness of the church will soon become irrelevant. A lot of people will interpret the church's non-involvement as a tacit support of the status quo and will consequently make the church to lose face. There is the need to take a cue from the American church. Commenting on the state of the Church in the United States, Wilson-Hartgrove (2002) states:

Since the decline of Moral Majority, Christianity has been left without a visible face in American politics. This is not entirely lamentable. That Christianity lost face at the end of the 20¹ century was perhaps just as much a judgment as it was an attack upon the church. No doubt, "secular humanism" presented a challenge. But the church's failure to meet that challenge cannot be entirely attributed to the 'enemy'. The American church has lost face in the public square in pan, some have contended because it has lost a sense of who it is (Italics mine).

Hartgrove's opinion here is that the American church lost its face because it became insensitive to the socio-political climate of the American society. So if the church in Nigeria is not to lose her face, there is the need for a re-awakening in the area of struggling for fundamental human rights and identifying with the oppressed.

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