

MISSIONARIES GO HOME: THE INTEGRITY OF MISSION IN AFRICA

By

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Introduction

John Gatu, a Presbyterian minister, in Lusaka, vividly expressed the moratorium call. He stated, “we cannot build the church in Africa on alms given by oversea churches, nor are we serving the cause of the kingdom by turning all bishops...into beggars...For Africa has money and personnel...Let mission be the mission of God in the world, not of the West to the Third world.”¹

The purpose of this paper is to examine critically the call to missionaries to go home and attempt to answer the vital questions why were the missionaries asked to go home? Is Christian mission relevant in this millennium? What is the nature and primary task of the church in the modern world? Is this call to Christian missionaries to go home the expression of some African Christians and nationalists who spoke the voice of few minorities?

Brief Outline of Missionary Activities in Africa

The coming of Christianity to Africa dates back to the first century of our era with a continuous history in Egypt and Ethiopia. Egypt after leading the world in civilization for thousands of years declined under the influence of Greek culture, Judaism, Christianity and finally Islam. Even her language changed to Arabic. Christianity first spread among the scattered Jews in Egypt. Jesus as a child was taken to Egypt for safety and was first worshipped in Africa by the Wise

¹M.E. Uka, *Missionaries Go Home?* (New York: Peter Lang, 1987), 191.

men. Simon of Cyrene who carried the cross was from Libya. Apollos was an Alexandrian race (Acts 18:24).

In about 500 CE the 'Nine Roman Saints', who were Byzantine Saints, established monasteries and translated the New Testament into Be'ez language. In 1940 Portuguese missionaries arrived Ethiopia looking for Presbyter, John. Jesuit missionaries followed this. They converted Emperor Suserryo to Christianity that later became the state religion.²

The promised tolerance by the muslim in North Africa faded away. Evangelization was forbidden and Islam in North Africa cut off Christian mission gradually for about 800 years until the 15th century. The first Christian missionary activities in Zaire and Angola were in 1490 when the King of the largest African kingdom, Manikongo was converted to Christianity. Christianity flourished and churches were built until Portuguese government changed their policy and slavery began. It finally led to war in 1660 and missionary activities stopped. Similarly in about 1596 Christian missionary work slowly disappeared in Angola and missionaries crossed to Zambezi and worked in Rhodesia.

George Schmidt, a Moravian missionary did some pioneering work among the Hottentots. Vander Kemp, John Philip, Robert Moffat are outstanding missionaries who did tremendous work in South Africa.³ The French Protestants did some tremendous work in Sotho in Lesotho. In 1853 J.W Colenso was the first Anglican bishop in the Zululand. Eventually, indigenous churches were established in Southern Africa and West Africa as a result of dissatisfaction of the missionary attitude to African culture and religion. Today there were about 500 of them in West Africa, 500 in central, 300 in East, and 3000 in South Africa.⁴

A missionary activity in West Africa was as early as 1470 in Ghana, 1472 in Nigeria (Benin City). Missionary visited Benin Kingdom until it finally

² David Tuesday Adamo, "The Church in Africa and African Traditional Belief and Practices," Rel D Dissertation, Indiana Christian University, Indianapolis, 1983, 47.

³ Ibid, 48.

⁴ Ibid, 54.

disappeared. In the 16th century, missionary work reached Sierra Leone where chaplains ministered to only traders with very little contact with the Africans. In 1795 some Baptist missionaries reached Sierra Leone while in 1811 Methodist missionaries arrived there. Presbyterian missions also worked in Calabar while Jamaican Baptists also started work in Fernando Po Island and Cameroon. The Roman Catholic mission work was slow in West Africa after unsuccessful attempts in Senegal, Liberia and Sierra Leone.

Edward Blyden, a born Dutch West Indies Presbyterian, first inspired the formation of African Indigenous Churches in West Africa. He vehemently rejected the claim of some anthropologists that blacks are inferior to whites. He maintained that the evangelization of Africa would never be successful until the imposed form of evangelization is taken from foreign hands. The first noticeable independence was the formation of United Native African Church in Lagos, Nigeria, in 1891. Later other African Indigenous Churches followed as a result of dissatisfaction with the dictatorial missionaries, foreign formalism, and the anti-African customs and traditions. These churches include The Church of the Twelve Apostle, The Army of the Cross of Christ Church in Ghana, The Aladura Church, and The Cherubim and Seraphim church in Nigeria.

The church by its nature is unavoidably missionary. In the New Testament, Christ is the manifestation of God's salvation. The church founded by Christ mediates his salvation. She is the symbol of Christ's saving presence on earth. God's eternal plan is carried out through the church. She is entrusted with the good-news of the kingdom, which must be proclaimed. The encounter between the Africans and the missionaries had a far reaching effect. The civilizing influence of the mission houses produced African revolutionary mentality. African elites became critical of the existing patterns of relationship with the West. The relationship was regarded as faulty, inadequate, and exploitative. This captive condition brought about the moratorium call.

The Reasons for the Moratorium Call

The cry was made because Africans suspected that the missionaries have become instrument of imperialism in the hands of the European government and multinational corporations. The missionaries in many places preceded the colonial administrators and traders. “The mere presence of the missionaries in an area was the basis of claim”⁵ to a colony and protectorate. The missionaries came with Western Christianity that claims to foster biblical ideal of freedom, equality and justice. This ideal derives from the gospel of the kingdom, the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, the promise of human progress and the rights of man. This gave Africans an utopian orientation.

Africans were disappointed because of the missionary apparent tension between homiletics and action. The missionaries were seen to have played double roles in the socio-political, economic life of Africa. This contradicts the very tenets of the gospel, which they proclaim. The despair gave rise to a state of confusion and protest, which led to the popular clamour for missionaries to go home. G.G. Brown, an anthropologist, noted that a missionary is a member of his society characterized by the culture and thinking of his society...⁶

The missionaries deviated from the ideal gospel message as they combined Christianity with Western culture. They, therefore, produced a distorted view of the original message of the gospel. The motive of love and salvation for others, which inspired them to action, was not free from imperialistic interest. This made E.M. Uka to argue that European “ideological use of religion and the humanitarian sentiments that flow from it was a cover up for national economic self-interest.”⁷

⁵ Uka, 27.

⁶ G.G. Brown, “Missionaries and Cultural Diffusion,” *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 3 No 2, (Philadelphia, Nov. 1964), 214.

⁷ Uka, 101.

The missionaries probably came for the interest they have to preach the gospel. But, this interest was hijacked in a subtle way by European traders and the governments. The psychological influence of the mentors of the missionaries made the Western Christian agents to behave the way they did. They were serving the socio-economic interest of those who sent them. This is because he who plays the piper dictates the tone. The missionaries were given financial, military and other material assistance to further their course. Hence local resistance to the missionaries were often crushed by the imperial army.

Africans wanted the missionaries to go home because of their assumption of the superiority of European culture imposed on them. Much work has been done in this area. The pioneer scholars who examined the claims of European missionaries and anthropologists are E.B. Idowu, J. Mbiti, J.N.K. Mugambi, and Parrinder. More recent scholars are J. Ukpong, S.O. Abogunrin, D.T. Adamo⁸. These authors showed that missionaries were convinced of the superiority of their culture and strive to impose such idea on the world. Robert Glover's picture of Africans is one of the best illustrations of colonial literature. He wrote:

The heathen are spirituality lost, wicked, willful sinners, without Christ, having no hope and without God in the world. Their moral conditions are reeking with filthy and degrading habits... They are marked by abject poverty, wretched homes and unremitting.⁹

E.B. Idowu argued that the missionary assumption was based on ignorance, prejudice, and preconceived notions. He regarded the colonial writer as “stay at

⁸ E.B. Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*, (London: SCM Press, 1973), 1-2. J. Mbiti, *African Traditional Religion and Philosophy*, (Nairobi: SCM Press, 1973), 10f. G. Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion*, (London: J.P. Clark 1960), 54; J. Ukpong, “Inculturation Hermeneutics,” *Semeia*, (Atlanta, 1996), 18. S.O. Abogunrin, “Biblical Interpretation in Africa: The Task Ahead,” *African Journal of Biblical Studies* Vol. 1, No 1, (Ibadan 1986), 1-3, D.T. Adamo, *Explorations in African Biblical Studies*, (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001). 6f.

⁹R. Glovers, *The Progress of World Wide Mission*, ed. H. Kane, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960),4.

home researchers.”¹⁰ They were hostile to native culture and intolerant of African traditional religion. It was a case of arrogant disrespect or disdain. African Traditional Religion was branded heathen or pagan. In fact, there was nothing valuable in African religions and culture. Africans were given new names in baptism and confirmation. Shrines were destroyed. African religious heritages and medicines were abandoned to become a Christian. African Christian converts were, thus, given an utopian orientation. The issue of missionaries has surfaced again in this critical period of world history where cultural interdependence is almost leading to cultural convergence. While this is taking place, Africans scholars are critical of apparent loss of cultural and institutional heritages in the camouflage of globalization. It is an unacceptable social price to pay in the name of cultural convergence.

The missionaries were also told to go because they assumed that they were superior and nearer to God than the Africans. This assumption was challenged by African scholars, theologians and pioneers of national liberation struggles. The brake-through in science and technology gave the colonial agents this pride of place. They claim to be the agents of civilization, socialization, and salvation in Africa. For this reason, they claim to possess “the power to determine the political and economic destiny of Africa”. While Christian life and European life were seen as the same, they believed that there was a radical, difference between Christian life and African life. Western thinking was to maintain, protect and defend the status-quo.

The moratorium call has again been interpreted that the missionaries were aiding and abating European oppression of and perpetuation of injustice in Africa. The missionaries and the church in Europe were silent over major world issues of oppression up till date. The vital issues of concerns are exploitation and subjugation of Africa, formerly by illegitimate trade on human beings later by IMF and World Bank loans, ideological orientation of Africa for selfish economic

¹⁰E.B. Idowu.

interest: such as globalization, free market policy and deregulation. These concepts and approaches are designed to exploit and enslave Africa and Africans. Ideology is used here as a “form of world-view which inspires a programme of action.”¹¹ Christianity was, therefore, seen by Africans as a type of an institution meant to sustain Western socio-economic and political policies.

Missio Dei and Diakonia Cosmou are important subjects in mission discussion. The first phrase simply means the mission of God and the second phrase is the servant of the world. This notion refers to the argument that says only God can save. He is the true missionary who brings salvation. The salvation of humankind is not the work of the church but the work of Christ wrought in heart of the people through the conviction of the Holy Spirit. The function of the church is limited to the service of mankind and the world creating a new humanity in cordial relationship.¹¹ For this reason, the work of mission is not the most essential. In this respect, it is not the orthodoxy of the message preached, but the practice of Christianity which has the priority.

Other reasons have been given for the call. The call for missionaries to go home is regarded by some scholars as a rejection of or a retreat from mission. It has also been interpreted as an act of ingratitude by Africans who for a century have enjoyed the free services of the missionaries. Others consider it to be a sign of the retreat of Christianity.

The missionaries were also high-handed in dealing with the Africans. There was racial discrimination in the appointment of bishops. The ordination of ministers were done in favour of the British. The conditions of service made by the missionaries for African clergies were poor and offensive to many Africans. A case study here is the treatment, which Western missionaries gave to Bishop Ajayi Crowther in Nigeria.

Crowther was the first African bishop. The white missionaries under him were not loyal. They were disobedient and racial. In 1889, Rev. Henry Townsend,

¹¹ J.Enuwosa, “African Christian Theology,” *Castalia*, vol.1, no 1 (Jan. 1996), 46.

white missionaries under Crowther, incited the CMS youth from Cambridge to write a damaging report on the black bishop. They did and the CMS authority stripped Crowther of all power. He died in 1891. After the death of Crowther, James Johnson, his African companion formed the Niger Delta Pastorate Church in April 1892. The Pastorate was independent of the CMS, but under the Anglican Communion. Johnson thought he could get Lambeth to create a diocese where an African bishop would be in full authority and control.

One of the most significant results of the 19th century missionary movement was the emergence and stabilization of new religious institutions. The mission is an institution because it developed a new form of “a structured, co-ordinated collectivity.”¹² It becomes a social organization. As the missionary endures, it becomes more cohesive. A set of norms which exerts constant pressure on members were developed. This gave the missionary movement a sense of continuity and a direction consistent with its values. The mission leans towards self-preservation and bureaucracy sets in with much emphasis on effectiveness and efficiency of administration. The missionary enterprises was a bureaucratic organization which “was not only shaped by the dynamic call of the gospel, but also by the bureaucratic imperatives”¹³

In a bureaucracy, relationships are not between persons, but between offices,¹⁴ it is impersonal and hierarchical. For the missionaries, the central authority resides with the Board of each mission agency. The self-interest of the church or mission as an institution must affect its theological perspectives. The Church or mission is the bearer of the gospel. Under this framework and bureaucratic procedures, the gospel, character, and purposes of the missionaries will be conditioned by the strategies, doctrines, and planning of the institution.

¹² Uka, 14.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid, 106..

E.M. Uka discussing R. Niebuhr's *Social Sources of Denominationalism*, pointed out the dangers of confining the gospel within the limits of a bureaucratic organization. He argued that the institution is static where as the gospel is dynamic. Bureaucratic institutions reflect the peculiar interests, prejudices and convictions of the leaders of the organizations. The tendency is for the institutions to identify the gospel with the practices and doctrines of the organization. Instead of promoting the gospel, they begin to promote their own types of work. Richard Niebuhr concluded that "when the church or mission society becomes institutionalization, it has the tendency to make itself its own end, to be promoted, defended as though its preservation is its ultimate goal."¹⁵

The shift from dynamic evangelism to bureaucratic institution struggling for survival, relevance, and material prosperity, constitutes a compromise and a contradiction of its existence. Nevertheless, institutionalization is a natural characteristics of any human group. Since the members of the church are truly human, a minimum of human form of organizational structures is inevitable. The church was never an amorphous anarchic group. Jesus chose and formed a group around himself and differentiated between grades of disciples. Since the inception of the church, there has been a recognizable leadership structure. That there may have been exaggerations and at times gross abuses in the exercise of ecclesiastical authority proves no more than that the church is human.

3. The Relevance of Mission

(a) Scriptural Basis of Mission

Mission is an indispensable aspect of the church. The church exists for the sake of mission. The incarnation of the Son of God is a mission. John clearly stated "the word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 3:16). In another place, he said for God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten Son "(John 3:18). Jesus left his heavenly throne for the world to accomplish his saving task. This is a

¹⁵ Ibid, 109; R. Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, Hamden Conn: The Shoe String Press, 1954), 160

mission. The New Testament considers the proclamation of the gospel as the duty of the church. (1 Peter 2:9) and evangelism as part of his missionary task. For experimental purpose, Jesus sent out his disciples for mission in the gospel of Mark and Luke (Mk, Lk). Infact a better title for the book of Acts of the Apostles would have been “missions of the early church”. This is because the whole Acts is devoted to apostolic mission: the missions of Peter and Paul.

The church is founded by Christ on the apostles. The word, *apostolos*, shows the degree of value, which the evangelist attached to mission. The meaning of apostles for the evangelists is “being sent out.” The church, thus, is sent out to carry out God’s mission. Hence, the church is essentially missionary.

Thus, the New Testament as a whole offers a direct foundation for the theology of mission. Many texts of the New Testament may be used to support the argument for mission. The nucleus of the church’s mandate, the message of Jesus, cannot be made the object of church’s negotiation for any reason. It is non-negotiable because it must be proclaimed. The moratorium call is a betrayal of the missionary mandate of Christ to proclaim the gospel to all nations (Matt. 28:19). Nothing can substitute for or replace mission.

The Christian kerygma (preaching) is a solemn public announcement of the saving event in Jesus Christ. It is associated with the term *euaggelion* (evangelism). *Euaggelion* is the proclamation of the good-news with emphasis on conversion, and prosleytization. These are Greek terms, which show the solemnity of the announcement and the faithful passing on of the doctrine received. Post Barthian school of thought rejects the moratorium call. Larry begins his argument from the idea of witness. To Larry “witnessing,” means to preach with authority invested with full power. The biblical concept of conversion carries with it the decision to change one’s life and giving up ones religion.”¹⁶

¹⁶J, Larry, *The Church and Other Faith*, (Accra: Kofiura Press, 1998), 130

This view of Larry is supported by the teachings of the fathers of the church known as “*epistrophes*.”¹⁷ The word is used as a turning of the soul to God and despising the world and other religions. The theory shows the state of the mind of a new convert in his struggle to overcome his old belief and ways of life. This argument is similar to the patristic tradition of “*logos spermatikos*.” The phrase implies that other religions were able to reach a dim knowledge of God because the notion of God is planted in all men. There cannot be compromise with cultural traditions, which have partial knowledge of God.

A halt to missionary activities because of culture, breeds syncretic mind and compromise. It is an anti-Christian orientation to assimilate Christians into other culture without knowing. An attempt to make the non-Christians and their worldviews as a way of salvation is dangerous to true Christianity. The non-Christian culture can only attain the salvation of Christ through active participation in the faith. The notion that Christianity is one of the religious cultures in the world must be rejected. In the field of mission, the task of the church is conversion of souls because she appears to show more concern with worldliness than conversion. In reality, the church has entered the world and the world has entered the church.

The gospel commission is, therefore, imperative and compelling because if mission is thrown away, the gospel is also thrown away. It is like throwing away the baby and the bath. Mission and the gospel are inseparable because the gospel produced the church and mission which in turn bears and spreads the gospel. We hereby agree with Paulo Suess and Birger Nygaard description of mission. They maintain, the Christian community is under an obligation to its Lord to engage in certain specific tasks, irrespective of the circumstances in which it finds itself. It is sent (out) to tell the story of Jesus Christ, as interpreted by the apostles, and invite people, without discrimination to become part of the story by turning to him in repentance for the forgiveness of their sins. It is given a commission to be a

¹⁷ H. Anderson, *Early Church Fathers*, 2nd Edition, (Rome: Costello, 1991), 50.

reconciling and healing agent by resolving conflict, bringing peace with justice, comforting and empowering people excluded from belonging to families and civil society caring for the environment and restoring people to physical and psychological well-being. It is summoned to a purity of life in all its relationships, in the midst of much political and business corruption and the loss of high standards of honesty and decency in personal relationships.”¹⁸ The commission therefore is a divine edict.

(b) The church Universal

Moratorium call is devastating to the universality of the church. Universality was a term originated by St. Ignatius of Antioch in his Epistle to the Smyrneans. He employed the Latin word, “Catholica.”¹⁹ It has a triple meaning:

- (i) Universal because its mission covers the whole world to the end of the earth.
- (ii) Unity because of oneness of origin and faith
- (iii) Faithful and orthodox.

The church universal is a community of all believers living in brotherhood. This fact takes precedence over and gives meaning to all other aspects of the church. Like brothers of the same family, members of God’s household (Eph. 2:19), they are bounded together by love-“agape.” An important aspect of the universality of the church which a halt to mission affects is that the church is at home anywhere and everywhere. Members are free to go to anywhere in the world. Anywhere they are, they are members and citizens. The universality of the church is, however, eschatological because it is more in potency than actuality since it is meant for all men (Matt. 24:14). There is no room for any form of racial or class discrimination as in the call for missionaries to go home (Rom. 10:12;

¹⁸P.Suess and B. Nygaard, “Conference Theme,” X1th International Assembly in Malaysia, July 30-August 6, 2004. This was the paper with which the theme of the conference was explained.

¹⁹J. Onayeikan, “Doctrine of the church and Sacraments,” Lecture Note, SS, Peter and Paul Major Seminary, Ibadan, 1982, 7.

Gal. 3:28; 1Cor. 12:13). This will be actualized in the church's missionary programme.

Modern Church History in Nigeria

Church and mission are the areas that Nigerians are most successful. Today every Nigerian wants to form his church. In major cities, nearly every home is a church or a fellowship group. Church of God mission, Deeper Life Bible Church, Zoe Ministry, Redeemed Christian Church of God, Winners Chapel, Synagogue, Christ Chosen Church of God, The Watchman, Celestial Church of Christ, The Church of the Lord-Aladura, Mountain of Fire and Miracle Ministries are outstanding. This awareness of the saving grace of God in Christ is the result of European missionary activities. Andrew F. Walls wrote:

Taking it as a whole,...the missionary movement has changed the face of Christianity. ...The most remarkable feature of this transformation has been in the African continent, minimal in Christian profession when the missionary movement began. But now, when so much of the West is in the post-Christian period (loss of faith), Africa is moving to the position where it may have more professing Christians than any other continent.²⁰

Modern church historiography in Nigeria is a mockery of the moratorium call. The call is academic and the issue ended in the hall of the conference in Lusaka. The moratorium is known to few clergymen in Nigeria. Archbishops, bishops, primates, general overseers or superintendent receive grants from Europe and America to build their churches, buy vehicles, megaphones and to travel abroad for a conference, synods or annual leave. The success of Archbishop B.A. Idahosa was based on grants from America. The protestant white missionaries voluntarily withdrew long ago before the moratorium call on the recommendation of Henry Venn for a Native Church that is self-propagating, self-sustaining and

²⁰A.F. Walls, *The Missionary Movements in Christian History*, (Edinburgh: Orbis Books, 1996), 85.

self-governing. European and American Missionaries are many in the Roman Catholic Church in Africa. The Bishop of Warri Catholic Diocese is an Italian. Among the Pentecostals, Oral Roberts, Billy Graham and Kenneth Hagin have been coming to Nigeria as missionaries. They preached and won converts for the church. In February 2004, Renard Bonnke made a missionary tour of major cities in Southern Nigeria. Millions of people attended his crusades and were satisfied.

The indigenous churches mentioned above have established missions in Europe and America. Branches are also found in other parts of the world. European missionaries actually brought Africa to the Christian faith. But Europe is now re-evangelized by her converts because of Euro-American loss of faith due to science technology and rationalization. Science in the real sense is not incompatible with God. The moratorium call was made by those in search for power and leadership position in the church. They want to be bishop, archbishop, primate and founder. These men were used by African nationalists to whip up emotion and sentiment in Africa against the colonial masters in their struggle for independence.

Conclusion

It is obvious that the call is unnecessary. It is contrary to the universality of the church. The call is unrealistic and may isolate the church in Africa.¹¹

The work of mission is going on in Africa. This time around, she is not only receiving foreign missionaries, she is also sending out missionaries to other parts of the world in fidelity to the gospel commission. It is a sign that the church in Africa has attained great maturity. Whatever mistakes and omissions the missionaries have made, God has used them to bless Africa. The continued relevance of missionary activities in Africa and particularly, Nigeria, cannot be denied. It is obvious that the majority of African secular and religious leaders, especially Nigerians, owe whatever they are to God and the missionaries. The

missionaries inspired and activated by the love of God's word in Christ exported everything and risk their lives for our salvation. They felt that the best service was to seek the salvation of others. The love for Jesus made them to develop a sense of duty to obey the command in Matthew 28:19. The ethical attitude which a person who differs must adopt with respect to another person who differs from him in his view of the world and of life is tolerance. It is an attitude of respect for others while still firm in one's faith. Missionary work is sharing one's faith. Instead of calling for missionary to go home, they can be advised to be tolerant and learn to give and receive.