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# The Challenging Contemporary Issues against Church Growth in Nigeria: Implication on Poor Disciple Ship: A Diplomatic Historical Imperative

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**Abstract:** *The church in Nigeria is grappling with a lot of challenges in this 21<sup>st</sup> century. But one of the greatest challenges which the church is grappling with problem of poor discipleship. This very challenge is presently taking its toll on the church. The church in Nigeria is no longer creating/ building disciples. Rather the church is now focusing on creating/ building millionaires. The disciples are the very ones that have the capacity of propagating/spreading the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. If there is a turmoil or crisis or persecution against the church, it is the disciples that will stand their ground and defend the church. While the millionaires will catch the next available flight and leave the country. Thus this paper will take a critical look at the church in Nigeria. It will also examine how the dwindling of discipleship is reducing the spread of Christianity in Nigeria. This paper will also proffer solutions to these problems that is associated with poor discipleship.*

**Key words:** Church, Discipleship, Christianity, growth, gospel

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## Introduction

The issues concerning discipleship and the church in Nigeria, is a serious one. This is as a result of the dwindling number of Christians who embark on evangelism, which will result to the conversion of unbelievers to Christianity. These issues concerning true discipleship was stressed by Jesus during His brief sojourn here on earth which can be found in the new testament book of (Matthew chapter 16 versus 21 to 28. Revised standard version). In this chapter and verses our Lord Jesus Christ revealed to his disciples what will befall him in Jerusalem and his death including his resurrection on the third day. But Peter one of his disciple rebuked him, saying “God forbid Lord” in (verses 22) But our Lord Jesus Christ in turn rebuked him; saying “Get Behind me Satan” (verses 23) “ You are a hindrance to me, for you are not on the side of God , but of men”. To further buttress this point on true discipleship Jesus Christ went on further to say that “ If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (verses 24) (verses 25)”. For whoever would save his life, will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it”. This indeed shows how important true discipleship is to the propagation and to the survival of the church and Christianity in Nigeria. Our Lord Jesus also said in (verses 26) for what will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life? (Verses 27) or what shall a man give in return for his life? For the son of man is to come with his Angels in the glory of his father, and then he will repay every man for what he has done”.

The importance of true discipleship and the propagation of the gospel were also instructed by Jesus Christ in the book of Mathew chapter 28:18 When he charged his disciples to “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the father and of the son and the holy spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you, and lo I am with you always, to the close of the age” And hors very charge was the last command that Jesus Christ gave to his disciples he ascended into heaven. This charge is in deep a charge to the church in Nigeria. Thus, how has the church in Nigeria obeyed this charge? If the church in Nigeria has worked towards the building of disciples the issues of Boko Haram and the Niger delta militants wouldn't have plagued the Nigerian state. The church has abandoned its primary responsibility of making disciples and is now making millionaires. Then the difficult question of who will defend the church in times of crisis, now stares at the face of the church. The issue of discipleship is indeed a great challenge to the church in Nigeria as the poor rate of disciples, missionaries and evangelists is now having a negative effect on the church in Nigeria. This paper will look at the numerous effects of this anomaly on the church in Nigeria and also proffer solutions to these problems.

### **A Brief History of Christianity in Nigeria**

The origin of Christianity cannot be discussed without mentioning the name “Abraham” Abraham is generally believed to be the father of the Hebrew nation. Abraham, was believed to be a tent dweller or a shepherd chief who lived a wandering life in the desert regions of Arabra in the city of Ur before he was called by God Almighty and ask to leave city of Ur and relocate to the land of cannon. (Guest: 1969:35) Ur was a city of the Chaldees in the south of Mesopotamia, Abraham had to journey North-westward through the valley of the Euphrates, turning westward and crossing the Syrian desert before he settled in Canan. As Abraham was rich in flocks and herds, this made him to have conflicts with the nations of Canan, who had already made considerable progress in civilization. (Guest: 35).

It was the call of Abraham from the city of Ur that marked the beginning of Christianity in the world. Thus, it is very vital for Christians to always remember this incontrovertible fact, including the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ which is indeed the climax of the Christians faith on which the propagation of the gospel is anchored on.

It is on record that the first nation that introduced Christianity to the territory is now called Nigeria was the Portuguese . The Portuguese missionaries were very active in Benin, and in Warri and the Portuguese missionary activities in these two cities took place between 1485 to 1520. And history has it that on two occasions the Oba of Benin came close to being converted to the Christian religion. (Onwibiko, 1972: 197). But the Portuguese did not stay too long as they later left these two cities. After the Portuguese left, missionary activities slowed down in Nigeria until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, when missionary activities began in Yoruba land. In the 1830s, many freed slaves who were of Yoruba origin, had returned from free town, Sierra Leone to Badagry in Lagos and some to Abeokuta. And by 1842 about five hundred of them had to settled in Abeokuta (Onwubiko:202). It was also reported that these liberated slaves had embraced Christianity in Sierra Leone before returning to Nigeria. The efforts to establish Christianity missions in Yoruba started in 1841, when the two (2) C.M.S missionaries named Rev J. F Schon and Samuel Ajaiyi Crowther (Later to become the first black African Bishop of the C.M.S) now the church of Nigeria Anglican Communion. Ajaiyi also had accompanied the 1841 Niger expedition. (Onwubiko: 202).

Another milestone achievement which was made, in the establishment of the C.M.S mission at Abeokuta by Henry Townsend and Rev Samuel Ajaiyi Crowther, who it was ordained in 1843. And it was from there that the C.M.S expanded to other areas, notably, Lagos in (1852) in Ibadan (1853) and to Oyo in (1856). The C.M.S was able to make these grant stride because it had the support of the British government and the support of the British traders, and this facilitated the expansion of Christianity in Nigeria in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Some attempt were also made in 1854 during the Niger expedition to establish missions on the Niger. Crowther and Rev J.C Taylor (an Ibo ex-slave who was had been ordained in Sierra Leone) also accompanied the Day spring expedition to the Niger. And a mission station was also opened at Onitsha with Rev Taylor was in charge of the station. Other mission which were established in Nigeria includes the Methodist mission which was establish in 1842 in Badagry, the Baptist, established in 1840,1852 and in 1855, in the cities of Ijaye and at Ogbomoso. While the Church of Scotland and mission also established Churches in the Cross River area of Eastern Nigeria. In 1846 Rev Hope Waddel arrived at Calabar with one European and a party of Christian Jamaican ex slaves to establish more mission in the Cross Rivers area.

As a result of the declaration of the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria by Britain in 1885, the missionaries started to expand in land along the Cross River. Stations were also opened at Ikot Ana in 1884 and in Uwana in 1887. (Isichei,1983).

The Roman Catholic mission was also revived in Nigeria in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by father Bouche and brother Martinez of the society for African missions (S. M.A). And they both founded the first mission at Lagos in 1868, the Catholic mission also spread to Nkweile in 1888 and to Aguleri in 1890 under the supervision of father Joseph Shanahan. (who later became the first Catholic Bishop of the Eastern Nigeria). (Onwubiko: 204). Churches were also established in the middle belt of Nigeria in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century about 3000 churches had been established in Nigeria with a total population of about 800,000 communicants (Onwubiko:204).

The early Church planting was also successful in the Niger Delta region as a Church was planted on the bank of the Niger Delta, in the city state of Bonny. And one important attribute of the early Christians in Bonny was that the massage of gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ had to form a part of their daily life as (Isichei:157) puts it.

“Like the early Christmas they carried the Christian message as they went about their daily work, and as they went to the interior”.

(Isichei:157) also arrived that

“One Bonny Christian, Joshua Hart, met a martyr’s death in 1875. The Niger mission was alight with promise, and was the pride and joy of the parent missionary society”

Thus, the Church in Nigeria steadily grew from strength to strength, and some indigenous Churches were later founded in Nigeria, including the Penticostal Churches in Nigeria. If we trace the history of the Church with effect of the Methodist Church in 1842 at Badagry the Church/Christianity is just one hundred and seventy six years old in Nigeria. (176). This is because the Portuguese who first brought Christianity to Benin and Warri had left in 1520, thus

leaving the Church moribund, so the actual commencement of Christianity in Nigerians the year 1842. If we take a flash act to the fact that the letters which Paul wrote in the Bible to the Churches in Constantinople, Turkey. These seven Churches were all in Turkey. And presently today Islam has uprooted Christianity in Turkey. Before Islam uprooted Christianity had existed for one thousand and twenty six years. Yet Islam was able to uproot Christianity in Turkey. Turkey used to be 96:04% for Christians and Islam was 3.06%. Today the reverse is the case in Turkey as Islam is now 96% in Turkey while Christianity is 4% in Turkey.

They are some factors that has inhibited the aggressive raising of disciples in the Christian world in Nigeria.

### **POLITICAL FACTORS, INHIBITING DISCIPLESHIP IN NIGERIA.**

I have mentioned earlier in this paper that the primary responsibility of the Church, is to build/create disciples, who will in turn propagate the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ and also expand God's kingdom in Nigeria. But unfortunately, the Church in Nigeria has abandoned this responsibility, and the Church is now busy creating millionaires and amassing wealth.

The political situation in Nigeria has contributed to this sudden and dramatic shift which the Church has made. Firstly the Nigerian constitution is not favorable to the Church in Nigeria. Nigeria, is a secular state, and does not have any particular religion as the official religion of the state. Rather it provides for a freedom of worship and also recognizes three religions, namely Christianity, Islamic and African Traditional religion.

But the contents of this constitution, contravenes this fact as that same constitution has a dual identity. The constitution mentions Islam several times, it mentions Moslems several times and it also provides that the Sharia legal system should be practiced and also provides for the establishment of the Sharia court and the grand Khadi should head the Sharia courts. And this is in contradiction of the constitution which is expected to be a constitution for a secular state.

I have seen nothing in that same constitution that made reference to Christianity, the Church or the word Christians. Thus the Nigerian constitution does not in any way guarantee protection for Christians and to the disciples whose sole responsibility is to spread the gospel and expand Christianity.

The issues concerning the Boko Haram insurgency and the herdsmen attacks against Christian communities in the Nigerian states of Benue, Plateau, Taraba, Adamawa and Bornu, including Yobe and parts of Eastern Nigeria, has worsened the growth of discipleship and also affected the Church in Nigeria. Presently, Nigeria is topping the list of Countries where Christians are persecuted and killed. In the second quarter of 2018 two Reverend fathers and seventeen parishioners were killed in Benue state by suspected herdsmen. In Plateau state also more than one hundred persons has been killed in only attack, Christians all over the Northern part of the Country have suffered persecution, wonted killings, Churches has also been burnt including Christian schools, the list is endless. The reasons for this wanton killings is not unconnected with the grand plan of the organization of Islamic countries to Islamize Nigeria, which the federal Government of Nigeria has demonstrated that it has no political will to fight the Boko Haram insurgency and the herdsmen attacks that is fast decimating the Christian population in the North. The North East and the North Central of Nigeria. The situation has resulted to the staging of peaceful protests by Christians all over Nigeria and the holding of prayer sessions against the Nigerian state, that is dominated by Islamists from Northern part of

Nigeria. And for the fact that the security agencies in Nigeria are all headed by persons from the predominantly Moslem North. Churches has also embarked on Night Vigils, fasting and prayers, which some prominent Church leaders has also condemned the wanton destruction of lives and property by the Fulani herdsmen and the Boko Haram terrorist group in Nigeria.

The lack of political will to fight this insurgency by the Government at the centre has also affected the Church in Nigeria, as the Church now finds it difficult to raise disciples that spread the gospel. The issues of security and protection of Human lives have indeed hampered the raising of disciples by the Church in Nigeria, coupled with the non challnt attitude of the Church in raising disciples.

Rather than raising disciples for the Church the Church now believes in raising millionaires while the Church leaders now associate freely with the political class, which guarantees them contracts and fat financial donations. Again, some Church leaders now embark on political campaigns for candidates of their choice during elections electing campaign, while under mining the charge by our Lord Jesus Christ to the Church to make disciples of all nations, and to separate the gospel to the nooks and crannies of the earth till the end of the ages. Thus, political factors have contributed to the issues of poor discipleship that have affected the Church.

### **Economic Factors**

Economic factors have also inhibited the raising of disciples by the Church for the Church.

Firstly, the issue of poverty, unemployment and disease have worked against the Church in Nigeria. Poverty in Nigeria is indeed a problem that needs urgent attention should the Church decided to tackle it. Church leaders in Nigeria have devised strategies of always receiving money from their members, and do not in any way give back to their teaming followers who toil day and Night in order to return offerings to their congregations. Church leaders now amass wealth. The building of schools, both primary, secondary and Universities by the Churches in Nigeria is now very common. Some Church leaders now live in mansions, while some have acquired private jets, with which they use in travelling around the globe, while their members are wallowing in poverty. Sometimes these schools built by these Church leaders are very expensive, thus making it extremely difficult for the children of these members who contributed the funds with which the Church leaders used in building these schools to attend such schools.

There has been a deliberate strategy by Church leaders to continuously impoverish their members. Church leaders have refused to raise disciples for fear of sponsoring them to embark on missionary journeys for the sole purpose of spreading Christianity and expanding Christian faith. If poverty is tackled by the Church head long, it will enhance the raising of multitude of disciples. Because in the times of crisis or turmoil against the Church as it is being witnessed in the North East and the North central zones of Nigeria, it is the disciples that will stand physically to defend the Church. The millionaires will catch the next available flight and live the Country. Again, because of their stupendous wealth they will not be willing to lay down their lives in defence of the gospel. Thus what the Church in Nigeria needs now is disciples and not millionaires. The apostle Paul and other disciples of Jesus Christ had to forego the amassing of wealth and riches and aggressively worked tirelessly to spread the gospel, but the crop of Church leaders in Nigeria are busy amassing wealth and acquiring worldly properties. Meanwhile the spread of the gospel has continued to suffer relegation to the background. And this is indeed very dangerous to the Church in Nigeria.

The issues concerning poverty is also closely tied to unemployment and disease. Unemployment has also affected the Church adversely in the area of raising disciples. Despite the fact that Government has failed in its responsibility of providing employment for the teeming population that can work in all sectors of the economy, the Church as a body can pool its resources together and establish businesses and companies that can offer employment to the youths who are the persons that are most affected when unemployment issues are brought to the front burner in Nigeria. If adequate employment is provided some youths can sponsor themselves to embark on evangelism during vacation periods from work or during the week end to preach the gospel. Thus there is an urgent need for economic empowerment for genuine Christian youths to enable them become disciples. And to enable them overcome the temptation of being converted to Islamic religion of monetary inducement, which the Islamist now use as a strategy in converting Christian youths to Islam.

The Church should also make frantic efforts to fight against diseases and in the prevention of diseases. Moreover, the Church should embark on an aggressive campaign for the prevention of the HIV/AIDS pandemic that affect the youths. While some efforts should be made by the Church to ensure that the environment is kept clean always. The Church can also embark on free medical services as a strategy for expanding the gospel. There should also be massive evangelism as this will be capable of converting the heathen and the sick people who could not access medical services. There are other area of expanding the gospel such as feeding the poor and the indigent persons in our society and providing support services to farmers, providing portable drinking water and clothings etc.

The harsh economic situation in this contemporary times has also affected the raising of disciples by the Nigeria Church. The inability of the Church to sponsor disciples/evangelists can also be attributed to the paucity of funds in some Churches because it is not all the Churches that are rich, or that can conveniently sponsor disciples. But for the rich Churches, there should be a change of strategy. The lackadaisical attitude of some General Overseers keeping everything to themselves and their family members should be discontinued, while a new approach of sponsoring true discipleship and evangelism should be embarked upon. Although, this assertion is not a blanket assertion as some Church leaders are now building schools, free restaurants, hospitals were sick people are given free medical treatment are also being embarked upon by some Churches in Nigeria. Some Churches also give free skills acquisition to youths while things like clothing, housing (free housing) and free business support programmes including free transportation is also being given by some Churches and this is indeed very healthy for the Church in Nigeria, in this contemporary times.

Finally, the economic situation can be surmounted if the Church in South will come to the aid of the Church in Northern parts of Nigeria. The Church in the South unfortunately, has not lived up to expectation in helping the Church in the North. A concrete example can be taken from the issue of more than four hundred orphans, who lost their parents in 1989 religious riots in Kaduna. A Christian association that took this children to Abeokuta in the West of Nigeria for shelter, education, clothing, food, and health for them was unable to find any help from any of the Churches in Nigeria. Instead it was the Church in Canada that assisted the organization with funds which made possible for those children to be catered for adequately. Christians in the North are facing the worst kind of persecution in Nigeria, hence the need for the raising of disciples that will help in the propagation of the gospel in the North because the Church must rise up to its responsibility in order to ensure the survival of Christianity in Nigeria.

### **Social/Cultural Factors**

In Nigeria, there are numerous cultural practices that have inhibited the spread of Christianity, including the raising of disciples. One of these is the problem of idols worship. The worship of idols has been a major problem to the raising of disciples. Some youth in affected communities where idol worship has held sway find it difficult to join the army of discipleship and the Church is doing little or nothing to liberate these affected youths in these areas to embrace the gospel and become disciples for Christ. For instance, the issue of Boko Haram and the Niger Delta militants and the menace of the proliferation of secret cults in South, South East and South West of Nigeria would not have reared their ugly heads if the youths in these areas were massively converted to Christianity. And made to become disciples/agents of spreading the gospel. The hydra headed proliferation of the small and light weapons would not also be the case in Nigeria.

The high rate of armed robbery, kidnapping, child abuse, rape and other vices that have affected the social fabric of the society/ the Church can be curbed through raising of disciples and evangelists including the spreading of the gospel. Another problem that falls under the social/cultural factors is the use of force by the promoters of idols, including the compelling of Christians to join them in taking part in some aspects of cultural festivals where fetish practices are carried out.

We have had instances of this in Ikwerre society where Christians are forced to take part in festivals such as the annual appeasing of the gods of the land. Where natives cows are slaughtered. Christians even contribute money meant for the purchase of the native cow.

Penalty awaits Christians who refuse to adhere to this practice to make monetary contributions. Such penalty includes forfeiture of farm land, this is effective in situations where the farm lands in the community are communally owned. But in cases where the farmlands are not communally owned, it was difficult to coerce the Christians to make monetary contributions to these fetish activities. And in this case the church is expected to wade in order to protect Christians from being persecuted by idol worshippers.

Even during marriage ceremonies involving Christian couples, these idol worshippers sometimes force the Christian couples to embark on some unethical practices which are fetish, including the use of strong alcoholic drinks e.g, local gin (popularly called *kaikai*). This is not expected to happen if the couples are Christians, and have been raised as disciples who would have assisted the Christians to overcome the activities of these idol worshippers whose sole aim is to victimize Christians and force them to conform with their nefarious worship of idols in the various communities.

Social activities such as dance groups that conform with fetish practices is also taking its toll on Christianity and the Church. The Church is expected to take proactive steps to ensure that gospel music are used to spread the gospel. Thus gospel singers should be encouraged as this will also help in spreading the gospel in Nigeria.

Finally, the Church leaders should also desist from fighting one another. Some Church leaders now use the social media to fight against one another posting words that are derogatory to the Christian faith. The mistakes which the Church in Turkey made before Christianity was uprooted in Turkey is the same mistake that the Church in Nigeria is making in this contemporary times. And this mistake is disunity. Thus the Church in Nigeria must be united now and Church leaders should stop quarrelling themselves on the pages of newspapers and on the social media. The Church is the body of Christ and must be united now in order to propagate

the gospel effectively. And if this is not done the issues of poor discipleship will continue to affect the Church in Nigeria. Thus, the raising of disciples may not be achieved if the Church is not united. Young people must be carried along to enable their lives to be transformed. Churches should also be planted in virtually all the nook and crannies of Nigeria to ensure that Christianity is expanded in Nigeria.

### **Conclusion**

The history of Christianity in Nigeria cannot be examined without acknowledging the first effort which was made by the Portuguese. The efforts yielded fruits in 1842 when the Methodist established the first Church in Badagry, Lagos, South West of Nigeria.

The issues concerning the effects of poor discipleship on the Church is very important and vital to the survival of the Church in Nigeria. The Church must rise up now to its responsibility of raising disciples that will stand in the period of crisis to defend the Church. The emphasis of the Church should be redirected to raising disciples and not to be raising millionaires. It does not mean that millionaires are not needed in the Church. They are needed in the Church, but that should not be the focus of the Church.

This is because in the time of crisis or persecution of the Church the millionaires will not afford to stand and defend the Church, instead the millionaires will catch the next available flight and leave the country. It is only the disciples that will stand to defend the Church. The urgent need to raise disciples in Nigeria must be pursued with most vigor by the Church in Nigeria. Church leaders should avoid Luke warmness in the area of the propagation of the gospel. Instead of amassing wealth and acquiring private jets, these should be deployed to sponsor seminary/theological schools to enable it massively raise disciples because the harvest is much but the laborers are few, thus the Church should make the laborers to be many since the harvest is much.

The Church in Nigeria must work round the clock in order to overcome the forces of evil in the political scene in Nigeria. This is because the federal government and the Nigerian state have failed in the task of protecting the lives of Christians in the North and in the middle belt. Islam and the Islamic agenda is being implemented step by step and the killing of Christians, including the herdsmen attacks on Christian communities and the Boko Haram are part of the plans to Islamize Nigeria. If the same force which the Nigerian state has used in guarding oil installation in Niger Delta is being used to protect the lives and properties of Christians would not have been perpetuated by these murderous Boko Haram terrorists group and the dangerous Fulani herdsmen would have been a thing of the past. The Nigerian state values oil installations and cows more than Humans lives. The disciples are urgently needed to sensitize our people from resisting this evil plot by the Nigeria state. If ranches are to be created in the North where cattle rearing is predominant, it should also be created for farmers in the middle belt where farming is the predominant occupation of the people who inhabit the area.

If the Church will overcome the effects of poor discipleship on the Church the problems of poverty, unemployment must be fought aggressively and it must be defeated and the raising of disciples will indeed stamp out these societal problems.

The Boko Haram insurgency and the Niger Delta militants, the proliferation of secret cults, and small arms and light weapons, including the high rate of kidnapping, armed robbery and rape would not have thrived if the Church had succeeded in raising disciples in Nigeria. Thus the Church must wake up now and begin to massively raise disciples.

If disciples are raised and fully sponsored by the Church, the harsh economic situation in Nigeria will not take its toll on the Christian community in Nigeria, neither will Christianity suffer deprivations. Adequate social amenities such as portable drinking water, good health care delivery, employment, and social welfare services can be given to both the old and new converts in Nigeria. The importance of discipleship was stressed by Jesus Christ during his brief sojourn on planet earth.

Finally, the implications of poor discipleship on the church in Nigeria can only be adequately addressed if the Church will now lay emphasis on the raising of disciples that will preach the gospel and thus spread Christianity in Nigeria, and if the issues of unity are adequately addressed, the Church in Nigeria will remain formidable, and cannot be uprooted by any religion not even Islam.

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