

The Place of the Church in Equitable Distribution of Nigerian Commonwealth

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Abstract

Equitable distribution of the nation's wealth is believed to be one of the bases for peaceful co-existence among various groups in a country. Nigeria is blessed with lots of resources ranging from crude oil, gas, mines, bitumen, timber, cocoa, cotton, coal and the likes. It is however unfortunate that most Nigerians are living in abject poverty because these resources are under the control of few privilege individuals who are either on the corridor of power or born with silver spoon. While the rich in the country are becoming richer and monopolizing the nation's wealth, the poor are becoming poorer. The aim of this study therefore is to investigate the roles of the church in addressing this uneven distribution of Nigerian wealth knowing full well that some of these wealthy people are in the church. The phenomenology and historical research methods were adopted for this study. The study focused on how the church today can be a model example in fair sharing of national wealth taking a clue from the apostles in the early church who ensured the people that complained of neglect in daily distribution of food were justly treated. It therefore recommended that the church (the Assembly of God's children) should be involved in sharing the national wealth and preach always against injustice in the land. This would help in bridging the gap of inequity between the rich and the poor and promoting peaceful co-existence in Nigeria.

Key words: Church, Commonwealth, Equity, Federalism.

Introduction

The account of creation in Genesis revealed God as the maker of everything in the universe (both animate and inanimate). He created man (humankind) and other valuable resources (plants and animals) that could sustain him for his living. Man who is in supreme control of everything God created is expected to manage them well. The declaration of God before the creation of man in Genesis 1: 26, corroborates this:

...Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals and over all the creatures that move along the ground.

God blesses man with many good things on earth as revealed further in Genesis 1: 29 that God created every seed-bearing plant, every tree with fruit and all other creatures on earth including mineral resources on ground and all these are to be used for the sustenance of human race. God knew that man could not do without these resources so; He made them available for all people and not for selected few. In other words, the endowed resources are not meant to be used by certain categories of people as it is happening in some parts of the world today but were intended to benefit everybody on earth. God therefore is not partial in His dealing with human race. He desires that everybody has what it takes to enjoy the provisions He made for them. For this reason, God blesses every nation of the world with various resources. Several passages of the Scripture show God as the one who provides and sustains some of these passages are Psalm 22: 26, 68: 10, 105: 40 – 41, 146: 7, 2Peter 1: 3.

The complaint of inequality in sharing Nigerian resources has been on the rise and it is receiving attention in the academic circles. In the work of Ajibola Akinyemi et al¹ on ‘poverty and inequality in Nigeria: Implications for Inclusive Growth’. It was noted that earning and assets are largely unevenly distributed thus creating gap between the rich and the poor and for poverty and inequality to be abolished more spending must be made on education and quality health service provided for all.

Vanessa Ko argued that Nigeria is a prime example of the ‘resource curse’ due to its poor economic growth and development despite the natural resource wealth.² Dada Adelowo’s main argument is on reducing the phenomenon of inequality in Nigeria, he opined that one of the ways to close the gap between the rich and poor is to give equal opportunities to everybody in the country.³ While in this study, the writer focuses on investigating the roles of the church in ensuring equitable sharing of the wealth amassed from the natural resources entrusted to the country by God. The writer argues that churches should play humanitarian roles and follow the example of Jesus Christ and His apostles in teaching Christian virtues to the public and making life better for all. The writer believes that the church as the Assembly of God’s saints should in its teaching and preaching speak out just as Christ did during His earthly ministry (Luke 4:18) in correcting the injustice in the land especially wealth distribution.

The phenomenological and historical methods of investigation were adopted for this study. The phenomenology research focuses on commonality of a lived experience with a particular group⁴; the writer conducted oral interviews with some Christians in Agbowa-Ikosi to get the needed information on the issue at hand and as well observed through his participation. This work is also historical in nature; therefore the early church in Acts of Apostles was used as a model.

Inequality and economic oppression in Nigeria

Inequality in resources sharing is an issue of concern to many people in Nigeria today and curbing this problem will promote peace and harmonious living in the country. Study revealed that Nigeria is blessed with many natural resources like copper, diamond, gold, cotton, timber, cocoa and most especially the crude oil which is now the nation’s main source of income. There are also more than nine thousand untapped natural resources in Nigeria as identified by Raw Material Research Development Council⁵, which are meant to be used to better the lots of every citizen of the country. However, most of the resources are not judiciously utilized to meet the needs of all the people of the country. Therefore, it was said that ‘Nigeria is plagued with man-made poverty’⁶, in spite of its wealth and potentials. In the submission of Banji Oyelaran Oyeyinka, only 20% of the Nigerian population owns 65% of national

assets, while about 70% of the population is involved in low productivity, low skill, or rural labour⁷. The nation's wealth is mostly concentrated in the hands of few individuals especially those on the corridor of power. Most of this privileged few are not even willing to allow the masses to have taste of it. The baton of leadership is becoming hereditary in the country, as the same sets of people are in control of the nation's wealth. This upholds the assertion that 'Nigeria is practicing government of the family by the family and for the family'⁸ instead of a democratic principle.

Nigeria Economic Report has alleged that poverty rates remain high in the country as 2012 National Bureau of Statistics portrayed that 'about 112 million of the 160 million Nigerians were whipped into poverty'⁹. The statement of the immediate past Prime Minister of Britain, Theresa May during her visit to some African countries in August, 2018 corroborated this, she said that 87 million Nigerians were living below \$1.90 a day and this makes Nigeria 'home to more very poor people than any other nation in the world'¹⁰. Millions of people in Nigeria today cannot afford three square meals a day. Some have come up with several dietary formulas in order to cope with their income. Few Nigerians eat twice a day, morning and night, this is 1-0-1 dietary, while some adopt 0-0-1, or 0-1-0 and many cannot even afford one meal in a day. Whereas, the privilege few do not know what to do with their money. They eat whatever they desire, spend extravagantly, travel abroad for medical treatment; maintain fleet of cars and houses. This must be the reason for the recent canvassing for restructuring in Nigeria today but those that are benefiting from the system fail to see it as a problem. They want to maintain the status quo possibly because they and their families are not affected.

Odisu, while describing sharing formula in Nigeria, stresses that the resources of the country belong to the central government and oil is the major sources of revenue while the money generated from the sales are kept in the federation account and later shared monthly among the three tiers of government¹¹. This disproportionate distribution and allocation of Nigerian wealth as Opadokun noted, has been on, since military took over the control of power¹². The most horrible part of it is that, hardly could

one see any development in all the states where these resources are derived and as a result, many Nigerians are impoverished. Therefore, it is the desire of Nigerians today that true federalism where the nation's wealth would not only be in the center but also decentralized is operated¹³. Various movements championed by some groups in Southern part of Nigeria such as the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), the Movement for the actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and the likes would not have been necessary if the nation's resources have been adequately managed.

Religion should have been a major avenue to ameliorate the suffering of the masses as it has special responsibilities in maintaining justice in the world. It is seen as an instrument of promoting discipline and good moral¹⁴ but most of the people in Nigeria today who claim to practice one of the three major religions in the country are not exhibiting the teachings of these religious faith, for many of them are only concerned about their gains. This must be the reason why Odumuyiwa referred to Nigeria as 'a religious but criminal society', as there are many Christians, Moslems and Traditionalists that still indulge in evil practices¹⁵. To Karl Marx, religion is one of the forms of spiritual oppression, opium of the people to make them submissive.¹⁶ Contrary to that, Emile Durkheim sees it as a social cohesion that unites people and establishes rules of 'fair play' that makes social life possible¹⁷. With this assertion, religion is a tool that helps to promote harmony within society. In the opinion of Diener, religion does not only make one to relate with the Ultimate reality (God), it also helps in relating with other humans¹⁸. This writer sees religion as a way of relating with the creator (God) who lays emphasis on justice and fairness to all in the society. Religion must therefore take its proper role of reforming the society and Christianity has a lot to do in this regard.

The fundamental duties of the Church

The church has diverse meanings to some people; to some, church is a building where people congregate to worship God, while some see it as a local gathering of believers in Christ. But according to Martin Luther as Michael Taiwo quoted,

...the church is the assembly of all those on earth who believe in Christ...the assembly consists of all who live in true faith, hope and love so that essence life and nature of the church is not a bodily but a spiritual assembly of heart in one faith, one Lord¹⁹.

The church therefore, as a spiritual assembly of believers in Christ, should show the love of Christ to all and sundry. According to Richard Patterson, the church exists in two senses in the Bible. First, it exists in the universal sense as those who have been reborn of God and baptized into the body of Christ. Second, in the local sense as those in the universal church who have linked themselves together in a specific community²⁰. Love is the key that can make people from diverse ethnicity to fellowship together as one indivisible community. The church therefore is an assembly of regenerated people; the people of God who are obedient to His teachings and commandments and live in the society; people who have covenanted to fellowship and worship Christ and serve Him as their Lord and Saviour. It is a community of those who acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord (1Cor. 12:3), it is a fellowship where Holy Spirit lives (1Cor. 3:16) directs and energizes its communal life²¹.

The church was established to fulfill two main purposes according to Getz, first, to minister to the body of Christ that gather to worship Him and, second, to minister to the entire world²². The church therefore has the responsibility of ministering to its members and the whole world. The church ministers to the body of believers (members) through teaching, fellowship and worship. Also, it ministers to the world through her evangelistic strategies which are beyond the four walls of the church. Ministering to the world may be in form of meeting the physical needs through social gospel, proclamation of the word, action/life style evangelism and the like. The church must be involved in matters that pertain to common concerns and existence in the society²³. Through this, the word of God would be established in the hearts of the people and adhering to the teaching of the church will make the world peaceful and pleasant to stay.

The Place of Church in Wealth Distribution

The church as an institution in the society does not only gather to worship the Supreme God but is also called to denounce the root causes of economic oppression and proffer solutions to (alleviate) the sufferings of the less privileged in the society²⁴. The early church and its leaders were proactive in early resolution to the issue of disparity in daily distribution of food brought by the Grecian Jews in Acts 6: 1-7. The Apostles responded by asking the church to choose among themselves honest men of wisdom and good report, full of Holy Spirit that can be entrusted with the work of serving the table. This led to the selection of seven Deacons (GK *Diakonos*) who were chosen from among the neglected minority in the church. The whole assembly was happy after the selection and more people were added to them. Judging from this response of the early church and its leaders, the church must play the following responsibilities in ensuring equitable sharing of the Nigerian commonwealth.

Firstly, the church leaders in Nigeria should play an influencing role in directing the people to vote for right candidates that have the fear of God during elections. People that will lead Nigeria to greater heights are in the country and many of them are in the church; these people should be encouraged to participate in politics while the church rally round to support them without collecting money from any of them. A politician that will ensure fairness in wealth sharing will not be using money to canvass for people's vote and will not engage in do or die politics. The apostles in the early church played significant roles in influencing the church to choose people of integrity to leadership position. Similarly, church leaders today should be trustworthy to influence the members to choose people after God's heart to positions of authority. When the leaders are upright, the members will obey and follow their instructions²⁵.

Secondly, the voice of the church must be heard when the nation's resources are being shared. This according to Alabi is necessary because the voice of the church is the voice of God, the church will guide the government to exhibit the fear of God and be fair in sharing. The church must not be in the dark on what all the three tiers of government are receiving from the federation account and how these are utilized. The church was involved in 1974 Udoji award after the civil war and

everybody was happy with the outcome.²⁶ Also, according to the news report by Vincent Ujumadu, the Minister of Labour and Employment, Dr. Chris Ngige donated cash and food items to villages in Anambra state to cushion the effects of COVID-19²⁷ and involved the church in distributing the food and cash to members of the public. He must have done this, possibly because he believes that the church will be fair in the distribution. A church occupies very important place in the society; it should therefore not be neglected in dealing with the affairs pertaining to the public.

Thirdly, the church and her leaders are to live by example and follow the teachings of Christ. Many churches today are not leading people to Christ; they are founded to suit the purpose of the founders. Some churches are business oriented and what the founders are after is how to raise money instead of being a blessing to the worshippers that are seeking to worship God in Spirit and in Truth. Eddie Gibbs and Ian Coffey have rightly observed that:

Those who have turned to Christianity and churches seeking truth and meaning have left empty-handed, confused by the apparent inability of Christians themselves to implement the principles they profess. Churches, for the most part, have failed to address the nagging anxieties and deep-seated fears of the people, focusing instead upon outdated or secondary issues and proposing tired or trite solution²⁸.

Some churches are fond of seeking assistance in fund-raise from politicians and people in Government. Some Governors in Nigeria donated millions of Naira to churches for building auditorium or to purchase evangelism bus. Where does this money come from? Was it not part of Nigerian wealth? The money that should have been used for the benefit of all people in the country. Accepting donations from politicians is to encourage the people in power to continue to steal. The money they are donating comes from the commonwealth of the country and there cannot be equity in assets distribution if the church is asking for donation from them. The church should follow the example of the early church that raised all they needed within the believers without seeking donations from external body Acts 4: 34 – 35.

Fourthly, the church today can use the spirit of communalism like the early church to promote equity in the country. The Bible declares that the church was in one accord, had things in common and shared their belongings among themselves to the extent that, no one lacked in the church. It was evident from the practice in the early church that there was equity in the sharing of the resources. None of the members had more than the others and no one had less. They all had everything that was needed because those that had properties sold them and brought the money to the apostles to share among the needy. If the church in Nigeria today demonstrates this communal spirit, nobody will lack in the society because the members of the church are also part of the society. However, some leaders of churches today do not have the communal spirit of the early church. Every year during Christmas, Government usually offers rice, turkeys or chickens to some Christian leaders for celebration but many of the leaders don't share these gifts with their members but consume them with their family members.²⁹ Whereas, some members celebrate with whatever they have at home. Moreover, the palliatives for COVID- 19 were given to the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) officers, Agbowa-Ikosi by the Government. Most church members were abandoned and the officers did not deem it fit to share some with their members.³⁰ This is totally against the spirit of communalism of the early church. The palliatives for COVID-19 and the Christmas gifts given to some pastors by political office holders were from the commonwealth of the nation. It should be shared equally and not only for selected few.

Fifthly, ministry of the teaching (GK *Disdaske*) and preaching (GK *Kerygma*) of the word should be the supreme task of the church today as it was in the early church. The early apostles took the preaching assignment seriously, they responded to complaints of marginalization by the minority groups in the early church as stated in Acts 6: 2 – 4 thus:

It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on the tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit. We will turn this responsibility

over to them and we will give attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.

The teaching and preaching ministry of the early church were not taken with levity. The apostles considered it as the primary assignment and they could not do otherwise but be committed to it. This led to the conversion of more souls who were also assets to the church (Acts 2: 41, 3: 12, 5: 42, 6: 7). The church today must also intensify efforts in the preaching of the word, nothing must take the place of teaching the sound doctrine through Bible Study, Sunday school, Discipleship and sermon. There are some church pastors that preach only from the New Testament neglecting the Old Testament. This should not be because 2Timothy 3: 16 says: ‘All Scripture is God breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness’. Both Old and New Testaments contain God’s words that can guide and lead one to the right path. Bible should therefore be the central focus of the Christian church and not unbiblical church traditions. James Smart stresses the essential of Bible in preaching the word thus:

The Bible is the basic book for the educational ministry of the church. Biblical truth in all its rightful expressions in text and in life has been the content of religious education from the earliest days of the faith. This was true in the time of Moses. It continued to be true through the centuries of the Old Testament and the New Testament period³¹.

Jesus, several times, quoted from the Scripture during His earthly ministry and taught His disciples to obey and keep God’s injunction in the Bible. The twelve apostles after His departure did not relent in teaching their converts as they have been instructed (Matt. 28: 18 – 20) by their Master. This eventually led to the spread of gospel and believers continued in the apostles’ doctrine. The church and its leaders today must keep on preaching the gospel in season and out of season. When this is done, the word of God will multiply in the hearts of the people and the fear of God will promote equity and fair play. Thus, there would be job opportunities, good health services, and sound education for all.

The early church also practiced *Koinonia*, that is, daily fellowship. The Bible says in Acts 2: 42 that ‘...they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayer’. In their fellowship they learnt and shared their burdens together and prayed over it and this resulted in the unity of the body as shown in Acts 2: 46 that “they continued daily in one accord in the temple and in breaking bread from house to house, eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart’. Fellowship involves parting with material resources in order to spread the gospel (Rom. 15:26, 2Cor. 9:13, Phil. 1:15) or sharing rejection through identification with Christ (Phil. 3: 10)³². The members of the early church were going from house to house having fellowship meal or love feast with one mind. Ayandokun affirmed that fellowship in the church is needed to help people feel loved and accepted as members of the family of the people of God³³. Brethren in the church should show love to one another through sharing and giving so that no one will lack. When this happens, the society will be affected and will want to exemplify communalism as practiced in the church. So, the transformation of Nigerian society starts from the church.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Nigeria is blessed with many valuable resources, which if judiciously utilized and managed every family in the country will live comfortably with good job, quality education, good transportation services and sound health care. However, large percentage of the people in Nigeria is living from hand to mouth. The inequity in wealth distribution experienced in Nigeria today may not occur if the church plays active roles in transforming the society. The apostles and early church played significant role in curbing disparity in the church during its formative years which promoted peaceful coexistence among the people then. Therefore, the author submitted that the church leaders must influence and guide the members to choose godly leaders who would be concerned in the welfare of generality of Nigerians. The church should also be actively involved in the distribution of the wealth of the nation. The teaching and preaching ministry of the church should be paramount as this would help in disseminating the mind of God to the people. The church and its leaders must also be a good example in conduct and speech to the public as this will make their recipients to listen to them and keep their warning. The

Unitarian function of the church will similarly drive many people to the church as the church is seen as the final hope in providing solution to the suffering of the masses.

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