

The Institute of Church & Society: The Whole Gospel for Modern Nigeria

Jos, Nigeria

May, 1981

Background to the Article

In May 1981 I wrote a paper “The Whole Gospel for Modern Nigeria.” The following few paragraphs are quotations from my memoirs, *Every Square Inch*¹, to provide the background to it. For purposes of this re-publication, I have expanded the title to what you see at the top.

I submitted this article

to the Christian Reformed World Mission (CRWM), the body that sponsored and supported the denomination’s Nigeria mission, including us, for approval to publish it. For a while, they were skittish about the things missionaries published and wanted to check them out prior to publication. It was not exactly censorship, for their comments were supposedly “advisory” only, but the pressure was there. The purpose of this paper was to get it published in *The Banner* before the upcoming home service, so that I would have not to repeat myself *ad nauseam*. I explained the reasons I was involved in this ministry, namely the rampant dualism that left most of life secular and prevented people from a full response to the Gospel in their daily lives. Then I proceeded to describe the major programmes we were involved in and their rationale. I concluded the article as follows:

I am not sure the article was ever published anywhere. But here it is and can serve as a summary of much the writings collected on this website and, in fact, of our entire ministry in Nigeria. This carries the spirit of it all. Enjoy the short read and carry it along with you as you read other articles on this website as well as the books published elsewhere—see the Bibliographies on the various pages of this site.

¹ Vol. 2, pp. 230-231.

The Paper

Some 15 years ago, the Protestant churches in Nigeria felt the need for an agency that would serve as a catalyst amongst them to encourage a Christian sense of responsibility in professional and social life. The agency created is now widely known throughout Nigeria as the Institute of Church and Society (ICS). Subsequently, the need was felt for a Northern Area Office (NAO) and yours truly was requested to open such an office in Jos in 1977. Christian Reformed World Missions (CRWM) agreed to the request to loan this missionary to the ICS. The CRC pays the salary and supplies housing, but the ICS provides the office and finances the programmes. I also report quarterly to CRWM so they can monitor this arrangement.

The rest of this article deals mainly with the NAO, since, while it cooperates with headquarters, also runs a set of programmes independently from the latter. Some of these programmes deserve a complete article, but for now a bird's eye view will have to do.

As already stated, the ICS seeks to encourage a sense of Christian responsibility for society in general, while it also tries to inculcate integration of the Christian faith with all of Nigeria's cultural sectors. God knows how necessary this is. Throughout the mainline churches of Nigeria, including the churches with which your missionaries are affiliated, there is a strong sense of separation between the spiritual and the material, between the Gospel and the market place, between the "work of God" and other work often defined as "*aikin kudi*," or "work for money." There is a strong consensus that business is business, politics is politics and religion is religion. Religion should not be allowed to interfere with these other areas.

This situation, in one sense, is a surprising development in a country where there are such strong forces in favour of a unified approach to life. For one thing, the people have the Bible, though not always in their mother tongue – of which there are reputed to be some 400! As a Reformed people, we have always known, theoretically at least, that this Bible has a message covering all aspects of life. There is the Muslim community that also insists on the unity of life and religion. The third element is that of African Traditional Religion, the former religion of most first-generation Christians, in which religion and culture are so totally intertwined that the very notion of separating them is absurd. In spite of these powerful forces, the churches without exception suffer from a separation of the Gospel from the main structures of national life. The story of how this separation came about is a complicated one that I have explained at length and almost *ad*

nausea in my books, articles, and lectures, but that we will not further explore in this article.

The ministry of the ICS then aims at bringing the fullness of the Gospel to bear on Nigerian life, to unite what was never meant to be separated. A Gospel separated from the main structures of life is a Gospel without a punch. It does not portray salvation in its fullness and hardly provides a sensible alternative to thinking Nigerians who are confronted with a number of religious and philosophical choices.

In pursuit of its wholistic aim, the ICS publishes literature, organizes conferences and participates in conferences organized by others. Our latest publication is *Living in God's World* and has recently been advertised in *The Banner*. It is a compilation of Bible passages that directly or indirectly have a bearing on economic behavior. Provided with short introductions to each chapter, it is intended to be used for private reflection and group discussions to encourage Christians to work out the teachings of the Bible in their economic activities. We have used a preliminary version in many conferences and refresher courses and the reaction is always one of open amazement. All this is in the Bible? Is the Bible that concrete and practical? We add that this publication is useful for Christians anywhere, also in Canada and the U.S.

This article is written a few days after I conducted a seminar on Wholistic Health Care. Few missionaries are subject to more pressures on their time, patience, endurance and talents than are medical missionaries. They are called upon to pour out their love without ceasing without much expression of appreciation. Appreciation is indicated only by the appreciating number of patients. This unremitting pressure, combined with a basically very secular medical training, has resulted in health care that is very mechanistic and, apart from the Christian love and devotion, is rather far removed from Biblical insights as well as African psychology and the social background of most of the patients. The ICS is concerned to stimulate medical folk to embark on a search for an approach to healing that takes into consideration not only physical problems, but also the underlying spiritual and social factors that *often* are the basic cause of disease. In 1980, we were instrumental in organizing a workshop and just a few days ago we followed it up with a seminar which, we hope, will be the first of a series designed to increase the depth of the search.

The question of science is getting increasing attention amongst Christians everywhere. Last year the ICS organized two conferences for Christians in science

to give them a chance to reflect together on the relationship between science and the Bible. These were initial attempts and had all the markings of it. However, out of it came an invitation to organize such conferences at individual post-secondary campuses, especially for the benefit of students. We are eager to embark on such a programme, but we are struggling with shortage of manpower. The need for such a programme is not to be doubted, for many students come from pre-scientific communities that have not prepared them for university life. Many students are hard pressed when their faith is attacked either directly or indirectly.

There are other programmes. There is the League for Action Against Bribery. There is our attempt at awareness building among the peasant farmers. We are engaged in the distribution of literature that caters to the educated elite and seeks to give them guidance in the affairs of their work and the nation. But not all can be told in one short article.

For this type of ministry, the Reformed missionary has a distinct advantage. Every other major Western Christian tradition is burdened with some form of dichotomy between the spirit and the world and every one of these tends to place the material in a secondary place. A message based on a theological or philosophical contempt for the world is a message without a real thrust. I end this article with praise to God for a tradition that, for all its other shortcomings, has provided me with a basic framework that enables me to see the whole world in terms of the Kingdom of God that does not pit spirit against material, but embraces them both. The Reformed tradition, spelled out *consciously*, has a message for Nigeria that can bring genuine salvation for this life and that to come.