

'Kingdom Vision' is Transforming Churches in Nigeria

(1992¹)

Nigeria has been blessed with a myriad of foreign missionaries, beginning about the middle of the 19th century. But it has been a mixed blessing. With few exceptions, these missions have brought a pietistic spirit to the Nigerian Christian church. From its inception this spirit led the church to frown on members who are active in "worldly" endeavors, such as business, civil service and especially politics.

Evangelicals of all stripes came with their traditional dualism of grace and nature. They did not overtly tell the people that God is much more interested in spiritual things than He is in the world, but that was the implication of their missionary message that Nigerians inferred. Unfortunately most of the earlier Christian Reformed missionaries were of a similar pietistic nature that has been absorbed into the blood streams of our Nigerian sister denominations, the Christian Reformed Church of Nigeria (CRCN) and the Church of Christ in the Sudan Among the Tiv (NKST).

The result has been almost fatal, especially in politics. As churches grew in membership and influence, they kept looking askance at their members who went into politics. These members enjoyed neither blessing nor guidance from the Christian community. That they became secular in their approach and vulnerable to the rules of the political game is not surprising. For example, when the various state governments, under Muslim pressure, took over many Christian schools and hospitals in the 1970s, most Christian churches complained without lifting a finger. They simply were not equipped to oppose such open confrontation. Their "theology" left them with an empty arsenal.

'Politics a dirty game'

¹ This article was originally published in *CC*, 30 Sept/1992. See also *Every Square Inch*, vol. 2, p. 404.

The taking over of those institutions is one of the factors that has set in motion a change in the churches toward a Reformed world and life view. Christians throughout Nigeria are now realizing that when you leave politics to non-Christians, the country will be steered into the Muslim camp.

The Christian Association of Nigeria, the widest ecumenical body in the country that includes the CRCN and NKST, addressed this issue in a booklet. "The missionaries did not impart to us the technique of governance," the booklet states. "A Christian should not be interested in politics, we were told. Truly politics is a dirty game, but who will make it clean? The righteous cannot rule if he is taught not to be interested in government."

Of course, not every missionary was of that orientation. Jolly Tanko, for example, an employee of the CRC Mission in Lupwe, told me that when he confided in missionary pilot Ray Browneye that he was considering a political career, Browneye urged him to answer that call.² The eventual result was a mighty Christian political warrior who feared no one, a powerful advocate for Christian freedom.

Since then, Christians have seen the light in this respect. They are doing what they can to overcome the spiritual vacuum created by pietism. Bitter recent experiences have forced upon them the imperative of political action at every front. When confronted by a religion like Islam that rejects any notion of separation of church and state and that cannot cope with pluralism, pietism becomes a fatal stance that condemns Christians to the sidelines.

The new Christian insistence on a strong political presence is a major cause behind the frequent uprisings and burnings of churches in recent years in Nigeria. Nigerian Muslims are nervous about the growing political muscle of Christians. Because they do not know how to cope with it, they erupt into irrational uprisings.

Pietism leads to powerlessness

² *Every Square Inch*, vol. 2, p. 390.

This developing realization that the Word of God must be a governing influence on all of life is also leading to new developments in other areas of the church. A friend of mine with a doctorate from an American university holds a very high administrative post in a major Nigerian church with a fundamentalist background. He has opted for the Reformed worldview, because he has seen that the view of his own church leads to powerlessness in both social and spiritual matters. One denomination with a Baptist background has recently changed its name to “Evangelical Reformed.” Only recently a Pentecostal friend advised me that Nigeria needs more Reformed literature, precisely because it needs guidance in applying the Word of God to life.³

It is particularly gratifying to me that some people who have recently been elected to political offices have done so in direct response to my interaction with them in the context of my work with the Institute of Church and Society.

One, Matthew Adams, a staff working under me for the CRC Hausa Literature Committee, has become our local mayor.⁴ Another person, who became the deputy governor of a state, confided in me that he ran for this office as a result of my writings. A great number of Christians have followed in their footsteps. The two states in which the CRCN and NKST are located, Taraba and Benue, both have Christian clergy for their governors. The point is that all of these people are politically active Christians.

It is no accident that the NKST has decided to establish its own “Institute for Christian Studies.”⁵ Only a few years ago, the NKST synod declared that Christians are not members of any party except that of Jesus. They have come a long way

³ In 2014, Dr. Tim Palmer, a CRC professor at TCNN, reports that adherents to the “health and wealth gospel” in Lagos are reading pirated copies of Louis Berkhof’s books. Berkhof, the uninitiated may need to be told, was a major theologian at Calvin Theological Seminary at one time.

⁴ For the story of Matthew, see *Every Square Inch*, pp. 275-276, 309, 319-320, 346, 376.

⁵ The Institute has since been renamed “Hilltop University.”

since then. They now seek ways to subdue all of life to the Kingdom of God. The NKST policy of sponsoring students to attend Reformed tertiary institutions in the USA is paying off.

'Kingdom vision' not just talk

Members of the CRC in North America who do not recognize the power inherent in their tradition's Kingdom emphasis could learn from their Nigerian counterparts. These Nigerians have experienced almost two decades of crises that are largely the result of powerlessness inherited from pietism. Some have come to recognize the difference a Reformed worldview with its comprehensive Kingdom vision can make in such a struggle. Instead of running away from political issues, the Reformed perspective encourages tackling them in the name of Christ.

Under a military regime for many years, Nigeria is now preparing for a return to civilian politics. In the past, largely because of their dualistic heritage, the role of Christians in politics was discouraging. Let us pray that this time around, with a new appreciation of a Reformed perspective, Christians will make a positive contribution to the emerging political scene. This is no time for CRC World Missions to retreat into a narrow church-growth philosophy. Our challenge today is to stand at the side of Nigerian Christians to encourage such positive developments in every way we can.