



THE CHURCH AND STEWARDSHIP

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The Church and Stewardship

I want to thank the trustees of the Christian Financial Accountability Association (CFAA) for inviting me to share a few thoughts at the commencement of this association.

These are not the best of times for pastors. They are not the best of times for the church in general. Pastors are beleaguered. They stand accused of greed and commercialisation of the gospel.

Now, we can go spiritual in trying to identify the cause of the public relations debacle, and we must acknowledge the proficiency of Satan at negative branding; but such an approach will block the opportunity to strategically deal with underlying issues. And there are four underlying issues. If we don't deal with these challenges we will be administering palliatives.

The first challenge is formulaic approach to ministry. There is a successful ministry template. A financially successful ministry is considered an emulative case study. Irrespective of the fundamentals of that ministry there's an ambitious imitation, sometimes envious rivalry to equal or exceed the achievements of the ministry. But in order to do this a pastor must abandon his personal mandate from God. This is the driving force behind the materialism that has obsessed the church. If a visible pastor buys a Mercedes every pastor aspires to own one as proof of ministry.

The unreasoned challenge to material success as proof of ministry is that the philosophy adjudges ministers like Apostle Paul total failures. He did not ride a Mercedes donkey. He did not have an impressive auditorium to minister in. The sizes of his congregations were not mega. Paul was a total failure if we use our modern metrics. Yet his name is going to be inscribed

in the foundation of the New Jerusalem. Revelation 21:14. It would seem therefore that God's criteria for success in ministry is different from ours.

The second challenge faced by the church is the challenge of intellectualism. There is no scholarship. This generates unsound and indefensible theologies. These theologies demand people suspend their intellect on Sunday morning.

We're told the people cannot understand deep theology or elevated teaching and so must be taught simplistically. It's why they're fed sound bytes. Of course this is an irony where the congregants are undergraduates, or doctors, lawyers, entrepreneurs, engineers, architects, pharmacists and consultants. These people somehow function in professional capacity Monday to Saturday, treating arcane and complex subject matters at work; but they lose their ability to process data and assimilate information on Sunday morning. And they miraculously regain it on Monday morning.

But what about the uneducated masses, someone asks? But it was undereducated masses Paul wrote to. The early church was not full of elites and scholars. 1 Corinthians 1:26 TPT. Yet they could understand the letters of Paul. And those letters were shared in different churches. In Colossians 4:16 Paul explicitly asked that his letter be read in church and sent to the church in Laodicea, who were in turn required to share their letter with the Colossians. The difficult concept of the mystery of Christ was discussed by Paul in Colossians 1:15-20, so it's either we're excusing our laziness and poor scholarship, or we don't trust the Holy Spirit enough to facilitate understanding of God's word. Irrespective of the educational capacity of the people sound doctrine must be taught.

The by-product of the lack of scholarship in the body of Christ is an unhealthy diet of fast food theology. It created Demand and

Supply Christians. They make demands, God supplies. Anything outside that paradigm becomes a challenge of faith. They cannot endure trials, cannot abide persecution, they know nothing about church history. And so certain passages of scripture cannot be understood. These are the lost scriptures.

The third challenge is the challenge of political context. It shows up the political naivety of the church, our unsophisticated understanding of politics. Affiliated with poor scholarship it ensures Christians can't appreciate the political dimension of either God or the church. Not understanding the nature of governance churches set themselves up for persecution. They became targets.

There is a reason politicians seek the endorsement of the church during campaign. But the church is poor at bargaining. She doesn't leverage her numbers. What is even more shocking is that some Christians eschew participation in politics. They're not properly taught.

The fourth challenge is the challenge of public relations. It shows up the disturbing disconnect between pastors and society in general. Pastors live in heavenly places so they find it hard to relate to society.

The challenge of public relations is why churches communicate in idiomatic expressions. No one outside of church can understand our banners and posters. Society can't understand our adverts. The language is technical jargon - "Glory to glory!", "Power must change hand!", "Angelic Visitation"... And yet Jesus died for the world. If we can't communicate with the world how are they going to get saved?

The challenge of public relations is why pastors run away from social media. They're not used to pushbacks. They're used to

unchallenged one-way communication, like the Rediffusion radio in my grandfather's house.

It is the combination of these factors that has generated an ethical conundrum for the church. Because of poor scholarship for instance, pastors could not debate the question of tithe. They could not discriminate legislative tithing under the law, from worshipful tithing by Abraham, from covenantal tithing by Jacob. Some congregants resorted to spiritual thuggery, issuing death threats to challengers. This was based on misquotation of the "touch not my anointed" scripture. Psalm 105:15. The tithe debacle created anaemic cash flow for the church, which unfortunately hampered the social responsibility programmes of several credible ministries. Churches were punished as a collective. As it turned out the people were tithing out of fear. They hardly understood New Testament giving. The standards of New Testament giving are higher than Old Testament giving.

It is the distillation of these four factors that would eventually lead to the formation of the Christian Financial Accountability Association (CFAA). That the scriptures might be fulfilled: honey came from the carcass of the lion. Judges 14.

As conceptualised by God the church is a progressive and dynamic institution. In the earliest history of the church we saw the nationalistic stubbornness of the Jerusalem collective. James and Peter saw Christianity through the prism of Judaism. That provincialism was eventually forced to accommodate the multicultural mission of Paul. The irony was that the vision for the internationalisation of the church was already evident at Pentecost. The people spoke in international languages.

At the beginning of the church communalism was practiced. But it was an unsustainable economic model. It was largely financed by the donations of successful Christians. People like Barnabas, the famed “son of consolation” donated proceeds from asset liquidation. But for their smartness, Ananias and Sapphira fell into this category.

As the church expanded internationally a different economic model was required. The church became a federal structure and so did the finance. The various churches operated a federated finance architecture. Jerusalem did not control the finance of Antioch for instance. But no matter the disparate finance architecture there was a regulation protocol. And the regulation was ethical standards. Pastors kept above board, even when they received upkeep from the church. And it wasn't just pastors who submitted to ethical standards, bishops did too. They were required to be “blameless.” Even the number of wives they could marry was regulated. A bishop could only marry one wife. And his reputation must be intact. Ordinary deacons had regulatory standards too, especially with regard to money. “They must not be greedy of filthy lucre,” Paul wrote. 1 Timothy 3:1-12. As per accounting standards, when it came to social responsibility Paul urged the people to gather the money in advance. For that to have happened they must have had a trusted treasurer.

The church is of course more sophisticated than what it was in the first century. Paul for example didn't have a social media unit. They didn't have parking lot attendants either. They didn't park donkeys like we park cars today - those with Mercedes to the left, those with Kia to the right. There were no Mercedes donkeys or Kia donkeys. Church finance is also more sophisticated. But the principles remain unaltered.

The church is designed to respond to context. If the church is supposed to respond to context we must necessarily ask ourselves, what context do we find ourselves in, in Nigeria?

There is denudating poverty. The youths have lost confidence in politicians. There's rebellion against authority. There are no jobs. The future looks bleak. The youths are concerned about the state of the nation, angry about the brazen theft of national resources. They're not happy about the parlous state of the economy.

They EXPECT the church to be a beacon of hope. They EXPECT pastors to rise above certain standards. Those standards are above the national mean. They EXPECT pastors to be upright. They WANT a sensitive church, one that is moved by the feeling of the infirmities of the people.

The reason they can expect all these from pastors is because they credited pastors with extreme trust. They do not question the word of pastors, even when it's contrary to reason. There's diffidence. They trust the church with money, or at least used to. They donate their earnings to church, sometimes giving in extremities and sacrificially. They devote their lives to church. Church attendance is twice a week. Workers do thrice a week and specialised ministries like music and drama can do up to four days a week. The people pay extreme price. The rigour of devotion demanded by church is not always good for marriages. Some have lost their marriage, and yet they remain faithful to church. Big men lower themselves when it comes to church. They serve in humbling capacities - as cleaners, parking lot attendants and ushers.

The picture that emerges therefore is an institution in an intense fiduciary relationship with her constituents. It is not surprising therefore that those constituents are demanding reciprocal fiduciary standards from the church. The church has fiduciary obligations to society. Her means come from the purse of society. She depends on public confidence for value and currency. Once fiduciary standards are shattered trust is broken.

The Nigerian church has a major image challenge. The church is viewed as commercialised. Pastors invited to help raise offering for special projects take a cut of monies raised like commission agents! There are charges of over-priced tuition fees by schools owned by the church. There are charges of pastors living large on church resources, charges of sexual immorality, economic exploitation, spiritual showmanship, false demonstration of the miraculous, charlatanism, admixture of the convention of African traditional belief system with Christianity, sole trusteeship and poor organisational structure. These, coupled with those expectations of society justify the creation of CFAA. CFAA may just be the salvation of the Nigerian church.

Throughout church history the issue of financial accountability has been on the front burner. The word “simony” was coined from the biblical story of Simon the Sorcerer. Acts 8:9-24. It refers to the buying and selling of spiritual privileges. Preachers in the first century were judged by their disposition towards money. For the sake of a clean image Paul chose not to touch church finance. He concentrated on social responsibility projects. The lesson that emerges is that even though the gospel needs finance there is a right and wrong admixture of money and ministry. Philippians 3:18-19.

We must however temper our expectations concerning CFAA. Like all revolutionary forces it will meet resistance. Besides, CFAA cannot regulate human will. It can only regulate an expressed desire for probity. CFAA will not turn the image of the church around overnight. It is an island of best practice, for now.

But we hope to look back to this day and say to ourselves we were part of the historic initiation of a regime of accountability in Nigerian churches. We hope to see change.

I want to thank the visioners of CFAA. And I want to thank all the churches and ministries that sign up. This is the commencement of a new calendar in Christianity in Nigeria. Hopefully we will not only spur financial accountability, but also spiritual accountability.

Thank you and God bless.