



THE MODERN CHURCH: IMPERATIVES

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I'll like to thank Pastor Poju Oyemade and the management of Covenant Christian Centre once more for inviting me to speak at this conference.

Churches are critical to developing economies. They constitute the social security system. They're the ones who take street urchins aka "area boys" off the streets; they reach out to sex workers, act as ameliorators for mental health challenges, organise job seminars and placements, organise conferences for SMEs, set up hospitals, set up schools, feed the hungry, take care of drug addicts... They provide scholarships, clothing and accommodation for the poor, motivate the youths, teach them values... When people disparage churches and pastors because of the perpendicular misalignment of a few pastors I realise they don't know the critical role churches play in a nation like Nigeria for example. There's that hypothesis the proliferation of churches in Nigeria seems inversely proportional to the values of society. But think about it... If things are this bad despite the churches imagine how things would be without the churches. We will live in a Hobbesian state.

The privilege about being a pastor is that pastors are professionally entrusted with shaping the mores and values of society. You shape the thinking of generations. What an honour!

What I want to do in this lecture is challenge the ecclesiastical class. There are gaps we must pay attention to.

As I prepared for this lecture I felt a tug in a definite direction. The impression I got was that our topic is so broad I can only deal with foundational stuff. This lecture is more like an introduction.

I want to begin my lecture by recalling a visit to a senior pastor. The circumstances of my invite have faded from my memory but I went in a professional capacity. I went as a consultant. The man of God knew something wasn't right with his ministry but he couldn't place his hands on it. Nothing prepared me for the feeling I encountered as I stepped into that ministry. It felt like I had stepped into a time warp. Something felt dated and it troubled my spirit. Turns out the son of the pastor attends another church. He can't relate to his father's church. That church had a generational challenge, which is an irony considering the provenance of that ministry. The ministry was an offshoot of a generational move of God. It emerged from the second wave of the word of faith movement of the 1980s.

As I spoke to the pastor I had this impression he had gone to bed one night and woke up the next morning in an unknown destination, like in the middle of a desert. He had no coordinates. It's a place many pastors have found themselves. It's why you have patent fear.

As I analysed my visit I progressed my thought on the state of the church. I realised the modern church has four critical challenges. The four challenges are:

1. The challenge of formula
2. The challenge of intellectualism
3. The challenge of public relations
4. The challenge of politics

These challenges are relatable to the yearnings of the youths. As per formulaic approach to ministry the youths would rather authenticity. As per scholarship they want intelligibility on theological issues. As per public relations they want sensitivity

from pastors. And as per governance and politics they're concerned about the state of their nation, what the future holds.

I'll take the issues one by one.

The first challenge is a formulaic approach to ministry. Many pastors simply copy what obtains in other ministries without reference to their individual mandate. Yet the pattern we have in scriptures is individual mandate. Individual mandate takes into cognisance the background, education and personality of the minister. It's what determines the thrust of a ministry. The mandate of Peter is different from that of Paul for the simple reason Peter was a provincial fisherman while Paul was an educated intellectual. Paul had a wider worldview. He understood culture. It's why he ended up heading the international headquarters at Antioch. Peter had marooned himself to the national headquarters in Jerusalem, but he did have opportunity for international ministry. Remember God showed him a vision of a wide sheet descending from heaven – the one full of unclean animals. We were the unclean animals on that sheet. He never ate from the sheet as directed by God. Turns out that was the second intimation of international ministry. Pentecost was the first. The reason international languages were spoken at Pentecost was because Christianity was going to go international. Peter didn't cue in.

The reason pastors copy pastors is many times because of lack of self-belief. The question of self esteem and self confidence comes into play. And as pastors copied pastors, especially the successful churches, a prevalent template emerged. Groupthink developed. Invariably an Orwellian "pastor-speak" emerged. Pastor-speak is the language of pastors. Put on your TV on Sunday or tune to TBN any given day and you'll see

pastor after pastor saying the same thing, employing the same mannerisms, deploying the same dictionary, using the same syntax. The punch lines are predictable. They're as predictable as Alleluia after Praise the Lord. It's almost like watching a Chinese movie. You know once that guy says "Good morning" there's going to be fight. It's this formulaic approach to ministry that makes it easy for charlatans to set up churches. They just duplicate mannerisms. And the people can't tell the difference. They've been conditioned.

When it's formulaic there's no freshness of spirit. Formula robs a ministry of authenticity. The youths want authenticity. They want you the pastor, your perspective, they want your story, your imperfections. They want a pastor they can relate to. And they need answers – genuine answers on questions of purpose, sexuality, success, relationship and nationhood. In search of these answers some youths have left church and joined alternative fellowships. Unfortunately some of those gatherings are syncretisms of eastern spiritism and Christianity. There are now Christians who say they believe in Jesus but don't believe in the Bible, or church. They're exploring universalism.

The danger of regurgitation of the sermons of other pastors is that it gives the impression the revelation of God is over. We make God seem like that lecturer who has been dictating the same lesson notes year after year, irrespective of advances in his field. We're still preaching the same sermons Kenneth Hagin preached, along with the mistakes. And there were mistakes. But the knowledge of God is supposed to be progressive.

A formulaic approach to ministry can't address emerging trends and issues. There's no template to deploy, and so when the context changes, or culture changes the ministry is left in a

lurch. We need to stop lazy pastoring. We need to go back to our individual mandates. If we do every other thing but don't fulfil that mandate the ministry is a failure.

Now, please I am by no means condemning the ministry of Kenneth Hagin. Kenneth Hagin served God in his generation. He dealt with the issues of his day. Thank God for that ministry. Kenneth Hagin preached the fundamentals of faith. For a specialised ministry that is okay but not for a church. A church has to have a more rounded syllabus. A church has to address issues Kenneth Hagin was not mandated to address. Brother Hagin was a specialist and technicalist. He specialised in the subject of faith.

A church can't for example keep preaching the fundamentals of faith. The congregation won't grow spiritually. It's basic stuff. Paul told us, "Let us stop going over the basic teachings about Christ again and again. Let us go on instead and become mature in our understanding. Surely we don't need to start again with the fundamental importance of repenting from evil deeds and placing our faith in God. You don't need further instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And so, God willing, we will move forward to further understanding." Hebrews 6:1-3 NLT.

Let me illustrate how we're stuck in a rut. Hebrews 11:1 defines faith as "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." Kenneth Hagin took a deconstructivist approach to that passage, broke it down for primary application. But the church doesn't seem to have moved past Hebrews 11:1. We totally ignore the remaining 39 verses of Hebrews 11. The over arching definition of faith in that passage as enumerated by the Amplified Bible is "inherent trust in God, the enduring confidence in the power, wisdom and goodness of

God". That definition incorporates trials and suffering. But we don't want trials so we don't move near verses 36-38. Those verses talk about gruesome persecution – being stoned, being whipped, being sawed in half, being murdered. The reason we don't preach those verses is because they don't fit into our one-dimensional narrative of faith. We major on acquisitive dimension of faith – getting a car, getting a husband, obtaining visa to America... Those verses talk about the gruesome persecution of Christians by the Roman government. It started in AD 67 under Emperor Nero and lasted 200 years. Nero burnt down Rome and laid the blame on Christians. The man was so horrible he would sew Christians in the skins of wild animals and sic dogs on them till they died from exhaustion. Nero poured wax on Christians, fixed them to axletrees and set them on fire to illuminate his gardens. He turned Christians into human torches.

The danger in this selective preaching of faith is that we're breeding Christians who are totally unprepared for the political reality of Christianity. They don't know trials. They can't relate to the history of the church. We're creating Demand and Supply Christians.

I am not saying we shouldn't teach about the acquisitive dimension of faith. What I'm saying is that we need to teach the full gospel.

Let's look at the second challenge – the challenge of intellectualism.

Inadvertently pastors are reinforcing the notion Christianity is anti-intellect. We're labelling the use of intellect anti-faith, anti-Spirit and carnal. That is a troubling misrepresentation of Paul's

submission on faith and intellect. If at all, what Paul was advocating in his letter to the Corinthians was recourse to higher intellect – the type only God possesses. He said in effect God’s lowest IQ point is higher than Einstein’s. God’s foolishness is wiser than men. 1 Corinthians 1:25.

The first casualty of this anti-intellectual stance is our theology. Our theology has been robbed of intellectual depth. It’s why we have a lazy definition of the logos. Someone long ago taught that “logos” means “written word” and “rhema” means “spoken word” and the over-simplification stuck. But until you dive into the history of philosophy you can’t fully understand what John was alluding to when he said Jesus is the logos and that “all things were made by him; and without him was nothing made that was made.” John 1:3. We can’t even fully appreciate John!

The concept of the logos predates Christianity by 500 years. The guy who originally propounded the concept was an eccentric philosopher named Heraclitus (c.535-c.475). In the conception of Heraclitus the logos is the organising principle of the cosmos. The brilliance of John was the intellectual leap he made, stating that that logos is not just a principle but is in fact a personage. And that his name is Jesus. Without scholarship we can’t preach the full gospel.

We run into a similar problem with another one of John’s statements – 1 John 4:2: “This is how you can recognise the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God...” As young Christians casting out demons on campus we’d often ask the demon manifesting if Jesus came in the flesh! Of course the demons would say yes, Jesus came in the flesh, and that used to puzzle me. It seemed contrary to scripture. Because of the knowledge I have now I realise that was a dead giveaway to the demon we didn’t understand scriptures, that we had no clue what we were

talking about. What John was talking about was the heresy of docetic gnosticism. That heresy denies the bodily manifestation of Jesus, says it was a mere semblance the apostles saw. Which is why John wrote, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the word of life." 1 John 1:1.

Gnosticism was the greatest threat to Christianity at the time of the Apostles. It still is. Only now it has morphed into other forms and religions; including New Age. When you hear people call themselves Jesus Christ that is Gnosticism manifesting, the Cerinthian heresy version. Cerinthian heresy says Jesus went to Egypt to learn the art of Egyptians. That heresy claims that the "Christ" is a consciousness that descended on Jesus at baptism but left him just before crucifixion. It says that consciousness can alight on other individuals.

Almost all the prominent religions in the world are based on Gnostic doctrine. It's permeated media, academia and literature. Those funny documentaries about Jesus on National Geographic or Discovery Channel are gnostic heresy. The DaVinci Code is gnostic heresy. The so called Gospel of Thomas is gnostic heresy. The heresy has a seduction. It says salvation comes from enlightenment, which is exactly what the serpent told Eve. But my big point is, poor scholarship, poor theology.

Pentecostals in particular are very fond of poor scholarship. Our theology tends to be summaries. We specialise in fast food theology. In propagating fast food theology we end up breeding poor intellect in church. We somehow imagine intellectual docility is discipleship. We're training people to suspend their faculty at the door of the church. But such people are a danger to the pastor. They will turn out to be yes men who will take

anything the pastor says, irrespective of the position of scriptures. It's so easy for the pastor to fall into error under such circumstances. Abuse of power becomes feasible and control becomes a temptation to the pastor.

There's a reason Jesus went for critical thinkers like Paul. There's a reason God raised graduates to become pastors. The Holy Spirit is an intellectual. If he's not he couldn't have influenced the writings of Paul. It would mean Paul is more brilliant than the Holy Spirit. An unthinking, uncritical and unexamining generation of Christians is a danger to their faith and a danger to their nation.

Poor scholarship affects the body. The church suffered when the issue of tithe arose because many pastors could not articulate the position of scriptures on tithing. The debate escalated into personal attacks and spiritual threats. And yet the Bible says we must always "be ready to give a logical defence to anyone who asks you to account for the hope and confident assurance that is within you. But do this in a gentle and respectful way." 1 Peter 3:15 AMP. The people weren't tithing from knowledge. They were tithing from fear. They didn't understand the covenantal basis of tithing. They couldn't distinguish legislative tithing under the law, from worshipful tithing by Abraham, from covenantal tithing by Jacob. Perhaps if we had taught the people New Testament giving many churches will not be in the dilemma they're in right now.

The anti-intellectual stance of the church is creating a crisis of faith in the youth church as well. The kids can't reconcile Genesis with science. For some reason there's an unexamined belief science is opposed to God, which is really hogwash. Concerning Jesus Colossians 2:3 tells us, "In him lies hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" – be it nuclear physics, molecular biology, organic chemistry, cosmology,

quantum mechanics, computer science or cosmology... Truth is you can't fully understand Genesis 1 and 2 without studying quantum mechanics and cosmology. The genius of God is that he wrote difficult science in prose, reduced it to folklore. One of the things we should be teaching in Children's Church is the Periodic Table. It's a great tool for teaching Genesis. It explains how the elements in the early universe were formed. Don't just say the Big Bang theory is wrong. That's an ideological stance. That theory is one of the greatest proofs of Genesis. It proves the universe has a beginning. That was a big debate in science, and the idea didn't come from an atheist it came from a reverend father – a physicist named Father Georges Lemaitre (pro. Lo-may-tri). Every time you tune your radio and you hear cackles that's part of the faint glow from the cosmic background radiation in the early universe. It's the sound of Genesis. Those wild grainy dots on your TV... They're partly static from Genesis.

Science can't be opposed to God. God created science. Some scientists are opposed to God no doubt – just as there are geologists who are opposed to God, and doctors who are opposed to God, and lawyers who are opposed to God, and even reverends who are opposed to God. But science can never oppose God. Science is the methodical discovery of God's intellect, an exploration of his personage.

There are five conceptual manifestations of God in scriptures – God the Government, God the Compassionate, God the Financier, God the Commander-in-Chief and God the Scientist; and yet the first impression God wants us to have of him is that of a scientist. That's the God we met in Genesis. He's a creative genius. A 21st century church can't be effective without scholarship. Let there be scholarship.

And now the third challenge.

Pastors are not public relations savvy. Which is rather surprising considering that the gospel is public relations. Pastors tend to lack sensitivity to society. Perhaps the reason this is so is because pastors don't live on earth. They live in the heavenly places. It explains why many youths struggle to relate to pastors. Pastors don't relate at street level. They talk from on high. Jesus recognised this would pose a challenge to him as high priest, so he came down to earth to experience humanity. "For we do not have a High Priest who is unable to sympathise and understand our weaknesses and temptations, but one who has been tempted, knowing exactly how it feels to be human in every respect as we are, yet without committing any sin." Hebrews 4:15 AMP. A good pastor is human, a great pastor has humanity.

Here's the challenge. We're in the age of interactivity – the social media age. It's important to understand the mechanics of this age lest you imperil your ministry. In this age everyone is a publisher, everyone is a broadcaster. It's why everyone records and broadcasts services. The mobile phone enables that. The operative scripture is Psalm 68:11 – "The Lord gave the word: great is the company of those that published it."

The grave implication of this reality is that the church is now open. Church is more or less like a glass box now. There are no concrete walls. What you say in church can go viral in less than five minutes. We're in the era of open church. It's why you need to watch your utterance. You have to have sensitivity. You have to be aware of context. Where there's mass poverty there has to be a sensitivity to context. You don't want to provoke envy and ill feelings. It will affect the work. There'll be a blow back. Pastors who lack public relations sensitivity misbrand themselves. And the internet never forgets. And please when

you're accused of a malfeasance don't double down. Respond with wisdom. You will harm your ministry otherwise. You can't function in the social media age without environmental sensitivity. You'll play into the hands of the accuser.

The last challenge is with regards church and politics.

The prominent thing here is the ill-preparedness of the church. That ill-preparedness manifests every election cycle. We usually get into the fray usually three months to election. We never prepare, we never plan long term.

The operative principle of the order of Melchizedek is that the church plays at the intersection of the priesthood and the kingship. We pray and strategise. The sons of Issachar weren't stargazers or a spiritual enclave. They were analysts, researchers and strategists. They worked with data, analysed trends, developed anticipatory strategies. It's why the Bible says they understood the signs of the times. They understood political equations. It's why they aligned with David. 1 Chronicles 12:32.

When it comes to politics the naivety of the church is troubling. When a politician graces a Christian convention you can be sure he didn't come to listen to Hallelujah Chorus. He wants endorsement. He's come to negotiate. He needs your numbers. But because the church has no agenda it ends up being a one-sided negotiation. Pastors are only too happy to have access to politicians. To what end?

Democracy is a game of numbers. The church never leverages her numeric value. Christians will rather pray people out of power than participate in politics. The Bible says that when a

demon is chased out and he realises the place has been swept clean he goes and brings seven meaner demons. That probably explains the Nigerian situation.

It's a shame some Christians are still wondering whether to participate in politics or not. In 2019?! There are issues from thirty-five years ago. When I was in university a Christian brother named Soji Omole ran for Students Union President. He was a charismatic and absolutely brilliant fellow, but the Christians had a huge challenge supporting him. And he needed them to win. They weren't sure a Christian should participate in student union politics. They set aside a day to pray on the issue – the very day of the elections. They gathered in the sports arena. They finished praying at 6pm. The elections ended at 5pm. Soji lost but the Christians were happy they had prayed. How can righteousness exalt a nation when the righteous won't participate in governance? If we don't encourage the congregants to participate in politics we may wake up one morning and find that the Bible has been declared hate speech. If you doubt look around.

So here's the summary:

1. Execute your individual mandate
2. Preach sound theology
3. Be sensitive to context
4. Understand the political terrain

I want to thank you for listening. May God bless your ministry.