



The Church And Ethical Issues

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ABSTRACT

Reflections on ethics is a perennial responsibility of the Church in view of her significant roles in nation building. The church is described as the light and the salt of the world. Accordingly, it should be a model for, and a guide to, the world. Thus the Paper, “The Church and Ethical Issues,” is a contribution to nation building. The paper makes three categorical affirmations about the Church and ethics, namely: 1) The Church is an Ethical Organization; 2) The Church Should Uphold Ethical Monotheism; and 3) Ethics is a Reflection of an Authentic Church. Also, the paper examines four ethical issues with reference to the Church, namely: 1) Corruption; 2) Materialism; 3) Inordinate Ambition for Positions; and 4) Poverty. The goal of the paper is to promote a Church that is more committed to ethics and thus help to make the Nigerian society better.

Keywords: Church, Ethics, Corruption, Materialism

INTRODUCTION

We are living in a time of great moral disorientation. More and more people are abandoning moral principles for various reasons. The society is becoming increasingly more permissive. In this development, the Church has a critical role to play in stemming the tide of moral permissiveness. This is the rationale for this paper. It is an attempt to reflect on the Church in the Nigerian context with the view of affirming the Church as a significant partner in progress with the state in creating a better society. In other words, the Paper, “The Church and Ethical Issues,” dovetails on the ideological framework of nation building with reference to ethics. The paper makes three categorical affirmations about the Church and ethics, namely: 1) The Church is an Ethical Organization; 2) The Church Should Uphold Ethical Monotheism; and 3) Ethics is a Reflection of an Authentic Church. Also, the paper reflects on four Ethical issues with reference to the Church, namely: 1) Corruption; 2) Materialism; 3) Inordinate Ambition for Positions; and 4) Poverty.

Undoubtedly, Nigeria is undergoing great changes and crises. Thus a reflection on the Church in the context of the nation is necessary in order to enhance her effectiveness in contributing to nation building. We are living in a time of ethical confusion and perversion. Ethical norms are being jettisoned increasingly. Practices frowned at some years back are being perpetuated with impunity. Carl F. Henry elucidates on the moral collapse of the contemporary society and one of its attendant effects thus:

The severance of ethics from fixed values and standards, ardently promoted by John Dewey and the naturalists, has brought moral chaos. Theological sanctions discarded, the modern man covets only social, and sometimes only individual, approval of his behaviour.... One fact is certain: simultaneous with this relativity of moral imperatives, human life has lost its worth. The soul-
nausea and dread of modern man has reached depths unknown even to the ancient Greek skeptic. The sense of cosmic lostness and of personal insignificance frames modern man’s window in life.¹

Henry further notes: “Our generation not only flaunts its iniquities before men; it actually approves those who delight in them”² Against the backdrop of the moral crisis of the contemporary society, the Church should come to the rescue. Accordingly, the Church should engage ethical issues more than ever before. This is the thrust of the paper.

Three Categorical Affirmations On The Church And Ethical Issues

1. The Church is an Ethical Organization: The Church is a composite of people who have been redeemed, a new humanity, the people of God. While members are not perfect and are growing in their understanding and manifestations of the reality of being God’s people, they are different from the rest of the society as they are transformed and are expected to be agents of transformation of the society (Matt. 5:13-16; I Peter 2:9-10). It can be affirmed that the distillation of the Bible is change and that is why II Cor. 5:17 is an apt summary of the Bible thus: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come; the old has gone; the new is here!”

Consequently, the Church must of necessity be concerned about ethics. Indeed, the Church should set ethical standard for the society. The Bible is replete about the ethical reflection of the Christian faith. For example, James 1:27 affirms: “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” Indeed from the Old Testament perspective, one major reason for God punishing His people is their failure to obey His ethical requirements – not treating widows and orphans justly, robbing the poor, maltreating the slave and the stranger (cf. Amos 2:6-8; Isaiah 58:1-7). It is significant to assert that while we live in the dispensation of grace, God’s ethical requirements for His people are never abrogated by grace. God is a holy God and He demands righteousness and holiness from His people (1 Peter 1:14-16), the infringement of which has great consequences.

2. The Church should Uphold Ethical Monotheism: Ethical Monotheism is one of the legacies of the Jews to the world. Against the historical background of great and obnoxious idolatrous and immoral practices of the nations out of which Judaism was birthed, Ethical Monotheism is one of the greatest teachings and revelations that have come to humanity. The concept underscores the worship of the one and only true God who demands high ethical standards of those who worship Him without which He may discountenance their worship and even judge them. In view of its Judaistic background, Christianity should uphold ethical monotheism. It was noted at the beginning of the paper that the context of the Nigeria State is crises and moral perversion. Carl’s description of the contemporary generation is apposite: “The fibers of morality have disintegrated in society, in fact, because they first deteriorated in the family.”³ Consequently, Ethical Monotheism is a teaching the Church should emphasize in the contemporary time to redeem herself, to make her ministry more effective and to help stem the tide of the moral confusion and perversion of the present generation.

3. Ethics is a Reflection of an Authentic Church: Ethics can be described as the practical application of doctrine. Thus a doctrinally pure church will of necessity be an ethnically sound church. This is the consistent biblical pattern. For instance, in the great theological book of Romans, Apostle Paul elucidates on theological themes in chapters 1-11. Then chapter 12 opens: “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will” (vs. 1-2). The clear linkage is that a true understanding of theological truths must produce practical Christian living that is acceptable to God, honors Him in the world and results in holiness, righteousness and peace thus producing better individuals, more peaceful families and a more conducive atmosphere for a great society that would fulfill God’s purpose to reward the good and punish evil. The extent to which a church is an ethical church, to that extent she is a reflection of a doctrinal church. Thus to divorce ethics from doctrine is to be disoriented with the biblical pattern, to manifest ignorance of the true nature of God and the essence of the Church as a redeemed community and to make the Church a caricature thus negatively impacting her witness and relevance in the world. Having

discussed the three categorical affirmations about the Church and ethics, the paper will now reflect on four ethical issues with reference to the Church.

4. In relation to the ethical issues to be discussed, the Church should emphasize normative ethics. According to Norman I. Geisler, “A normative ethic is one which is prescriptive rather than merely descriptive. It is an ethic which commands certain courses of action as opposed to others. A normative ethics does not merely describe how men do act; rather, it prescribes how they ought to act.”⁴ Geisler also adds: “Normative ethics is categorical and not hypothetical. It is the ethic of commands, not of conditions.... It is the ethic of the imperative and not the subjective mood.”⁵ This can be otherwise described as a universal norm which “applies to all morally responsible creatures in any given situation.”⁶ The Bible emphasizes absolutes and the Church should identify with the emphasis.

The Church And Ethical Issues

(a) The Church and Corruption

In discussing the Church and corruption, three basic assertions are apposite. Corruption is a great clog in the wheel of the progress of the nation, a major factor for the inability to actualize the potential greatness of the nation. As a significant organization in the nation, therefore, one great contribution the Church can make is in the fight against corruption. The Church should be more committed to this crucial role in the nation in view of the pervasive and endemic nature of corruption in Nigeria.

Reflecting the global dimension of corruption, Norman Shields observes: “The world is afflicted with a great number of corrupt practices. Bribery is one of the most common and one of the most damaging,”⁷ Commenting on the dangers of corruption, Shields adds:

Evil is an essential elements of all bribery. It is impossible to give or receive bribery without being corrupted by it. Bribery is corruption.

1. It is gross selfishness.
2. It degrades those who practice it.
3. It perverts justice.
4. It estranges the guilty from God.⁸

With reference to Nigeria, Adeyeye Oyedodun notes that corruption has eaten very deep into the fabric of the nation and opines on its dangers thus: “The vices brought about (by) pervasive corruption is better imagined than experienced. Today there is insecurity, kidnapping, ritualism etc. in the country because in the face of high level of corruption, the nation’s leaders seem to get involved in mismanagement.”⁹ Similarly, Zeka P. Ahuche writes on the social consequences of corruption thus:

Corruption has been the major obstacle to development because it does not only weaken the efficiency of the developmental efforts but undermines justice and weakens democracy. It also makes the rich richer, supports dictatorship, and hampers good human relation as it results to human right abuses in all its forms. Even our infrastructure bears eloquent testimony to this reign of decadence. Almost nothing works in Nigeria today.¹⁰

Among others, good governance is imperative to reduce corruption in the nation. M. M. Goel notes in this regard: “currently, the term ‘good governance’ is being increasingly used in development literature. Bad governance is being regarded as one of the root causes of all the evils within our societies.”¹¹ Goel adds that “we can call a government a good government if it gives SMART administration – Simple, Moral, Accountable, Responsive and Transparent.”¹² He further isolates issues in good governance thus:¹³

- Participation
- Rule of Law
- Transparency
- Responsiveness
- Consensus Oriented
- Equity and Inclusiveness

Effectiveness and Efficiency
Accountability

It is evident that Nigeria has to take the issue of good governance more seriously to address the menace of corruption which is a great stumbling block to the progress and development of the nation.

To be more effective in assisting the government to fight corruption, the Church should purge herself of corrupt practices so that she can show a good example to the society, command the respect of the nation and have the moral right to speak against corruption in the nation. In practical terms, the steps the Church can take in reducing corruption include the following:

- i. Teach members the evils and dangers of corruption;
- ii. Encourage members not to engage in corruption;
- iii. Refrain from incessant requests of politicians to make donations for church projects;
- iv. Inquire about members whose sudden wealth and/or contributions to the church is suspect;
- v. Refrain from giving too much attention to rich members of the church;
- vi. Resist the temptation of rich people who want to control the church, especially to do things that are against the Bible or contrary to Christian principles;
- vii. Serve as a prophetic community by becoming part of the conscience of the nation the more, especially in speaking against corruption in the nation;
- viii. Support members who are political leaders in their struggles and temptation not to engage in corruption;
- ix. Work with some other organizations periodically for joint actions against corruption as may be necessary;
- x. Enhance intelligence and data collection for more meaningful actions against corruption;
- xi. Promote advocacy against corruption and sponsor, through members in the legislative chambers, anti-corruption bills for the progress of the nation.

(b) The Church and Materialism

Materialism, the excessive desire for material possessions, is a causative factor for many of the social ills in the nation today such as corruption, prostitution, armed robbery, and ritual killing. Sadly and unfortunately, the scourge of materialism has found its way into the Church. As an ethical issue, in addition to being a causative factor for many social evils, materialism also promotes cheating, payment of unfair, unjust and abysmally low wages, widening of the gap between the rich and the poor, tension and even violence in the society, jealousy, hatred, enmity and unnecessary competition. These practices generally impede people from living authentic lives, affect family life negatively and create an unconducive atmosphere for the peace, progress, prosperity and ultimate greatness of the nation.

Again, practical suggestions for the Church to reduce materialism include the following:

- i) Leaders and members should inculcate a more simple lifestyle individually;
- ii) Churches should teach and encourage a life of contentment which the Bible affirms is a great gain (1 Timothy 6:6);
- iii) While wealth is good and members should be encouraged to have it, the backlash and dangers of ill-gotten wealth especially should be underscored by the Church perennially;
- iv) Churches should refrain from making excessive demands of members;
- v) Churches should encourage a balanced presentation of the gospel and avoid the extreme of prosperity gospel;
- vi) Churches should resist the temptation of giving preferential treatment to the rich especially in matters of position and discipline (cf. James);
- vii) Churches should emphasize discipleship the more so that members can inculcate the mind of Christ and reflect His disposition to wealth acquisition and usage.
- viii) Churches should promote entrepreneurship among members, help to empower the low income members and encourage wealth redistribution among members.

(c) The Church and Inordinate Ambition for Positions

Inordinate ambition for positions, especially among ministers, is another problem besetting many churches and denominations today. While human beings have always been God's instruments, inordinate ambition for positions in the Church is a problem. As an ethical issue, among others, it makes church people to employ worldly methods in seeking for positions such as distortion of facts, character assassination and threat to life. Also, it causes disaffection among brethren and impacts the testimony of the Church in the world negatively.

The following suggestions will help in addressing the problem of inordinate ambition for positions in the Church, especially among ministers:

- i) Ministers should be true and committed to the gospel and its proclamation being the primary reason for coming into the ministry.
 - ii) Those who seek positions should surrender to God's will in the process. Subsequently, they should accept the result of the process in good faith and work with the new leader to move the organization/denomination forward to the glory of God.
 - iii) They should refrain from carnal and worldly methods such as campaigning, running other contestants down, and exerting pressure on committee members through their supporters.
 - iv) Soul searching is necessary on the part of contestants - to examine their motive and to ascertain their capability for the office being contested for.
 - v) Those who midwife the process of the emergence of the new leader should be fair and objective, bold and courageous, trustworthy and godly.
 - vi) Subject to the process of selection in a given context, present leaders should beware of having a candidate among the contestants which may create feelings of distrust and/or animosity after the new leader emerges.
- (d) The Church and Poverty

Poverty is another serious problem in Africa and it affects members of the Church as well. "Poverty has been variously viewed as a burden, a curse, a disaster and a yoke, among others."¹⁴ Segun Adegboye defines poverty as: "(An) economic condition in which people lack sufficient income to obtain contain minimal levels of health services, food, housing, clothing and education generally recognized as necessary to ensure an adequate standard of living."¹⁵ Similarly, according to I. Johnson Mobolaji; "Poverty is the opposite of wealth. It is a state of lack and want... (Poverty is) lacking basic necessities of life such as clothing, shelter, food and so on."¹⁶ "Thus poverty is characterized by lack of means to meet basic needs and obligations, inability or difficulty in meeting financial responsibilities and substandard living within context."¹⁷ This description of poverty underscores its burdensomeness on millions of people in and outside the Church. In addition to the problems poverty causes for individuals and families, its cumulative effects also rob on the development of the Church and the progress of the nation.

As an ethical issue, poverty affects the quality of life of the poor, brings a terrible burden on families and contributes to the backwardness of the nation. Accordingly, the Church should be more actively involved in reducing poverty among members and even in the society at large. To this end, the Church should do the following in reducing the level of poverty:

- i) Challenge members to desist from personal habits and lifestyle which contribute to poverty such as laziness, wrong investment and wastage.
- ii) Pay fair wages as an employer of labor to employees and workers and thus set a good example for others.
- iii) Organize workshops and seminars on skill acquisition for members to enhance their income as well as their financial empowerment and independence.
- iv) Organize and/or strengthen pooling of resources schemes such as cooperative society and joint contributions.
- v) Link members with organizations that can give information and resources for starting small scale businesses.
- vi) Challenge members in position of influence and authority to give consideration to members when vacancies open in their establishments without compromising merit;

- vii) Be realistic about church projects and be considerate in demands on especially low income members.
- viii) Discourage elaborate spending during celebrations such as weddings and funerals.
- ix) Challenge governments to embark on pro-people projects and policies.
- x) Organize a financial consortium of members to give periodic information and advice on savings, investment portfolios, real estates and money management schemes.
- xi) Encourage the reduction of the gap between the rich and the poor both among members and in the larger society. This can be done by encouraging interest free loan and grants for poorer members to start small businesses, sponsoring skill acquisition and financial training, donation of money and materials for low income members especially during crises, and raising support for members in need, among others. The church as an organization can also be involved in some of these efforts.

It is significant to reiterate that reducing poverty level is one of the most important ways the Church can contribute to national development. Reciprocally, the Church herself would benefit sequel to the financial empowerment of members. In addition, the standard of living would improve across board, compounding the improvement of average life expectancy, the health of families, the Church and the nation. Poverty is a great burden in Africa and the poverty circle is a terrible yoke. The Church should not only show greater concern about the burden and yoke of poverty, but should be move actively involved in lifting the burden and breaking the yoke of poverty in Africa.

CONCLUSION

The paper has made three categorical affirmations about the Church and ethics and examined four ethical issues especially in relation to the Church. In view of the moral degradation of the contemporary society and its ethical disorientation, the Church is the bastion of hope in the ethical wilderness of the nation. Consequently, the Church should be very strong on ethics. Also, the Church should take ethical issues and principles more seriously than ever before. Thereby, the Church would be a better example to the society and a greater blessing to the nation.

ENDNOTES

¹ Carl F.H. Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: baker Book House, 1979) 13.

² Henry, 14.

³ Henry.

⁴ Norman I. Geisler, *Ethics: Alternatives & Issues* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Zondervan Publishing House 1975), 21.

⁵ Geisler, 22.

⁶ Geisler, 23.

⁷ Norman Shields, *Christian Ethics* (Bukuru: African Textbook 2004), 183.

⁸ Shields, 189-190.

⁹ Adeyeye Oyedokun, *Corruption in Nigeria* (Osogbo: Atman Limited, n.d.), 57.

¹⁰ Zaka P. Ahuche, *Curbing Corruption in Nigeria: A Necessity and A Reality* (Ilorin: Gosh Impressions, 2013), 69.

¹¹ M.M. Goel, "Good Governance: Philosophical and Empirical Perspectives," *Integrity and Values in Public Service*, Ramesh K. Arora, ed. (New Delhi: New Age Int. Limited, 2014), 402.

¹² Goel.

¹³ Goel, 403-406.

¹⁴ Simon A. Kolawole, "The Minister's Home and Poverty," *The Minister and His Home*, Helen Oyekanmi, ed. (Oyo: Baptist College of Theology 2016), 298.

¹⁵ Segun Adegboyega, *27 Secrets Behind Financial Hardship* (Lagos: Ayanlola Positive Printers, 2007), 1.

¹⁶ I. Johnson Mobolaji, *Theology of Wealth with Illustrations from the Word of God* (Ibadan: Duti Press, 2013), 3.

¹⁷ Kolawole, 299.