

Evangelical Review of Theology

A Global Forum

GENERAL EDITOR: THOMAS SCHIRRMACHER

Volume 41 • Number 1 • January 2017

Published by



for
WORLD EVANGELICAL
ALLIANCE
Theological Commission

The Church as a Civil Society: An African Ecclesiology

Emiola Nihinlola

I Introduction

The doctrine of the church is an important study for at least two reasons. *First*, in Systematic Theology, which is the particular area of theological preoccupation of the writer, ecclesiology (the doctrine of the church) is the bridge between soteriology (the doctrine of salvation) and missiology (the doctrine of Christian missions). According to Millard Erickson, biblically speaking, 'conversion leads the individual into fellowship of a group of believers. That collective dimension of the Christian life we call the church.'¹ Church experience is thus indissolubly bound to salvation experience. And a very important part of church life is church work or mission.

Second, ecclesiology is of particular interest to evangelical theological institutions and instructions. Research topics at post-graduate levels in Systematic Theology in the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary from middle 1990s have focused particularly on the

theology of the church. The doctrine of the church is actually one of special interest to Baptists. This is because, historically and practically, Baptists are a group of protestant, evangelical Christians with particular ecclesiological conviction and sacramental persuasion. Some of the fundamental pillars of the Baptist faith have to do with the doctrine of the life and work of the church. Examples are regenerate church membership, ordinances of baptism and Lord's Supper, church polity that is both local (congregational) and connectional (advisory bodies—association, conference, convention/union and alliance).

II The Use of a Theological Model

This paper is an attempt to explore the topic, 'The Church as a Civil Society', by the use of a theological model. In systematic theology, a model (image, figure) is a valid methodology for a theological discourse. Down through the ages, the church has been studied with the aid of models. The models of the church are of diverse categories: bibli-

1 Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1998), 1036.

cal, religious, philosophical, cultural, social and political. A few examples may be cited:

- The people of God, the body of Christ, the bride of Christ, the building of God, the kingdom of God, the family of God, the flock of God and the vineyard of God.²
- The temple of the Holy Spirit³
- Political society, communion of saints, servant, theocentric community, mother, ancestral mediation, clan.⁴

From the viewpoint of linguistic analysis, 'the church as a civil society', is a simile. The church is not really a civil society, but it can be studied as a civil society. Philosophically, however, a model is an approximate symbolic language to describe a reality. Useful as it is, a model has certain limitations as it cannot usually completely or adequately represent its object. It will be understood, then, that this model will reflect that deficiency.

The church as a civil society is a socio-political model to examine some civic responsibilities of the body of Christ in contemporary Africa. This paper is thus an attempt to develop an ecclesiology that is contextually, 'contemporarily' African. It can be said to be an exercise in political theology (theology of public and corporate life), as well as liberation theology (ecclesio-

logical interpretation from the perspective of injustice, disintegration, disconnectedness, hostility and alienation).

Some scholars like Matthew Lamb think that liberation theologies are meant for the Third World countries while political theologies are for western cultures.⁵ Contrary to that opinion this paper, as an African socio-political theology, borrows some elements from both liberation and political theologies. A clarification may be made at this juncture, namely, that the paper does not endorse the use of Marxist categories and methods like the use of violence to press for societal development.

The paper will begin with a discussion of the nature of the church as a civil society. This will be followed by an examination of the task of the church as a civil society in Africa today. Particular attention will be given to Nigerian socio-political context.

III The Nature of the Church as a Civil Society

What does it mean to talk about the church as a civil society? The starting point is to consider the meaning of the world 'church'. Among several other possibilities, I think of the church as the assembly of Christian believers called by God the Father from the world, saved by the Lord Jesus Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Every local church is a representative and expression (rightly, poorly or oth-

2 Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1998), 260-265.

3 Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1049-1051.

4 John O. Enyinnaya, 'Ecclesiology through the Centuries: A Critical Assessment of Historical Paradigms of the Church', *Contemporary Issues in Systematic Theology: An African Christian Perspective* (Ibadan: Sceptre Prints Ltd, 2011), 65-97.

5 Matthew L. Lamb, 'Political Theology', in David F. Wright, Sinclair B. Ferguson, and James I. Packer (eds), *The New Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 1988), 772-779.

erwise) of the universal church.

Theologians and practitioners approach the life, functions or purposes of the church in different ways. For Erickson, the functions of the church are evangelism, edification, worship and social concern.⁶ On the other hand Wayne Grudem considers the purposes of the church to be ministry to God, ministry to believers and ministry to the world.⁷ The threefold ministry of the church is sometimes described as 'up reach', 'in reach', and 'outreach'. For this author, the essential, major functions of the church are worship, fellowship, discipleship, stewardship, ministry and mission.

Usually, the mission/task of the church is an integral aspect of the nature of the church. In socio-political terms the mission of the church includes social ministry and action (to the poor, prisoners, the blind and oppressed—economically and politically as seen in the manifesto of Jesus Christ, Luke 4:18, 19). We observe that the traditional statements of models and mission tasks of the church are mostly socially cautious, economically hesitant and politically evasive. The task of the church in society is usually discussed from the perspectives of evangelism and social ministry with particular emphasis on preaching, teaching and learning. In this paper an attempt is made to highlight the role of the church to citizens in the face of unjust economic and enslaving political structures.

What is the meaning and task of a

civil society? As an important element of social development and the democratization process, civil society (along with government and business) is an important sector of every modern state or community. One public policy inter-governmental organisation has defined civil society as: 'an arena, a forum in which citizens associate to achieve a wide range of different purposes, some positive and peaceful, some perceived as negative and violent'.⁸ Most civil society institutions and organizations in different parts of the world promote democracy, good governance, rule of law, equity, transparency and accountability. Examples of civil societies in Africa are:

- African Women's Economic Policy Network, Uganda
- Cameroon Aid Action for the underprivileged Areas, Cameroon
- Campaign for Democracy, Nigeria
- Foundation for Eco Diversity, Kenya
- International Centre for Conflict and Human Rights Analysis, Ghana
- Development in Africa Inc, Nigeria
- Youth Partnership for Peace and Development, Sierra Leone.⁹

As Reuben Abati, a well-known Nigerian commentator, put it, an important task of civil society is 'to hold government down to the first principles of the social contract'.¹⁰ The 21st cen-

⁸ Civil Society, Policy Paper by The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. Retrieved from http://www.idea.int/publications/country/upload/8_civil_society.pdf on 3 October 2014.

⁹ United Nations Conference on Trade and Development proceedings, www.unctad.xii.org/Documents/UNCTADXII/uxiidom_cso001_en.pdf, accessed on 3 October 2014.

¹⁰ Reuben Abati, 'More Than a Strike', in

⁶ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1061-1069.

⁷ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan: 1994), 867-869.

tury African nations are struggling to democratize.

The mission of the church cannot be restricted to traditional roles of Christian mission—soul winning, church planting, discipleship training, and revivalism. The church must become more politically sensitive and involved. Thomas Starks thus once asserted significantly, 'The day is coming and now is when social liberation is absolutely essential to evangelism. Unless believers are promoting the rights of the oppressed humans, the church's witness in the 21st century will be made inauthentic.'¹¹ The African church must function as a civil society to contribute to the contemporary democratization process on the continent.

IV The Task of the Church as a Civil Society in the Contemporary Africa

The issues that will be considered in this section are defence and preservation of human rights, democracy and the rule of law, social/economic injustice and the connection between social justice and communal peace.

1. Defence and preservation of human rights

From the biblical perspective, human dignity is the basis of human rights. Christian theologians have always maintained that 'Human beings have dignity because God created human

beings in his own image.'¹² Moreover, that dignity confers certain rights on every human being as explained by Bujo, 'At the core is the concept of the dignity of the individual: being human justifies the claim to certain rights.'¹³

Human rights in a society have been classified into various groups. The first 'generation' of rights, usually called 'classical rights', are civil and political. The second generation of rights are social and economic rights. The third generation of rights in developing nations have to do with 'the basic needs for living—water, food, shelter—without which human beings can claim no other rights'.¹⁴ Some of these rights are taken for granted in developed nations.

However, from the African perspective as stated by Bujo, 'property is never private. In the final analysis, the individual administers property in the name of the community.'¹⁵ This means that, unlike in the western World, in Africa, human and personal rights are actual community rights. The point of interest is that in a socio-political life, denial of the rights enumerated above as a result of mismanagement, oppression and exploitation of the poor amount to great injustice. This becomes truer when the poverty is due to

The Guardian, 18 January 2004, 18.

¹¹ M. Thomas Starks, *Toward a Theology of Missions* (Aurora: Ont. AMG, 1984), 54.

¹² Alan D. Falconer, (1999) 'Rights, Human', in David F. Wright, Sinclair B. Ferguson, and James I. Packer (eds), *The New Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 1988), 901-902.

¹³ Benezet Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community* (Nairobi: Pauline's Publications Africa, 1997), 144.

¹⁴ Benezet Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, 144.

¹⁵ Benezet Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, 149.

enslaving structures of a society.

God's concern for the poor, weak, oppressed, marginalized people is seen in biblical and church history. The deliverance of Israel from Pharaoh and their exodus from Egypt is an example. In the Magnificat, Mary's song of social, economic and political liberation, 'God's "no" resounding from Mary's life is a "no" to the social evil of injustice in its "various forms"'.¹⁶ Luke 1:51-53 is one of the most radical and revolutionary documents of all times. This is liberation theology *par excellence*.

In the New Testament we also see God showing 'solidarity with an intrinsically poor humanity' in and through Jesus Christ. It has been argued that, since love of God and love of neighbour as oneself is the greatest commandment, 'human rights need to be grounded in love of God who gives human their rights'.¹⁷ Africa is being impoverished morally, socially, economically and politically. God is concerned about the suffering of his people.

The human rights record of Nigeria and some other African countries is very poor.

The catalogue of violations include politically motivated assassinations, extra-judicial killings and excessive use of force by security agencies, arrest and detention of people for political reasons, elec-

toral malpractices, restrictions on freedom of speech and assembly, all of which the government justifies with the omnibus phrase 'security concerns'.¹⁸

Should the church keep quiet? No, the church should team up with appropriate civil societies to condemn actions of government that have to do with abuses of human rights. The church should seek legal assistance for hundreds of prison inmates who have not been tried for offences. The church should organize public protests when any inhuman policy is about to be passed by legislature. The church should condemn acts of corruption at every level of government.

Conversely, the church should commend right steps of government to promote communal, human rights. An example is the promulgation against gay, lesbianism and same-sex marriage in Nigeria and Uganda in 2014. The body of Christ needs to be culturally sensitive. The African worldview is a celebration of heterosexuality. The church in Africa cannot take a stand that will amount to cultural perversion. However the stand, position and expression of the African church on this and other issues must not be judgmental.

2. Democracy and rule of law

One key preoccupation of most civil societies is the promotion of democracy and the rule of law. Democracy is a particularly appealing and widely accepted contemporary political system. However, it also shares some of the demerits of other ideologies and politi-

16 Ivone Gebaru and Maria Clara Binger, *Mary, Mother of God, Mother of the Poor*, trans. by Philip Beryman. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1989), 1170.

17 Glen H. Stassen, 'Human Rights', in William A. Dryness and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen (eds.), *Global Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2008), 405-141.

18 *The Guardian*, 2005, 14.

cal systems. Democracy is humanistic both by definition and tendency. It is a government of people, by people, for people. Where is the place of God in this ordinary but popular definition?

One major problem of modern political systems (including democracy) which have been imported into Africa is that they have no place for religion and fear of God. John Mbiti thus lamented that they 'despise, reject or even oppose religion'.¹⁹ This is a serious deficiency that makes them irrelevant to Africans who have a religious worldview.

Western democracy has many limitations and problems as analyzed critically by Y. A. Obaje.²⁰ Communal democracy has some claims if 'it pays attention to the traditional African model and properly considers it'.²¹ In traditional African leadership style every king or chief was supported by a council of elders. No king was an absolute ruler. The ruler that was becoming tyrannical would be removed or killed. In a similar manner, as asserted by Bujo, even 'a multi-party system not understood and not rooted in tradition, can lead to chaos'.²²

It is imperative then to incorporate traditional African values into any socio-political ideology that will be of benefit to Africa. Mbiti has suggested that in such a system elements of so-

cialism, capitalism and others should be 'harmoniously joined together into a religious whole',²³ as it obtained in the African Traditional Life.

While democracy has practical challenges is there a better alternative in contemporary life? Africa is struggling to imbibe the spirit of multi-party democracy. Many political leaders are not true democrats, but instead, they are despotic rulers in civilian dress; they try to monopolize power, to force themselves on citizens through bribery, manipulation, violence and all kinds of undemocratic and unjust actions. There are many pretenders in governance who are in politics not for the common good of society but for personal enrichment.

The church needs to be politically awake and participate more actively in the democratic process. The church (both at denominational level like the Nigerian Baptist Convention) and interdenominational level (like Christian Association of Nigeria) needs to sponsor election-monitoring teams along with local and international groups doing so. The church should condemn maladministration and misgovernance.

Is it not a shame that churches in Nigeria and Kenya with 50% and 80% Christian populations respectively have kept quiet in the face of disproportionately, outrageous salaries of elected political officers! Democracy is threatened when the financial cost of governance impoverishes the poor. Some Nigerian politicians are extremely wealthy, almost rich enough to buy

¹⁹ John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1969), 285.

²⁰ Obaje, Yusufu Ameh, *Theocracy and Not Democracy for Nigeria* (Ogbomoso: Ogunniyi Printing Works, 1994).

²¹ Benezet Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, 179.

²² Benezet Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, 144-149.

²³ John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 266.

human beings, whereas the poor cannot afford three square meals daily. When a political party in governance fails to abide by the judgement of a court of law, it is also a crime for the church to keep quiet.

3. Social and economic injustice

Justice is an issue in social relationships. According to Nicholas Wolterstorff, people are treated justly when they receive what is due to them.²⁴ As stated earlier, in Christian understanding, the requirement to be just to people is rooted in the image of God. Thus, says Wolterstorff, we are to do justice both 'as a manifestation of our respect for the image of God in persons' and also 'as constituting (part of) our imaging of God'.²⁵

In this respect an important emphasis of justice in the Bible is the care of the weak, impoverished and marginalized members of the community, particularly the poor, widows, orphans and aliens. Several Old Testament prophets called for social justice. For instance, 'Amos spoke at a time when financial affluence and religious formalism combined to produce a high-tide of social decadence and permissiveness.'²⁶ He protested vehemently against social vices like injustice, corruption, oppression, and exploitation and called for justice and righteousness (Amos 5:24).

²⁴ N. P. Wolterstorff, 'Justice and Peace', in David J. Atkinson, David F. Field, Arthur F. Holmes, and Oliver O'Donovan (eds.), *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 1995), 16.

²⁵ N. P. Wolterstorff, 'Justice and Peace', 18.

²⁶ David and Pat Alexander, *The Lion Handbook to the Bible* (Oxford: Lion, 1983), 372.

Africa is poor but the economic poverty is largely due to tyranny, maladministration and mismanagement of God-given natural and human resources. This poverty of godly, responsible, responsive governance and leadership is one of the reasons for the underdevelopment of the land. The church must wake up, speak up and advocate against the widening economic gap between the leaders and followers, between the rich and the poor. The contemporary church in Africa seems to have lost a sense of justice, the pursuit of moral righteousness in public life.

This is a matter of enlightened self-interest. Economic inequality is a recipe for social disharmony and political chaos. Where there is economic injustice there cannot be social peace and the church cannot preach the gospel effectively. Meanwhile, the starting point is to achieve internal justice and peace in the church. The church must conduct its life in justice and righteousness to be able to help society.

4. Social justice and communal peace

Interestingly and justifiably, justice and peace are closely related. There are two significant and fundamental facts about that relationship. The first fact is that in the context of this study both justice and peace are relational concepts based on human relationships and so human rights, human worth, human dignity, on the basis of their creation in the image of God. The second fact is that in social relationships justice is the prerequisite for peace. Human beings cannot live in peace unless and until there is righteousness in the lives of people and justice in society.

Wolterstorff has pointed out that both justice and righteousness come from the same Greek word *dikaio-syne*. In the Bible justice is equivalent to righteousness (Mt 5:6, 10) and it is closely connected with holiness, wholeness, integrity and peace (*shalom*) and so flourishing.²⁷ Two passages of the Old Testament will be cited to show the direct interconnectedness of justice (righteousness) and peace:

Justice will dwell in the desert and righteousness live in the fertile field. The fruit of righteousness will be peace; the effect of righteousness will be quietness and confidence forever (Isaiah 32:16-17, NIV).

Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other. Faithfulness springs forth from the earth, and righteousness looks down from heaven (Psalm 85:10-11, NIV).

One major factor responsible for conflicts and wars today is the lack of harmonious relationships. Many people are alienated from God and so lack inner, individual peace (James 4:1, 2a). In different parts of the world labour unions go on strike to ask for social and economic justice. There is no peace in many families and organizations because of lack of justice. At national level, many political and ethnic communal clashes have unjust economic undertones leading to hostilities and warfare.

For instance, in my opinion, there are at least two factors for Boko Haram in Nigeria. One is religious, the other is political, but both are related

to economic injustice. The people are very poor. Life is very cheap and they are frustrated because they have not benefited from civilization (which they equate with western education). So they wrongly reason, conclude and decide to go back to primitive lifestyle! This is really a self-contradiction because they use modern scientific and technological inventions such as automobiles and the internet.

Of course global terrorism in many respects and places wears a religious garb but its objectives include a reaction (and perhaps overreaction) against unjust international economic systems and structures. The truth is that one of the reasons for contemporary global restiveness and restlessness is the fact that the activities of many multinational corporations, along with banks and governments, have enriched a few people who swim in stupendous riches while the majority dwell in abject poverty.²⁸ The free market economy promoted by capitalism is a bubble that will soon burst. Some international organizations and multi-national corporations dictate local economy. If the church wants peace in the world, let the church strive for social justice. Peace without justice is a mirage, an illusion.

V Conclusion

I would like to conclude this paper by proposing an agenda for the church in Africa to pursue social justice and communal peace.

First, theological institutions need

²⁷ N. P. Wolterstorff, 'Justice and Peace', 15-21.

²⁸ John Perkins, *Confessions of an Economic Hit Man* (London: Plume, 2004).

to develop ecclesiological models that are more socially responsible and encourage churches to embrace practices that are more politically relevant.

Second, the scope of the mission/task of the church in the world needs to be enlarged, to include social ministry and action in support of the oppressed, marginalized and impoverished people in the world.

Third, like a civil society, the church must participate in human rights watch. Abuses of human rights are offensive to the gospel of Jesus Christ. The church must continually call on the government to maintain and uphold human rights.

Fourth, since credible elections and rule of law is the pivot of participatory democracy, the church must seek means to educate the populace on responsible citizenship. Discipleship training should include equipping for

civil roles, public life and political office.

Fifth, economic inequality in the world today is social injustice and it is one of the reasons for lack of peace in the world. The church in Africa must show an example by working for internal justice and righteousness and by caring more for the economically disadvantaged citizens as called for in the biblical revelation.

Sixth, since it has been established that peace will come into society through justice, the church in Africa should actively collaborate with and support advocacy for different types of social justice: creation care and environmental justice, human rights abuses and violations, gender rights and issues, youth orientation and empowerment, as well as electoral education and election monitoring.