

## CHRISTIAN PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS: THE NIGERIAN CONTEXT

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### INTRODUCTION

The rate people rush into Nigerian politics today is at an alarming rate. The reason is not far fetched: to get opportunity to go on pilgrimage, either to Mecca or Jerusalem; or gain other advantages and privileges. Despite all these important factors, some people argue that Christians should not be actively involved in politics because politics in Africa generally and Nigeria in particular is a corrupt and dirty business. It is believed that when Christians involve in any politics, they can be corrupted or influenced negatively and eventually loose eternity. Looking at African politics, if a Christian comes for advice or counsel as to whether or not he or she should be involved in active politics, how can one counsel such an individual? It is the contention of this paper that Christians have rights under the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. They should exercise their civic responsibility.

The common belief that politics is a dirty game is based on a wrong premise. As a result of this view, people argue that Christianity has become irrelevant to the political life of our Nation. It should be understood that because Christians have made themselves irrelevant in the national scheme for too long.

Christians need to help in nation building. Some of the

conservative Christians like to keep faith and politics apart. Although Christ's Kingdom is ultimately not of this world, we believe that the Christians' responsibility extend from the personal to the realm of politics.<sup>1</sup> The Church is the manufacturing industry where 'wild human beings' are processed and refined into 'children of God' with Christ-like character. These are the right type of people who can bring about good governance in any given nation.<sup>2</sup> Studies have shown that leadership can only produce good governance when people who have had a life transforming experience are voted in power.

However, the passive position of Christians to politics, while at the same agitating for good governance raises some critical questions such as: of what justification are Christians' cries, complaints and condemnation of the people in power for failure to deliver, when power is left in the hands of the so called dirty people?<sup>3</sup> What about the history of crusaders, jihads, arsons inquisitions, destructions, murders, persecutions, violence, hatred, bitterness, divisions etc. connected with various religions?<sup>4</sup> Who are the people to control it? Should the Christians take any part in any politics? If they should, mainly what are the roles of Nigerian Christians in politics? Should they vote in general, local and ward elections? Join a political party? Become an elected representative? Join in political demonstration or pressure group? What is really expected of Christians? What are the right things to do?<sup>5</sup>

It is an undeniable fact that there are many sincere Christians who are active in politics and it should be understood that millions of respectable citizens vote. Actually, Christians should exercise their right to vote and should be voted for (Franchise). They should endeavour to get the right people into power, so as to improve the society as well as nation and the whole world at large.

People complain that there are Christians and church leaders

who still firmly hold that active participation in partisan politics is full of intrigues, deceit, back-stabbing and unfaithfulness. This is why missionaries and church leaders of old did not encourage Christians to go into politics in the early stages of church development. This means that any man or woman venturing into politics must take cognizance of the complexity of the political system and take concrete steps to fully understand it.<sup>6</sup> But as at today we have come to grips with the fact that politics and political leadership touches on every facet of life of a people, even the church. The fact is that the laws that govern the affairs of the land under which the church exists are not promulgated in the vestries, church conferences, church conventions, church or synods, but in the House of Representatives or National Assembly of the land. It is therefore right to state that if good laws are to be made for the enhancement of the life of the people of the land, and to give the Christians the right to worship and preach the gospel of salvation unhindered, they must have a voice in the making and execution of those laws. Moreover, this is possible in no other place but in the field of politics.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the church must provide a representation. Christians must not be voiceless in a nation where life is insecure due to armed robbers and other tyrannical religious groups. Christian leaders and clergy must play active roles, apart from prayer in a nation where the ordinary man is finding it difficult to feed his family, whereas the wealth of Nigeria is in the hands of a class of frontline politicians, top businessmen and top military bras in and out of uniform. Nigeria is a country where known criminals, corrupt and scandalous thieves roam the streets in civilian and military dresses unprosecuted. The born again Christians in Nigeria should not let this situation go unabated. Christians church leaders and clergy should take active part in government and politics to avoid unwanted circumstances that can split the church of God. The Place of Nigerian Christians in politics in a heterogeneous society like this is necessary.

**CHRISTIAN PARTICIPATION IN PARTY POLITICS IN NIGERIA**

A Christian is a person who has a personal living relationship with God through Jesus Christ (John 17:3), or somebody who has repented from sins and personally accepted Jesus Christ as his Lord and Saviour (John 1:12-13; 3:3).<sup>8</sup> A Christian is someone who professes in the teachings of Jesus Christ.<sup>9</sup> *The Latinized Greek term Kristianos* found only three times in the Greek Scripture designates followers of Christ Jesus, the exponent of Christianity (Acts 11:26; 26:28 1 Pet. 4:16).<sup>10</sup> In a nut shell, a Christian is a person who believes in the teachings of Jesus Christ or has been baptized in a Christian church, and showing the qualities that are thought of as a Christian; good and kind.<sup>11</sup>

A party is a political organization that you can vote for in elections and whose members have the same aims and objectives.<sup>12</sup> Politics is about the accumulation, organization and utilization of power in a society in particular the power to legislate, control and govern.<sup>13</sup> Politics is also the activities involved in getting and using power in public life, and being able to influence decisions that affect a country or a society.<sup>14</sup> The true meaning of politics is service to the people,<sup>15</sup> that is the well being or welfare of the electorate, or the people in general. Therefore, when politicians take part in party politics, they are involved in the internal affairs of the party or in the attitude of their party towards other parties rather than acting for the good of the country.<sup>16</sup> This is partisan politics. Ejifor refers to politics in Nigeria as a means of controlling the authority to distribute the values of society as supreme arbiter and the process and institution for confronting the assets of Nigeria.<sup>17</sup> In other words, politics in Nigeria deals with how a particular government is run and how power is distributed in political parties, interest groups, e.t.c.

The first republic of democratic politics in Nigeria ended in 1966, after which the military took over.<sup>18</sup> The second republic emerged in

1979 and ended in 1986.<sup>19</sup> The third (1999-up to date) republic, is characterized with: confusions, arsons, killings, fighting and riggings. The tenets of Christianity detest any form of the unholy behavior that characterizes politics or elections in Nigeria.<sup>20</sup> This is why many Christians steer clear of politics. The core Christian tenets of the Gospel and faith abhor communism, force and tyranny. Apart from this, some Christians see politics as practiced in Nigeria as a dirty game bedeviled with tendencies such as hatred, assassination, thuggery and injustice.

Since these politicians cannot overcome these deadly sins and abuse of power ravaging them, there is need to call for spiritually qualified men of God or Christians to participate in politics and reshape the terrible mishandling of public trust. Although some argue that Christians should not be encouraged to play any active role in public politics, because in action it seems pagan<sup>21</sup> and corrupt but it can also be argued that the constitution is deliberately kept aside when major decisions are made which directly or indirectly affect the Christian church negatively. On many occasions Christians get the worst of it. Some are sent to jail or killed without proper trial; some are forced to change their religion, while others are forced to flee out of their countries for their lives. Those who remain alive are under perpetual fear for not being able to know where the government of the day would strike next.<sup>22</sup> As a result of above listed reasons; many Christians in Nigeria are discouraged from participating in partisan politics. It is therefore only right that if good laws are to be made for the enhancement of the land and to give Christians or the church the right to worship and preach the gospel of salvation unhindered, they must have a voice in the making and execution of those laws. Moreover, this is possible in no other place but in the field of politics.

Kwame Bediako, a Ghanaian theologian says that African Christianity may have an important role to play in the moulding of

new political models and ideals.<sup>23</sup> Christians should take active part in politics. However, their participation should be with a difference as highlighted below:

**1. Servant Model:** A true Christian is known through selfless service. One School has its motto: *ducere est servare* meaning "to lead is to serve"<sup>24</sup> In Matt. 20:28; Lk. 22:26-27 and other related passages Jesus Christ says, "I come not to be served but to serve". Leadership in the Bible is seen as a means of serving people in a way that glorifies God, using different approaches and planning to meet the needs of people. When you serve other people faithfully, you are in effect serving God and He will bless you in return (Matt; 25:34-35) "Service above self" is the motto of one old Primary school. Servant leadership model is based on "agape" love and built on humility. To be a true servant model, love and humility must be included. In the New Testament, Jesus Christ humbled Himself when He took human nature and died on the cross of Calvary to redeem man. He humbled Himself to the extent of washing His disciples' feet and served them in many other ways. For the Nigerian Christians who truly wants to serve his/her people, he or she must make some personal sacrifices in order to be a true servant.

The biblical concept of leadership as modeled by our Lord Jesus focuses on serving people rather than being served. This is quite different from the world concept of leadership. The worldly concept of leadership is about being honoured and served. Jesus Christ pointed it out that worldly leaders lord it over the people (Matt. 20:25). This is like what is happening in the world today; majority of Christian politicians do not like the idea of being a servant. The servant model emphasizes different things such as running errands and carrying out the decision of the group he/she is leading or representing.

**2. Welfare of the Electorate:** A political leader should see political

a veritable means to influence people positively, and beneficially, in terms of making the welfare of the people his/her concern. The compassion for the electorates must be his/her concern to the extent that he/she will not see people living in abject poverty, while knowing that such poverty is man-made and caused by injustice, corruption and mismanagement of resources.

Christian politicians should emulate and follow the foot prints of our Lord Jesus Christ who was in every way very compassionate. Just like what Jesus did in Mat; 9:35, He had compassion on the crowd, because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. Christian politicians must have compassion on all the electorate without any selection or prejudice. No one can secure any political post under democratic governance without the input of the people, support, or mandate. Therefore, if this be the case, as a Christian and one of the political leaders, one should see politics in the sense of making it "electorate – oriented" by making it a point of duty to cater for their welfare and well being. The popular saying is that "A good turn deserves another."

**3. Faithfulness:** A faithful Christian in politics is someone who can be trusted to keep his promises. Christian politicians should be faithful to keep the promises they made during their campaigns. They should endeavour to keep to their words or utterances, no matter the situation and not change like chameleons or being blown around by every wind of doctrine. Their words should be their bond. They should mean what they say without being hypocritical. They should be the kind of people who can be depended upon to bring about positive changes in the society through their words and actions. They should also steer away from selfish politics. They should note that a good name is better than gold and silk. Psalms 31:23b says, "The Lord preserves the faithful, but the proud he pays back in full." Politicians in Nigeria are known for making promises they do not keep. They say one thing and do another. This implies

lack of faithfulness. As Christian politicians they should be people who can be trusted. They must be faithful.<sup>25</sup>

**4. Be Morally Disciplined:** Discipline is the quality of always behaving or working in a controlled way. It is also a training to develop self control, right conduct, and orderly conduct.<sup>26</sup> It is expected of Nigeria Christians in politics to be salt and light of the world in all its ramifications (Matt. 5:13-16). Their actions should portray and proclaim God's righteousness and mercy in everyday living, and pursue justice in government affairs. They are to radiate and preach justice and righteousness in all areas of society, including the government.

Discipline has to do with doing the right thing at the right time in accordance with the rule of law. This means that they are to give "praise," "reward," and "recommendation" to those who do good in their community in particular and Nigeria in general (Rom. 13:3). They must be ready to punish evil doers. They should note that their community or the electorate and the whole world are watching them. The Old Testament prophets, the Lord Jesus Christ and the Apostles were all disciplined and self controlled people in the scripture. The Nigerian politicians should be advised to do likewise if they want to be effective and make a difference in the lives of people. Therefore, they need to be morally disciplined. A Christian politician must therefore be a disciplined personality. One who is not disciplined cannot instill discipline in others. A worthy life style is a disciplined life style. Fruits of righteousness are produced by discipline.

**5. Affection and Compassion:** Affection is the feeling of liking or loving somebody very much and caring about them.<sup>27</sup> A.S Hornsby defines compassion as a strong feeling of sympathy for people who are suffering and a desire to help them.<sup>28</sup> Compassion involves applying oneself to heal people's wounds no matter the cost.



correcting injustice, fighting corruption and working in a loving way to bring about peace and reconciliation among people.<sup>29</sup>

Compassion is based on selfless love. It is people centered. Nigerian Christian politicians should avoid selfishness and self-interest in the whole process. Rather they should promote both local and national interest because Nigeria is greater than any individual in this country. Nigerian Christian politicians should endeavour to rescue the innocent from destruction. They are to rescue those who are being led away to death and hold back those tottering toward slaughter. The Christian politician should have compassion to ameliorate the suffering of those who are oppressed and intentionally show kindness to those who are in need (Prov. 14:13b; Amos 2:6-7; Hebr; 13:3). Apostle Paul of old says if one part suffers, every part suffers with it. The Christian politicians should feel so much for their friends and relations that are mistreated and call for reconciliation. They must hate injustice without hating the person carrying out injustice. Christian Politicians should note that love and compassion are essential attributes they need to effectively discharge their duties and to serve the people the nation.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the clarion call is that all Christians in Nigeria who are being led by the Holy Spirit should into politics without hesitation. Politics itself is good, but the politicians have to desist from their ungodly attitudes. This is because attitude determines the altitude. All Christians should come and make positive impact in the politics of this nation. The Christian church leaders should stand up to the challenges in the country in the political sphere by taking active part in politics and elective positions. All the virtues of the Christian religion which include: honesty, faithfulness, straightforwardness, servant-hood service, moral discipline, just to mention a few, can be useful through Nigerian Christians'

participation in politics. It is evident that Christians and church leaders in Nigeria have more active roles to play in politics.

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