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The Present Day Relevance of the Protestant Reformation to Nigeria

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Abstract

Christianity today is marked by the existence of many denominations and sects as opposed to how it was at the beginning of the church. The early church was one universal church, but several factors which accumulated over a period, contributed to a revolution or reformation which was aimed at correcting some problems in the church. This reformation brought about the emergence of many Christian denominations like the Lutherans, Calvinists, Methodists, reformed Baptist and Presbyterians among others. This paper attempts to examine the background of the reformation, its causes and its relevance to the present day Nigerian society.

Introduction

Meaning of the protestant reformation

To reform means to transform, restore, rebuild, to amend, to make better, to remove defects, to bring to a better way of life, to prune (Kirkpatrick, 1983). Hence, the protestant reformation was an event which was aimed at effecting this transformation or change in the catholic church. It was a religious movement which began in the 16th century, and attempted to purify the Christian church morally and doctrinally on the basis of biblical norms, and it had a far reaching effect on the political, economic and social spheres (Benton, 1981).

Furthermore, it was a great religious upheaval which was linked to the liberal movements in the English commonwealth and the American revolution (Hastings, 1971, cited in Rhodes, 2008). Several factors contributed to it, and Martin Luther played a key role in triggering it off and catalyzing it.

Causes of the protestant reformation

Various reasons have been advanced as the causes of the reformation. These reasons accumulated over a long period and were eventually ignited into the reformation by Luther.

First among these causes was the reported case of the projection or exaltation of the Catholic Church as being more important than the individual (Hastings, 1971 cited in Rhodes, 2008). Church views, rules, ordinances, regulations and policies were valued more than the individual. There were claims that only the church could dispense salvation to the individual, hence, he must seek salvation only from the church.

Secondly, monasteries came into prominence at this period. Monks felt so important that they struggled with priests for power and authority in the church (Hastings, 1971). Eventually monks were accepted and integrated into the church, but since monasticism emphasized individualism, it was destructive to the church (Hastings, 1971), and contributed to the reformation.

Thirdly, many priests were needy. Much of their allocations were appropriated by Monks. A monastery took the endowment of a parish and was supposed to provide for the care of souls in return by sending a monk to lead mass on Sundays. They took the great tithes of corn and left the small ones to the vicars.

Despite these, some monasteries were still poor, while some were rich. Furthermore, an abbot could scarcely get his election confirmed, unless he goes to Rome to see the Pope and Cardinals, spending greatly in the process (Hastings, 1971 in Rhodes, 2008).

The Pope was supposed to govern and guide all churches then (Hastings, 1971). But this was impracticable since it was difficult to travel then (Hastings, 1971). Coupled with this, the church adopted three conflicting policies which were witnessing to the world, renouncing the world and gaining from the world (Hastings, 1971, cited in Michalski, 2013). This led to disorder and confusion.

Fourthly, non-religious factors also contributed to the reformation. The period was the era of the birth of nation states, their secular rulers wanted to attain greatness and identity, hence they were not willing to tolerate any form of interference or domination in their territories by religious

authorities of the church. Hence, they sought for ways of bringing under their control, the powers and prerogatives of the church, the pope and the emperor (Iwe, 1985 cited in Michalski, 2013). The reformation offered them this opportunity.

Fifthly, the renaissance, a vast intellectual awakening in Europe, aroused a new critical spirit and a new way of thinking in people, which paved the way for the reformation (Iwe, 1985 in Michalski, 2013). This critical mind enabled the people to criticize the wrongs in the church and to finally carry out the reforms.

Sixthly, some humanist scholars such as Dean Colet, Sir Thomas More, Desiderius Erasmus, Lefebvre of Staples and Ulrich Von Hutten, did much to enlighten and arouse the critical spirit in the people (Iwe, 1985 in Michalski, 2013; Kahl, 2005). Their classical studies led to the translation of the Bible, a wider circulation of biblical works and knowledge. Through their efforts, it became possible to identify and condemn some of the wrongs in the church. These factors laid the foundations for the reformation, but the last straw which sparked off the revolution, was laid by Martin Luther. This will be examined in the next section.

1. The Role of Martin Luther

Martin Luther, the son of a miner, was born in 1483. He later became an Augustinian monk, and later a Professor of Theology at Wittenberg University.

Luther was disillusioned by the scheme of redemption which was based on indulgences and adopted by the church (Benton, 1981 in Sunshine, 2005). The church rejected the former method of confession and absolution as being inadequate for erasing sins, because a person cannot remember all his sins. Alternatively, the church held that man was still capable of making up for his bad deeds with some good deeds. This will give him credit before God for his salvation. Some people even earn extra credits which exceed what they need for their salvation. These extra credits constitute a treasury of merits of saints from which the pope can transfer to others whose accounts are at arrears. This transfer is called indulgence and the recipient normally paid for it (Benton, 1981 in Sunshine, 2005).

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Luther reacted to all these by launching his 95 theses on all saints day in 1517. He raised three points in it. The first was on financial abuses. He held that if the pope had realized the poverty of the people, he would have abandoned the building of Saint Peter's cathedral, instead of building it on the blood and hide of his sheep (Benton, 1981; Kahl, 2005).

Secondly, he held that the pope had no jurisdiction over purgatory as the issue of indulgences appeared to show, if the pope had such jurisdiction, then he should empty it free of charge (Benton, 1981).

Thirdly, Luther held that the basis of indulgences was cancelled by the assertion that the treasury of the church is the gospel and not the merits of indulgences. Of course the gospel says that salvation comes by faith in Christ (Benton, 1981 in Sunshine, 2005).

Luther further declared the pope as being fallible, he wrote many manifestoes to encourage and support the reformation. In a tract, "the Babylonian captivity" he accepted only two sacraments out of the seven as being truly Christian. Those two were baptism and mass. The rest were rejected by him. This resulted in the issuance of a papal bull, which instructed him to recant his position and views within 60 days or face excommunication. However, he maintained his stand, defied the pope and publicly burnt the bull, hence he was excommunicated from the Catholic Church. The reformation was now in full swing (Benton, 1981; Kahl, 2005).

2. The present day relevance of the reformation to Nigeria

The protestant reformation is relevant to Nigeria today because its impact can still be felt in the community and the whole world. The reformation resulted in the formation of various religious denominations such as Lutheran, Anglican, Calvinists Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians and Pentecostals. These churches still exist today with many members all over the world, hence they exert a great influence on the society and many people today. This is confirmed by Mattera (2017), who states that the reformation led to gross fragmentation which resulted in the emergence of thousands of denominations.

In addition to these, the churches affect their communities both positively and negatively. On the positive side, they invest in and establish educational institutions such as Hope Waddell Training Institute, Duke Town Primary and Secondary Schools, Edgerley Memorial Girls Secondary School, all of which were established by the Presbyterian Church mission in Calabar. Other examples are the Methodist Boys High School, Oron established by the Methodist church in Oron, Nigeria; The Holy Trinity Secondary School, Uyo and the Holy Trinity Primary School, Calabar, both established by the Anglican mission; the Living Faith Church (Winners chapel) has established kingdom Heritage schools in all state headquarters of the church. They comprise of nursery, primary and secondary schools.

In addition, this church has also established two universities namely; Covenant University at Otta and Landmark University in Kwara state, both in Nigeria. These institutions provide education and training which improve the lives of many people. Some of the churches give scholarship and assistance to needy students. These schools would not have existed if the protestant reformation had not brought about the establishment of the churches behind them. Still on the positive side, some of these churches do enhance the economic status of their members. They do this by rendering welfare and financial assistance to some needy members and non members. Some embark on business ventures like the sinking of boreholes, sales of water and printing presses. These ventures provide employment, income and revenue to many, including the government which receives taxes from them.

Religiously, some of these churches promise and offer spiritual solutions to many problems that people face. These include sickness, poverty, barrenness, bad luck, marital problems and others (Offiong, 1992). Due to this, many people flock to them from far and near places, and there are regular testimonies or claims of reception of solutions to problems by many members and visitors. Still in the religious sphere, the reformation weakened the influence of Christendom which led to individual Christianity (Mattera, 2017).

It relocated spiritual and theological authority to the scripture and successfully challenged how persons gained right standing with God, which was not through purgatory or indulgences, but

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through grace and faith (Dragos, 2017). In addition, it made liturgy and church services to be accessible to lay people, affirmed the immediacy or closeness of God's presence through the mediation of Christ, afforded women leadership and influence in the church, made the Bible accessible to lay people and also made the Roman Catholic Church to initiate its own reforms (Dragos, 2017).

Furthermore, it enhanced the expansion of the priesthood, the introduction of new ways of worship in the church and a constant reminder of repentance (Hahn, 2017; Sunshine, 2005).

Socially, some of them are seen as social nuisances who disturb the peace and decorum of the environment with their noise and music especially at nights. Some of their members often cause traffic congestions by parking their vehicles indiscriminately on the roads.

However, on the negative side, the protestants spirit which is radically critical and confrontational, seems to be in existence till today in the protestant churches. For instance, there are cases of quarrels, disagreements, differences, dissatisfactions and problems in many protestant churches. These have led to the breaking away of factions and splinter groups from them. For instance, several members of the Apostolic church have left the church at various times to establish or join other churches. An example is one Elder W. U. Ekanem who left to establish the African Apostolic Church in the 1970s (Asuquo, 1992; Sunshine, 2005).

Other examples include the following: The Mount Zion Light House Full Gospel church which was founded by Bishops J. U. Udom, Jonah Etefia, J. O. Asiak, Prophet Robert Akpabio and Bishop J. E. Etefia, who all left the Apostolic church in 1946. The Light crusaders ministries church Calabar which was founded by Reverend Imeobong Isemin who left the Apostolic Church in 1984 (Offiong, 1992). Victory Christian fellowship which was founded by Reverend Etim Ikpat who left the Presbyterian and Church of God Mission Churches which he attended previously (Offiong, 1992 in Sunshine, 2005). Bishop Evans Etukidem formerly of The Mount Zion Light House Full Gospel Church, also left to establish the sanctified Mount Zion church due to some differences.

Even within the Roman Catholic Church today, there are elements of Protestantism. Some people there have started to question and oppose the celibacy of the priesthood. In addition, the

Catholic Charismatic movement has tried to introduce Pentecostal practices into the church, such as speaking in tongues, prophecy, visions, exorcism and prayer meetings and others. These have caused upheavals in the church.

From all indications, it appears this protestant spirit is still very active and will continue to be as many more religious groups continue to come into existence as a result of protests and differences within older groups. This view is supported by (Hahn, 2017) who states that the reformation ignited other uprisings and fights for freedom and liberty.

Conclusion

Some people hold the view that the reformation was inevitable when it occurred. Luther played a key role in it, but he seems to have been a catalyst in the process. If he had not instigated it, perhaps another person would have done so, because the church had deteriorated to a stage in which it needed reforms.

However, some Catholics view the reformation in a different light. They regard the reformation as a rebellion and heresy against the Catholic Church authority and doctrines, hence, they condemn it. Luther is regarded as a heretic and a rebel. However, the veracity of these views are not the concern of this paper. What matters is that certain factors caused the reformation in which Luther played a key role. The reformation has affected Nigeria and the whole world until today, both positively and negatively.

Recommendations

The teaching, encouragement, application and utilization of some of the positive effects of the reformation will be very beneficial to the society today and in the future.

For instance, the encouragement and application of the practice of relocating the spiritual and theological authority from the church to the Bible, will eliminate the dictatorship of the clergy and tyranny from the church, along with the effects of wrong interpretation of the Bible by the clergy.

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Secondly, more people should be encouraged to go into the priesthood through training, guidance and proper regulation by appropriate bodies like churches, Christian Association of Nigeria, Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria and the relevant governments. This will ensure the screening of those who enter the ministry and their activities.

Thirdly, the role and influence of women in the church should be enhanced and increased where possible, so that women can contribute their quota to the improvement of the church and the society. These steps will seal the relevance of the protestant reformation today and make it permanent.

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