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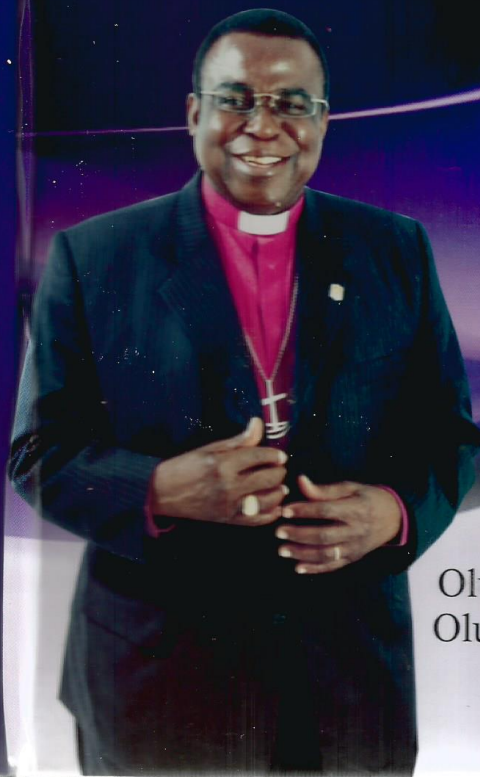
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THE HEART OF THE ACT:
**CHURCH,
POLITICS
AND SOCIAL
TRANSFORMATION**

A Festschrift in honour of

His Grace,
Most Rev. Michael Kehinde Stephen



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THE HEART OF THE ACT: CHURCH, POLITICS AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION
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CONTENTS

Profile of the Most Rev. Michael Kehinde Stephen	ix
Foreword	xvii
Preface	xix
Acknowledgements	xxiii
Contributors	xxv

SECTION A: GENERAL

1. The Monk, His Moniker & The Mocked: An Examination of the Church, Politics & Social Transformation - Through the Prism of the Ministerial Work of Most Rev. Michael Kehinde Stephen <i>Konyinsola Ajayi (SAN)</i>	1
2. Christ's Helping Hands: The Christian's Mandate to Serve <i>Rosaline Opeke</i>	29
3. Methodist Church in Identity Crisis Within the Context of Politics, Security, and Injustice in Contemporary Nigeria <i>L.S. Ayo Ladigbolu</i>	39
4. Christian Conversion as a Tool for Social Transformation in Nigeria <i>Olumuyiwa Olusesan Familusi</i>	49
5. Towards A Transformational Church: A Call to Reposition The 21 st Century Nigerian Church <i>Chinonyerem Chijioke Ekebuisi</i>	67

SECTION B: BIBLICAL STUDIES THEMES

6. Insights from Biblical Concept of Political Leadership and Social Service as Model for Christians and Politics in Nigeria <i>Sampson M. Nwaomah and Emmanuel O. Eregare</i>	83 *
7. Implications of The Deuteronomic Concept of Prophecy as Vehicle of Socio-Political Transformation for the Christian Church in Post-Modern Africa <i>Olugbemiro, O. Berehiah</i>	93
8. Prophets as Consultants in Ancient Israelite and Nigerian Socio-Cultural Contexts <i>Peter Olanrewaju Awojobi</i>	113

INSIGHTS FROM BIBLICAL CONCEPT OF POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND SOCIAL SERVICE AS MODEL FOR CHRISTIANS AND POLITICS IN NIGERIA

Sampson M. Nwaomah and Emmanuel O. Eregare

Abstract

This essay begins from the premise that modern concept of political practices and processes may not be read into the Bible. However, it attempts to examine the biblical concept of politics using the lives of certain biblical characters that served in public/political offices whose positions enabled them to provide some form of social services to the people. It, then, argues that contemporary Christians can promote biblical values in governance and policy making as well as provide meaningful social services to their constituency and citizens in general. This paper concludes by identifying some areas that biblical Concept of politics can provide models for platform for Christian Social Service in Nigeria.

Keywords: Biblical Values; Politics; Social Service; Governance.

Introduction

Writing an essay on Biblical concepts of politics as platform for Christian social service, which is the task of this work; comes with some dilemmas. The first is the temptation to read into the Bible a contemporary understanding of politics, which seems alien to the Scriptures. The second dilemma is the tendency to hastily conclude that if the Bible does not define politics as it is now understood and practised, then politics could not provide Biblically approved platforms for Christians to actively engage in social service. Thus, this kind of immediate response to these situations could result in some apathy to political and public leadership by some Christians. But as the title of this essay suggests, political involvement could be a platform for Christian social service. Hence, we may ask: how may we understand the biblical examples of public service in the context of modern political processes and participation? And could

these examples serve as models for Christians in contemporary political arena for the provision of social services? This short essay surveys these issues and makes some recommendations.

A Survey of the Concept of Politics and Social Service

The word politics has an ancient Greek origin. It derives from two Greek words *polis* meaning city and *tikos* meaning art, skill or method. Hence, it could be adduced that politics "is the art of governing a city."¹ In this sense, the practice of politics connotes "the art of organizing men in a society to live and interact with one another for the realization of their social nature...[and] therefore requires the institutionalization of social structures such as the establishment of legal and government systems to facilitate this interaction."² In contemporary practices, politics includes:

*a process, within or among political communities whereby public values are articulated, debated and prescribed; diverse political actors (individuals, interest groups, local or regional governments, and nations) cooperate and struggle for power in order to satisfy their vital needs, protect their fundamental interest, and judgments are made and implemented.*³

In the light of the immediate description of politics above, while we concur that political actors cooperate and contend for power for personal and corporate needs and interest, it is, however, debatable whether the public values that are articulated, debated and even prescribed are for the general interest of the people. Furthermore, in a society where most of the political actors do not uphold biblical virtues, the integrity of the values could also be questionable.

It could be inferred that since politics includes the act and process of governance; political activities impact on the society and its people because of the policies and influence of the political actors. In other words, the well-being of people in political community is to a large extent shaped by political behaviours and policies of those who are in political leadership. This is more evident in the kind of social services that may be

¹ Thomas O. Ebhomienlen and Emmanuel I. Ukpebor "Religion and Politics in Nigeria: A Comparative Study of the Nigeria Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs and the Christian Association of Nigeria" *International Journal of Science and Research (IJSR)*, India Online ISSN: 2319-7064, Vol. 2.9 (2013), p.166.

² Ibid, p. 166-167.

³ Joel and Chituru Nwachukwu, "Democracy and Church Politics", in Eregare, Emmanuel (ed.). *A Survey of Church Politics in the 21st Century*, (Nigeria: Babcock University Press, 2018), 82- 93.

provided; since social services cover public services that may be provided by the government for its citizens. It is argued that "these public services aim to create more effective organizations, build stronger communities, and promote equality and opportunity."⁴ These may include, but not limited to education, healthcare, housing, community engagement, advocacies and policies⁵ for the general well-being and improved quality of life of the citizens. Hence, we conclude thus far that there is a nexus between politics, social services and quality of life/well-being of citizens and state. Where this nexus is properly harnessed, it could engender good governance, protect citizen rights and enhance quality of life. But before we further explore how Christians can use politics as platform for social service delivery in Nigeria, we briefly examine biblical concepts of politics and social service.

Biblical Concept on Politics and Social Service

As pointed out in the introduction of this essay, the word politics does not occur in the Bible neither may we read into the Bible's Jewish theocratic society, the contemporary political systems and practices. However, in the Nigerian context, some scholars have advocated for the active involvement of Christians in politics. One of such recent writers is Falaye⁶ who advances some reasons to legitimize this call. First, he argues, based on the counsel of Paul to Christians in Rome on their relationship with civil authority (Rom. 13:1-4) that God ordained the institution of government and as such Christians need not be lethargic about governance. Although, in our view, while this reason does provide a basis for Christians support of a civil government and seems the strongest of the argument of Falaye's arguments, yet it is difficult to build a theology of Christian political participation on Romans 13:1-4 because the text does not suggest Christian involvement in partisan politics, or in the process of the formation government. The second reason Falaye provides is reading political participation into the dominion principle of Genesis 1:26, an attempt that is also challenging to uphold since it stretches that text too far. He further argues that (i) satisfying the yearnings of citizens for security, good legal system, equity, peace, integrity, honesty and transparent governance, (ii) enhancing a conducive environment for the Church's work of intercession and (iii) provision of godly heritage for successive

⁴ "Social Services" in Wikipedia accessed from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_services, July 12, 2018.

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ T.A. Falaye, "Christianity and Politics: The Experience from Nigeria" in *Global Journal of Politics and Law Research* Vol. 4, No. 6, pp.1-7, (December 2016), pp. 3-4.

generations are basis for Christian participation in politics. Perhaps, it is this positive attitude towards Christian participation in political processes that informs the position of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), especially in the context of the imbalanced ethnic, cultural, social and the multi-religious values of Nigeria, which was expressed recently in the call for Christians to actively participate in politics. Rev. Dr. Samson Olasupo Ayokunle, the President of CAN, urged Christians to take active part in the 2019 general election. Christians were challenged to:

Join a political party and be a card-carrying member; register to vote; participate actively at the ward level of your party, attend meetings, and contribute meaningfully during discussions; vote and encourage others to vote during election period; do not stay back at home and watch TV, play football or sleep; monitor and protect your vote.⁷

He was further quoted to have said –

To get to a position of power, there is need for election especially in a democratic setting like ours. We must be involved in all facets of politics. Politics is not a dirty game as many have come to believe, but those who play politics are the ones who are dirty.... If we do not participate actively in politics, then we do not have the right to complain about the type of leaders that are presented by political parties to be voted for and voted into various offices. This year, God is interested in our nation and us. Throughout the Bible, we see God intervening, leading and instructing men on how to lead their nations. He is urging us as Christians to be involved in the governing process of our nation. Nigeria is at the center of God's plan for the human race.⁸

Nevertheless, while we cannot fully comprehend or analyse the purpose for this call and while it is also challenging to read modern political concept and practices into the Bible, it could be inferred, through the general depiction of some faithful biblical characters and certain principles enunciated in the Bible, that within appropriate boundaries, political involvement could provide a platform for Christians provision of social services. We examine some instances in the succeeding paragraphs.

In the Old Testament and in non-theocratic states, some biblical characters such as Joseph (Gen. 37-50) was appointed the second ranking

⁷Wale Odunsi "2019 election: CAN tells Christians what they must do" accessed from <http://dailypost.ng/2018/01/13/2019-election-can-tells-christians-must/>, July 12, 2018.

⁸. ibid

political leader in ancient Egypt (Gen. 41:40 cf. 45:8). As the ruler of all the land of Egypt, second only in throne to Pharaoh, Joseph may have been a *vizier* which was the most powerful position next to the King in ancient Egypt.⁹

The *vizier* had a wide range of responsibilities and oversights over governmental agencies. Mark identifies some of these as follows:

- (i) **Agricultural** – Procedures, practices, settling land disputes
- (ii) **Financial** – Taxation, the treasury, and the census
- (iii) **Judicial** – The appointment of the judges and the chief of police
- (iv) **Military** – The appointment of generals and approval of their choices in subordinates
- (v) **Architectural** – The planning and building of the king's monuments and tomb
- (vi) **Interior** – The planning and construction of roads and repair of dikes, dams, and canals
- (vii) **Religious** – The maintenance of proper rituals and traditions and appointment of high priests¹⁰

Charles Aling adds that the *vizier* also was the chief recorder of the government records, and in charge of foreign affairs.¹¹ Thus, Joseph could have been a person of immense political influence in ancient Egypt as the story of his public service in the land indicated.

In another era and nation, Nehemiah was also a top official in the Persian court of King Artaxerxes and was also the king's confidant as a cupbearer (Neh. 1:11c) and Mordecai, a faithful follower of God, was one of the security chiefs of King Ahasuerus of Persian kingdom (Esther 2:21) and later exalted a higher rank because of vigilance and faithfulness (6:1-11). Daniel served as a statesman in both the Babylonian and Persian government (Dan. 3-6). He was the chief of the provincial governor appointed by the king of Persia. Each of these men was entrusted with political assignments and occupied significant political position in the government that they served. It is also very significant to note that these

⁹ Charles Aling, "Joseph in Egypt: Part iv" <http://www.biblearchaeology.org/post/2010/04/05/Joseph-in-Egypt-Part-V.aspx#Article>, accessed July 12, 2018; Joshua J. Mark "Joshua J. Mark, Ancient Egyptian Vizier" https://www.ancient.eu/Ancient_Egyptian_Vizier/ accessed July 14, 2018

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ Charles Aling, "Joseph in Egypt: Part iv" <http://www.biblearchaeology.org/post/2010/04/05/Joseph-in-Egypt-Part-V.aspx#Article>, accessed July 12, 2018.

men served in non-theocratic governments of the foreign nations where they were captives. Although they did not seek elective offices, they were entrusted with these political responsibilities due to the noble characters that were evident in their lives. For instance, Joseph was a person of integrity, hard work and spiritual insights (Gen. 37:2; 39:9-10; 41: 38). These character qualities, which positioned Joseph for the social services he offered to the nation of ancient Egypt, were also evident in Mordecai (Esth. 2:22; 3:5), Nehemiah (See Neh. 2, 3, 6), and Daniel (Dan. 3:12-18; 5:12; 6:1-5) and were attested to even by their non-Jewish colleagues and observers.

A study of the lives of these men reveals some of the positive influence they facilitated in the society. These biblical characters with political/public service and responsibilities, championed certain social services such as: (i) initiation and execution of policies on food security and poverty alleviation (Gen. 41:34-49; 53-57), (ii) provision of selfless services (Neh. 2:4-8) (iii) engagement in advocacy for the defense of minority rights and (iv) championing of religious freedom, (Est. 4:1-17), (iv) fight against corruption (Dan. 6:1-5), to mention but a few. These characters lived selfless lives of service and sacrifice based on the centrality of social service in the biblical law instituted by God. They used their political positions as platforms to improve the quality of people's lives who were less fortunate or disadvantaged persons. Their social services include economic, social and religious freedom, and support for the disadvantaged; and such could also happen now in various unfavorable situations that plagued humanity and inhibits the good of society. For these men, their positions were vehicle to enable social services that impacted on social, physical, mental and morally disadvantaged people in society. These men serve as models for faithful Christians in the political arena to also create a culture that will impact positively on their constituencies and even beyond. They can, through their influence and actions, season the environment, since Christians are the salt of the earth (Mat. 5:13).

The New Testament does not directly speak about Christian involvement in politics. In fact, the leadership concepts/positions frequently spoken of, in the New Testament, are within the context of the Christian community. A fundamental contrast made between secular leadership values and that which is expected in the Christian community is Jesus' admonition on the values of true leadership, often described as "servant - leadership" (see Mark 10:41-45; Luke 22:24-27; John 13:4-17). The imperative of Jesus on what constitutes true leadership challenges the expectation and orientation that leadership is greatness, status, authority and control. However, there is at least an instance of a notable Christian

serving on a respectable public/political position (Rom. 16:23; cf. Acts 19:22; 2 Tim. 4:20). Erastus was the treasurer of the city of Corinth. We do not know when and how he took up this position. But Paul's mention of him indicates he was also a respected and faithful Christian. The Greek word (*Oikonomos*) that Paul uses to describe Erastus' position literally means manager/steward of household or business of a master; and could refer to a political office of high civic status. Thus, Erastus position may either have been that of career public service or political position. His office may have included directing public works and collection of public revenue and thus with significant influence in the city. There is no doubt that Erastus was one with significant political standing in the government of the city of Corinth and his continuation in this position was not censured by Paul.

We could conclude that a survey of the bible indicates some committed followers of God who served in public/political offices. They had some common characteristics that positioned them for their task and enabled them to provide social services. Thus, we can infer that when godly people are in positions of leadership in public service and/or in political leadership, their leadership will be modeled according to the biblical principles that are illustrated in the lives of the biblical personalities who provided public and political leadership.

Recommendations and Conclusion

It would be appropriate, based on our observations thus far, to make some recommendations on the biblical Concept of Politics as platform for Christian Social Service in Nigeria.

Politics of Integrity

First, the bible does not approve of the modern political practices where social élites jostled for position, popularity and status in the political arena. It also does not encourage patronage, benefaction, political enmity, oratory and coercion as crucial to a successful profile of secular political leadership. Faithful Christians today who would like to participate in political process are challenged by certain factors such as monetization of political process, unhealthy culture of political patronage and rivalry, lack of integrity and transparency in the political process as well as personality and character defamation during electioneering. These practices of the modern political system and the attendant challenges diverge from the biblical principles of leadership and human relations. But this is one area that Christians could bring sanity in the arena of political participation and service provision. For Christians who are in politics to provide meaningful social services, they must demonstrate qualities that are far different from

such that are common within the general political culture we have today. Christians in political positions must demonstrate the character qualities that will distinguish them from others. Also, professed Christians in political leadership must be held accountable for their actions. It is when this is done that Christians in politics can provide social services.

Citizenship Advocacy

Christians in political positions should use such platforms to promote citizenship rights and responsibility. This means that they need to promote justice and equity and correct injustice. They should consider themselves as under oath and as emissaries of God to promote and do justice. Justice and equity requires that governments must pay special attention to the poor and protect minority rights and interest. These include the poor, the widow, the orphan, the stranger, the weak, the prisoner, the sick, the aged, the distressed and all who have low incomes. Some of these are in communities where they are deprived of their freedom or of the resources needed for a responsible life in relation to God and to others.

Religious Freedom

Christians in politics can also provide social services by promoting religious freedom. Religion is not limited to one area of human life. Advocacy for religious liberty in Nigeria means citizens, people, communities and organizations should have the right to live out and express their different beliefs in the society, and such persuasion should neither deny them the exercise of civic responsibilities, nor dispose them to the risk of loss of life and property.

Education

Christians in politics could also use the platform to promote right and access to education. They should urge governments to protect and assure the right of children to adequate education and give them the opportunity to quality education.

Anti-Corruption Campaigns

Christians in politics should also be at the forefront in the fight against corruption. This fight may, however, be hampered where some professed Christians in the political arena are also accused of corruption, or perceived to be corrupt. Christians and Christian communities should engage in voters education and sensitization of its members to enable them vote wisely irrespective of the promises that may be made by candidates whose election will inhibit religious freedom, promote corruption, and service self-serving agenda.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the Bible does not directly endorse nor censure Christian participation in politics. But as citizens of a state, it is somewhat difficult for Christians to be politically aloof. Of course, there are biblical examples of some faithfuls who occupied some form of political position. They were people of integrity, visionary, industrious, and faithful to God in spite of very challenging and compromising circumstances that they found themselves in the political scene that they served. These kinds of characteristics positioned them also to offer social services to the nation and even their people using the platforms of political leadership positions they occupied. It could be inferred, through the general depiction of these faithful biblical characters and certain principles enunciated in the Bible, that Christians' political involvement could provide a platform for Christians' provision of social services with appropriate boundaries.