Election of the Deacon in Acts 6: 1-8, An Insight for National Integration

By

Amakiri, M. E, PhD
Department of Religious and Cultural Studies,
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rumuolumeni,
Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria

Mgbara Cletus Monday
Department of Religious and Cultural Studies,
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rumuolumeni,
Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria
&
Ali Anthony
Department of Religious and Cultural Studies,
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rumuolumeni,
Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria

Abstract

In every human society, the issue of inclusiveness occupies acentral focus. In biblical era these challenges of inclusiveness and integration came and was addressed for the early church to progress. This paper concern itself with the complaint of the Hellenist group in the early church Act. 6; 1-8 that their widows and the needy were not taken care off in the daily distribution of food. The paper noted that, the apostles realizing that serving at table will be a distraction suggested the appointment of deacons. The paper identified some qualities including uprightness, devotion and humility for those to serve at the table. The aim of the study therefore. Was to examine the problem of non-inclusiveness and solution in the early church and how the solution can be applied to solve the Nigerian problem of marginalization. The paper applies Karl Marx's communalism theory as a frame work for the study. It employed the hermeneutic and analytical approach in the discussion. It observed that the appointment of the seven deacons based on the principle of proven integrity firmly addressed the concern of the Hellenists for their widows and the needy.

Introduction

The continent of Africa and especially, the West was the bride of the European exploiters at the wake of the fifteen century. The scramble for and the partition of West Africa led to the Nov 15th, 1884 and 30th, Jan 1885 Berlin conference. Britain eventually, took over the geographical entity which is today known as Nigeria. Several communities all of which were different in their outlook and beliefs merged into one conquest territory. In 1914, the North and South were further amalgamated without regard to their different customs, religious beliefs and social background. Several laws were made; decrees promulgated which gave the federal Government power to own the greater percentage the land and what lies beneath it. However, the sharing of the common goods and leadership positions continue to be problematic. Various attempts made to ensure peace and national integration among the various communities that made up the Nigerian states has been decimated with plethora of crisis with devastating consequences, especially on the basis of religion and ethnicity. Just like the Nigerian State, the early church was faced with the problem of intergroup bias, which posed a threat to the unity and progress. However, the early Christian community rose up to the challenge and peace was ensued. It was also discovered that the problem of ethnicity and national integration in Nigeria is not just in its heterogeneous nature but in its leadership. The quest for national integration must begin with the willingness of the leadership to address the issues of social injustice and discrimination through a call for national dialogue, to harness opinions that will make for national integration for peaceful co-existence.

Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, ''It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and sit at tables."Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business;"but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word".And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch, whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them. Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith. And Stephen, full of faith and power did great wonders and miracles among the people (Acts 6: 1-8)

The **Meaning of Deacon**

The Meaning of the Root Word Diakonew**.** There are three words used in Scripture *(diakonos, diakonia, diakonein)* thatrelate to the office of deacon (Cranfield, 1966). Each of

these forms are derivatives of the root *diakonew,*which in the classical sense meant“ to wait at table (Hermann, 1964). This basic meaning is "echoed" in all forms of the word. More generally it meant "provide or care for" and has the inclusive meaning "to serve. In Judaism it had similar uses. Philo used it to speak of service in the same sense of waiting on tables. Josephus used it to mean waiting on tables, serving, and obeying. The secular application of *diakonew*in Greek life was seen in both its use to describe the work of one who cared "for household needs" (thus indicating personal subjection) and to designate one's acts of service to the community or state (thus indicating a service performed by a free man). The Greek culture considered service to the state to be honorable but understood personal service to another as being derogatory.

Hess states,

> In general the voluntary giving of oneself in the service of one's fellow man is alien to the Greeks thought. The highest goal before man was the development of his own personality. However, as Jesus walked among those with this mind set, He became a living contradiction to their self-centeredness. In the New Testament then, the idea of service to others became the key to understanding Christ and following Him (Mark 10:35-45).

As Beyer states,

The natural man-especially the Greek-would see no difficulty in answering the question who is greater, the one who serves or the one who is served. It is obviously the latter ... [However, Jesus emphatically states]: I am among you as a servant. This is said by the uncontested leader of the disciples, by the Son of Man who knows that He is Lord of the kingdom of God (Lk. 22:29) ... [Thus,] He is instituting in fact a new pattern of human relationships. He makes this no less clear in terms of the specific process of waiting at table than by His own action in washing the feet of His disciples. Thus, Jesus is a self-described servant who actually did the work that His Father sent Him to do, indicating that service is not to be seen in a negative light (Matthew 20:28; Romans 15:8). An application for the deacon (or any Christian) can be specifically made at this point.

C. E. B. Cranfield states,

> When those who give of their substance for the relief of the needy or those who organize and administer the Church's *diakonia* yield to the temptation to self-importance and lordliness, their service ceases to be authentic *diakonia* (Cranfield 1966).

The Origin of the Deacon Ministry

The need for deacons came early in the life of the church. According to Acts 6: 1-7 the first deacons were elected only five years after Jesus had suffered the agonizing and humiliating death of crucifixion (Bruce, 1898) Yet, because He had been raised in glory and power, the church was experiencing tremendous revival. The seeming defeat at Calvary had been authenticated for what it really was--victory over death! Many people in Jerusalem were being radically changed as they experienced a personal relationship with God. Their sins had been forgiven, their sorrows taken away and they could dance as children of Yahweh. The deadness of religious ritual had been replaced by joyful fellowship with the living Lord. The Holy Spirit had taken possession of their souls, permeating their lives with the very holy presence of God.

The Reason of their Election

1) The temporal needs of members of the Church. "Widows" are especially mentioned in all communities the most deserving of aid. The Bible, therefore particularly commends them to be compassion of the benevolent. "Pure religion and undefiled," etc. It is the duty of the Church to attend to the temporal as well as the spiritual needs of its members. Indeed, Christ has left us an example. The gospel is more a record of His beneficent acts than of His doctrinal ideas.
2) The absorbing work of the gospel ministry. This the twelve referred to as a reason. The deacons were elected not to rules but to relive the preachers; so that, undistracted, they might give themselves wholly to their proper work.

The Importance of the Deacon Ministry

That deacons fulfilled an important role during the New Testament era, is easily recognized by observing their presence and practice in the early church. Therefore, to help verify the significance of their ministry, several noteworthy points will be made based on a summary of the Biblical evidence. Their importance is substantiated by noticing: (1) the emphasis placed on this ministry throughout Scripture; (2) the evident testimony they portrayed for their Savior; (3) the positive results produced through their ministry; and (4) the later admonition of Paul to continue the ministry of deacons.

The Qualification of their Election

The word deacon really means "servant" or "attendant". It was used of somebody who waited on tables or did menial tasks (Hughes, Chapell, and 2000: 83). The office of deacon seems to originate from Acts 6: 1-6, where the apostles were confronted with the needs of the widows in the community. In order to focus on prayer and the ministry of the word,

they had the Church select seven faithful men who were full of the spirit to care for the widows (Acts. 6; 2-3).

Though the word deacon is never used in that context, the verb form of the word is (Acts 6;2) says, " so the twelve called the whole group of the disciples together and said , " it is not right for us to neglect the word of God to wait on tables". Wait on tables is literally "deacon". A servant especially in a Christian congregation. These men partnered with the apostles, allowing them to focus on specific ministry tasks.

The Moral Qualifications of the Deacon

The first qualification specified for the prospective deacons was *martureo* and is translated "**goodreputation**" (Acts 10:22; 1 Timothy 5:10). The basic meaning of this word is "to bear witness (Robertson). A deacon, then, was to bear a good witness in the home, the church, and the community (1 Timothy 3:8-13). The present tense of this verb indicates that a candidate's witness among people was to be an ongoing characteristic and trait; they were to continually have a good reputation.

The second qualification the deacon is to possess is being full of the **Holy Spirit**. Cowen notes that the word "full" *(pleres)* means to "come under the complete influence of some person or idea (Cowen). In this context it means "to be under the complete control of the Holy Spirit, so He directs one's entire life" (Acts 13:52; Ephesians 5:1S). When used in this way, to describe a person, it means "one who is constantly characterized by being filled with the Spirit. This was part of his character.

The third qualification for the deacon is to be **full of wisdom**. To be filled with wisdom primarily means to be filled with the Word of God (Colossians 3:16). The deacon will be extremely handicapped if he does not have the type of godly wisdom brought by a personal, daily, spiritual walk with the Lord Jesus Christ in His Word. This is true because anyone not filled with God's wisdom will be filled with an earthly, demonic, self-willed wisdom that breeds strife, bitter envy, self-seeking, confusion, and every evil thing (James 3:13-1S). Anyone filled with this latter type of wisdom will not be able to settle disputes but will only cause problems among the people. The heavenly wisdom brought by a deep knowledge of God's Word promotes peace, mercy, gentleness, willingness to yield, and good fruit. Being filled with godly wisdom, then, will facilitate harmony and unity in the church. Having heavenly wisdom will not only help the deacon settle problems, but also will strengthen his own character with God and keep him from being a problem in the church. The deacon wants to settle problems, not create them.

An Insight to National Integration Nigeria

The Nigerian state is the product of colonial supremacy date back to 1884-1885 Berlin West African conference. Divers ethnic and tribal groups with their political, religious and economic interests were forcefully merged together. Adam Smith one of the pioneer economist pointed out that the principal factors of production are land, labour, capital and entrepreneurship. Smith, Adam cited in (JohnWangbu 2018; 35). Nigeria was made a federation by same colonial power. The various ethnic and tribes and regions were stripped of the control of their natural endowments. This is because, "in a federation, the national constitution gives the central government control over matters of general, or common concern to the country as a whole and gives the states the power to regulate matters of more local concern" (Ibid.37). However, it is the case of robbing Peter to pay Paul. There are lots of cries marginalization from different parts of the country and especially, the Niger Delta region.

The deliberate policy of political, economic marginalization and exclusion. The quest for justice by communities, ethnic groups, and regions has led to series of agitations and even secessions. The unity and sovereignty of Nigeria is now under threat. Unlike the leadership of the early church who were proactive and pragmatic in responding promptly to groups sentiment, the Nigerian state rather prefer military might with divide and rule tactics. Some of the prominent dissatisfied groups that officially asked for in different fora. For example,

1. Biafra war of 6th, July1967- 15th,jan 1970
2. The Ogoni Bill of Rights 1990
3. The Charter Demands of Ogbia People, 1992
4. The Kiama Declaration, 1998
5. The First Urhorobo Economic Summit, 1998
6. The Ikwerre Rescue Charter,1999
7. The Warri Accord, 1999
8. First Niger Delta Indigenous Women Conference, 1999

Lately, Nnamdi Kanu has come up with the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). The Yoruba separatists led by Sunday Igboho, the Oduduwa republic. The Arewa republic, The Middle Belt republic etc. while some of the platform used to express sentiments of marginalization has been peaceful, others have resulted in loss of lives and property difficult to estimate.= as Nigeria prepares for 2023 general election, it is dramer especially within the major political party, the People's Democratic Party Thus, one fundamental reason for the continuance of the challenge of ethnicity in Nigeria is pivotal to the nations'

lack of true national leadership with character, vision and purpose. According to Achebe (1984:1),

> The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing wrong with Nigeria land, climate, water, air, or anything else. The Nigeria problem is the unwillingness and inability of its leaders to arise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example, which is hallmark of true leadership.

Nigeria has been unfortunate in leadership. According to Achebe (1983), if other countries are affected with natural disaster, Nigerian own disaster is leadership failure. From inception, Nigeria lacked leaders with strong moral character like the apostle, who have the ability to lead, inspire and motivate to rise against the challenges of ethnic and religious bias. Nigeria is plagued with primordial leaders with strong ethnic and religious sentiment which has contributed in no small way to undermine the quest for national integration.

Nigeria needs true nationalists with vision and character who can implement the prototypical solution of the leadership of the early church to the challenges of ethnicity in Nigeria. The leadership of the early church respondent to the challenges of group prejudice by calling the people together in a round table conference, where they discussed their differences and grievances and proffer solution to them. Not only that, the leadership upheld the opinion of the people as reach in the dialogue. Through the collaborative efforts of the leaders and the people, which is commendable and most appropriate method to obtaining satisfactory and long-term result, peace was restored to the community.

Thus, the backbones of Ethnicity (rights groups and separatists) in Nigeria will not be weakened until the leaders are willing to call the various ethnic and religious groups to a national dialogue, where the people would collectively decide on the issue of oneness and peaceful co-existence, and consequently come up with a constitution on how they must be governed. The quest for national integration must begin with social and political consensus, which recognizes the multicultural characteristic of the Nigeria society, and the people's acceptance of co-existence, mutual tolerance, social justice as sine qua non for peace and development. It is only through collective willingness to accommodate, tolerate and develop a sense of respect, flexibility, inclusion and relatedness that we can produce the true spirit of oneness and unity in Nigerian multi-diversified polity.

Furthermore, related to the use of leadership is the challenge of social injustice, lack of fairness, and inequality. Nation is built by exemplary men and women in leadership but

sustained by institution that promote as social justice, equality and fairness, which is the bedrock for good governance, social development, economic wellbeing of any society.

The leadership of the early church addressed the issue of marginalization and social injustice and inequity by addressing the issue of power in balance in the leadership structure of the church. Before now, the leadership of the church was demographically disproportionate comprising only of the Hebrew. However, with the complaint of the Hellenists, the apostles were willing to re-structure and expand the leadership to accommodate the marginalized community which ensured justice, equity and fairness to all.

In the same vein, the leadership of Nigeria must sincerely address the issue of social injustice and inequality through restructuring, if true peace and reconciliation is to be achieved. In Nigeria, not only are many of the citizen deny their basic right, but there is also serious variations in the enjoyment of these rights across the nation. Social-economic inequalities across the nation fuels fear and suspicion, which keeps the nation divided. Consequently, the citizen is not interested to support the state, because they do not feel the society is adequately concerned about their welfare. Nkom cited in Okpeh (2004: 246) therefore noted:

> The problem of national integration (…if you like intergroup relations…emphasis added) resolves around the issue of building a just democratic social order which gives every individual a sense of belonging, which guarantee each person a satisfactory level of participation and development and which ensure for a people a share of resources of society commensurate with descent acceptable living.

An integral application of justice and equality is the building of a common citizen status {beyond ethnic and religious identity}, which ensure a base line of social and economic status and equal opportunities for all. Instead of resorting to the primordial identity of ethnic origin (or state of origin) as a means of accessing national resources, a general citizenship model of identification, such as place of residence, should be put in place. This will create a civic structure of right that will unite people around shared right and goals. Nigeria therefore must strengthen its institution, policies and practice to reduce the predominance of ethnicity and religion in local, state, and national politics. Lasting peace and stability in Nigeria can only be achieved when solution are based on the rule of law or respect for right of all Nigerians of place of origin.

In addition, the search for peace, fairness and social justice, the leadership of the early church called for the nomination of men of good reputation, full of the spirit and wisdom, who willbe in charge of the distribution of common goods. Not minding that the Hellenists were in the minority, the Hebrew were willing to select from them men of good character whom they entrust with the administrative responsibility of the early Christian community. The Apostles were able to focus on preaching the word of God which was their cord mandate. Not only was peace restored, their number increased, and a large group of priests became obedient to the faith.

Power they say corrupt and absolute power corrupt absolutely. Therefore, political power should not only be left in the hands of the ethnic majority to avoid the risk magnetization of the ethnic minority. Election or appointment of people into public office should be based on integrity and competence, and not on ethnic or religious identity. Equality in social, political and economic structure will bring to a minimal decimal the cry of marginalization and inequity. This will enhance national integration and bring to an end current mutual mistrust that is sliding the foundation of the nation's existence.

The apostles showed commitment towards evolving a just and humane society which was illustrated by their acute sense of concern for the commoners in their community. Their strong desire for the promotion of justice, equity, fairness, their high sense of responsibility and dedication to duty in the conduct of public affairs, and judicious use of public resources is worthy of emulation. The government of Nigeria must put meeting the need of the disadvantaged as a key objective of public policy. Such an approach can make possible a common experience of life by Nigerians living in different part of the country, and elicit their commitment to the national unity.

Conclusion

The problem of ethnicity in Nigeria is not a natural outcome of multi-ethnicity of Nigerian State but in the politicization of ethnic identity but her citizens, especially the leaders. Therefore, in an attempt to ensure harmonious intergroup relations and national integration in Nigerian, it is essential that intervention strategies are developed to tackle primordial identities prejudice and intergroup discrimination through an inclusive citizenship identity modality that recognizes, accommodate, and promotes the equality of all Nigerians, irrespective of ethnic origin, religious affiliation or place of residence. This can only be achieved through the willingness of the leadership to call for a national dialogue, where the people would collectively decide on the issue of oneness and peaceful co-existence, and consequently come up with a constitution on how they must be governed. With the collaborative effort of the leadership and the people's willingness to

co-exist and accept one another with open mind and work for the common good of all, the challenge of ethnic and religious identity in intergroup relations will be brought to the barest minimal, if not to an end, and thus national development will be inevitable.

References

Achebe C. (1984). *The trouble with Nigeria*. USA: Heinemann Educational Book.

Cranfield, C. E. B. (1966) "Diakonia in the New Testament." Chapter in *Service in Christ:Essays Presented to Karl Barth on His 80th Birthday.* Edited by James. McCordand T. H. L. Parker. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.

Bruce, F. F. (1990).*The Acts of the Apostles: Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary.* 3d Edition. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.

- General Editor (1986).*The Book of the Acts.* In *The New International Commentary on the New Testament.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (1963). In *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries.* General Editor R. V. G. Tasker. Grand Rapids: Wm. B.Eerdmans Pub. Co.; Copyright, the Tyndale Press.
- Bruce, F. F. (1990). *The Acts of the Apostles: Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary.* 3d Edition. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.

John K.W. (2018),The Niger Delta Paradox; Impoverished in the midst of Abundance, Safar Books Ltd.

Phillips, John (1991). *Exploring Acts.* Chicago: Moody Press, 1986; Neptune, N. J.: LoizeauxBrothers.

Williams, Ernest Swing. *Systematic Theology.* Volume 3, *Pneumatology, Ecc!esiology, Eschatology.* Springfield, Missouri: Gospel Publishing House, 1953.

The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 1996 (Nashville:United Methodist Publishing House), p.186

James MacGregor Burns, (1978).*Leadership* (New York: Harper & Row).

Henry Davis, (1978) (translated and editor), *St. Gregory the Great: PastoralCare*, (Regula Pastoralis) (New York: Newman Press,).

World Council of Churches (1982), *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* (Geneva, Switzerland: World Council of Churches), p. 33.