

The Challenges of the 21st Century Church: The Nigerian Perspective

Godwin Akpan Amaowoh

Nigeria

***Corresponding Author:** Godwin Akpan Amaowoh, Nigeria

Abstract: History has revealed that the church has never been from challenges since her inception as recorded in Book of Acts of the Apostles. The challenges facing the church were foretold by the Lord Jesus in Matthew 16:18 which he referred to as the “Gates of Hades” the challenges began initially as extended in the form of persecution before the internal challenges come in the form of heresies, Simony and disunity.

The 21st century church has not been without challenges but according to the Lord Jesus, the Gate of Hades have not prevailed over it. This paper seeks to look at the challenges of the 21st century church and how she is coping with it.

1. INTRODUCTION

The history of the church is, indeed, a miracle story. Against all odds and severe challenges beginning from its inception, this institution, unlike and other undertaken by men, has continued to endure. The birth of the church is dated back to the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came upon the one hundred and twenty disciples, who, in obedience to the Lord’s command waited in the upper room after the ascension for the outpouring of the spirit (Acts 2). Peter’s inaugural sermon led to the conversion of about three thousand people who were added to the church. Some other scholars, however, would not consider the day of Pentecost as the genesis of the church. They traced it back to the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus, which became a universal witness to him on the day of Pentecost.

1.1. State of Problems

Before the epochal event of the birth of the church, the Lord Jesus had said “Upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matte. 16:18). He had foreseen the diabolical onslaughts of Satan against the church and at the same time the triumph of this divine movement “My Church” over all her avowed enemies. One mystery that still remains unraveled by the humanist is why Jesus chose to die a criminal’s death rather than a Conquering Military General in order to fulfil his mission.

On the miraculous survival of the church, unlike earthly institutions, Newby (1982:35) makes reference to St. Augustines “The City of God” in which he reacts to the destruction of Rome in AD 410 inter ilia:

All earthly cities are vulnerable
Men build them and men destroy them
At the same time there is the City of God
Which men did not build and cannot destroy,
and which is everlasting.

History repeats itself, and this is a truism when we look at church history. In presenting a paper on the challenges of the 21st century church, it will become absolutely necessary to look at the challenges of church in retrospect under the following historical phases:

- (a) The Early Church Ad 29-500 (1st – 6th Century)
- (b) The Medieval Church Ad 500 – 1517 (6th – 16th Century)
- (c) The Reformation To The Present (1517 – 1999) 6th – 20th
- (d) Century.

2. THE EARLY CHURCH 1ST – 6TH CENTURY AD

This period was manned by the Apostles and later by the church or apostolic fathers. The Apostles who took over from the Lord Jesus undertook the missionary and administrative tasks of the budding and youthful church. Their main challenges were persecution from the opposing judaistic sect and Rome, growth problems (administrative issues), and the Gentile Question. Persecution by Rome was very serious and most of the Apostles were martyred. This lasted from Emperor Nero in AD 54 to Emperor Diocletian in AD 311. The church heaved a sigh of relief during the reign of Emperor Constantine, who, following his conversion to the Christian faith in 312, issued the Edict of Milan, March 313 which made Christianity a state religion.

But the church was to face a floodgate of some other challenges, and these were heresies and theological controversies, which in no small measure threatened her foundation. Ebionism, Gnosticism, Monarchianism and Sabellianism were just minor heresies of the early days.

Arianism marked the beginning of major heresies and controversies in the days of the church fathers. Others were Macedonianism, Apollinarianism and Monophysitism. Much energy and resources were dissipated by the church in setting these controversies and curbing the heresies. Ecumenical councils were convened to resolve these internal crises.

Paul Ajah (1989:46) commenting on the challenges of the controversies says, “Really, it seemed that the devil who had been behind the persecution, now changed his strategy, intending to destroy the church by false doctrines (heresies)”. Men like Constantine, Athanasius and Augustine were used by God to crush these heresies.

This era also witnessed controversies over the church liturgy, ecclesiastical hierarchy and the dichotomy between the clergy and laity. It was a stormy sail for the church to safety.

3. THE MEDIEVAL CHURCH (6TH TO 16TH CENTURY AD)

The church in this period came under Papacy, a Latin word “Papa” meaning “Father”. According to John Schwarz (1995:138), this marked the emergence of the title “Pope” in the 6th century. From the doctrine of apostolic succession, Roman Bishops derived the authority over all other bishops. This period witnessed the separation between the Western (Catholic) and the Eastern (Orthodox) church in 1054. The rule of the Pope was a complete aberration from the Christian traditions. T. S. Siddle (1986:25) makes this sad commentary on the rule of the papacy:

This period of the church saw the beginning and rise of the papacy which again developed out of the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes, for with the growth of a separated priestly body, came the need to elect a superior of amongst the priests to whom to appeal in case of disagreement... The intrusion and development of the papacy was another retrograde step in the life of the worldly church, for the secularism of the popes was more in evidence than their spirituality, in deed in some it is quite true to say that spirituality was non-existent.

The popes had perpetrated murders, sexual abuses and gross avidity for wealth. History calls this period as The Rule of the Harlots (904 – 963). On Sergius III, (904 – 911), it is said, he had a mistress by name Marozia who with her mother Theodora and sister filled the Papal Chair with their paramours and bastard sons and turned the papal palace into a den of robbers.

Pope John XII (955 – 963) a grandson of Marozia was said to have been guilty of almost every crime, violated virgins and widows, high and low lived with his father’s mistress; made the papal palace a brothel, and was killed while in the act of adultery by the woman’s enraged husband (Halley 1965:774).

This period is also known as the “Babylonian captivity of the church” which witnessed avarice, simony, and imposition of burdensome taxes.

It was against this backdrop of papal abuses that God raised up the Reformers Championed by Martin Luther in 1517 to cleanse the papal mess, and save the drowning church.

Yet, another challenge of the church was the rise of Islam and its antagonism against Christianity. Moslems melested Christian pilgrims in the Holy Land, and in response; the church took up “arms of the flesh”. The expeditions were known as “Crusades” and lasted for almost two centuries (1096 – 1270) the crusades did not help matters for the travailing church, but God was still in control.

4. THE REFORMATION TO THE PRESENT (16TH – 20TH CENTURY)

The Reformation fire sparked off in 1517 when Martin Luther nailed his ninety-five theses on the church door at noon on October 30, 1517. The reformation had aimed at restoring the original Christianity and in actuality this was realized. But it did bring about many more problems, which, like the previous ones, were nearly able to extinguish the church.

The church was for the second time in its history broken into two different and warring factions – the Catholic and Protestant. Through its program of counter – Reformation, the Roman Catholic employed all available weapons of – death struggle, a period known as “The Religious Wars of Europe”. Much money was spent on this warfare, many lives and properties were lost. Europe was divided into two factions because of the Reformation. These wars were the Schmalkaldic war, the Hugue not war, the Netherlands war, the Armada war and the thirty years wars.

There were also devastating problems within the protestant itself. Questions arose over some doctrines, infant baptism and the liturgy. These and perhaps, personality clashes led to the founding of churches or denominations during this period. Today, denominationalism is posing a great challenge to the church.

The present church has experienced some major movements since reformation such as Evangelicalism, Orthodoxy, Holiness, Pentecostalism and the Charismatic movement. The frontiers of the faith have been enlarged and many souls converted, albeit high percentage of nominalism. Many churches have responded to missionary challenges. Many independent churches have sprung up. Theologization has been done based on socio-political blocs of the world, and thus, through contextualization, the gospel has penetrated almost all the ends of the earth.

Heresies and gross abuse of spiritual gifts have been here with us.

Theological education and a large number of the clergy have characterized this era. Sophisticated church politics has been learnt by both the clergy and the laity. Affluence of the clergy more than his ministry authenticates his call of God. In some countries, Christianity has withstood almost all her enemies. The church now seems at least, to march victoriously into the 21st Century in spite of all the challenges of the four hundred years.

5. THE CHALLENGES OF THE 21ST CENTURY CHURCH

It has been said earlier on that history repeats itself. Thus, the next century will not manufacture new challenges, but as events are cyclical, the past and present challenges will be recycled by Satan, and those ones which the church had lost sight of will be fully developed against her. The following will possibly constitute the challenges of the 21st century church.

5.1. Islam and Other World Religions

Islam has the second largest population next to Christianity. It is Christianity’s greatest competitor. In 1992, Muslim population in the world was estimated at a little over 1 billion (Morey 1991:35). Currently, it stands at 1.8 billion Lugo, L. *et al* (2011). In Nigeria, Mulism population is about 50% of the total population. Over 46 countries make up the Mulism world, and among these are some of the richest countries from where Isalmic programs and mission are sponsored. At present Islamic leaders and nations are devising strategies, organizing conferences and building Training Centres for world islamization. This is going to be a serious challenge to the church of the 21st century.

Other world religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikkism, Confucianism, Taoism, Shintoism and Bahaism are equally warning up for global expansion. They are contesting that Christ is not the only way to God. The Nigerian church is facing serious challenges from African traditional religion and syncretism in addition to Islam which is spreading through the Jihad and terrorism.

5.2. Occultism and Cultism

The occultic world has been a serious challenges to the Christian faith. People who are adept in the use of satanic powers to maim, hypnotize and manipulate preachers of the gospel, missionaries and members abound in all parts of the world. The testimonies of former occultists like Kalu Abosi the author of “Born Twice” from Demonism To Christianity, Vol. I; Iyke Nathan Uzorma, the author of Occult Grandmaster Now in Christ, evangelist (Mrs.) Helen Ukpabio, the late Victoria Eto, etc will convince the doubting Thomases of the reality and challenges of the occult world to Christianity. According to them, the church is usually their target and place of practice of the use of their diabolical means. My personal encounter with them have convinced me of their menace if not checked. Jesus had encountered them, too. The next century will be a period of increased demonic and occultic activities.

Cultism will also pose a great challenge. Cults are religious in nature with some elements of Christian traditions but they are not for Christianity. Walter Martin in his book *The Kingdom of the Cults* and Hobart E. Freeman in his book *Every Wind of Doctrine* enumerate many of the cults that challenge the Christian faith. They attacked most of the fundamental beliefs of the Christian religion such as the virgin, birth, miracles, death, resurrection, the rapture, the Second Coming of Christ, hell fire, etc.

5.3. Denominationalism

The church today is no longer one, but a fragmented body, with one denomination opposing the other. Demagoguery, jingoism and chauvinism will in deed continue to be a bane to the church in the next century. Jesus had prayed that the church should be one but the devil that knows the strength in unity rose up and reacted Berlin walls among the brethren. I am foreseeing a fiercer competition over souls, halls, land, cities, media and recognition by the government among the various denominations in the 21st century. This is another serious challenge to the 21st Century Church.

5.4. Nominalism

Biblical accounts reveal that people have to be converted or born again into the church (John 3). This has to be preceded by a genuine repentance from sin. This was the experience in the early church until the Edict of Milan of 313 AD which removed the check – point on the church entrance. People embraced the faith without repentance from sin. This dangerous trend has continued and fulfils the parable of the drag Net in Matt. 13:47-50. The 21st century church faces this challenges of making genuine and deep conversions out of her adherents, to reduce the incidence of nominalism.

5.5. Worldliness and Sin

The Lord intended the church to be different from the world, a kingdom of priests, a peculiar people, and a holy nation but from time to time, history reveals that the enemy has been coming too close to this chaste virgin, and she is romancing incautiously with the devil. Hence, she has constantly defiled herself with fornication, adultery, homosexuality, idolatry, lying, drunkenness, etc.

In this Shadow of Sodom, Paul Morris (1978:14-15) speaks on how homosexual lifestyle was to be included in San Franciscan (U. S. A.) educational curriculum to Sensitize” students to accept or at least tolerate this practice as just another way of living. “Some clergymen believe that this (Homosexuality) is one of the toughest problems the church has had to face the sad reality is that many professing Christians do indulge in these sinful lifestyles, even in the so-called civilized countries. The church in the 21st century should stand up to this.

5.6. Materialism

Wealth and riches are from the Lord, but any form of inordinate lust for it is condemnable. At present, there seems to be an unchecked drive towards materialism and many clergymen and lay people have hurt themselves so much so that they no longer function in their God-given capacities. Some have founded their churches and fellowships purely for economic motives. In order to survive the nest century, even the very elect may abandon the truth and join the rat race for the “blessing of the vineyards.”

5.7. Heresies

Yet another future challenge is hereby. Heresy is an opinion contrary to orthodox opinions. History reveals that this enemy's tool has never left any stage or epoch of the church. It may come either from incorrect interpretation of the scriptures, dreams of certain individuals or satanic manipulations. The 21st century church should guard against this.

5.8. Clerical Abuses

Jesus said that many were called but few would be chosen. But a certain person once reframed this statement, saying, "Few were called but many have answered". He was saying this to say that it was possible for one who was not called for the ministry to choose to do so due to some personal considerations. Iyke Nathan Uzorma (1994:151) as an occultist said he disguised as a minister and joined a church in Kaduna, Nigeria. Certainly, no hireling can satisfy the master or work in harmony with his fellow servants in the vineyard. Many self-called apostles will be there in the 21st century to constitute a challenge to the church – the ecclesia.

5.9. Lukewarmness

One of the signs of the second coming of Christ as recorded in Matt. 24 is that the love of many believers will grow cold. This is supported in 2 Tim. 3. This may be caused by the delay in the coming of the Lord, persecution or affluence of Christian.

5.10. Science Technology And Philosophy

During the age of Reason and Enlightenment, faith was relegated to the background and reason was extolled. Some scientific postulations like Evolutionism were directly against the teachings of the Bible. Liberal Theology sprang up and the church fought to retain her Orthodoxy. In this century, science has delved into changing of a person's sex, test tube babies, legalizing abortion, etc. some philosophies have ruled out the existence of God and others have debunked the Holy Bible. The church then should rise up to defend her faith both polemically and apologetically in the 21st century.

5.11. Liturgical Abuses

The worship life of the church depends on its liturgy, and the liturgy depends on who handles it. These three together determine the strength of the church. For the presence of God to be real in the church, there must be a sound liturgy. The Reformation had paid much attention to the church's liturgy because of its vital importance. Today, in most churches there is no respect for the pulpit all sort of irresponsible attitudes towards the church's liturgy. Slangs, fad and slogans provoke noisy responses from their congregations. This is a grief to the Holy Spirit. Funds are raised in unbiblical styles. Ministers dress shabbily without respect for their high calling. That is why no miracles or genuine conversions are record. This will pose a problem to the 21st century church.

5.12. Juvenile Delinquencies

Since the church today has neglected ministering to the children and youths, juvenile delinquencies are already with us and will assume an alarming rate in the 21st century. Since the government took over schools from Christian missions (in Nigeria for instance), who had inculcated moral values in the pupils and students via the curricula, there has been a very high degree of moral laxity in schools. If this trend is not altered through aggressive and dedicated children and youth's ministries, with the exit of the aged, church buildings may become warehouses in the next century.

5.13. Financial Constraints

The church may face financial challenges in the next century, as her members may not be willing to part with their money. The problem of nominalism and loss of membership may lead to financial dryness, which will impair the functioning of the church.

5.14. Missions

One of the main duties of the church on earth is mission. The Lord is never pleased with a church that does not carry out the Great Commission and Satan constantly takes the church's attention away from this. Many unsearched people exist that should be evangelized come the 21st century.

5.15. The Welfare of the Clergy

One major problem facing the church especially in Nigeria is the neglect of the clergy, hence, poor productivity, and inefficiency due to lack of motivation.

In most countries, the welfare of the clergy has improved tremendously. On this, Michael R. Turker (1978:36) says.

Churches are finally emerging from era when pastors were paid in chickens and ego strokes. Church staff salaries are climbing to decent levels. The old adage that some church boards prayed, “Lord, you keep our pastor humble, and we will keep him poor” was no joke! But the wise church board gives freedom to those who lead full time. They compensate adequately so that the pastor has personal freedom also, and his prayer time isn’t praying for money to feed his family but for the other people and the life of the church.

6. HOW THE CHURCH CAN COPE WITH THESE CHALLENGES

- In order to cope with these coming challenges, another reformation will be inevitable. This reformation should affect the entire life of the church, pursuing her of worldliness, syncretism and all “filthiness of the flesh.”
- There should be no spectator syndrome in the church. Everybody from the pulpit to the pew should be involved in the life and growth of the church.
- The unity of the church is non-negotiable. Although the church exists in denominations, unity in diversity should be encouraged. The Berlin wall of Germany has been broken, let denominational walls also cave in, to fulfil Psalm 133. The early church was edible to overcome persecution because the members were one. Hence, being in “one accord” is mentioned about seven times in the Book of Acts.
- Aggressive missionary enterprise should be embarked upon to convert the health and checkmate false religions and occultism.
- Furthermore, theological education of both the clergy and laity should be given more attention. This will enable the clergyman in particular to respond bravely and competently to these challenges. Their welfare should also be given due attention to arouse their motivation. Seminars and refresher courses should be organized for them regularly. Training in exorcism is a necessary handmaid of the gospel ministry and should never be overlooked. This balanced training will enhance the proper use of the church’s liturgy to fight both internal and external enemies of the church.
- Above all, the importance of prayer cannot be over-emphasized. The church should pray like the early church in Acts of the Apostles. With these and other preparations, the church shall win even more than before.

7. CONCLUSION

This paper has carefully X – rayed the challenges of the church in the 21st century based on historical antecedents. The church has often been pronounced “dead” throughout its 2000-year-old life, only to rise again with greater power than before. The history of the church is indeed a miracle story. The challenges of the 21st century are enormous but the gates of hell shall not prevail against the church of Christ.

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