

John The Baptist: A Model for Christian Leadership for Effecting Change In Nigeria

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Abstract – Leadership is a general phenomenon that the human society cannot do without. It is a universal act carried out in order to govern the affairs of mankind across the world. The flow of leadership has been a serious issue over the years; some people take advantage of others, this sometimes brings commotion, chaos or uproar; this includes the Christian community. There is misunderstanding concerning leadership in the Church and this makes the purpose for which the Church was established seems futile. In view of this, a critical discourse is made on the Christian leadership in the Nigerian Church context using John the Baptist and his preaching as a thermostat. This inherently indicates that this research is set to engaged the seeming deteriorating attitudes of Church leaders in Nigeria; using the leadership qualities of John as a platform for engaging and re-entrenching this disgusting vice which has ravaged the Nigerian Church.

Keywords – Christian, John, Leadership, Leaders, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

A recent and critical understanding of the nation Nigeria reveals the need for change. The research observes that almost all the phases of the nation seem to need transformation. Some of the sphere are; politics, religion and social life. However, the focus of this research is the religious angle of the nation Nigeria; to be specific, the pericope of this work is the Christian religious leadership outlook. Although the term 'change' is not a new one to Nigeria; its effectiveness is blurring. It is not an understatement to say almost all facets of Nigeria desires change; this is because of the obvious fact that has to do with series of happenings politically, socially, economically and even religiously. It is important to note that the research in the course of this discourse make use of the word Christian leadership for pastors and other church leaders. In Nigeria, religious activities are numerous observed and carried out, but the expected fruits are not realized. It is disheartening that the sphere of Christian leadership is filled with robbers and quest for personal gains. The truth has become a derogatory term for the Nigerian Christian leaders; probably because of lack of allegiance, purity, boldness and integrity. Therefore, John the Baptist and his preaching becomes relevant, his uncompromising nature and discipline presents him as a thermostat for efficient Christian leadership in Nigeria.

The Biography of John the Baptist

John the Baptists' name implies he baptizes people (which he did) but his life on earth was more than just baptizing [1]. He was the last prophet in the Bible who spoke about the coming Messiah. John was also a preacher who baptized people and denounced their sins. Jesus Christ was John's cousin, and John was born some years before Jesus was conceived. John was raised under the teachings of his father Zechariah. He learned about the Torah, Talmud and other important Jewish Holy Books and scripture.[2] John was probably being groomed for the priesthood like his father, but the Spirit of God had led John out into the wilderness to live as a wild man who learned how to eat off of the land [3]

As a prophet, John the Baptist was a novelty in Israel at this time. [4]The "hair" cloak might have been a rough fabric woven from camel's hair, or a camel skin itself. The text is ambiguous. It was, however, quite reminiscent of the adornment of certain Old Testament prophets (Zech. 13:4).[5] The Bible claims that he eats locust and wild honey as daily diet, even his clothing was manufactured from camel hair. John's life is characterized as a life of a rugged individual who lived in the wilderness preaching the word of God.

The Message of John the Baptist

John's basic message is one of repentance; a complete turning away from sin and return back to

God. The coming of the Messiah is imminent so they must repent of their evil ways and be baptized. There is no time to lose; if they are to qualify they are to submit to baptism as a public admission that by their sin they have failed God. Mark tells his readers that John 'baptized' people in the River Jordan. The word 'baptized' literally means 'to dip' or 'completely immerse' in water. [6] It is intended to be a symbolic washing away of a person's sin. It was sometimes used along with circumcision as an initiation for converts into Judaism. John's understanding of baptism, however, is one of preparation for the Messiah.

John is described as wearing clothes made of camel hair with a leather belt around his waist. John is identified with the great prophet Elijah who also wore a cloak made of animal skins tied with a leather belt. At the time of John the Baptist many Jews believed that before the Messiah came Elijah would return to Israel (Malachi 4:5). John the Baptist is painted as a great Old Testament prophet who ushers in the beginning of a new chapter of God's dealings with his people.[7] Therefore, the message of John the Baptist is centered around genuine repentance and total turn to God.

The Context of John's Ministry: 'Wilderness of Judea'

John the Baptist appeared on the New Testament scene before the beginning of Jesus' ministry in order to break the prolonged silence years. The ministry of John wasn't situated in the synagogue or temple, not even in the strategic commercial locale of those days. Instead, the locality of his ministry was the wilderness of Judea (Matt 3:1), possibly Perea, South East of Jordan River and Aeon near Salim (Jhn 3:23). The Bible journey article explains river Jordan;

The River Jordan runs along a wide, flat-floored 'rift' valley with steep sides. The Jordan (meaning 'the descender') rises from springs at the foot of Mount Hermon and descends to 1280 ft / 385 m below sea level at the Dead Sea. Approximately 100 miles / 160 km from its source to the Dead Sea, it is the longest watercourse in Palestine. It flows all the year round, and was a suitable place for baptisms by John the Baptist and by Jesus's disciples (see John 3:22-23). Today, the lush greenery of the irrigated Jordan Valley appears in stark contrast to the neighboring Judean Desert. The River Jordan continues to wind its way slowly across the flat floor of the floodplain, just as in the days of John the Baptist, though in New Testament times it would have been considerably wider and deeper as much of the

water is now extracted for irrigation. The area attracts many groups of pilgrims, and Christian baptisms can often be seen taking place at **Bethany beyond the Jordan** where the **River Jordan** leaves the **Sea of Galilee**. [8]

The 'wilderness' had been an important religious and historical event to the Jews. Moses received God's revelation in the wilderness (Exodus 3), the covenant were cut (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) in the wilderness. In view of this, Caird argued that John's stay in the wilderness is the re-enactment of God's deliverance of his people in the wilderness. He sees the context of John's ministry which is the 'wilderness', as a traditional prophetic inspiration.[9] Douglas explained John's lifestyle as ascetic, eating grasshopper's and wild honey which shows John as conforming to the Nazarite position.[10] In other words, the wilderness as archaic as it looks is significant to the ministry of John. Therefore, the wilderness is an integral template for which the message was herald in John's mouth and a re-understanding of the importance of location in the ministry is needed among church leaders in the Nigerian context.

Church Leaders in Nigerian Context

The nation Nigeria is one of the religious states; with the existences of different religions in the society. Notably among the three (3) prominent religions is Christianity. In the recent time, researches have shown that Christianity if one of the fastest growing religion in Nigeria with diverse denominations. Many churches exist in Nigeria to the extent that some shops on the street also serve the purpose of gathering believers to worship God. It is saddening that the so called religious nation is in a state of quagmire; although the leadership of Nigeria are questionable but the role of the church in the current state of the nation cannot be sidelined. Meanwhile, this directly boils down on the church leaders.

It is unfortunate that the leadership of the nation is an issue worthy of discussion but Church leaders in Nigeria do not even fare better. Many people assert that leadership in the Nigeria secular sphere is somewhat better than the church. Church in Nigeria has many prominent figures who are not qualified to be called leaders. This is because many church leaders offer special prayers for armed robbers, smugglers and drug traffickers; this is inherently affecting the society. Inherently, said 'change' should start from the church leaders and this makes the person of John the Baptist relevant.

John The Baptist: A Thermostat for Christian Leadership in Nigeria

The realization of problems plaguing the nation Nigeria demands practical and functional attention. The leadership sphere of Nigeria is obviously filled with corruption; even the so called Christian leadership is not exempted. Discoveries have shown that constitutional review and change in policies cannot sufficiently provide the needed solution for the nation's problems. Meanwhile, the remedy for these cankerworms will effectively stem from attitudinal change which will show itself in humanitarian and spiritual form; this then is sought after the style of John the Baptist. As a result, this discourse presents the two spheres and its relevant applicability for Christian leadership in Nigeria.

a. Accessibility: without discrimination and sentiment, John the Baptist being a pious Jew welcomed everyone that would come to him; he was pleased to teach and baptized the so called sinners in the group of tax collectors, soldiers, chiefs, among others. In spite of the bluntness, John the Baptist welcomed the Jewish religious leaders. The fact remains that this attribute is farfetched from the Christian leaders in Nigeria. This is due to the fact that the so called Christian leaders in Nigeria are accessible not until forms are filled (sometimes the forms are accompanied with certain amount of money). Discoveries have shown that Christian leaders in Nigeria are selective of the status of individuals whom they would like to interface with; this frustrated the chances of many people who seems hopeless in the society. Invariable, Christian leaders are becoming status quo minded and this relates to materialism; they meet with people who they term as "rich", "wealthy", "influential", and "connected" first and attend to others if time permit. But this attitude brings huge gap from the minister and his ministration to the recipient.

b. The Location of the Ministry: the base of John's ministry was the desert or wilderness (Matt 3:1). In spite of the fact that there are many cities and towns; this is an exhibition of the Spirit of endurance. Gbile Akanni in his book; *Tapping God's Resources for Life and Ministry*, said "when God gives an assignment; he gives along the needed consignment in the right location." [11] It is unfortunate that the Nigeria church is congested in big cities; there are innumerable large auditoriums and cathedrals. Every ministry in Nigeria wants to have a large building situated in the heart of a city; in fact, comments of people in the recent time depicts that

buildings by different denomination are means of competing with one another. This is a misplaced and diverted priority. There is a common saying among the contemporary Christian leadership in Nigeria; "I am called to minister to people in cities and towns". The amazing thing is that, John the Baptist was in the desert yet his ministry attracted crowds of many people. This reveals that he had the stuff people needed. This is a challenge to Christian leaders in Nigeria that delivering God's message should not be on a locale convenience basis.

- c. The Character of John's Message:** John being conscious of the source of his message directed the people to the same – God. Marshall explained that what John requested for was the ethical evidence of repentance and not just outward manifestation of water baptism. [12] Bruce affirmed that John the Baptist was a man of courage with strong voice in condemning evil and corrupt tendencies of his time without fear or favor. [13] John did not spare the excuses of imperial power exemplified in King Herod's moral bankruptcy. The relationship that exists between Christian leaders with political office holder in Nigeria is worth assessing in view of the fact that John the Baptist did not show interest in the wealth, influence or favor of the political leaders. It's unfortunate that Christian leaders who should say the truth have become 'royal prophets'; giving several prophecies because of their pockets. Many so called 'royal prophets' or 'royal pastors' as the case may be in Nigeria find it difficult to tell the politicians the truth. Rather, they re-paint and re-coin the message to suit the politicians in order to get money. Far beyond that, some Christian leaders in Nigeria make campaigns for politicians on the pulpit; in other words, the message is replaced with propaganda and the pulpit is turned to a campaign ground where the minds of believers are seasoned and poisoned with the interest of the political leader(s) the 'royal pastor' receives pay. This reveals the current trend of covetousness in the sphere of Nigeria pastorate to the extent that some ministers are on the pay roll of political leaders who embezzle and loot government funds. No wonder the truth suddenly become far from the pulpit, vice versa.
- d. Generosity:** John in his preaching laid emphasis on generosity. In a way, John the Baptist advocates for alleviation of poverty in its absoluteness not as a political propaganda. During the days of John, poverty was common among the Palestinian world. Hence, those who professed to have repented should show concern by sharing their procession with them

(Luke 3:10, 11). This attribute is apparently far from several church leaders in Nigeria today. Some church leaders have organized ways of extorting members to the extent. Several religious activities are devised as means of getting money from members; activities like selling of anointing oil, handkerchiefs, so called 'holy water' among others. Although church leaders paint the activities as ways of helping members but those acts forcefully prompt members to use their purse and pockets. These activities are rampant in the Nigeria church in order to benefit their personal pockets and interest. Obviously, this implies that church leaders in Nigeria are becoming more of fraudsters (419) on the pulpit; their messages are colored because of what they stand to get from the members and they take advantage of the poor and the ignorance of the congregation. John the Baptist called to order highly placed people like tax collectors as well as the congregation concerning contentment and the crave for materialism.

- e. **Humility:** an unusual humility was displayed in the person of John the Baptist. He did not project himself but Jesus Christ (Matt 3:11). He introduced himself with what he was called to do regardless of how odd it looks or sounds (Matt 3:3). John refers to himself as a 'voice' in the wilderness set out to prepare the way for the messiah; this implies a forerunner, an ordinary template for the original. It is clear that John's self-introduction of filled with self-denial and self-effacement which portrays him as a humble individual. Therefore, John the Baptist emerges as a model worthy of emulation for church leaders in Nigeria where ministers of God prefer to pose as super-powerful to their followers whom they are called to serve and lead. Several Christian leaders in Nigeria accord themselves with diverse titles, awards and degrees but John the Baptist called himself 'a voice'. They dictate to the community what they want to be called instead of allowing the community to testify to the effectiveness of their ministry. Many church leaders in the Nigeria today cherish their titles (such as; Bishop, Evangelist, Reverend, Pastor, Prophet, Most Snr. Apostle, Lady Evangelist, among others), showing themselves instead of presenting Christ to the people. Many of them in the contemporary time run after achieving academic awards and degrees with will be in respect to their names and add to their status in the society; this in the recent time have become competitive. Church leaders in Nigeria have lost the

consciousness of the owner and source of the ministry, blindfold by what they call themselves and what people call them; they therefore see themselves as all in all and the ministry as theirs, in other words, they call the work of God "my ministry." John the Baptist portrays himself as nothing; acknowledging the sole authority and sovereignty of the one who sent him "...After me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry..." Matt 3:11. The emphatic statement of John the Baptist here signifies that he is not the source of the power, authority and strength; this is humility. This is not found true of church leaders in Nigeria today; in fact they usurp the place of God [14] and with all devices point everything to themselves as if it's by their power.

- f. **Influence:** the current trend of influence and connection among Christian leaders in Nigeria is alarming; ministers of God want their ministry to attract crowd and as a result indulge in things that are wrong. Many of them stage several kinds of programmes (some of which are manipulated and masterminded) in order to draw people to their denomination. The fact that crowd followed John to the wilderness indicates his crowd-pulling magnetism; "...from all Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of Jordan" (Matt 3:5), even the Pharisees and Sadducees went to John for baptism. This implies that influence is not bought; it is earned through the correct lifestyle. The influence of John the Baptist is on the basis of his non-dependence on people of timbre and caliber, godly lifestyle and proof of his sincerity. This result will also be the same if Christian leaders in Nigeria will be disciplined in relation with people (especially those highly placed in the society, some of which are members and not). Many church leaders in Nigeria upon sighting high placed personnel get glued for personal interests and gain; then sideline others. It is unfortunate that many church leaders in Nigeria measure growth, development and success in the ministry with the number of members in the church and not the numbers of lives won for Christ. In fact, church leaders boast among each other on the number of congregations they gather in their services, programmes and conventions. Large crowd then calls for building of auditoriums and cathedrals at the expense of building lives in other to positively affect the nation, even the global world. A paradigm shift is lucid in the Nigeria

church in the sense that ministers no longer care about the growth of members, instead they care about large congregation and the growth of offering and tithes.

g. Lifestyle: the lifestyles of church leaders in Nigeria has become sudden subjects of discussion for media; on several occasions bad stories of church leaders concerning their lifestyles are projected on pages of newspapers, radio stations, magazines, among others. The lifestyle of some church leaders in Nigeria is nothing to write home about; they are incongruent with the biblical standards of church leaders. Also, the analysis in the preceding part of the research reveals those two things that describe John's lifestyle as food and dress. Although, John the Baptist had the opportunity to amass wealth from the crowds that followed him and could have eaten the best dishes of the land, yet he chose to live on grasshoppers and honey. Baker and Kohlenberger explained that John's attire was not a fine textile but Carmel's hair, the cloth of poor people.[15] This shows that John controls his appetite; the flair for flamboyancy and craze for latest in town had no place in John's life style. But John's lifestyle is farfetched from church leaders in the Nigerian context; flamboyant life style is the order of the day, many church leaders flaunt cars, apparels, to the extent of buying private jets worth of millions among others. The idea of what is 'trending' reigns among Nigerian pastorate; they want to follow trend in all sphere and this invariably makes them become extortionist. Church leaders become rich while the followers become poor. This has re-shaped the mindset of believers in Nigeria to see church leadership as a means of amassing wealth and riches.

h. Equality: John the Baptist in his ministry sees Jews and Gentiles as equal before God. This was demonstrated through his stand on baptism. Although baptism had been for Gentile convert to Judaism, yet John insisted that Jews must undergo the same rite to be saved. He also condemned the Jewish notion of the merits of the patriarchs. Although some church leaders in the Nigerian content see equality as an important ingredient for the church, yet they segregate among the members. Some individuals are rated as important as some in the church. The researcher observed that this affects the sitting arrangements of some churches in Nigeria; in the sense that some set of people are placed in certain seats in the church regardless of the

time of their arrival. In other words, some church leaders respect people in the rank of their wealth and influence; therefore, the question of what happens to the poor, needy, widow and less privileged in the church remains a puzzle.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The fact the John the Baptist is a correct model for church leaders in Nigeria cannot be denied; therefore, discoveries and observations made in this research are noteworthy. The research acknowledges that Christian leaders occupy important position in the nation. The desires of the Nigerian church leaders should be put in check, concerning food, clothes, money, among others. More so, church leaders in Nigeria who will effect change in the nation must endeavor to speak the truth irrespective of the affected individuals. Above all, a paramount attribute of church leaders who will effect change in Nigeria as exemplified by John the Baptist is the willingness to endure hardship and pay the price of saying the truth in a perverse generation as God's faithful servant.

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- [13] Bruce,F.F.(1970)"John the Baptist" In New Bible Dictionary 2nd Edition. Leciester: IVP, 603.
- [14] This invariably affects the Church members such that it is no longer what the Bible says; but what the papa, mama or pastorsays. "Ourpastorsaid syndrome" is the other of the day and this in turn has shift the focus of church members from God to their church leaders.
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