An Evaluation of Missiological Roles Played by Ethiopian Pastors in the Sustainability of Christianity in Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

This research attempts to investigate the missiological roles played by the Ethiopian Pastors during the Islamic war against Christians in Ethiopia to help retaining Christianity in the country of Ethiopia from 15th century up to the present time. The research will draw from the findings the implications of these roles for how contemporary Christian ministers can serve as a guiding light for the sustainability of Christianity in every community of the world. The method adopted for this research is literature review from library and internet source. There are three findings from the research as the roles played by the Ethiopian Pastors which by implication challenging other Christian pastors to emulate for the sustainability of Christian faith in their respectful communities. The findings are, the Church mobilised to preserve Christianity in the land of Abyssinia by teaming up with government of the land to defend Christianity and their father land; second, the pastors were unified in the work of God as a team, and in mobilising their Church members for the work; and third, Pastors took the lead in preserving Christianity in Ethiopia. Therefore, all Christian leaders are encouraged to emulate these legacies that Ethiopia Christian leaders laid down for the generations after theirs to follow for the survival of Christianity in our various communities, especially where Christianity is being challenged for its beliefs.

INTRODUCTION

 Ethiopian Christians suffered series of attacks from Islamic adherents. The attacks led to great losses for Ethiopian Christians. Houses that belonged to Christians were destroyed by setting them on fire through Islamic soldiers. Farmlands and the crops were set ablaze: Everything believers had was victims of fire. Almost all their properties were completely destroyed by heavy fire (International Christian Concern, 2010, Baye, 2018). The most pathetic aspect was the massacre of Christian families: Christians were killed mercilessly (International Christian Concern, 2010). We observe that this same situation repeats itself in this contemporary time all over the world, especially in places that Islamic adherents target for Islamisation.

The reason for attacks on Ethiopian Christians is the attempting to convert the Christians in Abyssinia to Islam or make them second-class citizens by force, if the mission of converting the whole of Ethiopian Christians is impossible, thereby Islamising the entire country. These were the capital reasons for capital casualty measured against Christians of Abyssinia by the Islamic adherents.

Despite these attempts, their ungodly missions were averted and Christianity flourished in Ethiopia. This was possible because God used pastoral instruments (otherwise known as pastors) to achieve it. The roles played by these God's Generals during the Islamic attack against the Church and the state shall be the focus of this research article. We shall discuss briefly the history of Christianity in Ethiopia, historical Muslim attacks on Ethiopian Christians, and evaluate the missiological roles played by Ethiopia pastors in the sustainability of Christianity in Ethiopia and the implications for contemporary Christian ministers. But before then, let us first define our terms of operation for a clear understanding of this research article.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

The terms we intend to define are the following: Evaluation, Missiological Role, Sustainability, Christianity, Ethiopia and Pastor.

Evaluation: derives itself from the verb "evaluate", meaning "forming an opinion of the amount, value or quality of something after thinking about it carefully (Hornby, 2005). We plan to evaluate what the pastors of Ethiopia did that helped Christianity to be retained as the official religion of the country today by examining the history critically. It is synonymic to assessment which refers to "an opinion or Judgement about something that has been thought about very carefully (Hornby, 2005). So, the core task of this article is to subject all that the then Ethiopian pastors did to careful observation and judgement to unveil how their roles during the religious war had a positive or negative impact on Christianity: How did the way they sustain Christianity in Ethiopia to offer lessons for the contemporary Christian ministers or Leaders?

Missiological role: a role played by the pastor or Christian minister or leader in making the work of God progress to spread the saving knowledge of God all over the world. (This view is our opinion based on the nature or perspective of this article). A role means a duty or responsibility, "the degree to which somebody is involved in a situation or an activity and the effect that they have on it (Gimson & Cowie, 2001)." So, a missiological role is the duty or responsibility taken by the pastor in actualising God's purpose either in the Church (Watkins, 1992; Hobbs, 1971; Hornby, 1995; Oyedele, 2013) in his or her community.

Sustainability: to be "capable of being continued for a long time (Hornby, 2005)." That is to survive the 'cold and hot weathers' that arise in its way without being defeated. Christianity in Ethiopia experienced tough and hard times but still blossoms today (Fuller, 2001).

Christianity: a religion of the followers of Christ Jesus. The direct disciples were first ascribed the name Christian to in

Antioch about 43 A.D., before it was generalised to all believers in Christ Jesus (Dickson, 1973). Christianity is Christian faith in Christ Jesus practiced by Christians.

Ethiopia: a country situated in East Africa. It was renowned among others in Africa due to its legend of the oldest self-government, commerce, early civilisation and church independence (Falk, 1997; Desai, 2015; The World Factbook, 2015; BBC, 2013).
Pastor: the shepherd, of a congregation, a bishop, or Christian leader (Jim Murphy and Carolyn Murphy, 2000).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF CHRISTIANITY IN ETHIOPIA

History depicts that Christianity was the religion of the people of Ethiopia right from early time of the country (Falk, 1997). It was embraced as the official religion of the country (Falk, 1997). How Christianity got to the soil of Ethiopia was unknown. Boer (2003) says its origin was uncertain. Cheesman (1989) confirms the existence of Christianity in Ethiopia but is unable to tell the date of entry. Fuller (2001) hypothesises that it was introduced to Ethiopia through Frumentius. Frumentius was arrested on his voyage to India through a Red Sea route in the company of his brethren by the security of Ethiopia and taken to the King of Ethiopia. Frumentius eventually became one of the king's officials used by God in the king's palace to convert the king and other people who later became the body of Christ in Ethiopia (Fuller, 2001). Falk (1997) agrees that Christianity's entry to Ethiopia includes Frumentius. This same Frumentius later ran to the bishop of Egypt to plead that he deploys a pastor to the Church in Ethiopia. In favouring the request of Frumentius, the Bishop of Egypt appointed and ordained Frumentius in 341 AD. as Bishop of Ethiopian Church, viewing him as the right and capable person who could do the work (Zanetti, 2016, Witakowski, 2012). Frumentius and other missionary pastors worked to spread the gospel in the country by translating the Bible into the language of the people, conducting services in the language of the people and taking

the gospel to new parts of Ethiopia (Falk, 1997). Through these great men of God, Christianity put down its roots in the soil of Ethiopia.

BRIEF HISTORY OF MUSLIM ATTACKS ON ETHIOPIAN CHRISTIANS

In 15th and 16th centuries, Ethiopian Christians had experience of severe attacks from Islamic adherents of Arab world who were devilishly determined to conquer the country of Ethiopia for their god. The countries that surrounded Ethiopia had been conquered. Countries like Egypt, Eritrea, Sudan, Nubia and North Africa (Morocco and Tunisia etc.) and around the Red Sea were already under their control. Because of the isolation of Ethiopian believers from other Christian communities like Europe, Arabian Muslims pressed forward their religious battle to the territory of Ethiopia. In the same 15th and 16th centuries, Ethiopian national leaders prevented the invasion of the blood-thirsty army of the Arabian religion. The people of Ethiopia strongly supported their national leaders in defending the country and Christianity. Church leaders kept mobilising their churches on missions to the new areas of the kingdom. The seat of the Ethiopia government was relocated to southern part of the country from the northern part, Axum. The church and the state could fight out the Islamic attacks due to the fact that Ethiopian leaders were Christians. Zara Ya'kob (1434-1468) and Lebna Dengel (1508-1540), the emperors, sent clarion calls for help to European Christians, the Pope and the Portuguese, asking them to defend Christianity and their country against Islamic attacks in 1509s. This partnership was the secret that aided the retaining of Ethiopia as a Christian country. (Falk, 1997). Thus, Christianity became the religion of the Ethiopia country until today. If the Pastors of those churches in Ethiopia had refused to cooperate with one another or had failed to allow their churches to cooperate with the state, there would have been no Christianity in Ethiopia today. Ethiopia would have been another of the Islamic countries in the world.

EVALUATION OF MISSIOLOGICAL ROLES IN SUSTAINABILITY OF CHRISTIANITY IN ETHIOPIA AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN MINISTERS

From the above historical accounts, we can identify three important roles played by the pastors of Ethiopian churches which helped in preserving Christianity. First, the pastors mobilised their churches to work unitedly with the state to defend their country and state from Islamic insurgences. The implication of this for contemporary Christian ministers is that they need to teach their churches to respect their community and protect it from any agenda that could bring chaos upon it and the Christianity.

Second, the Pastors of Ethiopian Churches cooperated to carry out missions work in Ethiopia during the Islamic war against Christians and the country; they mobilised their church members for mission work. They did not relent or get discouraged to press on for missions to new frontiers. The implication of this for contemporary Christian ministers is that they should dissociate themselves from disharmony among themselves. Historically, Ethiopia ministers did not allow their educational achievements, religious positions or denominational hierarchy to hinder their pastoral unity. So, contemporary Christian ministers should not allow those things to hamper pastoral unity in their community. The house that divides against itself shall not stand (Mark 3:25). They should cooperatively spread the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ and mobilise their church members to accept others even from other denominations, to champion the course of the gospel in their community.

Finally, Ethiopian pastors were first stepped out into new frontiers to lead their churches into missions (Falk, 1997). Contemporary pastors should not stay back at home when it comes to doing missions. They must take the lead in spreading the gospel to the new communities beyond their immediate

community. They can do this by mobilising their members to give, pray and go for mission endeavours.

CONCLUSION

This research article has discussed the history of Christianity in Ethiopia, the Muslim attacks on the Ethiopian Christians in the past and evaluates the missiological roles of pastors in sustaining Christianity in Ethiopia. Historically, Christianity has been the national religion of Ethiopia, although Islamic adherents from Ethiopia have attempted to change the Ethiopian state religion from Christianity to Islam. There is evidence of the impact of Ethiopian pastors to preserve Christianity which has resulted in the presence of Christianity in Ethiopia today. There were three identifiable great roles played by Ethiopian pastors which contemporary Christian ministers can emulate. If the contemporary ministers do these, Christianity will be widespread in our communities and beyond. There should not be excuse for any minister to hesitate in embracing these. The Great Commission should compel us to do that (Mathew 28:19-20). The death of Christ on the cross and his resurrection should challenge us to them. God intends to have his knowledge to be known everywhere in the world; the gates of hell should not prevail against it (Mathew 16:18). If Christianity will be rooted in any community or nation of the world, all Christian ministers in the world must take responsibilities for their part.

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