

Christians as Light and Salt in Matthew 5:13-14 and its Implications for Good Governance in Nigeria

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Abstract

The attitude of many Christians in Nigeria to governance is generally poor and this has always had adverse effects on nation building. Going by its tenets and values, Christianity is a worthy religion whose adherents are expected to positively influence the systems they are part of, and so, Christians cannot afford to leave the governance of Nigeria into the hands of others. Unfortunately, Nigerian Christians are, at best, apathetic to political participation. In the Beatitudes, Jesus likened those who believed in Him to light and salt with an expectation that they would have good impacts on their immediate community. Apart from the fact that light and salt are essential to life, they are also change agents. However, as indispensable as they are, they cannot make any appreciable impact unless they are part of the system they are expected to influence. It is, therefore, imperative that Christians in Nigeria would resolve to be practically involved in the governance of the nation. In this paper, the authors will critically examine the description of Christians as light and salt of the world and, using exegetical and hermeneutical methods, the implications of these to good governance in Nigeria would be highlighted.

Keywords: Christians, Salt, Light, Governance, Politics, Nigeria.

Introduction

The attitude of many Christians in Nigeria to the governance of the nation is generally poor and this has always had adverse effects on nation building. Nation building comprises those values that are beneficial to the people as a community and not peculiar to the individual. It involves rights, benefits, obligations and responsibilities, and this is heavily dependent on the citizen's understanding of and participation in governance. Unfortunately, it appears that the concept of governance is not fully understood by many Christians and this hinders their involvement in the task of governing the nation. By definition, governance is the activity of administering a country or controlling a company or an organisation; the way in which a country is governed or a company or institution is controlled (Oxford Dictionary, 2nd Edition).

The passivity of some Nigerian citizens, and in this context, Christians, stems from two main errors, among others. First, some Christians see the governance of the nation as the particular task of politicians and have never seen themselves as responsible for being part of the system. So, when governance or government is mentioned, they do not in any way think about their being responsible in the task. Two, some Christians also see anything that has to do with politics as dirty and corrupt and would not want to get themselves "contaminated" by it. These errors are traced to the early missionaries who brought the Christian religion to Nigeria. Some of the early missionaries preached against getting involved in politics (Talbert, 2010) and from their teachings many mainline churches got their doctrine of "Separation of the Church and State." Efforts are being made to make Christians realise their importance and responsibilities to the governance of the nation in contemporary time but some are still highly being influenced by this doctrinal error.

Reading through the Bible, Christians would find out that God's people have always been involved one way or the other in the general governance of the land they found themselves outside of Canaan. The likes of Patriarchs such as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were very much involved in the system of government of the Philistine and the surrounding nations (Gen. 14:18-24; 18:16ff; 20;26). Lot, even though was living among immoral people was found at the gate where decisions were being made (Gen. 19:1) Joseph's active participation in Egypt is still being mentioned

till date (Gen. 41:37-40). Daniel served under three consecutive governments in Babylon and influenced the entire system in no small way. In the New Testament, Christians who were scattered to different nations as a result of persecution made great impacts in the government of the nations they found themselves. Those who were in nations where Christianity was not embraced continued to speak apologetically against the undeserved punishments meted out against Christians. The conversion of the then Roman Empire where the greatest persecution of Christians was carried out to a Christian empire that now produces the Pope is as a result of the continued active participation of Christians in the governance of the nations they found themselves. This paper, therefore, looked at the implications of Christians as light and salt in the governance of Nigeria. The authors believed that the understanding of the descriptions of Christians as light and salt of the earth would help them to reposition themselves to bring positive changes to the governance of Nigeria among other nations.

Matthew 5:13-14 and the Sermon on the Mount

The teachings of Christ as recorded by Matthew in chapters 5, 6 and 7 of the book is generally referred to as the “Sermon on the Mount”. It is so called because the teachings were made on the top of a mountain. “The Sermon on the Mount” is the first and longest of the five sections in which Matthew gathers together the teachings of Christ. In the edited work of David Alexander and Pat Alexander (2000), these teachings are expressed as “Standards of Discipleship” as Jesus showed his followers how they ought to live – not simply according to a set of rules but by an inner revolution of attitude and outlook (p. 477). Vaught (2001) is of the opinion that the Sermon is one of the main teachings of Christ on morality and discipleship. The images in Matt. 5:13-16, according to Talbert (2010) immediately followed by the Beatitudes and are often interpreted as referring to Jesus expectations of his disciples. Vaught also explains that the Sermon on the Mount has been one of the most widely quoted elements of the Canonical Gospels. The Sermon on the Mount was given very early in the ministry of Christ. It followed immediately after his baptism by John the Baptist, the selection of his first disciples and his return from his 40 days and night in the Judean Desert where he had been tempted by Satan with the aim of making Christ renounce his spiritual

mission and gain worldly riches. Matthew 5:13-16 presents the metaphors of salt and light. These imageries culminate the profile of God's people presented in the Beatitudes. By describing his followers as "salt of the earth" and "light of the world" Jesus was emphasising on their value as agents of change. Perhaps, Jesus expects that when those who listened to his teachings in the Beatitudes obey and live to the demands of the teachings, they would surely become individuals who will transform the entire community where they find themselves.

Christians as the Salt of the Earth

It was Pliny who succinctly summed up a view shared by peoples all over the world living in many circumstances in his time when he wrote "Heaven knows a civilised life is impossible without salt" (Natural History, p. 88). Roman statesman, Cassiodorus also gives a hint about salt when he said "some seek not gold, but there lives not a man who does not need salt" (Life, n.d). This expression literally tells the importance of salt then and even now. Many years before now, salt was highly priced because of its importance in feeding both people and animals, curing and preserving foods, producing chemicals and medicines, and tanning hides. Therefore, since access to salt was necessary for survival, it localised people. Through the trade of salt, some nations became very prosperous. Redmond Life gives a brief history of salt, which reflects its importance. According to him:

salt has become an inexpensive and readily available commodity that most of us take for granted. But in older times, salt was heavily taxed and wars were fought over it. In some ancient civilizations, salt was in sure high demand that it was actually minted into coins to serve as the basic currency. Where salt was scarce, it became as valuable as gold... Salt was traded ounce-per-ounce with gold – if that were still the case we'd have to pay \$300-\$400 per ounce of salt. Because everyone, rich or poor, craves salt, rulers going back at least as far as the Chinese emperor Yu in 2200B.C. have tried mightily to control and tax it. Salt taxes help finance empires throughout Europe and Asia, but also inspired a lively black market, smuggling rings, riots, and even revolutions.

As rich and important this historical backgrounds of salt, which tells of how expensive it used to be, Christ, however, was not speaking about the price of salt then, but about its universal acceptance and importance to the human life. During the time of Christ in the Ancient Near East, salt was used basically as preservative and to enhance flavour of food (Potts, 1984, p. 225). Apart from these usages, salt also have certain medical benefits: it absorbs and transport nutrients; it maintains blood pressure; it maintains the right balance of fluid; transmits nerve signals; contract and relax muscles (Haskins, 2016). The medical usage of salt in the time of Christ, and especially to Christ may not be ascertained, but its importance as preservative and flavour are doubtless. So, by referring to believers as “the salt of the earth” Christ was simply making the people understand who they are in God and what impacts they need to make wherever they find themselves on earth.

The Text: Matthew 5:13

Greek Version: u`mei/j evste to. a[laj th/j gh/j\ eva.n de. to. a[laj mwranqh/| (evn ti,ni a`lisqh,setaiÈ eivj ouvde.n ivscu,ei e;ti eiv mh. blhqe.n e;xw katapatei/sqai u` po. tw/n avnqrw,pwnÅ

English Translation (RSV): “You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trodden under foot by men.” Christ was very affirmative in His description of His disciples (and by implication those who believe in Him) as the salt of the earth. He was not telling them who or what they ought to be, but who they are; that is their status as the people of his kingdom sojourning on the earth. As salt of the earth, Christ was making those who have come to believe in Him that they are to preserve the earth from all manners of corruption and decay and also give taste to the earth through their actions. But in order to accomplish this, the ‘saltiness’ in these believers must be intact!

There are different kinds of salt, but the salt that was being referred to in this periscope is the normal table salt, NaCl (Sodium Chloride). Nacl has two important elements, Na (sodium) and Cl (chlorine). Sodium is a soft metallic element, a highly reactive member of the alkali metals. The sodium ion is soluble in water and is responsible for

the salty state of the ocean, and the element is essential to sustain human life. Sodium on its own is dangerous to ingest, as sodium ignites when it comes into contact with water, so the element must be handled carefully. On the other hand, Cl (chlorine) is a halogen element, and because of its oxidation powers, it is used in many cleaners, bleaches, and disinfectants. Chlorine on its own is dangerous to ingest, as it is poisonous. However, chlorine becomes chloride when combined with other elements, and as such it forms many compounds necessary to sustain human life. When sodium and chlorine come together, they form sodium chloride (NaCl), popularly referred to as table salt, or simply salt (Cross and Livingstone, 2005).

The importance and usefulness of salt is dependent on its saltiness, which the elements and ions that make it up possess. Once these ions are lost, the salt loses its ability to preserve and sweeten food. The attributes that Christ highlighted and taught to His disciples as found in verses 3-11 could therefore be referred as the “ions/elements” that make Christians become “salty”. When these ions/elements are missing, the Christian loses his/her saltiness. The attributes that Christ taught to His disciples include meekness, righteousness, mercifulness and peacefulness among others that are parts of the fruit of the spirit, which Paul highlighted in Galatians 5:22 (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control). These are the ions/elements that make Christians who they are. Once these characters are found in Christians, they are already made salty; they would only need to display these attributes as they live with others on earth in order to make the earth sweetened as well.

The verb *mwranqh/* | in the verse translated in the English version as “loses its saltiness” means “to make foolish”, “to become tasteless”. But can salt lose its saltiness? Stotereau (2010) and White (2013) explain that salt is a very chemically stable substance and will remain salty for years as long as it is not exposed to moisture or rainfall. They both concluded that as long as salt is stored dry, it retains its saltiness. So, what makes a Christian to lose his ‘saltiness’ are all kinds of ‘exposures’ to the things of the world that get him or her contaminated and diluted. When this happens, the Christian only becomes one by confession and no longer in attitude for he has failed to keep his ions/elements that made him salty in the first place dry. The only Christians who will make impact on earth

are Christians that are kept dry from moisture and contaminations of all kinds. This is the only way they could remain wise (as against being foolish) and tasteful (as against being tasteless). Christians can actually make necessary impacts in the world by being actively involved in the systems that influence the world such as politics and governance, without necessarily becoming exposed and contaminated therefore losing their saltiness.

Christians as the Light of the World

In the similar way Christ used salt to describe His followers, He also made use of light. Light is a common and everyday phenomenon that is known by all. Light could be used both as noun and as verb. In the context in which it is used (Matt. 5:14). However, it is used as a noun – which explains what they are and by implication, what they would do by the virtue of who/what they are.

The Text: Matthew 5:14

Greek Version: u`mei/j evste to. fw/j tou/ ko,smou^o ouv du,natai po,lij krubh/nai evpa,nw o;rouj keime,nh\

English Translation (RSV): “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid.”

What readily comes to mind when light is mentioned is illumination that casts out darkness. So, by saying His followers are the light of the world, Jesus may be describing them as people who will bring illumination to the dark world that has been taken over by sin. However, the use of fw/j has deeper meaning than just being an illumination. Several Greek words are translated as light in the Gospels. And as Gagliadi (n.d) observes, all of these words are forms of fire. Today, there are forms of light that have no connection with or form of fire but in Christ’s period, this was not so. The Greek word translated “fire”, however, is used as “punishment”, while “Light” is associated with knowledge and virtue. Three of the Greek words translated “light” are fw/j, (phos), φέγγος (pheggos), and λύχνος (lychnos). All these three words are associated, at one time or another either with wisdom or virtue (Gagliadi). So, it can still be inferred that apart from the fact that Christians are to give illumination to the dark work, they are also sources of wisdom and virtues to the world. By implication, the attitudes that believer in Christ have imbibed

through the teachings of Christ and the fruit of the Holy Spirit can graciously give wisdom to the world as a solution to its foolishness and virtues in place of vices that are predominant in the world and its systems.

In addition, the metaphoric meaning of *fw/j* as the commonest word for light in Greek is “happiness”, “victory”, and “glory”. Gagliadi further observes that after *fw/j* began to be used to mean “illumination of the mind”, which may have come from its Hebrew source via the Septuagint Greek. Bringing all these together, it could be said that followers of Christ as the light of the world are sources of illumination to cast out darkness from the world; wisdom of the world, to deal with its stupidity and foolishness; possessors of virtues to deal with the vices that have contaminated and corrupted the world. They are the world’s happiness without which the world would remain in perpetual sadness and gloom; their presence in the world represents victory over all the onslaught of Satan; and they are the glory of the world, representing God’s image. By these descriptions, believers in Christ are indeed agents of real change in the world where they live.

However, as powerful as all these descriptions are and their potential to cause real change, they would be impotent without active participation in the systems that rule and govern the world, of which politics is a part. Politics is one of the ways the systems of the world are being controlled and governance is being carried on. The more Christians dissociate themselves from these important processes of change, the more incapacitated they would become. Christ explains that Christians as light should be well positioned to lighten their worlds; they cannot afford to be covered up. Uncovering themselves does not suggest they would become “exposed” which would make them to lose their saltiness; it is a way of deliberately influencing the world through intentional living and active participations in the things that set the course of the world going without allowing their lights to be put off.

While speaking at the 50th Anniversary of ShepherdHill Baptist Church, Obanikoro, Lagos, the Vice President of Nigeria, Professor Yemi Osinbajo said in his keynote address with the theme “The Role of Contemporary Church in Nation-Building: Pessimism, Optimism or Activism” on the 13th July, 2019 that as salt cannot make any change in a stew unless in the soup, Christians cannot make any difference in the world standing aloof. He is quoted saying that: “Christians must not sit at

home and pray but must be involved to make the difference. There is a test of courage and faith that every nation-builder must face and we must be ready to be the salt of the earth, like Jesus Christ said". He continued that "We (Christians) must put our faith to work and we must be the salt of the earth like Jesus said. As Christians, we do not agree with our flesh; we must be righteous and ensure self-sacrifice, if we will transform the country. People will speak evil of us, but we must stand in righteousness." This statement from the Vice President of Nigeria echoes the teachings of Christ on Beatitudes, which are essential for all to make positive changes through Christians' saltiness and illuminative prowess.

Governance in Nigeria and the Attitude of Christians

It is surprising to know that Christians have poor attitude to governance in Nigeria. Although this fact cannot be generalised; however, it is true for many Nigerian Christians. This problem, however, as earlier noted cannot be completely separated from the erroneous presuppositions and assumptions many Nigerian Christians have about politics and governance in Nigeria. Many Christians believed that Christians should be involved in politics, electioneering processes, exercising of one's civic rights by voting, and that the involvement of Christians in the governance of the nation will bring a positive turnaround but in practicality, only few Christians live to expectations. In a recent research carried out at Ikorodu West Local Government Development Council by Adewale, (2018) to test the participation of Christians in politics in Nigeria, the information in the Table 1.1 was gathered:

S/N	QUESTION	YES	NO	NOT SURE
1.	Should a Christian be involved in Politics?	209	32	9
2.	Should Christians participate in electioneering processes?	187	24	39
3.	Should Christians exercise their civic rights by voting?	232	18	0
4.	Do you have a PVC?	152	98	0
5.	Did you vote in the just concluded election?	52	198	0
6.	Will Christians' involvement in Politics bring a positive change in governance?	227	19	4

Table I.I: Attitude of Christians to Politics and Governance in Ikorodu West LCDA

Again, this data cannot be taken to be a good representation of all Christians in the research community and the number would be very infinitesimal to speak for the whole Christians in Nigeria, yet, it reveals in part the attitude of many Christians to the governance of their nation. Ironically, many Christians as observed from the research are positively disposed to politics but do not match their beliefs and dispositions with corresponding actions. Also from the work, it can be attested to that Christians do not hate politics. They love governance, they believe in it, they are positively disposed to it, but many are not just ready to be involved in it. It is like refusing to act on what you believe is right and worthy of pursuit but expecting someone else to carry it out. This attitude has turned many Christians into political analysts and commentators who are only interested in talking about the successes and failures of those who are active players in politics, but who will not take the right actions themselves. This is sadly a show of passivity where practical actions are expected to be taken.

Electioneering process is another very critical element of governance. By electioneering process, the authors mean political campaigns, rallies, protests, and other political activities which are much more pronounced during election periods as well as reactions to government policies, which are at variance with the ideals of nationalism. Omotoye (n.d) is of the opinion that protests that are channelled in the right direction, the type Pastor Tunde Bakare of Latter Rain Assembly took part under the umbrella of the "Save Nigeria" group led by Nobel Laureate, Wole Soyinka. The protest was against the absence of President Yar-Adua from Nigeria for over fifty days without allowing the Vice President, Goodluck Jonathan to act, as in accordance with the specific constitutional stipulation. Justifying his participation in the protest, Pastor Tunde Bakare said, "We need to spearhead effective social mobilisation, rebuild the spiritual streets and the walls of our nation and influence what is happening there. It is time for the true church to come out of the closet and rebuild ancient ruins (Nigerian Tribune, 2010). The statistical analysis in Table I.I reflects the patriotic level of many Christians in the light of protests and rallies that have to do with good governance.

A good number of Christians believe that gathering of such type, which is not solely for religious purpose, is sinful and unethical of Christians. It is the opinion of the authors, however, that a Christian may get involved in politics, electioneering processes, protests and rallies provided the motive is right and in tandem with the ideals of the nation, without necessarily going against the tenets of the Christian faith and the commands of God. Not everyone in partisan politics is a backslider as some Christians are made to believe. Voters' apathy is another cankerworm to good governance in Nigeria and it is disappointing that many Christians do not vote. Voting, however, is one of many citizens' civic responsibilities, which usually lead to the emergence of political leaders at the national, state and local government levels. As indicated in the research of Adewale as shown above, a good number of Christians believe they are meant to exercise their civic right by voting; only very few of them are not positively disposed to voting. However, even though many Christians support the fact that Christians are meant to be part of the voting exercise to choose their leaders, this paper is of the opinion that not all of them are prepared to actually cast their votes.

Going with the Independent National Election Commission's (INEC) rules and regulations governing election in Nigeria, only those who have what is called a Permanent Voter's Card (PVC) are qualified to participate in the voting exercise. This simply means that those who do not have their PVC cannot vote. Unfortunately, many Nigerians of voting age register to have their PVCs, but do not eventually obtain them after being produced. Even when produced, some only use them for other purposes rather than for the primary reason for issuing the PVC in the first place – to cast their votes. This fact is collaborated from the statistics of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC, 2010). From INEC's statistics, out of the 6,570,291 registered voters in Lagos State for example, only 5,531, 389 collected their PVCs, over a million copies of PVCs were not collected. Worst still, only 1, 089,567 of the residents in Lagos that have their PVCs exercised their franchise by voting during the 2019 Presidential Election. The voters' apathy was worrisome. The number again reduced in the gubernatorial election. Christians, observably, are not left out from this disdainful attitude of voting.

Implications of Christians as the Salt of the Earth and the Light of the World for Good Governance in Nigeria

There are so many implications for Christians as the Salt of the earth and the light of the world for good governance in Nigeria. As Salt, Christians need above every other thing to be salty themselves. Jesus said in Mark 9:50 that "Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt among yourselves, and be at peace with each other." One of the things that make Christians salty as earlier explained in this work is for them to have attitudes that Christ enumerated in the Beatitudes and that are also highlighted by Apostle Paul in Galatians 5:22 such as love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness. These "ions" make Christians become salty first and foremost, after which they would also be able to influence their immediate and remote environments.

Also as salt, Christians must use these ions that make them salty to promote peace and unity among themselves. Christians may not be able to make any necessary impacts in the governance of the nation if there is disagreement and disunity among them. Some of the many challenges confronting Nigeria as a nation are tribalism, socio-ethnic conflicts, corruption and greed that are usually borne out of selfishness. Unfortunately, all these are also evident among Christians, and these vices will not help them to make any meaningful impact. Regardless of what denomination a Christian body is, it is expected that the group would be part of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN). CAN is the only Christian umbrella recognised by the Nigerian constitution and doctrinal differences and denominational beliefs and practices should not deter any Christian denomination in Nigeria from being a member church. If all churches in Nigeria can come together to take a position over a matter that affects the nation, making impacts would be a whole lot easier. Christians will be able to achieve much more together than acting as an individual entity. In Matthew 5:13, the personal pronoun used (*u`mei/j*) is plural, which suggests that Christ was referring to the body of believers in the first place; individual entity is only implied.

Additionally, as salt of the earth, Christians need to get involved in governance in order to sweeten it and preserve it from decay. Salt as a sweetener and preserver has to get into the content – whether soup, stew or meat before it can unleash its potential into it; it cannot do it from

a distance. In that case, Christians need to get mixed-up in politics and governance to make appreciable impact. This is possible if Christians are ready and determined. It is high time Christians stopped leaving the destiny of the nation in the hands of those who do not have the prosperity of the nation at heart, making themselves political spectators, analysts and commentators – they need to become partisan in politics and governance. This does not necessary have to be at the national level only; they can begin to make necessary impacts at the grassroots.

As light of the world, Christians need to continually get their illumination from God who Himself is the father of all light. God is the source of light and as long as Christians get themselves plugged into God, they can never go out of power to give light. The light that God gives cannot be comprehended; it always shines brightly, disallowing darkness from ruling. There are sinful and unethical practices that are found in politics and virtually all systems in Nigeria; many things have been bastardized. However, Christians need to make the difference as light do. Christians are always being seen in whatever they do. There appears to be no hiding place for them because of what they profess to be. They should therefore shine the light of God in them to give illumination to the world around them. Illumination could come to political office holders at all levels in form of counsel, prayers, and even participation. Christian religious leaders should not run after politicians for monetary gains; they should rather place themselves in the sacred position their religious authority have put them and be ready to tell the mind of God to both political and non-political actors.

Conclusion

This paper has examined Christians as the salt of the earth and the light of the world in the light of good governance in Nigeria. Salt and light are powerful change agents. By referring to Christians as the salt and light of their immediate community, he expects them to influence these communities for good and make good impacts on the nation. If Christians, therefore, will make any significant impact in Nigerian politics and governance, they need to deal with their erroneous mindset about politics and governance in Nigeria, take a new leaf, and become practically involved in the system. Christians should be frontiers in the practices that promote good nation.

Way Forward

Christians should obey simple traffic laws, keep the nation clean, promote peace, unity and togetherness, participate in governance right from their local communities. The creation waits eagerly expecting the manifestations of God's children. Christians, therefore, should stop standing aloof, but join in making Nigeria a better place to live. This is an achievable feat if they resolve to.

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