

THE HEART SIDE OF REBRANDING

In a country bleeding from a battered image; where dishonesty is more or less a way of life; where it is almost an offence in certain times and places to insist on doing that which is just; and where corrupt individuals are celebrated for their loot, it is all too easy to lump everyone together and mark them red.

With all the cheats and dupes and crooks in high and low places, one has genuine reason to be suspicious. So when you ask a question, your neighbour replies with a question, wondering if your query is a bait to lure her into the con corner. Not even those with a claim to piety can be trusted anymore.

In an online chat with a Nigerian resident in the United States, I was asked if I were a man of God. My reply was that “Man of God” was a big one (and thus too big for me), but that Born Again Christian was more like it for me. His reply betrayed skepticism about that title. He was of the opinion that Nigerians were using God’s name to do funny things and by implication, the Christian appellation no longer commanded any awe.

One cannot deny the obvious; neither will I escape from who I am – the very essence of my being. In spite of all the name-carrying and noise-making, one thing is sure, “... the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal: The Lord knoweth them that are His. And let everyone that nameth the name of Christ depart from evil”. (The Bible, 2 Timothy 2:19). That gives me courage to say: no apologies, I am a Christian.

What is it that makes one a Christian? Is it just anyone who attends a church? Is Christianity merely one of the religions? If these are what Christianity is all about, then I am guilty of being part of a religion that has

failed to eliminate corruption despite the fact that churches spring up like mushrooms all over the place.

Nevertheless, Christianity is not a religion. A Christian is not a church-goer. When one is looking for an easy stratification in the secular world, we're permitted to list Christianity as a religion. In that secular notion, any crook who attends church on Sunday can boldly fill "Christian" in official documents. But that is not where true Christians belong.

The word "Christian" was first conceived not as a social category, but as a name for people with unique characteristics that epitomized Jesus. Followers of Christ were first called Christians in Antioch. When it became evident that the lives of Jesus' followers were radically different from that of every other person- a lifestyle that was peculiar to Christ - the people of Antioch termed them "Christians". They were effluences of Jesus- righteous and totally committed to God's standards of purity and love for humanity.

Therefore, a Christian is one who thinks like Christ, acts like Christ, talks like Christ, lives like Christ and loves like Christ. He is one who has been washed by the blood of Jesus, cleansed from sin, justified by faith in God and continues in righteousness by God's grace. He is not one who tries to do what is good, not a moralist; but one who is enabled by the Spirit of God to be chaste. It is a spiritual transformation that happens when a person acknowledges his/her sinful nature and goes to God in repentance. When he kneels in prayer, confesses and forsakes his sins, invites Jesus to become Lord over his life and believes God to accomplish the cleansing, then he becomes a new creature, washed by the blood of Jesus and empowered to have victory over sin by God's Spirit. Hence, "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death" (Romans 8:2).

For one who's had this experience and values it for what it is – a treasure greater than all the riches of the world – corruption is not an option. Harsh economic realities cannot compel him to engage in shady deals because his life is not dependent upon the national economy. His survival or success in life -he knows- is not determined by how good or bad the socio-economic climate is, neither does it rely upon who he knows nor what manipulations he can do for himself. Rather, he lives by faith in God and an unwavering faith in The Lord surmounts all obstacles, achieves the impossible and gives perfect peace amidst any storm (Philippians 4:6,7). Therefore, it is absolutely impossible for a true Christian to engage in graft or cheat anyone.

How many of such incorruptible people exist in Nigeria today? Many, as many as are ready to let God have their lives. People who've been disappointed by so-called Christians have concluded that upright ones exist nowhere. But I do know a good number of Christians who would not exchange their relationship with God for all the oil wells of Nigeria. God is still in the business of raising men and women who will stand out for Him in my generation. The Almighty allows us freedom of choice, we can choose to allow Him make us into His image, and we could decide to plod our way by craftiness. That freedom is what many abuse, thus giving their religion and nation a bad name. But one thing is certain: the God who is a merciful one is also a consuming fire (Hebrews 12: 29).

To those who think they are smart, so smart they can pull the wool over people's eyes, steal, defraud, embezzle and dupe, pity is all they deserve. We feel for them and pray for their salvation. Some are so bold as to use God's name in plying their nefarious trade. A certain internet fraudster sent me a mail claiming to have 5.6 million Dollars lodged in a bank in Burkina Faso.

She claimed she needed my help in investing the money. I was amazed when the person said she had prayed before deciding to contact me. I wrote back, asking which God she prayed to. She dared not reply, and I guess that would have been her nemesis (“She” may have been a man masquerading as an innocent woman).

True, Nigeria needs a thorough rebranding, but I believe more in a rebranding of Nigerian hearts that God alone can do. From experience, I know that Jesus does a regeneration of hearts that is foolproof, not subject to change as a result of hardship, family pressure and whatsoever. My God is rebranding hearts already. Hence, there is hope for Nigeria!

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