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Th 722 Studies in Ecclesiology

THE CHURCH VIEWED AS A VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATION OF RELIGIOUS INDIVIDUALS WHOSE TRUE ALLEGIANCE LIES ELSEWHERE

The trend in the United States of America of having church structures and activities organized around interest groups in order to cater to the individual tastes of believers is now being adopted by a number of churches in Uganda. Not only does this trend demonstrate how the church is infiltrated and influenced by the market, but also it suffocates the church's identity as the Trinitarian kingdom community, the one body of Christ. This is significant for me because for so long, the church has been the place of equality, where women, children, the poor and weak are treated with value and respect rather than as second-class citizens. The problem with this segmentation is that it reinforces the divisions along gender and economic lines. The solution to this problem is to understand the church's identity as a Trinitarian kingdom community. This paper will first trace the impact of church growth strategies and activities organized around the same-interest groups on the church in Uganda, pointing out the ways in which this has encouraged gender, class and economic divisions. Then I will give the theological framework of the church's identity as a Trinitarian kingdom community, the one body of Christ. Lastly, I will end with practical ways the church can come back to express this identity.

Since the coming of missionaries in Africa during the colonial Era of the late 1800s to the mid 1900s, the church structure, organization and activities in Uganda have been largely influenced by what is going on in the church in the West. For most of the colonial period, the church in Europe, especially England, had the biggest impact on church structures and activities in our country. However, during the 1960s, most Africa nations had sought to gain their independence from the colonial masters and in October, 1962, Uganda became independent. As the country sought to break ties with European dominance, so did the church and therefore, African church leaders began to mobilize and organize churches in ways that were consistent with their cultural self identity.^[1] However, the attitude and image of Africa and of Africans as inferior to Europe and Europeans that had prevailed in Africa and the African church during the missionary and colonial era did not break because the European left.^[2] Moreover, the church, independent of Europe and the missionaries has not had sufficient resources. (The Europeans were referred to as "Muzungu," literally meaning "white person" because of their white skin.) Ugandans have turned to America to break away from Europeans but to still remain attached to "Muzungu" because the attitude still remains that the "Muzungu" is superior to the African.

In light of the above, the church in Uganda has turned to the church in America, in part as an expression of its independence from Europeans but also to find resources^[3] in forms of finances, discipleship and leadership training manuals plus church growth strategies. As a result, churches in Uganda are increasing adopting church growth models, church structures and activities similar to those in the United States of America without necessarily being critical about the implications these have on the church in Uganda as a Trinitarian Kingdom and eschatological community called in its unique cultural context. Metzger notes, in the book *Consuming Jesus*, that in America,

“Many churches find that the best way to grow is to “target” a particular niche audience or demographic and determine what religious product best scratches that group’s itch. The omnipresent and omnipotent stature of the free-market enterprise has influenced the evangelical church in how it approaches and perceives “church growth.” [4]

It is this same pattern that our churches are currently adopting albeit many times in the innocent desire to better their service of worship to God. Therefore, many of the churches in Uganda are now being organized in such a way as to accommodate individual tastes and preferences.

This is seen in the way a number of prominent churches in Kampala, the capital of Uganda, which has so many tribes of people living together, are now having different services for the individual tribes. This is demonstrated in having one service conducted in Luganda for the Baganda tribe, another service for Banyankole-banyoro-batoro for the westerners, and usually an evening service for those tribes from the north. For those that have not divided according to tribal lines, they have an all English service for the Educated and another service in the local language for those that have not gone to school. Business people have been attracted to church by the Lunch hour fellowships in place of Sunday morning services so that they will have more time with their families and friends on the Sunday when the rest of the church meets.

For the University students, high class government and social workers, a number of churches in Kampala are putting in place a Saturday evening service. These churches have taken seriously the ideas like “ethnicity [is] a significant factor for propagating and arresting the flow of the Gospel.”[5] More and more, we are increasingly seeing that small groups are effective in attracting people from the same economic class, gender or tribe. More churches are setting up children’s choirs and Saturday children’s programs because then the parents attend. The church buildings are now decorated with expensive curtains and church choirs and bands are modeled off American artists because this also attracts a lot of the people.

This is all particularly significant because in failing to critically look at the new adaptations that we are taking on, as the church in Uganda, we are slowly yet steadily becoming a voluntary association of religious individuals whose true allegiance lies elsewhere. The church, without fully realizing it, is giving in to the free-market spirit disguised as an angel of light[6] and therefore pledging its allegiance to the market. In trying to cater to the individual tastes of the believer the church hands over its identity as the Trinitarian kingdom community of the triune God and loses its power to prophetically speak into the lives of the people. Instead of creating a community that involves constant communion of diverse groups, the church is becoming more divided along economic, tribal and educational lines. This is disturbing because for years, the church has been the place where such lines of division have been erased. The services have always been the one celebration in which everyone can join in and experience the same communion regardless of where they have come from. The church has also been understood as the representation of a kingdom higher than our tribal kingdoms, a kingdom in which we are all one tribe and family. Therefore, the voice of the church has been strong in the lives of the believers and the community in which it has been placed. The church has been understood as a kingdom in which Christ reigns.

The segmentation of the church gives the believers the power to choose according to their preferences when to meet, with whom to meet, and how they should meet. Congregations are set up to compete in what programs they are offering in order to attract people to the church. The church is therefore reduced to a vendor of religious services and each individual believer is free

to choose what best fits their schedule, their language, their education, their family and in many case now, even their political affiliations. What this has done is to create niche groupings, yet the church has not been called to be an association of individual believers but rather a body of believers^[7] who are one in Christ (Romans 12:3-5).

I believe the church will need to rediscover, understand and live out what its identity is in order for it to counter the negative implications that arise from adopting structures and activities that may bring in bigger numbers of people through the church doors but eat away on the church's witness as the Trinitarian kingdom community that derives its nature from the triune God. The Bible describes the church as the family of God. What this means is that we are one tribe, all members of God's house which takes precedence over any tribal boundaries. While all languages are expressions of divine creativity and are evidence of God's own artistic genius, these should be used in church in such a way that identifies us all as members of one community, the kingdom of the triune God. Baganda, Basoga, Banyoro, Batoro, Acholi, Ateso, Karamajong, etc, we are all one tribe as members of the triune God's household and therefore, church structure and activities should be organized in such a way that reflects this unity and oneness. As Harper and Metzger argue,

The church becomes the new family unit because it is God's family unit, God's household and God dwells in its midst. God dwelt in Israel's midst in the person of the Angel of the Lord, who bears God's name (Exod. 23:20-21), and God dwells supremely in our midst through Jesus, who shares God's name (Matt. 28:19-20; John 17:11) –the word who became flesh, tabernacling with us (John 1:14). Jesus shares God's name with us and makes the church a dwelling place in which God dwells through his Spirit (1 Cor 3:16)"^[8]

In Uganda's case, therefore, the church becomes the new tribal unit because God dwells in our midst through Jesus. As such we share God's name because Christ shares God's name with us.

Christ has given us the Holy Spirit who is the Spirit of adoption and through whom we call God "Abba father" (Rom. 8:15). We are therefore children of God regardless of our educational standard, gender and economic class. This makes us brothers and sister not only of Jesus Christ but also of one another. We should be seeking to express this unity as the children of God in regular gatherings for "there is no division between God and Christ and us."^[9]

The church of Christ is an eschatological community, living today in light of what we will be. Just as we will sing one song of the redeemed then as one people, we bear witness to this fact by singing the same songs even today as one people united in the triune God. The Church rather than dividing up should begin to seek ways in which it expresses this reality, that is, the reality of our togetherness that will be.

So then, in view of our identity as a Trinitarian kingdom and eschatological community, I hereby propose practical ways in which we can come back to express this identity. For the churches that have grown numerically and have to have several services to accommodate all their members, perhaps they will need to be deliberate in choosing the language/s in which the services are conducted. Since most of these church have mixed leadership from several tribes, in each of the services, they should introduce an interpreter and let each leader use his native language while also having an interpreter for the rest of the congregation. The songs sung could also be inter-mixed in languages not simply to cater to individual preference but to express the unity in languages and that different tribes are all members of this one big family.

The church should also encourage the expression of worship using our local cultural expressions and styles. Every tribe and tongue shall praise the Lord and now is the time for all the people with one voice to proclaim the praises of the most high. In bringing together our cultural and traditional expressions of worship for our God, we not only break the dependence on the Western forms of worship that have been viewed as superior to our cultural expressions but also helps the church to see the beauty that God intended for it in having all these tribes and people live and worship together. We all are His one eschatological kingdom community.

[1] Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: A renewal of a non-western religion* (New York: Edinburg University Press, 1997), 6.

[2] Ibid. 5-6.

[3] Elizabeth ISichei, *A history of Christianity in Africa: From Antiquity to the present* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.,1995),323-352.

[4] Paul Louis Metzger, *Consuming Jesus: Beyond Race and Class divisions in a consumer Church* (Grand Rapids MI:Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2007), 47.

[5] Donald A. McGavran, *understanding church growth*, ed. C. Peter Wegner, 3rd rev. ed. (grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 165.

[6] Metzger, *Consuming Jesus*, 40.

[7] Brad Harper and Paul Louis Metzger, *Exploring Ecclesiology: An Evangelical and Ecumenical Introduction* (Grand Rapids MI:Brazospress, 2009),42.

[8] Harper and Metzger, *Exploring Ecclesiology*, 27.

[9] Ibid, 26.