

Report on the Nigerian National Congress on Evangelization¹

Introduction

During August, 1975, some eight hundred folk met for ten days at the University of Ife, Nigeria, under the assumed name of “National Congress on Evangelization.” The program featured a variety of activities, including a number of main speakers, the gist of whose speeches eventually found its way into the Declaration that was adopted at the end of the Congress.

This was a Congress of self-styled *Nigerian* Evangelicals. Since this term has different meanings in different cultures, it may be well to point out that in Nigeria it has its own reach. While in North America one would hardly classify the Anglican or, as it is known in the USA, the Episcopalian communion as Evangelical, in Nigeria they are fully part of it. One of the main drivers behind the conference was an Anglican clergyman; another was a Pentecostal businessman. They had enough confidence in me, a Reformed missionary, to enlist me to translate some key documents into the Hausa language. Though from the linguistic point of view I may not have been the choicest of choices, this conglomeration does indicate the scope of the term “Evangelical” in the Nigerian context.²

It must be understood, too, that though a number of Westerners, including yours truly, were harnessed to provide certain services, the Congress was basically organized by Nigerians. Similarly, the main speakers were without exception

1 Held at the University of Ife in August, 1975. *Every Square Inch*, vol. 2, pp. 145-146, 140. The title of the original paper version of this document is “Nigerian Evangelical Concerns.”

2 At the time, I was in the middle of my doctoral research into the role of Evangelical missions in colonialism and hardly saw myself as Evangelical. However, I had decided to tolerate this perspective rather than distance myself from it, since it was the reigning paradigm among Nigerian Protestant Christians. However, my dissertation, and, in fact, most of my ministry in Nigeria, was really a thunderous call on Evangelicals to reject the dualism that has bedeviled the Nigerian church. I am also happy to report that during the last decades they are struggling to overcome its negative heritage.

Nigerians. Thus, one can legitimately consider the Declaration that was published as a genuine expression of African Christians. In view of the clamour for more genuinely African expressions of the Christian faith, the reader may well be surprised how familiar many of the statements are to North American Evangelicals. There is little that is peculiarly African in the Declaration. The sometimes nationalistically-determined call for the Africanization of Christianity finds its more radical spokesmen more in circles related to the All African Conference of Churches (AACC) than among Evangelicals, though, as will become clear, Evangelicals do contribute as well to the discussion on this issue.

In this context the reader should note that the Congress firmly views itself as a part of the global Evangelical community as it has expressed itself at a number of conferences during the last decade. There was no attempt to produce a document that is peculiarly African for its own sake.

It is not the aim of the following comments to criticize the Declaration for errors or ambiguities, theological or otherwise, or even for its not infrequent inaccurate Bible references. The purpose is to draw attention to some of the Declaration's highlights and to place certain issues in their Nigerian context for clarification.

The Charismatic Controversy

The discussion on the Holy Spirit is prompted by the "charismatic controversy" that has also found its way into Nigeria and taken on a peculiarly African hue. Especially among university students there has been raging a particularly bitter controversy between traditional Evangelical students and adherents of the charismatic movement to the extent that many students have become extremely confused – and so have quite a number of their non-Christian colleagues. Charismatics are accused of undue pride and of denying Evangelicals their Christian status. On the other hand, Evangelicals not infrequently find that charismatics have absorbed aspects of traditional Animism to the point of becoming syncretistic.

Polygamy

The section on the Christian home addresses itself to three very urgent family problems in Nigeria, but we will restrict ourselves here to a discussion of the polygamy question. Though most denominations exclude polygamists from (full) membership, many Nigerian Christians are hardly convinced that the traditional hard line taken by these churches is fully Biblical. Problems related to polygamy feature prominently on the agendas of most church elders' meetings and they are responsible for a high proportion of discipline cases. Some polygamists admit to having fallen into sin – without necessarily undoing the arrangement! –, but a significant number doubts its status as sin. My nearly ten years of experience as missionary-pastor in eight different congregations have not convinced me that the present rigid approach to the problem is very effective; I would prefer a less legalistic approach that would allow the problem to die a natural death as the Christian faith takes deeper root in this traditionally polygamous society. The Declaration merely confirms the traditional stand; it offers nothing new on this score. One wonders whether political expediency may have played a role here at all, for deviation on this issue would almost certainly alienate sizable segments of the church from this conference.

The Christian in the World

One of the aspects of this Declaration that is most hopeful is the very positive attitude taken towards God's world and the Christian's task in it. The imperative to be Christianly involved in the affairs of the world is unequivocally stated; the withdrawal syndrome, firmly rejected. This feature is important in the context of churches that, theoretically at least, tend to sharply separate the "work of God" and "working for money." This feature, furthermore, places the Nigerian Evangelical community squarely within the international Evangelicals that is officially beginning to reject their traditionally world-denying theological instincts.

Having posited the imperative, the Declaration immediately cautions against worldly forms of participation in society. Bribery, corruption, nepotism, tribalism

and ostentatious living are cited as sins to which many Christians have succumbed.

For full appreciation of this section, it must be remembered that the Congress took place almost immediately after the Gowon regime was toppled because of the prevalence of just these very evils. In a nation where people are all classified either as Muslims or Christians, no matter how secular they may be, Christians were given the blame for these evil practices, for Gowon is a Christian. The conference was burdened with a profound sense of Christians having failed both their Lord and their nation. In fact, some participants were among those toppled.

Unfortunately, the Congress did not really analyze the deep causes for this Christian failure and, consequently, it was not able to provide directions for the future either. Why had Christians in public office been left to fend for themselves? Some highly-placed officials had begged for Christian guidance, but they often pleaded in vain. The Body of Christ had not included the political aspect within her circle of concerns. The church expected personal integrity – no small factor, to be sure – and loyal support of Christian causes in the narrow sectarian sense of the word.

In short, I rejoice in the Declaration's insistence on the Christian political imperative, a profound change from tradition, one that will make it impossible to regard Christians in politics as somehow second rate. On the other hand, I am disappointed because of the lack of more positive guidance beyond that of personal morality, but perhaps that will be the next step?

Evangelization and Social Action

In the section on "Evangelisation and Social Action" there is again the insistence on the Christian social imperative, but it is attached to a strong negation of social action as either a substitute for evangelism or as identical with it. In true Evangelical fashion, both are insisted upon, but their relationship is not defined except in negative terms. It is a failure of no mean proportion not to have concretized this matter, for here lies the crux of the problem.

Religious Freedom

Under this same heading there is a discussion on religious freedom. The constitution of the country guarantees such freedom, but it is not always realized, especially in predominantly Muslim areas. In such areas it is not uncommon for local authorities to place all sorts of barriers in the way of individual Christians or even in the way of the entire Christian community. It is often forbidden, for example, to openly preach the Gospel, a restriction inherited from the British colonial regime. Obstacles are often faced by a Christian congregation seeking permission to build a church in such communities; they are frequently relegated to plots at a considerable distance from the urban areas.

The insistence on the right of religious groups to participate in nation building has as its background governmental hesitation to accept such participation. In the past, both Muslims and Christians have been guilty of bigotry and of advancing their own narrow interests at the expense of each other. The Declaration recommends that Christians replace confrontation by a relationship of dialogue with people of other religions and that in terms of such a relationship such groups should be given the opportunity to participate in nation building according to their particular genius. This is, in other words, a call to the government not to force religion into a narrow mold of worship and personal morality, while the actual structures and direction are governed by secular norms. It will be of importance to realize that the speaker dealing with this topic and who is mainly responsible therefore for the content of this section is the Rev. Adegbola, Director of the Institute of Church and Society in Ibadan, a man fully Evangelical in the wider meaning of that word, but more identified with the AACC and the WCC than with this narrower type of Evangelicals.

Serious attempts are being made to discredit Christianity as a foreign religion brought by an exploiting people to safeguard their interests. My own research has convinced me that there is sufficient truth in such charges that they cannot simply be ignored. However, the Declaration does not argue that Christianity has not

been used as such. Instead, it affirms the religion as African simply on basis of the fact that millions of Africans have accepted it as their religion.

The concerns of paragraphs six and seven are related. No doubt they were included in the agenda because of developments in other African countries such as Chad and Zaire where in reaction to colonialism and in the name of African authenticity Christian practices were forcibly replaced by traditional African ones. It has not by any means gone that far in Nigeria, but some profess to recognize swings of an incipient process in that direction.

Finally, in the present Nigerian context, this paragraph constitutes a courageous challenge to cultural nationalists and is an expression of mature independence in the approach to the cultural question in Africa. It is a firm refusal to succumb to popular propaganda. Along with the affirmation of working in God's world, this statement is, in my estimation, one of the highlights of the Declaration.

Now What?

The post-Congress question is: where do we go from here? It would seem profitable to organize a second congress after some time of deliberation for purposes of coming to more concrete approaches. *How* should Christians be involved economically and politically? *How* do evangelization and social action relate so that they do not compete? *How*, specifically, should indigenous practices be sanctified, or, what should be the criteria? These are not just questions for Africa; they are the very questions Christians everywhere are attempting to settle in the context of the various world cultures.

Postscript

The Nigerian Christian community was dealt a tragic blow recently by the drowning of Dr. Byang Kato, General Secretary of the Association of Evangelicals in Africa and Madagascar and a member of ECWA—the Evangelical Churches of West Africa, perhaps the biggest of Nigerian Evangelical denominations and

almost certainly its most dynamic and aggressive. Dr. Kato was one of the leading spirits at this Congress and he was mainly responsible for the mature and independent approach to the cultural question. He was a young man, who, though perhaps too narrow in his approach to the AACC, promised to become a positive leader on the African Christian scene.