

## Youth Participation In and Outside the Church Today

or

### Youth Participation in the Kingdom<sup>1</sup>

I have two titles for this presentation. The first is the one assigned to me; the other is my preferred version. Yesterday, in the course of preparing this speech, I slightly changed the topic by changing “and” to “in.” Today I am changing it again slightly to read *“Youth Participation in the Kingdom.”* The reason for this change is again the problem with the word “and.” Yesterday I suggested that when you place the word “and” between two words, you are trying to combine what you have first of all separated.<sup>2</sup> “Youth *and* the church” presupposes that they are two different things, as if the youth are not part of the church. They are already separated. When one speaks about participation “in and outside the church” it appears as if you are talking about two different places that you then seek to combine by the word “and.” What then would you call that place outside the church? World? Fine, but the church is also in the world. Society? Fine, but the church is part of society. So, instead of talking about “in and outside the church” I prefer to talk about Youth Participation in the Kingdom.

The reason I prefer this title is that the Biblical word “Kingdom” includes the whole world, also the church. In fact, it includes all of creation. It is wider even than the word “society,” for society refers to the human community only. Kingdom includes the whole creation, human and animal, animate and inanimate – everything. And though I could also use the word “society” for my purpose, I have chosen “Kingdom” because that relates it more directly and more clearly to the Bible itself. The Bible does not use the word “society,” to the best of my knowledge, but it very often uses the term “Kingdom.”

When we speak of participation in the Kingdom, we are speaking about participation in the total work of God, in and out of the church. Yesterday I

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<sup>1</sup> Speech delivered at a Youth Conference organized by the YMCA, Kaduna, Nigeria, April/1979. *Every Square Inch*, vol. 2, p. 189.

<sup>2</sup> That presentation has gotten lost in the course of several moves, including three countries and two continents.

presented some basic teachings that must be considered in our participation in the *church*. Today I want to talk more about work in society, but that is still work in the Kingdom. I am still talking about *religious work* in the world.

The church and church leaders do not have a monopoly over religious activity. Sometimes they appear to think they do. Recently at a pastors' conference there was a complaint about a certain youth organization. The complaint was that the youth did things without first getting permission from the local church elders. They thought of themselves as having to be in control over all religious work. The reason for that attitude I believe is that they identify the church with the kingdom. They think they are the same. Therefore, since they are in charge of all work in the church, they are thus in charge of all religious work.

However, the kingdom is much wider than the church. The elder's authority is restricted to that of the church. But what a Christian does in the name of Christ in business or in politics or at the university is not under the control of church elders, unless he does specifically wrong things and lives a wrong life. The church may give advice to a Christian working there and she should give advice and pray for such, but she has no power or authority in those areas. Yet one working in those areas is working in God's kingdom and he owes it to God to do God's will in those places.

God's Kingdom embraces all. And the church should encourage her members to do God's will in the various areas of society, whether in the civil service, business, building, education, professions or politics. One of the reasons there is so little Christian influence in these areas of life is that we have not regarded working there as service to God. We have looked at working in those areas simply as ways of making a lot of money. But when you read the Bible – the books of Moses, the historical books, the prophets, the gospel – all of them are full of teachings relating especially to money matters and politics. It is clear that the Bible or God is very interested in what we do in those areas. The whole world is God's, not just the church. And we are to serve Him everywhere, not just in the church.

However, *how* should Christians, including youth, work in the kingdom beyond the church? Or *where*? One could say: everywhere. And that is true. We need

Christian influence everywhere. However, in order to say something helpful, it may be better to select certain areas where our shoe pinches, where we as young people face social problems.

Now our social problems are very many. Some are the result of world problems and are too large for us as young people to do anything about directly. Other problems are the result of our present stage of development and they will not be solved quickly. They will take time. There are a number of problems that affect us as young people and about which we could do something – if only we have a vision of the Kingdom of God and some imagination, if we only looked away from others and see what contribution we ourselves could make. We always look at the government and expect her to solve our problems for us. They will never be solved in that way. Others look towards the church for solutions. But who is the church and who is the government? We are the church and the people in the government represent us. It is only when **you/we** do something that the church or government are doing something. So our question is what we ourselves as young people can contribute to our own problems.

No doubt the main problem we as young people face is that of our future – a job, education. I could be wrong, but I suspect that no problem looms greater in the minds of young people – your minds – than that. You have finished class 6 and you have not been able to go on to secondary or TC. You have not been able to find a job either. Or perhaps you have finished secondary school, but have so far failed to get into a higher institution. Neither have you been able to find a job. You have left your home village and hoped to find a better life in the city, but so far you have not booked any success. You are becoming impatient. You are blaming the government for not providing more jobs. You are angry because there was a chance for a job, but someone else with less training than you got it, because of bribery or because of nepotism by relatives. You are also losing interest in the church, because the church can do nothing or does nothing to help you. Things look hopeless for you. There is no place you have to turn. And you end up in wrong places – you get into trouble. In short, you feel miserable and angry.

Perhaps you belong to another group. Perhaps you have completed class 6 and you have landed a job and you have a secure income. However, you are not satisfied either, for you want to increase your education or you are looking for more money and better position. You see others making progress – more money, motorcycle or car, perhaps even a small business. You are also frustrated, because you are not getting ahead. You blame others – the government, your superiors, the church – anyone.

It could also be that you are among the so-called lucky ones. You have some training. You have some education. You have a chance for advancement as time goes on. Yet, you are not happy. You are bored on your job. You do as little as possible. You may be somewhat lonely. You are not happy with the way the church does its work and so you lose interest in the church. Instead you seek your happiness in other places – beer halls, with girls and so on. But you are not really happy. It just looks like you are. You are seeking meaning in life, but you are seeking it in the wrong way and in the wrong places. You are hoping that when you get your next promotion you will be happier, but that happiness never seems to come.

Now here we have examples of people with slightly different problems, but somehow related. And they are all unhappy. They all feel cheated by society and cannot find their way in the church either. *Society has not given them what they want.* All the promises of the government seem to be no more than promises. The future looks dark for you.

I wish to suggest that we as Christians can do something about these problems. But then we again have to listen closely to the Bible.

First of all, too many of us are angry or disappointed because life or society or the government or the church has not given them what we want. Too many of us want to get something. We want to receive something. But that is looking for success in the wrong direction. The Bible makes it very plain that life is not gained by seeking your own advancement. Life is gained by giving yourself. **You expect society to give you something; God expects you to give something to society.** Life lies in what you can give, not in what you can receive.

Let's read Matthew 10:39, 16:25, Mark 8:35 and John 12:25.

Some years ago, President Kennedy said, "Ask not what you can receive from your country, but what you can give." It is an old Christian teaching that we tend always to forget. It is time we learn this truth and use it. Experience has already taught us that if we only want to get something from our society, we will get nowhere and we will not be successful. So, let us see what we can give something. Try the way of the Bible. The worldly way has not worked for you. Try the Bible. Try God's wisdom. Before we go on to see how you can give something, we must remind ourselves of a few other Biblical teachings as well.

What you are really concerned about is your standard of living. You have no job, no education. You are not getting promoted. You may be poor. You may feel that you are oppressed, that you are not given a fair chance. If that is really true for your situation, did you know that the Bible has a great deal to say to you?

(Note: A section of the manuscript is missing. It contained Bible verses)

You hear what the Word of God is saying? It is saying that God has a very special place in His heart for the poor and the oppressed. On the other hand, He is very angry with those who do the oppression. One reason we are not getting our share of the opportunities may be that though the government may make good development programmes, those who carry out the programmes sabotage them in favour of themselves or their people. The rich are getting richer and the poor poorer.

You hear the reason for Christ's coming? Turn to Luke 4:18-19. Christ did not only come for narrowly religious reasons, he came also to renew economic and political situations. So, take heart, the King of Kings is interested in your problem and in that of all the poor. He has come to straighten out injustices. That means if we do something about such situations, we have God on our side.

One problem is that we have not read the Bible correctly. We have read it as a book about spiritual matters only. Well, it does deal with spiritual matters, but also with matters such as these. But because we have not read the Bible in relation to these problems, we have not found any help in the Bible. But these

(missing) verses as well as Luke 4:18-19 have always been there. It is time you read them and draw courage from them.

The third relevant Biblical teaching is one we touched upon yesterday. The people of God are not simply individuals, but we form a community together. It may be possible for a few of us to work ourselves up into the economic system and become successful. But that still leaves most of us behind. We must begin seeing ourselves as a community that tries to do something about these problems together. Let us quit just struggling for ourselves. Let us struggle together. Many years ago Karl Marx, the father of Communism, called upon all the workers of the world to unite. I now call upon all Christians to unite and do something constructive together.

Let us see where we are now. We have seen three basic teachings of the Bible that have to do with our situation. Beginning from the last, they are

- We must act as a community, together.
- God has a deep love for the oppressed and He will overthrow the oppressors. That should give us courage and hope.
- We must not try to squeeze from the world/country what we can get for ourselves, but we must ask what we can give to the world/country in the name of God, together and with courage.

Now we will ask once again what are the problems, this time not simply your problems, but those of the poor and oppressed in general.

There are the poor in the village, mostly farmers. You have many relatives amongst them and many of you are really part of them. You have just left them to their own lot in the village because you want the city to give you something. These farmers get cheated time and again. The Institute of Church & Society has published a report that lists many examples of how they get cheated out of the fertilizer and medicine, out of many services to which they have a right, including loans and the use of hired government tractors. But most of you probably don't need to read about this; you or your family have experienced them. Many of

them are angry, but they do not know what to do about it. So they do nothing and they continue to get cheated. What can *you* do for these people – your people? What can you *give* them?

You say you can do nothing for you have no money? You don't need money. All you need is faith in God that He will help you and them. All you need is understanding the power of the Christian community that acts together. You can help them organize themselves when they get cheated. On second thought, you should read that report after all, for it will give you ideas. We put our faith in money, but it is time we begin believing in the power of God and do things without money – give ourselves. And when you do that, you will suddenly find that you begin to forget about yourself, that you have found a more satisfying life. You will suddenly find that life has become worthwhile. We can say more about this at the question hour. This is my first example. Our group can discuss this.

In the city, for example, there is the terrible problem of housing. The government promises low-cost housing, but that low-cost is still high-cost for many people. People who have money to build do not build for those poor people. They build in order to make quick money for themselves, also Christians. It is time for some Christians to organize housing co-operatives for the poor. You need money for that, no doubt, but you don't need money personally. A group of you can begin planning how to organize or get money. Sit down and discuss together which Christians you will call upon to sit down with you and develop a sense of Christian responsibility and Christian action. The money is there. It is a question of getting the facts. Get someone to help you draw up a method of investigating the housing situation for the poor in Kaduna. Then do the research. Then present the facts to Christian businessmen and church leaders. Challenge them and organize those whom you have challenged.

The third example is how you can even organize yourself, you and those like you in your home town. Set up a co-operative free from government control to set up a good retail shop or a model farm. Get advice from Christian experts and NGO's in your neighbourhood and you may be able to get the necessary loans to set

yourself up in some kind of work. This will not only help you, but it will help all those who join your effort.

The fourth example is bribery. You can organize in various ways, but time does not allow me to continue. Together as a group read these publications from the League for Action Against Bribery (wave them before the audience.) and together create a plan of action.

Now, all these examples are not as easy as they sound. But there is the YMCA who is, I am sure, eager to help you organize for such types of activity. I represent the ICS and we are also prepared to help you organize in these ways. Wise Christians with a love for youth will be ready to help. Christian experts in any field will be glad to help if they are asked.

What I am really trying to say is that when you begin to contribute to society in the name of Christ, you make use of all the talents and resources of the Christian community, and you have faith that God is on the side of justice, you will suddenly find that life begins to look differently. Jesus says that you find life by losing it.

I know, not all of us have the ability to organize, but we all have some talent that we can use, even if we don't have a kobo. Quit feeling sorry for yourself, quit trying to get things. Seek ways to contribute and you will find life. God will be on your side. Experienced people will help.

Working in the Kingdom. That is the challenge before you – with faith and the willingness to sacrifice in the name of Christ. That is the way to find life. That is serving God. That is doing religious work in the kingdom, but together as a Christian community, not as mere individuals seeking their own advancement.