

**A HISTORY AND FACTORS AFFECTING BAPTIST
WORK AMONG OKPE PEOPLE OF DELTA STATE
OF NIGERIA 1916 – 2000**

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ABSTRACT

The historicity of a people is their identity. Baptist work among Okpe people which started in Sapele, an Okpe urban township in 1917 has grown to cover the entire Delta State of Nigeria.

The effect of the factors affecting the work from its inception both positively and negatively is still being felt and experienced by the people till date. The negative factors far outweigh the positive ones, and have stunted the growth of the work. As a result of this some Baptist churches in the area are not too sure of their Baptist heritage. There is doctrinal confusion in some of the churches.

The essay has six chapters. Chapter one gives a general introduction to the essay. In it key terms are defined. Chapter two discusses the Okpe people - who they are - their geographical location - demographic information - and their culture. Chapter three focuses on Baptist work in Okpe kingdom from its inception in 1917 up to 2000. Chapter four provides information about positive and negative factors affecting the work. Chapter five proffers solution to factors which are inimical to the growth of the work as it discusses innovative approach to Baptist work in Okpe kingdom. Lastly chapter six contains the conclusion – challenge and recommendations.

CONCLUSION,

In this essay it has been shown that the Okpe ethnic group of Urhobo nations of Delta State of Nigeria was involved at the cradle of Baptist work and development in Delta Baptist Conference at the wake of the 20th century, yet one can not point to tangible concomitant blessings attributive to the preaching of the gospel in the Kingdom apart from few Nigerian Baptist Convention primary schools and one Baptist High School at Orerokpe. This points to the fact that the effects of the shallow roots that were struck mentioned by Dr. Deji Ayegboyin are still “living” with the people. Isaiah the prophet said: “... my word that goes out from my mouth will not return to me empty but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it”. (Isaiah 55:11). Since the word of God is infallible it means that the gospel has not been effectively communicated to the people.

Most of the people are secular in nature and do not understand the basic affirmations of Christian faith. This lack of understanding ranges from sheer hardening of their hearts and ignorance caused by satanic oppressions to misinformation and partial truths about the Christian faith. This also includes perversions perpetuated by materialism and the ignorance of church members and their leaders.

A. The Challenge

In the context of the above situation with the Okpe people, the strategies of ministering to them have to change. The persons the gossellers seek to reach are different from few decades ago. They are different not so much in respect to their needs, but in their self-perception, their expectations and their values. They are secular persons and their presence raise persistent questions for the clergy – how do

we reach these ones in their traditional and cultural relativistic world – views where Christianity has been mutilated with syncretic activities amid doctrinal confusion that permeates the society through different sects who claim to be Christians?¹ An effective ministry outreach demands that we have to change our strategies both in words and deeds. Both the clergy and the laity should stop playing church and do church work. The clergy should concentrate on how to grow the people and not programs, disciple them so that they can in turn become *disciplers*.

B. Recommendations

1. The Church should compare her today's habitual practices to those of the early church and discover for herself a number of glitches in our communal life that are at variance with the "old – time religion" of Acts of the Apostles chapter Two where the believers had everything in common. The Church in Okpe Kingdom has to return to what it means to be "a people of God" in the Bible days in order to be relevant in the face of discrepancies and doctrinal confusion.
2. The church must learn to release the multiplied energy of the laity to carry out vigorous evangelism as stimulated by evangelistic formula designed in chapter five. The laity should no longer content themselves with a mere profession of faith, church attendance and making financial contribution, rather the church should engage in vigorous evangelism.
3. In order to reach the secular persons outside the door of the church, the typical church must face changes in its culture, its worship style, its forms of ministry, and the way it views the secular community.²

¹ Ben Johnson, New Day New Church (Decatur: CTS Press, 1995), p. 43.

² Johnson, p. 57.

4. Okpe Kingdom as revealed by its geographical location has many villages in the rural setting that have greatly polarized their way of life. Many are traditional and superstitious. They have great regards for their traditional rites of initiations, such as female circumcision, etc. It will be informative that the Christians provide alternative biblical solutions. Such solutions should culminate in a major public event that include certificates, awards, messages and testimonies from Christian elders, special music, dramas, and celebration feast which would emphasize the acceptance of the young person into the community of Christian believers.³
5. *It is observed that many well-to-do Okpe people do not go to church let alone to be known as Christians. To this effect concerned Christians should organize a conference or a dinner party whereby these set of people would be invited for the purpose of presenting the gospel to them. The writer believes there shall be fruits from this target audience if the program is backed up with prayers.*
6. We will seek opportunity to present the Gospel to the audience whenever the Okpe National Council is convened at Orokpe or anywhere Okpe people gather for any occasion.
7. Pastors' forum – a meeting for only pastors ministering in Okpe Kingdom should be instituted to cross – pollinate ideas on the progress of the work. Strategies on how best to win the people should form part of the agenda of such meetings.
8. Training of future ministers for the work in Okpe Kingdom is a task that must be done. Jesus our Lord chose twelve disciples whom he committed the work

³ Wilbur O' Donovan, Biblical Christianity in African Perspective (Ilorin: Nigeria Evangelical Fellowship, 1995), PP. 237-238.

to. We cannot afford to fail in this area because the field is always in need of laborers. The Okpe population is the highest among the Urhobo ethnic groups of Delta State as shown in this study. A. B. Bruce remarked that: “as never before in the history of the Christian ministry the servant of Jesus Christ is constantly grappling with the problem of how to reproduce himself and multiply his endeavors so as to encounter our ever increasing world population with the gospel of Jesus Christ.”⁴

9. In order to overcome the temptation of a minister turning the church of God to his personal enterprise whereby he does whatever he likes in the guise of the autonomy of the local church, we wish to recommend that the time has come for the Nigerian Baptist Convention to rethink about the implementation of the local church’s operation of the autonomy which many – both clergy and laity have abused. It should be noted that churches in Okpe Kingdom suffered a great loss from the missionaries on account of lack of this checks and balances. Some thing has to be done!
10. Finally, Mark 5: 1- 13 contains the account of satanic attack on Jesus and His disciples on their way to the region of the Gerasenes where the man possessed by legions of demons lived. The satanic assault was as a result of the good work of healing that was about to take place in the life of the possessed man. To avert such oppositions on the good work in Okpe Kingdom there should be spiritual warfare at all times whenever there shall be an outreach programme. The slogan should be, “no warfare prayers, no going out.” O’Donovan comments thus: “As Christians, we are engaged in a spiritual war. This war can become very intense when the servants of God attempt to take the gospel

⁴ A. B. Bruce, *The Training of the Twelve* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1971), p. vii

of Christ to people who are bound by Satan ... The Christian is opposed by demons of Satan in many different ways (Eph. 6:12-13).”⁵

May God release the Okpe people from the shackles of spiritual darkness and let the “Light” shine on the land so that they can see clearly and come out from the cauldrons, which their leaders have ignorantly prepared without realising the adverse consequences of their effects.