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THE CHURCH AS MOTHER : AN AFRICAN CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

In theology, in order for the enigma of faith to be understood, models are usually employed. Many models have been used through the years to help in carrying out the task of proper and better understanding of the nature of the Church.

The task of this writer is to develop a model which will provide a means of a better understanding of the nature of the Church to the African Christian. To achieve this objective, the image of "mother" has been chosen. The concept of motherhood in Africa is very powerful and the picture is highly evocative and inovative of the deepest level of passion and action. The nature of the African mother helps to reveal the nature of the church to the African Christian in such a way that he cannot but have a deeper and better comprehension of what the church should be.

The realisation of the given task of this essay led the writer to examine the African and biblical concepts of motherhood. On the basis of the examination, certain implications of the concepts of motherhood were brought out and used in the development of the image of the Church as mother.

SUMMATION AND CONCLUSION

The task of this chapter is to give a brief summary of the main points of this study and to make some concluding remarks.

A. The Church is one of the areas of great concern within the Christian faith generally and in Christian theology in particular. This is clearly demonstrated in the fact that, all through the history of Christianity, beginning from the New Testament and on to the present day, attempts have been made and are being made to understand the nature of the Church. In Christian theology, models are usually employed in order that the enigma of faith may be understood. This is particularly true of the Church, the nature of which the Bible uses several images to help people understand.

Furthermore, an authentic and universal theology of the nature of the Church from an African perspective can only be realized when a model which is meaningful to the African is employed. For this task, the model of 'mother' is employed. It is believed that the 'mother' model will help the African Christian to have a better understanding of the nature of the Church; hence the title, "the Church as Mother....". This understanding of the Church will assist the African Christian to reconstruct his perspectives of the Church and respond in certain ways to make the Church become what it should be. The study is therefore significant.

The literature review which are related to the African mother and those related review to the African understanding of the Church show that not much work has been done in African Christian ecclesiology and more specifically, viewing the Church as mother.

B. The concepts of motherhood from both the African and the biblical points of view were discussed with the following highlights:

1. The concept of procreation - In Africa, it is expected that a woman reproduces children. Her ability to reproduce children is one of the strongest factors of her worth.
2. The concept of nurture - The nourishment of the child is the most vital concern of the traditional African mother. From the breast milk and on to a variety of foods, the mother continues to take care of the nurture of the child.
3. The concept of proximity - The closeness between the traditional African mother and her child begins in the womb, and this proximity continues throughout life.
4. The concept of training - The mother, being closer to the child than any other, provides the needed guidance and training for the child. For as long as she lives, she continues to have a word of instruction for the child, no matter how 'great' the child becomes in life.
5. The concept of discipline - The mother does the job of correction and reprimand of the child in order to restore him/her to the expected behaviour.
6. The concept of service - The traditional African mother engages in serious labour in order to provide for her children, and to support her husband and community.
7. The concept of care and protection - The traditional African mother is very loving, caring and protective of her children.

The highlights of certain biblical concepts of motherhood include:

1. The concept of procreation - Though the Bible clearly shows that the topmost of the reasons for marriage is companionship, there is no doubt that there are several

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indications which prove that the foremost expectation of the people concerning marriage was motherhood (child bearing being a vital component).

2. The concept of love and care - The love and care of a mother for her child has various commendable expressions in the Bible. In fact the Bible tends to say that the highest expression of human love and care is found in the relationship of mother and child. this love and care is second only to God's love and care for His children (Isaiah 49:15).
3. The concept of training and discipline - It was the task of the mother, in conjunction with her husband, to train and discipline the children.
4. The concept of honor and obedience - The Bible calls on the children to give equal honour to their mother as they give to their father. Respect for the mother is therefore mandatory.
5. The concept of reciprocal love and care - Both the father and mother are expected to be loved and cared-for by their children, especially when they are in need, and as soon as the children are able.

In addition to the biblical concepts of motherhood, the biblical basis for the mother model of the Church was discussed with the following highlights:

The mother is a woman and the Bible uses the image of the woman to represent different aspects of life within the community of faith. The caring image in the search for a lost coin (Luke 13:18-19) portrays Jesus treatment of the woman's image in the Bible which are our examples in considering the Church as mother.

C. The concepts of mother, both in the Bible and the African worldview, provided us with certain helpful tools with which a theology of the Church as mother was developed.

1. The Church and reproduction - This concept is not dealing with biological reproduction, but the concept of rebirth, or re-creation from the spiritual point of view. It is an indication of the starting point in the Christian life.

2. The Church and nurture - It is the responsibility of the Church, like a mother, to nurture its member through Baptism, teaching, worship, prayer and witnessing.

3. The Church and service - Like the biblical and the African mother, the Church is required to render services in tangible and concrete terms to its member and those outside the community of faith. The services include:

   a) Service within Church membership;

   b) Service towards other Churches;

   c) Service towards outsiders of the Church (the world).

4. The Church and discipline - Just as the biblical and the African mother disciplines her children as frequently as they irritate her, balancing the discipline with the offence, so must the Church discipline her erring children in order for a standard to be maintained in the family of God.

D. There are certain implications for the African Church from a theology of the Church as mother and these include:

Implications for the Church as a Group:

1. Implication for Church growth - Like the African and the biblical mother is expected to bear children and nurture them, so must the African Church be concerned about winning more people for Christ and for nurturing them for spiritual growth. The growth of the Church takes place when there is increase in membership of a Church through conversions; when there is expansion of Churches through Church planting; and when members of the Church grow into spiritual maturity through various spiritual disciplines like - Bible study, prayer, worship, discipleship programmes and such other activities. The African Church must take arms against anything that will prevent it from evangelizing the world nurturing the various categories of people in the Church.

2. Implication for Unity - If the Church is mother, then the members are brothers and sisters, one of another. They have a common origin in the Fatherhood of God and being children of the Church, they must be one like the children of one mother.
3. Implication for love and care - The African mother is characterized with a powerful demeanor of love and care; so is the biblical mother. Love and care must motivate and direct the Church's tasks, especially in the areas of nurture, service, and discipline.
4. Implication for exemplary living - Just as it is expected of the mother to be exemplary to her children if they would follow and obey what she says, so must the Church be exemplary to its members. It is not enough to teach the Christian doctrines, the Church must practise what it preaches. By so doing, it provides certain patterns of life which the individual is to follow. A good mother must show the needed examples for her children.

Implications for Individuals in the Church:

Since the individual member of the Church is assumed to be like the individual child of the mother and since each child has certain responsibilities towards its parents, particularly, the mother, it follows that a concept of the Church as mother calls for certain responsibilities of each child.

1. Response of love and care - Every member of the Church is expected to show love and care towards the Church in response to the love and care received from the Church.
2. Response of attachment - Every member of the Church is expected to be attached to the Church. No member should seek to operate as a Christian in isolation of and from the Church. Like the African child is attached to its mother throughout life, so must the member be attached to the Church.
3. Response of honour - Every member of the Church must learn to respect the Church, just like the African and the biblical child is expected to honour its parents. The individual has no right to disrespect the Church. He must be obedient to the teachings and expectations of the Church.

Finally, having made a summation of this research as above, the concluding remarks are as follows:

The Church must constantly reflect upon its existence from generation to generation and from place to place in order that its reality and relevance would be understood, recaptured and reconstructed.

The mother model can help the African Christian to have a novel and better grasp of the nature of the Church which is biblical, intelligible and relevant. We must keep in mind, as we seek to understand the nature of the Church, that no single model of the Church is capable of exhausting the full meaning of the Church and no model should be considered in total isolation of others. Each model must be considered against the background of other images which are pointing to the same reality. When the model of "mother" is viewed against the background of other biblical and theological models, broader comprehension of the nature of the Church would be realized. Therefore, the Church as mother is not calling for the seclusion of other models, rather, it is a relevant addition to the total image of the Church of God.