

CELEBRATING LIFE AND LEGACIES OF THE NIGERIAN BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY, PAST HEROES: A CASE STUDY OF CHARLES EDWIN SMITH

(A lecture delivered on the occasion of Seminary Founder's Day Service)

On the 3rd of May, 2023

At the Multi-purpose Hall

Ayotunde Olayori Oguntade, PhD

Introduction

During the year 2023 Founder's Day Service held on the 3rd of May 2023, the Founder's Day lecture was focused on the pioneer principal of the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomoso. The lecture has three objectives. It narrated a brief history of Charles Edwin Smith, the pioneer principal of the school. It identified his contributions and made inferences from his life.

A Brief History of Charles Edwin Smith

The pioneering principal of what has today become the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomoso, Charles Edwin Smith (fondly called *Baba Alake Onirugbon* – a man with a long beard by Ogbomoso indigenes) was born in Conway, Massachusetts, United States of America (U.S.A) on the 1st of July, 1852. He was baptized in 1867. He attended Judson University in Arkansas, after which he studied at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky, in the United States of America from 1881 to 1884 for his pastoral and theological training. He was appointed as a missionary to Nigeria by the Foreign Mission Board (FMB) of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) on the 20th of March, 1884. However, he arrived in Nigeria on the 15th of December, 1884, without the company of his wife because she died on the way to Nigeria. When the news of her death reached her friend, Cynthia Morris, in the U.S.A, she decided to marry Smith. She travelled to Nigeria and became the wife of Smith on the 1st of March, 1886. Unfortunately, she died in 1889 due to what was called water fever. However, Smith remarried Miss Lucy Shenstone during his leave between 1890 and 1891. Both served as missionaries in Nigeria until their retirement on the 15th of July, 1909.¹ Let us now identify some of the contributions of Smith.

The Establishment of First Baptist Theological Institution in Nigeria

Earlier in his missionary work, Thomas Jefferson Bowen, the pioneer Baptist missionary in Nigeria, saw the need to establish a College to train the indigenes. Between 1855 and 1860, he advocated for establishing a school between the Upper Ogun area and Orile-Ijaiye consisting of three departments: Academic, Theological and Industrial.² He rigorously pursued this vision even after he had left the field through his various letters to the FMB.³ However, this could only be achieved

¹ George W. Sadler, *A Century in Nigeria*. (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1950), 98-111.

² Cecil Roberson, *The Bowen Papers – A Collection of Rev. Thomas Jefferson Bowen and his wife Lurana Henrieta (Davis) Bowen Vol. 1* (n.p & n.d), i.

³ S. Ademola Ajayi, *Baptist Work in Nigeria, 1850-2005 – A Comprehensive History*, (Ibadan: Book Wright Publishers, 2010), 125.

after several years once it was obvious that there should be no further delay in its establishment if the Baptist denomination and Christianity in Nigeria would have a bright future. On the 2nd of May, 1898, Smith informed the FMB that he would officially start the “Preachers’ Training School” the following day.⁴ However, the Board did not approve until 1899. This did not discourage Smith from closing down the school. Instead, he used his earning to finance the school until 1899, when FMB took over the school’s funding, he continued to make personal sacrifices to ensure the stability of the school. Before the 3rd of May, 1898, he had an individual instruction with John Agboola in his residence at Oke-Oshupa that was in 1896. He also had a similar Bible instruction with Solomon Odebisi. However, by the 3rd of May, 1898 according to the report of Cecil F. Roberson four students had enrolled in the school and he taught in the renovated Oke-Oshupa chapel building. In part of 1899 and part of 1900, the “Training Class” met at the basement room in the Smith residence.⁵ One of the outstanding pioneering students was Nathaniel David Oyerinde. Ezekiel Bamigboye considered him to be the first student to be admitted into the school when the institution officially opened on the 3rd of May, 1898.⁶ Other students in the early period of the history of the school included: Elikana Durojaiye Ladipo; John A. Adediran;⁷ Monday Ayoola; Akinrele; and Lafinhan.⁸ The first set of women admitted to the school included: Gbadero Kunle and Deborah Molade.⁹

Mentorship

The Mentorship was crucial in the training of indigenes by Charles Smith. This was evident and exemplified especially through his interest in the development of Nathaniel David Oyerinde who became the first Baptist Christian professor.

Evangelism/Church Planting

From 1901 Smith with his students began evangelistic outreaches to villages and towns near Ogbomoso. In their first evangelistic tours they reached Ajawa, Ejigbo and Ede.

Church Music

According to available records the Yoruba Hymnal was the brain work of C. E. Smith. Although, this has been revised a couple of times, it was Smith who began the translation of Hymns from English to Yoruba.¹⁰

Community Development

It was to the credit of Smith that he was the first missionary to introduce citrus fruits into Ogbomoso, he also brought bamboo plants.¹¹

⁴ Ezekiel A. Bamigboye *150 Years of Baptist Work in Ogbomoso*. (Ibadan: Sceptre Prints Limited, 2005), 110.

⁵ Cecil F. Roberson, *A History of Baptists in Nigeria, West Africa, 1849 – 1935*, (n.p.: 1986), 151.

⁶ Bamigboye, 111.

⁷ Bamigboye, 111.

⁸ Roberson, *A History of Baptists in Nigeria. West Africa, 1849-1935*, 152.

⁹ Bamigboye, 111.

¹⁰ Oguntade, 140.

¹¹ Roberson, *A History of Baptists in Nigeria, West Africa*, 154.