

MY STORY OF GOD

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I had been on God's Mind before I was formed in my Mother's womb

*"I will praise You, O Lord, with my whole heart; I will tell of all Your marvelous works...
One generation shall praise Your works to another and shall declare Your mighty acts,"*

MAY IT NEVER BE SAID OF OUR GENERATION THAT

*"Another generation arose after them who did not know the Lord nor the work which He
had done" (Psalm 9:1; 145:4; Judges 2:10b).*

**Excerpted from TEACH THEM, Book 1, and
WHITHER BOUND: CHURCHIANIZED NATION?**

**Portions of Chapter 1, TEACH THEM Book 1, and "WHO AM I?—
Author's Story of God", as told in three parts in Didactic 001 in
Whither Bound Churchianized Nation?**

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This Booklet is a portion of **Theodore's Letter** in TEACH THEM, Book 1, Chapter 1 and "**WHO AM I?—Author's Story of God**" as told in 3 parts in Didactic 001 in **WHITHER BOUND: CHURCHIANIZED NATION?** by the same author. It is published to create awareness and direct readers to our website of many free resources, www.BackToBasicsMinistry.org. It is freely distributed to raise funds for free circulation of Whither Bound, Churchianized Nation? as e-book, audio book and soft cover paper editions.

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YOU AND I ARE BIRDS OF THE SAME FEATHERS

Excerpts From Letter to Theodore (Teach Them, Book 1)



As to the question of whether you need to walk to the front of the church or not, you and I share a lot in common. Going forward after hearing a sermon was the last thing I wanted to do. I was active in the church from my childhood, but I was far from being a saint to put it mildly. Looking from hindsight, I would say that I had a relationship with the church but not with Christ. I did, and I participated in anything every teenager of my age in or outside the Christian faith would do and probably a little more. Because I was performing

well in both places—in the church and in the world—in my teens in high school, I became a Sunday school teacher and later the Sunday school superintendent. The school principal's wife, who was also a teacher in the school and my high school teacher in two subjects—English and Bible knowledge—in my second year, had introduced me enthusiastically to the principal as “Still waters run deep.” When she began to see me in my true color in my fourth year, she then described me to the principal as, “A snake in the grass.” What the public did not know was that I was a different person on the inside from whatever anyone considered me to be. I knew I was on the wrong path, and it scared me to death that I was heading for a bleak future if nothing changed. Yet, I was powerless to apply the brakes. It was easier to blame my problems on spiritual attacks.

Due to a rough school term that just ended—Christmas and New Year's break of 1971—and having narrowly escaped being expelled from school, I sought for ways to prevent my getting into further troubles with school regulations in the new school calendar year. To pursue a low-key lifestyle, I joined the Student Christian Movement (SCM), in my

high school in January 1972. Out of the blue, on my second meeting with the group, I was voted in as the new president of the Student Christian Movement (SCM). Prior presidents of the group had been ordained ministers, and that was even before I joined the group; so, I was the first lay president for that matter and had not been mentored by prior presidents. That changed the paradigm for me. I could no longer be a “Christian” as I used to be. Somehow, I always knew that there had to be more to being a Christian than I had known. From then, all eyes were on me as the supposedly number one most Christian student in the school. I didn’t want to let them down.

Maybe I should tell you a little more. In the past in my school—Ilorra Baptist Grammar School, Ilora-Oyo, Nigeria—it was the staff members who voted to elect students to offices as school prefects. I was told that in the staff room, I had been slated for what you would call the number two most important student office: the food prefect. However, because of some disciplinary problems I had with school regulations, I was made the hostel (or dormitory) prefect—like the 3rd in rank among prefects. It was the last school term of 1971, and it was a rough school term for me. At one time, when my fate was dangling in the air and it seemed I might be expelled from the school, the other school prefects visited all the teachers in their homes, except the school principal and his wife who was also a teacher. They appealed to them for leniency when my case would be brought up in the staff room. All promised to be supportive; only the vice principal was adamant. As I was told, the principal had expected a quick unanimous decision according to the standard practice on my infraction, but when the case was tabled, all the teachers rose up to defend me and prevailed on the principal for the school to offer me a second chance. The principal was baffled that they would do that but couldn’t be headstrong about it, because he needed the staff to rally behind him in other matters. Some other students with lesser infractions had been expelled. On top of that, I just returned to school from an “indefinite” suspension. Somehow, I was spared. Needless to say, that my accomplices and I spent the rest of the school term on the field—weeding, uprooting trees, and filling up flowerbeds and roundabouts with topsoil—until the eve of the final exams.

I was the wrong person for the office of the hostel prefect, and after one term—which I virtually spent on the field, serving punishment—I was relieved of the position. So, in the new school calendar year, I resumed as a final-year student holding no office as a

school prefect. The friends with whom I had served punishment the previous school term had transferred to other schools. That was when I joined the SCM. In God's timing and providence, I took up the mantle of the presidency of the Student Christian Movement (SCM). Looking back, I would say that while I was a misfit for the position of hostel prefect and had been passed over for food prefect because of behavior problems, I was the God-anointed person for the SCM. It was a turning point in the right direction for both the SCM and me. Those who say that God has a good sense of humor must be right. God picked the most unlikely for spiritual leadership to turn things around in the school and to make it plain to all that *"if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, old things have passed away, all things become new"* (2 Cor. 5:17).

As the new president of the SCM, I started reading the Bible for myself, especially the New Testament, and Christian materials to point me to the true way of salvation. I didn't want to mislead the members. Whatever I read from the Bible and Christian literature, I shared with the group. I started fasting too for the first time and spending time in the nearby bush to be alone in prayer. God was becoming real and personal to me. There were three meeting times in the week: one for prayer meeting, one for Bible study, and on Sunday evenings, we organized a worship service for the whole school. Because the prior presidents had been ordained Baptist ministers, I guess this was a piece of cake for them but not for me.

To deepen my knowledge, I attended a Christian youth camp in Easter 1972 organized by the Scripture Union (SU). The central theme of the three-day Bible study was how to be born again (Jn. 3). We had a long time of prayer after the theme sermon on Sunday night. Many young persons were weeping as they prayed. I wanted to weep for my sins, but no genuine tear dropped, and I knew it would be wrong to fake a cry. Before the prayer session ended, I said a sincere prayer in my heart and asked Jesus to come into my life. I believe Christ did. We were then asked to respond to the altar call and be counseled on our decision. I hesitated, but something moved my legs, and I found myself in front. I couldn't believe I was standing there, at the altar, before the team of camp counselors.

When the counselor who interviewed me asked why I had responded to the altar or what decision I was making or intended to

make, you would think that I would say that I had come forward to accept Christ, yet I didn't. I felt I was never a pagan, and I was ashamed to admit that after being a Sunday schoolteacher, Sunday school superintendent, and even the president of a Christian group in my school—after all that, that I was not yet a Christian! I couldn't swallow that; my pride got in the way. I told the counselor I had come forward to seek help regarding some questions that visiting Jehovah's Witnesses' members had bothered me with. However, as I mentioned, I had already prayed while in the pew for Christ to come into my life, tears or no tears.

You see, some people are not clear on what to do, how to pray, or what prayer to say, and they need help. That's what the altar call is supposed to do. It is the place where you can confide in a fellow pilgrim who has been on the journey earlier or longer than you. He or she can guide and help you to understand your decision and even lead you in a prayer you may repeat after him/her just to start you off on your Christian journey. In most settings, believe it or not, you don't have to walk to the altar alone. Many will be willing, even more than willing, to walk with you up to the altar to transact the spiritual business for your soul. All you have to do is tap someone sitting next to you and ask if he or she will be willing to accompany you. Most would count it a real privilege and a service for their Savior and fellow Christian.

During altar invitations, the late international evangelist, the Reverend (Dr.) Billy Graham, often made these statements: "Jesus died for you publicly. All the people that Jesus called or saved or healed in the New Testament record, Jesus did the calling, saving, or healing publicly." For practical reasons, going forward or responding to the invitation to the altar gives you a reference point for your spiritual pilgrimage. You have a reference point, a before and after, to recall when doubts set in. Matthew, one of the disciples of Jesus, would remember the day and time Jesus walked by his accounting desk and called him. Peter, James, and John recorded their fishing trip when Jesus walked by and tapped them on the shoulders to become His followers. Apostle Paul never forgot his experience and encounter with Jesus on the Damascus Road. All these people had something they could refer to as before I met Jesus, how I met Jesus, and life after that life-changing encounter. Taking a step of faith forward after a sermon may become your first public and personal identification with Jesus. So, Theodore, go ahead and do it.

WHO AM I? — AUTHOR’S STORY OF GOD [1 of 3]

I’M A CHILD OF GOD, A SLAVE OF CHRIST

(As told in three parts in Didactic 001 in “Whither Bound, Churchianized Nation?”
Didactic 001 was written in April 2022, in Nigeria, while on FMLA vacation—6
months, from December 2021 to May 2022).

“All My Life You Have Been Faithful, All My Life You Have Been So, So Good” (*Bethel Music*)

I Had My Roots in the SCM/SU¹ of the early 1970s. As I mentioned in chapter 1 of TEACH THEM Book 1, I was the first lay president of the *Student Christian Movement* (SCM) branch in my alma mater, *Ilora Baptist Grammar School* (IBGS or Ilograms, for short). That thrust me into Christian leadership position from the word “go”! Prior presidents of the group had been ordained Baptist ministers who were students as well. They had enrolled in school to complete high school, and I wasn’t a member of the SCM during their time. That put a little pressure on me to perform, as the so-called number 1 Christian student in the school. My record wasn’t at all exemplary though I had been the Sunday school superintendent for the school in the year before. The SCM group had a regular weekly Bible study and prayer meeting, which I had to facilitate or lead as the president, in addition to coordinating the Sunday service for

the school. Stepping into the shoes of ordained ministers was no joking matter. To complicate matters, I was elected president on my second meeting with the group when a new leader was needed to fill the vacuum of leadership left by the sudden departure of the last president. However, the pressure was helpful in accelerating my spiritual growth. Not wanting to disappoint or let them down on the trust put in me, I began to read any spiritual literature I could lay hands on. I gulped down the small epistles of the New Testament. I memorized Bible passages. I took devotional (or quiet) time, intercessory prayers and fasting more seriously. On top of all these, I attended the Scripture Union (SU) four-day Easter 1972 youth camp where being born again was clearly explained to me. The experience was transformative for me. For some reasons, possibly for not being a clergyman and being “one of them” or “one among equals,” I had a larger membership than my predecessors, and members—fellow students—were more vulnerable relating to my leadership.

¹ Student Christian Movement/Scripture Union

I had planned on witnessing and sharing Christ, one-on-one, to every

student in the school. I didn't achieve this goal, but I nearly did. I probably spoke with two-thirds one-on-one. However, as consolation, I had the privilege of addressing the whole school—with teachers in attendance—during the evening Sunday worship service under the auspices of the SCM of which I was the leader. Sometimes, while preaching Christ to one student another student or two would be keenly listening in because many wanted to know what had led to my change. I usually asked the small group that we go to the school chapel to continue the discussion and prayer. In this way, many prayed with me to ask Jesus into their lives.

Thereafter, if preaching and witnessing to students in my school weren't enough, I also visited other neighboring high schools to preach and teach Christ, especially during their own SCM/SU fellowship meetings. The highpoint was my regular visits to teachers at other high schools who were known to be leaders in the Scripture Union (SU). I visited them in their homes in Oyo, many kilometers from my school hostel. (At that time, we didn't have any known born-again, SU-type of Christian teacher in my school from whom to seek counsel.) Extending to me Christian brotherly love and hospitality, they encouraged me, gave me a sumptuous meal, some pocket money and transportation fare for my return journey. Believe it or not, one of those SU teachers I was visiting was eventually transferred to our school. I had invited him to preach during the Sunday evening service for the school. His title was, "*Alas! It was*

borrowed," (2 Kings 6:5). For emphasis, he repeated the title many times, each time echoing with profound emotions amplified by his deep, rich bass/baritone and Ghanaian accent. (Apparently, he had grown up in Ghana). Many teachers, including the principal, his wife, and the vice principal, were in attendance. They were pleased with his sermon; it was a breath of fresh air. They wondered how I came to know such an insightful, deeply spiritual, and anointed preacher. Needless to say, that my spiritual stocks as a leader went through the roof. At the same time, the teachers could witness and acknowledge my spiritual transformation, knowing very well my background that I had narrowly escaped being expelled from school for misbehavior in the last school term of 1971.

The preacher did not own a car then and had come in a taxi. The vice principal—one of the few car owners in the town at the time, offered to give him a ride home. Those of us in the leadership of the SCM had been praying for revival and God's visitation to the school, following our reading of Christian magazines such as, "Herald of His Coming" and "The Watchman". We didn't know what that visitation would look like or what it would entail. The next thing we knew was the guest preacher, Brother² Adesoye Adebayo, was posted to Ilora Baptist Grammar School as a teacher. Other teachers of the born-again, SU-type would soon join the staff. Those

² The more appropriate title in school and society was "Mr."

who say God has a sense of humor must certainly have a point.

“I, The Lord Your God, Will Hold Your Right Hand”

In 1973, I was working (with T & E, a div. of UAC of Nigeria) in Kano City, in the Northern parts of Nigeria, about 1000 kilometers away from my alma mater and from home, when the results of our high school West African School Certificate (WASC)³ were released. The results of every student who sat for the exams in my school, IBGS, came out EXCEPT yours truly. Many of my classmates had also sat for the General Certificate of Education (GCE) in addition to the WAEC exams. My pocket wasn't rich enough to afford the payment for the safety net or extra buffer that the GCE, a WAEC equivalent exam, provided. All my eggs were therefore in one basket not because I had wanted it that way but because I couldn't afford more than one basket. Mind you I was the “number one” Christian student in the school, as it were.

At that time, the boys' hostel where we were housed was a rented building by the school. It had an outhouse within the walled compound, which could have served as a kitchen or boy's quarter for the house owner. In 1971, that outhouse within the walled compound was the rendezvous of my group and me. We were usually a group of five: “If you offend me, you offend a group of five.” It was there, in the outhouse that we congregated to

³ Supervised/monitored by the “West African Examination Council,” (WAEC).

smoke cigarettes—something that was outlawed in the Baptist school. At the end of 1971 three in the group did not make the promotion exams and were asked to repeat the class. However, they would not; so, they voluntarily transferred to other schools. Four of us had served punishment for almost a whole term of about 3-4 months in the fields, cutting grass and wood, filling up a large roundabout with topsoil, etc. A final year student, a first offender, who had been registered to sit for his upcoming WAEC exam in the school was tried for a lesser infraction than mine, the same day that my case was tried. He was expelled; I was spared. His candidacy for WAEC exam was changed to “external student.” He roared and wailed like a lioness robbed of her cub as he staggered away from the assembly into an apparent oblivion. He was the scapegoat on many levels. Talk of grace that's so amazing; (details in chapter 1 of *Teach Them* Book 1).

[Side talk: According to the grapevine, at this time, the captain of the ship, also a Baptist deacon and church organist, was having an affair with one of his lady passengers. On one hand, this dampened the morale of his subordinates and younger crewmembers; on the other hand, it made it morally difficult for him to keep the young men on his crew from attempting the same. Therefore, some of the drastic actions at this period could be smokescreens. Sadly, the ugly rumor, which began to erode the Baptist spiritual atmosphere of the ship, eventually bloomed, and ballooned into a polygamous situation for the captain. “*How the mighty have*

fallen in the midst of the battle!” (2 Sam. 1:25)]

My group had no classes, but we did go to the dining hall during mealtimes. This was in lieu of being expelled from school. I’m not sure such drastic measures would be allowed as punishment in schools today, but those were the primitive “good old days”. The punishment was on my account, but we were a group. We were released from the field only to be able to sit for our final promotion exams. I was the only one of the four who passed. It was the first time ever, in my school career up until that time, when I did not come first in class; I took the fourth position.

I, therefore, resumed school in January 1972 as the only remaining member of the old group. (Back then, elementary and secondary school calendar was three terms from January to December; not September to June with a long school break/summer vacation. We were the last set with the school calendar ending in December. Thereafter, secondary school calendar was synchronized with the practice in tertiary education institutions, which was, from September to June.) This was the reason I had walked into the Student Christian Movement (SCM) meeting, just for me to explore a quieter lifestyle, because all eyes were on me. If I made another stupid move I would have been expelled from school before you could blink an eye. On my second meeting with the SCM I was elected as the new president of the group. Thereafter, I moved into the outhouse with a mattress and turned it into my sleeping room, prayer and

study closet. Any student who needed prayer or a “word from scriptures” would meet me there. Prior to the WAEC exams I fasted for 40 days, omitting breakfast only and spending the time alone in prayers in the uncultivated bushes that surrounded the school. (Would you blame our concerned parents for insisting that our heads should be examined and charging that we had taken this SU/SCM thing too far? I probably wouldn’t 😊). One of the key verses I had claimed and memorized for my exam was Isaiah 41:10, 13, especially the latter part of verse 10, “*Yes, I will help you, I will uphold you*” and the first part of verse 13: “*For I, the Lord your God, will hold your right hand.*” I am right-handed and I sincerely asked God to, and believed, that God was holding my right hand, as He had promised, when I was doing my exams. Faith wasn’t complicated then.

Fear not, for I am with you; Be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, Yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.’... For I, the Lord your God, will hold your right hand, Saying to you, ‘Fear not, I will help you,’ (Isa. 41:10, 13).

As we prepared for our final WAEC exams, many of my classmates studied in groups. They studied and discussed past questions together. I didn’t set my eyes on a single past question paper. I studied by myself alone and prayed in the outhouse, which had become my “sanctuary”. As soon as I finished any WAEC paper I handed the question paper to Michael Ayodele, one year

my junior. He had become a born again Christian earlier than me. He was a great encourager to me. At that time, the students in his set had chosen the subjects they would sit for. Michael Ayodele wasn't going to sit for Economics. As we stepped out of the Economics exam room the students in the penultimate class warmly greeted us and wished us well. I lifted up the Economics question paper I had just finished and announced, "Who wants this?" They didn't take me seriously, but one student finally yelled, "I do." I handed it to him and walked away. As far as I was concerned, I had committed my exams to the Lord, and I didn't want to look over any question papers thereafter so I wouldn't begin to doubt and second-guess myself.

Fast forward to 1973. I was in Kano. WASC results in my school were out EXCEPT mine. I was told that the principal and vice principal made several trips to WAEC office to find out the reason. My father was worried. He visited the school, but no one had an answer. I learned the results were generally disappointing, with many "mighty" fallen (and failing) woefully. Thankfully, many of them did well in the GCE exams in the same subjects that they had failed in WASC, which compensated for their deficiencies in pursuit of tertiary education. With the passing of days and my results still being withheld, I was told that the attendance in the SCM group began to drop. Zeal for the Lord began to wane. Some non-members were sneering at SCM members, "See what happened to your leader! Pass or fail; his result was withheld. Maybe he failed or was

found to have cheated. Who could tell what he was doing by himself in that room, all alone by himself? It's fanaticism—Bible, prayer, and fellowship all the time. Too much of anything is bad!"

Just at that time—I cannot tell how many weeks. Definitely, at the appointed time, like a divine setup, my results were released. I had the best results in the school that year, with the least aggregate. I made six A's in mathematics, English and the sciences. I was told that the attendance in SCM immediately soared again; members raised their heads and testified to a faithful God. The highpoint was that I got letters from many current students at the time and from some of my former classmates, all testifying to the impact the delay and eventual release of my results had made in the school and its boost to the morale of the SCM members. In their letters, they all encouraged me to continue to "serve and hold on to this your God." I still tear up whenever I recall how friends and "enemies" talked about God's faithfulness and goodness regarding my results. (Please read a more detailed version in *Teach Them 1*, chapter 1. Thanks).

The University of Ife, Ile-Ife (Sept. 1974-June 1979) Was My Further Training Ground

Consequently, I resumed in the university of Ife, in September 1974, prelim class (or freshman year), as one you would regard as a mature Christian youth. This was noticeable and I was immediately absorbed into

the executive team of the Christian group on campus. While working in Kano, that is, in between high school and university, I had become heavily involved in the *Campus Crusade for Christ* ministry. I used their tools and taught the mini-books and transferable concepts by Dr. Bill Bright.

My university days, especially my undergraduate days, were further training days for me on many levels. I was in leadership positions in Christian circles from my first year until I graduated. I fondly remember my disappearing leadership style back in my university days. As a leader of a Christian group on campus, if we had a special program coming up and the heat was on me from every area as leader to make decisions to tidy up various loose ends in the few hours before the event, I would just disappear into a secluded place to pray and center myself. When I eventually reappeared after several hours, I would hear from every quarter: “Brother Mike where have you been?” “Everybody’s been asking of you and looking for you.” “We’ve looked everywhere for you.” “Where were you?” (This was before the mobile phone era.) I would ask, “What were you looking for me for?” “For so and so,” they would say. “So, what happened when you didn’t find me?” They would reply, “We did so and so,” or, “Brother/sister So-and-so did so and so; it took care of it.” I learned a great lesson from those experiences that I would find useful later in life. The lesson was: **No one is indispensable**; it’s foolishness and self-deception to think otherwise.

This disappearing act or, “What if I am not around?” mindset later engendered my mentoring and training style. The same way I had been thrown headlong into Christian leadership position in my high school—sink or swim—became my training and mentoring style. It may sound silly and harsh, but please promise me you won’t resort to name-calling. Yes, after watching me or tagging along for few times, I would throw the mentee into the waters to sink or swim. Either, I would be there with him/her. That was something I didn’t have. I didn’t have someone to model for me or hold my hand, steady and guide me along. The important thing was that sink or swim, I would be there. I had their back; I would defend them, shield them from ridicule, and be proud of them for taking the risk and accepting the challenge. Any fault or blame was mine, not the mentee’s. Surprisingly, rescuing or defending rarely happened, because people rose to the occasion when they were entrusted with a task, knowing that fail or succeed, they were still loved and trusted, and that their failure was seen as part of the learning process. For some reasons, I can say it was the same way I had been mentored by my key mentors. Years later, during my chaplaincy (Clinical Pastoral Education, CPE) training, I learned a difference between mistakes and errors of the head (which are excusable, resulting from lack of experience or as faltering steps in the learning process) and mistakes and errors of the heart (springing from callousness, outright wickedness, and punishable). In other words, errors from “good heart bad

head” are allowable but errors from “bad heart good head” are not.

My key mentors (see chapter 10 of *TEACH THEM* Book 2), Evangelist Bola Sanni, founding chairman of *Advertisers of Jesus Christ*, and The Reverend (Dr.) Bisi Orebayo, national director of *Every Home for Christ*, (both of blessed memories) would give me tasks that I had no experience or training for and assured me I could do them. They could just highlight a problem and asked me, “What can you do to fix that?” believing I would come up with a workable solution. Sometimes, they would take me along with them, or send me to represent them, in some high-powered meetings or to serve on committees where I would hobnob with bishops, ministry and denomination leaders from around the nation. I was never treated as an employee or their carry-my-briefcase or carry-my-Bible assistant. Rather, I was taken along or sent and introduced as a colleague or partner in ministry with the big title of “Director of So-and-so ministry”, which often caused some of those bishops and leaders to keep an eye on me and probably wondering, “Is Saul also amongst the prophets?” Trust me; I just observed and listened. I never voiced an opinion in those meetings. Rev. Bisi—bless his heart—would raise up three or four of my publications and announced that I had published dozens of books. At that time, I had six or seven publications to my name. I would correct him thereafter, privately. However, Rev. Bisi would repeat the same thing, “dozens of books,” at our next meeting. I now know that he was being prophetic then. Somehow, I

always made my mentors very proud of me by my performances in those situations.

My disappearing act and “no one is indispensable” mindset from university days also helped me in managing my social media. Today, there are text messages and calls for help from ghost families to whom I often choose not to respond, because I refuse to be a RESCUER. The problem of being a rescuer is that you have to do it again and again, that is, keep on rescuing again and again, because the person who is being rescued had learned to be dependent, thus creating a codependency case where both the rescuer and the person being rescued are sick. Therefore, I treat those texts as if I never read them, and somehow the senders never bother to call me or ask if I got their messages. My refusal to be a rescuer, and my “What if I am not here?” attitude often forced the “needy” person to come up with a self-generated, homegrown solution. It also helped me from encouraging dependency, taking up an assignment or responsibility that’s not central to my calling and God-given assignment or acting in anyway as if I was the indispensable solution-man. Somehow, those so-called urgent matters always sort themselves out. They always got resolved without my input, which further buttressed my point: NO ONE IS INDISPENSABLE (More of my university days in *TEACH THEM*, Book 2, chapter 10).

Unfortunately, all (good and bad) things must come to an end. When pressures mounted and deadlines piled

up, only God knows how many times I had wished I could still employ my disappearing act today, but I couldn't. Being a leader among peers and equals in the University was completely different from being a leader in the society. Where would you disappear to, and to make what point, as a responsible husband, father, teacher, pastor, mentor, supervisor or leader? However, it was good while it lasted. Now I know a bit of what the Psalmist, David, had in mind when he said, *"Oh, that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest. Indeed, I would wander far off, And remain in the wilderness. Selah. I would hasten my escape From the windy storm and tempest."* (Psa. 55:6-8).

Bye-bye to Student Mentality

With the benefit of age, I began to reconsider my "no one is indispensable" mantra. While it may be true that no one is indispensable, it is a good feeling to be needed. Nature is so kind that, in the absence of a key factor or person, life somehow readjusts or recalibrates and finds new and alternate paths for people and events, the same way that a GPS recalculates new routes after missing your turn—and still gets you to your destination. This pokes a hole in the idea of "no one is indispensable." However, we may never be able to tell what could have been or might have been if the key factor or person had not been missing, which is one of the mysteries and beauties of life. We also know that the GPS rerouting might take you through a longer, winding, rough and unpaved terrain. This kind of detour also has its parallel in life.

"Thru many dangers, toils, and snares... grace will lead me home [or to my destination]" wrote John Newton in *Amazing Grace*, third stanza (insert mine).

While it makes sense to function with the idea of "no one is indispensable"—and I still do, I now believe that it is a good thing, a sacred privilege, and a good feeling to be needed, to be dependent upon, to be valued as essential, to feel responsible for someone else's wellbeing. As a senior citizen, I believe the best way to live is to posture oneself to be a "Dorcas" (Acts 9:36-42) in people's life, to be able to add so much value and meaning to other lives that, indeed, one is irreplaceable; that a lot will be missing in society and people's lives because one has exited the stage. Dorcas was *"full of good works and charitable deeds"* that when she died *"all the widows stood by weeping, showing the tunics and garments which Dorcas had made"* for them (Acts 9:36, 39).

It is not possible to wake up every day and live a life of purpose and significance without a deep sense that you matter; that you are needed, valued, wanted, important, and relevant in family, neighborhood, and community. The world may or may not grant you this feeling of importance and worthiness. You get that deep sense of worthiness at the core of your being in your identity and relationship with God. That's why the secular term is self-esteem—because it's rooted in self, in your understanding of your origin and worth. This brings it back to the fundamental questions of life that have been asked through the ages: *Who are*

you? Why are you here? And, what is the purpose of life? Are you a product of chance, the outcome of some biological happenstance in the evolutionary process, or are you a created being that emanated from a Creator God? Nevertheless, the worst way to live is to live for self—me, myself, and I, to help no one, and serve no one. That, to me, is the dispensable life, if ever there's one. Another way of saying that my university student mentality of "no one is indispensable"—good as it was—has now been amended.

Hence, in 2 Samuel chapter 18, verse 3, the captains and the generals of king David's army protested and warned the king, "*You [king David] shall not go out [to the battlefield]! For if we flee away, they will not care about us; nor if half of us die, will they care about us. But you are worth ten thousand of us now*" (insert mine). This, no doubt, was an acknowledgment of the indispensable leadership qualities of king David in the nation of Israel. His loss was valued to be equivalent to losing 10,000 soldiers!

Spiritual Formation

From the onset of my Christian journey, I was discipled by one or two elderly Christians who considered speaking in tongues as gibberish and of the devil and had warned me against it. Equally, soon

after, especially in my first year in the University, I was discipled by one or two elderly Christians who insisted that praying in tongues was edifying yourself (1 Cor. 14:4) and building up your holy faith (Jude 1:20) and had urged me to seek it. It was this kind of spiritual environment and spiritual formation that forced me to pray, study, ask questions and decide for myself how and what the pages of the New Testament spoke to me for my spiritual nourishment and empowerment. Thankfully, I couldn't say that I saw the light and was saved under the ministry of any particular local church or denomination—Orthodox, Reformed, Evangelical, or Pentecostal. Therefore, I never considered myself a denominational person in a strict sense.

In addition, as far as possible, as a matter of personal principle, I always strive to walk the middle of the road or strike a balance on many issues; eventually leaving me not fully here or fully there. The problem with straddling the fence is that no one from either side of the fence will stretch out his/her hands and heartily embrace you as one of their own. For that reason, I am not offended if/when a true Baptist, on account of glossolalia, chooses to keep me at arm's length, or a true Pentecostal, on account of fully embracing sense and spirit, decides to discount me.

Back to Basics Ministry, Inc. is a literature ministry to, and in partnership with the local church/chapel, for equipping the youth of today, leaders of tomorrow, through free distribution of TEACH THEM publications by Dr. Michael O. Ojewale in higher education institutions. *Free pdf versions are available on our website.*

1. **TEACH THEM (Book 1 of 2): Biblical Counsels on Thorny Questions For Youth & Truth Seekers (371pp)** and
2. **TEACH THEM (Book 2 of 2): Pathway to True Freedom & Echoes of Hope from a Prison Chaplain's Ministry (452pp).**

WHO AM I? — AUTHOR'S STORY OF GOD [2 of 3]

I'M BAPTIST AND PENTECOSTAL TO THE CORE

Ordained into the Ministry. Strange as it may sound, I am in the same boat with many Christians of my age and generation. I have been born again, filled with the Holy Spirit, baptized in the Holy Ghost, and speaking in tongues, mostly in private during my personal devotion and worship, for close to five decades. I am fully Pentecostal and a Baptist, though not a Baptist-ordained minister. My parents, from Fiditi-Oyo, were Baptists. My father was buried in the cemetery of Fiditi Baptist Church, Fiditi-Oyo and my mother is resting in peace in one of the graves in the cemetery of Otu-Okaka Baptist Church, Otu-Oyo, both awaiting the time when *“The Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout... And the dead in Christ will rise first”* (1 Thess. 4:16). I attended Ilora Baptist Grammar School, Ilora-Oyo (1968-1972).

On the recommendation of my mentor and boss at *Every Home for Christ*, the late Reverend (Dr.) Bisi Orebayo, a senior minister in the Foursquare Gospel Church, I was ordained by a Pentecostal denomination in the Eastern parts of Nigeria in December 1989. He had a mentoring relationship with the denomination and served as an adviser to the board. I had no relationship with this denomination, both before and thereafter—except that my ordination certificate bears the **“SAVE THE LOST MISSION, INC.”**

denomination's name. That did not make me a freelance or lone ranger minister.

For both my covering and shepherding, my loyalty and submission have ALWAYS been to the local pastor of any church denomination that I join or with whom I have a kindred affinity. That is, join, as in officially receiving a right hand of fellowship and/or getting on the local church's membership list, beyond being a regular guest at church services and special programs. (I said this, because I was a known face and often regularly worshipped, especially mid-week and attended special programs in many churches within reasonable traveling distance at which I had not signed their membership register. So much so, that a neighbor in Brooklyn had charged me with “spiritual adultery.” She was wrong; I simply enjoyed sharing fellowship across and beyond denominational boundaries.)

For example, The Reverend (Dr.) Gary V. Simpson of *Concord Baptist Church of Christ, Brooklyn*, New York, was my pastor and spiritual umbrella while I was in the City. I was an associate pastor—the pastor for prayers—and the Concord Baptist church was my “home church,” meaning I was a “Concorder” for about 25 years until I relocated to Albany, in 2017. I then transferred the same to Pastor (Dr.) Paul Beck and the

Loudonville Community Church, Albany, New York, while I still continued my fellowship in the spirit with Concord, in line with the church's cliché, *"Once a Concorder, always a Concorder."* I have a kindred relationship with the *Christ Life Ministries and Bible Church* in Brooklyn, NY, where my friend and brother, a visionary man of God, Dr. Julius Abiola is the presiding (Pentecostal) Bishop, along with his wife, Dr. Matilda Abiola. If I needed an ecclesiological endorsement from a denomination, or a personal need that only a kid brother (from the Motherland) would understand, I ran to Christ Life, Bishop Abiola, for shelter and emotional support.

That December of 1989, during the national convention of "Save The Lost Mission, Inc." my gifts and calling into the ministry were recognized and endorsed. I was publicly set apart for Gospel ministry to "save the lost." Hands were laid on me and anointing oil was poured on my head from the hands of the visiting Pentecostal bishop and senior ministers of the denomination. I am, however, proud of my Baptist background and heritage. I was undergoing formal theological education and training (off campus, long distance learning, Trinity Theological Seminary, Newburgh, Indiana, US) when I was ordained into the ministry, and later became the chaplain of University of Lagos Protestant Chapel. Consequently, that transformed my study and pastoral ministry into an on-the-job training experience.

I'm As Baptist as Could Be

As Baptists, we believe so much in the priesthood of every believer and

inerrancy of the Word of God. Our pastors are, therefore, our employees. We hire them and can fire them, because the ultimate wisdom and authority resides in the body, in the local church, not in the pastor. I love that system of church administration until "thy kingdom come." If a Baptist pastor fails to educate, teach, and build relationships in order to get members on board with his God-inspired vision and mission, his best ideas will be tossed into the wastepaper basket. It is clear that either God hasn't spoken to him, or he hasn't learned the first principles of Biblical leadership in a local (Baptist) church setting. The same Lord (or Spirit) who spoke to the pastor must speak to the members (or majority of members) on the issue as well for headway. However, some tactician politicians in a Baptist pastor's garb often maneuver their way to secure the board of deacons under his/her thumbs.

As a person, I'm scared of having too much authority for decision making and unlimited power for leadership on my shoulders. I just want to preach, teach, pray, serve and be served, build relationships, share and fellowship, baptize new believers, wed young lovers, bury departed saints, etc. I can then leave every other things like budget, payrolls, building projects, facility maintenance, carpeting, choir robes and songs, etc. in the hands of those smarter than me to handle them. My neighbors then (one in the same building, the other in the adjacent building) on Community Road, Akoka, Lagos, and spiritual mentors, of blessed memories—Rev. (Dr.) Bisi Orebayo and Rev. (Dr.) James Boyejo (aka Papa Foursquare, and Pastors' Pastor), had counseled me, **"Build the people, the people will build the church"**. In my book, they were right.

An average Baptist church is an enlightened congregation. Yours truly is born again and sanctified both in the head and the heart. I don't check my brain at the door before stepping into a church building. I worship God with my MIND and HEART, my SOUL and SPIRIT. Coming from a science background, I question everything. (God never gets angry with me for this; He's never struck me on the head). I have no space for gimmicks, playing on people's intelligence, or abracadabra in the name of God. Way back as a young Christian, I had made up my mind that I wouldn't hold a brief for God; that I wouldn't defend the indefensible; that if this "born again" thing didn't work, I would be the first to admit it and quit. I made up my mind that I might be guilty of many things, but deception would not be one of them, especially, falsehood, trickery and dishonesty in the name of God or in defense of God, rationalizing or making excuses for God, should God "fail" to deliver as we had expected. The decision was mine but upholding that commitment had been by the hands of a saving and keeping Savior.

I Listened, Learned, Found My Rhythm and Ministry as the First Chaplain of the University of Lagos Protestant Chapel

Three reasons were clearly spelt out for me in June 1990 by the chapel committee why the congregation was seeking to hire the services of a chaplain, though the committee was still struggling and unsure how to find the money to pay the salary of a chaplain. One, to grow the membership, which was measly and diminishing, consisting mainly of a few core Anglican and Methodist staff members. (In my book,

these were the visionary university staffers who "stuck with it" when it seemed nothing was happening. They had chosen to stay and worship on campus rather than going to well established churches in the metropolis in the hope of keeping and maintaining the presence of a Protestant chapel on campus.

[PS: This was one reason why I kept fighting for "them" when some, who later joined the chapel, wanted us to go all out Protestant/Pentecostal by eradicating any historical footprints of Anglicanism in the chapel. If these "Anglicans" had not stayed with the mission when other university residents were worshipping in the city, there probably would have been no Protestant *Chapel of Christ Our Light*.])

Two, to raise (or source for) funds to complete the chapel auditorium that was jointly owned by the Catholic and Protestant congregations, as an ecumenical building. The building had been completed to its then skeletal stage (with perennial leaking roof problems) largely through foreign endowment, either congregation not being on strong financial footing. And, three, to make the chapel "a church" where students worship, because it'd been largely few staff members in regular attendance.

(Side note: As chaplain, I took a salary much lower than I was earning in *Every Home for Christ* (EHC). Nevertheless, I was still a fulltime, paid staff of the EHC for approximately the next two years, meaning that I had two jobs, two offices, was technically seconded to the chapel by the EHC, and was testing the waters. However, things took off very well in terms of increased membership and financial status, so much so that within the first three months of my

chaplaincy, the chapel was able to match what I was earning in EHC. Thankfully, the EHC office, my residence and the chapel were all located in the same vicinity of Akoka. The EHC office and my house were probably within five minutes' drive or less than 5 kilometers to the chapel. Details in *Teach Them* Book 2, chapter 10).

I do believe it's a calling and blessing, to build edifices to God's glory and the comfort of God's people. If history remembers King Solomon and credits him for anything; it was that he built a top-class, one of the ancient wonders of the world temple, for the worship of Yahweh. Today, any imposing architectural building dedicated to the worship of God beautifies and adds value to the environment and community, simply by its stunning features. It is also a witness and powerful testimony to a beautiful and attractive God, who endows humanity with such skills. I stand in awe, mesmerized, when I visit some church facilities around the country, enthralled and awestruck because such is not something I would do, or ever felt called to do. In my book, functionality is a must; aesthetics is optional.

However, I didn't have a building vision or passion for architectural structures during my pastoral ministry in Unilag⁴ Chapel, Nigeria, (July 1990-Sept. 1996), for two reasons. One, a senior and elderly pastor had mentioned to me that once you start with a building project as a pastor, you never stop; it would be one building project after another, and another. He was one of those who had counseled me, "Build the people, the people will build the church." He cited

many distinguished pastors that were known to me who started with one church auditorium-building project and had continued with building one edifice after another, because they never stopped (fundraising and) building. The sprawling edifices had become a status symbol for them.

The second reason came from one of the members I baptized in the chapel I pastored, a senior executive in the banking sector. She learned of the fundraising drive for another building project by the chaplain of a sister institution—the College of Medicine of Lagos University. She was well familiar with the chapel. She commented that it was "building for building sake." She said they could easily have solved the space and congestion problem by having two services. This was doable, since the chaplain, also a professor of medicine, was an Anglican canon and the chapel was patterned after the Anglican mode of worship, which was typically an hour-long Sunday service. I didn't ever want to have someone say behind my back that I was "building for building sake." Simply, I'm called to build the people, not build architectural edifices, though it's a good thing to do, and a blessing, if one is called to do that.

Notwithstanding, even with prayerful lobbying and heavy canvassing behind-the-scenes, nothing could be unilateral or made to happen by fiat. There was a chapel committee (loaded with professors) responsible for fiscal and administrative policies for major decisions. Not surprisingly—because it came with the territory of being called "lecturers", some professors on the committee came alive only when they had aired their opinions (or lectured others) and debated for debating sake. The chapel committee began to gain

⁴ Short form of "University of Lagos"

momentum in many of its projects when it was broadened to include cost saving and time sensitive specialists and professionals in the corporate sector. These had joined the membership and were non-university staffers or residents. They had a different mindset of less debate and more action. Several of those time-and-money-conscious experts from the business sector injected a new spirit when they were given the reins as chairpersons of committees of projects in their areas of expertise.

Every pastor has to do fundraising at one time or another for building, feeding the less privileged or awarding scholarships to deserving indigent students. Fundraising is scriptural. Moses did it. The Early Church did it. The Apostle Paul was fully engaged in fundraising, especially moving resources from an endowed part of the Body of believers to help a struggling and suffering sector of the Body. Faithful prophets of old, like Haggai and Zechariah, preached and encouraged the returning exilic people to give sacrificially for the rebuilding of the Temple. I, however, struggled with fundraising. I wasn't keen about it and wasn't good at it, putting it mildly. Beyond preaching one or two sermons to initiate a project, I refrained from keeping the emphasis on giving on and on, as if money was the goal. This was probably one reason why focusing on building the people resonated well with me. I believed in teaching discipleship and stewardship and trusting that the people would give generously out of their love for God, because they'd bought into the vision and out of a deep sense of stewardship of their treasures, talents, time, and all of their life to God. If I succeeded in this area, it's over and done; if I didn't perform well, it's behind me for good.

I still remember one of the things Rev. (Dr.) Bisi Orebayo, my boss at *Every Home for Christ*, had told me about one of the blessings of being a pastor. He noticed my reticence to different churches and denominations in Lagos seeking to have me join their pastoral staff, following my ordination. I was comfortable with being a Christian worker in *Every Home for Christ* and teaching the young adult Sunday school class at the *New Estate Baptist Church* whenever I was in town rather than being saddled with the weight of pastoral ministry. I had enjoyed the freedom of being able to travel all over the nation teaching schools of prayer and doing missionary activity of evangelizing and empowering students in colleges and universities with Christian literature. The freedom to travel would definitely cease or be curtailed with the tag of "pastor." Reverend Bisi told me that as a pastor, you don't have to do or be everything: the evangelist, prayer warrior, church musician, missionary, gospel financial, etc.; because under your faithful ministry God will raise all these people and ministries—evangelists, missionaries, helpers, etc.—called and sent forth under your leadership. I found him to be right.

In September 1995, I recommended nine of my assistants—including two women—for ordination under two renowned Pentecostal denominations—the same way that I had been recommended by Rev. Orebayo. Thereafter, I gave the newly ordained pastors assignments in the chapel according to their ministry gifts. From then on, it was on-your-marks, set, go! Everything bloomed and flourished in the chapel, to God's praise. One of those pastors became the substantive chaplain after I relocated to the US, thus

facilitating a seamless transition. The *Chapel of Christ Our Light*, University of Lagos took a chance on me to be their first paid staff chaplain. I am eternally grateful to the people and thankful to God for the trust and the mutual growth therefrom.

Although I didn't embark on any major or impressive building project, thankfully, it is evident that one of the many gifts of my successor is the vision, passion and desire to transform both the spiritual and physical environments through awe-inspiring architectural designs. Today, the *Protestant Chapel of Christ Our Light* (COCOL), University of Lagos can boast (sorry, are we allowed to use that word, boast?). If it's okay, then, the COCOL can boast of an imposing, envy-of-the-town ministry office complex of many floors as one of her on-campus real estate accomplishments, in addition to an auditorium cum office space for children and youth services and the main sanctuary building, as well as a chaplain's mansion, all facilities fully air-conditioned.

What Reverend Bisi didn't tell me, which I equally found to be true, was that God could just as well transform the services and skills of so-called secular workers, such as, architects, structural engineers, accountants, bankers, physicians, etc. in the membership into ministries of the church that bless the community and enrich the presence of Christ and His church in the community. The same God who had given the heavenly pattern of the Tabernacle to Moses also endowed the artisans, Bazalel, Oholiab, et al with special skills to do the project (Exo. 31:1-11). This, of course, happened when the church endorsed the "secular" worker members, provided opportunities for visibility and

volunteerism, such as, chairing or serving on a special task committee in their area of specialty, providing free medical consultation, free legal advice, free tutorial services, free marriage and career counseling, etc. to members who needed such.

Jesus said, "*It is more blessed to give than to receive,*" (Acts 20:35; also, Luke 6:38). Therefore, the results were mutual blessings and feelings of life enrichment that were on a two-way track: Both the people who served and those that were served gained a sense of life fulfillment, belongingness, and affirmation. Their secular skills, employment and businesses had been sanctified into services for Christ's church.

What Always Made My Sundays; Now and Then

Sundays were the high points of my week and earnest preparations began on Thursdays. I always knew that every Sunday service I conducted would—in one way or another—be meaningful, relevant and spiritually beneficial to all seekers who were thirsty in attendance based on my understanding of John 3:16—the Good News in its most succinct form. I had this confidence not only because I had prayed, studied and prepared the best I could but much more because I knew I was doing something at the core of God's heart. It was God's work and mandate, not mine. I was just an available vessel or tool in God's hand. I've been told that God does not need our ability, only our availability. God then supplies the ability.

I knew my assignment was a mission that God was so vested in and committed to that God sacrificed His only Son to achieve God's end. I had

that at the back of my mind and always repeated it to God in my prayers. This was much like Moses had reminded God in his intercession for Israel that the rebellious Israelites God had intended to wipe out for their idolatrous practices were God's covenant people whom God had redeemed for Himself, with His outstretched arm and power, from Egyptian slavery (Exo. 32:9-14; 33:16). Therefore, even when passing judgment, God should be mindful that God's reputation as a merciful, covenant-keeping Deity was at stake before the watching pagan world.

Hence, I was operating with the mindset that God genuinely and passionately loved and cared for the people to whom I wanted to minister and to whom God desperately wanted His message of love to be passed. God would use a DONKEY to get the message across if God had to resort to that. (I was probably that donkey.) God Himself, out of His kindness, had chosen me, and He who had sent me was with me. I wasn't smart enough for the work. I couldn't do anything by myself if left alone to myself. That God would be faithful to His Word and His mission. That God, the Father, God, the Son, and God, the Holy Spirit, God, Three-in-one would become real in the service and minister to each person as that individual's situation warranted. Many preachers had such confidence for their pulpit ministry based on Isaiah 55:11—"*So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the things for which I sent it.*"

However, I pitched my confidence for my ministry of *presence* (that is, as an ambassador or a representative of Christ in the church and community) and my ministry in the *pulpit* (that is, as a

spokesperson for Christ, and God's messenger of the word of reconciliation) on this: "*HE WHO CALLS YOU IS FAITHFUL, WHO ALSO WILL DO IT... FOR IT IS GOD WHO WORKS IN YOU BOTH TO WILL AND TO DO FOR HIS GOOD PLEASURE,*" (1 Thess. 5:24; Philipp. 2:13; pardon the uppercase—I wasn't yelling, just excited; also Eph. 3:20). It's in the same spirit of a chorus we sang back then, "I hold not the Rock, but the Rock holds me." God was the One who had to do His work through me; it couldn't happen any other way. Presently, what gives me joy as a prison chaplain—in addition to the occasional outburst of "Jesus is here!" from the incarcerated individual with an open heart in the service—is that WE—preacher, choir, ushers, and congregation—did it in one hour. (Details for reasons why a one-hour Sunday service has a sentimental importance for me is in *TEACH THEM* Book 2, chapter 1.)

My present assignment as a chaplain in a prison further reinforced that sentiment. Incarcerated individuals would love nothing more than the chance to spend many hours of their Sunday afternoon in church, away from the negative environment in their dorms. While I sympathized with their plight, I discouraged the notion that spending many hours in church on Sundays could make one a better Christian. The corporate worship provides us with the opportunity for our spirit to encounter the Spirit of the living God, and thereby, spiritually, refuel, recharge, and refocus. This divine awakening can be ignited in our souls in a moment. Yet, its effects can last a lifetime. The dorm, community, or society is the place we live out the Christian life and reveal who we truly are in Christ.

Most Evangelical/Pentecostal pastors believe in **prevenient grace**⁵. I do, too. Believing that enables me to lead a church service with confidence and intentionality knowing fully well that God has gone ahead of me wooing, entreating, confronting, convicting, comforting, forgiving, saving, justifying, delivering, healing, calling, setting apart, and passionately doing all that the Good Shepherd does for His sheep. From this standpoint, I don't believe that any incarcerated individual walked into the Sunday service because doing so had been a good family practice in the streets and he had wanted to. Rather, that God had drawn and brought him (John 6:44). I believe this more so because I had prayed so, that God would bring them and give me a word for each person.

What gave me utmost joy then, as a university chaplain in COCOL, in addition to each worshiper encountering God in his/her own way, were the comments I heard from visitors and first-time comers after service. They would shake my hands and say to me, "I enjoyed the service immensely. Thank you very much. The service was meaningful to me. **It was like our church service back home. I felt so much like I was in my home church; it was like home away from home.**" Often, I said to them, "If I may ask: What's your church or denomination back home?" They said, "Baptist," "ECWA," "COCIN," "Anglican," "Presbyterian," "CAC," "Methodist,"

⁵ Prevenient grace (or preceding grace or enabling grace) is a Christian theological concept that refers to the grace of God in a person's life which precedes and prepares to conversion. It is divine grace that is said to operate on the human will antecedent to its turning to God.

"Nondenominational," "Pentecostal." That always made my day to hear that the service was a little bit of this, and a little bit of that, so much that everyone felt it was like their home church. It was what I had desired and prayed for, a welcoming community for all who sought after God through Christ, be it in a university chapel or prison chapel.

Just for the record: It was for the same reason of "a little bit of this and that" that I had found the *Concord Baptist Church of Christ*, Brooklyn my home church, and presently, the *Loudonville Community Church*, Albany, a home away from home.

The Power of the Ministry of (Pastoral) Presence

I didn't really appreciate the power of the ministry of presence until I worked as a hospital chaplain in Beth-Israel Medical Center and Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in Manhattan, New York City, in 1997-1998. I would encounter a patient or patient's family for a brief time and later hear their unbelievable comments and great appreciation for my ministry to the patient or family. I would ask myself, "What did I do?" This could be an encounter with patients in their pre-op/post-op or on their hospital bed, or in the pharmacy area. I didn't preach, didn't share a scripture, and very rarely touched or held their hands, regardless of their gender or age. All I did was sit with them, for 5, 10, or 15 minutes on the average, listened to them attentively as they poured out their heart, oftentimes with raw emotions, anguish, and sobs. When necessary, I breathed or sighed deeply and said, "Tell me more"—no advice from my part and no solution offered, just listening. Every instance

was an opportunity to put my Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) training into practice by active listening with my posture and facial appearance communicating, “I hear you; that’s tough,” and occasional “Hhhmmm” as my empathic listening response. Most times, I ended with a prayer no longer on the average than 45 seconds (that’s less than one minute), and with no drama or spiritual gymnastics. In every case, I ended my prayer—hold your breath, please—without mentioning the name of Jesus! Being conscious of and respectful of the religious biases and preferences of the patients, I always ended my prayer with, “In Your Name I pray” or “In Your Precious Name I pray,” or simply, “Amen.” I knew who I was praying to regardless of the religious inclination of the patients. Yet, men, women, Caucasians, Asian-Americans, African-Americans, Jews, Gentiles, and In-betweens, at my next visit, or if I encountered the family members in the lobby, they told unbelievable stories of how impactful and helpful my ministry had been in their lives and their healing process. In my head, I was asking myself, “What did I do? I didn’t even mention the name of Jesus!” On top of that, the patient or patient family—even of a deceased patient, often mailed to me a “Thank you” card after the discharge or hospital episode for the roles I had played.

Although I was an ordained Christian minister, I wore no clerical shirt/collar, or cross around my neck. More like a Baptist minister, I was always dressed in a shirt, tie and suit, and my chaplain’s badge around my neck. I would approach a patient or patient’s family and introduce myself, “I’m a chaplain. I visit and chat with patients or their family members in the hospital. I listen

to their stories and offer pastoral care. Is this a good time to visit with you?”

Now, I know better. It is not what I do, or don’t do. It is Who I represent in the consciousness of the people I encountered. I represented God to them. In that brief encounter, they could see past me into the workings of a loving, compassionate God assuring them of His presence in their crisis hours in all the uncertainties surrounding hospital visits. As a pastor, for years I had labored on studying, praying, fasting, researching, and preparing for my sermons, believing in the ministry of proclamation. I still strongly believe in the ministry of the Word, for *“Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ”* (Rom. 10:17; ESV), but I equally believe in just being there with the people, voicing nothing, but prayers for them in my heart under my breath. It is not what I say, it is the presence of the invisible One, Whom I represent by being there. I now know that we bring into the room and pastoral relationships the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, “Christ in you” and a loving Heavenly Father visiting through us (or making His tabernacle with) the people He loves.

[Side note: I presented a case study during my CPE on a patient who was an avowed atheist. To my polite request, “Is this a good time to visit with you?” on my first visit, he flatly had objected and retorted with his hand raised, “No! It’s NEVER a good time to be visited by a CHAPLAIN because I am an ATHEIST.” I thanked him for letting me know that. I told him that his atheistic or nonreligious stance shouldn’t be a barrier because I visited patients simply to chat with them on their hospitalization. He immediately blurted out some angry words against the

hospital system. I took a chair and listened to his ranting. After this first encounter, he told me I could visit him again. From then on, he was always looking forward to my visit. I visited him more than five times before he was discharged to a rehab center that had no taint of religion, not even the 12 steps. He was an alcoholic and had bluntly refused going to any detox or rehab center that had any mention, program, or artwork suggestive of a Higher Power. His hospital stay was prolonged because it was difficult to find a rehab/detox facility to which to discharge him that was completely secular and had no 12 steps or Higher Power connotation. It took some searching, but they eventually found one to which he was agreeable. Religion never came up between us. At every visit, I just listened to him tell me his life story because he was worth my time and worth listening to. I reasoned, if religion or God couldn't be a bridge between two souls, God certainly shouldn't be a wall between them. (Unfortunately, religion might). He remained an atheist when we finally said goodbye. However, I had a feeling that he probably had a change of mind about Christian ministers, that pastors could be nonjudgmental, good listeners whom he could entrust with the dark stories of his life without being condemned. From my understanding of scriptures, God will give this man, labeled an alcoholic, space to rehearse his broken, messed-up life to God, which, unbeknownst to him, he was doing as he told his story to one of God's agents. Here, again, I was reminded of the aphorism, "There but for the grace of God go I".]

In 2012, on behalf of the ChristLife Bible College and Seminary in Brooklyn, New York, I visited Nigeria as one of the institution's professors to teach Biblical Counseling and Pastoral

Care in Nigeria for a doctoral class. Unfortunately, the candidates who least valued my presentations, and showed little interest in the seminars, because, as far as they were concerned, they could not be in anyway beneficial to them, were the Pentecostal bishops who had registered for the doctoral class. Those who valued it best and participated most meaningfully were the nurses, retired high school principals and other professionals who had no ecclesial titles. These nurses had been in the trenches with suffering individuals and knew the little value of religious platitudes in those circumstances. Ironically, many of the bishops did not attend the sessions but sent their secretaries or someone else to sit in class, mark attendance, and take notes for them. As far as they were concerned, all those talks about counseling, empathy and active listening were a waste of time. All they wanted to do, or were supposed to do as spiritual leaders, was cast out demons in those to whom they ministered. In their theological reasoning and their understanding of the etiology of human problems, demon possession was the root of all problems. Civility prevents me from voicing what I thought of those bishops except to say that I would rather talk to and ask for prayers from one of those nurses than seek out any of those bishops if I had any spiritual or physical problems.

One retired high school principal and his wife, both in attendance, were my contemporaries in the same Christian fellowship in our undergraduate days in Unife, now Obafemi Awolowo University. They hosted me during the trip. My friend, Bisi Oyelami, of blessed memory, said Nigerian pastors were no longer satisfied to be called "men of God." Now they postured themselves and behaved like "gods of men."

I'm As Pentecostal as Could Be

Can you keep a secret? Like it or not, Pentecostalism is the vogue, the trend, in Nigerian Christianity today. That's one reason why many talented Nigerian Christian musicians and professional gospel singers often inject glossolalia into their performances and recordings.

As a young Pentecostal believer exploring and experimenting with spiritual gifts in my campus days, I had stood up in the congregation of students' fellowship to give prophecies or prophetic messages. (*Experimenting* was not a bad thing to do; how else would you know your spiritual gifts without the boldness to first experiment?) Yes, I had stood and prophesied, as in Isaiah's or Amos's style, declaring boldly, "*Thus says the Lord...*" Since I couldn't be 110 percent certain that it was the Lord indeed speaking, not my spirit, all the time, yours truly thenceforward decided to tone it down, play it safe, and say something like, "I feel the Lord is impressing so and so on my mind," when strongly moved by the Spirit. I loved God—no doubt about that, but I was scared of Him, too. He's the Almighty, the Most High God; that's no child's play. I couldn't bear the thought of declaring, "Thus says the Lord..." when the Lord had not said so specifically. I'd rather share and expound scriptures, if necessary, boldly prefacing it with, "the scripture says ..." than stand to prophesy in the name of the Lord even some harmless generic indisputable eternal truth such as saying, "Thus says the Lord, 'I love you ... I am in your midst'" when God hadn't specifically sent me to give such a message at that instant. Along the same line, I had wanted to have a private

conference with my fellow prophets and prophetesses in both the SCM and ECU in the University of Ife back in the mid-to-late-1970s, to warn or advise on the need to exercise some caution out of a holy fear. To this day, I regret that I never did so.

I was radical enough in my own way as a young convert (or newly born again) that I had decided that I'd rather be a Moslem than remain a Christian if I had to learn a new language (Greek or Hebrew) or visit some holy land (such as Jerusalem) to authenticate my faith in Christ. Happily, I didn't have to do either. (Good Muslims learn the Arabic language and make holy pilgrimage to Mecca, at least once in their lifetime).

The Christian faith is home grown in any culture and on any part of the globe. The gospel message is often confused with the culture and lifestyle of the messenger, but these are two different things. Pulpits, robes, pipe organs, hymn books, collection plates, PowerPoint, architectural designs, etc. are accessories or the messenger's creativity, and not integral parts of the gospel message. The message is simply this: "*God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation*" (2 Cor. 5:19).

Today, if I am in a new environment, I will walk ten times faster into a Baptist, Episcopal, nondenominational, or interdenominational congregation than I would into a Pentecostal church. I go to such places more because of my relationship with the pastors or leadership, usually a bishop. Why? There's too much subjectivity, claiming undue authority with "the Lord told me," as preface and veneration tending towards "leadership worship" in many

Pentecostal churches, not to mention some spurious fundraising tactics, and hocus-pocus behind the scene. Being essentially leadership and/or founder-centered, there are fewer checks and balances. The system that operates in most—thankfully not all—founder-led Pentecostal churches is by the way of “the Lord told me.” The sad part is that the world is watching. The church members may have been fooled and tricked; the cynical and skeptical world is not so easily fooled and can see through the deception.

That notwithstanding, the advantage and beauty of the bishopric, authoritative and/or autocratic (not a bad word if the leader has a good and kind heart) over the democratic, congregational or presbytery church leadership system is that it speeds up progress in the kingdom. Many successful Christian organizations are run this way, because the momentum for action is dependent on the pioneering and entrepreneurial energy, charisma and skills of the founder. A charismatic leader does not wait for the consensus of a committee before (singlehandedly) going ahead with a project. The late highly respected, charismatic, Pentecostal leader and church founder, Archbishop Benson Idahosa, of Benin City, Nigeria, said, “A committee set up without commitment will soon commit crime and become a nuisance in the society.” Great advances in God’s kingdom and many social transformations in the community can be traced to good spiritual leadership of a Pentecostal minister of an authoritarian, go-getter style.

Unfortunately, those charismatic go-getter leaders are themselves often responsible for the collapse of their empires or stain on their legacy. This might happen during their lifetime as a

result of some self-inflicted wounds and corrupt practices, or immediately after their deaths, for their failure to adequately develop and prepare a carefully chosen successor, who necessarily may not be a blood relative.

I had read a statement somewhere a long time ago, shortly after my conversion that had stayed with me. It was: **No one is a true success without a successor.** It was so ingrained in me from the onset of my Christian journey that I think I might have taken it to an extreme, because I often engage in finding a successor even before I start. Long before a project gets on the way or is established, I find myself already looking for a successor, which then tends to an attempt to quickly pass the buck.

They say, “each one his own.” For me, I prefer a democratic structure. If we are right, let’s be right together, and if we are wrong, let’s be wrong together. Don’t crush me with any pride of success or guilt of failure when we can rejoice or groan in both together.

If “praying in tongues” confuses Satan, as some allude to, with the quantity of unknown, strange tonguing going on daily in Nigeria, the devil should have been so confused and lost his mind by now that there shouldn’t be any demons or demonic operations in Nigeria today. Maybe the devil has been confused and chased away. Maybe there isn’t any demonic activity or demons troubling Nigeria. Maybe the reality is that many Nigerians have taken it upon themselves to do the devil’s work for him (and are so ardent, committed, and good at it) that the real devil is on furlough from Nigeria. Just a couple of plausible maybes. I might be wrong, but I reasoned this way because once in a hot exchange with the Jewish religious

rulers, Jesus chided, *“You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do”* (John 8:44a). The people in Jesus’s audience loved to do the desires of their “father, the devil.”

To some Nigerian ministers “speaking in tongues” is like a badge of belonging to an elite spiritual group or caucus. However, any keen observer, with rudimentary knowledge of scriptures and psychology can discern that most of the hyper-spirituality in the church is a coverup, behind which is an individual avoiding responsibility to look in the mirror, repent and deal with the real issues in his/her life. This reminds me of the warning Jesus gave towards the end of the Sermon on the Mount, *“Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, [prayed and sung in tongues in Your name] and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’”* (Matt. 7:22-23; insert mine).

“Judge Not!” This is Simply Storytelling and Letting History to Be the Judge

Sitting side-by-side on a large stone and chitchatting in the cool of the Saturday evening, I listened to a carpenter, nicknamed “Pastor” on the streets, who had his workshop in an undeveloped plot adjacent to my house. I learned from my conversation with him that a Pentecostal bishop fired a dozen of his pastors, because the branches these pastors were assigned to were not financially vibrant and did not generate enough money to meet their quotas. The carpenter, whose street pet name is Pastor, then showed me on his smart

phone the picture of a gigantic auditorium, an edifice architecturally designed like a coliseum, that the bishop was raising funds for. He asked rhetorically, “Were the church branches planted to generate funds or to win souls for Christ?” He answered his own question. He said, “These dozen pastors were not disciplined—they were fired. They were not offered opportunity of a second chance after further training for their failure to win souls; they were fired for not generating enough money for the leader’s project, which means the bishop was not concerned about souls, just money. It means those pastors were his employees, not ministers of Christ. It’s all about money, money, money, money, and more money for their family business or their empire.” If I didn’t know this carpenter next-door to my house to be a shrew and all about the profit margin himself, I could have been fooled to think that I probably was speaking with the Carpenter from Galilee (Mark 6:2, 3). They say it takes one to know one of their own.

This middle-aged carpenter, who was always humming or whistling a church tune, told me there was a public outcry against this same Bishop during the covid-19 pandemic lockdown. Rather than helping his members and the hungry masses he was busy marketing new strategies and outlets for his members to continue to donate to his coffers, as if there were no hunger and suffering in the land.

I went to church the following day and the church sang, *“Ho, my comrades see the signals”* composed in 1864 by Philip Paul Bliss, during the American Civil War. *Hold the Fort*, lyrics below, relates to something that happened during the War and he used it to illustrate a parallel truth in our spiritual warfare.

1. Ho, my comrades! See the signal waving in the sky! Reinforcements now appearing, victory is nigh.

Refrain.

“Hold the fort, for I am coming,” Jesus signals still; Wave the answer back to Heaven, “By Thy grace we will.”

2. See the mighty host advancing, Satan leading on; Mighty ones around us falling, courage almost gone!

3. See the glorious banner waving Hear the trumpet blow! In our Leader’s Name we triumph over ev’ry foe.

4. Fierce and long the battle rages, but our help is near; Onward comes our great Commander, cheer, my comrades, cheer!

Refrain again.

“Hold the fort, for I am coming,” Jesus signals still; Wave the answer back to Heaven, “By Thy grace we will.”

I wept through the singing of the hymn as I recalled the historical event behind the composition. I question within myself if we are seeing the signals and listening to Jesus, saying, “Hold the fort, for I am coming.” Bliss, the composer of other hymns based on contemporary events, had taken the event during the

Civil War to illustrate our spiritual conflict, and the need to remain faithful to our charge, and continue until Christ comes again. After the singing, the preacher mounted the pulpit. He said he wished we could keep on singing that hymn because it was “an old-time religion” hymn. I also kept wondering, “How did we, the blood-bought people of Christ, wander off from that mindset to where we are today.” It then dawned on me that we, the church, are our own worst enemies.

Under the guise of building God’s kingdom, the sacrificial giving and tithing of faithful supporters are often diverted either to fund some private, family enterprises or furnish a lavish and ostentatious lifestyle. There’s little or nothing anyone can do about it; you either belong or you don’t. You should know that those “churches” and “ministries” are led by their OWNERS and FOUNDERS (uppercase intentional). The unwritten ethical code is: “This church is a private enterprise and we run it like a family business. Dissidents beware!”

ADDITIONAL INSPIRATIONAL RESOURCES

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WHO AM I? — AUTHOR'S STORY OF GOD [3 of 3]

I'M A SPIRIT BEING HAVING A HUMAN EXPERIENCE, NOT THE OTHER WAY AROUND

I Didn't Know What I Was Doing

"I don't know what I am doing" or "I didn't know what I was doing" are two phrases I have confessed to myself or to God in prayer, again and again, meaning that I don't fully understand what I am doing but I can feel a Power carrying me along (or, from hindsight, I didn't fully understand what I was doing, but I could feel a Power carrying me along). Either at the point of action or from hindsight, regarding major decisions I have made in my personal life and ministry since 1972 when I gave my life to Jesus.

For certain, this "*not knowing what I am doing*" is not in the same sense of struggling with sin, which Apostle Paul wrote about: "*What I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice, but what I hate, that I do... Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me,*" (Rom. 7:15, 20). This has no tendency towards sin or sinning. It's about having a sense of being "*moved by the Holy Spirit*" (2 Pet. 1:21), "*carried away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain,*" (Rev. 21:10), or, as the prophets of old would say, "*the hand of the Lord was upon me,*" (Eze. 1:3; 3:22; 8:1). This is without my human initiative or intentionality.

For example, I usually keep my computer away from the bedroom, if possible, on another level of the house. Yet, countless times in one night I could be awakened with a strong "word" and would make my way down to the computer. Along with this is Providence arranging circumstances leading to open doors, finding the right information, meeting the right persons, and divine provision of resources. In those circumstances, I just kept praying and moving, stepping into open doors, and backing off when I banged my head against a closed door, not really knowing why or what. Looking back, I often chalked them down to John 3:8, "*The wind blows where it wishes... So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.*"

However, lately, I gained a new understanding. Since I have the Holy Spirit [and the Godhead] dwelling in me (John 14:23; Rev. 3:20), I believe **I have a sanctified mind**. According to Philippians 2:13 (also John 14:16, 17, 26; 16:13-15; 2 Cor. 5:17; 1 Thess. 5:24; Eph. 3:20 and Rev. 3:20), God's Spirit is not only resident in me, **but God is also at work in me both TO WILL and TO DO for His good pleasure**. Consequently, my speech, steps (and stops) are being directed by the Lord (Mark 13:11; Psalm 37:23).

This posture and spiritual understanding have helped to simplify my decision making greatly. Here is my simple checklist:

If ANYTHING, or intended ACTION is

- Not immoral, or dishonorable,
- Not taking undue advantage of the weak,
- Not sinful, or tending to sinfulness
- Will harm or hurt no one,
- Has the potential to extend the Kingdom of God,
- Is likely to enrich other lives, and add value to the community,
- Is more likely to receive the approval of other Christian leaders,

Then, I AM DOING IT because IT IS GOD’S WILL FOR MY LIFE. If it is not God’s will, it’s up to God to stop me. God has 1001 ways to stop or block me. For that, I do keep an open mind for any real stop signs, not the devil’s distractions. Here is my roadmap: If it is God’s will, or something with God’s blessings, I expect divine resources from known and unknown sources to manifest, some synchronicities to further serve as confirmation, and the peace of God to keep assuring me as I go on. As long as doors remain open, resources are available and I don’t have a troubled mind, it has to be God’s will. I no longer wait for the sky to part or thunder roll to decide God’s will, when, the scripture says, “*God is at work in me both to will and to do for His good pleasure.*” That scripture has to mean something. It suggests to me that I am in union or partnership with God; or, simply, that I have a sanctified mind.

As at today, I can say, “I don’t know what I am doing” regarding **Thinking**

Aloud—2 and Didactic 001. However, according to my roadmap, (1) I see an open door for ministry, (2) I have resources divinely made available, and (3) I have the peace of God going ahead, even though I fear unfair criticism from some quarters. My first allegiance is to Christ and the Scriptures. As you would have noticed, my theological persuasion is a hybrid—is that a good word?—between Evangelical Baptist and Charismatic Pentecostal. Maybe grafting is a better word; that is, like a Pentecostal twig grafted into a Baptist trunk. What product do you expect from such union? *Manna!* [Aramaic; “What is it?”]. It is what it is! It is my prayer that one day when I look back and say, “I didn’t know what I was doing” these works would prove to be one of those God-led moments of my life. AMEN.

The Greatest Truth I Ever Unearthed in Scriptures: that I Am a Divine Spirit on a Human Assignment, Beloved and Chosen from Eternity by the “I AM”

One of the most liberating and empowering truth I later learned in my walk with Jesus was that I was a divine spirit, that I came from God and that I was therefore a piece of God. God is a Spirit and God is my Source of origin; I am therefore a spirit being.

At my conversion, I already learned about being born again, born from above, being regenerated, having the Holy Spirit living in me, becoming a new creation in Christ, etc. This was the change on the inside working and showing on the outside. I was happy with that. I later began to understand that everything did not happen or begin in Easter 1972, that I had been in God’s mind and His eternal blueprint even in

my pre-existent state, that I had been chosen, adopted, ordained, and prepared for a task—as part of the storyline of God’s Story—way, way, deep into eternity. This realization was on a deeper, personal level than Calvinism, Arminianism, and other isms they teach in seminaries. If anything, those seminary postulates had traveled from my head to my heart. (By the way, did you notice the pronouns I have used? It’s been—I, I, I and my. Take it or leave it; this is my story, my truth.)

[Side Comment: By the way, this is not about New Age doctrine or Psalm 82:6—*“I said, “You are gods, and all of you are children of the Most High.”* Jesus alluded to this verse in John 10:34 to affirm the portion of divinity in each one of us. However, some teachers have carried this too far. Deity-gods are immortal; they don’t die. Yet, for their failures, the Elohim judged the lower-ranking elohims in the divine council in this difficult Psalm with death sentence or same fate as humans. Anyone fooling himself to be a god only needs to read the next verse of the very Psalm 82, verse 7—It reads, *“But you shall die like men, And fall like one of the princes.”* That’s your “god-ness” gone up in smoke. Yes, you shall die; your pastor who clowns like a god or some deity shall also die. Someday, for you and the one who teaches you that you are a god, it will be, “Ashes to ashes, dust to dust” when your spirit returns to where it came from. I know enough to know that I am not a god. Even the yearly common cold, hospital visits, medicine cabinet and arthritic pain, reminds me daily that I am human. At best, I am a divine soul housed in a frail, dying human body. I am not a god. I am a divine creation. I emanated from God. I bear God’s fingerprints. The Holy Spirit of God is pleased to live inside of us, mere

mortals. The Apostle Paul says we have this treasure in earthen vessels (2 Cor. 4:7).]

In the beginning God had breathed into a handmade mold of clay—molded by the fingers of God—and that piece of dirt and the Eternal *Ruach* (Breath/Spirit) became a living soul (Genesis chapters 1 and 2). Being an offspring of the first Adam, redeemed by the last Adam, this means there’s a part of me that was never born and will never die, because it came from the eternal Godhead. **I am a spirit being having a human existence and human experience, not a human being having a spiritual existence and spiritual experience.** I’m on a divine assignment here. Having been sent from the world of spirits, I had to pick up flesh because my assignments here required a human skin. I will shed the flesh as soon as my assignment is over and return to the world of spirits from where I originated.

This is true for every member of Adam’s race. As the apostle Paul later postulated, none of us lives or dies to himself (Romans 14:7-9). All the unexplainable, irreconcilable intricate details of how, or the way and manner, a person arrives on Earth—through biological parents, or sadly, through incest or rape, and departs the Earth—through old age, cancer, or beheading as in John the Baptist, is all part of the mysterious assignment that soul is sent to deliver in the storyline of the one great story of God. You will always struggle with sleepless nights if you believe otherwise. God has to be sovereign or He’s not God at all.

Everything—educational, financial, material, human resources—which I need on earth to carry out my divine assignment, for which I was sent here,

arrives on time. It cannot be any other way. I'm sent here, and He who sent me is with me. Did I arrive at this truth the first year I was saved? No. Maybe it's even past the first decade of being saved and serving Christ faithfully before this truth began to really dawn on me. I finally came to realize that what God had said of Jeremiah, in Jeremiah 1:4, 5, (verses I had loved and memorized since 1972), is true for all of us. The same Eternal God, who chose me and sent me on assignment, is able to connect the dots and poll resources. I've truly got to believe that God, the great Master Planner, does arrange and rearrange the circumstances of my life, moves people and resources around in a divinely choreographed fashion and synchronicity that cannot be explained. I've got to live with the consciousness that God does all these that my "destiny helpers" [using a popular phrase you hear in prayer in many circles today in Nigeria] may show up at the right time and place. Did I get this at my first year of conversion? No, but I matured into the truth. It freed me from >90% of my worries. Why worry when God is working on it, and everything will arrive on time—on His time?

Does that mean no more problems or hassles? You wish. Ask Moses, Joseph, Jeremiah, Isaiah, John the Baptist, Apostle Paul, the nation of Israel—the Lord's chosen seed of Abraham, or even Jesus, who had been called and sent from eternity. They'd tell you that pain and sorrow, doubts and disappointments, suffering and deprivations, persecutions and unjust imprisonments, are part and parcel of the package of being called, chosen and sent by the "I AM WHO I AM" (Exo. 3:14).

Ephesians 1 alludes to this. My birth certificate reads October 1952, (the date

is unnecessary to make the point). Presumably, the conception, the beginning of my life when my Mama's egg and Daddy's sperm fused, the fertilization resulting in a zygote, happened early in the year—9 months before birth. However, if the Scripture is true, then my true identity predates all these, reaching far into timeless eternity. For, I was in God's mind even before the world began. That's way, way, way back to an undated past, even before my great, great, grandparents were born.

For several years, esp. 1973-1976, I always carried with me copies of the *Four Spiritual Laws* (by Dr. Bill Bright, *Campus Crusade for Christ*), as a witnessing tool. Old school saints will recall that the opening statement of the Four Spiritual Laws was: GOD LOVES YOU AND HAS A WONDERFUL PLAN FOR YOUR LIFE. So, I always knew and taught that God had a plan for each of us. However, it is on a different level to live with a consciousness that this *wonderful plan* God has predates one's biological existence or date of conversion; that each one of us—like Moses, David, Paul, or even the Messiah—had been chosen, beloved and sent with a unique assignment prior to the time God "*formed my inward parts in my mother's womb*" (Psa. 139:13-16).

The apostle Paul believed he was "separated" and "called" from his mother's womb (Galatians 1:15). John the Baptist "*was a man sent from God*" (John 1:6), "*filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb*" for the assignment God had for him, (Luke 1:13-17). Without attempting to save His neck, Jesus boldly declared to Governor Pilate, "*For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world,*" (John 18:37).

Sin put us out of alignment with God and God’s purpose for our lives, but “the grace of God that brings salvation to all” (Tit. 2:11) has brought us back into alignment with God, and God’s purpose for our lives.

[me] accepted in the Beloved... For [I am] His workmanship [meaning that God’s fingerprints are on me], created in Christ Jesus for good works, which GOD PREPARED BEFOREHAND [implying some predetermined divine assignments] that [I] should walk in them.” (Eph. 1:4-6; 2:10; uppercase and inserts mine).

It was like being born again a second time when I realized from Scriptures and truly believed that “He [God] chose [me] in Him [Christ] BEFORE THE FOUNDATION OF THE WORLD, that [I] should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined [me] to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made

Jesus told His disciples, and us, His disciples today, “You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you,” (John 15:16).

Long ago, Fanny Crosby (and Phoebe Knapp) in 1873 wrote the hymn, “Blessed Assurance, Jesus is Mine”. Happily, the “Blessed Assurance” was not an exclusive experience. Today, we are all invited to join in singing:

Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!
Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine!
Heir of salvation, purchase of God
Born of His Spirit, washed in His blood

This is my story, this is my song; Praising my Savior all the day long
This is my story, this is my song; Praising my Savior all the day long

REDEFINE FAILURE—WHAT A FRIEND I HAVE IN FAILURE!⁶

One thing that I am not ashamed to admit is this: **I have failed in many areas of my life over the years, with a long list of uncountable failed projects.** This is for the simple reason that, as a dreamer, I am both relentless and incurable. However, I can say that I have kept falling forward, failing forward, learning to try another way, never quitting, always hoping that the next attempt would be “it!”—the eureka! My version of Paul’s “*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith*” (2 Tim. 4:7), and Jesus’ “*It is finished*” (John 19:30) is not for me to have

⁶ Not part of Whither Bound, Churchianized Nation? “Redefine failure” is an appendix, added for balance. As I am often charged with, I probably have a selective memory, although I think of it as a special gift from God, because I don’t always remember the bad things that happened to me or that people did to me. I remember only the good vibes. I’m thankful for this grace to forget any horrible past experiences and live in the moment. Hence, this appendix, to erase a superman image.

achieved all my goals and no longer have any unfulfilled dreams and unrealized aspirations on my to-do list. Rather, for me to have the satisfaction that, at the time I finally lay my head on the chest of the One who died for me, I can say that I have faithfully run my segment of the race and successfully handed the baton to those coming behind us. It's their responsibility to complete the unfinished tasks on the to-do list and cross the finish line for all the runners ever enlisted into Jesus' Team.

My deceased first wife, Olawanle, of blessed memory, was my best and most trusted critic. She could point to a trail of failures, "wasted" efforts, time and money. (To a researcher, no unsuccessful experiment is a failure or a waste of resources if you write scientific papers postulating why it failed.) Though my track record testified loudly against me, I would attempt to reason with her that I deserved some credit, because I had been consistent, that all my struggles and failed projects had been in two related areas: Christian counseling and literature ministries. I had learned very early in my Christian journey that it was easier to steer a car in motion than one that's stationary or parked. So, I just kept moving—this way and that way—claiming Proverbs 3:5, 6: *"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, And lean not on your own understanding; In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He shall direct your paths."* Also Psalms 37:4, 23—*"Delight yourself also in the Lord, And He shall give you the desires of your heart... The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord, And He delights in his way."* Failure is amoral; it may even be a friend.

I've learned not to be discouraged or upset when I seek help for my projects from local churches and do not get positive response because I have been informed by Scriptures that even God, believe it or not, sought for helpers and didn't find, so much so that God had to step in and perform God's own agenda by Godself. That's one way I understand these two Messianic passages in Isaiah 59:16; 63:5

He [God] saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no intercessor; Therefore His own arm brought salvation for Him; And His own righteousness, it sustained Him (Isaiah 59:16; insert mine).

I [God] looked, but there was no one to help, and I wondered that there was no one to uphold; therefore My own arm brought salvation for me; and My own fury, it sustained Me (Isaiah 63:5; insert mine).

In like manner, I just do what God did—that is, let *"My own arm [bring] salvation for me; and my own fury [passion], sustain me."* I do whatever I can on my own.

As people of faith, we need to redefine failure. We should do this because God can, and God does, weave together all our failures and broken dreams to fashion us, and our story, into a masterpiece for His glory, not in spite of, but as a result of, those broken pieces of our lives which we've surrendered to Him. Each of us enters and exits the stage to play our part in the unfolding drama of the one story of God, and one song of the universe. In this timeless one song, and endless one story, which are eternally being choreographed by the heavens, God is in the business of editing our individual storybook and uniquely positioning us, in order for us be able to—with God—make a divinely orchestrated impact for His Kingdom in our sphere of influence. We may become, by God's grace, the co-creators of our own miracles when we dare to believe His Word and follow with corresponding positive actions. For, as James put it, *"faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead"* (Jam. 2:17).

The story of Joseph in the Old Testament is a classical case study in this regard. Joseph did not attempt to exonerate his brothers of their culpability in their wicked plots and inhuman deceptions against him. Yet, looking from hindsight, Joseph took ownership of the storytelling and declared to his remorseful brothers, *“God sent me before you to preserve a posterity for you in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So now it was not you who sent me here, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house, and a ruler throughout all the land of Egypt... But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive”* (Gen. 45:7, 8; 50:20; emphasis mine). Some preachers refer to this as the “But God” factor of life, when one little conjunction, “but”, invokes heaven’s intervention and favorably rewrites and changes the storyline. New Testament saints also take comfort in Romans 8:28, *“And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.”*

Even in secular settings, I teach my students to view failure as a feedback, as an opportunity to redo, rethink, re-strategize, retool, adjust, explore new avenues, or move in a different direction. Failure is a sign that you are stepping out of the boat, taking risks, and stretching beyond your comfort zone. Failure means you are putting one foot in front of another and stumbling, staggering, and falling in the process. To me, this is a better position to be in than the person who remains in his seat, stuck, playing it safe, because he’s scared of falling. That person never learns and never grows. We are able to walk and run today, because we didn’t give up as learners in our childhood. We got up and tried again and again, each time we fell and bruised our knees as toddlers learning to mimic adults. We might not have the language for our resilience and tenacity back then, but taking few steps and falling, to our simple minds, was a learning process, and the fall and bruises were well worth the eventual outcome: we walked and ran.

Eleven disciples of Jesus sat comfortably in the boat and watched Peter walk on water momentarily before sinking out of doubt. Did Peter make a fool of himself? Probably yes. The right question to ask is: Who had a spectacular story and rare experience to share, and who were mere eyewitness reporters of this phenomenon? I’m almost certain that before the twelve disciples retired to bed that night no one ridiculed Peter for daring to walk on water at Jesus’ invitation to do so; rather, they secretly admired Peter for showing them another dimension of limitless possibilities when we follow Jesus. I’d rather be in Peter’s shoes, making a fool of myself, while the world watches me taking one step walking on the water, sinking and crying out to Jesus, as Peter did, *“Lord, save me!”* (Matt. 14:30). I’m not afraid to fail, again and again. I am immensely thankful to God for His grace has shielded me from colossal and irreparable damage from any failure or consequences of failed projects.

In the business community, they talk about taking “calculated risks”. I think of risk taking in the Kingdom in terms of 1 Corinthians 10:13, which states: *“No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also*

make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.” What I love best in the verse is the second half, the portion that begins with the “but God is faithful...” and ends with, “the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.” As painful and unwelcome as it may be, for the Christian, our faltering steps, well-intentioned trial-and-errors and failures provide an opportunity for us to testify, if not in the immediate circumstance, certainly from hindsight, to God’s faithfulness in putting a hedge around us to protect us, a clamp around our issues so they do not overwhelm us, as well as His ability to show us “the way of escape” out of any mess. If every strand of the thinned grayish hair on my head could speak, the message would be, “Even with a long list of hard-to-beat record of failures, and though he’s limping from unknown right ankle pain and arthritic knee joint pains, he’s not going to stop trying this and trying that for the Kingdom of God. Not now, maybe never.”

To anyone out there in the ministry (or Christian parent, homemaker, schoolteacher, youth leader, civil servant, engineer, carpenter, mechanic, police officer, etc.) struggling, falling, failing, and doubting, I say, “welcome to the club.” Take it from me; the “struggling, falling, failing and doubting” are all parts and parcel of your legacy and ministry. The world is watching you, amazed, dazzled, and dumbfounded, wondering and scrutinizing how you maneuver your way through the maze of out-of-anyone’s-control daily events and how you live out your faith, regardless. The most important part is your faithfulness. God does not measure success with the same yardstick as the world. God rewards our obedience, faith, faithfulness, selfless service, and steadfastness. We are God’s agents, God’s witnesses in a dark world.

What is evident today, in human consideration, as a colossal failure, witnessed and broadcast before the world may be heaven’s concealed weaponry (1 Cor. 2:8). For example, the hateful and jealous religious groups, and even Jesus’ disciples, thought it was over for Jesus. They considered Jesus and His mission a total failure when He had been arrested, beaten, spat upon, crucified by hanging on the cross, died and was buried in a donated tomb. However, three days later, God played His trump card when Jesus arose from the dead and appeared to His followers. In the ageless drama of the one story of God, and one song of the universe, we read in the gallery of faith, Hebrews 11:36-40, the following unlikely accounts of faith. These individuals who were considered worthy of mention in the “Who is Who in the Hall of Faith” entered the stage, played their part, sang their song—with or without an applause from the audience, or amidst shouts of disapproval or contempt from the audience—took a bow, and exited the stage. Reading their account sounds defeatist and gloomy, yet they were examples of unrelenting faith to the world. It reads:

Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented— of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth. **And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise**, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us (Heb. 11:36-40; emphasis mine).

Bless God, when time ceases to be, these saints with “good testimony through faith” who “did not receive the promise” would be “made perfect” with us, in the by and by.

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