

The Implications of Being an Ambassador for Christ in Contemporary Nigeria: An Analysis of 2 Corinthians 5:19-21

Funke Elizabeth Oyekan PhD
Religious Studies Programme
College Of Liberal Studies
Bowen University, Iwo, Nigeria
Email: funkeoyekan@yahoo.com
Phone: 08062313277

Abstract

An ambassador, which is a diplomatic/royal language, represents the interest of the country, the master, the king or the organisation he /she represents. He does everything to promote the interest of the sender. Christians are ambassadors for Christ. However, the attitude of some Christians in recent times raises the question of whether Christians are genuine, representatives of Christ. Scholars have interpreted 2 Corinthians 5:19-21 from the angle of reconciliation, peace-making and evangelism without looking at other possible implications, especially in the Nigerian context. On the other hand, some Christians have interpreted 2 Corinthians 5:19-21 in the context of Christians being ambassadors from the angles of having access to the best things in life and the use of talent and vocations for the benefit of humanity. Yet, these scholars have not looked at the impact of the traditional meaning of an ambassador on Christ ambassadors in Nigeria, whereby, people honour and serve the ambassadors. Consequently, this paper attempts a socio-historical analysis of 2 Corinthians 5:19-21 concerning the phenomena of ambassador and its implications for Christians in any representative Nigerian society. Findings reveal that some Christians who claim to be Christ's ambassadors are not following in the steps of Jesus reconciling the world to God, and serving people. Rather, they see themselves as special people, who must be served and honoured as it is in the contemporary representatives in Nigeria. The study advocates a paradigm shift from being a 'boss' ambassador to being a 'servant' ambassador, as in Pauline's context.

Keywords: Ambassador, Christ Ambassadors, Nigeria, Socio-Historical Analysis, 2 Corinthians 5:19-21

1. Introduction

An ambassador represents the interest of the country, the master, the king or the organisation he /she represents. He barely shifts or changes the interest of his master and where he must change the master's interest, the master must be duly informed for the master's consent. Christians are ambassadors for Christ. However, the attitude of some Christians in recent times raises the question of whether Christians are genuine representatives of Christ. This problem manifests itself in both the political and ecclesiastical arenas of Nigerian society whereby some Christians who hold political as well as ecclesiastical positions are seeing, deviating from the teachings and examples of their masters.

2 Corinthians is seen as Paul's biography, with Paul in defense of his apostolic integrity, persuading his audience to rise from doubt and mistrust of the gospel to belief and mutual affection (Gignilliat 36). 2 Corinthians 15: 19-21 is part of the pericope (2 Corinthians 15: 14-6:10) which demonstrated the influence of Isaiah's canonical message of servants of Isaiah 40-66 on apostle Paul's theological stance. The pericope presents Paul as an advocate of equality, tolerance, and an indiscriminating identity between the Jews and the Gentiles (Gignilliat 11) Nevertheless, scholars have interpreted 2 Corinthians 5:19-21 from the angle of reconciliation, peace-making and evangelism without looking at other possible implications, especially in the Nigerian context. On the other hand, some Christians have interpreted 2 Corinthians 5:19-21 in the context of Christians being ambassadors from the angles of having access to the best things in life and the use of talent and vocations for the benefit of humanity. Yet, these scholars have not looked at the impact of the traditional meaning of an ambassador on Christ ambassadors in Nigeria, whereby, people honour and serve the ambassadors.

Consequently, this paper attempts a socio-historical analysis of 2 Corinthians 5:19-21 with the phenomena of ambassador and its implications for Christians in any representative Nigerian society. This method looks at the life situation (*sitz im Leben*) of an event, analyses the situation using the resources available in the *sitz im Leben*, and compares the situation using the resources from outside the situation to the religious environment and cultural context (Slade 6). This study examines ancient social history with a particular emphasis on the use of Greco-Roman rhetoric and compares the cross-cultural parallels' bearing on contemporary society.



2. Conceptualisation and Characterisation of an Ambassador

Most sovereign and independent nations of the world usually establish diplomatic relations with other sovereign and independent nations, and they expect good returns from each other, which at times involve financial investments (Delgado 268). The diplomatic embassies of nations are represented by ambassadors whose responsibility is to see to the welfare and defend the nations they represent. In some cases, they receive training and are fully professionalised. They are also referred to as 'envoys' or 'orators' because they serve as spokespeople for the countries or nations they represent. They serve as mediators and spies, maintaining peace between the country they represent and their country of residence (Halikowski-Smith 110). He might be the highest rank official representing his nation's government or appointed for a special or temporary diplomatic assignment (Mish). It may however be used informally for people who are known in their various professions or careers and fields of endeavours. They are without a national appointment. An ambassador preserves the relationship between two nations or states through negotiation, information gathering and representation (Nevejans 24). God's ambassadors are chosen to make peace between God and humanity.

3. Ambassador in the Nigerian Traditional Culture

Traditions describe a group's beliefs and behaviours that are passed down from one generation to another. It is all that a society of a given time possesses and which already existed when its present possessors came upon it. Culture is a linkage from one generation to the other as people transfer what they have learned and preserved for future generations. Culture describes the shared characteristics of the entire group, which has been amassed throughout its history (Idang 99). It is the embodiment of the attitude of a people to their traditional values to ensure growth and advancement in all strata of society (Erhun 47). Representative or delegated authority curbs the effect of power distance which is a cultural dimension in Nigeria (Ibrahim 6).

The traditional African leaders are not despotic, and any leaders found to be so, most times is dealt with decisively because there is a system of checks and balances within their system of government as in the case of the Dahomeans who fined kings for breaking the law, the Ashante king who must procure the chiefs' consent to act, the Junkuns in Nigeria who killed their kings for breaking any royal taboos, the Serer of Senegal who beat the drum to announce the end of a king's reign and the Yoruba of Nigeria who commands the king to "open the calabash",

meaning to commit suicide when he errs (Ayittey 1195). Although most times, the traditional rulers have the final say, especially in matters of governance and administration, there is room for delegated authority and representation. The African traditional leaders administer justice, guarantee safety and security, safeguard tribal sovereignty, and perform their functions in upholding indigenous laws within the ambit of the society (Mashele 349) and preserve social order. These functions start from the family head, the community head, the clan head, the village head, the district head, and the tribal head. Ayittey identifies the chief (the central authority), the Privy Council, the Council of Elders (the lineage heads), and the Village assembly of commoners as the four basic units of government in African societies (1188).

In the Nigerian context, the ambassador is a messenger and a representative with distinctive social identity, and social limitations. The king/monarch representative is an ambassador. He tells succinctly the policies of the royalty to the citizens as well as the foreigners. They provide current information about the events within the cultural settings and the government of the day. In traditional Nigerian culture, the work of an ambassador is incarnational (Tripp 104). He is an embodiment of the person he is representing. All right and privileges of a king are given to the staff of office of a king who is absent in an event. The same goes for the king's ambassador. As an ambassador, he buries his ego and concentrates more on the interest of the sender.

However, happenings in modern-day Nigeria, reveal that most ambassadors are not ready to suffer for the sender. In Nigeria for instance Nigerian Senators and House of Representative members have been called upon to reduce their salaries and allowances several times. They never listened. They rather continue increasing their allowances at a slight moment of inflation while the masses continue to suffer (Okele and Okechukwu 48). In the case of the king, the *abóbakú* (Emmanuel and Odunayo 6) among the Yoruba of South Western Nigeria, in modern times is not ready to die for the king as noted when the former Traditional ruler of Ile-Ife died in 2015. The *abóbakú*, the person designated to die whenever the king dies having enjoyed some of the rights and privileges of the king, ran away, whereas he was a chief who enjoyed the rights and privileges of the king with the aim that he would be buried with the king when the king died. Religious leaders are also guilty of this. Many religious leaders are not ready to suffer like ambassadors of Christ. They feed fat on the tithes and offerings of members instead of using the money for missions and evangelism. Unfortunately, they make the members feel that they are wretched because they have little faith!



4. 2 Corinthians 5:19-21 in Literature

2 Corinthians 5: 19-21 is a part of 2 Corinthians 5:14-6:2 which Boers claims have unresolved grammatical structure, and syntactic and semantic problems (Boers 527). The question here is about whether this audience of Paul. Is the audience the believers or unbelievers? Boers insists that considering 2 Corinthians 6:1, the Corinthian readers have not fully reconciled with God (Boers 542). Verses 16-17 are Christological statements while verses 19-21 are theological statements. Verse 21 is usually referred to as the seminal verse (Brown 304). There 'we' might refer to the human race, Paul here refers to the college of the Apostles or himself alone (Brown 306). On the sacrificial imagery of 2 Corinthians 5:21, Marvin Pate opines that in verse 21 there is the interconnection between glory and suffering whereby the sinner is restored into righteousness through Christ, yet must suffer for righteous sake (Patte 33, 34).

Mark Gignilliat notes that some scholars insist that *καταλλασσωις* rooted in Isaiah 52:13-53:12 and that the 'reconciliation' language in this context is an incursion from the Apocalyptic Literature of 2 Maccabees (Gignilliat 43). Seyoon Kim on the other hand insists that Paul's use of *καταλλασσειν* is an innovation in the History of Religion and it is exclusively Pauline in the New Testament (218). Paul's sacrificial imagery is truly rooted in the Old Testament considering his personality as a Jewish rabbi, and a lawyer, who would always appeal to the Old Testament to proclaim the Gospel message among the people. Mark Gignilliat concludes that Paul's narrative is located in Isaiah 40-66 and that Paul sees himself as a servant of Jesus Christ who, though righteous, suffered to proclaim the message of the Kingdom (53). Chalamet also notes that the theme of reconciliation is also central in the Old Testament as it is rooted in the feast of Yom Kippur, the "day of atonement" (376).

He became folly that we might be made righteous. The reconciliation unthinkable in the human emperor is begun by God, who identifies the agent of reconciliation with the offence: "Him who knew no sin, God made into sin in our place"; Christ becomes the hostile party, so that we, in turn, may become the reconciled party in him (Brown 207). In 2 Corinthians 5:18-21, Paul demonstrates that his experiences in the ministry and the suffering of Christ are directly from God who made Christ a sin to become righteousness, wisdom, sanctification redemption that Christians might also be the same to the world (Hooker 375). God is the ruler of the universe who has given the Christians, the marginalised or underrated people within the empire, the power to bring peace and mediation between God and man (Khobynya 131). Reconciliation

involves the re-establishment of right relationships, with a strong passion for mercy and at times forgiveness (Woody 9).

5. Socio-Historical Analysis of 2 Corinthians 5:19-2

5.1 The Textual Analysis

V.19 explains the last clause of v. 18, "...and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation." The word $\omega\varsigma\ \sigma\tau\iota$ means seeing that, or because. Opines that the $\omega\varsigma\ \sigma\tau\iota$ could be explained as a pleonasm, or a mixture of two constructions, $\omega\varsigma\ \theta\epsilon\omicron\upsilon\ \omicron\upsilon\tau\omicron\varsigma$ and $\sigma\tau\iota\ \theta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma\ \epsilon\sigma\tau\iota$.

The verb $\eta\nu$ (was), is also a bone of contention here. $\text{I}\eta\nu$ referring $\epsilon\nu\ \chi\rho\iota\sigma\tau\omega$, in Christ, or to $\kappa\alpha\tau\alpha\lambda\lambda\alpha\sigma\sigma\omega\nu$, reconciling? Hodges supports Luther and Calvin's view that God was in Christ and reconciled the world with himself not counting their sins on them (160). Yet others opine that since $\eta\nu\kappa\alpha\tau\alpha\lambda\lambda\alpha\sigma\sigma\omega\nu$ is in the imperfect tense meaning was reconciling, expressing a continuous action, then God was making atonement for the sins of the world using his son, Christ as propitiation (Hodge 161). God, through Christ, is the initiator of the reconciliation. God removes the barrier of sin between him and humankind. God reconciled man to himself through Jesus Christ at no cost to the trespassers (Furnish 334).

The Christology of 2 Corinthians 5:21 is also illustrated in 2 Cor. 3:17; 4:4; Gal.4:4; Rom. 8:3, 29; and 15:2f. the believer though in the nature of God, does not count it to be equal with God. Man, however, acknowledges that he is a free man and has received the full rights of sons.

v. 20: $\upsilon\pi\epsilon\rho\ \chi\rho\iota\sigma\tau\omicron\upsilon\ \omicron\upsilon\nu\ \pi\rho\epsilon\sigma\beta\epsilon\upsilon\omicron\mu\epsilon\nu$ (Now then we are ambassadors for Christ). An ambassador in the Graeco-Roman context is considered *absens rei publicae causa* ("absent on public business"), and legal cases against him during his absence as a *legatus* are annulled. This is referred to as the *restitutio in integrum*, is not prohibited from doing his private business as long as it is not negatively affecting his official assignment and his legal protection includes inviolability in respect of the crimes and contracts he was engaged in before his mission (Fedele 40). This ambassador's inviolability is contained in the *ius gentium* stipulating that any citizen guilty of breaking the ambassador's inviolability was extradited to the country of the insulted ambassadors (Shmeleva, Utkina and Shmelev11).

In Pauline context, the ambassador is both a messenger and a representative, acting to represent Christ himself. He acts on the authority of the one who commissions him. The followers must see the master in the ambassador and receive the ambassador as they would receive the real person. "Any neglect, contempt or injury done to him in



his official character, is not a personal offence, but an offence to the sovereign or state by whom he is commissioned." (Hodges 163). The ambassador of Christ should teach the truth of the Word of God.

Verse 21, the Servant and Jesus died in place of others despite their sinlessness (cf. Isaiah 53). God is not angry, but gracious to the extent of forgiving mankind to be redeemed.

The foundation for 2 Corinthians 5:19-21 is verse 17. In Christianity there is no room for nationalistic and patriotic ambitions, there is no social distinction, and the dignity of each human person is affirmed (Henderson 143). In Pauline's context the martyrs, the converted slave, the oppressed, the persecuted and the one who abandoned his lucrative profession are ambassadors (Hutson and Tortora 279). In Christianity, the slaves, the women, the rich, and the poor have the same spirituality and suffer persecution in the same way.

5.2 Context Interpretation of 2 Corinthians 5:19-21

There are two uses of the word ambassador in Pauline letters, Corinthians 5:20 and Ephesians 6:20. The third appearance, πρεσβυτης, is in Philemon 1:9, and most bible translators or interpreters do use the word ambassador. Yet, in all the interpretations the idea of an elderly person can be deduced (one as Paul the Aged'). The word was a common language among the Christians and non-Christians of Paul's day denoting heavenly messengers, and especially among Christians as messengers of God (Woody 2). Kruse avers that it has the idea of the wisdom of the aged in connection with the one whom the ambassador is representing (Kruse 106). Anthony Bash likens the ambassadors in the ancient Roman Empire as an agent of communication whereby there is a sender, an agent, a route and a receiver and those referred to by the word group, πρεσβ is selected to assume international diplomatic duties but not permanently (4).

πρεσβεις and πρεσβευται are the two words meaning ambassador in Greek East of the Graeco-Roman World although the ambassadors are sometimes referred to as messengers, αγγελιοι or διακονος, βιβλιαφοροι (letter-carriers), θεοπροποι (an enquirer of an oracle), θεωροι (spectators, envoy on religious business, participants in sacred festivals or announcer of an imminent festival), ἱεροπομποι (conveyors of sacred taxes to Jerusalem for the Jews), κηρυκες (heralds) and φητιαλιοι, the *fetiales* (Bash 8). In the Latin West, the ambassadors were referred to as *legati* while their embassy was called *legatio*. They were either military or civilians, chosen by the senate or appointed by the magistrate to perform specific governmental functions and powers for a period of

office in a province. The *legatus* could be a governor or a commander of a legion saddled with administrative, political or military roles (Schmitz 677). The *legatus* performs the *officium* or *munus publicum*, public obligatory services to the *municipium* depending on the period appointed for the *legatus*, and usually applies to a *legatus a civitas*, a *provincial*, an *ecclesia*, the emperor or the pope. The envoy sent by private individuals was a *nuncius* or *missus*, not a *legatus*. Such was the case of Hellenic philosophers (Lyons 146).

The ambassadorial status can only be secured by birth, and every free-born citizen as a soldier was a member of the Senate, who could represent the Roman empire in any of its Provinces, although Roman citizenship could be conferred on families and their direct descendants who held high municipal offices (Ajdini 387). The Greek ambassadors were saddled with the responsibility of uniting the various Greek ethnic groups in order to resist the approaching invasion of the Greek world by the enemies (Anson 13). The overseas provinces were ruled by the Roman *praetors*. The proconsuls at times, with the aid of the Governors who knew little about their provinces, exploited the provinces, forcing them to pay heavy taxes and pay debts incurred by the corrupt Senators, at times for the rest of their lives (Richard 46). The ambassadors of Paul's time enjoyed diplomatic immunity as spelt out by the Roman Senate. Burton however noticed that the Roman ambassadors in Paul's time were not diplomatic in the sense of the modern-day ambassador as they could be rude, arrogant and tactless (Burton 1). The foreign ambassadors to Rome must present themselves to the magistrate to request food and lodging, deliver an oration, thank the Senate for Roman assistance, a complaint about Roman enemies to the Senate and assist in mediating in times of conflict (Burton 2).

In Paul's context, the ambassador dies for his subjects and in the broader sense it is for the entire world while in the narrow sense, it deals with his apostolic ministry and relationship with the Corinthians (Khobnya 133). Paul's message is unlike the hierarchical nature of the ancient world. His leadership might not be available or acceptable in his society, he was bent on a social construction that models Jesus' example and doing God's will (Barentsen 11).

Besides, the empire embraced polytheism, whose gods behaved like human aristocrats, with its ritualistic characteristic and such religions being regulated by a class of priests. Yet Judaism and Christianity, an offshoot of Judaism, were monotheistic and were not ready to add Roman gods to their religions. The followers of Jesus claimed he was the powerful, son of God, he washed his disciples' feet,



but died a shameful death, though sinless (Richard 254). By the end of the first century CE, the Christians were already developing their own identity almost in opposition to the norms of the Hellenistic world (Georgi 65). There was a dire need to give the Christians an identity that was worth recognising in a world that was so hostile to the Christians, even the 'least' among them (Witte, Jr and Latterell 364). More so, the Corinthian Christians were divided and confused (1 Corinthians) to the extent that they seemingly doubted the apostleship and ministry of Paul (2 Corinthians). They needed to reconcile with God to be agents of reconciliation because the old has passed away (2 Cor. 5:17), and as an ambassador in the chain (Ephesians 6:20) representing Christ is a lifelong assignment whatever the situation or circumstances. An ambassador may also suffer in achieving the goal of the sender. Just as Israel's reconciliation (Isaiah 42:1, 6; 49:6; 66:19) with God is meant to be for nations, so Christians' reconciliation must be for the world.

5.3 *Ambassadors for Christ in the Context of 2 Corinthians 5:19-21 and its Implications in Contemporary Nigeria*

Paul, in 2 Corinthians 5:19-21, reveals that are naturalized citizens of the Kingdom (Munroe 184), whose task is to do the bidding of Jesus Christ. Their mandate is to plead for sinners to be reconciled. In Paul's context, the ambassador suffers even without sinning. Paul describes himself as an ambassador in the chain (Eph 6:20). The ambassador is made righteous by the suffering of the sender.

It is observed that the many Christian ambassadors in Nigeria are wandering away from Pauline's ambassadorial context. They are allowing the cultural interpretation of the ambassador to impact their relationship with the world. Some Christians therefore believe that they should be served, and also lord it over others. They demonstrate this in various ways. Firstly, they Nigerian Christian leaders, and believers believe that being ambassadors of Christ means total physical victory over enemies and the absence of financial poverty. Therefore, rather than blessing the enemy like Jesus Christ, they physically curse the enemy, thereby making the gospel message a mockery. Besides they become slaves to the rich corrupt leaders and politicians. Jesus would not do this. He rebuked the rich of his time and confronted them with the message of the Kingdom.

The Nigerian Christians should be ambassadors for Christ in all strata of the society. Unlike the ambassadors who are to be served, and enjoy preferential treatment, they should be ready to serve the master, bearing in mind that their reward is in heaven. As representatives of

Christ, Nigerian politicians should shun corruption and be ready to correct, and rebuke all forms of corruption within the Nigerian society. Christian leaders in Nigeria should be examples of Christ ambassadors, overlooking self-interest to entrench kingdom values, ideals, virtues, norms and culture within the Nigerian society.

6. Recommendations

The ministry of reconciliation is most times a reversal of earthly standards and there are five implications of this. One, an ambassador of Christ doesn't have geographical boundaries. He doesn't have to be born physically in a particular location. However, he must be born again and put the past behind him to be fit for the ministry of reconciliation. Two, socially, a Christian should be humble, relating with the high and the low to be a true ambassador of Christ. In the third place, the ambassador should lead, not as lording it over the subjects, but with the aim of. Also, an ambassador of Christ does not necessarily have earthly rewards. Therefore, religious leaders should follow the examples of Jesus Christ, and imitate Paul's example of being an ambassador. They should stop exploiting Christian believers through their prosperity theology. They should allow citizens to enjoy the wealth of the land both for the citizens and the land. Ambassadors of Christ though may experience earthly rewards and enjoyment, have the kingdom of heaven as their reward. Nigerian representatives should desist from acquiring material wealth at the expense of the masses. Fourthly, Paul's reconciliation process is a shift from the standard paradigm of reconciliation. In Paul's context, the offender looks for the offended and accepts being guilty. Christians who are ambassadors of Christ are encouraged to preach the Gospel of forgiveness and reconciliation. They should follow in the steps of the sender who forgave and blessed those who cursed him. They should continue seeking the sinners, not to punish them, but to reconcile them to Christ. In the fifth place, ambassadors of Christ must be elders. The Greek words, *πρεσβυτερος*, and *πρεσβυεις* are indications that ambassadors must be 'elders. Elders here is not about age but about Christian maturity as we see examples of churches that choose elders to carry out different ministries.

7. Conclusion

The ambassador in the Ancient Graeco-Roman world matches the ambassador in Traditional Nigerian Society/Culture. In the ancient Graeco-Roman world and The Nigerian context, the ambassador is served, honoured and rewarded with material wealth. There is a



paradigm shift from being a 'boss' ambassador to being a 'servant' ambassador in Pauline's context. Christians and Nigerian citizens should follow the ambassador in the Pauline context in the task of reconciling the world to God.

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