

Colonial Mission and the Great Commission in Africa

Beatrice Okyere-Manu

INTRODUCTION

Several studies that have been carried out on the Great Commission argue that the call of Christ in Matt. 28:18-20 was not only for the early disciples but rather for all followers to come, to extend the gospel to all nations, thus the command: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” The Great Commission according to Joe Kapolyo “is given by the highest authority in the Universe, and it is binding on all disciples for all times. No other task comes with the same authority, the same universal scope or the same eternal consequence.”¹ This universal mandate given by Jesus prompted the early Christians long before the nineteenth century to embark on mission. This mission was intended to extend the gospel to all nations, including Africa, in order to make more converts, expand the church, and thus hasten the coming of Jesus Christ. Although the command of Jesus is clear, it has been argued that the same command was misinterpreted and used as the explanation for opening the way and instigating imperialism in most foreign lands.² Specifically to Africa, the command motivated missionaries such as David Livingstone (1813–73), “to ‘open up’ the continent for Western Christianity, commerce and civilization.”³ The period following Livingstone’s expedition saw many missionaries and traders continue on the road he paved

1. Joe Kapolyo, “Matthew,” *Africa Bible Commentary*, ed. Tokunboh Adeyemo (Nairobi: World Alive Publishers, 2006), 1170.

2. Greg Cuthbertson, “The English-speaking Churches and Colonialism,” in *Theology & Violence: The South African Debate*, ed. Charles Villa-Vicencio (Johannesburg: Skotaville, 1987), 16–17.

into the continent, and this eventually led to the colonization of Africa. This raises a number of questions such as:

- What did the missionaries who came to Africa inevitably overlook that resulted in the exacerbating of inequality, injustice, and human suffering?
- What prompted them to choose a focus on teaching over addressing human suffering?
- Was this the intention of Jesus when he mandated his disciples to go?

These are a few of the questions that this chapter seeks to answer. I intend to do a reflection on the activities of the missionaries in Africa driven by the Great Commission. While accepting their contributions as necessary and in some ways appropriate, I intend to explore the missionaries' role of silence in influencing the injustices and inhumane activities exacted against the indigenous Africans. This contribution, therefore, is a critique of missionary activities under the guise of the Great Commission. It is divided into four sections: first, it shows that colonial missions to Africa were intertwined with the Great Commission. Second, it looks at the activities of the missionaries in particular and the positive impact of their activities on the indigenous people and on the continent as a whole. Third, this chapter will critically assess the negative impact of the role played by the missionaries contributing to issues of inequality, traumatic experience, and injustice as well as the influence of these factors on the indigenous African people. Finally, the chapter discusses the ethical implication of the Great Commission for postcolonial mission in Africa.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COLONIAL MISSIONS AND THE GREAT COMMISSION

It is not the intention of this section of the chapter to give a comprehensive history of colonial missions in Africa; this has been done by a number of scholars. Rather, it seeks to explain the existence of a relationship between the missionaries and European colonists and the impact of said relationship on the missionaries' agenda. It must be noted that the actual date when Christianity came to Africa has been contested by a number of scholars. Edwin Smith believes that in "the early period of her [African] history, the church has never been absent from Africa. Christian communities existed in Africa long before

3. Musa Dube, "The Scramble for Africa as the Biblical Scramble for Africa: Postcolonial Perspectives," in *Postcolonial Perspectives in African Biblical Interpretations*, ed. Musa Dube, Andrew Mbuvi, and Dora Mbuwayesango (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 1–26 (2).

they were found in the British Isles and Northern Europe.”⁴In the same vein, Labode Modupe has also argued that Christianity already existed in Egypt as far back as the third century.⁵However, most historians attribute the introduction of Christianity in Africa to the Portuguese expedition around the fifteenth century.⁶ During this time, Islamic activity on the west coast of Africa was expanding. In order to explore the extent of this activity (with the aim of bringing it to an end) and at the same time to fulfill the Great Commission, Prince Henry of Portugal trained men and sent them to Africa.⁷ It was through that expedition that most cities in the coastal region of Africa, such as Cape Verde, Elmina, Sao Tome and Mombasa, came under Catholicism, which was then the state religion in Portugal. Commenting on the Portuguese activities in the early history Modupe argues that

The case of the Portuguese exemplifies the close relationship between Crown and Church. In the treaty of Tordesillas (1494), the pope recognized Portuguese claims to Africa. The crown was also responsible for attempting to convert the indigenous people to Christianity. Much of the missionary effort over the next two and half centuries was conducted under Portuguese authority.⁸

The Spanish, German, and Dutch nations were also exploring the continent around the same period. It was believed that their attempts were unsuccessful. Charles Grooves attributes their unsuccessful attempts to the following reasons:

- The missionaries only concentrated on the coastal populations especially the ruling elites;
- They were a few in number with limited financial resources; most of them could not cope with the harsh local weather and politics;
- There was the belief in some quarters in Europe that it was not necessary to convert Africans;
- and most importantly economic interest was more prominent.⁹

4. Edwin Smith, *The Christian Mission in Africa* (London: International Missionary Council, 1926), 8.

5. Labode Modupe, “Christianity: Missionaries in Africa,” in *Encyclopaedia of Africa*, ed. Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999) 270–77 (274).

6. Olayemi Akinwumi, “Political and Spiritual Partition: The impact of the 1884/85 Berlin Conference on Christian Mission in Africa,” in *Christianity in Africa and the African Diaspora*, ed. AfeAdogame, Roswith Gerloff, and Klaus Hock (London: Continuum, 2008), 9–19(10).

7. Katie Geneva Cannon, “Christian Imperialism and the Transatlantic Slave Trade,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 24, no. 1 (2008): 127–134.

8. Modupe, “Christianity: Missionaries in Africa,” 274.

9. Charles P. Groves, *The Planting of Christianity in Africa* (London: Lutterworth, 1948), 11.

Eventually with the abolition of the slave trade and the revival of missionary work in Europe, there was a renewal of missionary work on the African continent.¹⁰ Musa Dube is of the opinion that “it was not until the modern European imperial movements of the eighteenth to nineteenth century that a more forceful agenda was undertaken to Christianize sub-Saharan Africa.”¹¹ The success of the missionaries this time was attributed to the new strategies they employed, which include strategies such as changes in the evangelization method, employment of more missionaries and indigenous people to preach the gospel, availability of funds, and cooperation between the different denominations in the continent.¹² In the past, scholars of African Christianity separated church from mission and mission from empire. But nowadays various scholars are arguing for the interconnectedness of these three entities.¹³ It is for this reason that scholars of history have argued that colonial mission was intertwined with the Great Commission. While the spread of the gospel ensued, the colonial mission had another agenda that in several ways impacted on missionary work in Africa. For example, Robert Woodberry posits that “the British were the most powerful Colonizers in the nineteenth and the twentieth century and thus were presumably able to impose their will and extract resources from colonial subjects.”¹⁴ It is believed that most of the missionaries in the colonies, especially the British colonies, could not challenge colonial leaders because they lacked the necessary power to do so; therefore, they had to compromise with the whims and caprices of the colonial leaders.¹⁵ For example, the missionaries had to travel with the European merchants to the mission field in order to enjoy the protection of the colonial official on their journey. Even in the mission field, the European merchants and the colonial officials were the only people the missionaries could associate with.¹⁶ Hence their relationship was cemented to the point that in most cases the “missionaries acted

10. E. Bolaji Idowu, “The Predicament of the Church in Africa,” in *Christianity in Tropical Africa*, ed. Christian Baëta (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 417–40 (417).

11. Dube, “The Scramble for Africa,” 2.

12. Akinwumi, “Political and Spiritual Partition,” 11.

13. David Maxwell, “Writing the History of African Christianity: Reflections of an Editor,” *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 36, no. 3 (2006): 379–99 (395).

14. Robert D. Woodberry, “The Shadow of Empire: Christian Missions, Colonial Policy and Democracy in Post-Colonial societies,” (PhD diss., University of North Carolina, 2004), 3.

15. Abbe Livingstone Warnshuis, *The Relations of Missions and Government in Belgian, French, and Portuguese Colonies* (London: International Missionary Council, 1923), 13.

16. Dana Robert, “The Great Commission in an Age of Globalization,” in *Antioch Agenda: Essays on the Restorative Church in Honor of Orlando E. Costas*, ed. Daniel Jeyaraj, Robert W. Pazmiño and Rodney L. Petersen (New Delhi: Indian Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, 2007), 1–22 (10).

as intermediaries in the early years of colonial rule between Africans and the Europeans for they served as advisors to the indigenous rulers. In this role, their influence was usually biased towards colonial government and the rapid cultural ‘Europeanisation’ of the African population.”¹⁷ Thus, the closed nature of their relationship influenced the missionaries’ activity on the continent. Modupe has observed that “a few missionaries actively helped European government defeat African states, and other missionaries protested against abuses associated with colonial government but did not question the authority of these governments to colonize Africa.”¹⁸ It is with this background that Norman Etherington writes,

... secular historians have reached a virtual consensus on the question of Christianity and colonialism. Phrased in different ways by different authors, it is that the missionaries, who aimed to replace African cultures with European ‘civilisation’ and who frequently allied themselves with colonial governments, nevertheless transmitted a religion which Africa turned to suit their own purposes: spiritual, economic and political.¹⁹

Modupe continues to assert that “it appeared that most missionaries accepted colonialism and worked within the system. Some governments attempted to forge links with missionaries: both the Portuguese and Belgian government privileged missionaries from nations working in the colonies. Most of the missionaries and colonial government worked closely together, although they did not have the same goals and were often in conflict.”²⁰ It must be noted that those missionaries who stood up against colonial interests were sometimes sued or sent back to their country of origin.²¹ Such acts affected the missionaries’ work greatly: it silenced them and as has been noted above, influenced their initial agenda of spreading the gospel. As a result of the intimate relationship between colonizers and missionaries, colonial officials and the European merchants played significant roles in directing and facilitating the missionary project to their own advantage.²² So far we have argued that even though the Great Commission prompted missionary work into Africa, it was entangled with colonial mission by Europeans in Africa. This relationship impacted both

17. John Anthony Christopher, *Colonial Africa* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble, 1984).

18. Modupe, “Christianity: Missionaries in Africa,” 276.

19. Norman Etherington, “Recent Trends in the Historiography of Christianity in Southern Africa,” *Journal of Southern Studies* 22, no. 2 (1996): 201–19 (209).

20. Modupe, “Christianity: Missionaries in Africa,” 276.

21. Harry Langworthy, *Africa for Africans: The Life of Joseph Booth* (Bonn: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 1996).

positively and negatively on their activities. It is with this background that the next section critiques the missionary activities in Africa. In my critique, I will resist the temptation of critiquing missionary activities in every country on the continent, though that would have given a complete overview of their activities in Africa. Due to space limitations, I will give a generalized critique of missionary work on the continent as a whole.

CRITIQUE OF MISSIONARY ACTIVITIES IN AFRICA

Although there were positive results as a consequence of the missionaries' teaching motivated by the Great Commission on the continent, there were important aspects they omitted that had negative impacts on their work. For the sake of this chapter, the activity of the colonial missionary will be divided into two areas: positive and negative.

POSITIVE ACTIVITIES

Missionaries and colonial mission made a great impact on the continent of Africa. The major impact includes general literacy in health, teaching and conversion into Christianity, education with the view of expanding the size of elite and middle class, and exposure of and rallying against abuse in the indigenous cultures. This section explores the positive impact of the missionary work under the theme of teaching driven by the Great Commission.

TEACHING INSPIRED BY THE GREAT COMMISSION

The missionaries who came to Africa, particularly the Protestant missionaries, were interested in converting the indigenous people of Africa to Christianity as mandated by the Great Commission. With this in mind, in every territory they entered, they tried to develop a written form of the oral language of that territory. They also translated the Bible into these languages and then taught the indigenous people how to read and write.²³ Consequently, their motivation for the education they provided for the indigenous people in Africa was to create a basis for the gospel with the intention of converting the colonies to Christianity.²⁴ Through this strategy, a number of educated indigenous lay leaders and clergy were trained to help spread the word among their own

22. Michael D. McGinnis, "From Self-reliant Churches to Self-governing Communities: Comparing the Indigenization of Christianity and Democracy in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 20, no. 3 (2007): 401–16 (404).

23. Kenneth Ingham, *Reformers in India, 1793–1833: An Account of the Work of Christian Missionaries on Behalf of Social Reform* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 96–109.

people.²⁵ The strategy of teaching the indigenous people to read and write occurred within the context of the conviction of the missionaries that all people are created in the image of God and are redeemable. This strategy ran counter to the popular anthropological ideology during the nineteenth century that “dark skinned people are incapable of abstract thought and cannot be civilized through education.”²⁶ In his writing about the activities of the missionaries around the mid-nineteenth century, William Brown mentions that “the success of the mission was, on the whole, highly pleasing. The congregations were considerable; numbers of the natives baptized, many of whom were also admitted as communicants. The influence of the mission extended far beyond the stations; it was felt in a great part of the surrounding country.”²⁷ Education, therefore, became an enticement for conversion. Although many missionaries viewed the delivery of social services as a practical application of their faith, their primary purpose was to spread the gospel to unbelievers.²⁸ Therefore, they did not concern themselves very much with what the indigenous people were going through socially but pursued their goal of sharing the gospel and consequently the elevation of education (as a basis for conversion) over social justice at the time. As a result, by the 1940s about ninety-seven percent of the population of students in Ghana and Nigeria were believed to have been educated by missionary schools. In South Africa, there were an estimated 5,360 mission-sponsored schools as opposed to 230 state-sponsored schools.²⁹ Subsequently, as Horton Robin asserts:

With the advent of the twentieth century . . . Europeans came to be seen as symbols of power, and Christianity itself came to be seen as part of a larger order, comprising Western education, colonial administration, commerce and industry, with which everyone had henceforth to reckon. These changes created a much more favorable climate for conversion.³⁰

24. Dick Kooiman, “Who is to Benefit from Missionary Education? Travancore in the 1930s,” in *Missionary Encounters: Sources and Issues*, ed. Robert A. Bickers and Rosemary Seton (Surry: Curzon, 1996), 153–73 (158–59).

25. W.H. Taylor, “Missionary Education in Africa Reconsidered: The Presbyterian Educational Impact in Eastern Nigeria 1846–1974,” *African Affairs* 83(1984): 189–205(196).

26. Brian Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag: Protestant Missions and British Imperialism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Leicester: Apollos, 1990), 162.

27. William Brown, *The History of Christian Missions*, vol. 2(London: Thomas Baker, 1864), 532.

28. *Ibid.*

29. Edward H. Berman, “African Responses to Christian Mission Education,” *Africa Studies Review* 17 (1974): 527–40(527).

One major success of the missionaries' educational activity was that it produced more indigenous people with skills for "running western style bureaucratic organizations."³¹ Besides the training of the indigenous people, the missionaries managed to carry out their core agenda of spiritual transformation as prescribed by the Great Commission.

GENERAL HEALTH CARE

In addition to evangelization and education, colonial leaders opened opportunities for missionaries to build hospitals and other institutions to help the indigenous people with their numerous ailments. For example, C. J. Zvobgo says that "Christian missionaries established medical missions both because they regarded the ministry of healing as an integral part of the Christian witness and because they viewed medical missions as an important evangelistic agency."³² Therefore, indigenous people seeking medical care became potential Christian converts. Writing about missionary work in northern Nigeria, Andrew Barnes quoted Akiga the Tiv who observed that "there was medicine at every mission station and treatment was given to the sick. Of all the work that the mission does, this pleases the people most."³³ Missionary Clara Bridgman founded the Bridgman Memorial Hospital in Johannesburg in 1928, which focused on improving childcare.³⁴ Thomas Hakansson narrates the story of Jakob Janssen Dannholz, an Evangelical Lutheran and a trained nurse who established a mission station in South Pare in Tanzania, whose goal was to show the destructiveness of deleterious practices on children. These practices include polygyny, female circumcision, premarital sex, and beliefs in ancestral and all other forms of spirits. Dannholz believed these practices produced a dangerous environment for children and called them "animistic beliefs." He therefore "used preaching and demonstration to spread his message."³⁵ He would demonstratively deliver children slowly in order to show that a clean and

30. Robin Horton, "African Conversion," *Journal of the International African Institute* 41 (1971): 85–108 (86).

31. Woodberry, "The Shadow of Empire," 28.

32. C. J. Zvobgo, "Aspects of Interaction between Christianity and African Culture in Colonial Zimbabwe, 1893–1934," *Zambezia* 13 (1986): 43–57 (54).

33. E. Andrew Barnes, *Making Headway: The Introduction of Western Civilization in Colonial Northern Nigeria* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2009), 145.

34. David Hardiman, *Healing Bodies, Saving Souls: Medical Mission in Asia and Africa* (New York: Rodopi, 2006), 40.

35. Thomas Hakansson, "Pagan Practices and the Death of Children: German Colonial Missionaries and Child Health Care in South Pare, Tanzania," *World Development* 26, no. 9 (1998): 1763–772 (1768).

properly conducted birth would produce healthy children.³⁶ Through this strategy he managed to attract a number of converts. Many other mission hospitals were opened in various parts of the continent to treat the indigenous people, and also functioned as a strategy for spreading the gospel and making converts. William Brown, writing on the positive impact of colonial mission prompted by the Great Commission in Africa, adds the following:

The people under the care of the missionaries made considerable advances in some of the more common and necessary arts of civilized life. Many of them built themselves convenient houses, some of them of stone, instead of their old smoky unhealthy huts. In place of the skins of animals which they used to throw over their bodies, the men adopted in part the European dress, while the women who had learned to sew made decent clothes for themselves and their daughters. Though they were previously not simply a pastoral people, but cultivated millet and other produce, yet now their husbandry was considerably extended. They obtained ploughs and other agricultural implements, and many of them occupied themselves in the culture of corn, which they sold to the Dutch farmers for cattle, clothing, soap, salt, and other useful articles. Vaccination also was introduced among them, and we trust that it may check in future the frightful ravages which small-pox was accustomed to make among them.³⁷

From the above quotation, there is no doubt that healthcare became one of the major concerns of the missionaries, and this resulted in the building of mission hospitals and the provision of western medicine, which improved the survival rate of the indigenous people on the continent. It also helped to increase the number of converts into the Christian faith.

THE NEGATIVE ROLE PLAYED BY THE MISSIONARIES IN AFRICA

Despite all the positive impacts of colonial mission prompted by the universal mandate of the Great Commission, most African scholars have argued that the same biblical text was used to abuse Africans through the missionaries' relationship with the imperialist programs. It is with this background that this section explores the activities of the missionaries that negatively impacted the indigenous people on the continent. I will specifically explore what the

36. Ibid.

37. Brown, *The History of Christian Missions*, 534.