

## **THE RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL COVENANT: THE PURITAN CHALLENGE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Sustainable national development is grounded in a vision. Such visions are anchored on solid philosophical worldviews that shape intellectual and moral conduct. The history of advanced western nations bears this fact out. In this study, our focus is on the impact that Puritans brought to bear on the American Society. The Puritan impact on some of the American colonies lasted for centuries and still continues in the context of modern and postmodern popular revolutionary culture. The Puritans grew out of a strong Calvinist theological tradition. Their vision was driven by their covenantal perspective which spanned the religious and social spectra. The goal of this study is to challenge Nigerian Christians to adopt the Puritan heritage in order to wrought desirable development in our national life.

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **THE PROBLEM IN VIEW**

The challenge for the Nigerian church as regards social engagement today is how to influence transformation among the citizenry particularly among the political leaders. This is a great task, given the deplorable political and social economic situation in the country. The question is: what should be the role of the church in meeting the challenges of social engagement in the Nigerian context? This study is predisposed to address this task.

Since independence in 1960, the country has continued to struggle with many challenges in nation building. Nigeria is afflicted with multidimensional problems which are antithetical to peaceful co-existence, such as socio-economic imbalance, instability and inequality. Aluko argues that despite the country's oil wealth, it is still one of the poorest countries in the world where millions of primary school age children are out of school while youths have no access to quality education and majority are unemployed; educational institutions are devoid of enough infrastructure and no access to safe water, good roads, adequate shelter and health services.<sup>2</sup> To worsen the situation, conflagrating insecurity, kidnapping, armed robbery as well as tottering electricity supply have crippled the country. Moreover, much of the infrastructure in the country, like hospitals, roads, railway lines, electricity supply, communication, oil refineries and education institutions, are in shattered state. The high rate of unemployment, underemployment and job insecurity has paved way for the youth to be conscripted by militia groups, political thugs and cults. These are all clues of a country that has suffered from poor leadership over long periods of time, particularly in terms of socio-political and economic structures. This is the context under which Christian theology raises some fundamental questions of national development.

Nevertheless, it can be observed that, this situation will most probable not change in the near future except concerted efforts are made in this respect. It is this challenge that the Christian Community is being prompted to address in a more sustainable way through its leadership and membership in order to transform the socio-political and economic prospects of Nigeria.

Consequently, this study inspires the church to actively involve in social engagement with capacity to explore potential measures within the Nigerian context in order to achieve social transformation in light

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of the current challenges. How may church leaders in Nigeria, in light of the poverty, underdevelopment, corruption and poor leadership in the country, contribute more profoundly to the sociopolitical and economic transformation of Nigerian society? A Puritan perspective will be offered on how Christians in politics and in the civil service should orient themselves for better service. The civil service system in Nigeria is the structural foundation of corruption.

### **The Puritans in America**

The Puritans were driven by the concern to establish a godly society when they realized that the Church of England was not thoroughly Reformed. They believed that believers are called to set themselves apart for God, not by way of isolationism but by living according to the tenets of the biblical doctrines that they held. They believed that they were in a social and national covenant with people and God in civic duties so that through their obedient efforts God would be honored and he will bless them more. This is borne out of the Calvinistic understanding that true religion is defined by its covenantal structure, beginning from God's voluntary condescension to humanity in order to have a relationship and consequently our relationship to the world in keeping with God's revealed will.<sup>3</sup>

The Puritans moved to America in the 17<sup>th</sup> century where they made a heavy impact, not only in church life but also socially, economically and politically. Their approach to life was holistically, being informed by the biblical worldview. The Bible, as God's word, provides a guide in all matters of life including how believers should conduct themselves in private and public life. Their life view and system was shaped by their theological traditions by which they held strong convictions that they were "instruments in God's plan for reordering human society."<sup>4</sup> The emergence of Puritanism on the American shore was providentially an occasion for experimenting the force of the gospel in private and public life.

Ahlstrom inconsistently presents the impact of Puritanism in the American society. On the one hand, Puritans greatly developed their theological vision through establishment of higher institutions and then "intellectualism was deprecated and repressed" which made the American to trail their European counterpart.<sup>5</sup> However, the Puritans were notable for combining the "practical and theoretical" framework of Scripture, thus identifying them as "increasingly literate people."<sup>6</sup> Their "peculiar power and distinctive" characteristic was their "adherence to Reformed theology" in the context of spiritual and political debasement in order to bring far reaching reforms in the society.<sup>7</sup> Even if this attestation refers to the time of Elizabeth to the restoration of Charles II what would have accounted for the intellectual difference in the American Puritans as Ahlstrom portrays? Jonathan Edwards who was a product of American Puritanism exerted his religious, intellectual and moral influence in New England in a highly significant way and this does not prove the account that Ahlstrom presents. In Edwards, the intellectual and the spiritual were harmonized. Even after his death, his work had great impact on the American church and society as he was described as "the quintessence of Puritanism."<sup>8</sup>

The Puritan conviction stemmed from drawing all principles of human existence from the Creator-creature distinction whereby all of creation is to work according to the divine plan to the glory of God. Though sin has vitiated the glorious nature of the creation to function in line with God's original purpose we have the mandate to partner with God's redemptive agenda.

Scripture has given us spectacles to see God in all things so that we can better appreciate the world.<sup>9</sup> The necessity of Scripture to guide us in complying with God's plan because only through it can we know his mind. In the covenant of works, God laid down the terms for humanity to assent which such obedience continues through all the covenants.<sup>10</sup> The covenant is a relational expression by which God is capable of

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<sup>3</sup> Herman Bavinck., *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans, John Vriend Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004. p 569.

<sup>4</sup> Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1972. p 80.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p 1090.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p 92.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p 91.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p 312.

<sup>9</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, Michigan. 1996. p 132.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p 213.

relationship with his entire creation and this further defines human relationship with one another and his environment. Turretin explains that the original covenant had dual purposes for man, namely, the general which refers to the “knowledge and worship of God, justice towards his neighbor and every kind of holiness”; and “the special was abstinence from the forbidden fruit (in which obedience to the whole law was contained as in a compendium and specimen).”<sup>11</sup> At the center of God’s creation stands humanity bearing his image. Man, being a key actor in this relationship holds a vertical and horizontal responsibility and such must be held in balance though the vertical defining and shaping the horizontal. This is what Turretin expresses above as “worship of God” and “justice towards his neighbor.” This second part draws from the first because it is only when we truly worship God that we can value other fellow humans by giving them justice.

The glory of God was the prime compass for human actions.<sup>12</sup> The core of Calvinism emphasizes the glory of God in all that we do. Therefore, “a person could serve God and glorify him in any area of labor.”<sup>13</sup> Drawing from the Calvinistic theological tradition of excelling in all human responsibilities to the glory of God, the Puritan work ethic shaped many territories in America such as the New England, Plymouth, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Maine, New Haven and Rhode Island and even beyond. This conviction made them to emphasize intellectual development in order to understand the depth of the word of God and its application to daily human activities. To underscore this, they established renown academic institutions in their colonies such as Harvard and Yale as instruments of reform.<sup>14</sup> It was the conviction of Puritanism that Reformed theology should be applied to the “needs of public and personal religion by means of the idea of covenant.”<sup>15</sup>

Though their emphasis was not on human ability to merit salvation due to the depravity of the human nature, they believed that the grace of God gives ability to strive for piety, righteousness and hard work which goal was to glorify God. The Puritans

were theologically driven to make manifest a holistically integrated life—a life in which their individual vocations or callings would not be less important nor more noble than that of another, a life in which, just as the Christian is given life and held together through the new covenant of Jesus Christ, so too is society held together through a social covenant—a life in which one’s social responsibility is rooted in a desire to honor God through the love of neighbor and is a tangible outpouring of one’s personal vocation as well as an overall adherence to the social covenant holding the commonwealth together by the grace of God.<sup>16</sup>

The Puritans believed in working out the fallen society in accordance with the first covenantal stipulations given to the first Adam, redeemed, reconciled and reshaped by and through the second Adam. It is on the basis of the vision of connecting the lost and reconciled world that they engaged public life. “With these unique qualities of the Puritan worldview in mind, an exploration of the contributions of Puritanism to American civil society and the American social vision by way of a deeper look into their embrace and understanding of covenant theology, their rejection of the sacred/secular dichotomy through their doctrine of vocation, and their view of social responsibility is in order.”<sup>17</sup>

In corroborating this Kincaid explains that with “covenant theology in mind, the Puritans allowed this theological understanding of covenant to seep not only into how they understood their relationship with God as His elect, but also into their understanding of the social framework of the commonwealth.”<sup>18</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger, vol. 1 Phillipsburg: P&R, 1992. p 577.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p 81.

<sup>13</sup> David W. Hall, *The Legacy of John Calvin: His Influence on the Modern World* Phillipsburg: P&R, 2008. 27.

<sup>14</sup> Ahlstrom, Sydney E. *A Religious History of the American People*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1972. p 130.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>16</sup> Andrew Christenberry, A City Upon a Hill: The Puritan Social Vision in American Civil Society. May 10, 2017. Available at <https://extranewsfeed.com/a-city-upon-a-hill-the-puritan-social-vision-in-american-civil-society-544>

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>18</sup> John Kincaid, J. “The American Vocation and its Contemporary Discontents,” *Publius: The Journal of Federalism*, 1971,1: pp115–140. Accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.pubjof.a037835> on January 5, 2019.

It is further attested that “The concept of covenant provided a basis for virtually all the relationships that were important to the Puritans. Covenant denoted a relationship of mutual trust and obligation. It explained God’s dealing with the individual person and was the philosophic basis for such Puritan institutions as family, church, and state.”<sup>19</sup> As a matter of fact, “There was for [the Puritans] no disjunction between sacred and secular; all creation, so far as they were concerned, was sacred, and all activities, of whatever kind, must be sanctified, that is, done to the glory of God.”<sup>20</sup>

Having a good grasp of our calling to serve the society requires that we have a good grasp of God’s scope of creation and redemption. It is only cogent that “The scope of our mission must reflect the scope of God’s mission, which in turn will match the scale of God’s redemptive work.”<sup>21</sup> The scope of God’s redemption cannot be less than the scope of God’s creation. It will be incongruent to view that his redemption will be restricted to the spiritual without corresponding physical, social, political and economic effects. Therefore, if we are in the business of God to bring his kingdom on earth, it must reflect that comprehensive scope that God holds. Ours is not to define God’s scope but to obey through compliance of actions that underscore all the redemptive categories. In this light, “There needed to be an ongoing commitment to economic and social justice, freedom from oppression, and due acknowledgement of God through covenant loyalty and worship.”<sup>22</sup>

The covenant is the sole decision of God which summons humanity to acknowledge his sovereignty in obedient religious obligations and faithful social conduct in the world. Everything starts from God and flows to humanity and to the entire creation. Our humanity and performance in private and public life finds true meaning only in our proper relation to God. In this sense, “Man’s liberty assumes truly human dimensions in relation to the covenant, as the new relation to God is more than a religious experience. All life and all human relations are redirected according to the truth to be made manifest at the end in the new cosmos.”<sup>23</sup> Although the redemptive covenant has special focus on God’s elect, its correlative agenda spans God’s common grace which requires our expansive performance in all spheres. Though civil government is “not a redemptive ordinance” it “provides, and is intended to provide, that outward peace and order within which the ordinances of redemption may work to the accomplishment of God’s saving purposes.”<sup>24</sup>

Though Calvin thinks that the blessedness of the ancient people did not consist in earthly life<sup>25</sup> he does not diminish the importance of earthly orderliness in human society. By the very constitution of the human nature, God imbued it with the “natural instinct to foster and preserve society.”<sup>26</sup> Just like innate character of our *divinitatis sensum*, “there exist in all men’s minds universal impressions of a certain civic fair dealing and order.”<sup>27</sup> This is sort of a covenantal regulation of the human mind which is authored by a “lawgiver, been implanted in all men.”<sup>28</sup> This comprehends even the political order because “some seed of political order has been implanted in all men.”<sup>29</sup> By this reality, God has given us a great sense of responsibility in our covenant pact so we learn what is pleasing to God and strive towards it by the enabling power of the Spirit of God.<sup>30</sup> Our obedience works in conjunction with God to establish his purpose in the entire world.

Scripture attests that “all things are of God” (2Cor. 5:18; Rom. 11:36; 1Cor. 8:6) which shows the extensive scope of engagement in the entire creation. Calvin however, believes that “all things are of God” does not refer to “creation generally; but of the grace of regeneration, which God confers peculiarly upon

<sup>19</sup> Leland Ryken, & Packer, J.I., *Worldly Saints: The Puritans as They Really Were* Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books, 1986.

<sup>20</sup> Christenberry, Andrew., *A City Upon a Hill: The Puritan Social Vision in American Civil Society*. May 10, 2017. Available at <https://extranewsfeed.com/a-city-upon-a-hill-the-puritan-social-vision-in-american-civil-society-544>

<sup>21</sup> Christopher JH Wright, *The Mission of God*. Downers Grove: IVP, 2006. p 265.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, p 289.

<sup>23</sup> Paul Wells, “Covenant, Humanity and Scripture,” *The Westminster Theological Journal* vol. 48 no. 1, 1986, 32.

<sup>24</sup> John Murray, “Common Grace,” cited by Mark W. Karlberg in “Review Article” *The Westminster Theological Journal* vol. 50 no. 2 1988. p 328.

<sup>25</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.10.10, 436.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 2.2.13, 272.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*. Calvin introduced this concept in Bk 1.3.1, 43 and 1.4.1, p47.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, p 273.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 1.17.3, 214-5.

his elect, and he affirms that it is of God — not on the ground of his being the Creator and Artificer of heaven and earth, but inasmuch as he is the new Creator of the Church, by fashioning his people anew, according to his own image.”<sup>31</sup> I think by narrowing his view here, it misses the comprehensive scope of the implications that the death and resurrection of Christ has for the entire universe. Though the application of the redemption wrought by Christ is limited to the elect, there is a cosmic implication for its renewal for the elect of God. Even though the elect are always in view, Paul’s idea here takes into consideration the totality the creation and redemption of the universe, which groans alongside God’s children (Rom. 8:18). The ministry of reconciliation that has been given to us is wide open to all sinners through which God’s elect will be gathered. The restoration in view is not only spiritual but also social which must conform to the standards of God for which he intended for the original creation to proceed. It is not helpful and necessary to introduce any dichotomy here.

The basic Christian theological construction usually stems from the social and cultural contexts. Christ himself expressed a deep concern for the situation of the downtrodden just as Calvinism’s doctrine of predestination also grew out of the social and economic distress of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>32</sup> Covenant theology must also address or lead us to address social concerns in our public service in accordance with biblical revelation. As much as the sinful nature inclines itself in a covenantal obedience to Satan, believers who have the grace of God have a duty to reverse that to the original intent of God through conscious living to please him in all vocations.<sup>33</sup> All of creation belongs to God and he was and has been reconciling the world to himself in Christ (2Cor. 5:19). If Israel was required to live a life to God through the law encompassing religious, moral and civility, this could not be suspended in our case, though this is not to merit us eternal life, but the distinctiveness of our lives in this fallen world cannot be compromised.<sup>34</sup> All this points to the fact that we are God’s servants in the entire human society. Christ demonstrated how we should live our covenant life, namely, that he “comes into the world with the newness of his person and work.”<sup>35</sup> Our renewal is whole approach so that while our whole being is turned into new creatures (2Cor. 5:17), our personal ethics and work ethics must be consistent with what we have been made into in Christ. “The true following of Christ therefore does not consist in copying him, in replicating him, in imitating his life and teaching but is found in the inner conversion of the heart, which gives us a true desire and choice to walk according to all, not just some, of God’s commandments in spirit and truth.”<sup>36</sup> This is an important summary of the Christian life, which emphasis is laid not on the outward practice of the Gospel but on truth that overflows from the heart through the influence of the Holy Spirit.

The covenant of grace was made between God and Christ and all believers who are in union with him.<sup>37</sup> It therefore, means the responsibility that God imposed on Christ has also been transferred to us. While the covenant brings us redemption and reconciliation with God, we have also been given the ministry of reconciliation to bring other offenders back to God, and the entire creation. Though Calvin sees this responsibility as belonging exclusively to the apostles or ordained ministers of the Gospel (2Cor. 5:18f) within its contextual framework, I think its application should pertain to all believers who are captured within the Priesthood of Christ. God has qualified believers in the New Covenant in Christ to be ministers of the Gospel in the fallen world for reconciliation (2Cor. 3:6). If Christ worked for the coming of the kingdom of God, such rule cannot be limited to the spiritual renovation of the human nature but it will also incorporate the social aspects which often evidences what lies at the heart of our spiritual configuration. In the redemptive covenant of grace, believers are turned into instruments in God’s hands in order to achieve his purpose and goal of creation. This is the essence by which the ministry of reconciliation has been placed

<sup>31</sup> John Calvin *Commentaries on Second Corinthians* Oregon: Ages Digital Library, 1998. p 119.

<sup>32</sup> *Bavinck, Essays on Religion, Science and Society*, ed. John Bolt, trans, Harry Boonstra and Gerrit Sheers .Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008, 119.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, p 122.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, p 124.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, p 131.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, p 133.

<sup>37</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* .Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975. p 358.



into our hands. Tripp argues that “when God calls you to himself, he also calls you to be a servant, an instrument in his redeeming hands” who will further the holistic transformation of the whole person.<sup>38</sup>

### THE CHALLENGE FOR THE NIGERIAN BELIEVERS

The submission to this view is that Christians in Nigeria have a significant role to play in politics by acting as an upright guide, moral watch dog, spiritual counsellor and conscience to the society. So much has been written to challenge believers to rise up to the occasion as our society keeps rolling down the misery slope yet without much reaction. It should however be noted that imbedded in the sacred and sacramental mission of the Church is her social ministry as a gadget of justice in an unjust sociopolitical system, a mechanism of reconciliation and peace in a conflict and crisis-ridden society, as well as an instrument of liberty in an oppressive structure. The paper argues that engagement in the process of socio-political and economic deliverance for the realization of justice is a task, even a necessity for the Church as both a religious and viable social institution.

The problem that Nigerian believers need to deeply reflect upon and refresh is attitudinal and behavioral change in order to fulfill God’s vocational call to us in Christ Jesus.<sup>39</sup> “One, however, wonders why there is a discrepancy between present day Christians and the reality of faith in their daily experiences, especially in the area of responsibilities to the state and the political leadership. This contrast between belief and social action has created an unfortunate gulf between many Christians and political leadership.”<sup>40</sup> When Christianity gained currency in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by the surge of the Reformation, it took along with the spiritual renovation, a social transformational structure too. Nations changed from their former status quo due to the conscious application of the Christian ethical principles in both public and private lives. It is this spirit of transformation that drove many Christians in the advanced nations to start moving beyond their shores as missionaries from the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to other nations to plan the same gospel changing truths. And if this gospel still remains the same, and with the staggering population of believers in Nigeria, the failure of replication what believers in other advanced nations did in their countries stands inexcusable. It rather shows the adulteration of the gospel, having allowed anthropological concerns with its selfish orientation to override the divine mandate that was packaged in the covenant and given to us. But Nigeria can only be transformed based on the blueprint of God, which is his word in his application form.

A nation that transforms goes through the stages of transformation. (1) Realization of Crisis/Need/Deficit, (2) Revelation from God to His servant, (3) Repentance, (4) Revival/refreshing of the spirit, (5) Renewal of the mind, (6) Reproduction of transformational leaders, (7) Reconciliation of all things to God. This is the operational phase in which a renewed Christian minority on God's agenda acts as salt and light wherever they are, repositioning their lives and the organizations they serve in all spheres of society to alight with God's purpose of reconciling all things to Himself, (8) Restoration/Transformation. Biblical transformation can be defined as the process of restoration to God's intentions of all that was broken when man rebelled against God in the Fall.<sup>41</sup>

At the socio-psychological aspect of hardship and underdevelopment, it is not an exaggeration to avow that some forms of socio-political apathy and discrimination at both national and local levels have been engrained into the socio-cultural structure and psychology of our survival and relationships. At the national level, there is customary ethnicism and nepotism, chiefly in the areas of power sharing, employment, scholarships, admission to higher institutions, and so on.

The role and significance of good leadership that often translates into socio-religious, political and economic transformation in the various strata of human society is scarcely in doubt. The need for visionary and result oriented leadership is undeniably common in political, economic, social, cultural and religious

<sup>38</sup> Paul David Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands* Phillipsburg: P&R, 2002. p xi.

<sup>39</sup> Stephen Vongdip, *The Church and Political Leadership: Now is the time for a New Nigeria* Lagos: Mareshah Publishing: 2013. p 31.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, pp 33-34.

<sup>41</sup> Olabode Ososami, “How God Transforms Nations,” <http://blogs.christianpost.com/christianlife/how-god-transforms-nations-11080/>, posted on 7/30/12 and cited on April 6, 2019.

circles while the need for greater engagement directed towards the transformation of Nigeria from their scrape of poverty, underdevelopment, corruption and poor leadership is, indeed, crucial. Many believers have demonstrated unfortunate compromising attitudes and actions due to temptations of money and power. They have not shown consistency of character, faith and doctrine which the foundation layers of our faith and action have shown. They either get involved in unethical deals or fail to challenge bad leadership for personal selfish interests. This often makes the hope for a better Nigeria to grow dim. As believers, we should not think of doing things like others are doing; believers do extraordinary things in extraordinary ways which is a demonstration of the power of God in us. The Apostles overturned the behavior of the then world which continued with an explosion in the Reformation and beyond. The question at this point is whether the gospel will remain an abstract entity without commensurate impact or a practical reality in Nigerian Christianity that can yield social transformation as a unique testimony of the power of the gospel in the redemptive history.

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