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The Eroding influence of the Church in Nigeria: Growth versus Impact in the view of Matthew 28:18-20

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Abstract

The Church in Nigeria has grown in number over the years, and the activities of the church have increasingly gained attention over the years by both believers and unbelievers alike. Despite the quantitative growth, the influence of the church is not growing in line with the increasing numbers. Based on the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20), the church is called to influence the world. Making the world disciples means having influence on them. In recent times, the Nigerian church and its activities have been under constant attack. The people who constantly attack the church will surely not be influenced by the church. The eroding influence of the church is specifically seen over the young generation. If the future is to be secured by the young people and the church has no influence on the young people, what will be the future of the church? This may mean that the Nigerian church may be dying without us realizing it. While the increase in church programs, increase in fellowships, etc., are commendable, they will absolutely mean nothing if there is no corresponding increase in influence in Nigeria. It silently says the Nigerian church is failing at the great commission.

Keywords
Nigerian Church, Great Commission, youth, discipleship, religious influence, Pentecostalism, Secularization

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1. Introduction

Nigeria is well recognized to be one of the most religious countries in the world. As of 2020, the Pew Research Center estimated the Nigerian population to be 56.1% Muslims and 43.4% Christians. World Christian Encyclopedia places Christians in Nigeria at 100 million and identifies it as the largest in Africa. About 51% of the Nigerian Christians are said to be Charismatic, Pentecostal, and evangelical. The church growth identifiers are visible across the country, and they include large auditoriums, crusades, diverse denominations, a large minister pool, etc. With these diverse numeric expansions, there has been no proportional societal influence.

Gez, Beider, and Dichew (2022) observe that there is a rising number of religious "nones" in Africa, though the continent remains least secular. Not less than 60% of the young people in Nigeria are aged 18-35 and are alienated from traditional religious practices. The Christian count in Nigeria is decreasing as a result of a lower fertility rate compared to the Muslim population. The Muslim population growth rate has been increasing since 1995, with a major sporadic increase from the Muslim north.

This paper examines the disparity between the quantitative growth and qualitative influence using the theological framework of Matthew 28:18-20. The Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) calls for influence through discipleship, not mere attendance. If the church fails on its mandate of influence, especially on the youth, the future of the Nigerian church is jeopardized.

2. Theological Exegesis of Matthew 28:18-20

2.1 Text and Structure

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in[a] the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." Matthew 28:18-20 ESV

In the original Greek text, there exists only one direct command, which is matheteusate, every other verb used in the text is used to describe how the making of disciples is to be done. Hence, the primary command in the Great Commission is to make disciples.

2.2 Authority and Mandate

In verse 18, Jesus specifically stated He is backing the mandate. First, to note that every authority resides in Him, whether in heaven or on earth. And secondly, that the mandate is given with all authority in heaven and on earth. The mandate given is not just to tell people about Jesus, even though it is where it starts from, literally. It is to disciple people, which is to impart to them for Jesus so that they live and believe what He believed.

2.3 Discipleship as Influence

Making disciples means bringing people into a deeper and growing relationship with Jesus, which begins with public confession of such people as they take Jesus as their personal Lord and Saviour. The great commission focuses more on what happens after the conversion to continuous obedience to the teachings of Jesus Christ.

Hull (2006) sees discipleship as the intentional influence of one believer upon another for spiritual growth and Christlike living. He noted that Matthew 28:18-20 is foundational for disciple-making and spiritual multiplication. Wilkins (2004) holds a similar view when he

presents discipleship as a process by which believers influence others to follow Jesus, imitate his character, and obey his commands.

2.4 Scope: “All nations” and “All things”

Hertig (2020) emphasizes that “all nations” refers not merely to political states but to ethnic and cultural groups, which highlights intercultural discipleship and global Christian witness. This would mean that the disciples are to make more disciples across boundaries and must not allow cultural biases to affect the discipleship.

The phrase “all things” as used by Jesus would mean that nothing can be left out of all that He passed to them. It focuses on the quality of disciples they are to make. It reflects that, as Jesus made them, they are to make others. Wilkins (2022) noted that obedience to all Christ commanded is central to authentic discipleship. This emphasizes the “all things” noted by Jesus in the great Commission.

3. The Nigerian Context

In 2023, Open Doors reports that Nigeria accounts for 90% Christian killed for their faith across the world annually. At least 60,000 Christians have been killed, over 15 million Christians have been displaced, and 18,500 churches have been attacked. In 2025, Intersociety already warned that Christianity may fade out completely by 2075 if care is not taken. Constant attack on the church means a reduction in the witness for the church and a continuous reduction in the possibility of spiritual formation of little Christians remaining.

In the midst of all these, the Nigerian church is losing favour with the youth. Reasons include, but are not limited to, character flaws of leaders, changing cultural identities, lack of relatable teachings and engagement, lack of depth, etc. As the church loses touch with the youths, so also they lose influence over the youth. It is exceptionally worse with the youths who ought to be converted and discipled. They already have a bad disposition toward the church.

Uroko (2023) argues that the moral credibility of some church leaders has been weakened when questionable wealth and unethical practices are tolerated or celebrated within the church communities. Adeoye (2024) argues that secular ideologies, materialism, and changing social values are reducing the relevance of traditional church structures among many Nigerian youths.

We are in a time when the young generation is constantly checking their belief system against the church's ideology. Uwaegbute (2022) identified that many Nigerian youths are reconstructing their understanding of Christianity through contemporary culture and social realities rather than relying solely on traditional church teachings.

While there are public view of massive church attendance, program engagements, and mega church structures, this does not correspond to the influence on the youth. Since the Nigerian church is failing to influence the youth, it means the Nigerian church is not fulfilling the great commission. And since the youth are the future, it means the future of the Nigerian church may be dead before it begins.

4. The Great Commission Gap

The exegesis shows that the mandate in the Great Commission is not focused on mere conversion but on disciple-making, which is to be achieved through teaching and obedience. Unfortunately, the Nigerian church's growth is often measured in Crusades, auditoriums, and programs. While the church agrees to the Great Commission and its importance, the church

fails to follow the stated path to achieve it. The church has also failed to use the right metrics to measure compliance.

The great commission gap continues to widen more as long as the church focuses on other things other than discipleship, which is the focal point. The Great Commission may begin with evangelism, but compliance with it is discipleship, and full compliance with it is quality discipleship. The farther the church goes from discipleship, the wider the Great Commission gap becomes.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

There seems to be a paradoxical relationship between the unprecedented size of the church and the diminishing influence on the youth. While Matthew 28:18-20 sees success as disciples who have become Christlike, not a crowd attending church programs or service, but the church uses a different metric. The metrics used by the Church for church growth measurement are crusades, programs, auditoriums, etc. This paradox and the measurement metrics are high contributing factors to the decrease in church influence over the youth.

In view of the discussions in this paper, below are the recommendations for the church;

1. The Nigerian church must refocus on building discipleship. Every crusade, program, outreach, etc. must be done with a solid plan for discipleship. Success is the number of disciples made, not just mere conversion.
2. The church must create quality, in-depth, and relatable youth discipleship programs. Apologetics, social engagement, and discipleship programs that address the concerns of the youth must be made available and accessible to the youth.
3. The church must strategically re-enter civic discourses on matters such as poverty, corruption, governance, and justice. It is important to note that influence requires public presence and a stand, not withdrawal.
4. The church must begin to measure the rate of obedience to the great commission based on transformed lives, the number of disciples, and the degree of discipleship, rather than just the number of converts and material blessings.
5. The church must begin to show, advocate, and protect its members. A church that can not stand by its members loses influence over the members and eventually loses the members to whoever cares to advocate and stand by them.

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