

THE DECLINE OF CHRISTIANITY IN THE 7TH CENTURY NORTH AFRICA: LESSONS FOR THE CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN CHURCH

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Abstract

The decline of Christianity in North Africa is a fact of history that is better imagined than explained. Many people hold the view that Christianity is a white man's religion and thus view Christianity as a religion that is foreign to Africa. However, from the available literature, this is not true. Christianity thrived considerably in North Africa such that one would have expected it to grow steadily and eventually take over the entire region and become the major religion. The paper uses qualitative and historical approaches based on descriptive and content analysis. However, from the analysis, it is found that this is not the case. Several reasons account for the decline of Christianity in North Africa such as paganised Christianity, ecclesiastical corruption, the corruption of church leaders, imperial Christianity, and Vandal persecution among others. This paper analyzed the reasons for the decline of Christianity in the North African Church, in the seventh century. It recommends that the church in Nigeria should avoid the temptation of joining issues of the church with political issues thereby allowing itself to be influenced by the political leaders against God's word. The church should seek to influence political leaders to play politics following the word of God.

Keywords: Decline, Christianity, North Africa, and Nigeria

Introduction

Contrary to the erroneous assertion by some people that, "Christianity is a white man's religion" it is a historical fact that Christianity is not a colonial heritage to Africa, neither is it a religion that is entirely foreign to it. Several historical evidences point clearly to the fact that the African continent shares some basic geographical origin of Jesus Christ from His early life on earth as a human being with Middle Eastern countries. For instance, it is on record that, when King

Herod gave an executive order that all little boys should be killed; Jesus' human parents (Joseph and Mary) were instructed by the angel of God to flee to Egypt, a North African country. Also, during the early days of the immediate disciples of Jesus Christ, Apostle Philip was instructed by God to go down to the road, leading to Gaza to meet an Ethiopian Eunuch to preach to him. It is an uncontested fact that the Ethiopian Eunuch was a North African man. It follows that the Ethiopian Eunuch must have brought the Christian faith to North Africa long before the advent of colonial administration in Africa.

Furthermore, it is on record in the book of Luke that a Cyrenian was compelled to bear the Cross for Jesus as He was being led to Golgotha, the place where Jesus Christ was crucified. Other evidence could be seen in the account of the Pentecost day. It follows that, on the day of Pentecost, Egyptians and Cyrenians were among the crowd that the apostles were speaking in their various native languages. These and several other pieces of evidence suggest clearly that Africa; especially the northern part of it has been part of the geographical origins of Jesus Christ in particular and Christianity in general.

From the foregoing, therefore, it is a settled fact that the people of North Africa were the first people to receive and embrace the gospel of Jesus Christ in Africa. To authenticate this fact, Kitause (2023), affirms that "Christianity existed in North Africa up to six hundred years before the arrival of Islam as a religion in the area" (p.3). This has also provided us with sufficient proof to discount the erroneous assertion that Christianity is a white man's religion. From the facts of history, as can be seen above, we can safely assert without mincing words that Christianity is native to North Africa and should be seen as such.

However, despite the above facts about North Africa and the Christian religion, it is worrisome that Christianity has declined drastically in North Africa. This sudden decline or disappearance of Christianity in North Africa is a fact of history as considered by most Ecclesiastical historians.

According to Adiele (1996),

The failure and the decline of the Church in Carthage was because the Church: Was neither a witnessing type nor a united community of Christians, she virtually ceased to be a force to be reckoned with. It is against this background that an opportunity to spread Christianity southwards across the Sahara to West Africa and perhaps to Nigeria in general and the eastern states in particular was shattered. (p.4).

On the other hand, Fuller (1993), regretting the same tragedy of the decline of Christianity in North Africa observes that:

What happened to North Africa was a tragedy for West Africa. The Berbers became Muslims and they were the ones who came as traders across the Sahara to West Africa and brought Islam with them. If they had been Christians, they would have brought Christianity in those early years instead. (p. 39).

In another sense, Gaiya (2002) lamenting the ordeal of the decline of Christianity in North Africa corroborates: that by the time the Muslim jihadists invaded this region around AD 700, they met a Christianity that was superficial, syncretistic, divided, and weakened.

However, from the views of the scholars above, the decline of Christianity in North Africa happened owing to several reasons which must be told and reinterpreted for lessons for future generations. It is against this backdrop that this paper is set out to investigate the decline of Christianity in North Africa.

Basic Conceptualizations

Decline: According to Merriam-Webster's English dictionary, the word decline as a noun is the period during which something is deteriorating or approaching its end.

Nigerian church:

Christianity came to Nigeria in the 15th century through Augustinian and Capuchin monks from Portugal. The first mission of the Church of England was, though, only established in 1842 in Badagry by Henry Townsend. In 1864 Samuel Ajayi Crowther, an ethnic Yoruba and former slave was elected Bishop of the Niger and the first black Bishop of the Anglican Communion. Lagos became a diocese of its own in 1919.

When it comes to Christianity in recent times, the tides seem to have changed; the country has begun to export its Christianity to other parts of the world. This has been partly due to a new type of church called the mega-church. Mega churches seem to have arrived with the advent of Pentecostalism which can be traced to the early 20th century in America. The mega-church syndrome can be traced to 1910 when a local charismatic movement led by an Anglican deacon split from the Anglican church to become the Christ Army Church.

There was a revival in this new church and as a result, the church grew in size forming independent churches. These churches were characterized by fervent prayer styles, known by the Yoruba word Aladura (praying people). Some of the early Aladura churches include the Eternal Sacred Order of the Cherubim and Seraphim Society, founded in 1925, and the Church of the Lord (Aladura), founded in 1930.

Over the next two decades, foreign Pentecostal churches began to plant branches in Nigeria. It was during this period the Welsh Apostolic Church was established in 1931 and the Assemblies of God in 1939. Also, the Foursquare Gospel Church was introduced in Nigeria at the same time. Some local Pentecostal churches also sprung up; these include the Celestial Church of Christ which arrived in western Nigeria from Benin to become one of Africa's largest Aladura churches.

North Africa: North Africa is a region encompassing the northern portion of the African continent. There is no singularly accepted scope for the region, and it is sometimes defined as stretching from the Atlantic shores of Mauritania in the west, to Egypt's Suez Canal in the east. But the most common definition of the region's boundaries includes Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, and Western Sahara, the territory disputed between Morocco and the partially recognized Sharawi Arab Democratic Republic.

According to Boer, (1978), the population of Carthage (present-day Tunisia) and its surrounding settlements of what is now known as North Africa consisted of three major groups: the Berbers who were mainly farmers and laborers, dwelling in the villages and deserts; the Phoenician or Punic element which made up the middle class; and the Romans who formed the upper class, who were the owners of estates and properties and also managed the leading business enterprises of the day. Three languages were spoken: Berber, Punic, and Latin. Though Coombs (2012) affirms that, "Before the Latin age, the educated class and church leaders spoke and wrote in Greek until the beginning of the third century" (p.10).

The Origin of the Church in North Africa

Talking about the origin of the Christian Church in North Africa, two significant facts of history should be remembered. First, it is to be noted that Christianity swept over North Africa in the early centuries of the apostolic era.

This early Christianity in North Africa lasted for about five centuries before the emergence of European Missionary Christianity. Secondly, after a millennium of difficulties and setbacks, it died but only to resurface again, flowering throughout Africa south of the Sahara in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries respectively. Missionaries from Europe and America were involved in planting this seed of Christian faith which has survived and has flourished throughout Africa to the present day. North Africa at the time of Christ was filled with many different nations which were at various levels of growth and development. These countries include Egypt, Cyreniaca, Carthage, Numidia, Mauritania, Nubia, and Abyssinia. The earliest Christianity to North Africa came from two main routes: into Egypt from Palestine; and into Carthage from Rome. It is to be noted that North Africa played a prominent role in the early civilization of the then world. Falk (1997) observes that:

The records of Narmes-menes indicate the existence of the Egyptian civilization at the time of Sumerians in Babylon and their contribution to the civilization of their day. From the second Millennium BC, Egypt had intimate ties with Palestine and Syria. Throughout the centuries, Egypt has been in constant contact with the civilizations of the Middle East and Europe (p. 25).

The Expansion of the North African Church

The progress of Christianity in North Africa seems to have been so rapid in the third century. The spread of the Christian gospel had gone to all parts of the provinces by 250 AD. There are two main opinions among historians concerning the reasons for the expansion of Christianity during the third century in North Africa. Latourette (1971) sees the 'rapid Romanisation' and the mass conversion of heretical communities as the main reason while Mbiti (1986) sees the similarity of African culture with Christianity as a main factor. As a consequence of the expansion of Christianity, the worship of Saturn, a traditional religion, almost ceased between 240 AD and 275 AD. The Church seems to have been strongest in the cities, mainly within the Latin-speaking portion of the population. Therefore, the conversion of both the Punic and Berber tribes seems to have been rare in this era. The Episcopal system had already been introduced into Africa in the first century. As early as the middle of the third century, the Christian Church and its bishop were accepted as a normal part of the community in most cities of Roman Africa. According to Neil, (1965):

Every town and almost every village had its bishop, whereas the rest of the Christian world had bishops only in cities. There seems to have been a great increase in the number of bishops through the third century: seventy-one African and Numidian bishops assembled at Carthage in 220 AD (p.37).

Reasons for the Decline of Christianity in North Africa

There is always a cause-and-effect relationship in every happening on earth. Christianity would not have declined in North Africa if not for certain reasons. The reasons for the decline of the church in North Africa among others are enumerated and explained below:

Paganised Christianity

From the beginning of the North African Church, there seems to have been elements of paganism, and this seems to have played a key role both in contributing to the people accepting Christianity and hence, through the dilution of doctrine, in leading the Church into decline. This implies that the failure of the North African people to identify and separate Christian values and practices from those of pagan worshipers played a grave negative role in the decline of Christianity in North Africa. Coombs (2012)

On the other hand, however, paganism that was absorbed without filtration into the Church brought religious syncretism to the worship and faith of the North African Church. With this point of view, the assessment of Mbiti (1986) seems correct when he said: that African Christianity was a combination of apostolic Christianity and ancient African culture. Although there was a massive conversion of pagans in the first three centuries, this did not mean a complete severance from their former paganism. It means that Christianity has to be contextualized to make it meaningful to them.

Ecclesiastical Corruption

Ecclesiastical corruption has to do with the situation whereby church leaders compromise the standards of God's word and do things mostly for personal and selfish reasons. Where Ecclesiastical corruption occurs it will invariably lead to gross misunderstanding and the loss of good reputation and integrity from leaders leading to eventual spiritual decline. Ecclesiastical corruption seems to have occurred mainly during the fourth century, but could also be found even in the times of Tertullian and Cyprian. Ecclesiastical

corruption will be analyzed briefly under two subheadings namely, The worldly nature of the Church and the worldly nature of the Church leaders as below:

The Worldly Nature of the Church

Evidences of the corruption of the Church are readily seen from the records of Church - leaders, like Tertullian, Cyprian, and Augustine, and from Eusebius' works. In the words of Schaff (1980, pp.95-146), "It is certain that the immunities to and the privileges of the Churches under Constantine were a starting point of both 'profit' and 'loss' to the Church." During the rule of Constantine, the Church received special benefits from the state and these enabled the Church to amass wealth during the fourth and fifth centuries. Against the enrichment of Churches, "Augustine warned the clergy of the spiritual distraction and criticized its materialism, saying, 'the Church is not a trading company.'" (Augustine, 226:9).

There is no doubt that the spiritual benefits of the state brought numerical growth and enrichment to the Church, but also promoted the loss of the missionary mind, and increased its moral corruption and spiritual decay.

Consequently, we can assume that the loss of the missionary mind was followed by the secularization of lay Christians. During Augustine's time, many attended Church merely to find a Christian employer, to marry a Christian wife, to gain a Christian client, or some other individual purpose.

The Worldly Nature of Church Leaders

The corruption of the clergy in the North African Church seems to have begun when the Church leaders were affected by materialism, secularization, and the loss of the pastoral mind. However, it is ironic that in the North African context, not only after 313 AD but also before 313 AD, we can find evidence of the secularization of Church leaders even in the time of Cyprian in the third century. Clarke (1984, p 229-230) observes that Cyprian tells of the worldliness of some bishops in his *De Lapsis*, written in 250 AD thus:

The bishops were wanted in religious devotedness, the ministers in entireness of faith; there was no mercy in works, no discipline in manners... Numerous bishops, who ought to be encouragement and example to others, despising their sacred ministry, engaged themselves in secular vocations, relinquished their Chair, deserted their people, strayed among foreign provinces, hunted the markets for mercantile profits; tried to amass large sums of money, while they had brethren starving within

the Church, took possession of estates by fraudulent proceedings, and multiplied their gains by accumulated usuries.

The excerpt above shows the depth of the writer's mind on the state of spiritual decline among the clergies in those days. Cyprian highlights the loss of evangelical faith and the moral corruption of the bishops. We could assume that the corruption of Church leaders, specifically after 313 AD, resulted not only from the special favor that the state gave the Church and clergy but also from the influx of unqualified clergy into the Church. Stevenson (1987) observes that under Constantine, the clergy became a privileged class exempted from the public burdens of taxation. Hence, a few un-vocational peoples, such as members of the *Decurion* (town councilors), were ordained as clergy merely to get immunities and exemptions from taxes in the Roman Empire (*A New Eusebius* 285).

Imperial Christianity

There is also the proposition that one of the main reasons for the decline of the North African Church was its failure to evangelize the native people. That is, those people who were not affected by Latin culture. The gospel was only concentrated in urban areas and only among the upper classes. Amongst these indigenous Berber and Punic inhabitants, the gospel seems to have spread very slowly which invariably resulted in the decline of Christianity in North Africa. Coombs (2012)

Failure to Indigenize Native Africans

The Romans were the main powerful ethnic group of North Africa, dwelling in the towns and the coasts, and speaking Latin. They were mainly Christians. In the mountains and deserts, however, the majority population was Berber, speaking the indigenous Berber languages. They still believed in Saturn. Although the Church in the city was full of Christians, that Church seems to have focused little attention on the native Berbers. It is one thing to evangelize a people and yet another thing to indigenize the gospel among them. To indigenize is to make the people own it themselves. It is uncertain whether or not the gospel was preached in the Punic and Berber tongues. In the view of the natives, Christianity was always regarded as a Latin religion of the Romans, and to be Christian simply meant Latinization, and nothing more.

No wonder, (Latourette, 1971, p.93), believes that the problem of the early North African Church was the absence of a Church suitable for the Berber:

The Punic and Berber populations became Christian only to the degree that they became Latinized and that the Latin language was the sole vehicle of Christian preaching. Possibly, as the great landed proprietors, Romano-Africans, became Christian, some of them furthered the conversion of the people on their estates.

Evangelization certainly seems to have taken place only in urban areas among the upper classes, that is, in those who understood Latin due to the neglect of the native Berbers. The few Berber Christians had very little depth and could be swayed easily. Groves (1948) draws the following lesson from the North African Church's lack of serious evangelism:

"If the interpretation we have set forth of the historic situation is correct, then there is no more vivid warning than to fail to share the faith with all around is to let it die". (vol.1, p.89)

Failure to Translate the Bible into Native Berber

The presence of a Latin Bible in Africa before 200 AD testifies to a very considerable dispersion of Romanized Christianity in the area. The early Church spread the message to many places. In most places, the believers translated the Gospel into the local languages: into multiple dialects of Coptic, Syriac, Aramaic, and Latin. When they encountered people speaking languages that were not written, the early Christian missionaries preached the message in the spoken languages, and in many cases, they developed alphabets and translated the Bible into them. These include Ethiopic, Nubian, and others. When Saint Jerome (c327 AD – 420 AD) translated the Bible into Latin, he did not use the Literary Latin used in all books up to that time; instead, he wrote in colloquial Latin so that the common people could understand it. (Sanneh, 2003, p. 98) describes the principle followed by the early Church:

The general rule that people had a right to understand what they were being taught was matched by the view that there was nothing God wanted to say that could not be said in simple everyday language. God would not confound people about the truth, and that made the language of religion compatible with ordinary human understanding. The gospel proclamation stripped religious discourse of the hocus-pocus and elevated the voice of the common people.

If these people groups had not been given God's Word in their spoken languages, their knowledge of the biblical faith would have been weak and unsustainable over the generations. This is evident from one of the tragedies of history, namely that the Scriptures were not translated by the early Church into Persian, Arabic, Himyaritic (ancient Yemeni), or Berber, even though there were many believers among them and many Churches and clergy. The Churchmen in these places, many of whom were foreigners, insisted on presenting God's Word in prestigious languages, namely Syriac, Greek, and Latin. The result was that everyday believers lacked a good understanding of God's Word and were vulnerable to other winds of doctrine.

The Vandal Persecution of the Church

Another contributing factor was the fall of the Roman Empire and the conquest of North Africa by the Vandals. The Vandals were a group of Barbarian Europeans who captured the city of Rome and moved through Spain as they made inroads to North Africa. In the spring of 429 AD, led by Geiseric (their ruler from 428 AD to 477 AD), they crossed the Straits of Gibraltar. By the following year, they had advanced along the coast from city to city through Mauretania and Numidia and were besieging Hippo in Augustine's last days. Within a few years, they had gained control of a large swath of imperial North Africa, and in 439 AD they seized Carthage itself.

From this base, these previously inland people became the strongest maritime power in the Western Mediterranean, able to cause major problems for shipping and control the progress of vital trade in corn, oil, and other commodities between Africa and Europe.

In North Africa, a great deal of the Vandals' fierce energies went into their attempt to impose their Arian faith. The policy was launched by Geiseric and taken still further under his successor, Huneric (477 AD - 484 AD). Catholic clergy were exiled, monasteries were dissolved, and pressure was brought to bear on Christians who resisted the demand for conformity. Some did comply; others fled; many suffered severely for their defiance. Refugees included both clergy and laity; the latter were typically members of the landowning class who had been dispossessed of their property. They found sympathy from fellow believers abroad, and everywhere they went they took the stories of the Vandals' atrocities with them.

Some of the most important Christian literature from African writers of the later fifth century was produced by victims of the Vandals' attempts at doctrinal totalitarianism. Among some of the works were the writings of Churchmen in exile, such as Victor of Vita, who wrote a valuable history of the persecution while removed from his Church in the late 480s. Vigilius, Bishop of Thapsus, was banished by Huneric in 484 AD and fled to Constantinople, where he produced several texts in defense of orthodox doctrine, though most of these do not survive. Under the Vandal rulers Gunthamund (484 AD - 496 AD) and Thrasamund (496 AD - 523 AD) there was less violence, but Arianism continued to be pushed strongly, and Catholic believers continued to experience problems on one account or another.

The Presence of Donatism

Donatism was a movement within the North African Church. It was a protest movement that was aimed at bringing about reform in the then church. This secessionist group was named after its founder, Donatus who became their Bishop between A.D 313 and A.D 335. Donatism claims to have stood out primarily for the purity and holiness of the church especially of the priests, and the discipline of godless leaders. The Donatists believed that they constituted the true church and that the Catholics were apostates. So, Donatism succeeded in dividing the church in North Africa. From this division, Donatus built a powerful schismatic church he called the church of the 'Saints and Martyrs.' The exit of Donatists from the church greatly weakened and contributed to the decline of Christianity in North Africa.

Lessons for the Nigerian church

There are so many lessons to be learned by the Nigerian church in light of the foregoing. If Christianity declined in North Africa as a result of certain factors as seen in this paper, then the Nigerian church must learn from this history to avoid the tragedy of the past. This is because Christianity would not have declined in North Africa if not for the reasons that have been enumerated and expatiated in this paper. The following are the lessons for the Nigerian church to learn:

1. The church in Nigeria must guard against syncretism (mixing her faith in Jesus Christ with other fetish practices). For example, when Christian politicians go back to their old traditional way of worship to collect fetish and cultic powers

and still come back to the church to give testimony and praise to God is syncretistic. God is a jealous God; He does not tolerate rivals. A situation where a Christian is presumably worshipping God but, still subscribes to other things to serve them is inimical to genuine Christianity. Where this becomes the practice then, one can be rest assured that Christianity is bound to decline. This is seen from the obvious fact that the failure of the North African church to identify and separate Christian values and practices from those of pagan worshippers played a grave negative role in the decline of Christianity in North Africa.

2. The church in Nigeria must shun corruption and strive to maintain moral integrity in all spheres of life. The situation where Christian leaders ignore God's way of doing things and choose to do things based on human feelings and inclinations can be detrimental to the survival of the church. For instance, in the choice of leadership personnel in the church, such deadly considerations as tribalism and other sectional sentiment must be avoided if at all the church must continue to grow. The church leaders must subject themselves to the best method of choosing leaders based on the principles of God's words.
3. The church in Nigeria must give itself to effective evangelism. This is because if the church fails to evangelize then the unconverted people around the church in Nigeria will hunt the church. This is seen manifestly clear from the activities of Boko Haram insurgencies, kidnappers, and so many other vices that have become a threat to the survival of the church in Nigeria. This is in tandem with the analysis in this paper where it was noted that the failure of the North African Christians to reach the Berber tribes with the Gospel played a major role in the disappearance or decline of the Church in North Africa.
4. The church in Nigeria must recognize and accept the identity of the indigenous people where it is not in conflict with the word of God as this is part of the indigenization process. This is because failure to accord respect to the identity of the indigenous people may make them reject Christianity. The evidence of this can be seen from the analysis of this work where the church in North Africa seems to have focused little attention on the native Berbers, hence its decline. Tribalism, nepotism, sectionalism, etc. must be frowned upon by the Nigerian Church as we are all one in the body of Christ.
5. Nigeria is a multi-ethnic country with diverse languages. In this regard, immense efforts must be made by the Nigerian Church and all translating agencies to translate the Bible into as many local languages as possible to get

the local people to hear the word of God being read to them in their local dialects. For example, the only Bible in the Jukun language is the New Testament known as “Aji Bu Chidon, NugewaRipye”. Plans are on the way for a complete Bible in the Jukun language. There is also a New Testament Bible in the Kuteb language; this is also awaiting full translation status. The Bible in the local dialect of the people will open them up to the gospel. This is because, from the facts of history as we have seen in this paper the presence of a Latin Bible in Africa before 200 AD testifies to a very considerable dispersion of Romanized Christians in the area. The early Church spread the message to many places. In most places, the believers translated the Gospel into the local languages: into multiple dialects of Coptic, Syriac, Aramaic, and Latin. When they encountered people speaking languages that were not written, the early Christian missionaries preached the message in the spoken languages, and in many cases, they developed alphabets and translated the Bible into them.

6. Given Nigeria as a heterogeneous nation divided along so many lines, the Nigerian church must imbibe the virtue of unity, love, and peaceful coexistence in its preachment. As it has been rightly observed in this paper, Donatism as a protest movement divided the church in North Africa which eventually caused its decline. The church in Nigeria must avoid all divisive tendencies within its fold and intentionally preach love, unity, and peaceful coexistence in the country as salt and light of the world.

Recommendations

In light of the foregoing, the following recommendations are advanced for the Nigerian church to adopt for greater efficiency of the church:

1. Linguistic and sociological disparity plays a vital role in propagating and sustaining the gospel. Efforts should be made by the Nigerian church towards translating the Bible into local languages. Christians who have a genuine passion to evangelize and disciple souls for God should endeavor to learn the dialect of the people to whom they intend to reach out. This will enable them to communicate effectively with the local people thereby getting the message across to them as expected.
2. The church in Nigeria must maintain its distinct identity and not compromise or join issues of the sanctity of the Christian faith with political leaders.

Politics is not bad in itself, but where the church allows itself to be manipulated by the whims and caprices of political leaders it can be detrimental to the spiritual survival of the church and the sacredness of its doctrines. Instead of allowing the unwholesome influence of politicians on the church, the church should seek to influence political leaders to run politics according to the dictates of God's word.

3. The church in Nigeria should be organized effectively and see itself as one body striving to achieve a common goal. Denominational biases should be avoided and the Christian community should see one another as members of one body in Christ Jesus rather than stirring up unnecessary conflict and divisive sentiment.
4. The factors given above are certainly useful as we work for and pray for the revival of Christianity in Nigeria. The indigenization of the Church in its leadership and language must be key to survival and thriving. The organization of Churches is essential to health. The pursuit of doctrinal purity is an outworking of love for the God of truth. Training in responding to the kinds of relentless pressure exerted by Islam might play an important role in helping new Churches to survive and thrive. However, there is little hope in mere human methods and strategies. A stray war or an outbreak of civil unrest and violence during economic or political crises cannot be anticipated or prevented.

Conclusion

Christianity is not foreign to Northern Africa. Northern Africa has been part of the fundamental history of Jesus' childhood. Evidence abounds in the gospel according to Saint Luke where Jesus' parents were asked to flee to Egypt to stay there for a while as a result of King Herod's deadly policy of killing innocent male children. The presence of Christian faith in North Africa would have still been very effective if not for certain factors such as a lack of evangelizing the local people and paganized Christianity, corruption of the church and its leaders; the Vandal persecution, and the presence of Donatism, among others. Following the numerous reasons that account for the decline of Christianity in Northern Africa, there are a lot of lessons the Nigerian church can learn from to avoid the eventual decline of the church as has been the case in Northern Africa. Some of these lessons are: the church in Nigeria must guard against syncretism; it should maintain its sanctity and purity, the church in Nigeria must shun corruption and

maintain its integrity as salt and light in a dark world, the church in Nigeria must intentionally engage in effective evangelism and discipleship, the church in Nigeria must recognize the identity of indigenous people and seek to indigenize the gospel among them, the Church in Nigeria must seek to translate the Bible into as many Nigerian languages as possible as this will enhance the spread of the gospel, and finally, the Church in Nigeria should avoid all tendencies of division and preach love and unity within its fold.

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