

SOCIAL CHAOS AS A CATALYST FOR THE SPREAD OF THE GOSPEL

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Abstract

The greatest mandatory assignment everyone has in his hand as a Christian is the preaching of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ to everything that has life here on earth, and throughout all nooks and crannies of the world. It is an assignment that must be done no matter what the circumstances, situations, seasons, and conditions may be. This piece argues that even in chaotic social conditions that may appear to be frustrating and inhibiting, there are elements that may be drawn upon to facilitate the spreading of the gospel. Such favourable conditions should not be missed, but should be identified and effectively utilized for the unceasing propagation of the word of God, towards the accomplishment of the Great Commission.

Keywords: Social Chaos, Catalyst, Spread, Gospel, & Great Commission

Introduction

Social chaos is a doomsday, an apocalyptic phenomenon. Considered in its face-value, social chaos is a situation that evokes fears of uncertainties, upheavals, hopelessness, desperation, and destruction. It often appears to be more of a bane than a boon, especially when the spread of the gospel of salvation is at stake. For an average Christian evangelist, pastor, teacher, or preacher, social chaos is a bad omen. However, somehow paradoxically, amidst the cloudy sky, some silver linings can be found. This piece is interested in those tiny, little slivers of silver linings within every murky cloud of social chaos, violent upheavals, and confusing atmospheres, in which God's soldiers

of faith cannot only seize some golden opportunities to escape for their dear lives, or help other people in crisis situations meet their immediate needs first, but can also harvest for Christ, perishing souls. In Nigeria, religious violence has wreaked havoc in a rather surreal manner. According to Jegede, “The colossal loss to violent religious conflicts in Nigeria did not only end with loss of lives and properties. In fact, its attendant effects on peaceful co-existence, political stability, and socio-economic development are beyond comprehension.”¹ But they cannot and should not stop the spread of the gospel. The main purpose of this paper therefore, is to enjoin Christians in general to always look out beyond the panic, discomfort, and confusion that usually attend social conflicts, wherever and whenever they may be accosted by the stern realities; to hunt and gun instead, under God’s invincible power and direction, for souls physically and spiritually trapped in such unfortunate, and dire social circumstances as social chaos. Jesus said: “And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell, (Matthew 10:28). When others are facing a crisis, we do not push the crisis aside in order to get the message out; we love the persons and help them in the middle of the crisis; then share Christ by applying the gospel to their situation.

2. Conceptual Clarification

For conceptual clarity and alignment, the concepts used in the title of this work will be defined and analyzed in the light of the meanings they are intended to assume and convey. The concepts are: social chaos, catalyst, spread and gospel; and are presented as follow:

Social Chaos: The term “social” is defined by the *Merriam Webster Dictionary* as, among other things, “(adjective) of or relating to human society, the interaction of the individual and the group, or the welfare of human beings as members of the society.”² On the other hand, “chaos” is also defined as, “a state of utter confusion, a confused mass or mixture.”³ From here, can social chaos be derived, and defined, for the purpose of this work as: “a situation in human society that is in utter confusion, or a confused mass or mixture.” It is clearly a situation of uncertainties that spells disorderliness, havoc, disarray, stampede, free-for-all, and even violence and conflict, wherein there is no safety, and everybody is on his or her own. In such a circumstance, almost everyone is in need of one type of help or another.

Catalyst: A catalyst is: “a substance that enables a chemical reaction to proceed at a usually faster rate or under different conditions (as a lower temperature) than otherwise possible. An agent that provokes or speeds significant change or action.”⁴ In a human society, a catalyst may come in the form of an emergency situation such as a war, communal clash, communal conflict, attack by bandits or marauders, unexpected violent incident of disastrous consequences; natural disasters such as flooding, raging fire, famine, storm, volcanic eruption, blizzard, hurricane, political conflict and what have you.

Spread: “To open and expand over a larger area, to stretch out, to distribute over an area, or to distribute over a period or among a group.”⁵ The saving gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ was established to spread and not stagnate, and whatever condition or

circumstance that brings its spread is embraceable. God's intention is to make the living gospel available to every living thing that has breath.

Gospel: "The message concerning Christ, the kingdom of God, and salvation. One of the first four New Testament books telling of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ."⁶ This is life-giving gospel that must be disseminated without fail, let, or hindrance.

From the conceptual explication, and clarification, comes the unclouded, unobscured meaning of the message conveyed by the subject-matter of this communication; namely, that there are, even in situations of turbulence, war, social conflict, natural disasters of whatever nature, famine, or whatever; opportunities for winning souls for Christ; and should not be missed.

3. Social Change and the Spread of the Gospel

Generally, opportunities for the dispersal of the Lord's gospel hangs precariously on the exigencies of the changing conditions in society. Some conditions in society may facilitate soul-saving evangelization, while other conditions may impede it. And, the spread of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ does not really depend on whether the situation in society is peaceful or chaotic; although, commonsensical reasoning tends to suggest that conditions of peace may be more favorable for gospel spread than crisis situations. But, that is not always the case. Changes in society occur constantly through either peaceful or chaotic causes, but God being the maker and controller of all conditions in heaven and on earth, works through them all.

A society is defined as a “companionship or association with one’s fellows: friendly, or intimate intercourse: company. A voluntary association of individuals for common ends, especially: an organized group working together or periodically meeting because of common interests, beliefs, or profession”⁷ According to Form and Wilterdink, *The editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica*, “Social change, in sociology, is the alteration of mechanisms within the social structure, characterized by changes in cultural symbols, rules of behaviour, social organisations, or value systems.”⁸ No society is ever stagnant for long. Societies are constantly in a state of flux: sometimes they change for the better, and at other times for the worse. And such changes could either enhance or impede the spread of the word of God. Social change is multi-causal, and some of the causes are discussed as follow:⁹

3 (a). Causes of Social Change

i. Biological factors of social change

Social change is sometimes brought about by biological factors including the hereditary characters of the population. The powerful and great men and their birth are dependent upon heredity to a large extent. In a society that is ruled as a kingdom, every successive king or queen brings about a social setting that is different from the one under a previous king or queen. In addition, the biological process of natural selection and struggle for survival, is constantly producing alterations or change in society. The demographic factors such as population size, composition, and density are determined by reproduction, migration, and social mobility, that play a crucial role in social change. Sometimes these occurrences bring about advantages for evangelizing.

Population fluctuation has both positive and negative changes in society. However, population growth also brings about negative social change, and hostile climates that may not easily favour peace-time gospel fervour. What does a Christian do to unbelievers who live in a turbulent kingdom, for example, that has just blocked Christian forms of worship, or banned establishment of Churches? Pray for God's intervention, offer help, counsel or encourage the people to look unto God for help, deliverance and salvation. Israelites were freed in chaotic social circumstances from 430-year slavery, when a Pharaoh, that knew not Joseph (Exodus 1:8), came up to impose hardships on the Israelites, and they began to groan painfully to God. God moves in scary, painful social situations when his people are oppressed.

ii. **Physical or environmental factors of social change**

Changes in the physical environment do bring about crucial changes in society. They are usually not rapid, but occasional changes in the environment bring total changes in human social life. For example, geographical hazards such as storm, drought, flood, earthquake, heavy rainfall, change of seasons, tsunami, and so on, force people to migrate to new areas hence people have to change themselves according to social and environmental changes such as in culture, clothing, and social relationships. Such social conditions create emergency situations, and constitute ripe fields for proselytization. The number of souls Paul the Apostle of Christ won during and after his chaotic experience in the high sea-storm and in Malta, during his journey from Jerusalem to Rome likely exceeded what peacetime preaching could achieve. The wonders God also used him to work in chaotic situations could hardly have been

achieved in peacetime evangelizing (Acts 27:1-28 :10). On October 2, 2018 a church building miraculously survived a raging tsunami to the glory of God, in spite of the massive devastation the angry oceanic waters caused in Indonesia.¹⁰ Another miracle happened in India.¹¹ According to Anderson (2005): “In times of great stress, we need to hear about miracles. The Santhome Cathedral Basilica in Channai, India, was right in the path of the storm. Although waves devastated the coast, the Rev. Lawrence Raj says the sea did not touch the Basilica. The building sits at the site where St. Thomas, one of Christ’s apostles, was buried in 72 AD. Although all the buildings on either side and in front of it were damaged or washed away, no water touched the recently renovated Basilica.”¹² God is always present during emergency situations of whatever kind, and he awaits his people to show initiatives. In or out of God’s miracles, our voices can persuade people in stress to look unto God for assuagement.

iii. Technological factors of social change

Technological factors also play important role in ushering in social change. Technology means the systematic application of scientific knowledge to solve specific problems of life. Technology changes society by changing our environments to which we in turn adapt. When we make adjustments to adapt to the changing environment caused by technology, then we often modify our customs, norms, and social institutions. Sometimes even technological effects on social changes do bring about social dislocation to people. The indigenous people in Abuja, the Gwari, are said to be the original occupants of Abuja, the new Federal Capital Territory (FCT) of Nigeria.¹³ When, in 1976, the Federal Military Government of Nigeria decided to move Nigeria’s

capital city from Lagos, in the Southwest of Nigeria to a more centralized location, Abuja was chosen for the new capital territory. The people who occupied the land were moved to a new location, and promised compensation. In the process of movement their lifestyles and culture were completely altered, while the promised compensation is said to have not been implemented in the way they were promised.¹⁴ The people seem to be lamenting fitfully about the chaos they have been experiencing since the dislocation. Would some god-fearing people ever come to rescue?

iv. The economic factors of social change

Economic cause as a factor of social change may be one of the most notable. It has received considerable attention from scholars, thinkers and philosophers, among whom has been Karl Marx. In his postulation in his books, *Das Kapital* and *Communist Manifesto*¹⁵ he argues that the society is made up of two antagonistic economic classes namely, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat – the one consists of very rich and oppressive capitalists, and the other very poor workers. The oppressive capitalist will keep on oppressing the workers, until they reach a tipping point where the workers can take it no more, and like the proverbial goat pushed to the wall, will spontaneously turn against the bourgeoisie class in violent and uncontrollable eruption and war that will oust the capitalists from the control of the production resources in society, and take over the world. But Marx's theory failed to materialize when communism, his preferred social engineering method failed in early 1990s. But, that has not precluded economic-driven social changes. In recent times, banking failures, economic recessions, and rapid oil price changes have generated ripples of social changes that

reached catastrophic proportions. In famine and starvation, many people do need help. Churches and Christian institutions and individuals should show their helping hands through economic-humanitarian programmes, rather than only words of blessings.

v. The cultural factors of social change

Cultural change and social change are one and interwoven. The belief systems, social institutions, value systems, social relationships, and modes of dressing in a society are elements of a larger society. Changes in one will affect changes in others. Sometimes the changes may be so forceful and sudden that people are left in panic and desperation, because of scarcity and demands for necessities of life. During the recent chaotic covid-19 lockdown, and social distancing, many people had no access to their worship centers, food, medication, companionship, and so on. There were lonely souls locked up in their homes, but they needed life-sustaining prayers and Christian counseling, and personal contacts. It would have been ground-breaking happening in the life of an abandoned unbeliever to get reached and prayed for by a Christian neighbor, acquaintance or even stranger.

vi. Political factor of social change

The state is the most powerful organization that can enact new laws, and change old ones to bring about social change within the society. Such laws as the ones on child marriage, inheritance and succession, child education, human rights and women's rights, and the like, can bring about tremendous social changes in society. When a new Pharaoh made a law to kill all Hebrew male babies in Egypt (Exodus 1:15-22), baby

Moses still survived the social chaos by the intervention of God, and grew up to lead the Hebrew people out of 430-year slavery in Egypt, into freedom. So, social chaos may not always be a dead-end, or hopeless situation.

vii. **Legal factor of social change**

Laws are made by constituted authorities and powers for the purposes of creating new norms and values within the society. Originally, the laws that began in the Garden of Eden when God instructed Adam and Eve to enjoy the fruit of all the trees, except the fruit of the tree in the middle of the Garden, were meant for peace and order within the society. However, some governments do make some bad laws, and create chaos and upheavals; like Pharaoh's law that sought to kill Hebrew little boys in Egypt. Or, Nebuchadnezzar's law that aimed at trapping Daniel, and sending him to untimely death (Daniel 2:13). Response by Christians to such bad laws should be to take matters to God in prayers, not rebellion, on behalf of people languishing under such bad laws. Such prayers do touch souls, and may convert those found in trouble.

viii. **Psychological factor of social change**

Most sociologists regard psychological factors as important elements in social change. The cause of social change is the psychology of man himself. Man by nature is a lover of change, and so he is always anxious to experience new things in life. Consequently, the more traditions, customs, social relationships, and so on, of every human society are continuously undergoing change, the more, newer customs, and methods replace the old ones, while some modifications and adaptations are made. When the Israelites arrived at Canaan, the promise land, God warned them to abandon, and replace the old

Philistine customs, traditions, systems of worship, they met there, with the Abrahamic system of customs, traditions, and systems of worship which placed the Almighty God amidst the center of the universe and spiritual realm. Their arrival in Canaan was marked by extreme measures of social chaos, and wars that they fought and took over the land as permanent inheritance. With God, there is always something cathartic in social chaos.

ix. **Ideological factor of social change**

Ideology consists of new opinions, ideas, and thoughts. The resurgence of science and technology through different eras, has brought with it different ideas and logic about different choices in social engineering, easily known as ideology. Ideational developments are very powerful factors that give rise to social changes that occur constantly. Change in customs and traditions about dowry and bride price, female education, child labor, human rights, have resulted in widespread social variations, and modifications in many societies. Most social revolutions take place as a result of evolution of new ways of thinking. The thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi, Karl Marx, Mao Zedong, have influenced the populations, and have had socio-economic impact on social change. However, Marx's theory of dialectical materialism, and social contradiction,¹⁶ failed to materialize, possibly because among other things, he precluded God from his interpretation of society. He held it that religion was an opiate of the masses, and removed godliness from his body of knowledge. In 1989, in chaotic circumstances, communism collapsed worldwide when the Germans tore down the Berlin wall that separated East and West Germany.¹⁷

x. Planning

Social change may result from goal-directed large-scale social planning. The possibility for planning by government bureaucracies and other large organizations have increased in modern societies. Government carry out planning through the formulation of laws and their implementation such as for old age pension, guaranteed medical care, unemployment allowance, and the like, that have produced significant changes in modern society. However, there are so many large-scale changes in societies that are unplanned. For example, when the Federal government of Nigeria decided to move its capital city from Lagos to Abuja,¹⁸ it did not plan for the explosion of the number of church buildings in the virtual bare land that existed in Abuja on the date of the official movement, when only a couple of government ministries were on ground. The movement completely changed the social structure of Abuja that had been like a farmland, into a fledgling new city. But it also became a city with so many churches that have eased up the challenges of Christians in different denominations, who can hardly travel a distance of five kilometers before finding a worship center. This was a type of social change that helped to build evangelizing vigor, and the strength among Christians to raise funds for building churches for the surging Christian populations coming into the new city.

xi. Social movement and social revolution

A social movement refers to collective efforts to establish a new order of life that ultimately brings changes in the existing social system of the society, state, or country. A social movement originates when either people are discontent and unhappy with the

existing social system, or social order when people try to establish a new order of life or a new style of living. Sometimes, in the process of wading through the ripples of life in such situations, some people may fail to grasp the tempo of life and get stranded. For such people nothing can be more chaotic for their lives. Delving back a little into the world history, one can recall the French Revolution, the Chinese Revolution, the Russian, and the like. Revolutions can be compared with the tempo of the ease with which the chameleon changes its colors. When Israelites were herded into slavery in Babylon, they were like fish out of the sea, when they arrived in the strange land, and needed helping hands and adaptation.

3(b) Positive Social Change and the Spread of the Gospel

Positive social change mostly goes with relative peace, ease, and development in the lives of the people affected by it. But change is change. Many people will still need more time and efforts, and resources before they can adapt to positive, new situations, especially spiritual resettlement, no matter how beneficial a change in social conditions may be. Israelites' journey in the wilderness was a positive change, as God's word became stronger amidst them, but forty years in the wilderness was not a dance shuttle to waltz through, as many of them missed their meat, fish, cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic, in Egypt; even though God was closer to them than when they had been in Egypt buried in sin and sufferings (Numbers 11:4-6). Peter's Pentecostal Day sermon that converted three thousand souls in one fell swoop, marked an unprecedented relief to souls saved in sweeping positive change in society (Acts 2:14-36). Paul's conversion on his evil mission on the way to Damascus was a positive

social change, yet it was not a frolic to him and his evil co-travelers, and out of it came salvation for Gentiles (Acts (:1-19). Azusa street Pentecostal revival,¹⁹ spearheaded by a Black American man, Pastor William J. Seymour, was a positive social development. It came out of difficult personal experiences he had suffered from his fellow pastors, out of racism and discrimination. And, out of it, and his sweat, in organizing three worship services each day, and seven days a week from April 9, 1906 to roughly 1915, the world was taken by storms, and Pentecostalism as it is known today, was launched worldwide.

3(c) Negative Social Change and the Spread of the Gospel

Negative social change often goes with chaos and crises, yet many outstanding developments do occur in chaotic social conditions in favour of the growth of the gospel. The chaotic fall of Adam and Eve, disappointing to God as it was, led to God sending Jesus to the earth on a messianic missions of salvation of mankind and reconciliation with God through grace in Jesus Christ. The chaotic destruction of the earth and the rise of the grace in Noah's ark, was God's way of cleansing the earth, thereby beginning a process of recovering his creation. The destruction of the Tower of Babel, was chaotic, yet it was God's way of putting an end to the ascendancy of evil, and enthronement of the prosperity of righteousness (Genesis 11:1-9).

4. The Spread of the Gospel in Chaos

The gospel of Jesus Christ is itself a potential spinner of social chaos and conflict, and this does not matter whether it is positive or negative change in society. No wonder the gospel tends to expand even faster in chaotic, than in peaceful and stable

circumstances. This is because Christ is the master of the universe. Jesus said of himself and his teaching: “Think not that I am come to send peace on the earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man’s foe shall be they of his own household.” (Matthew 10:34-36). And again he said, “Suppose ye that I am come to give peace on earth? I tell you, Nay; but rather division: For from hence there shall be five in one house divided, three against two, and two against three. The father shall be divided against the son, and the son against the father; the mother against the daughter; and the daughter against the mother; the mother in law against the daughter in law; and the daughter in law against the mother in law. (Luke 12:51-53). Even in the Old Testament days, God most times used social chaos to achieve his goals. Israelites’ freedom from 430-year slavery in Egypt was more chaotic than peaceful; so chaotic that Pharaoh and his national army as a whole, perished in the Red Sea for Israel to gain freedom (Exodus 15:4). The Pentecost Day outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and the chaotic speaking in many different tongues by the Apostles, led to the conversion of a whooping number of three thousand souls (Acts 2:41). The battle on Mount Camel was between only Prophet Elijah on God’s side, and eight hundred and fifty false prophets, but Elijah slaughtered all the false prophets and gave glory and honor to God (1Kings 18:16-45). The Tower of Babel saw God creating chaotic language confusion amongst evil people who ambitiously wanted to build a tower to go see God’s face in heaven (Genesis 11:1-9).

What could have been more chaotic than the groundbreaking crucifixion, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, in fulfilment of his messianic mission on earth?

5. Conclusion

The propagation of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ respects neither the times of calm nor of crises, neither of security nor of peril, neither seasons of doldrums nor of euphoria; since the Lord himself was no respecter of times, seasons or social conditions. Christians are commanded to preach the gospel in season and out of season (2Timothy 4:2). Christ himself set an example for all about this. Whilst on a journey in a boat across the sea on one of his teaching missions, there arose great storm. As the boat was rocking to and fro, and up and down on the dangerous stormy waves, the Lord took it easy and was fast asleep, until his co-travelers called on him to report of the peril everyone in the boat was facing. Confidently, the Lord awoke and only rebuked the storm: “Peace be the still,” he commanded. And the storm obeyed, (Mark 4:39). So, let every Christian exercise due diligence when stepping into the world for soul winning, whether there is peace or chaos in society. He who commissioned you on the Great Commission, will surely lead you through it (Palm 32:8, 37:23-24; Isaiah 43:2).

ENDNOTES

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