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## **Stand firm: A message from a historical perspective to Christians living in hostile contexts.**

Mipo E. Dadang

Jos ECWA Theological Seminary, Nigeria

mipo.dadang@jets.edu.ng

### **Abstract**

Humans live in a world overwhelmed by an increasing sense of fear and tension. If they want to understand themselves, they have to understand previous generations before them. Robert Schuller (1986:13) noted that "tough times never last, but tough people do". Many times, shocking waves strike to teach people history. Penalties, hardships and casualties increase when people refuse to be accountable or rarely admit that prevailing hard times exceed the parameters of divine faith. For example, in Nigeria, defenders and critics during times of crisis seem to lock horns for decades of struggles. Denominations across Nigeria for example wondered whether they can survive these tough times, having lost more than two-thirds of their membership in the core north, central and north-eastern regions. This study is a historical-critical analysis of the Christian message to people living in hostile contexts as a way to inspire hope in communities ravaged by violence. The study concludes that terror-weary people can draw lessons from church history to overcome their struggles and hold on to their faith in the context of their violent locations.

### **Introduction**

The research question for this contribution is why should we study the history of the Church? Everything that humans are today is a result of what others have done, said and thought in the past. If we are to understand ourselves as humans, we have to understand our past. This is as true for the distant past as

it is for the most recent past. It is as true of nations and cultures as it is of individuals. This is as true of Church history as it is of secular history. Theology did not originate in a temporal vacuum. Theologians like Tertullian, Augustine, Athanasius and Luther did not just sit down and concoct theology. But they theologized from Scripture as an authentic source of Christian faith because theology is the science of God. Millard J. Erickson explained the word theology well in both a broader and narrower use. Erickson (2013:9-10) noted that “theology in the broadest usage, encompasses all subjects treated in a theological or divinity school. In this sense, it includes such diverse subjects as Old Testament, New Testament, Church history, evangelism, missions, systematic theology, philosophy of religion, Christian ethics, preaching, Christian education, pastoral ministry and leadership and counselling.”

In a narrower sense, he explained that “the word theology refers to those endeavours that treat the doctrinal character of Christian faith such as biblical theology, systematic theology, historical theology and philosophical theology.” He further opined that “within systematic theology, there are various doctrines such as bibliology, anthropology, Christology, and theology proper.” However, with regards to matters affecting the Christian faith, there were issues that had been simmering for centuries that finally came to a boil in their lifetimes and they needed to be addressed. This is one of such reasons for Timothy Palmer (2015:161) to argue that “theology is done in context.” The fact that these issues were simmering for centuries means that they were deeply rooted in the past. This is in line with what Solomon said, “there is nothing new under the sun,” (Ecclesiastes 1:9). That is why when a person reads a systematic theology by Louis Berkhof (2012:19), “A person is getting the distillation of centuries of reflection on the Scriptures.” They are building on the work of those who have gone before. The study of history is nothing less than a conversation with the past. It is a conversation with real people whose main difference from you and me is that they happened to live hundreds and even thousands of years ago. Why spend time studying history or Church history? Two prominent scholars in the field of church history answered this question. Reading the book by David Hackett Fischer (1972:xx, 86, 87, 88, 89, 338), argued in favour of studying the history of the church:

There are four reasons why church history is an important subject to study. (i). Studying church history serve to clarify contexts in

which contemporary problems exist. (ii). It is useful not merely for what it contributes to the present understanding, but also for what it suggests about the future. (iii). Studying church history can be useful in the refinement of theoretical knowledge, of an “if, then” sort. (vi). Historical scholarship can usefully serve to help us find out who we are. (v). Historians have a heavy responsibility not merely to teach people substantive historical truths but also to teach them how to think historically.

Mark Noll (2000:15, 16, 17, 18, 19) wrote that,

Studying the history of Christianity provides repeated, concrete demonstration concerning the irreducible historical character of the Christian faith. It provides perspective on the interpretation of Scripture. Church history is as useful as a laboratory for examining Christian interactions with the surrounding culture. It shows how God sustains the church despite the church’s own frequent efforts to betray its Savior and its own calling.

While humans are conversing with the past, they have to realize that they too, are part of the church today, even in contemporary Africa and this piece is written. Mipo Dadang (2018:xii) argued that “history is an inquiry focusing on past human experience in a society with a view towards significant and comprehensive narratives embracing human actions and reactions in respect to the whole range of natural, rational and spiritual forces.” Dadang (2015:xi) enlightened that “rendering a narrative of human affairs is true of ecclesiology history as it is in of secular history. To bring Christian history in the present context why Christians suffer particularly in Nigeria today, there is usually the need to probe about the past to know why heroes of faith stood firm and defended their faith.” Dadang (xii) further opined that “good understanding of church history requires the ability to get inside the minds of those of other times and other places so that lessons are learned that might be applied during current hard situations that bedevilled Christians.” This is profound because while the conversation is held with the past, there is the need to realise that living human beings are part of church history in every age.

So, now the question is, why write on church history? Why should one write on the historical perspective of the church by investigating theological controversies from its early stage to the present day? From a historical account, as would be documented in this work, these early Christians faced problems similar to what the Christian church faces today. This often manifests in a context of tremendous danger as regards what parts of the culture in which humans find themselves do, they reject as being inconsistent with the gospel? What parts do a Christian generation keep as being useful and non-threatening to their spiritual health and their witness to the world? These are questions Christians face in every age and every cultural context, particularly in a pluralistic religious context. Thus Steed and Sundkler (2004:2) argue that “Christian history needs to be written in the context of Africa.”

Reflecting on what these scholars wrote helped me to remember what a dear colleague and friend told me in recent times. A colleague and friend of mine told me recently of a Christian woman she knows who as a Christian spent 18 years under communism in what was then Czechoslovakia. She was separated all that time from her husband and children. This friend of mine made an interesting remark based on this woman’s experience. She said, “when God wants to get your attention, he touches your pocketbook or your health or your family. When he wants to make you a saint, he makes you thankful for a cup of soup, a cup of water, and a place to sleep at night.” So, the early Christian church’s opposition to pagan customs is something many Christians even today can identify with and all of us can learn from. Throughout the history the different stances of the church and state toward each other, ranged from outright hostility to the church by the state leading to various degrees of tension, especially in most of these cases were a result of theological controversies, once the church or individual theologians wanted to stand firm by the truth, they faced brutal treatment.

This work begins with a statement of the problem. It defines the early Christian church. It discusses Christianity in the Roman world and describes threats against Christians and their firmness in faith and theological standpoint through the fourth century in church history. Recommendations for contemporary Christians are offered to help them apply lessons of the past to the present and lay a foundation for future generation Christians to stand firm in the faith.

## Statement of the problem

While Christians around the world are experiencing brutal treatment, the same is true in the context of Nigeria where all Christian communities in the middle belt states have come under the wrath of Boko Haram and other terrorists who persecute by killing harmless people in the region for many decades now. Loves (2010:196) lamented that “Jihad has killed over one hundred and twenty million Africans. It has killed sixty million Christians. It has killed eighty million Hindus and ten million Buddhists besides unaccounted hundreds of millions wasted souls since the inception of Islam.” The situation is not different in Nigeria, particularly, in Northern Nigeria and the central states of the country. The nature of persecuted violence against Christians in Nigeria continues to deteriorate. Dadang (2022:5) provides a historical setting in the context of Christian suffering in Nigeria:

Nigeria, like most societies in the world, is a multi-religious society. Before the coming of Christianity and Islam, the indigenous peoples practiced traditional religion. But, between the 11<sup>th</sup> and the 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, Christianity and Islam were introduced. Since then, various ethnic groups have tended to adopt either Christianity or Islam.

He reiterates that “the existence of the two religions in Nigeria has brought enormous religious rivalry and crisis. For example, competition for converts and /or for religious, political, and economic dominance has characterized the relationship of religious communities. Each sees the other as a threat.” *Today’s Challenge*, Nigeria’s foremost Christian magazine reports that “3,462 Christians hacked to death by Nigerian jihadists in 200 days, 3000 abducted” (Abu 2021:42) Hundreds of thousands of Christians and even pagans carry emotional scars that hardly heal because almost annually, another round of bloodshed results in fresh losses. This is strong evidence that religious persecutions persist across Nigeria. Examples of bloodshed can be recalled in the context of Nigeria easily. On Thursday 25 September 2020, armed Fulani herds people attacked a Christian community village in Kaduna Vom in Jos South Local Government Area of Plateau State and killed several Christians numbering 25 Christians. Religious persecution from Islam against Christians has characterised Nigeria without an end. Speaking of how violent attacks have

come upon Christians has truncated the Nigerian society. Jan Boer (2003:14) describes the 1980s to 2000s as “Nigeria’s decades of blood.” This situation is still worrisome and needs a solution to help Christians stand firm despite their hurts. It is therefore imperative and timely to write and remind Christians generally who fall in this category on how they may respond to violent attacks against them and to learn from their predecessors how they endured. This can help strengthen not only those who suffer persecution currently in Nigeria. This will increase more Christian persecution in Nigeria and the global church as well. Writing the stories of Christians who stood firm in their faith by defending their theological standpoint from history stand as part of encouragement to help the present generation of believers to remain firm in their faith in Christ wherever they find themselves.

## **Early Christian church**

The Christian church in every age, past, present, and the eschaton, consists of all who believe in Jesus of Nazareth as Son of God. These are those who accept him as their personal Lord and Saviour from sin and obey him as Christ, the Prince of Peace of the kingdom of God of the universe (John 1:12-13; I John 5:10-13). Jesse Lyman Hurlbut (2008:13) notes that “The height which marks the starting-point of the Church of Christ, is the Mount of Olives, just outside the eastern wall of Jerusalem.” He affirms the first period of church history to be “the Apostolic Church from the ascension of Christ, 30A.D.” According to Hurlbut, “Jesus newly risen from his tomb in the garden, gave his last command and then ascended to his heavenly throne” (13). He further explains that “the Church of Christ began its history as a world movement on the Day of Pentecost, in the late spring of the year 30 A.D.; fifty days after the resurrection of our Lord, and ten days after his Ascension” (16). Palmer (2015:161) on the one hand asserts that “the Christian church was born at Pentecost. The first Christian theologians after Jesus were the apostles and the other writers of the New Testament.” However, Boer (2003:15) narrated that “it was in, the historic land of Israel, that the church of the New Testament first appeared in history.” He reiterates that “it is difficult to set a date for its beginning. If we say that the church began at Pentecost, we leave out of consideration the life and ministry of Jesus.” He opined that “if we say that the church began with him, we must remember the fact that the ministry of Jesus grew out of the life of Judaism.” Thus, Boer opined that “it is therefore, best

to say that the church arose out of the life and work of its Lord and became a universal witness to him at Pentecost. Their theological standpoint tended to be simple, but having a profound love for Jesus.” Adrian Hastings (2000:16) wrote that “it is with the crucifixion of Jesus around 30 CE that Christianity...begun.” He further explains that “there were many other charismatic teachers and healers in first century Judea. But for no similar individual did a movement in his name spring up after his death. In the explanation of this fact, lies the clue to the emergence of the church.” From a biblical perspective, their theological basis was centred on Jesus, the Messiah, the resurrection of Jesus and the return of Jesus (Matthew 24:36). It was strong in faith and testimony, pure in character and abundant in love. But one defect was its lack of missionary zeal. It stayed at home when it should have gone abroad with the gospel to other lands and other peoples (Acts 1:8, Matthew 28:18-20). However, the Roman world through which Christianity emerged is of significant importance about how the Christian faith suffered violent treatment.

### ***Christianity in the Roman world***

Dadang (2015:14) writes that “the world through which Christianity appeared and grew was the world of early Roman Empire. It began from 63 B.C., when Augustus Caesar became the first emperor of Rome until 180 A.D.” Dadang (2015:15) opines that “before Rome became a Roman empire, it was a republic. It had taken its cue from Greek city states such as Athens, which was the best expression of human government. It was the city in which republican virtue could flourish.” He further reiterates (2015:14) that:

During its first two centuries, Rome was master of the west. It was a period amply suited to the growth and spread of the gospel because from Asia Minor in the east to Egypt, in the south and Spain and Britain in the west, Rome held undisputed control, which meant there was peace and stability throughout the Mediterranean region. The goal of Rome was to extend civilization. At the death of emperor Marcus Aurelius, Rome was at the Zenith of its power.

He then concludes that “from that time, Rome began a slow decline. This led to a sense of dissatisfaction, both politically and spiritually which Christianity

sought to answer. But Christians were not liked. They were regarded with suspicion, at first by the general population increasingly by the Roman government” (Dadang 2015:15), noting that, “Christians were regarded as seditious because they said Jesus is LORD. Rather than they saying Caesar is Lord.” The result was the beginning of tough times and persecution for Christians from its onset. The early Christians began to face threats that aimed to disable them as a community of believers in Christ.

### ***Threats that disabled a church***

The dictionary defines ‘disabled’ as “deprived of capabilities.” Does being deprived of certain capabilities take away meaning and purpose in peoples’ lives? Does, it takes away their rights to life and religion? Do people who are deprived of capabilities ever reach a point where they should be allowed to die or where others should cause them to die? Is there a difference? The answers to these questions are critical. Historically, the church started with persecution from within. The aim was to disable its growth and stop it from expanding. Stephen was the first in the church to have the vision of a worldwide gospel. It was that which caused him to become the first Christian martyr (Acts 7:57-60). Saul took part in the slaying of Stephen. Immediately after his death, he became the leader in the persecution of the disciples of Christ. He seized, bounded and scourged both men and women (Acts 8:3). The Jerusalem church was broken up for a time, and its members scattered abroad (Acts 26:9-11). Hurlbut (2008:31) narrated that “In the year 64 A.D. a large part of the city of Rome was destroyed in a great conflagration. It has been said that the fire was started by Nero, worst of all the Roman emperors...” He reiterates that:

It was certain that Nero was charged with the crime by common report. In order to clear himself, Nero declared that the Christians had set fire to the city, and began a terrible persecution. Thousands were tortured and put to death. Among them was Peter by crucifixion, in the year 67 and Paul by beheaded, in the year 68.

This is agreed by church historians as the first imperial persecution in the history of the church. According to Hurlbut (2008:33), “the name of the last generation of the first century, The Age of Shadows, partly because the gloom of persecution was over the church.” About the year 90 A.D., the cruel emperor



Domitian began second imperial persecution of the Christians. Thousands of the believers were slain especially, in Rome and Italy. At this time John the last of the apostles was imprisoned on the isle of Patmos (Revelation 1:9). Hurlbut (14) narrates that “the first period of church history ends with the death of John, the last of the twelve apostles upon earth, which is said to have taken place about 100 A.D.” Palmer (2015:161) opines that “the end of the first century... all the apostles were dead.” At the end of the first century, the doctrines set forth by Paul in the epistle of Romans were accepted throughout the church as the standards of the faith. John Hunt (2020:1) affirms that “Romans contains profound and life-changing theology and this is one of the reasons why it has been so influential over the centuries.” Hurlbut (2008:35) remarks that: “the standards of moral character were high but the tone of the spiritual life was lower than it had been in the earlier apostles’ days. Yet everywhere, the church was strong aggressive, growing and rising to dominance throughout the world of the Roman empire.” Rodney Stark (2020:13) notes that “early Christians ...were so empowered by the divine spirit that at the first hearing whole multitude in the body eagerly embraced in their soul’s piety towards the Creator of the Universe.” However, the most prominent fact in the history of the church through the second and third centuries is the persecution of Christianity by the Roman Emperors. Hurlbut (2008:40) explains that:

While this condition was not continuous, it was often repeated for years at a time, and liable to break forth at any moment in terrible forms. It lasted in the fourth century until 313 A.D., when the Edict of Constantine, the first Christian emperor, ended all attempts to destroy the Church of Christ.

The Christian religion was forbidden. The last, most systematic and most terrible persecution of all the series took place in the reign of Diocletian and his successors. Hurlbut (2008:45) notes that “In the series of edicts it was ordered that every copy of the Bible should be burned. All churches which had arisen throughout the empire were torn down and those who would not renounce the Christian faith should lose their citizenship.” Dadang (2020:36) observes that “thus, the early years of the church was no doubt a mixture of sweetness and bitterness.” Keven O’Donnell (2009:52) wrote that “energy was previously devoted to training for martyrdom and to the refutation of heretical

teachings which sought to distort the core truths upon which Christianity was founded.” Shelly Bruce (2008:27) argues that “Christian enthusiasm transformed the Spirit of martyrdom into a commitment to God and imitation of Christ.” Dadang (2015:15) documented that “the first expression of Christianity outside of the New Testament is known as the post-apostolic period of church history.” It was a period dominated by several leading Christians who have come to be called the apostolic fathers. They were called the apostolic fathers because, in many cases, these were men who had themselves known and had been disciples of the actual apostles. They were mainly concerned with strengthening the church in the face of persecution. Palmer (2015:161) affirms by noting that “the next generation of Christian theologians is called the apostolic fathers, among whom are Clement of Rome, Polycarp and Ignatius.” Theologically, the apostolic fathers stressed monotheism. They taught but did not develop any systematic theology on humanity and the deity of Christ. Rather, they emphasised obedience to divine law for salvation and the necessity of baptism to forgive sins. They also taught the authority of the Old Testament and the words of Jesus. Boer (2003:17) affirms that:

The Old Testament had spoken again and again of the coming universal character of the people of God. The deepest ground for this expectation was the fact that the God who redeems is also the God who created all things. Throughout the Old Testament, Israel’s contact with the nations was maintained because Palestine itself was a crossroads between the great empires of her time.

Palmer (2015:161) writes that “Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, was arrested by Roman soldiers and taken to Rome to be martyred. On the way he wrote letters to six churches and to bishop Polycarp, expressing his deep love for Jesus.” Dadang (2015:19) described the affirmation of Ignatius on the way to martyrdom. Ignatius said, “Near to the sword, near to God; in company with wild beasts, in company with God. Ignatius got his wish and died in the arena in Rome.” Palmer (2015:161) reiterated that “twice in his letter to the Romans, he even calls Jesus God. But he does not explain how the Father and Jesus can both be God while there is only one God.” Yet, Polycarp did not denounce his faith when he was captured and demanded by the Roman authorities to

denounce Jesus Christ. Imagine yourself dragged to the Eagle Square Abuja, Nigeria. The square is filled with people screaming for your blood because you are a Christian? Dadang (2015:21) noted that “the proconsul gave Polycarp one last chance to renounce Jesus and pleaded with him to have respect for his age. Polycarp replied, fourscore and six years have I been His servant, and he has not done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?” With these words, and after his long prayer, he was burned to death for his declaration of faith in Christ. After these fathers came the apologists who defended the Christian faith. One of them was Justin Martyr. Martyr was a title and a description of the fact that Justin died as a martyr for Christ. Dadang (2015:32) wrote that “Justin is recorded in church history as one who defended Christians against accusations by the pagans. He demanded justice and fair hearing for those who were condemned without trials.” Ruth Tucker (2004:31-33) noted that “After a trial, the death sentence was pronounced by the judge and Justin Martyr along with five other men and one woman, were beheaded.”

K. Bediako (1992:143) observed that “Justin Martyr, who was martyred in Rome is an example of a contextualised Christian theologian. He argued for a common ground between Christian and the Greek philosopher. For him Jesus is the Pre-existent Word who is the source of all truth.” However, there were a group of Christian writers after the apostolic fathers by the second century. Boer (2003:48) noted that “Our knowledge of the arguments against Christianity comes mainly from a group of Christian writers who are known as the apologists.” Their defense was not with swords but with the pen. A closer study of the apologists show that these were men who made written defenses of Christianity and of Christians before various emperors. They were appearing for justice and a fair hearing and against the idea that innocent people should be condemned for no other reason that for the fact that they were Christians. These apologists played key roles in defending the Christian faith against pagan critics and persecution from the Roman Empire. Irenaeus was an apologist who defended Christianity against false teachings in the church. Shortly after apologists gave way, fresh theological questions were asked. Why did Christianity have to be defended? Who is God and how does the Bible define Him? What did they mean when they mentioned the name Jesus, the Son of God? How does the Bible define the Son of God? It required Christians to dig deeper into Scripture to understand how to introduce God to pagans and how to explain and answer basic theological questions. Early Christians did not only

endure for the sake of their faith in Christ. But they stood firm in their theological standpoint and refused to compromise standards with doctrinal matters. Therefore, they refuted theological heresy.

## **Theological heresies refuted**

During the third century period, there was a significant group of theological thinkers who wrote in Latin. There were two enemies that the church faces at all times which are usually, persecutors who attempt to destroy it from the outside. These are heretics who have distorted theological views and attempt to destroy the church. There were three major theological heresies the early church faced that they were firm in refuting. These are discussed.

### ***Standing firm against Gnostic heresy***

Gnosticism was a very complex and confusing system of belief. The name itself comes from the Greek word for knowledge: gnosis. It was a mixture of Greek Platonic philosophy, various forms of Judaism, oriental mysticism, and Christianity. It had its own elaborate mythology. It taught that salvation was based on the possession of special knowledge. It was a secret knowledge that only a few possessed. Palmer (2015:162) clarified that the Gnostics taught that “matter is evil and spirit is good. Gnostic sects claimed to have a secret path to escape the world of matter. The Creator God, they said was bad.” Gnosticism rejected the Old Testament and its God. To Gnostics, Jesus communicated secret gnosis, knowledge, to the twelve disciples. They in turn communicated it to others.

If material creation was evil, then what did Gnostics teach about how to live? There were two schools of thought among the Gnostics. The first was that, because matter is evil, it does not matter what one does with one’s body. A person can live a life of total self-indulgence because what they do with their body cannot affect the spirit. The second thought, an opposite extreme, involved severe asceticism. This school of thought taught that the spirit overcomes the body by denying it. It forbids marriage and procreation and eating of certain foods. Given the evil of matter, it seemed a logical thought to commit suicide. For Gnostics, there is a system of dualism. They taught that there is eternal warfare between God and matter. On the one hand, Docetists taught that the humanity of Jesus was just a deception. Tertullian was one of

the most remarkable figures of the early church. Although earlier, Justin Martyr, bishop Ignatius and bishop Irenaeus offered a basic theological response to the matters that concerned heretical teaching by the Gnostics and Marcion who thought that the Old Testament was different from that of the New Testament and was condemned by the church for his wrong teaching. Tertullian was one of the most fascinating and exasperating figures of early Christianity. Tertullian was from Carthage, North Africa. Kelly (2004:115) was one of the first to use “divine essence or substance,” to describe the Godhead in response to Gnostic heresy. Next to Gnosticism, the early church stood firm against its teaching of Marcion.

### ***Standing firm against Marcionite heresy in the church***

Dadang (2015:48) wrote that:

Marcion, like Gnostics, taught a distinction between the God of the Old Testament, whom he described as a God of justice. While he taught that the God of the New Testament is the God of love. According to Marcion, the God of the Old Testament is not good in the same sense as the God of the New Testament.

Tertullian wrote *Against the Marcion*. Marcion was a heretic. Kelly helps us to understand that Tertullian’s major contribution to Christian theology was in forging a vocabulary in connection with the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of Christ. Tertullian was the first Christian writer to use the idea of the Trinity in connection with the Godhead. He was also one of the first to use the word “substance” and “person” in connection with the Trinity. Substance describes the divine essence that is shared in the Godhead. The Father and the Son share the same divine essence and are united in one divine substance. This development served as major theological thinking that emerged during the third century of the Christian faith. In the fourth century, the church eventually triumphed over persecution to become the official religion of the Roman Empire. Before this, efforts were made by the Roman government to stamp out Christianity. Some of the Emperors who wanted Christianity thrown out of the empire were: Nero (54-68); Domitian (81-96); Marcus Aurelius (161-180) and Decius (248-251).

Looking at it from a political perspective, the 4<sup>th</sup> Century church had cause to expect a period of peace. Having overcome and endured years of persecution from an empire determined to exterminate the Christian church, faithful overcomers defended the gospel. Constantine had become a Christian. Imperially, his new faith was officially recognized as the religion in the very empire that had made efforts to destroy the church entirely. It was hard to know the emperor's motive. He attributed his coming to the faith in 312 to a vision on the eve of a battle. In his dream, he saw the words, "By this conquer" engraved on a cross. In the few days that followed, Constantine conquered his enemies and remembered the envisioned cross as his turning point. God had spoken to him at a particular time when life and death hung on the scale. Recognizing his dependence on a power that transcends mortal comprehension, Emperor Constantine paid homage to a sovereignty more powerful than his own. Susan Wise Bauer (2010:1) asserted that "Constantine dissolved the standing bodyguard that had supported Maxentius to the throne. He packaged Maxentius's head and shipped it south to North Africa as a signal to his own supporters that it was time to switch allegiance."

Leigh Churchill (2001:171) opined that "the Edict of Constantine promised protection, and friendship declared in AD 313 marked a new chapter in the world's Christian history in Europe." Nevertheless, "Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven," said Jesus (Matthew 7:21). No cleric in the empire would learn that lesson better than Emperor Constantine himself who discovered that declaring people Christian does not really make them so. But certainly, there is no human history that free from conflict or turbulence. Christian church history has given that background that no period is free from violent realities. They also describe cultural conflicts over eating meat already offered to idols and divisive theological inquiries. During the Patristic Era, between the ends of the first through the close of the eighth centuries, leaders of the church struggled with Gnostics. In its inability to conquer the Christian faith in open confrontation and argument, like Boko Haram, the Gnostic sect attempted to subvert Christianity by applying Christian labels to its neo-Platonic worldview that the Absolute God could be reached through mystical experience. But Gnostic heresy was decisively defeated. Yet, there was another heresy that the early church had to stand firm on to give a Scriptural explanation of the person of Christ.

### ***Standing firm in defense of the Person of Christ.***

In its history, the church experienced internal disputes. Constantine was confronted with unparalleled problems which inflicted a deep cut on the very heart of the Gospel. It concerned the nature and person of Jesus. In what sense can the church affirm that Jesus was the Son of God? How was Jesus identical to the Father and in His role in creation? The battle that fractured Constantine's realm was different from earlier crises which dealt more with the church and cultural tensions. But this major theological crisis in the history of the church concerned the person and work of the Savior. Danny McCain (2004:116) concurred, "Jesus, the Man-God, came into the world to save sinners. He is, the Son of God, the Savior of the world, the coming King..." Biblical evangelicals fought to uphold the beliefs when the heretics came to the city. Beautified by the media in search of novelty, a popular Arius can wreak havoc on guardians at the gate. It was all about the incarnational Jesus which was centred on his human and divine union. The debate was caused by the refusal of Arius to accept the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus Christ. Arius argued that only a created being could effect salvation for other creatures and rejected the claim that the Son of God can be the same essence as the Father. Arius taught that the Son of God was not coeternal with the Father. If God begat the Son, he that was begotten had a beginning of existence and from this, it is evident there was a time when the Son was not. In simple terms, Arius opined that the Son of God was a created being. The Son was created before the rest of creation, but he was created in time. The Son was a creature but exalted over all other creatures. For Arius, to worship Jesus Christ as divine in the same sense as God was tantamount to idolatry. He taught that the Son of God was Son by virtue of His adoption, not His essence. God adopted Jesus as His Son. The Son responded obediently to God's will, thereby earning divine status. According to Arius, salvation was achieved by attaching oneself to this obedient human being who paved the way to heaven. Arius and his followers' said Christ is God, but not in the same sense as the Father was God.

Although the battle was initially an engagement between Arius and Bishop Alexander, Arius's prominent opponent was Alexander's protégé and successor, Athanasius. Alister E. McGrath (2013:46) explained that "the outlook of the Alexandrian school of which Athanasius was a representative was strongly soteriological in character that held on to the tradition of the

human and divine natures of Christ.” David Horton (2006:676) documented that “the council of Chalcedon gathered more than five hundred bishops in AD 451. They affirmed that Christ is simultaneously fully human and fully divine.” Chad Brand, Charles Draper and Archie England (2003:1952) opined that “Chalcedon declared that Christ was “born of the Virgin Mary and acknowledged the two natures unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably, preserved and united in one person.” Finally, McGrath (2013:26) concluded that the council of Chalcedon expressed the incarnation of Jesus Christ as one person with two natures – the human and the divine. The union between God and the incarnation of God in Christ attracted a major theological discourse after Nicaea. The battles over Christology were not about the pre-incarnate Son of God. How did God become incarnate? How did Jesus keep His full humanity and still remain fully divine? Redemption required a redeemer who was united in his person, the nature of God and human nature, yet without confusing the two natures. How did divine Jesus have to be Saviour? How human did He have to be spotless? For Jesus to be the true redeemer, He must be everything that God is. Jesus must be everything that we are but without sin in Him. There were four things needed in any orthodox doctrine of Christ. First, Christ must be truly God. Second, Christ must be truly man. Third, Christ must be one person and, fourth the divine and human natures in Christ must be united. Jesus was not two persons but one person. Jesus was one divine eternal Son of God who assumed a complete human nature without sin. Jesus the God-man accomplished redemptive work in both natures. Millard Erickson (2013:659) concluded that “the biblical and historical material supports the view that Christ has both a human and divine nature united in one person.” Boer (2003:108) reiterated “He is fully divine and fully human. The early church accepted him as a man, and confessed and worshipped him as God.” J.N.D. Kelly (2004:205) wrote that “prior to the beginning of the fourth century all creeds and summaries of faith were local in character. It was taken for granted that they were enshrined and universally accepted faith, handed down from the Apostles.” Kelly (2004:206) reiterated that “they owed their immediate authority, no less than their individual stamp, to the liturgy of the local church in which they had emerged.” Kelly wrote,

In a new type of creed, the motive of testing orthodoxy was primary. The creeds were deliberately framed with this object in view... The creed of Nicaea was the first formula to be published



by an ecumenical synod. Consequently, it was the first which claimed universal authority in a legal sense.

Kenneth LaTourette (2003:159) argued that the “Nicaea creeds identified the issues, clarified Christian thinking and enabled the majority to reach a common mind. In this paradox, it presents the nature of the church as it has actually operated in history.” Nicaea brought the awareness to the reality that without a clear focus on this historical Jesus, fully God and fully human. Nicaea understood this and insisted that the focus of Christianity remained true to Jesus Christ, the one who said, “He who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).

Athanasius was a person in the life of the church, committed to biblical orthodoxy; he remained resolute and suffered at the hands of those who sought to undermine the church’s integrity by worshipping idols derived from their culture. In the history of the Christian church, Athanasius stands tall as one who spent his life defending the truth. Athanasius insisted on the biblical idea that Jesus Christ was “begotten, not made.” This came to be known as the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son (*Homooousios*). There is no difference between God and the Son in Scripture (John 10:30). The Nicaea Council adopted “Homooousios” as the best Scriptural expression of the relationship between God and the Son. It clarified the *person and work* of Christ. It applied the victory of revelation over rationalism. Arius wanted to make human reason supreme over Scripture. Christ and God are of one essence. Indeed, the distance between God and humanity has been bridged through in the Godhead (John 3:17; 5: 30, 11:42; 14:26;16:7; 17:18). The incarnation of God in Jesus Christ is the union of the divine and the human natures in one person (John 1:1-4, 14; 10:30). Jesus needed to possess both the divine and human natures to redeem humanity (John 1:29). Divine power was necessary to affect the redemption and the human being was necessary for the redemption to be accomplished (Colossians 1:13-14, 19-20). The Logos that became incarnate in Jesus Christ was never without human nature. Christ’s relationship of potency was an entirely voluntary act of self-renunciation (Philippians 2:6-7). The relationship of the divine and human natures in the person of Christ remained united (John 10:30). Millard Erickson (2013:659) concluded that “the biblical and historical material supports the view that Christ has both a human and divine nature united in one person.”

Boer (2003:108) reiterated “He is fully divine and fully human. The early church accepted him as a man, and confessed and worshipped him as God.” There is a clear indication that early followers of Christ offered sacrifices for the sake of their Lord. So, they were stigmatised. Rodney Stark (2020:176) concluded, “religious stigmas consist of all aspects of social deviance that attach to membership in the group.” These early believers practised sacrificial Christianity. Today, in the contemporary Christian faith, the challenge is to always endeavour to overcome and stand firm.

## **Contemporary application**

The costly demands in question concerning these tortures are not simply monetary costs analogous to the purchase price of secular products. Indeed, they seemed to be gratuitous costs accompanied by sigma and sacrificial attitudes common to religious groups who are usually distinct in not compromising their faith. Against this background, considering the historical perspective during the early period of Christianity is of paramount importance. Questions to ponder are, how much did it take to be and remain Christians? How possible was it that the costs of following their messiah strengthened their commitment to the Christian faith rewarding the faithful believer for a good cause? I have watched some Christians in Nigeria who appear rational in giving their money and time to social services. They are usually willing to enforce strict rules surrounding sex and marriage because of their religious beliefs. But I have observed that they often fail to ask an important question which is, how could a rational person accept torture and death in exchange for intangible religious rewards?

For the early Christians, they thought it worthwhile to make the supreme sacrifice. Their faith in life everlasting and the divine made it possible for the Christians to face death and bravely. The affirmation that most converts would live to see the Parousia was emphasised by the apostles (Mark 13:30), although many of the converts began to pass away without having seen “the Son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory” (Mark 13:26). Luke recorded a similar assurance in Acts, “this same Jesus who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11b). Dadang (2017:62) concluded that “the hearts of Christians clarified, reinforced, restored, and promoted an understanding of

God's gracious gift through bearing witness to Jesus Christ and remaining firm in the theology of the cross of suffering and constantly following him." This affirmation is in contrast to the religion of Islam in Nigeria, Africa and other parts of the world. The fact is that Islam never faced this problem because of its rapid growth during Mohammed's lifetime. This was because more often, the expansion of Islam was done by conquest and treaty rather than by personal conversion, and gave no occasion for disappointment. Monday Daniel (2009:21) affirmed this when he wrote that "over centuries in Islam there developed ideas that are critical to today's problem. Thus, jihad becomes an urgent necessity in order to reclaim all lands that ethnic communities have lost to Islam." This is the very situation in the modern Middle East, Plateau, Southern Kaduna, and the entire Middle Belt where Islam is making aggressive efforts to conquer the ethnic communities by forcefully taking over their lands. Daniel (2009:27) argued that "Islamization begins when there are sufficient Muslims in a country to agitate for their religious privileges." This is more reason why Boko Haram and terrorists' activities have refused to end in Nigeria. Unfortunately, peace is not actualized in the power of the gun bullets. Rather, peaceful co-existence comes when both the hearts of Boko Haram members and all other terrorists surrender their hearts to the love and power of Christ. The difference between Christianity and Islam is seen in the fact that the early Christians endured all sorts of insults poured on them to the point of many becoming martyrs was because they believed that God had forgiven them so that they can earn His salvation which is contrary to the teaching found in Islam. Dadang (2014:20) categorically opined that "there is no forgiveness in Islam because the religion is based on good works and man's efforts to reach heaven." Thus, Christians living in a violent context such as the one obtainable, particularly in Northern Nigeria, are to follow the example of the early church Christians. Sunday Bobai Agang (2016:121), using Zachariah's hymn as an example, encouraged Christians that "the feet of those who turn to Jesus Christ for salvation... in spite of their circumstances, they will serve Him in righteousness and holiness." This means that no period in church history is free from suffering for a person's faith in Christ.

## **Summary and recommendations**

The story of the early church from the first through the fourth centuries as discussed showed that there has never been a period in history when the

church was free of difficulties. John, the apostle concluded with words of encouragement to Christians. John said, “Hold on what you have, so that no one will take away your crown” (Revelation 3:11). The early Christian church stood firm despite the assault they suffered because of their faith in God. Dadang (2017:18) opined “today, millions of Christians are suffering and dying at the hands of godless tyrants particularly in Nigeria and other parts of Africa and the world at large because of their Christian faith.” Thus, while Christians around the world seem to encounter regular brutal treatment of which Nigeria is not an exception, it is time to appeal to the Christian faithful to know how to offer a response through this article to help strengthen the persecuted church everywhere in hostile contexts. To achieve this, some recommendations are inevitable. First, is that prayerfulness is always the most important priority for all children of God living in hostile environments given their faith. The spiritual and moral implication for Christians in hostile contexts has biblical virtue that provides guidance to stand firm no matter the level of brutality. Pray for God’s enemies and those who persecute (Luke 23:46). The early church responded to persecution with prayer when Peter was arrested and put in prison. The believers prayed earnestly to God for his deliverance (Acts 12:5). Secondly, peace is the ability to contain pain in the face of violating a group of people because of their faith in Christ. Peace is not necessarily the absence of persecution. Third, all Christian virtues are rooted in the theology of the cross which lies in Christ’s redemptive work, love, forgiveness and reconciliation (Galatians 2:20). The idea of love is in connection to “turn the other cheek,” except in any case where self-defence may be applied. Fourth, explore relational dialogue. This is an active dialogue which allows for identifying and application of common grounds to create room for accommodation and respect for each other’s views and rights. Fifth, the universal church should mobilise believers from other places towards providing practical help or rehabilitation for fellow Christians who are devastated. Christian communities are attacked and their houses are torched and they are chased away making them homeless. In most cases, such Christian communities have no option rather than to flee and stay with their relatives. But, the majority of them usually are not in a position to return and rebuild their houses. This practically happened in Christian communities like Jebu Miango, and Maingo villages, Yelwa Ziggam, Riyom LGA, Barkin Ladi LGA, Bokkos LGA, Part of Mangu LGA, and Jos South, all in the Plateau State of

Nigeria. Rehabilitating these Christian communities is often not a priority for the government in question.

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