

What would Jesus do if he were a pastor in South Sudan?

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By Zechariah Manyok Biar

October 31, 2012 - Commenting under my article entitled, "Is Juba going back to Khartoum?", published by Sudan Tribune on October 29, 2012, Paul Ongee wanted to know what I think the difference is "between constructive criticism and denigration as a Church is expected to play a role without observing the red thin line between politics and religious teaching."

This is a question I cannot ignore because the same question would be in the minds of many people. The most important area in the question is the observation of the "red thin line between politics and religious teaching." In other words, if Jesus were a pastor in South Sudan today, what would he do?

Let me give a simple answer to this question. Jesus would beat people up in South Sudan like he did in the Temple in Israel two thousand years ago, if they are mistreating or exploiting others. What he would not do is to beat people up for a selfish reason or for his personal glorification.

To elaborate on my point, for those who may not know what I am talking about, the Bible does not seem to be clear when it comes to whether Jesus was a fighter or a pacifist. He beat people up in the Temple for turning it into the house of robbers but he also rebuked Peter when he cut off the ear of one of the soldiers who came to arrest Jesus. So, the question is: which one of the above should the Church take in its moral teaching?

Let us first know who Jesus is before talking about what part the Church should take. Jesus was both a fighter and a pacifist.

Whenever you read the Gospels, you will observe that whenever Jesus is mentioned as being angry, he was angry not because he was personally mistreated or insulted but because other people were mistreated. He literally beat people in the Temple because they were exploiting other people through money and animal exchange. He would also be mentioned as angry when the religious leaders opposed the healing of sick persons on the Sabbath Day.

However, you cannot find a place in the Gospel where Jesus was angry because he was personally insulted or mistreated. For example, he rebuked Peter because he wanted to defend Jesus, using the sword. Having seen this, we would conclude that Jesus was a pacifist when it came to his personal issues, but not when seeing other people mistreated.

The thin line the Church takes is not to appear political in its criticism of vices in public service. We all agree that it is wrong for political leaders to use the Church as a podium for the promotion of their political agenda. We also agree that it is wrong for the government to use religious laws as supreme laws of the nation. That is the thin red line in my understanding.

Someone reading the above paragraphs, however, would say: Zechariah, put your biblical argument aside! We do not understand it. What we understand is this: How do you explain Article 8 (1) of South Sudan Transitional Constitution, 2011 which says: "Religion and State shall be separate?"

Fantastic! Let us turn secular then. My understanding of Article 8 (1) is that Religion and State shall not be mixed up. In other word, you cannot use the Ten Commandments to develop the supreme laws of the nation. You should not also use Religion for "divisive purposes," as stipulated in the same Article 8 (2). Nobody questions this.

Yet, there is nowhere the Constitution says that Religious people should not criticize the government. There is nowhere that it is also mentioned that people with religious convictions should not be elected as political leaders. Article 8 of our Constitution might have been borrowed from the US Constitution, but there are rarely elections where candidates do not talk about their religious convictions in the USA. Is that considered as violating the US Constitution? No. You cannot separate a person from his or her religious convictions. You only separate him or her from using his/her religious belief for the mistreatment of people who do not share that belief.

In line with our Constitution, I would say, it is the responsibility of Religious leaders to criticize any person who uses Religion for divisive purposes as it is equally important for them to criticize anybody who uses politics for the mistreatment of people. I regard this as constructive criticism.

My position, if I was not clear in my first article, is that I do not support anybody who wants to silence critics, whether inside or outside Churches. Church leaders have moral authority to promote justice and good governance in public. Dictatorship must not be encouraged anywhere in South Sudan.

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