

NIGERIAN CHAPLAINCY UK ANNUAL LECTURE

**SUSTAINING THE MISSIONARY LEGACY OF BISHOP SAMUEL
AJAYI CROWTHER:
THE ROLE OF NIGERIANS IN DIASPORA**

*Lecture delivered by the Most Rev Dr Emmanuel A.S. Egbunu,
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I wish to express thanks to God for this opportunity to be with the Nigerian Chaplaincy UK yet again. In particular, my family is thankful to the Chaplain, Ven Dr Ajaefobi for his pastoral care when we were held back in the UK last year and for remaining in touch for our other events since return. This invitation to share your warm fellowship is much appreciated. I trust God to bless us together in this lecture focused on Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther's missionary legacy. I am aware that this is sequel to what the Rt Rev Prof Dapo Asaju, then VC of Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo had done last year.

People are interested in Ajayi Crowther's life for various reasons, and indeed his life is something of an enigma. This is because it brings together exciting, heroic, painful and tragic dimensions all at once. In a sense, every life has more or less of the same rhythms.

For one whose life started in the first decade (born about 1806) and ended in the last (died Dec 31, 1891) he was most likely, the most widely known African Christian of the nineteenth century. The retelling of the travails of his closing years still hurt in some quarters and sentiments still run quite high. But we must appropriate the grace of God to help us move beyond some of the historical injuries to the healing that comes through our better understanding and experience of the liberating gospel.

The approach I wish to adopt in this lecture is to present to us the life of a man who was totally devoted to the Lord Jesus as a true disciple and was committed to the gospel that brings salvation through faith in Christ. So much more can be said about him, but what we remember him for is his commitment to the Lord through trailblazing, sacrificial, faithful, and

lifelong missionary service. Considering the audience and topic, careful selection of relevant aspects of his life is the focus here.¹

To speak meaningfully about his legacies, we must:

1. Look at **THE MAN**: a sketch of his outstanding life in its historical context,
2. **HIS MINISTRY & MEMORIES**, recalling the timeless legacies of his missionary commitment and
3. **THE MODEL** he leaves for us, highlighting the challenges for our day, especially for those in diaspora.

As with hermeneutics – which is a method of interpreting a writing, which takes us back to the overall context of a biblical passage or book for right interpretation, so must we seek to understand Bishop Crowther in the specific contexts of his life and ministry to be able to interpret him for our inspiration. We see the young village teenager from Oshogun captured and rescued. And we end up with a grey-haired old man, liberated from slavery to man and to sin, and a leader in the Church of Christ, who has remained unforgettable. As much as possible, I will allow us to listen to his words, and the testimony of others about him.

THE MAN BISHOP SAMUEL AJAYI CROWTHER

Crowther's biographer, Jesse Page titled his book, *THE BLACK BISHOP: SAMUEL ADJAI CROWTHER*, and got the famous CMS historian, Eugene Stock to write the preface. He provides this helpful sketch:

“Samuel Crowther's career was unique. A kidnapped slave in 1821, a rescued slave in 1822, a mission schoolboy in 1823, a baptized Christian in 1825, a college student in 1826, a teacher in 1828, a clergyman in 1843, a missionary to the country whence he had been stolen in 1845, the founder of a new mission in 1857, the first negro bishop in 1864, – where is the parallel to such a life? . . . In his later years as Bishop he was in constant demand as a speaker all over the country, (England) . . . he accomplished much for Africa. Amid

¹ I have written about him in the context of the Niger Mission crisis in "ANVIL: journal of theology and mission | Volume 36 issue 3 - Church Mission Society ["https://churchmissionsociety.org/anvil-journal-theology-and-mission/anvil-journal-of-theology-and-mission-volume-36-issue-3/](https://churchmissionsociety.org/anvil-journal-theology-and-mission/anvil-journal-of-theology-and-mission-volume-36-issue-3/)

circumstances of almost unexampled difficulty he went steadily on his way; . . . He lived in atmosphere of suspicion and scandal, yet no tongue, however malicious, ventured to whisper reproach against his personal character. Some might criticize his administration; no one ever question his sincerity and simplicity”²

We also have preserved for us what he wrote about his recollection of his rescue. We see an aspect of the naughtiness of the young Crowther at the point it became clear to him that they had been rescued:

In a few days were were quite at home on the nan-of-war; being only six in number, we were soon selected by the sailors for their boys, and we were soon furnished with dress. Our Portuguese owner and his son were brought over in the same vessel, bound in fetters, and I thinking I should no more get into his hands, had the boldness to strike him on the head while he was standing by his son — an act, however, very wicked and unkind in its nature.³

After this rescue on 16th April 1822, he was baptised by Rev J.C. Raban, taking the name Samuel Crowther after the Vicar of Christ Church, Newgate who was a great supporter of the CMS. – and what a way to immortalise one’s name, for he became more famous historically than the bearer of the name. he describes his baptism marking his beginning as a Christian in these words:

About the third year of my liberation from the slavery of man, I was convinced of another worse state of slavery, namely, that of sin and Satan. It pleased the Lord to open my heart... I was admitted into the visible Church of Christ here on earth as a soldier to fight manfully under his banner against our spiritual enemies.”⁴

As some would say today, he was one who seemed to have an appointment with destiny. Golden doors for learning, training, vocation opened up to him. Even though he had become the head of department in Fourah Bay, he opted to join the Niger Expedition of 1841. The expedition had James Frederick

² Preface by Eugene Stock in Jesse Page, *The Black Bishop*, pvii

³ Jesse Page, *The Black Bishop*, p17

⁴ Oladipo and Decovert, *Samuel Ajayi Crowther: The Miracle of Grace*, p12; Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, p157

Schon and Samuel Ajayi Crowther in charge of the missionary party. It turned out to be quite disastrous, for the casualty figures were high: out of 145 Europeans, 130 came down with severe malaria at a time when an effective cure was yet to be discovered. 40 of them died.⁵

Crowther and Schon survived and kept copious notes in their journals. He showed great interest in the religious life of the African people on the banks of the Niger: “he inquired diligently, listened closely, and depicted as accurately as he could what he observed and heard for himself. He was eager to corroborate, test, and confirm for himself, leaving issues of dispute open to opinion. He avoided rushing to judgment.”⁶

For instance, he gives us an illuminating insight into the ideas of the Ibo people about God whom they called *Chukwu* or *Chineke*. His journal entry reads:

The Ibos are in their way a religious people, the word “*Tshuku*” [Chukwu] is continually heard. *Tshuku* is supposed to do everything. When a few bananas fell out of the hands of one into the water, he comforted himself by saying, “God has done it.” Their notions of some of the attributes of the Supreme Being are in many respects correct and their manner of expressing them striking. “God made everything. He made both black and white,” is continually on their lips.

It is their common belief that there is a certain place or town where *Tshuku* dwells, and where he delivers his oracles and answers inquiries. Any matter of importance is left to his decision, and people travel to the place from every part of the country.⁷

Crowther strongly felt that traditional Africa was ripe for both antislavery and the Christian movement. Both from his personal experience and

⁵ K. Onwuka Dike, has 162 Europeans on board, and a casualty figure of 54. See “Origins of the Niger Mission 1841-1891” A paper read at the Centenary of the Mission at Christ Church, Onitsha, on 13 November 1957. Published for the C.M.S. Niger Mission by the Ibadan University Press, 1962.

⁶ Lamin Sanneh, “The CMS and the African Transformation” in Kelvin Ward and Brian Stanley, *The Church Mission Society and World Christianity, 1799–1999*, p179.

⁷ See *Journals of the Rev. James Frederick Schon and Mr. Samuel Crowther: who, with the sanction of Her Majesty's Government, accompanied the expedition up the Niger in 1841 on behalf of the Church Missionary Society.*

subsequently, from Christian conviction, he was passionately committed to the eradication of slave trade. He believed that Africans were not an exception to the rule of righteousness. He was not so bigoted as to base his judgment merely on sentiments. Lamin Sanneh points out that,

Crowther would not denounce or applaud indigenous institutions and native authorities merely for their being African. Rather, he demanded of them an unyielding, stringent compliance with the credo that slavery “is a great abomination in the sight of God.” His watchword on this matter is captured in his journal entry of 30th September 1851, “*For Zion’s sake will I not hold my peace, And for Jerusalem’s sake I will not rest, Until the righteousness thereof go forth as brightness, And the salvation thereof as a lamp that burneth.*” (Isaiah 62:1, KJV 1900)

When he and Henry Townsend started ministry in Abeokuta, he was assigned to Igbein while Townsend was located at Ake within the same Abeokuta. The 151st anniversary publication of St John’s Igbein records about Crowther:

Rev Samuel Ajayi Crowther – a slave boy who became Bishop, the first African Bishop was said to be a plain, humble, practical, patient, hardworking Christian with tenacity of purpose and attachment to basic principles. It was he who established the church at Igbein where he combined evangelical work with his pastoral duties.”⁸

Crowther has had his many admirers and critics. They are spread among fellow missionaries both then and since; missiologists, historians, nationalists, etc. One thing is obvious: he was a man of convictions who was both realistic and practical about the exigencies of the missionary context rather than disconnected and unrealistic ideals about mission. Armchair and ivory tower critics might pontificate, but he was a man who was devoted to the incarnation of the gospel and yet without losing ground to positions that were not biblically tenable.

⁸ *The History of St John’s Anglican Church, Igbein, Abeokuta, 1847-1998*, p5

MISSIONARY LEGACIES

The Great Commission was a top priority. He was not just an abolitionist or a crusader for an end to that evil trade, his convictions ran deep. Recall his memories of his baptism, earlier cited in this lecture. All through his life he remained ever indebted to those who rescued him from slavery, and even more indebted to the God who arranged it all, using men.

For us too, the urgency of the gospel message to those who do not have hope remains valid. The diaspora community has the unique opportunity of interacting with the marketplace of opinions, worldviews that will lead eventually to dead ends. We can take advantage of the same platforms that the enemy has used to proliferated his falsehood to promote the gospel and say as Paul did to the Romans,

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” (Romans 1:16, ESV)

TRANSLATION WORK

Bishop Ajayi Crowther did considerable translation work and was a firm believer in the power that comes when the message of the gospel comes across in the native tongue to those for whom that was the first language. He could indeed be called the Tyndale of Africa, for he studied both the biblical languages and the indigenous languages to ensure as much accuracy in translation as possible. This covers Yoruba, Igbo, Nupe, Ijaw. He was quite a linguist. His influence as a native speaker on the Yoruba translation is immeasurable since the missionaries had previously relied on informants and guides.

As J.C. Taylor, the liberated Igbo clergyman from Sierra Leone joined the 1857 expedition to the Niger and opened the Igbo mission at Onitsha, Crowther went up river, but was shipwrecked and stranded for months. He spent the time to study the Nupe language and looked for openings to the Nupe and Hausa people, thus beginning the Niger Mission. His work in the confluence communities speak for him. Crowther wrote the first book on Igbo and requested Schon who had come out with him earlier but was now serving an English parish to complete his Hausa dictionary he had begun. It is no wonder that all over the place – even in unlikely places, there are churches named after him: the Cathedral in Idah Diocese (where he had

once been captured) is named after him; there is Crowther Radio in Abuja, Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo; Crowther Graduate Theological Seminary in Abeokuta; Bishop Crowther College of Theology in Okene, Bishop Crowther Diocese (covering his birthplace: I was privileged to take the pulpit at the inauguration of the Diocese on March 11, 2007); and now Crowther Centre for Mission Studies in his home area in Oshogun.

He was a man who had many odds against him, but who like Apostle Paul, pressed on regardless.

But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.” (2 Corinthians 4:7–10, ESV)

Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound!” (2 Timothy 2:8–9, ESV)

He was undeterred. This is something we must take to heart. What are the obstacles we make such a big issue of? Could they actually be opportunities as Apostle Paul and Bishop Crowther saw them?

ENCOUNTERING OTHER FAITHS

Ajayi Crowther was an untiring crusader of religious tolerance in teaching and practice, as is well documented in a number of records, but notably by Peter McKenzie. Andrew Walls also cites the significant perspective modelled by Ajayi Crowther:

Crowther’s early experience in Sierra Leone had taught him that confrontation where one party cries “Jesus is the Son of God” and the other “No, he is not” was useless. In his mature years on the Niger, he sought for common ground at the nexus of Qur’an and Bible: the themes of the status of Jesus as a great prophet, his miraculous birth, Gabriel as the messenger of God⁹

⁹ Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, p144

WESTERN EDUCATION

Almost everywhere the CMS went, they build schools to accompany the churches to teach converts. There were medical establishments as well. Crowther kept these in all his Missionary engagements. Indeed the oldest school in northern Nigeria stands on the premises of the Holy Trinity Cathedral in Lokoja (my Cathedral) and both were established by Ajayi Crowther in 1865.

THE DIASPORA COMMUNITY

What we are now saying may be put this way: if Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther were to live in our day and situation, what opportunities would he see that we need to see? What would he do, given his profile that we have, and how does that inspire what we would do?

One of the major criticisms of social historians and nationalists against missionary Christianity is that it has been used to brainwash the converts and turn them into renegades who are renegades, black Europeans who have thrown away their native religion and cultural practices to embrace a foreign way of life. Crowther was accused by scholars like Professor E. Ayandele of having a disdain for African culture, attacking polygamy, and going around in English attire, etc. It has also been a distasteful missionary practice when missionaries substituted meaningful native names with foreign names at baptism as the native names were considered pagan. It has taken decades to turn this around, emphasizing that not everything English was Christian, and not everything African was pagan. Crowther was to labour hard in this respect, for he represented the new man in Christ who was sufficiently grounded in African values and yet shaped by the new way of life to be a trusted guide. At a point he was accused of abandoning pure evangelical doctrine in favour of African worldviews. (Indeed, people like Henry Townsend alleged that he no longer mentioned sin and the atoning sacrifice of Christ). In his response, he stated in his Charge in 1869 (at Lokoja) that Christianity came into the world to abolish and supersede all false religions, to direct mankind to the only way of obtaining peace and reconciliation with their offended God. He expands on the thought:

. . .it should be borne in mind that Christianity does not undertake to destroy national assimilation; where there are any degrading and superstitious defects, it corrects them; such corrections should be

introduced with due caution and with all meekness of wisdom that there may be good and perfect understanding between us and the powers that be that while we render unto all their dues, we may regard it our bounden duty to stand firm in rendering to God the things that are God's.¹⁰

As enlightened generations of African Christians have sought to separate Christianity from western culture and have come to understand that you can be both Christian and African, we have seen the liberating power of the gospel.

But also we have moved from the period when mission by CMS and others was from the West to the rest. It is now from everywhere to everywhere. Indeed, the hope has been long expressed that we would take Christianity back to the West that brought it to us. This must impress strongly on us the need to be ambassadors for Christ wherever we are in diaspora. As Christian values have become greatly endangered, we must present the authentic models of Christianity. But just as it became necessary to separate the gospel from western culture, so we must make sure our reputation as Nigerians does not hinder the gospel. We must be the alternative and authentic image of Nigerians and especially Nigerian Christians. In some quarters, it is still held that some Nigerians have hidden under the guise of Christianity to indulge in false documentation of their immigration status.

FORBEARANCE

In these days of instant results, there is a lesson to learn from Crowther's forbearance. When he was accused of being a weak leader - indeed he was called an Eli by some of his contemporaries for being too lenient with his lapsed African agents, he responded that he preferred going through the process of admonition, private counselling, temporary suspension, reprimand, and relocation before resorting to final expulsion. He used the African adage in a way that would make sense of his chosen approach: that a freshly made fire would make a lot of smoke at first. If all smoking logs are pulled out then the food would never get cooked. But if the cook got a fan to blow the fire and wait patiently, a happier result might be found. "We

¹⁰ J.F. Ade-Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria, 1841-1891: The Making of a New Elite*. p224

are all weak and imperfect agents, faulty in one way or another, which need to be strengthened, supported, reproofed and corrected, when not beyond amendment”

He came to see his spiritual bankruptcy and cherished the grace that saved him, as expressed in his baptism. Never did he forget this grace all through his life and he saw his missionary service as an unforgettable privilege. For us in diaspora, there is the allurements and benefits of material prosperity, social welfare and stability in so many ways that are taken for granted: 24/7 power supply, justice system, traffic rules, hospitals, internet and social media, schools, good roads, supermarkets, etc. Do we realise that we need to see what God offers for our salvation beyond these good things?

HIS FAMILY LIFE

Crowther had a great commitment for the salvation of his family: his wife, Asano Susan Thomson who was also a liberated slave of Yoruba parentage like him became baptised soon after him. She had been a teacher in Sierra Leone and made special efforts to start a girls' school when they settled in Abeokuta; his two older sons Josiah and Samuel, and his daughters Mrs Macaulay and Mrs Thomson were fully identified with his ministry initiatives. His youngest son Dandeson was described as “the constant and capable companion of his father in his missionary journeys”¹¹ joined the ministry, was ordained by his father on 19th June, 1870, in a moving ordination service, becoming over time Archdeacon in the Niger Delta Pastorate. He had the rare privilege of leading his mother to faith in Christ, after a separation of twenty-five years. After an emotional reunion, she accepted his offer to move in with them. The joy notwithstanding, “he was pained at heart often to see how she was still without knowledge of the true God and in heathen darkness of soul. . . . But one bright day she accepted Christ as her Saviour and was able to mingle her weak and quavering voice with the prayers of her son.” She had been ill and said she would have attributed it to one deity or the other and would have made sacrifices, “but now I have seen the folly of so doing, all my hopes are in the Lord Jesus Christ, whom now I serve.”¹² She was baptized by her son on 5th February 1849, and given the name, Hannah.

¹¹ Jesse Page, *The Black Bishop*, p252

¹² Jesse Page, *The Black Bishop*, p98

Our first mission field is our own family. While the society has so much to offer, it is our responsibility to lead our family members to a biblical faith in Christ at a time when values in the west are increasingly anti-Christian at almost every turn. Christian parents must take responsibility for this. Do not lose your children to the society that has turned against your faith.

Today there are still issues of discrimination. Crowther faced racial discrimination with grace and was vindicated even if not immediately. There were conspirators, but there were those who sought to do what was right. We too must be on the side of right, whatever the form of discrimination. The truth stands in all situations. African societies still suffer from ethnic discriminations and gender discriminations in the same way that racial discrimination is distasteful. We should find ways to model the oneness that the gospel brings. The world is awash with the opinions of those who are activists who do not know the Lord. We must provide the liberating Christian perspective.

Crowther lived with a strong sense of divine purpose. How about you? Crowther maximised his opportunities and skills to advance the gospel. What are yours?

We remember him today, long after he's been dead and gone. What would you and I be remembered for?

And while God keeps you out there, remember the needy churches and dioceses back home. Medical outreaches, or other forms of capacity building initiatives, support for schools at a time when government schools are run down and mission schools have been taken over can go a long way to reform and rebuild our broken walls. Quality education build on sound morals remains a great need.