

“AFRICA: REFORMS IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND VISIONARY LEADERSHIP IMPERATIVES”

A KEYNOTE ADDRESS DELIVERED BY

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It is an honour for me to be invited to be the Keynote Speaker at the Premier congregation of Covenant University. I wish to express my gratitude and high respect to the Chancellor, Dr. David Oyedepo, for this honour.

The story of Covenant University is an affirmation of God's faithfulness and man's potential. It is a story that celebrates the re-awakening of Africa a true African renaissance. Thank you, Dr. David and Faith Oyedepo for showing us the new Africa and the way to make Africa work!

My assignment today is to address the topic, *Africa: Reforms in Higher Education and Visionary Leadership Imperatives*.

Mr. Chancellor, the current picture of Africa is not a pleasant one. The original vision of a quality life that the founding fathers of Africa's emancipation unveiled with joy and hope to her citizens after the attainment of independence appears shipwrecked by our own acts of irresponsibility. In place of hope and happiness, a spirit of self-doubt and passivity has arisen. The African is gradually becoming used to disappointment and shattered dreams.

In a sense, it is understandable that our Universities bear the brunt of our national frustrations because the nation's desire and aspiration for knowledge and development lie within its bosom. In addition to the universities, our religious institutions have also had to respond to society's disillusionment with the moral and ethical failures of the clergy.

It seems obvious that the general citizenry of our Continent holds the leadership of our churches and universities in high regard and expects us to lead the way in doing that which is right. When the church stands in its prophetic role and leads the way in calling the nation to righteousness, the nation is exalted from reproach and dishonour to nobility. The church and our institutions of higher learning must be partners in providing true freedom and development to our people.

Greatness

Mr. Chancellor, I came across a brief reflection which has been attributed to Alexis de Tocqueville, a French political thinker and historian, who traveled throughout the United States of America in the mid 1800's to observe and record early American democratic life. In this poem, Tocqueville identifies the true source of greatness for a nation.

He wrote:

I sought for the greatness
And genius of America
In her commodious harbours
And her ample rivers,

And it was not there;
In the fertile fields
And boundless prairies,
And it was not there;

In her rich mines
and her vast world commerce,
and it was not there.
Not until I went
into the churches of America
and heard her pulpits,
afame with righteousness,
did I understand the secret
of her genius and power.
America is great
because she is good,
and if America ever ceases to be good,
America will cease to be great.

Although the immediate reference of this piece is to America, the relevance of the observation is applicable to all nations. Our greatness derives from our goodness. If that is so, then, there must be a source from which every nation and people draw its practice of goodness and virtue.

The social goodness that Tocqueville refers to in the poem is what Africa needs to neutralize the poison of greed and corruption injected into the mainstream of our public life. If Africa will be great, Africa must be good. If Africa must be good, its people must be good. If Africa's people must be good, its preachers must lead with godliness and integrity. Human motivations alone are not enough to equip us with the power to do what is right.

The Spirit of God

The Bible is clear on the truth that when we are submitted to the Spirit of God, we free ourselves from bondage to our base desires. Galatians 5:16 states, *Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh.*

The spirit of God equips us to do right when we determine to subject our lives to God's just demands. Any society which does not have a principled reference for the ethical and moral conduct of its citizens, succumbs to the base desires of its people. It is our lack of adherence to clear moral imperatives that has led to the increasing promiscuity, viciousness, crime, unemployment, social insecurity, hardship and family breakup around us today. If the leadership of the church leads in righteousness, the citizens will commit themselves to goodness.

Those of us, who are followers of Christ Jesus, cannot run away from the responsibility of challenging our Nations to live up to their potential instead of their lowest common denominator. Within the boundaries of democracy, we must strive to ensure a qualitative improvement in the lives of our citizens.

Science and development

Mr. Chancellor, within the space of twenty years, our world has seen such dramatic advances in science and technology that the world of our ancestors, it appears, was obviously a mere rehearsal for better days in the future.

Today, Medical science has expanded our possibilities through the deciphering of the human genome, with the potential to provide better preventive health care and more effective treatment for diseases like diabetes and cancer. Biotechnology now enables farmers to engineer the best drought-resistant, disease-resistant varieties of crops and most nutritious food for the world's ever-growing population in many nations. Information technology has shrunk the world into a global village. The frontiers of outer space are being widened through daring space exploration.

Personal computers, television remote controls, mobile telephones, compact discs, microwave ovens and the Internet, which have become so much a part of our lives today, only appeared in the last 25 years. Daily, our world welcomes new ideas and tools that replace the old. Within the vortex of such overwhelming global developments the nations of Africa remain trapped in very disturbing conditions of illiteracy, poverty and humiliating under-development. Our people appear dazed and stupefied by their own sense of powerlessness as they wallow in a daily routine of pain and shame.

Today the battles we are fighting are not against foreign enemies attacking our land. The majority of Africa's current battles are related to development. We battle against such enemies as; Low self esteem, Mass illiteracy, Humiliating poverty, Ethno-centrism, Oppressive political regimes, Negative traditional practices, Under-developed economies, Massive brain drain, Sickesses and diseases (HIV/AIDS). The statistics for our Continent are numbing. Before today ends, 15,000 more people in our world will become infected with the HIV virus. Half of them will be between the ages of 15 and 24. More than 210 women in every 100,000 still die during childbirth each year. One hundred and eighty six children in every thousand do not live to see their fifth birthday. Malaria is still a major killer. Many continue to die from preventable diseases brought about by drinking unclean water. Can our institutions of higher learning play any role in reversing these negative trends?

The Task

Mr. Chancellor, the task before us is huge and there are no easy answers to the riddle of our Continent's continued under-development. Factors such as the assumptions and beliefs of our pre-colonial culture, the effects of colonialism and our post-colonial experiences have all conspired to break our spirit and to render us passive and unimaginative. Any society that is founded on a culture of taboos and the terror of the unseen will create a restrictive world for its people and imprison the power of their imagination. Any people who have a core assumption that some other race of people are inherently more intelligent than themselves, will mortgage their destiny for donor dependency. Any government that brutalizes its own people will reap for itself a broken people who are incapable of building a nation. That is the situation of Africa. First, our old cultural assumptions imprisoned our power of imagination. Then the colonialists came in and damaged our self-worth. After that, our own governments broke our spirits and killed our love for country. That is what I will call, 'Africa's Triple Jeopardy'.

For our Institutions of Higher Learning to address this 'triple jeopardy', they must consciously craft a curriculum content that will help us in three ways:

- Renew our old cultural assumptions
- Break the myth of African inferiority
- Restore our confidence in our Continent

Our educational philosophy must not reinforce the factors that hold us bound and captive; they must seek to liberate us.

The fundamental influences of a society's worldview and development are seen in their responses to questions that relate to these five basic issues:

1. The existence and nature of God
2. The specific nature of human persons and their purpose
3. The nature and operation of reality
4. The sources, possibilities and limits of human potential
5. The moral expectations of people and the consequences of their actions

Our understanding of, and response to these five basic issues of life are the base material we use to construct our national life. The quality of our response to these issues has a direct impact on the quality of life we can live. Sociologists tell us that human beings are both the creators and creatures of their socio-cultural environment. Although we are products of our culture value systems, whenever we recognise that our positions on these values need re-evaluation, we must have the capacity to rewrite the script to suit our modern challenges. That is where I believe institutions such as Covenant University can offer a critical intervention. We can use new knowledge, faith and patriotism to rewrite the script for this Nation and the African Continent.

Renew our old cultural assumptions

Mr. Chancellor, I wish to propose that our inability to modify our culture is one of the fundamental causes of our under-development. In his monumental book, 'The Wealth and Poverty of Nations', David Landes comes to this conclusion about the significant factors that have shaped the economies of the world; "If we learn anything from the history of economic development, it is that culture makes all the difference". He identifies culture, which he defines as 'the inner values and attitudes that guide a population', as the vital essence that shapes the choices nations have made in history and their responses to crises. Experts have predicted that unless some very radical changes occur in the way our continent responds to its challenges, we shall continue to witness an ever-widening gap between the standard of living in Africa and the rest of the industrialized world.

We must vigorously challenge our society to re-examine its deep seated beliefs and practices. We must encourage our society to look for new answers to the old questions.

Break the myth of African inferiority

Trainers and practitioners in education are uniquely positioned to directly confront the myth of African inferiority. Their profound influence in determining popular culture and the value systems of the society confers enormous responsibility on them to employ the tools of their profession with great care. The content of your curriculum, the lessons from your experiences and the passion for excellence all shape the attitudes of your students. It is sad to observe that, in the absence of innovative thought, our national debates have been confined to that which is base and uninspiring. The concepts espoused through the media and in the domain of popular culture are as meaningless as they are obscene. They entrench the old assumptions that Africans do not have the capacity to wrestle with the weightier matters of nationhood and development. Human history has shown that for any people to graduate from a dependent and subservient life into a more dominant life, the ideas that shape the choices of the people will have to be deliberately constructed. Can we use the classroom to build a positive outlook on life? Yes, we can! We can use the classroom to create a new vision and offer new possibilities to our people. We can help introduce new attitudes and ideas that will expand on the options available to us. We can provide the environment with a new development paradigm that promotes innovation, new wealth and prosperity.

Restore confidence in our Continent

Mr. Chancellor, another critical challenge we face as a Continent relates to our inability to forge one cohesive body out of our complex diversity in languages, ethnic groupings, religions and cultures. Pride in the cultural identity derived from our ethnic subcultures has become a critical obstacle to forging a beneficial national and continental identity. These difficulties are endemic on the African continent and

have fertilized the germination, growth and spread of senseless genocide on Africa's killing fields- Rwanda, Burundi, Sudan, Chad, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire, Western Sahara, Angola and Mozambique. Ethnic diversity in most African Nations has become the fault lines along which our many social tremors have occurred. As yet, our voting patterns betray the weaknesses of our nations. Almost everywhere on the continent, citizens go to the polls to vote mainly along old tribal lines. Regional efforts such as ECOWAS continue to mark time to the monotonous beat of various declarations, conventions, accords and protocols whilst our individual nations nestle in their old ancestral cocoons.

Rich opportunities in resource mobilization and deployment are insufficiently exploited as particular ethnic¹ groups claim ownership of the opportunities in their domain which they are ill-equipped to exploit on their own.

Our nations and continent have grown in population yet our unwillingness to tackle issues raised by our diversity appears to have eroded our ability to wield our numbers to our economic advantage.

Mr. Chancellor, it has been argued that ethnic and sub-cultural allegiances affect the form that economic organization takes in nations. In societies where the scope of interpersonal trust is broad, people are much more able to develop large-scale economic enterprises than those where trust is limited to family, close friends or ethnic loyalists. If this argument is correct, it has significant implications for the limits that may exist on Africa's development as a major player on the world economic scene. Ethnic motivations alone are not enough to equip us with the needed driving force and staying power in our pursuits, because true national and continental liberation requires the full deployment of our massive resources in a focused manner.

A new breed of Leaders

Mr. Chancellor, our Continent's declared intention to move from its present status of dependency, to a more favourable level of economic freedom, requires moral and ethical professors, pastors and students. It is only when we have such a capable human resource base that we can proceed to bring about changes in all the other sectors of our national lives. We must have an ethical, moral and intelligent populace to lead the effort to re-invent our continent.

The thrust of this effort must be the recruitment, training and maintenance of the key administrators of education in our land. The renewal of our educational system should not only be limited to the provision of physical infrastructure but more importantly, on an efficient, committed, highly motivated and morally upright teaching force. Students recruited into our universities should be individuals committed to excellence both in their moral lives and in their academic pursuits. These

would be offered a training programme, designed to deliver a creative and compassionate professional. The time has come for us to place morality and ethics at the centre of a modern and efficient school system.

In order to change the culture, Africa needs leaders who are able to bring hi resources that add unique value to the change effort by modeling new ways to act, think and view issues. The new leadership of our nations will make a difference if they are able to:

- Create and foster a vision of a new future
- Identify values and practices in our current culture that must change
- Initiate and lead the change
- Build shared ownership through participation for all citizens
- Communicate the changes and new cultural messages
- Create a sense of urgency and excitement for the citizens
- Reward behavior which supports the new culture

It is my full persuasion that Christian Institutions of higher learning like Covenant University can offer Africa a new path to renewal, growth and development. You are best positioned to dramatize the unity we share in Christ to a continent that is suspicious of its own brothers and sisters. You have the rich resource of the scriptures as a tool for changing the mindset of our people from dependency to productivity. You must share the story of courage and excellence that founded this institution with the rest of Africa. Your story is our story. Your success is our success. Your dreams are our dreams.

To our graduating class of 2006 I urge you to under-gird your life with character traits such as truthfulness, honesty, integrity, individual responsibility, good stewardship, humility, wisdom, justice, steadfastness, dependability, service to humanity and self-discipline. Let me conclude with seven rules to guide your path in life.

1. Be content with what you have while working for what you want
2. Remember that all success comes at a price
3. Commit yourself to quality and excellence
4. Remember that your character is the passport to your destiny
5. Seek respect rather than popularity
6. Be a good team player wherever you find yourself
7. *Trust in the LORD with all your heart, And lean not on your own understanding; In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He shall direct your paths. (Proverbs 3:5&6)*

Shalom and God bless you.

