

BOOK REVIEW

ABODUNDE, Ayodeji, *Messenger: Sydney Elton and the Making of Pentecostalism in Nigeria*. Lagos: Pierce Watershed. 2016. 479pp. ISBN 9789789497652. Hbk. \$7.99.

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Messenger is a hagiographical story of a British classical Pentecostal missionary, Sydney Granville Elton (1937–87), who spent fifty years in Nigeria working among young Nigerian Christians. Elton came out to Nigeria as a missionary of the Apostolic Church of Britain, and later broke away from the Apostolic Mission to become an independent missionary based in Ilesha, Osun State, Nigeria. This story is written by Ayodeji Abodunde, who is making an impression as a lucid writer of church history in spite of not being a trained historian. His first work was *A Heritage of Faith*, written with the same theme as *Messenger*, which is the transference of charismatic spirituality from one generation to the other.

The subtitle of *Messenger* puts the book in the current debate by scholars of Nigerian Pentecostalism. Abodunde tells us that Nigerian Pentecostalism is an importation from the west with Elton as a major catalyst of it. Thus, *Messenger* is the larger than life story of Elton, as will be shown presently. But putting the book within historiography of Pentecostalism, Abodunde has put his weight in favour of scholars who believe charismatic and Pentecostal expression of Christianity in Nigeria or Africa in general is foreign. Leading exponents of this view are Bengt Sundkler, but even more prolific on the subject is Paul Gifford.¹ It should be pointed out, however, that Gifford was speaking of the “American Gospel”, which Elton would later denounce as ruinous and corrupting (pp. 311, 313). However, other scholars, such as Ogbu Kalu, Andrew Walls, Rosalind Hackett, Allan Anderson, Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, Kwame Bediako and others, disagree and argue that Nigerian Pentecostalism began before their Western counterparts arrive in the 1930s. The *Aladura* movement and other prophet-led movements in Nigeria were Pentecostal in as far as the emphasis on the filling of the Holy Spirit as a major sign of spirituality was concerned. When they invited western Pentecostals, they did so to protect the young movements from British

1. See, for example, Paul Gifford, “The Complex Provenance of some elements of African Pentecostal Theology”, in Andre Corten and Ruth Marshall (eds), *Between Babel and Pentecost: Transnational Pentecostalism in Africa and Latina America* (London: Hurst & Company, 2001), pp. 62–79.

colonial government harassment and not to learn anything from Westerners on Christian spirituality. In fact, some leaders of what became the Christ Apostolic Church in Nigeria thought Western Pentecostal missionaries were not spiritual at all, seen in their lack of dependence on God for all aspects of life. This was major area of contention, which ultimately caused a break. But this outpouring of spiritual power was not limited to a particular place; it spread throughout Nigeria independent of Western missionaries. Richard Burgess tells us the outpouring of spirit power accompanied by repentance and “sign and wonders” broke out in Christian groups in Ibibioland (in 1927), and during and after the civil war in the eastern region of Nigeria. In northern Nigeria, there was a reoccurrence of a similar phenomenon in Gindiri (in present Plateau State of Nigeria) in 1972 with similar outcomes. These were communities that were Christianized by non-Pentecostal evangelical missionaries, who had no Pentecostal sympathy.²

Thus, the emergence of neo-Pentecostals in Nigeria in the 1980s was inspired by the need to take the African worldview seriously in dealing with spiritual forces hindering the realization of the abundance of life (a life of prosperity and success, good health and conquest of untimely death), which essentially was the concern of the Nigerian prophets of the 1900s to the 1950s. The first Nigerian neo-Pentecostal was Benson Idahosa and many followed his example. Idahosa, as Abodunde tells us, was Elton’s spiritual son. Although his creativity was not acknowledged, he created a bridge between African spiritual churches and the modern Pentecostal movement. But as we have noted above, Abodunde paints Elton as the founding father of Nigeria’s Pentecostalism. Later in the book he also showed him as working hard (criss-crossing the length and breadth of Nigeria) to create the path the spiritual movement should follow; this explains why he mourned the loss of “his dearest sons to the ‘American gospel’” (p. 320). But the “American gospel” only found an already cultivated spiritual field to grow and proliferate. This might explain why many of Idahosa’s neo-Pentecostal descendants, like David Oyedepo (of Living Faith Church), Enoch Adeboye³ (of Redeemed Christian Church of God), Mike Okwonwo (of The Redeemed Evangelical Mission) and others had sprung up out of African initiated churches to become leaders of their neo-Pentecostal churches.

These new Pentecostal groups developed a form of evangelism different from that of western Pentecostal missionaries. They emphasized church planting as against western missionary itinerant evangelism or Elton’s free-lance evangelism, a troubling development for Elton as Abodunde tells us (pp. 361–88). These developments were certainly beyond the theological and spiritual scope of western classical Pentecostalism to comprehend. This was Elton’s background

2. Richard Burgess, *Times of Refreshing: Revival and the History of Christianity in Africa* (Jos: Africa Christian Textbooks, 2008).

3. Adeboye was a member of the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) before joining the Redeemed Christian Church of God, which at that time was like the early African-initiated churches. He transformed it into a modern Pentecostal church.

which made it difficult to control even those he called his sons. As such, new Pentecostal groups in Nigeria also called “new generation” churches were a re-emergence of the earlier African spiritual churches (Aladura) coated in western modernism. Or as Kalu put it, the African prophetic groups and the new generation churches “use the same maps of the universe – even if they colour them differently.”⁴

The *Messenger* has provided a good history of the conflicts and controversies in the campuses of Nigerian universities surrounding spirituality and strategies for evangelism – a subject that is yet to be given adequate attention by church historians. Abodunde needed to be more critical and analytical in his presentation of the subject of his story, a very difficult position to take when an author is not detached from the story. Again, scholars who aspire to write history should provide a historiographic perspective for such a piece of historical re-construction. History is not written in a vacuum. Lastly, Abodunde showed a lack of familiarity with the literature on Western missionary presence in Nigeria when he writes that Elton “laboured the longest in the country since Thomas Birch Freeman” (p. 1). Dr Walter S. Miller of the Church Missionary Society served as a missionary in northern Nigeria for 52 years (1900–1952)!

4. Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 74.