

**CHARLES EDWIN SMITH:**

**A Visionary Missionary**

by

Isaiah O. Olatoyan, D.Miss.

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### **Introduction**

The importance of theological education in Christian missions cannot be overemphasized. It has far-reaching results on every aspect of the Christian ministry. Of course, one might be tempted to argue that the term, “theological education” is not written anywhere in the Bible. A careful reading of the Book of Matthew 28: 18-20, where we have the most detailed account concerning the mandate of the Great Commission can give us an answer. In this passage, we see that “theological education” is implied. For instance, the clauses, “Go and make disciples of all nations” and “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you”, help us to know that theological training is an integral part of the Christian missions.

In the early church, we see that theological instruction played a vital role. The disciples gathered together regularly for the purpose of exhorting one another and instructing new converts in the teachings of their Master, Jesus Christ (Acts 2: 42, 46; 5: 12; 6: 3 and 4). In the same vein, the apostle Paul expressly instructed Timothy, his beloved son in the Lord, to devote himself to the study of the Word, to teach, preach, and to commit the same to trustworthy men, who will in turn teach others (1 Tim 4: 1, 2, 13-16; 2 Tim 2: 1-2).

Also, down the lane of history, we see that Christian missions and theological education go hand-in-hand. Various missionary societies, for effective and enduring Christian

ministry, engaged in theological training in different places of their mission endeavors. For instance, William Carey, the father of modern Missions, and Duff realized that without the establishment of schools, it would be difficult (if not impossible) to achieve permanent results in their missionary work.<sup>1</sup>

Similar to what Carey and Duff did, the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptists in America used the establishment of network of schools in Central Africa (now Nigeria) as one of the most important means of developing and maturing Baptist churches. Through the evangelistic activities of the said network of schools, especially the Seminary, many people came to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. Thus, for over a hundred years, education remained one of the major approaches through which the Southern Baptists employed to evangelize Nigeria.<sup>2</sup>

Thomas Jefferson Bowen (the first white Baptist missionary in Central Africa<sup>3</sup>) who spearheaded the Southern Baptists work in Nigeria first demonstrated his belief that educational work would be an effective means for the evangelization of the Africans. His theory was that a network of schools should be set up in strategic centers as training schools for pastors, teachers, and industrial workers. He believed that on completion of their training, these natives would effect the evangelization of their fellow Africans.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Man and the Vision**

The stalwart Southern Baptist missionary who first caught the vision of theological education within the Baptist faith in Nigeria was Missionary Charles Edwin Smith. He was appointed on March 20, 1884 by the Foreign Missions Board of the Southern Baptist Convention

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<sup>1</sup>S. G. Pinnock, *The Romance of Missions in Nigeria* (Richmond, Virginia: Foreign Mission Board, Southern Baptist Convention, 1917), 133.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas O'Connor High, "A History of Educational Work Related to the Nigerian Baptist Convention 1850-1959" (Th.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1960), ix.

<sup>3</sup>I. A. Adedoyin, *Moses Oladejo Stone and the Beginning of Baptist Work in Nigeria* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Nigerian Baptist Bookstore Ltd., 1998), VI, 15.

<sup>4</sup>High, "A History of Educational Work," 3.

(USA) to serve as a missionary in Nigeria (at the time the Southern Baptist missionaries arrived in 1850, the present day Nigeria was then known as Central Africa.)<sup>5</sup> On October 15, 1884, Rev. C. E. Smith in company of other missionaries, (Rev. S. M. Cook and Rev. W. W. and Mrs. Harvey) sailed for Nigeria. This group of missionaries reached Lagos, Nigeria on December 15, 1884.<sup>6</sup> It is disheartening, however, to note that of these four SBC missionaries who made it to Nigeria in 1884, only Smith survived.<sup>7</sup>

By the time Missionary Smith arrived on the mission field in October 1884, he found himself shouldering more and more the leadership responsibility of the mission.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, Smith not only survived, but gave 25 years of his life to the Baptist mission work in Nigeria and pointed the way that later theological education in Nigeria was to follow.<sup>9</sup> For 19 years he was in charge of the mission work in Ogbomoso where his name was closely associated with the churches and schools. His passion for the work of the ministry made him so popular among the native Christians, who gave him the name “Baba agba” (i.e., aged father).<sup>10</sup>

Missionary Smith shared the same view with Bowen that a trained national leadership was necessary for the evangelization of the Africans.<sup>11</sup> He then gathered some Nigerian adults around himself and taught them the Bible at his own expense. Smith did this in keeping with the vision of his predecessors and particularly his own conviction that effective missionary work is best enhanced when converts could read the Bible on their own. The pioneering members of his

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<sup>5</sup>T. J. Bowen, *Central Africa: Adventures and Missionary Labors in Several Countries in the Interior of Africa from 1849 to 1856* (New York: Sheldon Blackman & Company, 1857), 42. See H. A. Tupper, *The Foreign Missions of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Richmond, VA: Foreign Mission Board of Southern Baptist Convention, 1880), 369.

<sup>6</sup>George W. Sadler, *A Century in Nigeria* (Nashville: Broadman, 1950), 94. See Louis M. Duval, *Baptist Missions in Nigeria* (Richmond, VA: Education Department Foreign Mission Board of Southern Baptist Convention, 1928), 110.

<sup>7</sup>Sadler, *A Century in Nigeria*, 94-96.

<sup>8</sup>High, “A History of Educational Work,” 31.

<sup>9</sup>C. Sylvester Green, *New Nigeria: Southern Baptists at Work in Africa* (Richmond, VA: Foreign Mission Board of Southern Baptist Convention, 1936), 75.

<sup>10</sup>Pinnock, *The Romance of Missions in Nigeria*, 112-16.

<sup>11</sup>Sadler, *A Century in Nigeria*, 94.

class were: James Odetayo, Philip Atanda, and David Aworinde.<sup>12</sup> He began the training classes with these students at Oke Oshupa Chapel on May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1898.<sup>13</sup> The curriculum he designed for his students included student preaching in villages and city streets.

In 1902, he moved the classes to a two story structure as the Baptist Training Institute. These three later served in different places as evangelists to their own people. Thus, the beginning of theological education in Nigeria in general, and the present Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomoso in particular can be traced back to these three individuals Smith brought up at his own expense.<sup>14</sup> At first, Smith's employer (FMB of the Southern Baptist) could not see any sense in what he was doing. Yet Smith chose to invest his life and resources on his students. Later on, Smith expanded the scope of the training by introducing a three-year course of Bible study with a number of young men. In the report sent to the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptists in Richmond, Virginia in 1898, Smith wrote:

I have tried to do something in the way of training school, but as a matter of fact, it is only an ordinary primary school, with only one teacher . . . I have kept up a class in the school in Bible study all the year.<sup>15</sup>

The following year (i.e., 1899), Smith reported:

I have had a class of adults in training for Christian work most of the year. There have been three most of the times. The study has been entirely in the New Testament, and learning to write . . . We have gone through the four Gospels, Romans, and most of the 1 Corinthians . . . I hope after three years, these men will be useful workers.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Pinnock, *The Romance of Missions in Nigeria*, 143-144. See High, "A History of Educational Work," 21.

<sup>13</sup> International Mission Board (IMB) Archives Department, Richmond, VA: through Jim Berwick on Wednesday February 5, 2014 via e-mail.

<sup>14</sup> Isaiah O. Olatoyan, "A History of Theological Education Related to Baptist Work in Nigeria" (Paper Presented in George Martin's History of Christian Missions Seminar at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, November 2006), 10.

<sup>15</sup> High, "A History of Educational Work," 21, 22. See Annual Report of the Foreign Mission Board, (Proceedings, Southern Baptist Convention, 1898), xxx

<sup>16</sup> High, "A History of Educational Work," 22.

Thankfully, Smith's employer finally reasoned with him concerning his theological education program. In 1899, theological work of the Baptist Mission, which Smith introduced among the Yoruba of Nigeria was officially approved by the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptists and placed on a sound financial basis.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, we need to remember that the name "The Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary" was not employed at the very beginning. It was in 1912 that Smith's preachers training class was formally changed to the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary.<sup>18</sup>

Also, we should not forget that the training of the Baptist Mission station workers in Nigeria did not follow a systematic approach of normal education system at the beginning. Instead, Smith and other pioneer missionaries simply followed the example of the great "Teacher", Jesus Christ. They got together men, who felt the call of God upon their lives, taught them, and sent them out in the power of the Holy Spirit as bearers of the gospel's light to their own people.<sup>19</sup> With time, the method developed into a formal and systematic system of education and after several changes in location, Ogbomoso was considered as being the proper location for the Seminary.<sup>20</sup>

### **The Man and His Passion for Missions**

For 19 years in Ogbomoso Smith demonstrated his evangelistic zeal and ability. He started a number of churches within Ogbomoso and in the outlying areas.<sup>21</sup> Smith's conviction on the need to train new converts how to read the Bible was so strong that even when he was away to Abeokuta Mission station in 1886 for honey-moon shortly after his marriage (with former Miss Cynthia Morris), he built a church and organized a school before he returned to his

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid, 22.

<sup>18</sup>International Mission Board (IMB) Archives Department. See High, "A History of Educational Work," 273.

<sup>19</sup>Sadler, *A Century in Nigeria*, 129.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid, 130.

<sup>21</sup>Travis Collins, *The Baptist Mission of Nigeria 850-1993* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Oluseyi, 1993), 34.

station in Ogbomoso.<sup>22</sup> In deed, there is no doubt that Smith made theological education to stand out in the development of the work of Southern Baptists in Nigeria.

By way of acting out the message of reconciliation he preached, Smith convened a conference in 1888 and 1889 titled, “Native Workers Conference.” The purpose of the conference was to reconcile the Independent and Mission Baptists<sup>23</sup> in order to establish a formidable Nigerian Baptist Convention. Smith intended the conference to be an annual event by which the workers of the Baptist Mission churches would have the opportunity to meet for prayer and edification. The meeting was to be convened concurrently with the annual meeting of the Baptist Mission of Nigeria so as to foster unity between the missionaries and their fellow Nigerian converts.<sup>24</sup> S. G. Pinnock who described Smith as an ideal missionary said:

He could teach school and make bricks and ties; he could make hymn books and set bones; he could write and translate books and cultivate a farm; he could preach the gospel in the vernacular from a buggy of his own construction; indeed there was practically nothing that he could not turn his hand to.<sup>25</sup>

Another early missionary of the Baptist Mission, George W. Sadler, who described Smith as a “many-sided man,” commented on his missionary activities and achievements thus:

He gave himself to the building program when he moved to Ogbomoso. He also concerned himself with the matter of education. It should be first, merely elementary for the children of Christians, without reference to their becoming preachers; and second, the training of those who wish training as preachers. Later he organized our first institution for the training of African pastors. Even as a builder

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<sup>22</sup>Sadler, *A Century in Nigeria*, 97.

<sup>23</sup>Adedoyin, *Moses Oladejo Stone*, 19–30. In March 1888, a schism broke out in the Missionary Church (First Baptist Church, Lagos) between the pastor of the church, Missionary W. J. David and some Nigerian church members over what the latter considered to be unfair treatment against the first licensed Nigerian pastor, Moses Oladejo Stone. The incident caused Stone and his sympathizers to breakaway from First Baptist, Lagos, and form the first Native Baptist Church in Nigeria, Ebenezer Baptist Church, Lagos. See Louis M. Duval, *Baptist Missions in Nigeria* (Richmond, Virginia: Education Department Foreign Mission Board Southern Baptist Convention, 1928), 157.

<sup>24</sup>Collins, *The Baptist Mission of Nigeria*, 27.

<sup>25</sup>Pinnock, *The Romance of Missions in Nigeria*, 112.

and an educator, he sounded the note of evangelism...He appointed a special meeting for prayer for the gift of the Holy Spirit and for the conversion of sinners...the Ij[e]ru Baptist Church was organized. For many years this has been one of our strongest churches in Africa.<sup>26</sup>

### **Life and Ministry Time-Line**

- Charles Edwin Smith was born in Conway, Massachusetts in United States of America on July 1, 1852. He was baptized in Marshalltown, Iowa in 1867. After his college education at Judson University, Judsonia, Arkansas, Smith felt the call of God and proceeded to The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky His seminary education took him two and half years (1881-1884).
- He first demonstrated a strong passion for missions when he was involved in a program called, “African American evangelism.” He worked there as a Bible teacher and Sunday school worker from 1877-1881. Smith’s dream for foreign missionary work came to a reality when the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention appointed him to serve as a missionary in Nigeria on March 20, 1884.<sup>27</sup> He set out on his missionary journey to Nigeria on October 15, 1884 and arrived on December 15, 1884.<sup>28</sup>
- Smith left his country with his wife, Mrs. Smith, but she died on the way to Africa. When the news of her death reached her friend, Miss Cynthia Morris, in Kentucky, Cynthia made up her mind to take the place of the fallen missionary. She headed for Nigeria and became the second Mrs. Smith on March 1, 1886.<sup>29</sup>
- In September 1889, Rev. & Mrs. Smith went down from Ogbomoso to Lagos to meet the newly arrived missionaries from America (Rev. & Mrs. Newton and Rev. & Mrs. Lumbley). While they were preparing to return to Ogbomoso, Mrs. Smith was stricken

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<sup>26</sup>Sadler, *A Century in Nigeria*, 111.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 94.

<sup>28</sup>Duval, *Baptist Missions in Nigeria*, 110.

<sup>29</sup>Collins, *The Baptist Mission of Nigeria*, 16.

with black water fever and died three days later.<sup>30</sup> With this sad event, C. E. Smith witnessed the death of two lovely wives in the course of his missionary work in Nigeria.

- During his furlough in 1890/1891, Smith got married to former Miss Lucy Shenstone. They sailed for Nigeria in August, 1891. The missionary couple served their Lord and Savior faithfully until the time of their retirement on July 15, 1909.<sup>31</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Prior to Smith's arrival in 1884, the Nigerian Baptist had just one ordained minister (Moses Ladejo Stone) but today the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary is sending hundreds of well-trained ministers out into the field every year. Without any doubt, Smith was a visionary missionary. He caught the vision for theological education and labored for it for about two decades in Ogbomoso and thereby pointed the way that later theological education in Nigeria was to follow.<sup>32</sup>

If somehow, T. J. Bowen, W. H. Clarke, Moses L. Stone, and C. E. Smith could visit the large churches of the Baptist faith in Nigeria and understand how God has used Nigerian Christians to propagate the gospel of Jesus Christ all over Nigeria and beyond, their hearts surely would overflow with joy and gratitude to God for using them in the inception of Baptist work in Nigeria.

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<sup>30</sup>Sadler, *A Century in Nigeria*, 98.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 110. See International Mission Board (IMB) Archives Department

<sup>32</sup>Pinnock, *The Romance of Missions in Nigeria*, 112.



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#### **Unpublished Material**

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