

# Christians' Response to Persecution: Its Implications to Contemporary Churches in Nigeria

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**Abstract** - *The series of crises reported daily on local, national and international media on killing and destruction of Christians and properties worth millions of naira is alarming. Christian persecution in today's world has taken a dangerous trend that warrants academic discourse. Persecution has become a serious challenge which has turned to global threat. The church has suffered much security challenges from people of opposing religious faith, who felt threatened by the unique presence of God, convincing miracles, power-oriented and dominating spirituality, unparalleled missionary spirit, and more significantly, her particularistic doctrinal claims. The paper appraisingly evaluates the response of the church in the Bible, especially in the New Testament during the time of Apostles in (Acts 4:23-31). For this reason, this paper adopted historic narrative and exegetical approaches. The paper, postulates re-integrating, internalizing and implementing the importance of prayer, unity, righteous living and boldness in the contemporary church. This paper discusses how Christians should respond during the time of persecution from within and without and proffer recommendations that will reduce to barest minimum the persecution of Christian throughout the world.*

**Keywords:** *Christians' Response, Persecution, and church.*

## INTRODUCTION

The Bible records persecution of God's people in both the Old and New Testaments. Neighboring tribes such as the Philistines and Amalekites instantly attacked the ancient Jew because they rejected idolatry and worship the one true God (1 Sam. 2-10). When they were backsliding, the Jews persecuted their own prophets, who were trying to bring them back. The Pharisees persecuted Jesus because he did not follow their man-made legalism. Following Christ death, resurrection and ascension, organized persecution of the early church started. One of its most zealous opponents was Saul of Tarsus, later known as the Apostle Paul. After Paul converted to Christianity and became a missionary, the Roman empire began to terrorize Christians. Paul was beheaded by order of the emperor Nero, and the Apostle Peter was reported to have been crucified upside down in a Roman arenas. Killing Christians turned into a form of entertainment in Rome, as believers were executed in the stadium by wild animals, tortured, and being set on fire [1].

Systemic persecution against Christian ended in the Roman Empire about 313 A. D, when the emperor Constantine 1 signed the edict of Nolan, guaranteeing freedom of religion to all people. From that time forward, Christians still have been persecuted all over the world. Many early protestants who broke from the catholic church were imprisoned and burned at stake [1]. Christian missionaries have been killed in Africa, Asia, and the middle East. Christians were imprisoned and killed during the Holocaust of Nazi in Germany and the Soviet Union. Today, the non-profit organization voice of martyrs tracks Christian persecution in China, Muslims countries, and throughout the world.

In the contemporary world, Religion and security challenges are major global theme. "Most" atrocities perpetuated in the world today, most societal crises, most opposition to peaceful co-existence in the world, are engineered by religious fanaticism"[2]. One can say to a large extent that of all the world religions, Christianity is the most persecuted.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study aimed at examining the Christian Church's response to persecution and its implications to contemporary churches in Nigeria. Specifically, it aimed to trace the historic beginnings of persecutions in the early Christian church; to determine the response of the early Christians towards persecution; to trace the historic beginnings of religious persecution in Nigeria; and to cite the implications of the findings to contemporary Christian church in Nigeria.

## Persecution in the Early Church

Christianity was originally considered as a synonym of Judaism, and so, it enjoyed considerable sympathy and acceptance within the Roman Empire. Nevertheless, there was conflict subsequently. According to Fatokun [3] when Christianity first came, it was considerably favored by the policy of Pax Romana simply because of its correlation with Judaism. Even there were Christians in the imperial palace as Philippians 4:22 reveals. The Romans could probably not at first appreciate in the disparity between the Jews who practiced Judaism which was a *religio licita* in the empire and the Christian Jew (Acts 18:12-17). However, later, due to jealousy by the Jews of the rapid spread of Christianity, they made known to the Roman authorities the difference between the followers of the Mosaic Law and the followers of Jesus of Nazareth [3]. The resultant effect of this was that persecution set in apparently because of certain factors which according to Fatokun[3], include the followings amongst others. The first point is ignorance. Christianity was seen as an enigmatic religion and as a result would be a great threat to the peace of the empire if allowed to spread its tentacles. It is probable that the Roman authorities could not draw a clear line of demarcation between religion and governance. Fatokun [3] further stated, they saw the growth and development of Christians as unduly fanatical as they tended to segregate themselves from the general public, abstaining from mundane things of life, -they would not attend public shows or theatre. They maintained a very sound moral rectitude. The cumulative effects of these were that the Roman Empire branded Christianity as *religion illicita* as Christians were not desirous to participate in state religion. They scorned the Roman gods as mere handworks of men and helpless idols. They also refused to burn incense or offer sacrifice to the

Emperor. In its stead, the professed faith in an invisible God and Christ His son who they claimed died for their sins [3].

Similarly, the refusal of Christians to join the Roman army infuriated the authorities. Rather than joined the Roman army, they referred to themselves as "Soldiers of Christ". They were thus seen as trying to equate themselves with the Roman authorities. Closely related to this is the issue of cannibalism. Christians spoke of drinking the blood and eating the flesh of Christ during the Holy Communion. The Roman authorities did not know that it was only symbolic: rather they misconstrued this to mean pragmatic involvement in cannibalism which invariably necessitated the seemingly unavoidable persecution of Christians. Akin to this was the issue of incest. According to Fatokun [3], because the outsiders who usually heard them calling themselves brothers and sisters were often shocked each time they saw them getting married to one another. They wondered how people of the same family could be getting married to each other instead of marrying from outside. As a result of this, they looked down on them as incestuous.

Also, the organization of the church which was based on hierarchy attracted the suspicion of the state. The church was becoming better organized with ordained bishops, presbyters and deacons at the helm of affairs. The Christians strongly respected those officials even more than the Emperor. Also, the appointment of deacons and presbyters demanded swearing an oath of allegiance to the bishop and church doctrine. The Christians preferred to obey the law of the church even such clashed with the law of the state. Similarly, they preferred to obey the dictates of their bishops to that of the Empire [3].

Besides, Christianity which was albeit budding was considered having the potential to be highly burgeoning. Again, Christianity was hated and persecuted because of the youngness of the faith itself in comparison with the ancient religions of the Empire. Hence the Romans despised it as an inferior religion with inferior doctrines. The name the devotees of the religion were called as well provoked hatred. They were addressed after Christ (*Chrestu*) often confused by the Roman with the adjective *Chrestu* – (good, kind) whom the Romans believed to have suffered death as a felon and as well a man of questionable personality [3].

The above enumerated, some of which were

considered as 'ineptitudes' or 'misdemeanor', inevitably compelled the Roman authorities to castigate and or chastise Christians, Again, according to Fatokun[3], the punitive measures taken on them include incarceration, banishment to lonely islands (e.g. John's banishment to the Isle of patmos), confiscation of property, enslavement, crucifixion, decapitation, etc. However, open persecution was not always constant but sporadic, depending on the state of mind of the ruling Emperor and events during his reign. Fatokun [3] goes on to enthuse thus:

Christians were sought for, tortured and executed. Before execution, they were used to amuse the people –some were dressed in furs to be killed by dogs, some crucified, some beheaded, some burnt alive, some exposed to wild beasts. It was during this period that Peter was crucified (with head upside down) and Paul beheaded. [3], as a troublesome character, a disturber of the Roman peace [4].

The persecution of Christian in the Early church was quite disturbing and intriguing. Christians were subjected to agonizing trauma and subsequently killed in ignoble ways. The best they could do was to run away to preclude annihilation.

### **Overview of Religious Persecution in Nigeria**

Prior to 1980s, there existed cases of religious persecution tension in Nigeria. There was a dangerous re-awaking of persecution, which assumed a serious dimension. Religious conflicts and associated violence translated into inter-religious confrontation in some areas as well as assigned an ethnic and regional character [5]. According to Akanni [6], "The rivalry between Christianity and Islam is known to all. This is occasioned, basically, by the attempts of each of the two religions to have the greater percentage of the people of the world". Perhaps, the above statement is the key reason for the persecution among the world religions.

According to Adebayo [7], in spite of the numerous security agencies put in place in Nigeria, there seems to be nothing to write home about in the nation's security situation. The rate at which religion organizations are being persecuted needs attention of scholars. In most cases, Christians always been at the receiving end. The persecution faced by Christians in the contemporary time all over the world cannot be

over-emphasized. In defense of the name of Christ, the Christians hold tenaciously unto it as the sole name by which human beings can be saved, Christians from all walks of life face sundry persecution challenges by fanatical Muslims and some adherents of other religious faiths and philosophical ideologies [2].

Both print and electronic media are full of reports of gruesome murders of Christians, especially in Muslim dominated villages, towns, cities and nations of the world. Christianity as a religion and its adherents have grossly suffered persecution in the country. The generally acknowledged first religious crisis in Nigeria according to Olutola and Fatokun [2] was dated back to 1987 arising from misunderstanding among Christians and Muslims at the College of Education, Kafanchan, Kaduna state, which soon spread to other part of the state leading to the burning of places of worship, with many lives and properties worth million of naira lost [2].

The most amazing in the first decade of the twenty-first century was Jos crisis, which started in 2001 leading to the loss of many lives and destruction of properties of many Christians. According to Clark [8], "whenever there is no legal protection in place to prevent it, the powerful are able to prey on the powerless." But the above assertion doesn't always happen. The powerful sometimes, in some places, choose not to prey on the powerless even though there's nothing to stop them. Sometime the powerful are quite nice, allowing the powerless to enjoy a modicum of freedom and property while living relatively unmolested. But such benevolence is unreliable. Benevolence is never sufficient as the only constraint on the powerful. The only way to guarantee freedom and personal safety for the powerless is by enshrining that guarantee in a frame work of law that protects the rights of all, including the powerless. This is what all needed to know to understand any form of religious persecution or religious conflicts. The persecuting of religious minorities occurs whenever the rights and freedoms of minorities are not guaranteed by law but are contingent on which faction holds power.

The persecution of Christians of Nigeria dated back to the days or period of the missionaries. According to Ajayi[9] Missionaries were often harassed, captured and detained, thus disrupting their evangelical assignment. Owadayo [10] and Ayegboyin, 2008 records that Crowther faced hostility

from both the local natives and the commercial companies. Crowther was persecuted in his attempt at laying the solid foundation of the church or mission at Ghebe. He saw its position on the confluence to be of vital importance to the promotion of trade up the Niger. He noted in his journal that the people of Ghebe were willing to hear the Good News. He was very sad on one occasion to learn from reports coming in from Lokoja that the place (Ghebe) had been plundered after being destroyed with fire. Owadayo [10] records the ory of Crowther:

Bishop Crowther once fell victim to the treachery of his one time friend, Chief Abokko. He and his son Dandeson visited the chief in his Oko-Okien village on one of his journeys up the Niger in 1867. Abokko ordered his men to clear Crowther's boat of all cargo. His personal luggage, apparel, etc, were removed. Bishop Crowther and his men spent the night naked outside. Abokko claimed that he regarded it as an offence for the English merchant to refuse to recognize him as the superintendent of the board of trade in the part of the river. (p.40).

It was not only Crowther that suffered persecution. There were other gory stories of suppression and oppression of the missionaries. Narrating a given ordeal, Owadayo states that:

On Sunday, 13<sup>th</sup> October, 1867, all the denominational churches in Abeokuta were not only attacked but the members who were ready for services were stripped. This was nothing short of rampage carried out in the manner that was outrageously immodest. It was called Ifole War, the missionaries fled the town. The wave of persecution soon spread to Bonny. The protomarty of Bonny was Joshua Hart whose only offence was that he had renounced his idols to worship the only true God. He was arrested on his way to the church on Sunday. Tormented and was told to participate in idolatrous rites, to which he objected. Joshua's hands and feet were tied and he was thrown into a stream. He kept praying that God should forgive his persecutors. He was finally stabbed to death with a sharp-pointed pole. There were other numerous cases of others who suffered privately. (p.39-40).

It should be noted that the persecution of missionaries was mostly done by practitioners of traditional religion who felt that Christianity came to usurp their adherents. It is pertinent to conjecture here that leading figures of the traditional religion had clients and or patients that they were looking after or who were consulting them on fees. However, Christianity came with the ideal of "free you are given and free you must give" (Matt. 10:8). With this, the traditionalists felt impugned unduly and consequently decided to persecute the missionaries. New converts were not spared. Buttressing this allusion, Mckenzie opines that, "by and large, it was the converts who bore the main brunt of persecution when it broke out". Mckenzie in Goriawala [11] goes on to postulate thus:

Persecution of early Nigerian converts is known to have started as early as 1538 in the Kingdom of Benin. But the main series of out breaks took place during the second wave of European expansion, mainly between the years 1848 and 1916, by which time British colonial rule was becoming firmly established and initiating what we might call counter-persecution of traditional Nigerian religions. The straight persecution of Christian converts by indigenous authorities continues thereafter only locally in the more isolated and remote areas of the country. (p.3).

The persecution of converts was equally noticed even when African church leaders sprang up. According to Olayiwola [12] the spectacular evangelism by prophet Joseph Ayo Babalola brought with it a wave of persecutions to all who rushed into the new faith. The prophet himself was not spared of the orgy of persecution. Babalola retreated to his home town in Odo-Owa for more spiritual strength. While he was at Odo-Owa, a warrant of arrest was issued from Ilorin on him. He was arrested for preaching against witches, a practice which had caused some trouble in Otuo in present Bendel state (now Edo State). He was sentenced to jail for six months in Benin City on March, 1932. After serving the jail term, he went back to Efon-Alaye, where he continued with his peripathetic ministry [12].

The persecution of Christians has been ceaseless. According to McKenzie [11], it would be strange if the Christian community in Nigerian numbering today well over twenty millions, should have

emerged without any record of persecution. In fact, we do find a number of references to persecutions and doubtless many others, buried in archival material or preserved in local tradition, will come to light in the course of time. What we do not have yet it seems, is any work specifically devoted to these persecutions. Ampitan, [13] in McKenzie: 1998) in the contemporary days, the major persecutors of Christians are essentially Muslims, and this is predicated on the age-long enmity between them. According to Shipler [14].

The enmity started when the Jews were under the impression that Moses was the last prophet. In the Torah, there is a prophecy telling, that another prophet for the Jews will come after Moses... the Jews thought that the new prophet was going to be Jewish. When Mohammed came with the message of Islam, he was first of all, an Arab, not a Jew. Mohammed fulfilled all the criteria written in the Torah. They were disappointed and shocked. From that point, the enmity stated toward Mohammed and Islam and his followers. Every time Mohammed had a truce with them, the Jews used to violate that truce, and the Jews got that reputation – as violators of agreement (p.167).

Many Christian have been hacked to death by Islamic fundamentalists. The fanatics are so mindless that they not only killed Christians in their scores, but callously burn down churches. Fanaticism implies the behavior, the character or the ideas of showing unreasonable keenness for some religious beliefs. Religious fanaticism could be violent, irrational, unreasonable in the display of religious community enthusiasm [15], Religious fanaticism which had triggered mindless blood-letting and wanton destruction of property and human lives, is becoming increasingly a negative factor in the Nigerian nation [15]. The unacceptable scenario of maiming has been on spasmodically with government doing little or absolutely nothing about the ugly incidences. And since the bigots are not sternly checked, they rather carry out their heinous acts with impunity. In fact, they have taken the massacre of Christians as something that should be carried out probably spontaneously, mindful of the very fact that it would be done without any repercussion. Buttressing this allusion, Opoola states that , it is surprising that

offenders are not punished in any form. The government only compensates the affected group when necessary (Opoola 2010). Sine Christian are always having it at the back of their minds that they are not to avenge because vengeance belongs to God (Rom, 12:19), their persecutors who have the injunctions “Holy fighting in Allah’s cause is ordained for you (Mualims)”. Sura 11:216; “so obey not the disbelievers, but strive against them” (Sura 25:52), have taken it as a license to perpetually humiliate and subdue them. The intent of the persecutors of Christians is to consistently put them under their hegemony, since they are not oblivious of the fact that Christians will never take-up arms against them in self-defence. What is often found is Christians running away for the avoidance of annihilation while their persecutors chase them ceaselessly.

In the contemporary days, according to Opoola, (2010) Christianity and Islam contend for recognition and dominance, with Islam struggling tooth and nail to exterminate Christianity. Consequently, it is quite evident that religious crises have become a regular phenomenon in Nigeria. These crises erupted because people do not want to acknowledge the right of individual to practice his or her religious beliefs and tenets. The problems have caused a breakdown in the religious, political and socio-economic stability of the country. Times without number, adherents of different religious groups engaged in conflicts which had resulted into loss of lives and properties (Opoola 2010). Thus, fanaticism has some what become the order of the day in a country that is secular in nature. According to Ampitan in Apenda, [15], these religious fanatics have built up tension in the country thereby bringing about disunity and retrogression as religion has become potent instrument of demobilization, destabilization and propaganda. Some of these group of unpatriotic people have been known to create mayhem in the guise of protecting their religious identities. According to Oyelade (2011) the definitions and views about Islam explain why Muslims voluntarily decide to die for it. It is in the defense of Islam, not people per se, that Muslims enter or generate religious conflicts and violence. The Quran not only enjoins Muslims to submit absolutely to Allah, it also commands them to subdue people of other faith or religions until they are in full state of submission to

Islamic rule (Sura XXII:78). It is on the strength of this that some fanatics do not care to die for the course of Islam, basically because of the indoctrination that, when they die, they will go to al-Janah (heaven). Thus they make sure that they instigate crises, with the slightest provocation, so as to kill without having any respect for their own lives. Apenda [15] records the catalogue of religious crises in Nigeria within two decades:

Over the past twenty years, Islam has developed such aggressiveness to the extent that it will like to obliterate Christianity from Nigeria as a whole. The period experienced many socio-cultural and political gestures which assumed the form of religious sentiments and overtimes. The destruction and killings by these religious bigots and extremists is what has characterized the Nigerian society [13].

Table 1. Illustration of the synopsis of diverse religious related crises in Nigeria over the years:

NO	TOWN	STATE	DATE	NATURE
1.	Kano	Kano	1980	Maitasine riot Intra-religious crisis
2.	Maiduguri	Boron	1982	Muslim/Christian crisis
3.	Kaduna Tundunwada	Kaduna	1983	Muslim/ Christian crisis
4.	Yola	Gongola	1984	Muslim/ Christian crisis
5.	Kafachan	Kaduna	March 6-10, 1987	Muslim/ Christian crisis
6.	Bauchi	Kaduna	March 1998	Muslim/ Christian fight at Kaduna Polytechnic
7.	Bauchi	Bauchi	June 1990	Muslim/ Christian (secondary school student fight over worship)
8.	Bauchi	Bauchi	April 2, 1991	Demonstration by Muslims
9.	Kano	Kano	Oct. 14, 1991	Muslim youth riot against Reinhard Bonnke's Revival in Kano
10.	Jalingo	Taraba	March 1992	Jukun/Hausa riot (Guardian Agu. 9, 1992)
11.	Imosan	Osun	Nov, 9, 1999	Hausa/Fulain, Muslims vs. Oro cult members. It started as an ethnic clash and ended up in a religious clash
12.	Ishaga/Onipanu Ikorodu	Lagos	Nov. 11,1999	Itsekiri vs. Urhobo (ethnic clash)
13.	Ilorin/Offa	Kwara	Dec, 9, 1999	Hausa/Fulani, Muslim vs. Christians.
14.	Oyo	Oyo	Jan, 5, 2000	Reprisal violence on Hausa/Fulani Muslims. This came as a result of an earlier attack on Christians
15.	Kaduna	Kaduna	Feb, 21, 2000	Hausa/Fulani vs. others after the introduction of Sharia legal system
16.	Aba/Umuahia	Abia	Feb, 28, 2000	Reprisal violence on Hausa/ Fulani Muslim vs. Christians. This came as a result of an earlier attack on Christians.
17.	Saki	Oyo	April 24,2000	Hausa/ Fulani Muslim vs. Christians.
18.	Saki	Oyo	May 6, 2000	Hausa/ Fulani Muslim vs. Yoruba
19.	Kaduna	Kaduna	May 20, 2000	Hausa/ Fulani Muslim vs. other tribes who were Christians
20.	Kano	Kano	July 12, 2000	Hausa/ Fulani Muslim vs. Yoruba Christians.
21.	Shagamu	Ogun	July 18, 2000	Hausa/ Fulani Muslim vs. Yoruba Christians.
22.	Mile 2	Lagos	Oct. 15, 2000	Hausa/ Fulani Muslim vs. Yoruba Christians.
23.	Ibadan	Oyo	Oct. 16, 2000	Hausa/ Fulani Muslim vs. Yoruba Christians.
24.	Alaba	Lagos	Oct. 16, 2000	Hausa/ Fulani Muslim vs. Igbo Christians.
25.	Alaba	Lagos	Oct. 17, 2000	Spillover Hausa/ Fulani Muslim vs. Odua, Christians.
26.	Ilorin	Kwara	Oct. 17, 2000	Hausa/ Fulani Muslim vs. Yoruba Christians.
27.	Minna	Niger	Oct. 17, 2000	Nupe/ Hausa/ Fulani Muslim vs. Yoruba Christians.
28.	Lagos	Lagos	Nov. 25, 2000	Hausa/ Fulani Muslim vs. Yoruba
29.	Tafa-Balewa	Bauchi	June 18, 2000	Hausa/ Fulani Muslim vs. other religious groups
30.	Gombe	Gombe	June 18, 2001	Hausa/ Fulani Muslim vs. others

Table 1(cont). Illustration of the synopsis of diverse religious related crises in Nigeria over the years

31.	Birnin Gwari	Kaduna	Aug. 8, 2001	Hausa/ Fulani Muslim vs. Christians.
32.	Jos	Plateau	Sept. 7, 2001	Hausa/ Fulani Muslim vs. Birom and other religious groups
33.	Gusau	Zamfara	Oct. 8, 2001	Hausa/ Fulani Muslim vs. other religious groups
34.	Kano	Kano	Oct. 12, 2001	Hausa/ Fulani Muslim vs. Yoruba Christians.
35.	Osogbo	Osun	Nov. 29, 2001	Religious Fundamentalists vs. Christians Before Reinhard Bonnke
36.	Idi-Araba	Lagos	Nov. 22, 2002	Hausa/ Fulani Muslim vs. Yoruba Christians.
37.	Idi-Araba	Lagos	Nov.13, 2002	Hausa/ Fulani vs. Yoruba Christians.
38.	Kaduna	Kaduna	Nov. 22, 2002	Muslim vs. Christians (protest over Miss World Beauty Competition) .
39.	Abuja	F.C.T	Nov. 23, 2003	Muslim vs. Christians (over an offensive publication in a news paper).
40.	Bauchi	Bauchi	Nov, 23, 2003	Muslim vs. Christians (over an offensive publication in a news paper).
41.	Jos	Jos	Dec. 2008	Hausa/ Fulani vs. Jos indigenes which resulted to Muslim and Christians riots.
42.	Bauchi	Bauchi	July 2009	Boko Haram Fundamentalist Sect. Spill over to other towns in the North

**Source:** Ampitan 2015.

The above table presentation is rather mind-boggling. Between 2009 and 2015 the number of Christians and churches destroyed by Boko Haram sect in the Northern part of Nigeria is outrageous. The carnage hitherto recorded is better imagined than experienced. Quite a considerable number of people have lost their kith and kin in needless religious crises. What is now particularly worrisome in Nigeria, according to the duo of Onmhawo and Adamu, is the propensity and intensity of religious conflicts of which the Christians are usually at the receiving end and most often are worst off in every religious conflict. These religious conflicts are predominantly between Christians and Muslims (Onmhawo & Adamu 2011). Arguably, the religions of the children of Abraham, i.e. Christianity and Islam have consistent been at loggerhead, despite the fact that both propagate peace. According to Apenda [15], all religions claim to be advocates of peace and harmonious co-existence, but Islam could take the greater share of this claim, for its very name is “peace”. But in spite of this peace-loving Islam, there is the disturbing phenomenon that some people operating under the aegis of Islam have over the years, caused so much pain for the nation and for non-Muslim population whom they brand as infidels that must either be converted or killed. [15], in fact, Christians ran away from their homes for fear of being attacked by aggrieved Muslims, as the issue of religious violence has always been a recurring decimal

in the history of Nigeria. (Onmhawo & Adamu 2011); what is obtainable is reminiscent of Jihad (holy war) where Quran was placed on the left hand, and the sword on the right. People were asked to make a choice; either to live or to die. There were series of massacres of very innocent people. The duo of Fagbemi and Ande records that Boko Haram members invaded the Gombi Council headquarters in four buses and launched their first attack on the police station, where several police officers and personnel were killed... the group moved to the Bank in Gombi and killed the manager and others for not reciting a portion of the Holy Quran... when the suspected Boko Haram invaded the bank, they killed those that failed to recite a particular portion in the holy Quran as they directed their victims.(Fagbemi & Ande 2011).

According to CNN (2016) "Here's a look at Boko Haram, a militant Islamic group working out of Nigeria, whose purpose is to institute Sharia, or Islamic law. In the local Hausa dialect, Boko Haram means "Western education is forbidden." The group also refers to itself as Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad, meaning "People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad."Boko Haram militants mainly inhabit areas in the northern states of Nigeria, specifically Yobe, Kano, Bauchi, Borno and Kaduna. Originally, Boko Haram was referred to locally as the Nigerian Taliban because of their religious similarities to the Taliban.

Boko Haram does not engage in Nigeria's political system out of an adherence to a fundamentalist form of Islam, which forbids participation unless the system is based on Sharia, or Islamic law. Boko Haram militants targeted and robbed banks in 2011(CNN 2016).

Timeline:

2002 - The group, which may have existed since the late 1990s, organizes under the Muslim cleric Mohammed Yusuf. It is centered in Maiduguri, the capital of the northeastern state of Borno.

December 2003 - The first known attack by Boko Haram includes roughly 200 militants, who attack multiple police stations in the state of Yobe, near the Niger border.

July 2009 - The Boko Haram uprising begins in Bauchi and spreads to the states of Borno, Kano and Yobe. The militant group kills scores of police officers. A joint military task force responds, leaving more than 700 Boko Haram members dead and its operational mosque destroyed. The uprising ends when police capture the group's leader, Mohammed Yusuf. His deputy, Abubakar Shekau, reportedly dies in the uprising. Yusuf later dies in police custody; police say he is shot during an attempted escape, but Boko Haram claims it is an extrajudicial execution.

August 2009 - Senior Boko Haram militant, Sanni Umaru, releases a statement claiming to be the new leader.

July 2010 - Boko Haram releases a video statement in which Yusuf's deputy who allegedly died the previous year, Abubakar Shekau, claims to be the leader of the group.

September 7, 2010 - In the state of Bauchi, 50 Boko Haram militants attack a prison, killing five people and releasing more than 700 inmates.

April 2013 - President Goodluck Jonathan states he has appointed a team to explore the possibility of amnesty for Islamist militants. Shekau responds in an audio statement: "Surprisingly the Nigerian government is talking about granting us amnesty. What wrong have we done? On the contrary, it is we

that should grant you pardon."

April 19, 2013 - Boko Haram battles with multinational security forces from Niger, Nigeria and Chad in the city of Baga in Borno State, leaving nearly 200 people dead, including many civilians. Shekau releases a video in May saying Boko Haram is not responsible for the civilian deaths.

May 15, 2013 - Nigeria's Ministry of Defence announces a military offensive has begun in Borno, Adamawa and Yobe to "rid the nation's border territories of terrorist bases and activities."

June 4, 2013 - President Jonathan approves the proscription of Boko Haram and splinter group Ansaru as terrorist organizations.

June 2013 - Boko Haram targets churches in various states on three Sundays in a row, leaving more than 50 people dead.

August 14, 2013 - The Ministry of Defence announces the death of Boko Haram's second-in-command, Momodu Baba (known as Abu Saad).

August 19, 2013 - Nigeria's chief army spokesperson claims Shekau may have died after an attack on June 30, but the claim is never verified.

September 7, 2013 - At a check point near Benisheik in Borno, executing travelers and burning vehicles, leaving at least 143 people dead.

September 25, 2013 - A man claiming to be Shekau appears in a video and says that he is, in fact, alive and well. However, his identity is not verified.

November 13, 2013 - The U.S. State Department adds Boko Haram and Ansaru to its list of terrorist organizations.

January 26, 2014 - At least 45 are killed in a market in Kawuri in Borno after Boko Haram militants open fire.

February 11, 2014 - At least 23 people are killed when suspected Boko Haram militants torch houses in the village of Konduga, according to the governor of Borno state.



April 14, 2014 - Boko Haram militants kidnap approximately 276 teenage girls from a boarding school in Chibok in Borno. Officials there say some of the girls were able to escape.

May 5, 2014 - In a video statement, a man claiming to be Shekau says, "I abducted your girls. I will sell them in the market, by Allah...there is a market for selling humans. Allah says I should sell. He commands me to sell. I will sell women. I sell women."

May 13, 2014 - Hundreds of Boko Haram militants storm three villages in the state of Borno. Villagers resist, killing more than 200 Boko Haram fighters.

May 20, 2014 - Twin blasts in the city of Jos kill 118 people at a market. Nigerian authorities decline to say who is responsible.

May 21, 2014 - The White House announces that the United States has sent 80 troops to Chad to help search for the kidnapped schoolgirls.

May 22, 2014 - The U.N. Security Council adds Boko Haram to its sanctions list.

June 3-4, 2014 - Hundreds of people are killed in raids by Boko Haram Islamic militants in the state of Borno, with some sources putting the death toll at 400 to 500.

June 7-8, 2014 - Suspected Boko Haram militants kidnap at least 20 young women over a weekend in the northeastern Nigeria village of Garkin Fulani, 8 kilometers from a town where more than 200 schoolgirls were taken nearly two months earlier.

June 18-22, 2014 - Boko Haram militants hold the village of Kummabza in Borno state, northeastern Nigeria, hostage for four days. They abduct more than 60 females, including children, and kill 30 men in the raid.

July 7, 2014 - Sources say sixty-three women and girls kidnapped by Boko Haram last month from the Kummabza village in northern Borno state, have escaped from their captors and returned to their village. Boko Haram is still believed to be holding about 200 schoolgirls abducted April 14 from a boarding school in the town of Chibok.

July 17-20, 2014 - Boko Haram raids the Nigerian town of Damboa. By the time the raid ends, 66 residents have been killed and more than 15,000 have fled.

October 16, 2014 - The Nigerian government announces they've reached a ceasefire agreement with the Islamist terror group that includes the promised release of more than 200 kidnapped schoolgirls.

November 1, 2014 - In a video, the group's leader denies the Nigerian government's claim of a ceasefire.

January 3, 2015 - A multi-day raid begins, where hundreds of Boko Haram gunmen seize the town of Baga and neighboring villages in northern Nigeria, as well as a multinational military base, leaving bodies scattered everywhere and as many as 2,000 people feared dead.

January 10-11, 2015 - At least 20 are killed and 18 injured in Maiduguri after explosives strapped to a girl are detonated at a marketplace screening checkpoint. At least three are dead and 43 injured after two suicide bombs, strapped to girls, detonate in a mobile phone market in Potiskum. Boko Haram is suspected as being behind the attacks.

March 2, 2015 - Boko Haram releases a video showing the apparent beheadings of two men they suspected of being spies.

March 7, 2015 - In an audio message purportedly from leader Abubakar Shekau, Boko Haram pledges allegiance to ISIS, the Islamic militant group which controls areas of Iraq and Syria, and is known for its gruesome executions.

March 12, 2015 - In an audio message, a speaker purportedly identified ISIS spokesman Abu Mohammed al Adnani, claims the caliphate has expanded to western Africa and that ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has accepted Boko Haram's the pledge of allegiance. On the same day, ISIS blows up the Iraqi army headquarters north of Ramadi, killing at least 40 Iraqi soldiers.

April 25-26, 2015 - The decomposed corpses of at least 400 men, women and children are found in

shallow, mass graves and on the streets of Damasak in northeastern Nigeria. Due to a joint Nigerian-Chadian military operation, the town has recently been freed of Boko Haram, which seized the town in November.

April 28-April 30, 2015 - Nigerian troops rescue about 450 women and girls in the Sambisa Forest during a military operation centered around destroying Boko Haram camps and rescuing civilians. According to the military, none of the rescued has been identified as the Chibok schoolgirl kidnapped last April.

July 1, 2015 - Boko Haram militants raid three villages in the northeastern Nigerian state of Borno, killing at least 145 people, according to witnesses.

September 3, 2015 - An estimated 30 people are dead and 145 injured after Boko Haram militants attack a crowded market in Kerawa, Cameroon and an infirmary near a Cameroonian military camp, according to Cameroonian military spokesman Col. Didier Badjeck.

September 23, 2015 - 241 women and children are rescued and 43 Boko Haram militants are arrested after the Nigerian military raids camps run by the

terrorist group in two villages.

February 2016 - Militants from Boko Haram attack two villages in northeast Nigeria, killing at least 30 people. In another attack, two female suicide bombers kill 58 people at a Nigerian refugee camp for villagers fleeing terrorism. A suspect in the attack on the camp tells officers that she and the two suicide bombers were dispatched by Boko Haram"

Source: (CNN February,2016)

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The method employed in this study is multi-dimensional. It is a qualitative research which adopted descriptive and context analysis method and exegetical approach. The text Acts 4:23-31 is from Revised Standard Version (RSV) translation. This was analysed with the help of some exegetical tools such as Greek Lexicon, Bible Commentaries, and Greek-English Interlinear Bible.

The text was selected because it gives a record of the apostles' Response to persecution in the early church and could serve as a model for Christian church facing persecution in Nigeria.

### The Text: (Acts 4:23-31)

<sup>23</sup>δὲ Ἀπολυθέντες ἦλθον πρὸς < τοὺς ἰδίους καὶ ἀπήγγειλαν ὅσα οἱ ἄρχιερεῖς καὶ οἱ ἡγεῖστές > εἶπαν πρὸς αὐτοὺς <sup>24</sup> δὲ οἱ ἀκούσαντες \* ἦσαν \* φωνὴν ὁμοθυμαδὸν πρὸς < τὸν θεὸν > καὶ εἶπαν Δέσποτα σὺ \* ὁ ποιήσας τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν καὶ τὴν θάλασσαν καὶ πάντα τὰ ἐν αὐτοῖς <sup>25</sup> ὁ εἰπὼν διὰ ἁγίου πνεύματος στόματος ἡμῶν < τοῦ πατρὸς > Δαυὶδ σου παιδὸς Ἰνατί ἔθνη ἐφορούαζαν καὶ λαοὶ ἐμελέτησαν κενά <sup>26</sup> οἱ βασιλεῖς τῆς γῆς παρέστησαν καὶ οἱ ἄρχοντες συνήχθησαν ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτὸ κατὰ τοῦ κυρίου καὶ κατὰ αὐτοῦ < τοῦ χριστοῦ > <sup>27</sup> γὰρ ἐπ' ἀληθείας τε Ἡρώδης καὶ Πόντιος Πιλάτος σὺν ἔθνεσιν καὶ λαοῖς Ἰσραὴλ συνήχθησαν ἐν ταύτῃ < τῇ πόλει > ἐπὶ σου ἅγιον < τὸν παῖδά > Ἰησοῦν ὃν ἔχρισας <sup>28</sup> ποιῆσαι ὅσα σου < ἡ χεὶρ > καὶ < ἡ βουλή > προώρισεν γενέσθαι <sup>29</sup> καὶ < τὰ νῦν > κύριε ἔπιδε ἐπὶ αὐτῶν < τὰς ἀπειλὰς > καὶ δὸς σου < τοῖς δούλοις > λαλεῖν σου < τὸν λόγον > μετὰ πάσης παρρησίας <sup>30</sup> ἐν τῷ σε ἐκτείνειν σου < τὴν χεῖρά > εἰς ἴασιν καὶ σημεῖα καὶ τέρατα γίνεσθαι διὰ τοῦ ὀνόματος σου ἁγίου < τοῦ παιδὸς > Ἰησοῦ <sup>31</sup> καὶ αὐτῶν δεηθέντων ὁ τόπος ἐν ᾧ ἦσαν συνηγμένοι ἐσαλεύθη καὶ ἅπαντες ἐπλήσθησαν τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος καὶ ἐλάλουν τὸν λόγον < τοῦ θεοῦ > μετὰ παρρησίας

4:<sup>23</sup> When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. <sup>24</sup> And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, "Sovereign Lord, who didst make the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, <sup>25</sup> who by the mouth of our father David, thy servant, didst say by the Holy Spirit, 'Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples imagines vain things?' <sup>26</sup> The kings of the earth set themselves in array, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed.' <sup>27</sup> For truly in this city there were gathered together against thy holy servant Jesus, whom thou didst anoint, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, <sup>28</sup> to do whatever thy hand and thy plan had predestined to take place. <sup>29</sup> And now, Lord, look upon their threats, and grant to the servants to speak thy word with all boldness, <sup>30</sup> while thou stretchest out thy hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of thy holy servant Jesus." <sup>31</sup> And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness. (RSV).

The book of Acts is duly recognized as the continuation of Luke, though its first five verses presented a problem. The dedication of the two books to the Theophilus argues in favour of the continuity between them; ( Dillon & Fitzmyer 1977). It is impossible to stylistically separate Acts from Luke Gospel. That the common author of these books is Luke the Antiochene is derived from extra-biblical ecclesiastical tradition. If the date of AD 80-85 is reasonable for Luke Gospel, the same can be used for Acts. The ancient tradition that it was written in Greece (Acheva or Boeotia) cannot be proved; but it has nothing against it.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The prayer of the Apostles (4:23-31) is the major key of the early apostles' response to persecution. Verses twenty-three to thirty-one (23-31) shows the prayer of the apostles in combating the persecution of the Jewish and the high priest When Peter and John went to the temple, they healed a lame beggar in the name of Jesus. While on trial before the Sanhedrin the next day and were told to stop preaching, they replied,

"We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20). - According to Dupon [16], Parkhurst, (2015), they went back to the group of the twelve. This was done after they have been warned not to speak in the name of Jesus again. But they cannot disprove miracle of healing of the lame man that has been done. People have seen the man on his feet jumping and dancing with people and the Sanhedrin. After they were released, they went back to the Church, and the Church prayed after they reported their experiences. Their prayer may have been longer, but the Holy Spirit moved Luke to report what was most important and exemplary in their

prayer. They began their prayer by addressing the true God as the Creator of everything and the Supreme Lord and King over all of creation – which included not only everyone in the First Church, but also the chief priests and elders who have control over the Sanhedrin. All of these human leaders ruled under the authority of and with the permission of the true God, Who through Jesus foretold that His followers would be persecuted for following Him (see Matthew 5:11-12 and John 15:20).

<sup>25</sup> ὁ εἰπὼν διὰ ἁγίου πνεύματος στόματος ἡμῶν < τοῦ πατρὸς > Δαυὶδ σου παιδὸς Ἰνατὶ ἔθνη ἐφρύαξαν καὶ λαοὶ ἐμελέτησαν κενά

<sup>25</sup> who by the mouth of our father David, thy servant, didst say by the Holy Spirit, 'Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples imagines vain things?'

The disturbed text of this verse is hard to remedy, except by conjecture. The Revised standard version read the text that is basically that of ms. B: "who (by) the mouth of our father David, your servant, did say the Holy spirit. The Variant reading of ms. D is probably an attempt to correct the text of ms. B, the koine tradition offers a text that may be too facile a solution. "Who said by the mouth of your servant David?". In this case 'our father' and Holy spirit may have come from scribes who were distracted respectively by a marginal gloss and a stock citation formula [17].

In their prayer, they referred to the Scriptures and what God had said in the Scriptures (Psalms 2:1-2). They did not need to know the reasons why the nations rage and people plot against God. They knew that they raged and plotted in vain (or in empty and

meaningless ways), because God was and remains the Sovereign LORD over all. They knew God's response to His and their enemies: God laughs, scoffs, rebukes, and terrifies His enemies (Psalms 2:4-5). They knew that the Holy Spirit inspired the Scriptures – which they used in their prayer. They knew that David, Jesus, and they were servants of the Sovereign Lord, and they could all trust the LORD God to do right no matter how situations appeared. King Herod, Pilate, Annas (the high priest), Caiaphas and other political and religious leaders banded together against the Sovereign LORD (Who the priests were supposed to lead the people to worship rightly) and against the Messiah (the name “Messiah” means “anointed one” – the same meaning as “Christ”). What they did was consistent with and foretold by King David, because as the servant of God the Holy Spirit spoke through King David.

In prayer as conversation with God, they reported what Scriptures seemed most related to the historical facts they had just experienced. The Holy Spirit inspired them to pray according to the Scriptures, and the Holy Spirit prayed for and with them (see Romans 8:26-30). These conspirators did what they wanted, because they saw Jesus and His followers as a threat to their power and wealth. Both the religious and political leaders conspired together, because the Messiah and His teachings were a threat to all of them.

These evil leaders acted consistently with their evil hearts and intentions to live supremely for themselves. They refused to rule unselfishly according to the Scriptures and the Law of God for the benefit of those they led politically and religiously. These evil leaders then took actions that the Sovereign Lord decided beforehand would happen (from eternity past and in human reckoning hundreds of years before Jesus was offered as a sacrifice for our sins). God used these evil people, who had committed themselves to fighting against God and His purposes, to bring about good and the salvation of all who would accept Jesus the Messiah and their Lord and Savior (Romans 8:28).

They bowed in prayer before God as His servants to do His will. They knew the great commission of Jesus (Matthew 28:18-20). They knew Jesus' promise and command: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). So they prayed for the Lord to consider the threats they faced (and do

what the Lord thought best, as they knew He would). But primarily, they asked that God would help them do their duty and obey Jesus' commission with boldness in spite of the threats and persecutions they faced.

They prayed that God would help them obey boldly in the face of danger from political and religious leaders who had crucified Messiah Jesus. They asked that the Sovereign Lord would honor Jesus and His Name by healing and performing signs and wonders as they witnessed boldly for God in Jesus' Name.

The Lord gave them an experiential sign that their prayer was according to His will. He would answer it, and He would do all they asked when they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, which many would have remembered from the Day of Pentecost as an authentic filling by the Holy Spirit.

#### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

The paper has succinctly examined persecution in the Early church and during the missionary period in Nigeria and the debacle between the two major religions in Nigerian, Christians and Islam. In the course of the work, it was established that Islam usually engenders crises, mindful of the fact that Christianity is usually not inclined to imbroglio or disagreement of a complicated or bitter nature. This study was able to establish overwhelming evidences of persecution of Christians. Destroying of lives and properties worth millions of naira has been evidently established. Also the attitude of early Christian in the face of persecution is focusing attention on God for protection and more boldness to work for God. This should also be the response of Christian in today's contemporary church.

#### **The implications for Nigerian Churches**

From the passage the following lessons are to be taken: that instead of today churches to be praying that God should destroy and kill their enemies that persecute them, they should pray for boldness and courage to continue the great command given to them by Jesus to do. ( see Math. 28:19-20). Also prayer to God to back up their works with miracles and signs which cannot be disproved by the enemies but force them to accept the teachings about God and Jesus Christ respectively. This should be the focus of Nigerian churches and not how to acquire ammunitions for counter retaliation on the persecutor.

More than these the church in Nigerian must be united together if God will fight for them like he has done for the Apostles, there are internal and intra persecutions. churches are persecuting one another. Catholic will not want to have anything to do with Anglican, Anglican despise Baptist, and vice-versa. The new generation churches saw Orthodox Church as non believer. Unity among the Christians is the key to peaceful co-existence.

Furthermore, the church today should have strong faith in the power of God and stop patronizing occultic power. It is important for the Christian to have faith in God and the prayers they offer to God. The Apostles had faith and strongly believed in the power of Jesus to save them from their oppressors. The Apostles were very sincere in their working for God and in their prayer to God for protection. The Nigerian Christians should also be sincere. It must be with all their strength and might that they work for God and not because of gain. It is important that righteousness should prevail in the Christian circles. Dishonesty and shady deals which are rampant in the church today will neither promote unity nor enhance answer to prayers. Lastly, the church in Nigerian should demonstrate love like that of early apostles.

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