

**SAMUEL AJAYI CROWTHER: BISHOP OF THE NIGER OR WEST AFRICA  
EQUATORIAL DIOCESE – A CRITICAL INVESTIGATION**

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**Abstract**

*The emergence of a slave boy into episcopal office is an act of Divine providence. However, the journey is full of turbulence and complications. Notwithstanding, this work seeks to unravel the episcopacy of Bishop Crowther by investigating the circumstances to his emergency, the nomenclature of his office, and the contributions of his episcopacy towards the advancement of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) mission work. Historical method which focuses on systematical way of recapturing the complex nuances, the people, meanings, events, and even ideas of the past that have influenced and shaped the present is adopted. The findings indicate that Crowther's episcopacy was purposely for Niger Mission which he was part of it from the beginning, and that due to numerous barriers which includes but not limited to funding, means of transportation, lack of man power, racial discrimination, communication and the death of Henry Venn, his episcopate was truncated. Yet, the truncation of his episcopacy could not stop the seed from blossoming into giant.*

**Keywords:** Bishop Crowther, Niger or Western Equatorial Africa, Investigation

**Introduction**

The abolition of the slave trade resulted in the creation of a colony in Sierra Leone called Freetown. Anderson (2021) explains that the colony of Sierra Leone had been founded by a coalition of antislavery interests, mostly evangelical Christian in inspiration and belonging to the circle associated with William Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect. This was intended to be a Christian settlement which will be free from slavery and the slave trade. As an act of divine providence, Ajayi Crowther who was sold as slave was among those the British Squadron enforcing the anti-slave trade law captured. Oslen (2003) explains that the slavers; however, did not control the seas but Britain which anti-slavery

law abolished slave trade the year Ajayi was born, recaptured the Portuguese slave ship, which was carrying the slaves, and repatriated the young Ajayi to Freetown.

It is worthy of note that more than half of the slaves died in the attack, but Ajayi survived. This can only be an act of God. From Freetown, he became an instrument in the hand of God through the Church Missionary Society (CMS). He was trained in Fourah Bay College after which he was made deacon and priested for the sole aim of being an instrument in actualizing Henry Venn's idea of using the native in evangelization process. The church embraced him quickly, and he soon became a model for what the missionaries had hoped for African converts. He soon developed a reputation for linguistic skills and was recruited by the Church Missionary Society to work on the Niger Expedition of 1841. The Yoruba Mission was a clear example of good of the act of God in using the resettled slave to propagate the gospel. God is master designer of events. The Niger Mission was now to be another.

### **The Emergence of Ajayi Crowther**

The name Crowther according to Page (2020) is a household personality in the record of missionary enterprise. This is not necessary of the fact that he was the first native Bishop, rather; it is as a result of the pathetic events of his early life, and the gracious success which has crowned his efforts on the banks of the Niger (p.iii). She went further to state that the work on the Niger, with which his name will forever identified, is a remarkable evidence of the advantage of employing native agency, if only to save a needless sacrifice of European lives and at the same time exhibits what the Gospel can do, and is doing, when confronted with heathenism on the one hand and a debased form of Mohammedanism on the other hand. How then did Crowther emerge?

After Ajayi Crowther was resettled in Sierra-Leone, he was trained at Fourah Bay College, Freetown and this prepared him to joined J.F. Schön as a CMS representative on T.F. Buxton's Niger Expedition of 1841. Describing the events and happenings prior to the success of 1857 expedition, Eugene (1899) observes that after thirteen years of the Expedition of 1841, a second Expedition was at last determined at the expense of a friend of Africa, Mr. Macgregor Laird, commanded by Dr. Baikie, and accompanied by the same African Christian who had been up with the first Expedition, and who was now the Rev. Samuel Ajayi Crowther. This Expedition was a signal of success not one man died nor was there any serious sickness. This is because it had occurred to Rev Crowther that the mortality in 1841 might have been due to the obnoxious vapours generated by the raw and green firewood loaded in the bunkers, in order to avoid such repetition he suggested that those green firewood be kept in the canoes accompanying the steamer, and only brought

when necessary. This was done; and he has always attributed the good health enjoyed by the party to this cause. In this ways, his advice became instrumental to the success of the Expedition and on its return, Dr. Baikie wrote as follows:

Crowther understands of the Native tribes, and his general knowledge of their customs, made him to be the right man for journey for which we have now returned from, and I cannot but feel that your advice was always readily granted to me, nor had I ever the smallest reason to repent having followed it. It is nothing more than a simple fact that no slight portion of the success we met with in our intercourse with the tribes is due to you (p.1).

The above is the great contribution of Crowther towards the success of the 1854 Expedition and as a result of this he was entrusted with the burden of leading the CMS 1857 expedition. The outcome was that the Dayspring was steaming up the river, with Samuel Crowther on board, being commissioned by the CMS to start the Niger Mission. Eugene (1899) stated that Onitsha was decided to be the best center for the new Niger Mission, and there the Rev. J. C. Taylor was stationed.

Supporting the above, Mazabane (2020) admits that Crowther's missionary career without doubt started in 1841 through his participation in the Niger Expedition, led by James Schön. For him, Crowther's linguistic skills contributed significantly to the success of the mission. Hence, the CMS was convinced that any successful evangelization of inland Africa must be carried out by Africans speaking African languages. This conviction was instrumental for the CMS to send him to England for further studies after which his ordination to the Anglican priesthood took place 1843 in preparation for him to champion the Niger Mission. Can one conclude that without the Niger Mission, Bishop Crowther might not have been ordained nor Consecrated Bishop?

The impact of Rev Crowther towards the success story of the 1854 Niger mission was in line with Henry Venn's idea of mission theory in regard to indigenizing the church. The young Rev Crowther shows clearly that only the Africans can be used effectively to navigate and evangelize Africa. On this, Shenk (1998) argues that the main thrust of Henry Venn's mission policy was indigenization. According to him, not a single biographer on Henry Venn contested this very fact. Critical study of Venn shows his passion for indigenization and contextualization of mission work. No wonder that he was known in missiological circle as the father of father of the 'indigenous church' principle (self-supporting, self-governing, self-propagating). In the same vein, Townsend and other pioneer missionaries in mid-nineteenth century Yoruba country also acknowledge this very fact of indigenization of missionaries. It was obvious that the success of Yoruba Mission was a result of the return of the Yoruba recaptives from Sierra Leone. Their

involvement and willingness to return was the ice-breaker that opened the Yoruba nation to mission.

On Rev Crowther's return from ordination in 1843, he co-worked with the missionary Rev Henry Townsend to open a mission in Abeokuta and in Yoruba Mission. At the fullness of time Henry Venn in 1857, sent Rev Ajayi Crowther to set up and head a new mission on the bank of the Niger which the entirely mission staff was African (Mozabane, 2020).

### **Crowther: Bishop of the Niger or Western Equatorial Africa**

Prior to the consecration of Rev Crowther as Bishop in 1864, Lagos and Yoruba Mission has been under the episcopal jurisdiction of the Diocese of Sierra Leone. Eugene (1919) stated that Diocese of Sierra Leone is not confined to the Colony of Sierra Leone. It comprised all the British possessions on the West Coast of Africa, at the Gambia, the Gold Coast, and Lagos. The Lagos and the Interior Yoruba Mission was in it.

At the early 1860's in the history of the CMS Mission in West Africa, the Niger Mission led by Rev Samuel Crowther was growing immensely due to the good hand of fellowship the people on the bank of the Niger gave to the missionaries. While at the same time several factors were impending and frustrating the Yoruba Mission. For instance, Eugene (1899) observes that the Yoruba Mission was without resident European Interior missionaries for several years: Abeokute from the time of their expulsion in 1867; Ibadan from the departure of Mr. and Mrs. Hinderer in 1869. At the remote branch of the Interior Mission at Ode Ondo, to the south-east of Ibadan was an African clergyman, the Rev. Charles Phillips who laboured with great perseverance amid many difficulties. Concurring with the above illustration by Eugene, Tugwell (1919) said:

The Church in the Yoruba country has been described – I think it was described at our last meeting as the strongest church in Nigeria. This description is apt to be misleading. Speaking generally, the Church in the Niger Mission is the strongest; it is not scattered over so wide an area as is the case in the Yoruba country. Muhamadanism has made no converts amongst the Ibo (p.2).

In the same meeting, G.T.M admits this fact; “take for instance, the number of churches, Bishops and Agents - the Owerri district, I believe I am right in saying has got more churches, more agents, more Christians than any single missionary district in the Yoruba country (p.5).

The fact that Yoruba Mission started earlier than the Niger mission did not make it to be more progressive; rather, the Niger Mission headed by Rev Samuel Ajayi Crowther was blossoming and waxing stronger that within seven years of her existence, Henry Venn

saw the urgency and need to give the mission an episcopal oversight. No wonder Eugene (1919) describes that the success of Niger Mission made Henry Venn's plan to be formed so soon such that his vision of a purely African Mission, under an African Bishop will soon be realized by an experienced African clergyman, the Rev. Samuel Crowther, who as the Society's representative was the leader of the first Christian Mission to the Niger territories.

More so, another factor that necessitated the consecration of Crowther was that for nearly forty years none of the Mission field has witness episcopal oversight and as a result none of the thousands of Negro Christians had been confirmed. This was part of the reason why the Society persistently pressed on the Government for a bishopric so as to give the mission episcopal administration.

On the superiority of Niger delta mission over Niger Mission, the statement by Bishop Crowther on the Expenditure of the West-African Native Bishopric Fund, May, 1870 (this was the fund raised after his consecration for Niger Mission in 1864) throws more light. According to him,

It was through this fund that Bonny Mission, in the Oil River, in the Bight of Biafra, was started in 1865, at which place a temporary mud-wall school chapel, a native mud-wall dwelling-house for the schoolmasters and boarders, and a house for the catechist, in which I have a room for my lodging during my periodical visit, have been put up.

The words of Hugh Stowell cited in Eugene (1899) helps to understand the jurisdiction of the new bishop:

The Resolution has been moved by one whom I may speak of, for I am no diplomatist, as the Bishop-Designate of the Niger...(referring to Rev Samuel Crowther). We then, indeed, are sustaining the apostolical succession. We are returning to the ancient days, and I believe that the simplicity with which that Episcopate on the banks of the Niger is to be instituted, is beautifully primitive also.... But I do most thoroughly rejoice that the Bishop of the Niger is to be no Lord Bishop; that he is to be simply a Missionary Bishop over his own countrymen. I rejoice to think that we have a Bishop so humble, so simple, so taught of God that he is not ashamed to advert to the lowliness of his birth...Marvellous illustration of the ways of Providence, that the wrongs and outrages to which he were subjected has been made the instrument by which they are to be redressed (p.455).

On St Peter's Day, 29<sup>th</sup> June, 1864 at Canterbury, three bishops were consecrated - Dr. Jeune for Peterborough, (to preside over a settled diocese in the Established Church of

England ), Dr. Bromby for Tasmania (another to build up a Church in a distant Colony) and S. Crowther ( to do the work of an Evangelist in Africa). This marked the beginning of bishopric in the Niger territories with its headquarters at Onitsha while the Yoruba Mission is still under the jurisdiction of Bishop of Sierra Leone. Page (2020) admits this fact and according to her “Samuel Crowther was consecrated as the first Bishop of the Niger” (p.78). Even the license of her Majesty read: “We do by this our license under our royal signet and sign manual authorize and empower you the said Reverend Samuel Ajayi Crowther to be Bishop of the United Church of England and Ireland in the said countries in Western Africa beyond the limits of our dominions” (Page, 2020, p.79).

Bishop Crowther on his return performed his first episcopal function, not for his own Mission, but at the request of the Bishop of Sierra Leone, by admitting to Holy orders the Colonial chaplain at Cape Coast Castle. He also paid visits to Dr. Baikie, who was now established at Lokoja as Consul and visited the stations, ordained a catechist deacon, confirmed some converts, and returned to Lagos. That Bishop Crowther carried these episcopal functions did not make him their bishop rather; it was to fill the void which the Bishop of Sierra Leone could not fill due to distance and lack of consistent means of transportation. Bishop Crowther for convenience sake stayed in Lagos but to solve the problem; three important steps were taken with a view to securing greater efficiency in the Niger Mission. First, a steamer was supplied for the Bishop’s use on the river. Secondly, an English layman was put in charge of it, who also was to keep the accounts of the Mission, supervise its building operations, and generally take charge of its secularities. Thirdly, two African clergymen were appointed Archdeacons, to assist the Bishop in the direction of the missionary work proper. All these arrangements were to ensure that mission work did not suffer lost; however, there were numerous difficulties that affected the mission.

In 1888 the Society contemplated a separate bishopric for the Yoruba Mission, and Archbishop Benson, the Archbishop of Canterbury assented to the plans for it. It was particularly desired that the bishop should be an African; but careful inquiries revealed the fact that this would not be liked by the Native Christians themselves. The said project was rendered needless by the formation of the new Diocese of Western Equatorial Africa after the death of Bishop Crowther in 1891 with the subsequent election of Bishop Hill who died without reaching Niger Mission and subsequent replacement by Bishop Tugwell who still used Onitsha as his headquarters. This new Diocese with a white man as the bishop has jurisdiction over the entire mission (Yoruba and Niger territories).

### **An X-ray of Bishop Crowther's Episcopacy**

To say that Crowther was a child of providence may not be far from the truth. It is evident in his life as Eugene (1919) describes the man Crowther:

Thus ended one of the most remarkable lives in the whole West African Mission For seventy years his career had been unique. A kidnapped slave in 1821; a rescued slave in 1822; a mission school-boy in 1823; a baptized Christian in 1825; a college student in 1826 ;a teacher in 1828 ; a clergyman in 1843; a missionary to the country whence he had been stolen, in 1845 ; the founder of a new Mission in 1857 ; the first Negro Bishop in 1864 ;-where is the parallel to such a life? And what a familiar figure he was amongst us at - home ! Ten times in the seventy years he came to England ; in later years as a bishop he was in constant demand as a speaker all over the country; and his absolute unselfishness, and cheerful readiness to be at -everybody's service, were an example indeed to "deputations." If he had accomplished nothing in Africa, he would still have been a valuable helper of the missionary cause among ourselves. (p. 396).

The man Crowther was a personality that contributed immensely towards the success of mission activities in Nigeria and not only on mission, he was instrumental in the socio-economic development of present Nigeria. His numerous work speak volume in the areas of linguistic development. His translations of the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer into Yoruba were instrumental in his pioneering of Christian-Muslim interactions in the Upper and Middle Niger regions. One of his biggest accomplishments was translating the bible to the Yoruba language. He went further and did a great work in the compilation of Yoruba versions of the dictionary and vocabulary. He encouraged Rev John Taylor and supervised him towards his Igbo translation work.

Ecumenically, Crowther pioneered an early form of Christian-Muslim dialogue for Africa and also created a conducive atmosphere for interdenominational relationship. The hand of fellowship he accorded the Holy Ghost Fathers of the Roman Catholic Mission when they arrived Onitsha is a thing to emulate by today's Church leaders. He received them and even gave them portion of land to start their missionary work. Such action can hardly be seen in contemporary times when Christian missions see each other as rivalry rather than co-laborers in the Lord's Vineyard. He oversaw Rev J.C. Taylor's work in Igboland and directed the evangelization of the Niger Delta, with notable results at different center, including Bonny.

On education and establishment of schools, he did great work in ensuring that converts are enrolled into school for proper evangelization. This he did in Yoruba Mission and also

ensured that Rev Taylor did same in Niger Mission. For him, gospel and education go together.

On the other hand, the death of Henry Venn generated troubles for the ageing Crowther and as a result, clouds gathered over the Niger Mission. New British missionaries who were racial inclined took over the administration of the CMS as this caused the morality or efficiency of members of Crowther's staff to be questioned. Not necessarily because of their inefficiency but due to their racial inclination against the black man. In the event following, Crowther's mission was dismantled through the introduction of financial and administrative controls that gave the laymen power over a bishop which is contrary to the Anglican pattern of running Episcopacy. This resulted in dismissing, suspending, or transferring the African staff without the consent and approval of Bishop Crowther. Such actions left the old Crowther desolated, and he died of a stroke paving way for a European bishop.

The definition of Bishop Crowther's jurisdiction was another challenge. His see was not properly delineated because of racism and reservation against the black man by the whites. He is said to be the Bishop of the countries of Western Africa beyond the limits of the Queen's dominions" or "from the Equator to Senegal" yet he was not granted control over the major outposts such as Lagos and Abeokuta (Yoruba Mission) due to fear of angering his missionary white critics who will not accept a black bishop supervisor. For this reason, these areas were subjected under the Diocese of Sierra Leone.

Another issue that Bishop Crowther faced is his dependence on merchandise ship to carry about his missionary activities. In one of his report, Crowther noted:

I MUST continue my notices of this year's visit to the Niger Mission, though my plans of operations have been entirely thwarted by the unfortunate grounding of the "Victoria" up the river. This circumstance having deranged my plans, I was unable to proceed down the river to Onitsha, where I had left orders for the inspection of the land promised for a new station at Ossamare, intended to be taken up this year; and thence to Brass River, to arrange finally about the occupation of Nembe, for which all preparations had been made; and thence to Bonny, where extensive enlargements were being made for the improvement of the mission work; and my steps were directed to the overland route back to Bida in Nupe, and through the Yoruba country to Lagos, leaving the "Victoria" on the sand, in the bed of the river, till the next season.

It is obvious that Bishop Crowther did his best and contributed immensely towards success of CMS mission work in West Africa.



## **Conclusion**

The personality of Bishop Crowther is what many want to identify with. The Yoruba Mission identifies with him; Niger Delta claims him, even those in the North lay emphasis about his contributions towards mission in their region. Even the colony in Sierra Leone has not forgotten him. Crowther is a man that touches lives everywhere. He is a child of providence. What the Church enjoys today in Nigeria is the offshoot of his work and ministry. His contributions were indelible. In the midst of all these, one thing is obvious, it was the Niger Mission that made him what he was and he remains the first Bishop on the bank of the Niger or Bishop of the Niger.

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