
The Pentecostal Prosperity Message and Inter-Church Proselytism in Southeast Nigeria

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The rate at which Christians in southeast Nigeria migrate from one Christian denomination to another calls for scholarly investigation; this migration is noticeable from the main-line churches to the Pentecostal groups. This study was conceived to interrogate this proselytizing venture with the view to finding the causative factors behind the inter-church movement. The study employed qualitative research methods on primary and secondary sources of data collection. Findings show that the prosperity message of the Pentecostal movement is a major player in proselytism. The continuing rise of Pentecostal groups in southeast Nigeria and the unbridled desire of some Christians for health and material prosperity give rise to the inter-church movement. The study further discovered that some Pentecostal pastors take advantage of the economic hardships in southeast Nigeria, particularly since the Nigeria-Biafra war, to manipulate the people into believing that religion, especially Pentecostalism, has solutions to all human health and economic challenges. Worried that the practice is aggressively attacking the cherished Christian kerygmatic understanding of the Church, the study recommends some practical steps that could be undertaken to save Christians from this seeming “holy deceit” as well as to rescue the image of the universal Church from being associated with religious commercialization.

Introduction

The Christian presence in southeast Nigeria has not only been concerned with the propagation of the gospel, it has equally focused on the material welfare of the people with a “Bible and Plough” policy as promulgated by the leadership of the Church Missionary Society (C.M.S.) Igbo mission (Thomas Fowell Buxton and Henry Venn). As such it appears that Christian missionary activities in the early period of missions in southeast Nigeria laid the foundation for the high quest for wealth in today’s church especially in the Pentecostal circle. Perhaps it was for this reason that Nmah (2008) argues that the undue pursuit of wealth, especially with Pentecostals, may have been occasioned by many factors, one of which was the caption, “For Glory, Gold and God” by the early Europeans to regions of sub-Saharan Africa.

Aside from the propagation of the gospel by early European missionaries in southeast Nigeria, the scramble was also for gold and markets—a quest intensified by the industrial revolution and supported by the mixed mercantilist and free-trade theories of the

period. A historical account by Dike (2012) sheds some light on what seems to be a missionary origin of materialism induced inter-church proselytism in southeast Nigeria as he reports that some basic amenities like schools, hospitals and job opportunities were given on the ground that one must be a member of a given church. Some Christians were denied health care for the reason that they refused to leave their church of baptism. Still others denounced their church of baptism as a condition for admitting their wards into some mission schools. It then appeared that being a member of a given church contributed to the enjoyment of a good life. In that case some churches that did not have the means to take care of the material needs of their members lost them to the ones that had better opportunities. This must have created a high level of insatiability amongst the Christian faithful and a background for the wanton inter-church proselytization that is being experienced today.

Today, the adoption of commercial strategies in winning converts has taken a different turn by some Pentecostal preachers who have used prosperity messages as tactics to draw members from their

churches of baptism, in most cases from main-line churches, to the Pentecostal circle, a practice that became widespread from the 1970s following the devastating effects of the Nigeria-Biafra war.

Southeast Nigeria was chosen for the study because it was the region that was most hit by the war. Given the devastation and despondency in the aftermath of the war, people tended to take up religious approaches to solving their socio-economic problems in reminiscence of their traditional way of employing religious mechanisms in addressing human existential challenges. Though the advent of Pentecostalism in southeast Nigeria predates the war, Pentecostal movements began to witness a great boom after the end of the war.

The term inter-church proselytism is employed in this study to denote the movement of people across Christian denominations. Akindele (2002) defines the term as a religious expression that involves the movement of people from one church to another in search of solutions to the existential problems of life. Inter-church migration when understood as proselytism is classified as a pejorative term by some church historians, by contrast with the word, evangelism. Moors (2007) has indicated that, used pejoratively, inter-church proselytism implies that in most cases the practice is promoted by a church's attempts at conversion by unjust means that violate the conscience of the human person, such as coercion or bribery. Udechukwu (2015) for his part defines the term more simply as the attempt to convert people from one Christian tradition to another. Others who use the term in this way generally view the practice as illegitimate and in contrast to evangelism, which is converting non-Christians to Christianity. However, Akindele (2012)'s position appears to be the most suitable to the arguments of this study because of the simplicity of his definition of inter-church proselytism as a situation whereby one changes his/her church membership to another church denomination.

The prosperity gospel is an umbrella term for a group of ideas—popular among Pentecostal preachers in Nigeria—that “if you give your money to God, God will bless you with more money.” Pentecostal preachers quote such scriptures as Acts 20:35, where it is written, “it is more blessed to give than to receive”. According to Smith (2021), over the past few decades in Nigeria, many millions of people have joined Pentecostal churches, and the most popular brand in recent years is known as the ‘prosperity gospel’. But while these hugely popular churches promise

economic as well as spiritual rewards, their prosperity message is a source of worry to the present researchers. Rotimi, Nwadiolor and Ugwuja (2016) talk of the prosperity gospel as one of the most controversial themes in today's Christianity. For them, it is the gospel or message, popular among Pentecostals, that advocates financial blessings, good health, and wealth as the unmistakable plan, program, and desire of God for all. David O. Oyedepo, one of the pioneer preachers of the prosperity message in Nigeria avers that God takes pleasure in the prosperity of His people since no father is happy to see his children in lack. Rotimi, Nwadiolor and Ugwuja have quoted Oyedepo thus:

Why then do you think that your lack excites God? Which father is excited to see his children begging all around? Have you ever seen somebody giving testimony saying, “I thank God, two of my children are beggars?” Your children's children will never beg. I want you to know that the prosperity God has planned for you has nothing to do with your profession, your career or your family background. (2016, 12).

Prosperity preachers, therefore, proclaim that it is the will of God that people should prosper, and giving to the church is sometimes a precondition for this blessing. How far this message has helped to combat poverty in Nigeria remains an unanswered question.

In south-eastern Nigeria, Pentecostal Christianity is firmly established and still growing. New churches seem to spring up nearly every day. Sunday services overflow and people attend all manner of additional prayer meetings and Bible studies. Television and radio stations broadcast extensive Pentecostal programming. Billboards and banners everywhere announce evangelical crusades, deliverances, miracle-working and opportunities to participate in spiritual warfare against the devil. Prosperity churches promise the faithful not only spiritual salvation but also improved social and economic circumstances.

At the same time that these churches are popular, there is the spectre of corruption especially for non-members. This concern is fuelled by media accounts of church scandals, rumours of church leaders' extreme wealth and the perception that corrupt elites join these churches in an attempt to legitimize their ill-gotten riches through religious performance. Reflecting this unease is a common joke in south-eastern Nigeria. It suggests that for many unemployed

graduates their best prospect for a lucrative future would be to found a church. But while some Nigerians view prosperity churches as profit-making enterprises for preachers and religious cover for elites' illicit wealth, members of these churches certainly do not see things this way. Instead, they commonly interpret the riches that accrue to church founders, pastors and successful fellow congregants as evidence of God's blessing. Further, they see their own faith as yielding many benefits, even when they are not visibly prosperous in monetary terms (Smith, 2021).

Southeast Nigeria at a Glance

Southeast Nigeria is one of six geopolitical zones in the country. It consists of five states which include: Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo. The region is otherwise known as "Igboland" and is regarded as the third most populous ethnic group in the country. It borders with Cameroon to the east and the Atlantic Ocean to the south. The people's dominant language is Igbo, although most of the people in the region speak English as a second language. Geographically, the region is divided by the lower Niger River into two unequal sections—an eastern and western section. The major religion of the people is Christianity, while a handful of the people practice African Traditional Religions. However, given the vastness of the area under study, the study focused on Anambra state. Meanwhile, relevant information was taken from other states of the southeast to provide a holistic and an in-depth study. Anambra was preferred because of its location which is considered the cradle of Christianity in Igboland.

The Coming of the Christian Missionaries to Igboland and the Background to Religious Commercialization

Historically, Christianity came and settled in southeast Nigeria in the middle of the 19th century. Ozigbo (1999) writes that Christianity was first preached in Igboland in 1841 at Aboh during the first Niger expedition. The religion was, however, established at Onitsha in 1857. With Rev. Ajayi Crowther and other C.M.S. missionaries, they established their first mission station at Onitsha which later became the bridge-head through which Christianity gained entry into vast areas of southeast Nigeria. The second efforts to Christianize Igboland were by the Roman Catholic Holy Ghost Fathers from

France in 1885 (Anyancho 2008). The Methodist Mission came into the Oron part of Nigeria in 1893 and had spread to Igboland in 1910 through Ibibioland. The Qua Iboe Mission also came into Igboland in 1917 to help in the Christianization of that area (Ozigbo 1999). Furthermore, beginning in the 1920s and 1930s, a number of Christian sects, mostly from the United States of America and Britain, came to Igboland. Some of these sects were: The Salvation Army, Christ Apostolic Church, Faith Tabernacle, Seventh Day Adventist and Jehovah Witness. From the 1930s to the 1960s many of the New Religious Movements also came into existence (Ozigbo 2010). The New Religious Movements are otherwise known as Indigenous churches.

Amongst the indigenous churches are some groups which later adopted the Pentecostalism that originated in Azusa Street, U.S.A. They are called "Pentecostals" due to their belief in and testimony to the second experience of the Holy Spirit accompanied and characterized by speaking in tongues (Milne 1993). The adherents share a common belief in the possibility of receiving the same experience and gifts as did the first Christians on the day of Pentecost. However, this multiplicity of Christian religious groups and traditions is regarded as one of the major reasons for the rise of the practice of moving from church to church in the Igbo region. Each of these churches and their founders claimed divine origin and superiority over one another. This seems to have promoted a sense of competitiveness, confusion and dissatisfaction among Christians in the area. This sense of dissatisfaction, competitiveness and confusion are the basis for continued inter-church proselytism.

In southeast Nigeria, Christianity is thriving in all shapes and sizes but it seems that Pentecostalism prospers the most, and the number of Pentecostals has continued to rise on a daily basis. This is clear from the fact that in southeast Nigeria, eight churches out of ten in a street are Pentecostal. This rise in the number of Pentecostal worshippers could be attributed to their prosperity gospel. In recent years, Pentecostalism has become a viable entrepreneurial venture as (mostly) young men, and in some cases young women, start churches to offer spiritual solutions to poverty, sickness, business failures, impotence, barrenness and premature deaths, while the founders of such churches become very wealthy within the few months in which they are able to gather a sizeable congregation. Unfortunately in present-day Igboland, the present researchers fear that many Pentecostal churches have

become instruments of exploitation and manipulation of people for economic gain.

This can be linked to what Kalu (2008) describes as the market theory where he traces the commercialization of the gospel to the attitudes of Africans to pioneer Europeans who came to Africa, along with some factors that attracted the indigenous people to the message of the Christian missionaries. Apparently, the 3Cs strategy of Christianity, Commerce, and Civilization adopted by the early missionaries helped to expand the frontiers of Christianity in Igboland, and Nigeria in general, but that made it seem as if those who embraced Christianity did so for monetary and material reasons. For Okeke (2006), Thomas Buxton's advocacy that the missionaries should take the plough and the Bible into the interior while they preach the gospel was misunderstood to mean that the church is an ultimate provider of wealth.

Isichei (1971) earlier noted that Africa had known the Europeans as people with immense power, wisdom, and wealth. In commercial wares brought by the Europeans, in their bearing and comportment, there was every sign of wealth, and this wealth Africans were already having a taste of in the gifts brought by the European explorers. In that way, Africans seem to have followed Christianity for economic and material benefits. The present researchers believe that this is a strong background factor in the commercialization of the gospel in Nigeria now as some people started seeing Christianity or the Church as a place one could turn to for material benefits. The Pentecostals don't pour out gifts to members. In fact, in most cases, it the members who give gifts to "God" through the pastors. Yet they do that because they have been made to believe that if you give to "God" through his "representative" on earth, God will double your blessings. Kalu (2008) argues that the "Bible and Plough" approach interfered in the spiritual formation of the African people. In Eastern Nigeria for example, the British missionaries apparently went as far as guaranteeing economic provisions to the early converts. In some other places, there were stiff competitions and monopolies on the provision of some social services.

In the New Calabar (Elem Kalabari) in the Niger Delta, for example, Chief Amarchree invited the Church Missionary Society in 1875. But in 1885 they were made to withdraw to Okrika because the supposed financial and infrastructural aid for their invitation was not provided. They had been invited

because they believed that the presence of the white men on the western part of the river paid economic dividends, but when the expected results were not forthcoming they were forced to withdraw. Similar circumstances also led to the closure of the missions in Brass, Quidah and Porto Novo (Tasie 1978).

The Nigeria-Biafra War and the Pentecostal Prosperity Message in Southeast Nigeria

Pentecostalism began in southeast Nigeria during the early twentieth century as a renewal movement from the prominent mission founded churches. From 1910, Pentecostalism began to flourish in the region due to the efforts of an Anglican deacon who launched an indigenous prophetic movement that later became the Christ Army Church. According to Nwadiolor (2019), the impetus for introducing early forms of Pentecostalism in Igboland was provided by the Prophet-Evangelist Garrick Sokari Braide. He was an Ijaw man who had to learn the Anglican Church Catechism in the Igbo language, the then official language of the Niger Delta Pastorate.

At first, the growth of Pentecostalism was in part an effort to break free from Western missionary control. However, following an influenza epidemic in 1918, revivals flared up in the mission churches resulting in the expansion of spirit-filled movements known by the Yoruba as Aladura (praying people). One of the early Aladura churches included the Church of the Lord founded in 1930. Around 1918, an Anglican form of prayer group known as the Precious Stone (Diamond Society) was formed to heal influenza victims. The group later left the Anglican Church in the early 1920s and affiliated with Faith Tabernacle, a church that is based in Philadelphia (Anderson 2001). The Christ Apostolic Church (CAC), also one of the earliest Pentecostal churches in southeast Nigeria, laid the foundation for charismatism in the present Igboland and they have prospered based on the marvels, material blessings, and beliefs that are rooted in the African worldview.

Pentecostalism in Igboland began to take a commercial form soon after the Niger-Biafra war. Nwadiolor (2019) notes that the war demystified the already bifurcated traditional religion to such a state of utter disillusionment that, in consequence, many Igbo people became disillusioned with the traditional religious practices and potency. There came a new desire for alternative religious affiliation. The praying houses that began to proliferate in Igboland in the

wake of the war became an alternative to Igbo traditional religious spirituality.

Burgess (2008) says that shortly after the end of the civil war in 1970, many Igbo charismatic leaders began to found new religious movements with Pentecostal persuasions. The Igbo believed in a spirit world that has direct contact with and control over the physical world. This accounts for why the Igbo would do all things possible to entreat the spiritual beings, either to curry their favour or to avoid their punishment. Mission Christianity played down such belief and dismissed it as mere superstition, thereby creating a religious vacuum in the Igbo spiritual world. These praying houses with their characteristic visions, prophecies, dreams and ecstatic worship appealed to the Igbo religious yearnings after the war, thereby boosting the popularity of Pentecostal movements. Kaing (cited by Inyama) puts it this way:

Dreams, visions and prophecy all relate to the desire for meaningful and personal communication with God. Tongues are considered to be a visible sign that God is present and has given the Holy Spirit to an individual. Healing indicates that God's power is available. Signs and wonders are sought not for their own sake, but for their ability to transform the lives of Christians and to draw unbelievers to Jesus Christ. (Inyama 2007, 89)

So in their efforts to implore divine intervention to provide solutions to their desperate situation, the Igbo resorted to visiting prayer houses and healing homes. The popularity of these prayer houses rested on their close affinity to Igbo traditional piety, their pragmatic approach to religion, and their promises of protection and security. Many people, also in need, took to opening prayer houses, not for sincere religious/social welfare services to the people but as a way of alleviating their own problems, since people would contribute money to the prayer houses. Burges (2008) says that in southeast Nigeria where the population is comparatively dense, and which was reeling from mass poverty and political instability particularly in the 1970s, the people underwent a Pentecostal revolution. Many young entrepreneurs started Pentecostal churches and sold the promises of health and wealth to the poor and afflicted. The period was characterized by severe economic hardship for the Igbo society, and Pentecostalism presented the gospel as an answer to financial hardship caused by economic decline. The prosperity teaching which links faith with the

expectation of material wealth and success contributed to the Pentecostal appeal especially among young people concerned with success and progress. Thus, the Pentecostal emphasis on the Bible, innovative worship style, community ethos, and proclamation of a holistic gospel appealed to the Igbo people who were faced with disintegrating social and economic situations.

Following the multiplication of these Pentecostal churches in southeast Nigeria, the idea of religious means of making wealth became a veritable means for winning converts. The people who seek a spiritual means of making wealth turn to the prosperity preachers for succor. The preachers claim they will transform the lives of their members financially, and so attract converts. In rural and urban areas, they create prayer houses to meet the demands of their clients for prosperity, health and success in their endeavours. According to Ndiokwere (1994), the Pentecostal churches, through prayers and miracles, would promise to meet their members' demands for prosperity, health and success in their life endeavours. In a situation where a large percentage of the people were poor, such assurances for wealth and economic wellbeing will seem to herald a new day for millions of the Igbo Christians.

Following this development, then, the Pentecostal movement, in a bid to gather as many people as possible, has adulterated and commercialized the word of God to attract those that are desperate for wealth, healing and deliverance without any serious transformation in their lives. Interestingly, it appears that this health and wealth theology has been connected with Pentecostalism from its very beginning. Its roots can be traced to a nineteenth century American tradition spearheaded by Waldo Emerson and William James. From the early 20th century in the Azusa Street of the USA, the faithful were inspired by a relationship between thoughts and experiences. With evangelists like Essek William Kenyon at the centre, the prosperity theology was developed. Years on, the prosperity gospel became a globalized phenomenon, commercialized by the likes of Kenneth Hagin and Kenneth Copeland (Smith 2021). Gradually, the tradition gained ground in Nigeria through Archbishop Benson Idahosa before it gained a wider publicity amongst the Nigerian Pentecostal preachers. It later influenced other Christian movements, including the mainstream churches and the New Religious Movements.

Pentecostal Prosperity Theology and Inter-church Proselytism in Southeast Nigeria

Prosperity theology is a form of Christian teaching that emphasizes God's will for the prosperity of all believers, to be attained through faith, devotion, tithing, and positive confessions. In Nigeria, it was spearheaded by the likes of Benson Idahosa in the 1970s. Today, its main proponent is Bishop David O. Oyedepo, one of the most popular pastors in Nigeria. He has been known to be vocal on the church's position on tithing and was reported in one of his messages to have said, "if you are not a tither, you will end up a beggar." In his church, as in other new generation churches, tithing is a core doctrine and a reasonable number of the congregation pays 10% of their monthly income as tithe.

Prosperity preachers in the context of Pentecostalism emphasize that giving unto God is the first step towards unlocking one's divine destiny. The message is that when one gives, God will attend to the person's material and spiritual needs. Across the spectrum of Pentecostalism in Igboland, this theology is sacrosanct for its followers. The wealth and get-rich-quick syndrome is very much embedded in the prosperity gospel which has become synonymous with Pentecostalism. The uncontrolled quests for the conversion of Christians from the mission founded churches by the Pentecostals through the banner of materialism can be argued to be the major reason for inter-church proselytism in southeast Nigeria. So it can be argued that the rise and steady march of the Christians from the main stream churches into Pentecostal movements is most often induced by what the converts have been made to believe they would gain in the way of healings, miracles and prosperity rather than by a selfless quest to worship God "better".

Above all, the recent economic quagmire in Nigeria has made many Christians migrate from church to church in search of relief from the socio-economic miseries of their existence. Following the decline of the oil boom in Nigeria, people turned to the church for relief. This is particularly so because an average Igbo person believes that to get answers or solutions to existential problems religious people need charismatic persons to interpret the divine mind.

A few people the researchers interviewed provided reasons why people change their churches. One of our informants who migrated from the Catholic Church to the Redeemed Christian Church of God in Awka, Anambra State, itemized his reasons as follows: lack of

satisfaction with the method of worship, search for greater spiritual solutions to socio-economic challenges, and insufficient pastoral care. Another informant who migrated from the Anglican Church to the Assemblies of God Church in Onitsha, Anambra State, maintained that he left because there was too much levy or contribution required in his former Anglican church without corresponding spiritual solutions to members' everyday life challenges. Another two people we interviewed both insisted that it was because of the boring homily/worship and lack of prophetic visions that they left their Methodist church of baptism to go to David Oyedepo's Living Faith Church (Winners Chapel). E. Nwokike stated that she migrated from the Anglican Church to Mountain of Holy Ghost in Aba, Abia State in search of pregnancy. O. Igboanugo said that it was a friend who introduced him to Christ Embassy where it is believed that absolute faith in God manifested in seed sowing could transform his dwindling business and fortune. Based on these responses, it appears that boring worship, lack of pastoral care, and pressure for contributions along with the quest for miracles and spiritual solutions to everyday life challenges are push-pull factors in inter-church migration in this region.

There is also an inspirational quality surrounding the prosperity gospel that makes it so attractive. These churches are attended by people from across various social classes, and for the less privileged, watching the wealthier believers testify and attribute their successes to their adherence to the prosperity gospel makes it worth adopting. For those employed by mega churches—pastors, drivers, teachers, technicians, musicians, amongst others, this theology has become an important source of livelihood. Inter-church movement now seems acceptable because of the inter-mix of religion and everyday life among the Igbo (seeing religion as a problem solving activity). Since they scarcely get solutions to these practical life challenging situations from the mission established churches they migrate to Pentecostal movements.

Prosperity in Christian Teaching and Living

Although we have been expressing concern about the prosperity gospel, it has to be noted here that prosperity is good and it is an aspect of Christian teaching and living. Jesus was going through all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness. He

multiplied bread and fish, and turned water to wine in order to address the material needs of those who came around him. The Bible further affirms the relevance of prosperity in some passages. But the Pentecostals seem to believe that prosperity is the full proof of the calling of Christians which has been enacted in both the Old and the New Testament scriptures.

In Deuteronomy 8:18, for instance, it is written that, “thou shalt remember the LORD thy God: for it is He that giveth thee power to get wealth that He may establish His covenant which He swore unto thy fathers, as it is this day.” Isaiah 60:5 corroborates thus: “Then you shall see and become radiant, and your heart shall swell with joy; because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you, the wealth of the Gentiles shall come to you.” This is further declared in the New Testament: “For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9). In John 1:2 it is written: “Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth.” However, the word “prosper” in the context used by John in the scripture above means to excel. Consequently, a Christian is to do well in the totality of their being—spirit, soul, and body. So, the above promise is neither to be understood solely in terms of money, riches and other material wealth and earthly possessions, nor an invitation to freelance evangelization or commercial interpretation of the scripture in order to reconvert those already converted to other Christian denominations. It is simply indicating God’s intent for the totality of the well-being of the Christian, materially and spiritually.

Regrettably, in what seems to be a desperate bid to circumvent the biblical guidelines of attaining sustainable wealth which is anchored on dutifulness, some Pentecostal leaders appear to have adopted a contextual meaning of “prosper” that suits a narrative of a Christian of affluence and wealth with a capacity to possess anything that money can buy. This narrative has been attributed to the Holy Spirit who they believe is present in their midst. “And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions” (Joel 2:28). Members are persuaded by the prosperity message in what in Pentecostal parlance is known as testimonies of those whom the Lord has blessed with wealth and other material possessions. This teaching, besides the fact that it has been conjured

to fit into the self-serving purposes of the leaders of such Pentecostal assemblies, seems to go against the initial ethos of the Pentecostal movement which is anchored on a personal encounter with God through Jesus and marked with the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The Bible makes no mistake in saying that love, joy, peace, patience, meekness, kindness, gentleness and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23) are the fruit of the Spirit, and not necessarily the wealth which some Pentecostal leaders seem to be propagating. The Pentecostal Christian therefore should firstly be marked by the fruits of the Holy Spirit. “Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit” (Matthew 7:16-17). If it then pleases God to add wealth and material possession to the gifts of the Holy Spirit, then it should be understood as an extraordinary grace.

Implications of Inter-church Proselytism on the Integrity of the Universal Church

The wanton and desperate pursuit of wealth and its consequent prosperity preaching by some Pentecostal preachers has given rise to scandalous and misleading insinuations against one another in a bid to remain more popular in the system. Furthermore some of the messages delivered by these preachers to retain members who are desperate for money have created an atmosphere of tension and mistrust amongst members of various denominations thereby increasing the rate of migration from one church to the other as a result of dissatisfaction. Many followers of these prosperity preachers continue to believe that wealth and other material possessions are the only way to demonstrate God’s love for His people, while the preachers emphasize the importance of sowing of seeds with the biblical injunction in Malachi 3:10 as support.

It is a matter of concern to the present researchers that more of these Pentecostal prosperity preaching movements are springing up on a daily basis across the length and breadth of southeast Nigeria. According to data from the Pew Research Centre Database 2003 (cited by Burges 2008), Christians in Nigeria in the 1990s, primarily attended mainstream churches. But a higher percentage of the Christian population in Nigeria today belongs to the Pentecostals and other independent religious movements. The implication of this development is that these new movements are almost equal to the number of the entire Protestant

churches put together. Apparently, the impressive growth of the Pentecostal and the new generation churches founded mostly in the 2000s has brought about a huge decline of the mission founded churches (Achunike 2004). This is largely because the Pentecostal churches have had a field day in reconverting the dissatisfied members of the mission founded churches; even some of those who still retain their membership in the mission founded churches may have done so for socio-political and socio-cultural reasons. More so, it can be seen that the quest for wealth and material possessions are strong indications for this high rate of Pentecostal growth and development. By aligning the growth and development of these movements, the prosperity gospel could be said to have, in many ways, fostered the proliferations of Pentecostal churches. Detailed investigations have also proven that about 57% of the people who are not satisfied with their present church denomination complain that these mission founded churches lay less emphasis on prosperity (Burges 2008). It is therefore unlikely that the popularity of prosperity gospel will wane anytime soon.

More worrisome is the fact that some church ministers and pastors within the mainline churches have tried to adjust the established Christian standards in order to stop their members from leaving. Some of these measures have included relaxing traditional and orthodox beliefs to accommodate the new theology and method of worship where prosperity, signs and wonders are the order of the day. This demonstrates how serious the matter has become. Yet, the idea of relaxing orthodox beliefs and embracing the new way with a new theology of miracle and luck instead of hard work and honesty has, instead of solving the problem, created more confusions and mistrusts amongst the adherents of the mainline churches.

Some of the charismatic groups created by mainline churches to help curb this menace, though they could be said to be spiritual arms of the mainline churches, yet in some cases end up either forming their own distinct churches or attacking the ecclesiastical structure of their parent churches. For example, the Evangelical Fellowship in Anglican Communion (EFAC), created by the Anglican church to help curtail this practice has not really achieved the target, but instead created room for more migrations because they disagree with the church on certain theological and liturgical issues. The Catholic Charismatic Renewal, which was created by the Catholic Church for the same purpose of retaining the dissatisfied

Catholics and preventing them from migrating to other churches, has equally not achieved the objective.

Furthermore, the situation has made the church to look like a problem solving institution where one attends based on certain benefits or inducements and if he/she fails to get what is expected from a given church can always migrate to another church with supposed greater opportunities. All of this is a very big challenge to the integrity of Christianity in Igboland because it now appears as though the church is emulating the traditional worshippers who replace or abandon their deities once they hear of a more powerful one. This, as a matter of fact, has made it difficult to differentiate between Christians and non-Christians since the way Igbo traditionalists move from shrine to shrine in search of solutions to existential problems is almost the same as the way these proselytizing Christians move from church to church in search of miracles.

Thus, there have been opportunities for freelance evangelizers to resort to commercializing the church as a business enterprise. In some extreme cases these freelancers have gone as far as employing diabolical powers as a means of retaining and maintaining their large number of followers. To support this claim, A. Igbokwe reported a case of a popular man of God, known as the “miracle pastor,” who was caught burying charms in someone else’s house. The name of the pastor was Prophet Paul Abam from Umuida, Enugu Ezike Local Government of Enugu state. If it had not been that some villagers had caught him in the act and raised the alarm before he was apprehended and paraded round the village, he might have convinced the owner of the building that family cleansing was needed to remove some charms and in that way might have increased the size of his congregation. There was also the case of one Onyebuchi Okocha, popularly known as Onye Eze Jesus who was arrested for indecent religious activities. The said Onyebuchi Okocha, who was the founder of Children of Light Anointing Ministries of Nkpor, in Idemili North Local Government Area of Anambra State, was arrested on the 27th of January, 2021 by Anambra State Government following his suspected evil activities in the name of church. The actual reason for his arrest was that he produced videos in which he not only claims to change the economic status of his adherents by magical means, but also throws a lot of Nigeria’s currency notes into the river and compels his adult followers, both male and female, to bath naked in the river, all the while recording them on video which he later distributed

through the internet and other means. What is the motive behind the distribution of the video clips of his magical disposition if not to attract the gullible and desperate ones into his fold?

For this reason, one could argue that certain elements of the church have almost lost the purpose of Christ in establishing the church on earth. Christ's mandate is not to reconvert already converted Christians but to convert the sinners and the lost people. But, it appears that the focus of some of the churches in Nigeria today has shifted to increasing the size of one's denomination against the others.

Response to Prosperity Induced Inter-church Proselytism in Southeast Nigeria

Renewal of the Church's Mission Mandate

Having analyzed some of the causative factors for inter-church proselytism in southeast Nigeria and its implications for Christianity itself, the first step forward should be to refer to the mission requirement of the church; the missionary mandate given by Christ Himself. When he finished His earthly ministry, Jesus sent out His apostles to continue his ministry. He gave them charge to go to the nations and make them his disciples and baptize them in the name of the Holy Trinity. The apostles in obedience to the command of their master preached the gospel to all they encountered. The mission mandate of the church is ultimately grounded in the eternal love of the Most Holy Trinity. This implies that the church on earth is by nature one. The ultimate purpose of the church therefore is none other than to make all people share in the communion between the Father and the Son in their Spirit of Love. It is from God's love for all people that the church in every age receives both the obligation and vigour of its missionary dynamism.

However, through this research it can be seen that there is a huge discrepancy between the message of the gospel and the human weakness of those to whom the gospel has been entrusted. Watt insists that it is only by taking the narrow way of the cross that God can extend Christ's reign, thus, "for just as Christ carried out the work of redemption in poverty and oppression, so the church is called to follow the same path if she is to effectively communicate the fruits of salvation to men" (2015, 350). Watt further insists that, "the church travels the same journey as all humanity and shares the same earthly lot with the world, she is to be leavened, as it were, the soul of human society in its renewal by

Christ and transformation into the family of God" (p.351).

Developing a Strong Prayer Life

Prayer and a strong faith in God are unquestionably the best responses to all life situations, including when they have gotten beyond human control. One needs no argument to prove that prayer is the universal human reaction to any crises or desperate situations. Prayer helps to sharpen one's faith in God, and living faith largely depends on a life of prayer. If a person does not open up to God in prayer, he/she will not be able to develop a strong and vigorous faith. Prayer in the time of trouble is the best approach to difficult and hard times. A Christian can be exposed to both hard and easy times. Praying for only wealth and material prosperity may not actually be the perfect will of God (Bounds 1984). In a nutshell, it could be said that the Christian God does not encourage laziness, but responds to the needs and aspirations of his creatures that trust in him. So it is good for Christians to be properly guided in their quest for prosperity or wealth acquisition.

Everybody goes through stress and anxiety (worry) at one time or the other, even Jesus did. On one occasion, he had to pray for hours to enable him to overcome his challenges (Mathew 14:23, Luke 6:12). That means that the prayer of a Christian must not be based only on wealth, comfort and earthly possessions, since Jesus never prayed for riches nor did his disciples. On the night before his death, his distress grew so deep that he had to pray earnestly to God for succour. Jesus' reaction to his personal challenges is what this study suggests is the best form of approach to life's uncertainties. Persevering in prayer therefore is the best form of approach to existential issues, not running helter-skelter from one church to the other.

Expanding Employment Opportunities

One of the reasons why Igbo Christians vehemently pursue wealth is unemployment. Due to the high rate of unemployment in the country, the people see the church as the next available option. Rural-urban migration, especially of young people, has increased the rate of unemployment among city dwellers. Because religious matters are taken seriously among the Igbo, and because the Igbo are often disposed to parting with money especially when they believe the order is coming from God through his representatives,

church business seems to be an easy way to find an income. Furthermore, unemployment has forced many people, especially the youth, to either found or join churches that will guarantee their financial freedom. This financial freedom comes when the newly founded churches begin to gain large congregations especially with members who are willing to donate to the churches in desperation to attract blessings from God, most especially school drop outs and illiterate men and women who could be said to be the most gullible in the society.

Conclusion

Bearing in mind the high levels of poverty in Nigeria and the considerable wealth of prosperity preachers, one can establish the nexus between the prosperity gospel and poverty, as studies have shown that poor individuals are more likely to be drawn to the prosperity gospel than wealthy ones. Against this backdrop, it is easy to understand why the prosperity gospel has spread, offering people in hardship a means of controlling their seemingly uncontrollable situations. It promises health and wealth for a believer who abides by its tenets. For those living in poverty, this message of hope can be very powerful and indeed comforting. It is also worth recognizing that many Nigerians find fulfilment in the prosperity gospel. Still centred on a relationship with God, it provides spiritual satisfaction along with the positive message of hopefulness in difficult situations.

It has to be noted here that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with Christians turning to God for material prosperity and good health, especially in situations where the people lack other practical approaches to solving these existential challenges. The message of Christ is holistic in that it offers salvation of both the soul and body. His earthly ministry was replete with miracles of healing and material provision, as were the ministries of His apostles. The synoptic gospels confirm that Jesus healed the sick and multiplied food items for the satisfaction of His followers. Equally, He cursed a tree for not producing fruit for people to eat and be satisfied. However, the problem of the prosperity gospel is a multi-dimensional one. It is only embarrassing to the universal church and a disservice to the message of Christ to insinuate that God only answers prayers in designated church denominations. Most worrisome is the fact that the practice is aggressively attacking the cherished Christian kerymatic understanding of the

church which is outlined in accordance with the standard and practices of the primitive church. It is in defiance of the pattern of the church as recorded and transmitted in both the scriptures and the early Christian traditions. Christianity as a religion is a belief in Christ. It is not solely an avenue for the satisfaction and attainment of our expressed needs; neither is it a platform for religious competitions, signs and wonders as a means of migrating members from one denomination to the other. Rather it is a place where spiritual and material assistance should be rendered to all and sundry irrespective of one's denominational affiliation. Jesus never performed his miracles under religious considerations; rather He extended his help to all who sought Him. He therefore commands His disciples to render their spiritual services free of charge/without conditions, because they were given the power freely.

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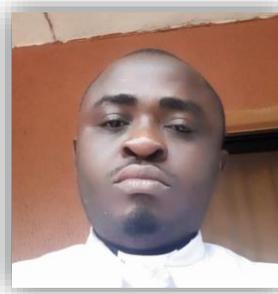
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