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Prosperity Gospel: Effects on Nigerian Christian Church and Society



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ABSTRACT: The paper examines effects of prosperity gospel on contemporary Nigerian Christian church and society. It discussed its historical origin and noted that it was birthed in USA and since the seventies now spreading among Nigerian Christian churches and society like corona virus. The study used historical and descriptive methods in its analysis. It discovered that most prosperity teachings are misused, thus, giving a false impression and interpretation about what the Bible really teaches. Finding revealed that, prosperity teachings in a way gives one a sense of hope, direction and reassurance that the life one lives can get better if one can only have faith in God. Equally, it was observed that the prosperity preachers or churches are quite correct in pointing believers to God and the wonderful promises made in his word in order to get their needs met. However, many of these preachers or churches have misused the gospel for monetization, lust for materialism, crimes and selfish advantages and thereby impoverishing their congregation the more rather than improving their lots. This in-turn has reduced the spiritual and moral capacity of the people in the church and society. The work recommended among other thing that the purpose of gospel preachers today should rather focus on doctrinal issues related to desire for the kingdom of God, soul-winning, salvation of man, hard work and good conduct in the church and society than lust for materialism and commercialization of religious activities.

INTRODUCTION

Prosperity gospel is a current phenomenon that exists among Christian churches in the world today. It is a global phenomenon that has drawn the attention of individual Christian, the government and the church and society in general. In Nigeria today, prosperity gospel has not become the characteristic of Pentecostal churches only, it has spread among some Catholic and Protestant churches. Most of Christian churches in Nigeria today misuse the original teachings of the gospel by given less emphasis on doctrinal issues related to soul-winning, salvation, desire for the kingdom of God and good conducts (Fatokun 1999). In fairness, the prosperity gospel does well to emphasize healing, deliverance and empowerment of believers spiritually and economically. It pays attention to the need for total restoration of the person leading to personal health and physical success and blessings. However, the Churches in contemporary Nigeria do not preach the Biblical concept of the gospel. Many of these prosperity preachers have turned the biblical concept of gospelling round for monetization, commercialization, lust for materialism, exploitation of their congregants and brainwashing them with wrong doctrines. Furthermore, the mind of many Nigerians has so much been corrupted to pursue wealth at the expense of the things of God which has eternal values as result of prosperity preaching. It is based on the above that this paper examines the effects of prosperity gospel in contemporary Nigerian Christian church and society.

PROSPERITY GOSPEL

The word prosperity gospel is also referred to as prosperity theology. It is an umbrella term for a group of ideas, popular among charismatic preachers in the evangelical tradition that equate Christian faith with material, and particularly financial, success. According to the Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English (2012), defines prosperity as the state of being "successful, and having good fortune. Prosperity theology teaches that God wants his people to be prosperous and healthy in life, with wealth being used as the measure for one's level of favour with God. Ayantayo (2010) defined and describe prosperity gospel as a strong teaching that requires Christians to be prosperous while on earth. For him and within such premise, the emphasis is strongly placed on material acquisition, which could be manifested in possession of cars, houses, fat bank accounts, cash at hand, clothing, abundance, fortune and success in all endeavors, all of which make prosperity therefore a divine favor which Christians must seek and possibly pursue with vigour. For the purpose of this study, the writers describe prosperity gospel as the gospel of good health, gospel of wealth, and the gospel of success in all walk of life. it is a religious belief among some Christians churches that financial blessing and physical well-being are always the will of God for them, and that faith, positive speech, and donations to religious activities will increase one's material wealth. Prosperity gospel views the Bible as a contract between God and humans: if humans have faith



in God, He will provide them security and prosperity in life. The doctrine emphasizes the importance of personal empowerment, proposing that it is God's will for his people to be blessed. The atonement (reconciliation with God) is interpreted to include the alleviation of sickness and poverty, which are viewed as curses to be broken by faith. This is believed to be achieved through donations of money, visualization, and positive confession.

ORIGIN OF PROSPERITY GOSPEL

History had it that it was during the Healing Revivals of the 1950s that prosperity theology first came to prominence in the United States, although commentators have linked the origins of its theology to the New Thought movement which began in the 19th century. Several scholars, Bowler 2013, Coleman 2000, Robin 2010, Harrel 1975, Brown 2011, noted that prosperity teaching later figured prominently in the Word of Faith movement and 1980s televangelism. In the 1990s and 2000s, it was adopted by influential leaders in the Pentecostal Movement and Charismatic Movement in the United States and has spread throughout the world. Prominent leaders in the development of prosperity theology include E. W. Kenyon Oral Roberts, A. A. Allen, Robert Tilton, T. L. Osborn, Joel Osteen, Creflo Dollar, Kenneth Copeland, Reverend Ike, and Kenneth Hagin O.

In Nigeria, there are many prosperity preachers but the individual who first became most identified with this movement was a young firebrand preacher, late Benson Idahosa, who would go on to become the father of the prosperity gospel in Africa. He earned his place in history, however, not just because he was the first African to articulate the message, but because of how he took this theology to the masses. Idahosa, against the trend in the society of his time, was preaching that Christians ought to have access to material wealth and live life to the full, insisting that he would no longer drive the two-door Volkswagen Beetle car that was in vogue and mostly used by the average wage earner but only ride four-door cars such as Mercedes Benz and Peugeot of the bourgeoisies. He also insisted that members of his church should not tithe nor give offerings with coins, but currency notes of high worth. Ojo (2013), asserted that Idahosa believed God created men and women for a better life than many are experiencing and He never intended that anyone should go through life imprisoned by their own superstitions but He opens the door of success to every believer who will dare to step out and go after the good life. No one in God's family was ever destined to exist in sickness, fear, ignorance, poverty, loneliness or mediocrity. God's abundant goodness will be enjoyed and utilized by those who discipline themselves, become decisive, bold, adventurous, believing, daring, risking and determined. Ojo noted this as the main trust of Idahosa's teaching. Today, many pastors in Africa particularly in Nigeria proclaim the same message as Idahosa. David Oyedepo of the Living Faith Church (A.K.A Winners' Chapel) is one of the leading and most prominent figures of the prosperity theology in Nigeria today. He was rank as the most prominent prosperity teacher because he has published more than seventy books, mostly on the subjects of success and prosperity in Nigeria, Africa and the world at large. There are other prominent preachers of like manner such as E.A Adeboye of Redeemed Christian Church of God, Late T.B. Joshua of Synagogue Church of All Nation, W. F Kumuyi of Deeper Life Christian Bible Church, Ibiyeomie of Salvation Ministry, Johnson Suleiman of Omega Fire Ministry, Joshua Igila of Royal Champion, Ashimolowo of Kingsway International Christian Centre, London and Oyakhilome of Christ Embassy Church, Paul Eneche of Dunamis Church, Fr. Ejike Mbaka a Catholic priest and the founder of Adoration Ministry, Rev. Ande Musa of RCCN and many other preachers of like manner.

It is easy to see that their message focus primarily on good health, wealth, victory, success and prosperity here on earth. Today prosperity gospel has spread and found among many Christian churches in Nigeria. It can be seen among Catholics, Protestants, and Pentecostals churches in Nigeria society.

THE TEACHINGS OF PROSPERITY GOSPEL

Most of the teachings of prosperity gospel preacher are from the Bible. They quote the scripture correctly but misused it to fit their selfish interest. Prosperity preacher always teaches that faith in God gives one good health. However, you can only acquire God's healing power if you work on your faith and follow the spiritual law.

The prosperity theology teaches that Christ's atoning death does not release believers from spiritual sin only. It frees them from physical disease as well (Isaiah 53:5). You maintain this freedom through effective and marathon prayer, regular fasting and positive thinking which means one believes that the healing has taken place. If someone is prayed for but does not get healed, then it is their fault because they lack faith or they have sin or sins they have committed but not confessed.

There is a huge emphasis on the need to clear all generational sins committed by one's parents or grandparents and all kinds of social, economic and political misfortunes. For this reason, there is a need for deliverance. According to the prosperity gospel or theology, a person needs deliverance not just from the generational sins of the parents or grandparents, but also from the evil spirits. The use of the 'blessed' and 'anointed' objects for healing is common. These include but not limited to oil, water, handkerchiefs, and food products. More often than not, these objects are sold at high prices to those seeking healing and deliverance.

Rightly so, wealth is regarded as blessing from God the Provider (Jehova Jireh). The prosperity gospel teaches that the invisible faith should lead to tangible financial rewards. The prosperity gospel would go further and claim that the size of your wallet tells the size of your faith. The more one's donate for religious causes the more God will increase one's material wealth. Most prosperity gospel preachers would argue that prosperity is governed by a spiritual law of positive confession. Here is the basic premise of

positive confession as far as the Bible is concerned. The Bible has promised the believers prosperity, so the believers should speak in faith about that promise. Indeed, the Bible is a faith contract between God and the believer. In this contract, the believers must fulfill their part of the contract. If they do this then they will receive God's promises of financial security especially if they make the financial miracles an everyday prospect, and invoke the name of Jesus which unlocks God's material blessings. Whoever does this becomes the beneficiary of the legal benefits (including the rights and privileges) that the substitutionary atonement of Jesus secures (Mark 16:17-18, Malachi 3:10 and Matthew 25:14-30).

Some prosperity gospel preachers preach that poverty is a spiritual evil that must be confronted through positive confession. Indeed, others would claim that God has promised to transfer the wealth of the wicked into the bank accounts of the righteous. Others would add that the Old Testament is full of people who enjoyed abundant wealth such as Adam and Eve before the Fall, Abraham and King Solomon.

However, wealth does not come unless one adheres to some rules. One of the key rules is faithfulness in giving directly to the preacher or church leader even more than giving to the church for God's work. In this context, faithfulness means you sow or give abundantly in order to reap abundantly (Malachi 3:10 and 2 Corinthians 9:6-8) and make sure you give the first fruits for God's work starting with your first earnings be it salary, car, loan, farm products, business profit (and so on) and then you continue to give faithfully and unceasingly during your lifetime. This leads to victory because God is a Victor (Jehova Nissi).

Victory is a spiritual and legal right that atonement secures for the believer, but one needs total victory which comes from total commitment. There is a frequent use of the word breakthrough. Nothing can stop you from becoming the winner. Moreover, nothing can keep you down. Nonetheless, you must follow the spiritual law of giving faithfully, fasting regularly while also invoking the name of Jesus.

COMMON PRACTICES, METHOD AND TECHNIQUES USED FOR PROSPERITY GOSPEL IN NIGERIA

Prosperity preachers use different method to inculcate or brainwash their members with prosperity mentality. They organized crusade, boast of having power, good networking, mentorship and intimacy, and use of effective media and publication of sermons. They organized crusade time to time with tags and labels associated with prosperity. There are many lists of crusade title in Nigeria that are used by prosperity preachers. One can see this in both rural and urban cities in Nigeria today like 2021 year of glory to glory, 2022 year of breakthrough, hour of unlimited blessing, freedom from financial bondage, deliverance from generation curses, poverty to prosperity, and many more. These crusade titles are not just tags. They are back with biblical quotation illustrating the need and desire for prosperous life (Ayantayo 2010).

The prosperity preachers claim of having power to make a person rich. As a result they introduce series of techniques which are manifested in manipulation and playing upon the intelligence or ignorance of their congregants. For example, they ask them to project that they are rich. That Christ suffered for them to be rich. At times they instruct them to donate money in other to be a beneficiary of God's blessing which could be cars, houses, passport, overseas visa, job, double promotion, success in business, journey mercy and success in overseas trip among others (Dada 2001). Worst still, they introduce quite a number of offering in which the preachers put a limit to what one can offer depending on the material worth of the individual audience. This involves a kind of gambling method because the preachers ask the first ten (10) luckiest members of the audience to donate N50, 000, until it gets to the least lucky person who may be asked to donate N100 or less. They sometimes quote biblical passages such as Gal. 6:7 which says" God loves a cheerful giver". The pastors often ask the congregation to sow fat so that they may reap bounteously. In the light of this, they design some offerings such as offering that open heaven for blessings, offering that remove poverty from one life completely, offering that brings abundant and unlimited success in all earthly endeavor. To accompany these, the prosperity pastors sell anointed water, candle, oil and handkerchiefs to the willing members of the audience claiming that their use will open the way to all round and everlasting success. For example they tell the audience by using anointed handkerchiefs, a person will get to anywhere he desires with ease. Majority of audience are carried away by these methods, including educated people among the audience. Those who do not participate in crusade, the prosperity preachers give them opportunity to buy tape and videocassette of the crusade. Today we have many videocassette, anointed handkerchiefs, oil, water, books and magazine of prosperity messages on sale in the churches and bookshops and on streets. Bishop Oyedepo a renowned prosperity preacher has written copies of books on issues related to prosperity. Mentioning few of them is suffice: we have book like: Bible Sense of Financial Fortune", "Covenant Wealth" Success Buttons", "Breaking Financial Hardship", "Understanding Financial Prosperity", "Exploring the Secrets of Success"(Winner's Bookshop Bushorun, Ibadan in Ayantayo 2010).

Good Networking, Mentorship and Intimacy are a common practices and method used by prosperity preachers in Nigeria. The wellestablished prosperity gospel churches are good at building networks and mentorships. Seminary training is one of the chief means of building their networks. A good number of the rich prosperity gospel preachers have their own theological college and seminary. They also connect well with all who attend church services through phone calls, emails, newsletters and the social media. With regard to mentoring, more often than not, the senior leaders tend to allow the younger and upcoming leaders to use the name of their church or ministry. In terms of intimacy, most prosperity gospel preachers know how to cultivate on-screen and off-screen intimate

relationship with their members and audiences just like the celebrities do. Some often share details of their 'perfect' family life experiences on TV shows. Also, they tend to wear custom made colorful clothes.

In attempt to inculcate prosperity mentality on the wider audience, a good number of the well-to-do prosperity gospel preachers use media and publications effectively and skillfully. Televangelism which became prominent from the 1960s has flourished since then. Most of the rich prosperity gospel preachers own a radio and television station of their own and have a publishing house that publishes the books authored by the preacher. The less rich often buy slots on television to broadcast pre-recorded church services. Billboards are mounted and leaflet are placed and pasted at conspicuous places for the audience to see. The preachers often make good money from their publications including books, CDs, DVDs and other material. Some time, they often employ the service of professional advertising agents who are good in the choice of word such that will be catchy enough to win the attention of public. Those on radio and television are aired intermittently, while those in billboards, leaflet are placed and pasted at conspicuous places for the audience to see. It is important to note that the common practices, methods and techniques involved in putting across prosperity gospel to the public and the much emphasis on the subject prosperity tend to affect Christian churches in Nigeria negatively. It turned people away from the true gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus during his earthly ministry warned his follower to seek his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well (Matthew 6:33).

EFFECTS OF PROSPERITY GOSPEL ON NIGERIAN CHRISTIAN CHURCH AND SOCIETY

There are different ways in which prosperity gospel affect Nigerian Christian church and society. One among them is the monetization and commercialization of religious activities. Monetization of religious activities originated in Nigeria as result of prosperity preachers. It is real that almost every religious activity such as clapping of hands, dancing, prayers, devotion and the likes has been monetized. This practice is what Obiora has classified as commercialization of religion. People are appointed into position in the church based on their monetary affluence and their financial contribution to the church. Religion has been misuse as money ventures in a large scale. In fact carrying a bible is one of the quickest means of getting money. This situation made the Patriarch of the Methodist Church of Nigeria- His Pre-eminence Sunday Mbang to liken the church to a den of robbers. In one of his publications in Dailly Star (1985), he writes that:

The commercialization of Christianity has led to corruption and other forms of indiscipline in our churches today. The church, which was supposed to be a house of God has, become den of robbers, a place for mischief makers, cheat and immoral acts.

In Nigeria today, both orthodox churches and Pentecostal churches place much emphasis on money than soul winning, salvation of man, hard work and good conduct in the society.

Lust of materialism has engulfed Christian churches today because of prosperity preaching. The quest to become rich has heightened the desire for materialism among many Christian adherents in Nigeria today. Materialism is the tendency to value material things like wealth, money, cars, properties, clothing, high profit in merchandise and bodily comfort too much and the moral spiritual and intellectual too little or not at all(Paul 1979). Materialism is not bad in itself because we need to be rich and contribute to the development of the work of God. But, the lusts for it which has made some to do away with salvation of soul and morality to get prosperous. In most Christian churches today, emphasis is place on wealth or materials possession of individuals. The desire to get rich quick is on increase and the religious moral value such as honesty, truthfulness are been buried.

There are high crimes in the church and society today because of prosperity gospel. Most Christian engaged in crimes such as drug and child trafficking, kidnapping, money laundry, 419, cheating, extortion among others in all their efforts to become rich since they have being taught that prosperity is the basis for their being recognized in the society and in the church. Since the churches especially the prosperity teaching churches do not seem to have given their members blue print regarding how to pursue wealth, we find people engaging in criminal activities. Confirming this fact Ikekwun(1994) identified the urge for material wealth with the high rate of crime in Nigeria. He further noted that:

Nigeria is a capitalist country where one is assessed by the type of car one drives, the number of house one owns and even the number of wives one has. This societal set up has created a mad urge in the individual to acquire material wealth by hook or by crook. Some do not care any more about their families and the upbringing of their children. All they want is wealth at all cost. Prosperity preachers do not care about the source of wealth of their members. They are found of pouring blessings on those that are rich in the society or in the church or those that contribute high amount of money to church project. Challenging this criminal act in our society, Adegbesan accused religion as agent of legitimization of crimes in Nigeria, when he argues that:

It is our contention that this criminal state of affairs was made possible because of attitude and activities of some religious leaders, which are consider being collusive and permissive. These activities were collusive when religious leaders were associated with criminals acting as their talismans. Reports in newspapers are replete with case of religious leaders who give criminals prayers, blessings, tiara and other charms before they embarked on their nefarious activities. Usually they proceeds of such successful ventures were shared with the religious leaders.

Concur with Adegbesan that most of prosperity teachers collude with most criminals in Nigeria today. It has appeared in many newspapers about many of the prosperity preachers that always prayed for drug and child traffickers before and after their operations.

These preachers know the source of wealth of these criminals but refused to question them because they are part of it and those criminals gift generously to the church with their ill-gotten wealth.

One of the most worrisome issues is that most prosperity gospel preachers own small, medium and big businesses and do so with money donated by the members including the most vulnerable. The children of the most vulnerable in the society cannot attend some of schools set up by prosperity preachers or churches despite the fact that they donate money to prosperity preachers or churches. In this sense they stand accused of playing lottery with the physical needs of the vulnerable who have real life issues and are looking to those in positions of 'power' for help not for reap off. It is amazing that those who attend the prosperity churches are not bothered at all by the level of the wealth enjoyed by most prosperity gospel preachers, the promotion of personality cults, and the idolatry of money.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to reverse this ugly trend posted by prosperity gospel among Nigerian Christian church and society, the need to raise the level of biblical literacy of Nigerian Christians is quite apparent and urgent. This is achievable when untrained and half-trained preachers submit themselves to adequate training by credible theological seminaries and strong Departments of Religious Studies in Nigerian universities in the area of Christian theology, biblical hermeneutics, biblical ethics, and effective homiletically principles. It will help to reduce misinterpretation of bible or biblical illiteracy by some prosperity preachers.

Proper social and religious regulation should be enacted to guide the activity of churches especially those who take from the sweat of the helpless people and give nothing back to the society but only to service their own selfish interests.

The church and its message should not just focus on tithing and sowing of seeds breakthrough, miracles and wonders. Religious leaders can encourage and promote good communities' initiative such as cooperative societies, creativity and innovations instead of waiting for government to what they can do for themselves.

The church and her preachers should be preaching the gospel of hard work, encourage production of goods and services, stimulate in their members critical thinking analysis, strategy, visibility plans, system building, market and customer analysis and the process involve in production of goods and services. When the church encourages this, it helps in creating noble wealth than wealth through hook and crook

Churches should stop glorifying riches which is required through miraculous sources. Christianity has played a big role to the fall of Nigeria today but that is not what it is intended. Spreading messages of instant success have met with generation of people who are just in for instant result, immediate relief and effortless profit. Prayer without work is useless and one should know that you do not need the pastor's blessing to create wealth in life. Wealth and developed societies don't come by miracle or magic in life. Religious superstition such as the shout of I received it, and loudest shout of Amen are not enough to neither put food on the table nor fulfill one's wishes. Therefore salvation of souls, desire for the kingdom God, hard work and good conducts should be the focus of any Christian preachers.

CONCLUSION

This article has made a case for prosperity preaching in Nigeria. The discussion has revealed that monetization and commercialization of religious activities, lusts for materialism, high crime are chiefs among the effects of prosperity gospel on contemporary Nigerian Christian church and society. It was argued that prosperity preacher give more emphasis on good health, wealth, success and prosperity here on earth than preaching the gospel of soul winning, salvation of man, hard work and good conducts in our church and society. While prosperity is good, it is important for us to pursue it within Christian and society ethics. That is, there should be desire for the kingdom of God first, good conducts and hard work in the society.

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