
**AN EXAMINATION OF PENTECOSTAL PROSPERITY PREACHING AND POVERTY
REDUCTION IN NIGERIA**

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ABSTRACT

Some Pentecostal Churches are known for being more interested in the prosperity of their members rather than emphasizing on the salvation messages for the salvation of their souls. There is no gainsaying some Pentecostal Churches have abused the prosperity preaching in the process of reducing the poverty of their members. Therefore, the paper examined the negative impact of prosperity preaching as regards to poverty reduction in the country. It attempted to proffer solution to this anomaly. Primary sources were observations and experience while secondary sources included books, internet materials and newspapers. It used phenomenological approach. The data collected were described and analyzed for easy comprehension. It was discovered that prosperity preaching in some Pentecostal Churches have contributed to the high rate of quest for materialism with its attendant get-rich-quick syndrome. The paper recommended that Pentecostal Prosperity Preachers needed to be guided by the scriptures so that they would overcome the temptation of preaching wrong prosperity messages, thereby deceiving their members.

Keywords: Prosperity, Gospel, Pentecostalism, Poverty and Corruption

INTRODUCTION

This country is described as a place where some people wallow in abject poverty while few live in luxury. The poor lack basic needs of life which make them struggle on daily basis to make both ends meet, yet they are ravaged by hunger, homelessness and poor clothing. There is no access to medical care, employment and quality education. The government whose responsibility is to cater for the citizens is not

doing much to rescue the poor masses from the scorching poverty. There is no doubt that the government instead of engaging in poverty reduction has compounded the poor condition of living by resorting to exploitation of the poor masses through self-centred policies, diversion of tax payers' money to private pockets, bribery and corruption and mismanagement of public funds.

It is believed by some people that poverty is one of the responsible factors that led to the growth of Pentecostal Churches given its intervention package to the poor for the alleviation of their sufferings. There is affinity between prosperity preaching or prosperity gospel and poverty. Without poverty there will be no prosperity preaching which is aimed at motivating the poor to become rich. The effort of the Pentecostal Churches in reducing poverty has not gone unrecognized. However, this is not to say that some Pentecostal Churches are not abusing Pentecostal preaching to enrich themselves at the expense of the victims of prosperity preaching. In some cases, they interpret the scriptures subjectively with the ulterior motive of satisfying their selfish ends, thereby spreading heretical teachings. Prosperity preaching has inculcated materialism in the minds of those that believe it which is capable of substituting Christ with *mammon* (riches). Some of the negative effects of abuse of prosperity preaching are, bribery and corruption, displaying of ill gotten wealth, ritual killing, laziness and get-rich-quick syndrome which are capable of bringing eternal damnation to the corrupt. The previous researchers focused on the positive impact of prosperity preaching on poverty reduction, while little work is done on the negative effects of abuse of prosperity preaching by some Pentecostal Churches in a bid to reduce poverty. Therefore, this paper will examine the negative effects of prosperity preaching in juxtaposition with poverty reduction in the country with the aim of addressing the negative effects of prosperity preaching that constitute nuisance in the country.

Clarification of Key Terms

The term Pentecostal is derived from the Greek word *Pentecost* which means fiftieth day. It was a Jewish feast of weeks also known as feast of Harvest of first fruits. This Jewish feast (Pentecost) was celebrated fifty days after the Passoverⁱ. Prior to the gift of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost day, Pentecost had nothing to do with Holy Spirit. However, owing to the fact that the Holy Spirit was given on the Pentecost day, Christians began to call that day Pentecost Sunday. Pentecostalism was derived from the term Pentecost which means the out-pouring of the Holy Spirit on the apostles after the ascension of Christⁱⁱ. It is the re-enactment of the manifestation of the power of the Holy Spirit in the church on the Pentecost day. Pentecostalism is a belief in the gift of Holy Spirit who empowers the Pentecostals to speak in tongues as well as possess other spiritual gifts like healing, prophecy, wisdom and discernment of spiritsⁱⁱⁱ. Pentecostalism is a Christian movement that upholds the indispensability of personal relationship with the Holy Spirit which is a mark of authentic Christianity^{iv}. In Pentecostal church, Holy Spirit is held in high esteem more than tradition, reason and scriptures. Pentecostal Church emerged as a Christian Religious Movement whose aspiration was renewal of the church. That is why it is called Holiness Movement or Born Again movement^v. Pentecostalism is a doctrine of Pentecostal church that places premium on speaking in tongues, faith healing and prophecy which is a result of American Pentecostal influence on Nigerian Pentecostal church that insists on restoring the Pentecostal influence in the early church to the

present church^{vi}.

Prosperity preachers preach prosperity messages to their parishioners. It is important to note that prosperity is synonymous with success. Prosperity means “the state of being successful, especially financially^{vii}.” It means being prosperous in one’s endeavour. Also, it is the ability to be successful in business. Prosperity is “the condition of being successful or thriving; especially: economic well-being^{viii}.” It also means economic achievement. Prosperity is a situation of being rich or wealthy. The Hebrew word for prosperity is *tsaleach* which means to succeed or prosper and it appears 6,734 times in the Old Testament. It also signifies successful venture. The Greek word for prosperity is *evodo* which appears 2,137 times in the New Testament that is used in passive voice to describe a prosperous journey. Prosperity also means to prosper in material things^{ix}. The analysis of the term prosperity in both Old Testament and New Testament shows that prosperity is more popular in the Old Testament than in the New Testament.

Background of Pentecostal Church

Pentecostal church dates back to the Pentecost day in Acts of the Apostles in which there was an outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the disciples of Jesus which consequently resulted in the manifestation of the Holy Spirit like speaking in tongues^x. Revival in the Mission Churches like Anglican Church and Methodist Church provided an opportunity for the emergence of Pentecostal church. It must be noted that Pentecostalism formerly began in the 20th century from Holiness Movement which separated from Anglican Church. John Wesley championed the holiness movement in which he inculcated Christian perfection into the minds of his members. It was the revival that took place at Azusa Street in 1906 by the Holiness movement that influenced Nigeria Pentecostalism^{xi}.

African Pentecostalism has its root in the Aladura Churches in the country. It started from the charismatic ministries of William Wades Harris and Garrick Braide in 1914 and 1918 respectively. William Wades Harris was a member of Methodist Mission in Sierra Leone and Garrick Braide worked with Niger Delta pastorate as a catechist/church Agent. Later, they broke away from the Mission Churches due to persecution. One of the early converts of Garrick Braide was Augustus Ehurien Nwogu of Old Umuahia who decamped from Niger Delta Pastorate (NDP) and joined Faith Tabernacle Congregation. He abandoned Faith Tabernacle congregation and formed Church of Jesus Christ which was renamed Assemblies of God Mission^{xii}. The first phase of Pentecostal movement in the country began from 1990 to 1960 which led to the formation of indigenous churches (Aladura). It was in 1930s that the indigenous churches came into contact with foreign Pentecostal movement through the Faith Tabernacle^{xiii}. There was no distinction between Pentecostal Churches and Aladura Churches owing to the fact that the later also believed in the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The first generations of Pentecostal churches are referred to as Aladura Churches^{xiv}. The founder of Eternal Sacred Order of the Cherubim and Seraphim, Moses Orimolade Tunolase hailed from Ikara town, Ondo State. He was convinced that God called him to preach the good news. Moses Tunolase became an itinerant preacher in 1916. His preaching coupled with the resuscitation of Christianah Abiodun Akinsowon gave birth to Cherubim and Seraphim in 1925 in Lagos^{xv}. Precious stone society was a prayer band in St. Saviour’s Anglican Church, Italupe in Ijebu-Ode. It was

D.O. Odubanjo who introduced precious stone to Faith Tabernacle. Members of the precious stone society were influenced by Faith Tabernacle to reject infant baptism and the use of medicine which finally resulted in the conversion of members of precious stone society to Faith Tabernacle^{xvi}. Joseph Ayo Babalola, formerly an Anglican joined Faith Tabernacle and broke away from Faith Tabernacle and joined the Apostolic Church in Bradford, Great Britain which was the first Pentecostal Church that was established in Nigeria, the Apostolic Church was later changed to Christ Apostolic Church. It is on record that Josiah Oshitelu, a dismissed Catechist of Anglican church who was known for introducing healing by prayer alone, consecrated water and holy names founded the church of the Lord (Aladura)^{xvii}

The Celestial Church of Christ came from Western Nigeria to Benin in the 1950s. Pa Josiah Akindayomi, a former member of Cherubim and Seraphim founded the Redeemed Christian Church of God in 1952. Later, Enoch Adejare Adeboye was made the General Overseer of the church. The leader of evangelical student revivals, Benson Idahosa, founded the Church of God Mission International in 1972. Again, Kumuyi established Deeper Life Bible Church in 1975. Living Faith Outreach Worldwide (Winner's Chapel) was founded in 1986 by David Oyedepo^{xviii}. Other Pentecostal churches that were founded later include, the Grace of God Mission, Four Square Gospel Mission, Chosen, Last Days' Messengers, Christ Ascension Church, Holiness Evangelical Mission, Masters Vessels and so on^{xix}.

The Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN) is a Pentecostal body in Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN). It coordinates the activities of member churches like Pentecostal, Evangelical and Charismatic Ministries, Churches and associations with the aim of fostering unity, that they may be one in John chapter 17. The Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN) is an umbrella of Pentecostal Christian Churches, an organization that believes in the gift of the Holy Spirit in Acts Chapter 2^{xx}. PFN is open to churches that believe in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and practice speaking in tongues (Acts 2:1-4).

Prosperity Gospel in Nigeria

Pentecostal church in the country came in contact with prosperity gospel when great prosperity preachers visited the country. Prior to the evangelical visits of prosperity preachers, prosperity gospel was alien in the Pentecostal churches in the country. Wind of prosperity gospel became a reality in the country as far back as 1970s when T.L Osborne and Ernest Angley visited the country^{xxi}. It must be noted that American Pentecostalism exerted great influence on the Pentecostal Churches in the country in terms of prosperity messages from 1970s to 1980s. It used evangelistic outreaches like evangelism, Christian literature and televangelism to influence Pentecostal Churches. Campus fellowships served as a medium for propagating American Pentecostalism in the country due to the Pentecostal pastors from America were predominately guest speakers^{xxii}.

The founder of church of God Mission, Benson Idahosa was the father of prosperity gospel. His mentor, Sydney Elton introduced him to Gordon Lindsay who was a renowned Evangelist and Pentecostal teacher. Idahosa was trained at Christ for the Nations Bible Institute founded by Gordon Lindsay in America. He was also influenced by Pentecostal preachers like T.L Osborn and Jim Baker. Other prosperity preachers

that influenced Nigerian Pentecostal pastors are Kenneth Copeland and Oval Roberts. In the country, Idahosa influenced David Oyedepo of Winners Chapel and Ayo Oritsejafar of Word of Life Mission, Warri. It should be noted that other renowned prosperity preachers include Gabriel Oduyemi of Bethel Ministries, E.A. Adeboye, General Overseer of Redeemed Christian Church of God, Lagos, Patrick Anwuzie who is in charge of Zoe Ministries and Chris Okotie of Household of God Fellowship^{xxiii}.

Prosperity Gospel and Poverty Reduction

Poverty reduction means the effort geared towards reducing the rate of poverty in the country. It is linked to finding solution to the poverty syndrome that ravaged the country in 1990 when many people lived below the standard of living. Even today, the masses including some pastors find it difficult to survive the harsh economic realities in the country. Preaching prosperity received a boost in the Nigeria/Biafran civil war that lasted from 1967 to 1970. The post Nigeria/Biafran civil war was replete with hunger and poverty that made the Pentecostal churches to stress on prosperity. Many people were forced to seek solutions in the Pentecostal churches with its attendant prayer and fasting, healing, miracles and speaking in tongues^{xxiv}. Today, Seekers of miracles and prosperity are moving from one Pentecostal church to another in search of prosperity and miracles. Prosperity preachers teach their congregations that it is the will of God that his children should not be poor or lack material things^{xxv}. Every Christian is expected to be rich irrespective of his means of livelihood. Experience has shown that prosperity is not meant for Christians alone. After all there are committed Christians that are still poor. Ogunewu observes that:

Emphasis of prosperity preacher is that you do not have to be poor to be a Christian. Failure, poverty, unhappiness and all forms of difficulties should not necessarily be lot of Christians. They emphasize that all Christians have the right, and even the responsibility, to be prosperous in all areas of life. This most notably includes the areas of financial prosperity, prosperity in the realm of physical health and general well-being^{xxvi}.

From the foregoing, prosperity covers every aspect of human life which ranges from economic prosperity, educational prosperity, and marital prosperity to spiritual prosperity. Prosperity in the Pentecostal churches is holistic owing to the fact that prosperity is concerned with the physical needs of the people.

It is discovered in the Pentecostal Churches that “many visit the church to claim the promise of prosperity, business successes; various levels of achievements etc. All these attempts bother on acquisition of one material desire or the other^{xxvii}” Statistics has shown that in the year 2000, Mountain of Fire and Miracle Ministries recorded about 3,000,000 people that attended its healing crusade. Another 550,000 trooped to receive miracles at the crusade of Reinhard Bonnke held in December, 2000 in Lagos^{xxviii}. In some Pentecostal Churches, prosperity messages have changed the mentality of people to believe that something is fundamentally wrong with a believer who is poor. In most cases, poverty is seen as the handiwork of witches and wizards, familiar curses, spiritual attacks and names. Pentecostals believe that one’s name has tremendous influence on his future and goes a long way to determine one’s destiny. Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM) usually change the traditional names of new converts into Christian or

biblical names as a way of severing the new converts from ancestral curses, negative meanings of the names and family gods. All these are part of the deliverance package for the new converts before they become Christians^{xxix}.

The prosperity preachers view poverty as a curse which every believer should avoid. Riches are believed to be the hallmarks of God's favour on believers and one's wealth determines his relationship with God. It is believed that God is a rich God, therefore, there is no way a child of God will be poor. The prosperity preachers use Abraham, Isaac, David, Solomon, Hezekiah as some of the examples of prosperous sons of God^{xxx}. Prosperity preachers encourage their members to give testimonies of their prosperity. Offiong who studied testimonies in a Pentecostal Church revealed that testimonies cover success in deliverance, healing, salvation, marriage, academic exploits, forgiveness of sin and financial breakthrough. Pentecostals give testimonies of success in examinations, admission into tertiary institutions and progress in other human endeavours. All these testimonies raise the hope of the members to aspire for more prosperity. They hold prayer sessions for deliverance, successful business, Children, academic success, promotion and riches^{xxxi}. There is no doubt that prayer of prosperity preachers revolve around prosperity which has its negative effects.

Negative effects of Prosperity Messages

It is observed that Pentecostal Churches have spread to every nook and cranny of the country. Pentecostal Churches spring up everywhere in the country which is not motivated by the desire to win souls, but by the ulterior motive of amassing wealth through the reckless planting of churches^{xxxii}. In most cases, establishment of churches is for profit maximization. The high rate in which "mushroom churches" spread like wild fire makes it impossible for people to know the statistics of the Pentecostal Churches. Nevertheless, the number of Pentecostal Churches is estimated to be about 1018^{xxxiii}. One of the disadvantages of the phenomenal growth of Pentecostal Churches is that it helps to spread prosperity gospel to every nook and cranny of the country. Many are not going to church to worship God in spirit and truth. Rather, a lot of people flock to churches today in search of prosperity without righteousness. The problem of Pentecostal prosperity messages is undue emphasis on prosperity^{xxxiv}.

The danger of prosperity gospel is that it rekindles people's desire to be rich at all cost, thereby engaging in all sorts of crimes. Many pastors have resorted to buying and selling of prosperity through selling of holy oil, mantle and handkerchiefs^{xxxv}. Unsuccessful businessmen, unemployed youths, area boys, touts, criminals and other people of questionable character have joined the ministry in a bid to make both ends meet. Pentecostal preachers preach to impress their congregations so that they will come forward and drop their offerings at their feet. Some will come and use white handkerchiefs to wipe their shoes and others will cheer at them, by saying "ride on man of God". The corrupt practice associated with prosperity gospel has brought shame to the gospel. Prosperity gospel is seen by many as commercialization of the gospel. It poses an obstacle to the salvation message. Prosperity gospel/commercialization of the gospel has attracted derogatory names to the Pentecostal Churches like, "cash and carry pastors", "freelance preacher", "Pastors for hire", and "419 preachers"^{xxxvi}. There is a necessity for the Pentecostal Churches

to play the game according to the rules. Prosperity preachers design various means of extorting money from their members. History has it that it was Oral Roberts who influenced Benson Idahosa to practice seed-faith. The seed-faith is based on the principle that the amount of money given by a person determines the quantity or the amount of money that will be given to him by God. One of the popular sayings of Oral Robert is “whatever you can conceive, and believe, you can do” which is used to justify seed-faith. Benson Idahosa borrowed seed-faith from Oral Roberts which he used as a strategy of raising money in his church^{xxxvii}. The prosperity preachers encourage their congregations to sow seeds for one project or the other, at the end nothing happens. In 1993, the founder of Church of God Mission International organized a three-day conference in Cameroun. Many people were in attendance at the conference. He encouraged the congregation to sow seeds of faith to enable the church build a Christian University in Cameroun. The congregation responded positively to his appeal for the sowing of seed- faith. Consequently, many people sowed seed-faith of 25,000; 10,000; 5,000; and 1,000 as he directed. The money realized from the seed-faith was diverted and was not used to build the university^{xxxviii}.

Pentecostals are encouraged to give testimonies of their ill-gotten wealth, promotions, admission, success in examination, progress, job opportunities without shame. There is no gainsaying the prosperity preachers attract many followers which have made it possible for many Pentecostal pastors to turn their attention to prosperity gospel^{xxxix}. Poor people are target for deliverance from satanic bondage that is believed to hold them captive. The poor masses and the troubled souls have no option than to join the churches that are known for prosperity gospel. Prosperity preachers intimidate their members with fake prophecies in order to subject them to series of deliverance with the aim of exploiting them financially. Okeke (2010:171) makes it clear that people patronize Pentecostal Churches for miracles. They go to pastors that are known for working miracles like Chigbo Osundu of El-Gibor Ministries, Lazarus Muoka of Lord’s Chosen Charismatic, Enoch Adeboye of Redeemed Christian Church of God, David Oyedepo of Winners Chapel and Late T.B^{xl}.

The irony of prosperity gospel is some Pentecostal Churches that broke away from the Mission Churches due to decay and worldliness have sunk deep into moral decay, worldliness and corruption. The churches that broke away from the Mission Churches to form the Pentecostal Churches are Assemblies of God, Church of God, Churches of Christ, Bible Believers, Deliverance, Redeemed Gospel, Full Gospel or Holiness churches.^{xli} Pentecostal Churches are characterized by 10 to 15 minutes “praises” during church service with its attendant clapping of hands and dancing profusely. They also divide the congregation into bible study groups and the bible study discussions last for 45 minutes after which they re-assemble to continue the service. During sermon delivery, the preachers from time to time echo “amens’ and the congregations respond with “hallelujahs”. The congregations usually applaud the preachers if their sermons meet their expectations. They use the strategies of night vigil, prayer meetings, revival meetings, open air crusades, healing and deliverance services to realize their ambition of prosperity^{xlii}.

Some prosperity preachers are greedy for material gains. The founder and pastor of Winners Chapel has 30,000 worshippers every Sunday. He also established word of Faith Bible Institute, an evangelistic arm

of the church. This bible institute has graduated 40,000 graduates from its campuses in Nigeria and Africa. He has authored 35 books among them is Understanding Financial Prosperity. He claims that he wrote the book to end the poverty that has ravaged the church members for years. Therefore, the book will sensitize the members of his church to be acquitted with the secrets of prosperity in order to make God's plan for them (prosperity) a reality^{xliii}. He realized a lot of money from his Living Faith Church (Winners Chapel) that holds three services every Sunday in Lagos. The church has a seating capacity of 50,000. It also has branches in Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Ivory Coast, South Africa, Gambia, UK and U.S. Besides, he has a publishing house, a University and a secondary school^{xliv}.

It is a known fact that the general Overseer of the Household of God's Church who was formerly a pop star is now a pastor, businessman and politician. Recently, Forbes rich list enlisted him then among the Nigeria's richest pastors for having the assets worth of between N3m and N10m. He is one of the Nigeria millionaire- pastors that have leading churches in Lagos, Africa, US, Europe and Asia. He is a proponent of prosperity gospel and insists that prosperity is a sign of God's favour. The church that was established in 1990 now boasts of having rich pastors that have luxury cars and travel by their private jets^{xlv}.

Prosperity preachers usually associate with political leaders with the aim of satisfying their selfish interests. For instance, a German born evangelist, Reinhard Bonnke associates with political leaders that are known for corruption and highhandedness. The president of Togo then, Eyadema the most brutal and ruthless dictator invited Reinhard Bonnke for a crusade. He attended the crusade after which he gave commendation to the president of Togo. It has become a common practice for presidential and governorship aspirants to visit Pentecostal prosperity preachers for blessing. The political aspirants mostly visit Adeboye and Oyedepo for prayer. In 2008, Newsweek included E.A. Adeboye among the 50 influential people in the world^{xlvi}. The former president of the country, Goodluck Jonathan during his campaign for second term visited Enoch Adeboye which attracted severe criticisms from the masses to the pastor.

Sometime ago, Chukwuemeka Ezeugo (Rev. King) a pastor was found guilty of the murder of Anna Uzor King who was his member by the High Court in Lagos in 2006. The woman was also his sex partner. He killed Anna Uzor King by burning her to ashes. Chukwuemeka Ezeugo was sentenced to 100 years for attempted murder of the following persons, Onuorah Chizoba, Olisa Chiejike, Uchechukwu Iwoba, Vivian Ezeocha, Jessica Nwere, Kosisiochukwu and Ezenwankwo that escaped death by burning^{xlvii}.

Prosperity preaching has dragged the reputation of the country to the mud. Nkwoka stressed that:

In November 1997, a ...newspaper published various huge amounts of money that people must pay in a particular Pentecostal church if they needed miracle babies, employment, healing and so on. In fund raising, people who can afford some fixed huge amount of money got individual laying on of hands and a torment of prayers involving every conceivable blessing while those who could afford only hundred got a mass blessing or a

touch with one sentence casual prayer^{xlviii}.

There are people that have embezzled public funds and used it for sowing seed- faith. Prosperity preachers indirectly contribute to the high rate of corruption in the country. The general overseer of Mountain of Fire and Miracle Ministries (MFM) narrated a story of one young man who was desperate to go to overseas. But, he had no visa. The young man went to a herbalist who told him to swallow pins which will make the officials of immigration not to see him at the border. Unfortunately for him, he was caught by the immigration and the pins he swallowed started disturbing him. This led him to go to Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM) that prayed for him and the pins jumped out of his stomach. In his reaction to the incident the general overseer blamed the man for consulting a herbalist instead of coming to his church where God of Mountain of Fire and Miracle Ministries would have closed the eyes of the immigration officials and nobody would have caught him^{xlix}.

CONCLUSION

It is observed that prosperity gospel originated from America that was bedeviled by quest for materialism. Prosperity gospel is not African in the sense that African culture promotes hard work and not laziness. Prosperity preachers capitalize on poverty that ravages Africa to propagate heretical teaching on prosperity. It has encouraged laziness among people that want to reap where they did not sow seeds. Again, prosperity preachers use dubious means of exploiting and extorting money from their members. It is caused by get-rich quick syndrome that is found among some pastors and the church members. Prosperity gospel is one of the factors that are responsible for the high rate of corruption in the country. Salvation message is sacrificed at the altar of commercialization of the gospel. There is the necessity for prosperity preachers to return to the bible as to be guided by the word of God.

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