

A Critical Reflection on Prosperity Theology in Nigeria's Neo-Pentecostal Churches

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Abstract

Prosperity theology is the belief that God will grant the wishes of believers in accordance with their financial contributions to the church, especially those wishes involving material wealth and good health. This theology is one of the teachings of Neo-Pentecostal churches that have continued to generate controversies among Nigerian Christians. Therefore, this study critically reflects on prosperity theology in Nigeria's Neo-Pentecostal churches with a view to underscore the theological and ethical questions inherent in this subject-matter. Data was gathered through observation, review of video tapes on prosperity preaching, Christian literature and other scholarly materials. Data was historically, contextually, critically and constructively analysed. This paper avowed that Nigerian prosperity preachers place too much premium on tithing and seed sowing as means of obtaining personal blessings of material wealth and good health from God. It further revealed that prosperity theology has promoted unethical practices among some Neo-Pentecostal churches' adherents. This is because the excessive emphasis on sowing and reaping bountifully has led some adherents into immoral financial pursuit in a bid to fulfill the stipulated requirement for obtaining material wealth and good health promised by prosperity preachers. This essay submits that Nigerian prosperity preachers should preach realistic sermons that encourage hard work, diligence and sincerity for effective Christian impact in the society.

Keywords: *Financial Pursuit, Material Wealth, Neo-Pentecostal Churches, Prosperity Preachers, Prosperity Theology,*

Introduction

Prosperity theology otherwise known as prosperity preaching or health and wealth gospel is the belief that God will grant the wishes of believers in accordance with their financial contributions to the church, especially those wishes involving material wealth. According to Davis (2010), prosperity preaching is usually connected with the "Give and You Shall Receive" message. The exponents of this teaching encourage their

adherents to contribute financially to the church in exchange for personal blessings of financial wealth and some form of dynamic healing from their ailments. Over the years, prosperity doctrine advocates have continued to promote the idea that God wants Christians to be "abundantly" successful in every way; with special emphasis on financial prosperity (Dada, 2004; Davis, 2010; Atoi, 2010). It is usually argued that because God is rich, his human children ought to be rich and totally free from the scourge of poverty (Oyedepo,

2007). Prosperity preachers maintain that giving generously in the form of “tithing and seed sowing” is a fundamental requirement that believers need to fulfill in order to acquire abundant wealth. They contend that the more you give to the church, the more you receive from God. It is believed that whatever a man sows in the Church will be reaped a hundredfold (Dada, 2004; Kitaase and Achunike, 2013; Adedibu and Igboin, 2019).

It is equally a common belief among the exponents of prosperity theology that poverty is the result of lack of giving and lack of the knowledge of God's promises (Goroh, 2009). As such, adherents are admonished to give generously and exercise undoubting faith in God's promises of prosperity. Prosperity preachers further assert that the exercise of faith in the prosperity message is one of the major prerequisites for the acquisition of material wealth (Atoi, 2010). Little wonder Gifford (2004) referred to this kind of theology as “the faith gospel.” It is believed that for prosperity message to be effective, adherents must think and confess wealth in order to bring operation force or angels in charge of wealth into action. This belief is called positive confession in Neo-Pentecostal churches (Dada, 2004; Mpigi, 2017). Prosperity gospel proponents claim that God's will for believers is wealth, healing and a life of abundance, and

that poverty and sickness are of the devil. They continually admonished their adherents to tenaciously hold on to a vision of prosperity and abundance, despite the threat of hunger and poverty in the society (Atoi, 2010). This theology has continued to generate a lot of controversies and ethical questions in the Nigerian theological and social space, which call for a critical reflection. Against this backdrop, this study critically reflects on prosperity theology in Nigeria's Neo-Pentecostal churches with a view to underscore the theological and ethical questions inherent in this subject-matter. Data for this study was obtained through observation method, review of video tapes on prosperity preaching by Nigerian prosperity theology exponents, and Christian literature by renowned prosperity preachers as well as other scholarly materials on prosperity theology. Data was historically, contextually, critically and constructively analysed.

Emergence and Spread of Prosperity Theology in Nigeria

Several scholars have traced the origin of prosperity theology to the United States of America (Gifford, 1991; MacArthur, 1992; Gifford, 1994; Gifford, 2004; Dada, 2004; Piper, 2010). According to Gifford (2004), the prosperity gospel first emerged as an influential tradition globally when preachers

like Kenneth Hagin and Kenneth Copeland began propagating their uplifting message to the American Pentecostal circles in the 1950s, 60s and 70s. The messages of these preachers appeal to the needs of the majority of their audience, especially people coming from poor backgrounds (Williams, 2001). Quite often, prosperity preaching is against a background of poverty, oppression, deprivation, unemployment and marginalization. It was popularised among the blacks in the USA who were among the down trodden in the society before it was exported to other nations of the world that are experiencing economic problems as a result of socio-political instability (Atoi, 2010).

The prosperity doctrine found its way into Nigeria in the mid-sixties through the activities of American faith-healers and televangelists such as Kenneth Hagin, Oral Robert, John Avazini, Kenneth Copeland, and others. It was popularised in Nigeria by Archbishop Benson Idahosa, the founder of the Church of God Mission with Headquarters in Benin City, Nigeria in the late 1960s. Idahosa briefly attended the independent Pentecostal College of Christ for the Nations Institute in Dallas, USA in 1971 and then began the first of many mass evangelistic 'crusade' for which he became well known (Anderson, 2004; Omavuebe, 2021). Babatomiwa (2010)

maintains that Benson Idahosa is one of the earliest preachers of prosperity gospel in Nigeria, as such; he referred to him as the father of word of Faith Movement in Nigeria. He further asserts that the astronomical increase in the number of church founders began in Nigeria in the 1980s, when things went wrong with the management of the Nigerian economy. Similarly, Dada (2004) observes that the mid 1980s witnessed an unprecedented upsurge of the Neo-Pentecostal movement in Nigeria. The period also witnessed the emergence of prominent Neo-Pentecostal preachers like Ayo Oritsejafor, David Oyedepo, Wale Oke, among others.

The emergence and spread of prosperity gospel in Nigeria can be attributed to two major factors. These include the unfavourable socio-economic conditions of the time and the long military administration of the country. It is an obvious fact that the global economic recession that took place from 1982 affected Nigeria's economy. This view was well articulated by Dada (2004) who opines that:

The harsh socio-economic conditions in the 1980s enhanced the popularity and the spread of the prosperity gospel. From the late 1960s to the early 1980s, Nigeria witnessed an unprecedented economic boom. The boom was boosted by rise in the price of crude oil

in the world market. During this era of boom not much is heard about prosperity gospel. However, from 1982 the global economic recession took its toll on Nigeria's economy. Many companies and private businesses folded up. Life and living became unbearable for the average Nigerian. It was in this situation prosperity gospel preached by American preachers, but locally mediated through literature and mass media, by Nigerian preachers flourished (p. 99).

The second factor that enhanced the development and spread of prosperity theology in Nigeria was the long military administration and the paraphernalia that go with it. The first military *coup d'état* took place in Nigeria, January 15, 1966 (Anyaele, 2004). It should be noted that before the military came to power, the civilian administrators were extremely corrupt and irresponsible. It was the corruption and the irresponsibility of the civilian administration that invited the military into Nigerian body-politics. The purpose of the military intervention was actually to make necessary changes and remedy the situation at hand. Unfortunately, the purpose was defeated because the military themselves ended up with worse corrupt practices. They used the opportunity to amass wealth for themselves (Atoi, 2019). No wonder today, all retired army officers seem to be very wealthy. Moreover, their regime was known for the violation of fundamental human rights of

citizens, and the use of autocratic and despotic means to compel citizens to submit blindly to their authority. The military administration ushered in the civil war which took place in Nigeria from 1967-1970, in which about a million Nigerians were killed and property worth millions of Naira were destroyed (Atoi, 2010). In addition, their era witnessed the emergence of millionaires who did nothing to be rich, but amassing wealth from the state treasury. The social implication is that the 'get rich quick' attitude became the order of the day. It was in this atmosphere that the prosperity gospel had the opportunity to flourish in Nigeria. Those who could not make it in the political terrain ran to the church for their own share which prosperity preachers promised (Dada, 2004). It is extremely important to note that religious worship was the only social gathering that was permitted by the military juntas who took over power. As such, many people embraced prosperity gospel when the military brutality became acute. The above socio-economic and political situation of Nigeria in that era facilitated the development and spread of prosperity gospel in the country.

Biblical Notion of Material Prosperity and Attitudinal Approaches of Biblical Figures to it

A survey of the various sections of the Old Testament reveals that God was not against material prosperity in the patriarchal era of the Israelite history. We often find God's blessings associated with material prosperity. Some patriarchs of the Old Testament enjoyed abundance of material wealth from God. For instance, the Bible recorded in Genesis (13:2) that Abraham was heavily stocked with herds and silver and gold. Also, the faithful man Job was enormously wealthy, and after Satan brought him to poverty, God restored his wealth in double folds (Job 1:3; 42:10). Moreover, God deliberately prospered King Solomon so much that there was no King like him in his days and God assured him that there would never be any one like him even after his reign (1Kings 3:13). The prosperous reign of King Solomon is better appreciated when viewed against the background of 1King 4:20-28. Solomon had prosperity in abundance up to the extent that his great wealth attracted the Queen of Sheba who came all the way from Africa to behold the wealth of King Solomon (1Kings 10:1-13). In lieu of the above, it is clear that God was not against material prosperity in the Old Testament; what he was against was its misuse. Even when one has become prosperous, there is a warning that goes with prosperity. For example, in Deuteronomy, we read: "But 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 father as it is this day" (Deut. 8:18). The above biblical assertion assured the Israelites that if they were obedient to God, he would make them a prosperous nation.

It is imperative to note that in the Old Testament times, and more specifically in the time of Solomon, there was no Kingdom of God to be sought after; the whole idea of the Kingdom of God was introduced by Jesus Christ. Before the time of Jesus Christ, material prosperity was central to the people's thought pattern. However, by the time the Old Testament period was closing, wealthy people were generally seen as odious people, partly because of the way they acquired their wealth and partly because of the way they misused their wealth. In Amos (2:6-8), Amos railed at the rich men of Israel who out of greed joined house to house and land to land. They oppressed the poor and stole from them. They knew they could not work on Sabbath day but they prayed that Sabbath should go quickly so that they could go and make more money. It is also instructive that we should know the position of Solomon in his last days as we see in Ecclesiastics; he wrote: "vanity upon vanities all is vanity." (Eccl.1:2). Also, in Proverbs we read:

Remove far from me vanity and lies; give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me: lest I be full, and deny thee, and say who is the Lord? Or lest I be poor, and steal, and take the name of my God in vain (30:8-9).

It is pertinent to state categorically at this juncture that Jesus Christ changed the prosperity thought pattern of the Old Testament when he said: “seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness; all other things shall be added to you” (Matt.6:33). We should not misunderstand Jesus; he was not against material wealth but was against the lust for it, especially when it is at the expense of the kingdom of God. To drive his point home, he asks the question: “For what is a man profited if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Matt.16:26). It is imperative to note that Jesus did not seek material wealth and he did not ask any of his disciples to seek it, rather he told the young rich man to sell all his possessions and give the money to the poor if he wanted to follow him. In His words: “If you want to be perfect, go and sell all you have and give the money to the poor and you will have riches in heaven; then come and follow me” (Matt.19:21). We were told that the rich young man was downcast because he did not want to part with his wealth,

although he wanted to follow Jesus. Hence Jesus asserts:

I assure you: it will be very hard for rich people to enter the kingdom of heaven. I repeat: it is much harder for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle (Matt.19:23-24).

Jesus was certain on the matter of wealth when he made the above statement. In the prayer he taught his disciples; he told them to ask for their meals on daily basis. “Give us this day our daily bread” (Matt.6:11). In fact, Jesus had zero tolerance for material wealth, because he knew that excessive love for material wealth could block one’s access to the ultimate, that is, the kingdom of God. As such, he encouraged his follower to seek heavenly wealth. Hence he declares:

Do not store up riches for yourselves here on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and robbers break in and steal. Instead, store up riches for yourselves in Heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy, and robbers cannot break in and steal. For your heart will always be where your riches are (Matt. 6:19-21).

Similarly, Jesus said:

No servant can be the slave of two masters; such a servant will hate one and love the other or will be loyal to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money (Luke 16:13).

From the foregoing, it is obvious that Jesus did not give any room for acquisition and accumulation of material wealth here on earth.

His position probably rests on two premises: first, acquisition of material wealth may make people improper and unholy in the process of acquisition of such wealth. Secondly and more seriously, the acquisition of material wealth may make believers forget God. This is most likely the reason why Jesus himself laid down example for his disciples to follow by turning his back on earthly possessions; he had no house of his own. In fact, he told somebody that the son of man had no place to lay his head. He had to catch a fish to get money to pay his tax and had to borrow a colt for the triumphant entry into Jerusalem (Matt.21:2-3).

It is important to note that most of the early disciples of Jesus kept the instruction of Christ about the accumulation of material wealth here on earth to the core. In obedience to the teachings of Jesus Christ, the Christians of the Apostolic Age detested the accumulation of material wealth. They lived a communal life of the brotherhood of all and the fatherhood of God. As God the father provided, they shared what they had among themselves in such a way that the poor, the orphans, and the widows as well as other members of their community who did not have enough could have all that they needed to meet their basic needs of life. Those who tried to keep back part of what they possessed such as Ananias and his wife Sapphira never lived to

regret their actions. The sudden death of Ananias and Sapphira, because of their attempt to accumulate wealth for themselves, stressed the fact that there was no room for accumulation of wealth among the Christians in the early Christian community.

It is pertinent to note at this juncture that even in the Old Testament where material prosperity was central to the peoples thought pattern, it was not without a warning. In fact, God was not happy with those who misused their wealth. For example, because Solomon misused his wealth, God was not pleased with him. We were told that Solomon was unable to manage his excessive material wealth. Because Solomon had so much money, he decided to marry so many strange women who turned his mind away from the worship of Yahweh to the worship of idols to the extent that he built temples and altars for idol worship which God detested.

Attitudinal Approaches to Material Prosperity in Nigeria's Neo-Pentecostal Churches

It is a well-known fact in the global Christian circle that prosperity theology is a fundamental teaching of the Neo-Pentecostal Churches. According to Piedra (2005), principally, it must be recognised that prosperity theology is a Neo-Pentecostal

religious package. In a similar manner, Sam (2007) asserts that the idea that personal material abundance should necessarily follow from Christian righteousness, a doctrine popularly understood as prosperity gospel, has become an increasingly prominent feature of Nigeria's Neo-Pentecostalism. Dada (2004) informs us that Neo-Pentecostal churches are those churches that some scholars referred to as the new-age churches. Examples of such churches in Nigeria are Benson Idahosa's Church of God Mission, David Oyedepo's Living Faith Church aka Winners Chapel, Chris Oyakhelome's Believers Love World aka Christ Embassy, and Ayo Oritsejafor's Word of Life Bible Church, among many others. Observation has shown that prosperity gospel has permeated so many Nigerian churches today through the activities of the above mentioned Neo-Pentecostal pastors and televangelists. Idahosa, Oyedepo, Oyakhelome and Oritsejafor, among other prominent Neo-Pentecostal pastors through their sermons and writings have continued to promote the theology of abundant life in Nigeria's Christian theological space, that is, the idea that God wants believers to be abundantly wealthy here on earth. Oyedepo in his famous book entitled *Understanding Financial Prosperity* asserts:

God's ultimate is to make you a blessing; God wants to see you prosper; it gives Him great pleasure! God is excited when you prosper. What an encounter this will be for you! One day by such an encounter, God picked me out of my poverty and threw me into the realm of prosperity. This will be that one day for you! God will usher you into strange realms of prosperity; sorrow-free and God-given kingdom prosperity! Come with me, as I take you into the secret house of wealth (p. 6).

Similarly, Yusuf (1999) in his book, *Principles of Ever Living Faith* maintains that prosperity comes through the creative force of faith and is a life of supernatural abundance and possibility. Oyedepo (2007) in another of his popular book on prosperity doctrine titled *Possessing Your Possession* writes:

"Jesus was slain to restore back to us all that was lost through the sin of the first Adam. Though these packages are yours by right, for them to become yours indeed, you must 'take them by force.' Even Jesus knew that we would need to always contend for what belongs to us" (p. 205).

Oyedepo (2007) tries to formulate a theological basis for prosperity preaching by arguing that Christians are ambassadors of heaven here on earth, as such, they are to enjoy heavenly supplies and provisions, thereby, granting them immunity from lack and want. He further contends that as part of God's covenant, believers ought to prosper. This covenant according to him is sealed by the

death of Christ, that all who believe in the message of the gospel will along with the salvation of their souls obtain “all good things” in this world including wealth, health and total success. Hence, Oyedepo (2007) maintains that redemption is a cure for poverty. According to him, “When you were saved, you were redeemed from the plague of poverty” (p. 74).

Many proponents of prosperity gospel in Nigeria are of the view that poverty, diseases and other forms of deprivation are some of the consequences of the fall of man (Dada, 2004). There is a popular believe in Nigerian Neo-Pentecostal assemblies that poverty is a disease, an anomaly and a curse which every Christian must strive to get rid of, thereby making people go into dirty and crazy money-pursuit by all means at the expense of the salvation of their souls (Unegbu, 2005; Kakwata, 2017). It is very common within Neo-Pentecostal churches in Nigeria today to hear a preacher making statements, such as, “God does not want you to be poor” and “God promises to bless you beyond measure if you honor Him.” The above statements are what many people in Nigeria take to heart because of the victimization, oppression, deprivation, and marginalization inherent in the country’s political, economic and socio-cultural spaces. The impression is given in such a way that

adherents begin to think that God wants them to acquire material wealth here on earth in an extraordinary manner. As such, they channel all their efforts and time towards asking God for abundance of financial wealth, to the extent that they employ various means, both legitimate and illegitimate, to increase their financial wherewithal even at the expense of the salvation of their souls (Atoi, 2019).

In many Nigeria’s Neo-Pentecostal churches, there are usually great emphasis on giving, hence, the constant promotion of tithing, and seed sowing doctrines. According to Magbadelo (2004), Pentecostal pastors are fond of emphasising the importance of sowing ‘seed faith’ to their flocks during ministration. He stresses the fact that some Neo-Pentecostal pastors anchor their request for monetary assistance on Malachi 3.10 which is portrayed as a non-negotiable financial obligation of the devotees. In promoting the Neo-Pentecostal philosophy of giving, Oyedepo (2007) argues in *Possessing Your Possession* that keeping to the covenant of God entitles the believer to economic empowerment (p. 75). To him, giving is the only way to obtain “enduring wealth, as every other means of acquiring riches is time-tagged” (p. 76). He further contends that “when you give, you are not giving away your substance, but you are giving your way out of poverty” (p. 200). In the words

of Akoko (2007) “in some of the new Pentecostal churches ... members are sometimes urged to borrow money, if necessary, in order to give to the church; they are told that they thus qualify for supernatural monetary blessing” (p. 5). It is important to note at this juncture that most Neo-Pentecostal preachers do not limit their prosperity doctrine to their churches alone, they go as far as preaching such message in public places where there are mixed audience with different religious orientations and doctrinal persuasions. According to Magbadelo:

The cupidity of Pentecostal pastors is not confined to their church alone, even on crusade grounds where there are mixed multitudes with different orientations and perspectives, the pastors are not discreet in their urge to amass wealth. At a crusade in Lagos where thousands of Christians converged at the crusade ground of Victory Holy Ghost Mission, to receive miracles and deliverance from satanic bondage, the ministering Evangelist, Uma Ukpai admonished the congregation to come forward to sow “seed faith” as a necessary condition for divine blessing. Uma Ukpai warned that those who refused to sow “seed faith” would not prosper, and he exclaimed: “if you are not a giver today, you shall be a beggar tomorrow”. Consequently, half the worshippers at the crusade ground estimated to be about 20,000 were reported to have responded by trooping out to sow “seed faith”. This trend has become an institutionalised style in

some Pentecostal assemblies across the country (pp. 24-25).

It is quite unfortunate that some of the advocates of prosperity theology in Nigeria do not see any reason why they should warn their adherents that God is not pleased with seed sowing, tithe and offering given from ill-gotten wealth, irrespective of how much one gives. Instead, they are pre-occupied with the business of establishing financial empires and constructing earthly mansions, and developing some money collection logic and strategies to convince people to give (Atoi, 2019). There is a drift from preaching of salvation to whole-scale mercantilism, besides; these preachers themselves have become accomplished businessmen. This attitude has brought several of them to public scandals (Babatomiwa, 2010; Smith, 2021). Evidences abound that most of the leading prosperity theology exponents in Nigeria are known for flamboyant display of material wealth and extravagant and luxury life style. They are engaged in purchasing private jets, exotic cars, wearing of very expensive dresses, building ultra-modern houses and going about with body guards during church programmes, which they insist that their listeners will attain if they keep to the instructions of the man of God and abide by the covenant principles (Atoi, 2010; Ogunrinade and Atoi, 2017). This is most likely the reason

why Piper (2010) contends that many prosperity preachers not only give the impression that they 'peddle God's word' and make 'godliness a means of gain' but actually develop a bogus theology to justify their extravagant displays of wealth. Some of these preachers argue that if there is no prosperity here and now, it means that all is not well, as such, they adduce all the reasons why all is not well. They may attribute it to sin, or failure to pay tithe, or failure to pray hard enough, among others. Under such circumstances, messages of hope usually goes out to devotees that it is not all over for them as long as they follow ways prescribed by the pastor. For example, they should pay tithe regularly and support the capital projects in the church (Atoi, 2010).

Evaluating Prosperity Theology in Nigeria's Neo-Pentecostal Churches

In this segment, the major premises set forth by Nigerian prosperity preachers to endorse prosperity theology and other related issues will be objectively assessed. The essence is to unearth any illogicality or incongruity inherent in prosperity gospel advocacy with regards to the teachings of Jesus Christ and his apostles, and the principal mission of the Christian Church. It is also to find out if there is any merit of such theology

in the Nigerian socio-religious space. From the discussion so far, we have come to understand that prosperity theology is essentially centered on the following postulations, among others:

- (a) Presumption that material poverty is of the devil and that the phenomenon of poverty befalls man as a result of his sins which is the consequences of the fall of man.
- (b) Presupposition that material wealth is a compulsory gain of salvation bequeathed to believers by Jesus Christ, and that anyone who is in Christ does not experience socio-economic hardship and suffering of any kind because Jesus had already paid the price.
- (c) Assumption that donating munificently to the Church through tithing, seed sowing and offering enables a believer to reap bountifully.
- (d) Surmise that the death of Jesus on the cross of Calvary is a guarantee of divine unfailing health for believers.
- (e) Supposition that exercise of positive confession is a necessary condition to obtain God's blessings of abundant wealth.

Critical reflection on the aforementioned theses of prosperity theology exponents divulges a considerable level of illogicality and

contradiction of the prosperity gospel when compared with the teachings of Jesus Christ and his apostles, and the socio-economic realities of the contemporary Nigerian society. Predominantly, the supposition that poverty is of the devil and the result of man's sins is fallacious because it contradicts the biblical notion that the poor on earth are often rich in the kingdom of heaven. Besides, God did not really promise to give all believers in the early Christian church economic wealth and financial abundance. The reason may be that God wants to establish a mutual relationship between the materially poor and the materially wealthy, so as to create a balance life between these two categories of people. As such, both the rich and the poor are expected to perform mutual functions for each other in order to promote a harmonious human relationship in the society. In actual sense, neither poverty nor wealth are evil in themselves, rather, both of them are basic realities of life. God has actually allowed both to exist to fulfill a purpose in human relations. Poverty turns out to become a serious social problem in contemporary Nigerian society because man has not been able to maintain a mutual relationship that ought to exist between the materially rich and the materially poor. A critical look at the state of the nation reveals that Nigeria is composed of many people who are extremely self-

centered. Those who have the wealth of the nation at their disposal have been very inconsiderate of the socio-economic situations of their fellow citizens. They have continued to hold tight to the economic resources at their disposal to satisfy self, to the extent that it has led to state failure and severe hardship of the Nigerian general populace. Fundamentally, the socio-economic quagmire bedeviling the Nigerian state today is as a result of man's inability to manage the economic resources of the nation and man's egocentric desire to satisfy self alone at the expense of the general good of the entire citizens. Besides, telling members of the church to pray for the best of cars, houses, gold jewelries, and expensive clothes is an obvious attitude of avarice which in actual sense goes beyond addressing the existential question of poverty in the Nigerian socio-economic space.

Similarly, the belief that material wealth is a compulsory gain of salvation and that all who believe in Jesus Christ do not experience hardship and suffering is a misconception of fact because it fails to elucidate the reason why early disciples of Jesus Christ, namely apostles Peter and John and their other colleagues who had one on one personal relationship with Jesus Christ were materially poor (Acts 3:6). Apostle Peter in his episcopal message to the early Christian church specifically made

believers to understand that suffering for the sake of Christ is a test of faith. Schirrmacher (2001) was right when he articulates that presenting only a gospel in which there is no place for suffering or hardship, “robs the believer of several elemental applications and results of his faith.” Besides, the central theme of the gospel in the thought of Jesus and his disciples was not material wealth but the good news of the spiritual deliverance of believers (Matthew 1:21). Although Jesus cared for the material needs of his followers; he instructed them in the synoptic gospel to pray for those needs on daily basis; ‘give us this day our daily bread’ (Matt. 6:11). Jesus was never interested in the business of accumulation of material wealth but about the kingdom of God. Throughout his ministry, Jesus set his face against worldly possessions and told those who wanted to inherit eternal life to forget about earthly possessions because such possessions were likely to hinder them from gaining eternity and loose the chances of experiencing the ultimate religious goal (Atoi, 2010). It is pertinent to reiterate that it was for this reason, members of the early Christian community, eschew every desire to accumulate material wealth for egocentric interest and lived a communal life of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of all. Those who have material wealth at their disposal brought it to

the apostles for the general use of all the members of the community. The few members who seek to accumulate wealth for themselves in the early Christian church like Ananias and Sapphires never lived to regret it. In lieu of the foregoing, it is clear that preaching the gospel in the context of the doctrine of Jesus and his apostles is primarily to make people receive salvation and secondly to make people receive well-being. But the problem with prosperity preaching in Nigeria's Neo-Pentecostal circle is that its proponents made the acquisition of material wealth their central focus at the expense of the salvation of the souls of their followers. It is true that some of God's faithful servants in the Old Testament were materially prosperous, but that does not mean that God will make everyone who serves him materially wealthy. On the other hand, does the fact that someone is poor materially mean that he or she does not have God's blessings? To answer the above question, it is imperative for us to note that the meaning of the word prosperity is far more than material wealth; it includes good health, bearing children, having good friends, a good name, spiritual wealth, and general well-being. But the generally narrow understanding of prosperity among adherents of Nigeria's Neo-Pentecostal churches is that of material wealth and this explains why the

word has often been misused and abused (Atoi, 2010).

Moreover, the theology of sowing munificently in order to reap bountifully in terms of financial and economic wealth here on earth contradicts Jesus' command that believers should give freely and expect nothing in return here on earth but expect to receive reward in heaven. Quintessentially, such belief negates all that Jesus was saying about storing treasures in heaven where moths and rust cannot destroy, and robbers cannot break in and steal (Matt. 6:19). It is pertinent to state here that there is this common notion among most prosperity preachers in Nigeria that if you give generously for the development of the church and the upkeep of the pastor, then God that blesses 'the sower' will prosper you with abundant wealth here on earth because you have honoured his servant." These preachers are quick to point out someone who sent them a donation and within weeks received many times that amount from some unexpected sources. But how many people sent in donations and received nothing? Moreover, prosperity theology exponents usually point to their luxury and extravagant life style as evidence of God's blessing of financial abundance, and insist that listeners will attain such if they follow the ways prescribed by them. It appears that there is an error in

reasoning in this line of argument because the fact that you have flashy cars, private jet, expensive clothes, ultra-modern buildings, among others, does not mean that God actually gave them to you. Besides, the little sums of money contributed for the church at morning and communion services, night vigils, weekly prayer meetings, and crusade grounds become huge sum of money which some Neo-Pentecostal pastors utilise to create and service their luxury and extravagant life style. The ordinary members of the church do not have such opportunity because they do not have access to the church fund. So, it could be said that the huge sum of financial resources that the prosperity preachers showcase is the labourious effort of the congregants. Fundamentally, prosperity preaching put too heavy a burden on the ordinary believer and this is one of the points at which we have problems with this kind of theology because it enriches usually the pastors and not the congregation.

It is imperative to state that some dubious prosperity preachers have continued to prey on some people who desperately want to change their life circumstances. Instead of teaching their listeners the practical skills they need to be successful, these preachers use false logic to convince such people to give the little they have to the church, in spite of their socio-

economic situation. The logic behind prosperity preaching is to tell people what they want to hear so that the message will be acceptable to them. As observation has clearly shown, this kind of gospel is commonly accepted among the poor and down-trodden in the society because it gives hope and assurance that all will be well in terms of material prosperity. But is that what the gospel really all about? The answer is NO; the gospel is primarily about the salvation of the souls of humankind. It also means good news about the kingdom of heaven. But, prosperity preachers have turned everything topsy-turvy by placing almost all the emphasis of the gospel on the acquisition and accumulation of material wealth to the extent that saving the souls of their followers has now become secondary. Little wonder why a good number of the adherents of such theology can afford to involve themselves in unethical and illegal conducts in a bid to acquire material wealth. In actual sense, prosperity preachers de-emphasise the gospel of salvation and put almost all the premium on the acquisition of material wealth. This attitude contradicts what Jesus said in Mathew (6:33).

In addition, the Neo-Pentecostal theological postulation of divine unfailing health contradicts scientific and biblical attestations of human's susceptibility to

ailment. Likewise, the belief in mere positive verbal confession is hinged on a faulty premise of anthropocentric view that humans are in God's class, making prayer request unnecessary. What we find incredibly insidious about the prosperity gospel movement is that if someone does not prosper in terms of financial wealth or their petition is not granted, they are blamed for having a lack of faith (Atoi, 2010). Observation has shown that prosperity preachers have polished their message over the years so it seems to make perfect sense. However, if Jesus' life style is a perfect example of how to live a virtuous life in every way, how do they explain his lack of material wealth? The irreconcilable contradictions between the attitude of most prosperity gospel exponents toward material wealth and the gospel of Jesus Christ are best summed up in the words of Jesus in Matthew (6:24).

Implications of Prosperity Theology in Nigeria

The undue emphasis laid on material wealth by prosperity theology exponents is having negative effects on both the church and the larger Nigerian society. The urge to accumulate wealth to satisfy human material desire has continued to mean that the Christian evangelistic mission of soul-winning, which ought to be the primary concern of the church,

has now become secondary in the religious thought pattern of prosperity gospel adherents in Nigeria. Perhaps, the pastors are desirous of building financial empires here on earth where moth and rot consume to the detriment of their adherents who have built undue dependence on them (Magbadelo, 2004). This attitude of prosperity gospel proponents towards material wealth negates all that Jesus was talking about laying down treasures in heaven rather than on earth.

The fact that prosperity gospel adherents believe that the more one sow seed faith, the more the person reaps, they tend to venture into so many unethical practices in order to meet up with their financial obligation stipulated for sowing and reaping bountifully by the exponents of prosperity theology. The excessive emphasis on material wealth by prosperity theology proponents has continued to promote unethical practices and all forms of criminalities, such as, embezzlement, looting of public funds, armed robbery, kidnapping, Internet fraud popularly known as 'yahoo', ritual killings, prostitution, drug trafficking and others in the Nigerian society. The individuals involved in these immoral and criminal acts think that material wealth is the evidence of God's blessings, as such, they try to grab as much as possible through any means (Atoi, 2019; Atoi, Sadiku and Kume, 2020). It

is imperative to state that the aforementioned unethical and criminal conducts negate the ethical teachings of Jesus Christ. Moreover, over emphasis on material prosperity in the church has promoted greed and raised a pool of lazy people who are only expecting miracles as against working hard to prosper (Atoi, 2010). Many false and dubious preachers have capitalised on the greed and naivety of their followers to get financial wealth over night by twisting the word of God to suit their own desires and personal interests. Even, some prosperity preachers have been involved in one scandal or the other in a bid to promote prosperity preaching and make it acceptable within Nigeria's socio-religious terrain (Atoi, 2019).

In view of the fact that prosperity theology exponents promise a hundred-folds rewards for one's giving in terms of seed sowing and other church contributions, adherents tend to develop the tendency to give excessively, even to the extent of obtaining bank loans and donating family properties to the church with the expectation of reaping mammoth financial harvests. When the desired financial harvests do not come as expected, devotees end up very disappointed and discouraged, having accrued extra debts in the process or having lost large amounts of money, sometimes even leading to bankruptcy

(Williams, 2001). Moreover, the desire to acquire financial wealth which prosperity preaching promises has made some people to keep changing their churches looking for where prosperity may be found as much as possible. So, what we see in church attendance in contemporary Christianity is a re-cycling, not an increase in the membership of the Nigerian Christian community. On major occasions, people return to their original churches for wedding, funeral ceremony, and so on. Out of frustration, some worshippers become apostate; they stop going to church all together because they can find neither prosperity nor salvation in the series of places they have been to.

Also, prosperity theology has continued to cause schism and unnecessary proliferation of churches in Nigeria. There is constant breakup of congregations; splinter groups emerge because of dispute over material possession and leadership tussle between pastors and assistant pastors. Due to the constant dispute over the sharing formula of the financial wealth realised from church services between pastors and assistant pastors, many Nigerian cities, towns and villages are today flourishing with the new era churches. These churches are found in large numbers on a single street, depending on the location and length of a particular popular street.

Sometimes, two or more churches do occupy different floors of the same building, each with its own loud speakers competing among themselves for membership, thereby causing noise pollution and other menaces to one another and the general public, especially at night (Babatomiwa, 2010).

Conclusion

This article avers that too much emphasis is being placed on the acquisition and accumulation of material wealth in Nigeria's Neo-Pentecostal churches, often at the expense of God's plan for the salvation of humankind. It is imperative to state here that acquisition of material wealth is not the primary goal of Christianity when viewed from the perspective of the teachings of Jesus Christ and his disciples. Besides, material wealth is not the ultimate goal we are seeking for in life. The articulation of Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics* is apposite here. According to him, "wealth is not the good we are seeking for; it is merely useful and for the sake of something else" (Crisp, 2004, p. 7). As such, prosperity theology adherents who desperately desire to be materially wealthy should be careful so as not to misplace priority and be consumed in their quest for material riches. They should consider the following words of Apostle Paul: "those who desire to be rich fall into many

temptations and are caught in the trap of many foolish and harmful desires, which pull them down to ruin and destruction” (1 Timothy 6.9). We should not misunderstand Apostle Paul; he is not saying that material riches are bad but warn believers who desperately want to be rich to be careful of their desire so as not to fall into temptations that may destroy them.

It is instructive to note at this juncture that the emphasis on prosperity preaching in contemporary Nigeria stems from the fact that the biblical metaphor of success and prosperity have taken on new meanings in the context of the competitive modern market economy and the increasing rate of poverty in the country (Kwateng-Yeboah, 2021). This paper acknowledges the fact that poverty is a serious social problem bedeviling the Nigerian society, which the church must support the government to tackle. However, the church must perform such role with caution and sincerity of purpose in order to achieve the desired result and not escalate the problem.

Christians must understand the fact that both the promotion of material prosperity or lack thereof as signs of godliness does not have biblical validation and as such, the church must strike a balance on these issues so as to realise the goal of Christianity (Taylor, 2003). Prosperity theology advocates should channel their energy toward declaring the message of God concerning the issues of bad governance, greed, bribery, looting of public funds and other social vices that are jeopardising the Nigerian economy, and causing abject poverty among citizens. Also, Nigeria's Neo-Pentecostal pastors need to teach their adherents a more pragmatic method of fighting the menace of poverty in the country and discourage them from the culture of greed and egocentrism (Atoi, 2019). In essence, prosperity preachers should preach realistic sermons that encourage hard work, diligence and sincerity of purpose for effective Christian impact in the Nigerian society.

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