

African Journal of Contextual Theology
SIST, Attakwu – Enugu
P.O. Box 9696, Enugu, Nigeria
ajct@sistenugu.com

Subscriptions

The *African Journal of Contextual Theology – AJCT* – (ISSN 2141-3037) is published annually. The subscription price is the following:

Nigeria: N500 per issue

Foreign: US\$20.00 per issue (including postage)

Payment may be made in cash or by cheque, payable to:

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Enugu, Nigeria

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Printed and bound by

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CIVIC EXPENDITURE VS CARE FOR THE POOR: A LOOK AT JOHN CHRYSOSTOM'S HOMILY ON THE TOWER OF BABEL

Mark Enemali, CSSp

Introduction

It is very common in the contemporary Nigerian society for people to display their wealth by embarking on the construction of mansions, villas, fancy cottages, and so on with reckless abandon. Many of this people, while caring less about the welfare of the poor and the marginalized in the society, may embark on the construction of churches, temples and mosques. They align themselves with one religious group or the other in order to satisfy their selfish interests. Their focus is to make a name for themselves through the physical structures they construct. They may not care to provide jobs for the jobless youths of the society, but they would make unbelievably huge donations towards one project or the other in the society. Religious leaders have been compromised at some quarters as a result of their inability to discern the actual motives of some high-level politicians who identify with their religious groups simply for the sake of their own political agenda. Many leaders, both religious and secular, are caught up in the dilemma of building structures or enhancing people. It is against this background that we suggest that Christians need to focus on empowering people, more than simply raising gigantic structures, as a way to contribute to national integration. In this light, John Chrysostom's homily on the Tower of Babel is apt.

In this homily, Chrysostom addresses the wealthy members of his audience in Antioch who were interested in civic expenditures as a way to memorialize themselves. He insists that, rather than spending on lifeless structures, the proper way to leave a memorial behind is in spending on the poor. He uses his characteristic approach of condemning a particular motivation for an emotion and then redirecting the emotion towards his purpose. In this homily, he criticizes the desire to be remembered through civic munificence and then turns around to propose the true way to seek remembrance, and that is helping the poor. In order to understand Chrysostom's homily here, as in all his other homilies, it is imperative to understand his context. We will show that, Chrysostom's emphasis on building projects, in the "Tower of Babel" story, aimed at responding to a value that was well known in his society: *philotimia* (literally, love of honor). And he mobilizes the emotion of shame in his rhetoric.

Babel and Chrysostom's Exegesis

Genesis 11:1-9 presents a fascinating narrative conventionally known as the "Tower of Babel" story. As the narrative goes, humanity possessed one language at the time. In order to prevent them from being dispersed all over the earth they wanted to make a name for themselves and so decided to raise a tower with its head reaching up to heaven. God frustrated this attempt by confusing their tongue, an action that elucidates the name *bābel*, which sounds like the Hebrew word *bālal* (to confuse).

The Tower of Babel was taken as historical by many of the church fathers though they failed to comment in detail on the passage. The event is often seen in the light of the confusion of languages. The existence of different languages is explained from the point of view of the agreement to carry out an evil act as a result of human hubris. This attempt is frustrated by God.

Origen, in response to Celsus who saw the Tower of Babel as an adulterated version of the story of the sons of Alocus, Otus and Ephialtes, in Homer (c. 8th century BC),¹ argued that Moses lived before Homer and so his account is more original.²

The division of humankind into 72 or 70 language groups was commonly held to come from Babel.³ Augustine held this majority view that the languages of the world and the division of the earth in Genesis 10:25 as a result of the diversity of languages came from the event of Babel.⁴

We now see that from these three men, Noah's sons, seventy-three nations - or rather seventy-two, as a calculation will show - and as many languages came into being on the earth, and by their increase they filled even the islands. However, the number of nations increased at a greater rate than the languages. For even in Africa we know of many barbarous nations using only one language.⁵

¹ Homer, *Odyssey*, 11.305-320; A.T. Murray, trans., *LCL* Vol. 1. (London: William Heinemann, 1969), 409.

² Origen, *Contra Celsus*, 4.21 (*ANF*, Vol. 4, 505); cf. Origen, *Celsus*, 5.29 (*ANF*, Vol. 4, 555-556).

³ Epiphanius, *Panarion*, 2.2.8-11; Cf. Frank Williams, trans., "The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis," *Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies* Vol. 35 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994), 16; Hippolytus, *On the Psalms*, 9 (*ANF* Vol. 5, 202). One source argued that there were only 70 languages corresponding to the number of Israelites who entered Egypt. *Pseudo-Clementine Homilies* 18.4 (*ANF* Vol. 8, 325).

⁴ Augustine, *City of God* 16.9; Henry Bettenson, trans., *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), 664.

⁵ Augustine, *City of God*, 16.11, Bettenson, 667-670.

Augustine alongside many other commentators at the time held that Hebrew was the original language.⁶

Modern Hebrew Bible commentators are far from a consensus with regard to the origin of this story. The only point of agreement is that it belongs to the Yahwistic source. We can, at least, identify three different motifs in the story: dispersion, breaching the boundary between divinity and humanity with the aid of the tower, and the confusion of tongues.⁷ While some scholars think that these motifs existed independently in separate stories before the biblical author put them together, others think the author may have reworked a fixed tradition or collected separate strands of traditional materials and then composed the story. Those in the latter camp suggest literary dependence on other ancient Near Eastern stories.⁸ The story may have been inspired by actual temple ruins in Mesopotamia.⁹

The manifestation of human hubris in the story has received much attention and modern commentators have taken the story in different directions. Some see it as a polemic against Mesopotamian civilization. Notice the prideful boast of the kings of Babylon in Isa 14:13-14:

⁶ Gregory of Nyssa however, rejected the view that Hebrew was God's original language. Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *Answer of Eunomius' Second Book* (NPNF, 2nd series, Vol. 5, 276).

⁷ S. N. Kramer, "Man's Golden Age: A Sumerian Version Parallel to Genesis 11:1," *JAOS* 63 (1943) 191-93; "The Babel of Tongues': a Sumerian Version," *JAOS* 88 (1968 = *AOS* 53) 108-11; Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11* (Trans. J. J. Scullion; Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 539-40.

⁸ An example is the building of the sacred precinct (Esagila) in Babylon, which is found in the *Enuma Elish* (Tablet 6: 60-62 in *ANET*: 69; Cf. E. A. Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (AB; Garden City N.Y.: Doubleday, 1979), 75-76.

⁹ Frank Anthony Spina, "Babel," in *ABD* I (ed. D.N. Freedman et al; New York: Doubleday, 1992): 561-63, 561.

You said in your heart, "I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit on the mount of assembly on the heights of Zaphon; I will ascend to the tops of the clouds, I will make myself like the Most High."

Some also see a polemic against Solomon and his constructions. Others have stressed the danger of technological development that is devoid of reverence to God. City builders make a name for themselves. And whereas the tower builders wanted to make a name for themselves, God gave a great name to Abram in the next chapter (Gen 12) and promised to give him a land, and all nations will be blessed or will bless themselves through him. By giving attention to the issue of human hubris and its frustration by God ancient and modern interpreters appear to have a common ground.

Chrysostom's predilection for the literal sense of Scripture, which was a common trait in the Antiochene School, led him to emphasize the principle of *akribeia* (precision) of Scripture that also calls for the precision of the exegete.¹⁰ His interest in this principle and the truth of Scripture occasioned the recognition of an aspect of the story of the Tower of Babel that is not often stressed by other patristic writers. Many church fathers spoke of the question of human hubris and that of humanity stretching beyond its limits through the gift of harmony, and the divine action of destroying that concord giving rise to the proliferation of languages. Chrysostom certainly interprets this passage along this line, but due to his interest in precision, he adds an aspect that makes the passage relevant in a unique way to his context.

¹⁰ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis 1-17* (translated by Robert Hill; Fathers of the Church Vol. 74; Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1986-), 18; Cf. Robert Hill, "Akribeia: A Principle of Chrysostom's Exegesis," *Colloquium* 14 (Oct. 1981) 32-36.

He relates the biblical characters' quest to make a name, through raising a tower reaching up to heaven, to the quest of his wealthy congregants to memorialize themselves through civic expenditure. To ignite some sense of self-examination in the hearts of his listeners, he says, "There are many people even today who in imitation of them want to be remembered for such achievements, by building splendid homes, baths, porches and avenues."¹¹

Chrysostom considers the event of the Tower of Babel as a building project aimed at memorializing the builders. "Let us make a name for ourselves" (Gen 11:6). He sees this as a wicked agreement as it comes up in other passages where he calls it an evil concord.¹² They do not build for God but for themselves. In Antioch around the fourth century C.E. it was rampant to engage in civic munificence by building and having one's name inscribed on monuments. It is in this context of fourth century Antioch that we understand Chrysostom when he speaks of "the wish to engrave one's name on property, baths, and houses."¹³ This was one of the ways to seek honor and reputation.

Building Projects and Civic Virtue

Part of the way the city was maintained in Antiquity was through the benevolence of the wealthy members of the society. MacMullen notes that "the physical magnificence of imperial civilization rested ultimately on sheer willingness."¹⁴ This willingness resulted from several factors according to Peter

¹¹ *Hom. in Gen 30.7* (PG 53. 275); Cf. Robert Hill, trans., *Homilies on Genesis 18-45* (Fathers of the Church Vol. 82; Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1986-), 224.

¹² Cf. *Hom. in Jo 57.2* (PG 59. 335)

¹³ *Hom. in Gen 22. 7* (PG 53. 195).

¹⁴ Ramsay MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 61.

Brown. When these factors were present the willingness filled the Empire with magniloquent inscriptions but when they were lacking the willingness was redirected to other form of expression – and the “‘gossiping stones’ fall silent.”¹⁵ The spirit of competition was directed towards the development of the town. “*Philotimia*: No word understood to its depths goes further to explain the Greco-Roman achievement.”¹⁶ This, Brown maintains, was the “driving force behind those more vague emotions – ‘patriotism,’ ‘archaism,’ ‘vanity’ – that we ascribe to *Antonine* men.” On the one hand it drove the members of the upper class into competition and on the other it created the audience of significant others who were potential competitors that competitiveness required.¹⁷

According to Brown, the move from the age of the Antonines to the age of Constantine meant a transition “from an age of equipoise to an age of ambition.”¹⁸ The age of the Antonines was characterized by a model of parity and a stress on the community in their traditional religious expression. Goods were given to the gods in order to guard against envy and competition.¹⁹ It is in this context of the Antonines that we understand Plutarch when he talks about those who, in order “to be reputed the favorites of heaven and above the common sort, invest their doings with a character of sanctity.”²⁰ The situation in the fourth century of common era was different. Success no longer came through “piety towards the gods, and generosity

¹⁵ Peter Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 30; Cf. Brown, *Making of Late Antiquity*, 112 n. 17.

¹⁶ MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations*, 125; cf. Brown *Making of Late Antiquity*, 31.

¹⁷ Brown *Making of Late Antiquity*, 31.

¹⁸ Brown *Making of Late Antiquity*, 34.

¹⁹ Brown *Making of Late Antiquity*, 35.

²⁰ Plutarch, *De deo Socratis* 9, 579 F. Cf. Brown *Making of Late Antiquity*, 112.

Brown. When these factors were present the willingness filled the Empire with magniloquent inscriptions but when they were lacking the willingness was redirected to other form of expression – and the “‘gossiping stones’ fall silent.”¹⁵ The spirit of competition was directed towards the development of the town. “*Philotimia*: No word understood to its depths goes further to explain the Greco-Roman achievement.”¹⁶ This, Brown maintains, was the “driving force behind those more vague emotions – ‘patriotism,’ ‘archaism,’ ‘vanity’ – that we ascribe to *Antonine* men.” On the one hand it drove the members of the upper class into competition and on the other it created the audience of significant others who were potential competitors that competitiveness required.¹⁷

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¹⁷ Brown *Making of Late Antiquity*, 31.

¹⁸ Brown *Making of Late Antiquity*, 34.

¹⁹ Brown *Making of Late Antiquity*, 35.

²⁰ Plutarch, *De deo Socratis* 9, 579 F. Cf. Brown *Making of Late Antiquity*, 113 n. 33.

towards men.” “Wealth and ceremonial,” says Brown, “drained away from its former vehicles, the public buildings and the public cults.” Private palaces became the source of the fame of the town. “Their magnificence spoke more eloquently and more enduringly of the status of the owner and his family than did the ‘gossiping stones’ of a previous age.”²¹ It is in this context that Chrysostom preaches his homily on the Tower of Babel.

In the displays of wealth and status by the rich and wealthy members of the society “we easily recognize the contours of the classical ideal of *philotimia*, the pursuit of public praise and honor through civic expenditure which had long served to establish the social hierarchy.”²² Leyerle notes that in talking about use of possessions and spending on the poor, Chrysostom constantly appealed to shame and self-interest.²³ Apart from the fact that the scriptures condemned the amassing of wealth, Chrysostom saw “how conspicuous displays of wealth created fissures in his own community.”²⁴ Libanius testifies to the presence of the tradition of *philotimia* in the fourth century. According to Leyerle, “civic-minded expenditure had adorned the city with temples, baths, racecourses, and elaborate festivals, as well as the theater and its shows.”²⁵ Libanius praised the men of Antioch who were more interested in spending for the city than in accumulating wealth for themselves. Their “keen sense of competition also urges them to surpass all previous benefactions

²¹ Brown *Making of Late Antiquity*, 48-49.

²² Blake Leyerle, “John Chrysostom on Almsgiving and the Use of Money,” *HTR* 87:1 (1994) 29-47, 32.

²³ Leyerle, “Almsgiving,” 40.

²⁴ Leyerle, “Almsgiving,” 40-41; Leduc points this out in his discussion of Chrysostom’s view of the effects of vainglory. Cf. Francis Leduc “Le Thème de la Vaine gloire chez Saint Jean Chrysostome,” *Proche-Orient Chretien* 19 (1969): 3-32, 15-16.

²⁵ Blake Leyerle, *Theatrical Shows and Ascetic Lives*, 40.

and make future rivalry impossible."²⁶ At stake in this endeavor is the emotion of shame.

The Emotion of Shame

The ancient Greeks and Romans have an understanding of the term shame that goes beyond our modern distinction. As Konstan maintains, "the ancient Greek emotional lexicon does not map neatly onto modern English concepts."²⁷ He argues against the view that sees shame as a primitive forerunner of guilt: "shame, the argument goes, responds to the judgments of others and is indifferent to ethical principles in themselves, whereas guilt is an inner sensibility and corresponds to the morally autonomous self of modern man."²⁸ He maintains that the term shame as it was used in ancient Greece encompassed more than our current modern terminology of shame. It included the idea of guilt.²⁹ Konstan focuses on Aristotle's analysis of *aiskhunê* in *De Rhetorica*.

Aristotle defines *aiskhunê* as "a pain or disturbance concerning those ills, either present, past, or future, that are perceived to lead to disgrace, while shamelessness is a disregard or impassivity concerning these same things."³⁰ Aristotle does not distinguish between the sense of shame or prospective shame (before an action) and the feeling of shame or retrospective shame (after the action). The question of perception is important. Remembrance

²⁶ Libanius *Or.* 11. 134-38, trans. Glanville Downey, "Libanius' Oration in Praise of Antioch (*Or.* xi)," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 103 (1959): 667. Cf. Blake Leyerle, *Theatrical Shows and Ascetic Lives*, 49-50; See also Leyerle, "Almsgiving," 32 n. 13.

²⁷ Konstan, *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), 93.

²⁸ Konstan, *Emotions of the Ancient Greeks*, 91; cf. 292 n. 2.

²⁹ Konstan, *Emotions of the Ancient Greeks*, 93.

³⁰ Aristotle, *De Rhetorica*, 2.6, 1383b 12-14; Konstan, *Emotions of the Ancient Greeks*, 98.

has to do with past events, present events are perceived right away, and future events are anticipated. The ill that brings disgrace can be seen in all three forms.³¹ And the response to that which brings loss of reputation is the emotion of shame.

The feeling of shame that we have at the loss of repute or in the wake of disgrace about a past event is the same as the sense that we have of the future event that is seen as capable of bringing disgrace. The only difference is that while one has already taken place and cannot be changed the other can be prevented. The disparity that is found in the conceptual framework of shame in some languages (French: honte and pudeur; German: Scham and Schande; Spanish: pudor and vergüenza) did not exist in classical Greek. The only distinction that Aristotle allows is temporal. The distinction in English between the experience of shame and the sense of shame did not exist for Aristotle. In the same vein shamelessness is the opposite, and is found where shame is lacking irrespective of the time. Insensibility to loss of reputation or disgrace is shamelessness. One who feels shame for having committed an act would refrain from committing such act in the future.³²

Shamelessness according to Aristotle is not a distinct emotion but a lack of the feeling (*apatheia*) with regard to what causes shame. Since shame has to do with pain with regard to ills that attract disgrace, the emotion that would be the opposite of shame could be described as "pleasure concerning those goods that are perceived to lead to a good reputation or approval."³³ This is what some might call 'pride.' Shame is thus seen as the opposite of pride by many contemporary investigators. Nathanson finds a

³¹ Konstan, *Emotions of the Ancient Greeks*, 98.

³² Konstan, *Emotions of the Ancient Greeks*, 99.

³³ Konstan, *Emotions of the Ancient Greeks*, 100.

close connection between the feeling of excitement at the experience of competence and the feeling of embarrassment where there is incompetence.³⁴

The positive sense of pride as an emotion is not clearly attested in classical Greek but the negative sense, which is arrogance (*hubris*), is well attested. The absence of the positive sense as emotion may be due to the fact that in the Greek world, where there was so much competition, people cared more about preserving their status in the public eye than they cared about receiving their admiration. In other words, they were concerned to protect their reputation, not to make others feel good about themselves. "Praise was easily read as flattery."³⁵ Three elements that arouse the emotion of shame: "a particular act (throwing away one's shield in battle); the fault of character that is revealed by the act (cowardice); and the disgrace or loss of esteem before the community at large."³⁶

Shame arises from the sense of injustice or inappropriateness and it exhibits a character flaw or moral failing. The fact that shame affects the moral character of the person means that it is damaging just like the modern understanding of shame affects one's self-esteem. Rather than seeing this external aspect as the essential constituent of shame, Aristotle sees it only as capable of aggravating the feeling of shame. He maintains that shame is loss of reputation before those who we take seriously. His hierarchy comes in: "examples are those whom we admire or who admire us, those with whom we compete, and older or cultivated people, along with righteous folk not inclined to

³⁴ Donald Nathanson, *Shame and Pride: Affect, Sex, and the Birth of the Self* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), 84.

³⁵ Konstan, *Emotions of the Ancient Greeks*, 100.

³⁶ Konstan, *Emotions of the Ancient Greeks*, 101.

pardon or forgive.”³⁷ Though there is the tendency to focus on the external factors that give rise to shame, the interior of the individual who experiences shame matters a lot for Aristotle. “A deed may seem to others to be the sign of a defect in character, and hence productive of shame, but true shame arises only if one knows oneself to be at fault.”³⁸ The people who engaged in civic expenditure did that as a result of their sensibility to shame. They saw it necessary to maintain a status in the society. Chrysostom recognized this emotion and attempted to redirect it. The link between honor/shame and civic expenditure is crucial to Chrysostom’s homily on the Tower of Babel.

Chrysostom’s Refutation

Late Antiquity gave a lot of attention to display and this created a close bond between the theater and the outside world. “For the social posturing in which displays of benefaction played an essential part, Chrysostom had a deep hatred.”³⁹ His polemic against *philotimia* was as a result of the fact that he saw it as vainglory masked. He attacked the proclivity of his audience “to wrap up wickedness in noble names, calling relentless addiction to the racetrack and theater, ‘urbanity,’ being rich, ‘freedom,’ desiring glory, ‘magnanimity,’ heedlessness, ‘plain speaking,’ prodigality, ‘benevolence,’ and injustice, ‘courage.’”⁴⁰ Chrysostom overturns this by emphasizing the judgment of the “Unsleeping Eye of God.”⁴¹ God will give lasting glory not to the one who acts with civic magnificence but the one who acts

³⁷ Konstan, *Emotions of the Ancient Greeks*, 103.

³⁸ Konstan, *Emotions of the Ancient Greeks*, 104.

³⁹ Blake Leyerle, *Theatrical Shows and Ascetic Lives*, 50.

⁴⁰ *Adv. oppug.* 3.7 (PG 47. 359); Cf. Blake Leyerle, *Theatrical Shows and Ascetic Lives*, 50.

⁴¹ *Adv. oppug.* 3.21 (PG 49. 386); *Adv. Jud.* 8.8 (PG 48. 941); *Hom. in Gen.* 7.3 (PG 53. 75); *Hom. in Jo.* 3.6 (PG 59. 46), 4.4 (PG 59. 52); *Hom. in I Cor.* 12.4 (PG 61. 101); *De stat.* 20.4 (PG 49. 203); *De Laz.* 1.8 (PG 48. 973).

with humility. He cites the example of the woman who anointed Jesus in the gospel. Her simple action won renown. Not in a theater but in a house.⁴²

In the homily on the Tower of Babel Chrysostom attacks the very heart of the motivation for building projects which he sees as the effort to leave behind memory. The memorials in stone and other civic expenditures receive a lot of attention by his contemporaries because of the need to maintain status. The root of their wickedness is the thirst to enjoy an undying reputation, which Chrysostom understands to mean being "in a position to be remembered in perpetuity."⁴³ In other words, they engage in this toil "so as to ensure their memory survives in perpetuity and to have it said that 'this is the house belonging to so-and-so,' 'this, the property of so-and-so.'"⁴⁴ Chrysostom sees the remembrance as accompanied with endless accusations. "So such behavior is calculated not to earn remembrance but to encounter unremitting accusations, achieve notoriety after death, and incite the tongues of onlookers to calumny and condemnation of the person who acquired these goods."⁴⁵ His orientation towards the end time comes to the fore in his reason for giving to the poor: it leaves a good memory and assures confidence in the age to come.⁴⁶

He enjoins his audience to be concerned about being remembered with such edifices. His use of the rhetoric of building as a way to leave a memorial is striking. In his application of this rhetoric to almsgiving he seems to transform

⁴² *Adv. Jud.* 5.2 (PG 48. 885); Cf. Blake Leyerle, *Theatrical Shows and Ascetic Lives*, 54.

⁴³ *Hom. in Gen.* 30.6 (PG 53. 275); Hill, 224.

⁴⁴ *Hom. in Gen.* 30.7 (PG 53. 276); Hill, 224.

⁴⁵ *Hom. in Gen.* 30.7 (PG 53. 276); Hill, 224.

⁴⁶ *Hom. in Gen.* 30.7 (PG 53. 276); Hill, 225.

the poor to magnificent edifices that last beyond ordinary edifices. For him the buildings made of stone do not bring us any advantage. On the contrary they attract mockery that is louder than an imperishable memorial. The disadvantages are manifold. They bring sins upon us, the buildings are transient, and we do not take them from here, and we in fact, gain not even the slightest reputation of value from them. On the contrary we acquire slander and the title immediately moves to someone else.⁴⁷ His rhetoric was designed to mobilize shame and to urge the wealthy members of his congregation to reorient their understanding of honor and shame.

The Relevance of Chrysostom's Homily to the African Context

From the foregoing, there is no gainsaying that Chrysostom's homily on the Tower of Babel is relevant to the African context and the conversations on theology and national integration. For Christianity to have impact on our nation, Christians need to seek profound ways to redirect their sense of honor and shame in order to focus on genuine human development and empowerment. Christianity, as is well known, is a fast growing religion in Africa and especially in Nigeria. In the face of this growth in population, however, certain questionable phenomena perceived in the life of many Christians in Africa make Christianity to lag behind in terms of the positive influence it is expected to wield on the society, which leads one to question the genuineness and depth of the Christian faith. Truth, integrity and honesty are easily ignored in the effort to attain positions of fame

⁴⁷ *Hom. in Gen.* 30.8 (PG 53. 276); Hill, 225. The earthly property passes from one person to another. If we think we have complete ownership of property, we deceive ourselves. This discourse concerning material goods reflects the stoic and platonic understanding that we find in Plutarch. They pass to people we would even prefer not to have them.

and in the desire to be reckoned as successful, the measure of success being often tied to how many physical structures one has raised. Very seldom is attention given to human wellbeing and the building of cohesive communities. In this situation it becomes compelling to attend to Chrysostom's exhortation.

We realize that it is very difficult to put all of Africa under one umbrella. Nevertheless, we recognize that all of Africa today experiences the common fact of material deprivation, which Obi Oguejiofor nicely refers to as socio-economic predicament.⁴⁸ This situation conditions the African's conception of ultimate reality.⁴⁹ In other words, the survival instinct plays a huge role in the African understanding of the universe. In addition to this, in the African thought structure, one's wellbeing in this world is paramount. The African world view does not conceive of this world as corrupt and in need of redemption. This is one strong reason why the gospel of prosperity flourishes so well in Africa. And this is why one's self-image receives so much attention. All these affect the way Africans practice their Christianity. Little wonder Oguejiofor thinks African Christians are donning a Christian garb but deep in their hearts, the underlying convictions are those of African Traditional Religion.⁵⁰ Surprisingly, while this assertion may be true with respect to some aspects of its belief system (for example, the pragmatic approach to God or to religion, the fear of evil spirits, the exaltation of this world with less emphasis on the afterlife,⁵¹

⁴⁸ J. Obi Oguejiofor, "The Resilient Paradigm: Impact of African World View on African Christianity," in *God, Bible and African Traditional Religion* (edited by Bede Uche Ukwuije; Enugu: SIST, 2010): 99-112, 102.

⁴⁹ John Illife, *A History of African Poor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 52.

⁵⁰ Oguejiofor, "Resilient Paradigm," 100.

⁵¹ It should be pointed out that though there is, within the African world view, a belief in the world of the ancestors, the fact that the ancestral world relies on

etc.), the core values of communalism and the extended family system in Africa are fading away.

It is on this note that we think Christians can step up and help work towards our national integration by refocusing on our interconnectedness. Where else is this idea of our interconnectedness better expressed than in the Eucharist, which is the memorial that Jesus left behind for his followers? A proper understanding of the community in the light of the Eucharistic table, where all are welcome and are equal, can shed light on the importance of building human beings, as a way to be remembered, rather than erecting huge structures that have no life. Our care for the poor in our midst is based on the fact that we are a community gathered around the Eucharistic table. While we recognize that it is an obligation, and not just a choice, to care for one another in the community (see 1 Corinthians 11; Leviticus 19), we also note that this is a better way to memorialize oneself.

Conclusion

Chrysostom's interpretation of the "Tower of Babel" story as a building project provides a fascinating glimpse into the life of his community. The desire of his audience to be remembered through civic expenditure was part of the classical ideal of *philotimia*. In line with his hatred for spectacles and ostentation he rejects any kind of benevolence that is geared towards acquiring honor. In the course of the homily, not only does he discourage his wealthy congregation from misdirecting their funds through *philotimia*, he, in the process, turned the poor members of his community into lasting memorials.

human beings for its wellbeing seems to show that the African world view gives a higher rating to this world.

After recognizing the innate anxiety for undying reputation, Chrysostom does not suggest its radical removal, but transforms it or channels it in the proper direction. The way to be remembered, he maintains, is to "give away these goods of yours into the hands of the poor, letting go of precious stones, magnificent homes, properties and baths."⁵² In this way Chrysostom subverts the contemporary idea of reputation. He maintains that this is the undying reputation (*he mneme athanatos*). This memory procures countless treasures, cleanses one's sins and grants surety in the Lord. The words that accompany the memory here matter too: "so generous and kind, so gentle and good."⁵³

⁵² *ei tauti ta chremata eis tas tôn pentetôn dianeimes cheiras, apheis tous lithous kai tas megalas oikodomas, kai tous agrous, kai ta balaneia Hom. in Gen. 30.7 (PG 53.276); Hill, 224.*

⁵³ *(ton eleeimona kai philanthropôn, ton epieike, ton chreiston Hom. in Gen. 30.7 (PG 53.276); Hill, 225.*