

Materialistic Gospel Message in Contemporary Nigerian Churches: A Critique

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Abstract

There is no gainsaying the fact that an important; but also current issue in Christendom that has caught the interest of the general public, and which is urgently calling for scholarly attention in contemporary Nigeria, is the phenomenon of materialistic gospel message that is being peddled by many “men of God” today, designed to defraud and exploit the sick, poor and biblical illiterate Christians. It is therefore pertinent at this stage of Nigerian socio-economic difficulties and its attendant quest for material security, to take a look at this new dimension of African Christianity and the contributing factors induced by some modern pastors to the social and economic upheaval in the society. This study delved into the structural roots of materialistic gospel message in Nigeria and discovered, amongst other things, that most materialistic gospel preachers are driven by the love of money and not love for God, Jesus, the people or the gospel. Their teachings are so toxic and demonic and it is corrupting and destroying lives. The study also found out that one of the reasons for this false teaching is because the verses and passages of Scriptures are taken out of context and promulgators refused to learn the principles of biblical interpretation such as hermeneutics, exegeses, homiletics and use of Bible resources such as Bible dictionary, encyclopedia, and other Bible references for study. This is coupled with the poor Bible reading habits of some Christians. The study concluded that materialistic gospel message is the worst kind of materialism and deception ever conceived by Satan and his cohorts to lay the foundation of greed and social discontent, and which, perhaps, the society is yet to come to terms.

Introduction

The menace of materialism in contemporary Christian Churches in Nigeria has become so fertile that most pastors and ministers of the Churches preach prosperity as part of spiritual salvation. It is an often repeated saying that as the human race makes giant strides in science and technology, the tendency is to shift away from religion. However, these days, due to economic hardship and political uncertainties in the society, people appear to be more concerned about using

religion to achieve material ambitions. This largely account for why people drift to religion in spite of secularism. According to Dike (2003), “the greatest enemy of the Church, which, incidentally, is also the greatest enemy of all mankind today, is our mindless quest for material things” (p. 96). The massive and uncurtailed growth of materialistic gospel message in the Churches in Nigeria and many parts of Africa today has largely confirmed this view. Materialistic preaching with its unapologetic emphasis on the acquisition of wealth at all cost and the shameful deceptions of the materialistic preachers with their open display of affluence have distorted the value systems of Christianity in Nigeria. Achunike (2004) confirms that “the flamboyance life of the prosperity preachers inspires avidity for money” (p. 90). They always want to live big, that is why their Churches are architectural wonders. The aim here is to attract people, particularly the rich class. In their bid to live big, they always make efforts to acquire the resources with which to live big. This is definitely followed by employment of all sorts of tricks to get more funds. This is further backed up with Bible quotations and pressures on the people to give more and more.

According to Marshal (1993), Christ Chapel was the first of the newer Pentecostal Churches to compete for membership in Lagos with the already established Churches. Christ Chapel is popular not only because of its relatively relaxed attitude to dressing and strict morality expressed by a retreat from “worldly” concerns, it's success from 1985 onward depended on its doctrinal approaches to materialism, miracles of healing and monetary reward. The attitude of the different Churches towards material gain, expressed in doctrinal stands on dress habits and conspicuous consumption, as well as the rights of pastors to benefit materially from their congregations, are the thorniest issues in our contemporary Churches, and points to the basic status and perceived interest. This disease – for it is a veritable disease – is a million times more deadly than HIV or AIDS because, those it attacks are seldom aware. There are also not enough doctors who can help, as most doctors are themselves helpless victims (Dike, 2003). Unfortunately, what we have in large supply are the purveyors of the virus who claim that, far from being a curse, material prosperity is in fact God's special blessing for those who sing and dance and clap for Jesus, and who make bountiful offerings regularly to Him through His anointed ministers.

Now, materialistic gospel preachers are dangerous, not just because they preach the worship of mammon, which is the bane of our society and the root of all evil, but much more, because they claim divine authority for their gospel. In a world that is dominated by the godless and the greedy, and populated largely by the ignorant and the destitute, it is easy to see how the materialistic gospel can very quickly become the gospel of the majority. This is particularly so because we live in a society that is flamboyant, a society that worships wealth or money or

possession. The increasing worldliness of our society today is such that a focused preacher-one of a rare breed today-who devotes more than a few sentences talking about heaven and hell, and less about God's readiness to give us unlimited prosperity, is probably unlikely today to be able to retain a viable congregation for long. This situation has had an overbearing influence on the populace and leads to the pursuit of materialism, presuming that since these pastors live in affluence and are able to pull crowd; there is nothing wrong with the life of affluence among the Christians.

Christianity has had a much longer tradition of critiquing a materialistic lifestyle. Jesus' life was lived as a rejection of the merely material perspective. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us that we can become enslaved by the desire for material things and money (Matthew 8). He pleads with us to go beyond concerns of what we will consume and to seek our creator and His will.

The problem with the attitude of many contemporary Christians towards material things is that they attach much importance to material things such as money more than their eternal life in heaven. They tend to depart radically from the teachings of Jesus which emphasizes contentment and instead erect the temple of materialism and take their eyes off Jesus and focusing on mammon (riches); i.e. focusing on the wrong thing-wealth, while neglecting the right thing-true salvation. This ugly trend has continued to affect the innocent Christians who suffer of material hardship, as Aweda (2009) writes that the interpretation and the implication of the teaching that no Christian should be poor is that those people who claim to be Christians but are struggling to make ends meet are only making false claims to being Christians.

The focus of this paper is on the modern day version of Christianity in Nigeria – materialistic gospel message. The task before this paper is to make a critical study of the issue of materialism in the contemporary Christian Churches, thereby trying to find out whether quest for material possessions should be the prime objective of Christianity. This study will proffer ways Christians should relate with material things.

Christians Attitude towards Materialism in Our Contemporary Churches

According to Hornby (2000), “materialism is the belief that money possessions and physical comforts are more important than spiritual values in life” (p. 727). There is a strong feeling among some contemporary Nigerian Christians that materialism is a sin. Our contemporary Churches teach that the worship of things is a sincere idolatry. In Christian songs and Christian books it has been emphasized that a sincere Christian cannot be materialistic. Call a believer materialist and you will meet with vocal protest. No one wants to be a materialist.

And no one believes that he is a materialist. Almost any Christian can repeat 1 Timothy 6:10a, “The love of money is the root of all evil”. But do we really carry this out in practice? Most importantly, is the materialism we condemn so loudly, the materialism that scripture warns us against or do we condemn a distorted ideology of our own concoction?

Graig (1994) emphasizes that, “It is very easy for a Christian to say, “I am not a materialist by defining materialism to mean something less than it is: the sin of acquiring unnecessary wealth” (p. 61). In the light of this, it is easy for many Christians to become so accustomed to a lifestyle focused on worldly gain such that they can no longer see that they are caught in it. It is so normal to such people, that the suggestion of being materialistic seems absurd. They are so used to their comforts and the pursuit of wealth that they do not recognize it for what it is.

It is altogether too easy to think that as long as we attend Church regularly, hold the right doctrines, live otherwise righteous lives, and do not neglect the other duties of a Church-going Christian that our focus is on the Lord, when our values and our daily lives really centre on the world. But this is a big mistake. The more those material things and their acquisition, preservation, and disposal occupy ourselves and consequently, our hearts, the less room there is for God's spirit to work in us and the more our joy as Christians is stolen by the world. Christ's description, in the parable of the Sower (Luke 8), says that the cares of the world are like weeds that choke the word of God.

Materialistic gospel message is the gospel message that tends to place more emphasis on the material prosperity of Christians than the gospel of eternal salvation of the soul. It is ironical that some Nigerian men of God have gallantly deviated from the path and only pay lip service to the true essence of Christianity. The fact that the Church business remains one of the most flourishing businesses in Nigeria is openly embraced and flaunted in our faces without apologies. It is very common to hear people outside the Churches, and other religious groups, comment on the venality of many pastors, most notably materialistic gospel preachers. One observer joked as noted in Marshal (1993) that, “Church is the biggest growing industry in the country” (p. 29). There is no doubt that in some Churches, the financial motive is moving men of God as much as the spirit is; and however cynical such comments may appear, there is a strong element of truth in them. While it may not be easy to explain why people continue to flock these materialistic preaching Churches, and give their money willingly. It is simplistic as well as patronizing, to assume, as such an approach would imply, that people are simply duped by clever and unscrupulous men. Clearly, people are making decisions to convert based on a real awareness of their needs and interests and needs that conversion serves them. Churches today have become

commercialized as a business venture. The establishment of Churches is now the quickest way to get rich. According to Nmah (2008), “many people see Church founding as the easiest way of beating down the biting economic crunch” (p. 41). Jowitt (2010) adds that:

Criticism made of some Churches include the fact that raising of funds enable some leaders to live in a decidedly elitist style; and some of the leaders preached a very materialistic gospel, so encouraging poorer members to believe that through their membership they would sooner join the rank of the rich. (p. 271).

The ignorant congregation are made to witness organized miracles and made to hope on promises of prosperity. The race for material wealth is actively influenced by these supposed men of God. Fakofa (2008) commenting on materialistic gospel preachers says that, “Holiness in their preaching translates to wealth. You can only be holy if you are wealthy and powerful” (p. 2). In order to continually give testimonies in Churches, men and women would do anything for money. No source of wealth is ever questioned by these materialistic gospel preachers.

There is obviously nothing wrong with seeking prosperity. However, there are many things wrong with striving to be rich at all costs so as to appear as the specially favoured of a material-minded God with the society remaining morally bankrupt for it. The lucrative nature of this modern day pseudo-Christianity can only be explained by the rapid nature of its spread. It is particularly endearing to many Nigerians because of its tendencies to revert to traditional means in their efforts to perform miracles. Their flamboyance is another attractive feature as this is well attuned to the African psyche that loves all things pomp and gorgeous.

Research after research reveals that the vast majority of Nigerians believes that God exists. If most Nigerians believe in God, why do so many of them live as though He is unimportant? Why do so many Christians measure their success in life by materialistic standards? Lewis (2008) states that, we could blame our modern society; the triumph of scientism, the tendency to reduce every phenomenon to materialistic component often leave little room for behaviour motivated by a spiritual reality.

The Structural Roots of Materialistic Gospel in Contemporary Nigerian Churches

It was Aweda (2009) who clearly emphasized that the root problem of materialism in the contemporary Christian Churches has been traced partly to the change of emphasis on the pulpits from the cross to acquisition of the material possessions and miracles. It is clear that the majority of Nigerians have been

experiencing abject poverty. The recent socio-economic situation of contemporary Nigeria has been a symptomatic of the endemic plurality of Nigeria's religious landscape. The country is now a procreant ground for all kinds of religious movements. Reason is because Nigerian economic development is too low. Although some of the founders of these new generation Churches always postulate diversified reasons for their emergence and expeditious growth, some say that their call is a divine call from God, while some claim divine visions and dreams, emphasized deeper biblical interpretation. However, the commercial tendencies of the many independent Churches in Nigeria have of late become overtly evident. So, this problem of Nigeria's economic situation has made religion mainly to be seen in Nigeria as a source of economic benefit. So, Church opening and its enterprise have become a career to Nigerians and qualification certificate for some lazy youths. Olorode (1985) observes that “many people are looking beyond realities for the solution of their multifarious emotional and economic problems and religion has been their last resort” (p. 15). Essien (2010) notes that religion has become a top bracket business in Nigeria and the key players in this situation do not accept the economic reasons as the basis of their action. Rather they argue that their action is purely based on a spiritual dimension, which has proved not to be such. The mad craze for money has made some people willing to commercialize religion for their own benefit and interest. Many vulnerable people have fallen into the trap of this unholy merchandize.

Although the case of trading in God's name and using religion as a market place did not even begin from this century; it began even from the century of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ experienced this when he entered the Temple at Jerusalem during his ministry on earth; he saw some people selling and buying in the house of his father; Jesus was not happy with them immediately he saw these. Jesus then went into the Temple and drove out all those who were selling and buying there; he upset the tables of the money changers and the seats of the dove- sellers. He said to them, according to scripture, “my house will be called a house of prayer, but you are turning it into a bandits den”. Materialistic gospel message entered into Nigeria through the several visiting American materialistic gospel preachers and through their books, magazines, pamphlets and radio programmes. However, the question is, is it possible to drive away all those materialistic gospel preachers that have commercialized religion for their own interest in order to gain from it? These gains are evident in the selling of recorded cassettes of messages, prayers, counseling, performed miracles, testimonies, which they sell for them to have buoyant economy.

According to Iwe (1991). “In Nigeria the spirit of materialism is fast invading and shadowing our traditional values and Christian ethics; traditionally our society laid more emphasis on spiritual and social dimension of human nature

and value” (p. 28). The truth is that the quest to accumulate wealth and right of liberty has thrown away some Christians' faith; values and norms that guide Christians most especially these materialistic gospel preachers in our society. Instead of laying more emphasis on the spiritual growth of the people, some of them emphasize more on material needs. Amucheazi (1986) is of the opinion that:

One of the major causes of materialistic gospel in the present day society is the people's excessive quest for material wealth. Materialism coupled with status consciousness and value orientations that have increased in the modern living have made jobless young men seek means of economic survival through the establishment of churches. (p. 22).

Therefore, the quest for property ownership has been one of the main key factors for materialistic gospel message in contemporary Nigeria. Asogwa (2006) sees Nigeria:

As a nation that is heavily endowed with both human and material resources that could have moved it to the level of a developed nation more than forty years ago; unfortunately, after almost 50 years of attaining independence the low political and socio-economic development of the country persist even with the abundant material and human resources that it is blessed with. Thus, Nigeria's socio-economic and political problems, despite various solutions seem insurmountable; it is still in doubt whether any nation on earth is as endowed as Nigeria. It becomes a thing of worry for rational minds, why a nation with such abundant blessings from God could be economically crippled, politically a toddler and socially incapacitated. (p. 6).

Here, it is obvious that Nigeria has been blessed with abundant natural and human resources but in spite of all these blessings, Nigerian economic development is still too low.

Though God did not say there would not be the poor ones or poor nations, but He made elaborate programmes to adequately accommodate the poor in the society. The lack of this understanding is responsible for the blunders on the pulpits. It is in order to find solution to the nagging problem of poverty that the materialistic gospel preachers resorted to twisting of the Scripture to address socio-economic hardship. Oyeshola (2005) states that:

Materialistic gospel simply ignores the political and economic reasons for so much poverty we found around us. Dependent economics, fluctuating prices, overgrazing, global warming, environmental degradation, over population, corruption, mismanagement,

destabilization and mistaken priorities and so on are empty phrases without relevance. (p. 38).

The constant pressures, both economic and political, which are brought to bear on the urban population, demand a degree of order that the Churches tend to provide meaningful and pragmatic solution to the daily problems of their membership, as well as evolve strategies of participation as group in the religious and political affairs of the nation. There are certain practices, attitudes and central beliefs which, apart from serving as basic reference points for members, demonstrate that there are important ways in which becoming born again provides individuals with new opportunities for survival and self expression, and certain groups within urban society with strategies for overcoming problems and changing social and economic practices which are experienced as oppressive and exploitative. According to Marshal (1993):

Rather than retreat from the world, the pastors have come gradually to adopt, to a greater or lesser degree, a doctrine of prosperity in which the spiritual and material fortunes of a believer are dependent on how much he gives, spiritually and materially to God (or His representatives), who will reward him by prospering him. (p. 18).

Thus the gospel of materialism tells people that material prosperity will be provided by a 'miracle-working God' or through the 'law of sowing'- the more you give to the preacher the more God will give you. Thus the gospel of materialism functions by diverting all attention from the economic and social situation. As far as the adherents of this gospel are concerned, carrying daily the cross of Christ in their lives is not a virtue. The key biblical texts they often quote are:

- i) Whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you receive it, and you will' (Mark 11:23-24).
- ii) All these blessing shall come upon you... if you obey the voice of the Lord your God' (Deuteronomy 5:28-30).
- iii) Bring the full tithes into the storehouse... and thereby put me to the test if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing' (Malachi 3:8-11).
- iv) There is no one... who will not receive a hundredfold here in this life' (Mark 10:19-30).
- v) My God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus' (Philippians 4:19).

Aweda (2009) says that, to preach that all Christians must be materially wealthy is a fraudulent interpretation of the Bible. He went on to say that materialistic gospel preachers even believe that there is a problem to be addressed if after one or two years of one becoming a Christian, one is yet to break through in

acquisition of material possessions. They say that there must be material proofs to show that one is a Christian. Some have even carried it too far by saying that it is a curse to be poor. Of course, if the hope of becoming wealthy should come from the preachers of the Gospel, suggesting God's approval, the teaching is expected to have large followers and that is what has happened. So, the Churches that preach prosperity for all Christians are having their auditorium filled to full capacity and even, over flow, at any of their services. The teachings however might have aggravated the jungle way of life, with the aggressive pursuit to get rich, with every one extorting the other.

The materialistic gospel preachers have unfortunately taken advantage of the general poor Bible reading habits of most people. Most people are unlike the Church at Berea who returned home “daily” from the Church to “search” the facts, to inquire whether those things they heard were so (Acts 17:11). Excuses can always be given for people's poor Bible reading habit but ignorance is not an excuse of the law. There cannot be a justification for any one's poor Bible reading habit because if getting to heaven is important to any one, then he must properly organize himself to gain access to the real truth that will help him achieve his goal.

Implications of Materialistic Gospel Message in Contemporary Nigerian Churches

The serious concern of the present researchers about this unbalanced preaching is in two folds. The first worry is that it may set confusions in the minds of those Christians who are living according to their calling (Bible standards), but are struggling to make ends meet. They may start to wonder whether there are certain faults in them as to why they have not stumbled at wealth, thereby become discouraged in their faith and from doing good. In other words, the interpretation and the implication of the teaching that no Christian should be poor is that those people who claimed to be Christians, but are struggling to make ends meet are only making false claims to being Christians. The second worry is that those who have entered the Church in order to become wealthy, if they failed in the purpose for which they have entered the Church, may resort to other unholy practices in pursuance of their inordinate objectives, doing satanic practices such as visiting traditional shrines.

The materialistic gospel preachers ask their flock to give generously to the Church. According to Aweda (2009), they preach that the measure of their wealth is determined by how largely they give and they are never in dearth of scripture passages to support their arguments. The members who claim to benefit from the prosperity preaching make a return to their preachers with expensive gifts; vehicles, or money. Gifford (2009) quoted the sermon of a Liberian materialistic

gospel preacher thus: “if you have enough faith to be born again, you have enough faith to live beyond your social and financial difficulties” (p. 51). The preachers claim that all the biblical verses dealing with prosperity are just as trust worthy as texts that deal with other issues. They continue to say that Jesus asked Peter to cast his net and the result was a net-breaking, boat-sinking load of fish (Lk. 5:4). They then conclude that Jesus had no problem blessing Peter's business because Peter had given to Jesus first. Therefore, for the materialistic gospel preachers, the condition for a Christian to receive financial blessing from God is for the Christian to first give to the pastor as the representative of God. In this way many people are hypnotized and deceived into emptying their pockets in guise of supporting the work of God and sowing the seed of faith. The seed of faith sown in this way can hardly germinate, because it is sown without honesty and sincerity (Achunike, 2004). They also apply other gimmicks like “God wants to bless someone today” among others just to raise more money. In this way, being tricked and duped to spending probably more than his means, the giver goes home more miserable than he was before attending the worship.

Many at times people mount the rostrum with the beautiful testimonies that they became wealthy after they enrolled in the Church having listened to the prosperity sermons. Their testimonies, however, would have been more meaningful would they have summarized how the wealth came about in order to assure us that the wealth has been righteously acquired. This, however is not to say that all the testimonies are not genuine. Many could have had their wealth righteously acquired if it has pleased the Lord to make such people wealthy. Of course it is normal (law of reciprocity) that what you sow, you will reap. So if a person gives liberally, on the day of his need, he may find help. But the law does not necessarily hold all the time as you find from time to time unfortunate things happen to good people. This is what king Solomon observed when he wrote that, “Providence seems to treat some good men as though they were wicked and some wicked men as though they were good” (Ecclesiastes 8:14).

What we have today is a large crowd that has been carried away with the falsehood that they will become rich after becoming Christians. So, Churches cropped up in large numbers in every street and corner, when actually the hearts and minds of the worshippers are far away from God and are not regenerated leading to moral decadence. In other words, we have Churches in large numbers everywhere with large members in attendance who have only gone there to ask for blessings in whichever way they can pursue money, fair or foul.

Commercialization of the good news is another implication of materialistic gospel message in Nigeria. Obiora (1998), describes commercial tendencies as “Holy Deceit”, the art of trading in God's name, willing to commercialize

religion for their own benefits and interests” (p. 88). Therefore, commercialization is a process or cycle of introducing a new product or production matter into the market. Now, these materialistic gospel preachers are commercializing the gospel in the name of preaching the word of God to people at market squares, buses and their Churches in their own interest. But what is very obvious in their preaching is that, these preachers and equally some new converts today that devote themselves to preach the word of God outside the Churches always make emphasis on money while preaching to people at market places or buses. They always make use of certain words to deceive people because they want money from them. That Jesus admonishes, freely you have received, freely you give (Matt 21:18) without even minding that what Jesus meant when he said these is to help human being to resist the temptation to commercialize religion. But despite this injunction, many of these prosperity preachers have not been able to resist the reality that they had made religion a source of merchandize. Some are still using religion as a lucrative business avenue to maximize profits.

Jesus' ministry was filled with teachings about materialism, both in parables and more directly. In fact, the beginning of his ministry is highlighted by his experience in the wilderness where Satan tries to tempt him with materialistic seduction. Consideration of the temptation of Christ sheds light on how our surrounding culture operates in much the same way as Satan did in the desert.

Materialistic Temptations of Jesus Christ

In examining the seduction of materialism and its impact on the Church, it is significant to say that at the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry, He was led into the wilderness by the Spirit to experience deprivation and temptation (Matt. 4:1). Biblical writers often use the word tempt to mean “to try something for the purpose of demonstrating its worth or faithfulness”. Twelftree (1992) says that Jesus' fasting in the desert provides his followers with an example of earthly suffering they could relate to. It provides also a model for how to resist temptation.

Satan's testing of Jesus in Matthew 4 should be a warning for Christians in our highly materialistic culture. Satan still uses these techniques today to test the faithfulness of the body of Christ. Matthew tells us that the first temptation was used by Satan to fulfill a perfectly normal bodily need. Jesus is hungry; he had fasted for forty days and night. Satan suggests that He turn the stones into bread, something well within Jesus' capabilities. Believers wrestle with the same suggestion from Satan today. But what is wrong with fulfilling normal bodily functions? We need food, clothing and shelter to survive, but it must be to the glory of God rather than yielding to our mere bodily desires.

Satan's temptation to reduce human nature to what might be called the “will to pleasure principal” is the idea that sensual pleasure explains all of our motivations and needs. Jesus responds with the Scripture “it is written: Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that come from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4). He replaces the will to pleasure view of human nature with a will to righteousness. We cannot live on food alone; humans must have meaning and purpose to survive.

Next, Jesus is tempted with a formula for instant status. Satan suggests that He perform a miracle that would surely convince the Jews that He is their Messiah. He should throw Himself down from the temple. His survival will be just the right sign needed for the Jews to recognize Him. The only problem with this plan is that it is not the will of the Father. Jesus might gain notoriety, but will accept our praise with miraculous support. We conform to His will; He does not conform to ours.

Finally, Satan shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and tells him that they are His if He will only worship him. Satan is tempting Jesus with what might be called the success syndrome. If Jesus' goal is to be the king of the Jews, why not do it the easy way? Jesus replies to him, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: “Worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only” (Matt. 4:10). Likewise, we are not called to success, but to obedience. There are many messages in our surrounding culture encouraging the pleasure principal, the importance of status, and the idea of success at all costs. However, as believers we are to seek a higher standard than pleasure, regardless of what others think and often in the face of disappointing results.

How Christians Should Relate with Material Things of Life

Getz (1996) suggests some biblical principles to guide Christians in their relationship to material things. First, he notes biblical warnings against being materialistic. It is possible for believers to be in bondage to things, we cannot serve both worldly things and God. Second, accumulating wealth brings with it specific temptations. The fifth chapter of James and book of Amos describe how financial power can lead to economic injustice as well as other forms of oppression. In Acts 8, Luke warns believers that some in the Church will use the Christian message to benefit themselves. Since this was present at the very beginning of the Church, we should not be surprised or discouraged when we see it happen today.

As the Church looks for the imminent return of Christ, believers should avoid the increasing tendency to intensify love for self, money, and pleasure. The warning in 2 Timothy 3 tells us to avoid those who succumb to this temptation. Christians

also have to constantly be on guard against self deception and rationalization when living in an affluent society. When the Church at Laodicea imagined itself self-sufficient and without need, Jesus described them as corectched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked (Rev. 3:17-18).

To avoid materialism, the apostle Paul writes that godliness with contentment is great gain (1 Tim 6:6). Do we have enough faith to believe this revealed truth? If so our first priority in life should be the pursuit of contentment rather than riches. As Paul declares “I have learnt the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want” (Philippians. 4:12-14).

When God blesses us with abundance, our goal should be to use it in creative ways to further God's kingdom, for where our treasure is so is our heart (Matt. 6:19-21). Jesus taught the disciples to seek His kingdom and his righteousness. Jesus taught the disciples not to be adsorbed with worry about the future but to seek His kingdom and his righteousness (Matt 6:34). People should learn to use their material possessions in harmony with God's will. A good example is given in Acts 2. When believers had given up their claim to even their personal belongings, God added to their number daily. How we use our wealth has a great impact on the watching world. A second effect is that love and unity are created in the body of Christ. When the Church was sharing their personal possession, “all believers were one in heart and mind” (Acts 4:32). What could be more powerful in our materialistic age than a Church using its wealth to further God's kingdom, united in love, and growing in numbers? This is how the early Church had such a remarkable impact on its surrounding culture.

The scriptural motive for giving is a test of our stewardship of sharing what God has given and entrusted to us with those who are genuinely in need for promoting the spread of the gospel. Aweda (2009) clearly explains that:

It is scriptural ignorance to teach people to give in order that they may become wealthy on earth as if God is money doublers. It may please the Lord to reward any giver while here on earth in addition to the reward, which accrues to him in heaven. If the giver is rewarded here on earth, it is only a fringe benefit. But the reward, which no giver will miss is the one stored for him/her in heaven and are safe from thieves. (p. 13).

Aweda's above explanation is in line with what the Bible says in Matt. 6:19-21, “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also”.

The Lord asked a religious leader to sell all he had and give the money to the poor so that it could become treasure for him in heaven (Matt 19:21). The Lord did not promise the rich man that he should give in return for wealth on earth but in heaven. The Lord was very clear in all His utterances, His end focus was never for this earth but Heaven and it is just unbelievable how these preachers are re-writing the Bible and have shifted attention and focus entirely on earthly things as if the world is all their hope and goal. They expound their teachings as if all we live for, is this world and there is no anticipation for heaven, which really is what the Bible encourages us to work towards because however long a person lives in this world, it is as short as the watch that ends the night, which dies at the opening of the day compared with the time, which we will spend in heaven, which is eternal.

Conclusion

Jesus brought the gospel of love, peace and redemption, but Nigerian Christians are being short-changed as what they get from most of these preachers is plainly the gospel of materialism. It is so bad that the whole thing has been turned into ridicule and the pastors are busy fleecing the society. While majority of Nigerian Christians can hardly afford three square meals, some Nigerian men of God are busy counting billions and flying in private jets. The people have been starved of divine knowledge because an informed people remain a threat to the interests of the prosperity preaching Churches. The moral fabric of the nation is weak and appalling, yet Nigeria boasts of thousands of Churches with stupendously rich ministers. Deception is being actively pursued under the guise of Christianity. If materialism was ever to satisfy anyone, it would have been Solomon, the richest King the world has ever known. He had absolutely everything and had more of it than any one, and yet he found it was all worthless and futile. It did not produce happiness or the satisfaction our souls long for. He declared, “Whoever loves money never has money enough whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income” (Ecclesiastes 5:10). In the end, Solomon came to the conclusion that we are to “fear God, and keep His commandments for this is the whole duty of man” (Ecclesiastes 12:13). Thus materialistic gospel message and its consequent materialism is a vice and should not be encouraged in the Christian Churches. For this reason, Achunike (2004) concludes that “materialism in its entire ramification is to be shunned; using tricks to make money from the people of God should be rejected in all its totality” (p.111).

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