

Integrity: A Vital Tool for the 21st Century Church Leaders in Nigeria

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Abstract

The increasing level of moral decadence such as rape, fraud, covetousness, sexual misconduct, character assassination, cultic activities, bloodshed, idolatry, syncretism among some church leaders in the 21st century has caused lots of reproach to the sacred order and arose varieties of questioning to the sanctity of the call of some church leaders in the present age. More worrisome also is the fact that while some church leaders in the 21st century spend more effort in theological formation, little or no attention is given to moral discipline. What should be the attitude of church leaders in matters of morality at home, society and church? Shouldn't the church leaders be honest and consistent in all things? Pauline discourse on the qualification of church leaders in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 is used as a guide. The paper employs phenomenological and historical-critical method. The essence of the paper is to remind church leaders in the 21st-century church that a high level of moral responsibility is demanded of them if they must thrive and be a voice in the present age.

Key Words: Integrity, Hypocrisy, Syncretism, Cultic Activities

Introduction

The issue of integrity among church leaders in the 21st-century church in Nigeria cannot be glossed over if the church leader's socio-religious undertakings are to be meaningful and impactful. Studies have proven that church leaders are not only required to be sound theologically but

they are also required to be morally disciplined to move the church forward spiritually and numerically. Regrettably, while many church leaders give more attention to the spiritual and theological formation, insignificant attention is being given to moral discipline as such the church reels in heartbreak, confusion and distrust as once respected church leaders are repeatedly exposed in sin and shame. In the light of this, the paper seeks to address the pertinent issues bordering on the integrity of church leaders which has made profane the sanctity of the sacred order using the Pastoral Epistles particularly 1 Timothy 3:1-7 as a template.

Clarification of key terms

The operative terms of this paper are “Integrity”, and “Church Leaders”. Integrity is derived from a Latin Word *Integer* which means ‘wholeness’, ‘soundness’ or ‘completeness’. It is the “quality of being honest and having strong moral principles; moral uprightness”. Integrity is the state of being whole and undivided. It is also “the quality or state of being of sound moral principle, uprightness, honesty, and sincerity”¹ In the context of this paper, integrity means doing the right thing at all times and in all circumstances, whether someone is watching or not. Church Leaders refer to those who have pastoral and spiritual oversight and responsibility on the flock of God or body of Christ also known in the New Testament as the Church. Also, Church leaders are persons or group of persons who act as special intermediaries before God and humankind. They are also persons or group of persons who have set themselves apart for sacred responsibilities to both the divine and human worlds. Furthermore, church leaders are mediators between God and man. They direct men to God. Besides, they are vested with the responsibility to expound the word of God to their congregations. It is important to note that church leaders may be male or females. At times the terms 'Priests', 'Pastors', 'Bishops', 'General Overseers', 'Apostles', and 'Reverends' are used interchangeably for church leaders especially when it pertains to a Christian organization which is the nucleus of this presentation. In this paper, they all represent the same thing and will be used interchangeably.

Characteristics of Church Leaders (1 Timothy 3:1-7)

The characteristics church leaders should possess be it in the church, family or society is best epitomized in the dual pastoral letters traditionally attributed to Apostle Paul to Timothy and Titus, Bishop at Ephesus and the Island of Crete respectively. The letter is called pastoral because it was addressed to individuals with pastoral oversight of churches. Apostle Paul wrote in order "... that they may know how they ought to conduct themselves in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15; Titus 1:4-5). Both Timothy and Titus were given explicit directives on how to shepherd their congregations, behave themselves and guide their churches. The essential aspect of the Pastoral letters is that it explores decisively issues of Christian living bordering on morality, Christian doctrine and leadership. Also, the letter contains the things that would be essential for the young pastors in relations to church organization, discipline, the appointment of elders and deacons and the opposition of rebellious members or false teachers. The directives and advice were given to Timothy and Titus still apply more to the contemporary church leaders in this present age.

Apostle Paul remarks "This is a faithful saying: If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work. A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behaviour, hospitable, able to teach; not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous; one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God? Moreover, he must have a good testimony among those who are outside, lest he fall into reproach and snare of the devil" (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:6-9 NKJV). This scripture sets the ideal characteristics of church leaders or Christian living with an array of qualities.

These characteristics fall into three categories namely "In relation to the society, in relation to church leaders themselves, and in relation to their homes".² Concerning the society, the church leaders must be blameless (1 Timothy 3:2a). This implies that the church leader's morality must not

be open for a query. The church leaders must be a person of unquestioned moral integrity, unquestioned by his church authorities, his critics and by his conscience.³ Indices of bribery, embezzlement, religious manipulation, dishonesty and corruption must not be associated with the church leaders. The moral and spiritual sanity of church leaders is part of the most essential qualities required in their day to day life. The church leaders must seek to offer to the world a life of purity that leaves no loophole for criticism. In other words, the church leaders are to live above reproach. They must fight the good fight of faith against false knowledge and false doctrine, and at whatever cost keep themselves pure to deal severely against false teachings and false teachers. The church leader needs to be trained and steeped in the scriptures in order not to mix fables with the gospel. Also, they are to be monogamous, married only to one wife (3:2b). This implies that there must not be room for an extramarital relationship.

Concerning themselves, the church leaders must practice self-control (1 Timothy 3:2c). They must not indulge in excessive wine drinking or quarrel or an unhealthy love of money, this implies that their motivation for life and ministry must not be for material acquisition or ostentatious lifestyles. The church leaders must be free from depravities that could enslave them and render them unable to exercise their ministerial assignments. Likewise, the church leaders must be competent in the handling of the word of God to enquirers, tolerant with the wrongdoing of their followers and charitable as well as demonstrate a noticeable spirit of unselfishness and impartiality in their ministry and in the church to be able to direct the church strictly and faithfully.⁴

Concerning their homes, the church leaders must manage their own families well (1 Timothy 3:4-5). The family which is the basic social unit in the society and centre for the transmission of basic cultural norms and societal values held by a given people from one generation to another is a miniature of the church; the family is the proving ground for leadership in the church hence, church leaders must maintain a stable family, secure the respect of their families as to enable them to earn the respect of the church for which they are responsible. Any church leader who is unable to manage his family which is seen as one of the strongest socio-political

institutions from which all public life emerged in the fear of God by maintaining Godly morals is not fitting for the leadership of the church. The church leaders must not also be a new convert, to avoid the temptation of pride.⁵ In addition to the above qualities, church leaders must avoid all vices such as covetousness, pride, and arrogance, wickedness, hatred and struggle to be real men/women of God, the sense in which Timothy and Titus were so addressed by following after “righteousness, love, godliness, faith, love and meekness” (1 Timothy 6:1-11). These are necessary qualities needed for those who desire to become or have already become leaders in the church.

Societal Anticipation from Church Leaders

“For the mouth of a priest should keep knowledge, and people should seek the law from his mouth; for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts” (Malachi 2:7 NKJV).

This scripture put differently, states that a priest should be a reference point in matters of faith, knowledge and morality, anything short of this becomes an aberration of the priesthood. The name Malachi means "Messenger of Yahweh". The prophetic book of Malachi is God's message to His people Israel through Malachi the prophet who served during Nehemiah's days, a period in which the Jewish people's history was characterized by corrupt priests, wicked practices and compromising leaders. All kinds of deception were done by the priests and the people in the worship of God. There were neglects in the fulfilment of vows and tithe by the priests and the Jewish people and intermarriage with foreign women was common. It was a time when the priest fell below their calling and by extension, the people of God the priest were supposed to be leading.⁶

One of the virtues anticipated from church leaders in society is integrity in all human endeavours. Integrity in this respect cuts across the ministry to those been ministered to, the family and the church. Interestingly, this is not only required by church leaders alone but by everyone who lives in the society irrespective of the socio-religious, political and economic stratification. In a situation where a high level of moral rectitude is expected from those who live in the society, it then implies that the

highest spiritual and moral exactitude and consciousness of heart and purposes are expected from church leaders by those who inhabit in the society. The reason is that they are the persons the society and their congregations look up to for guidance unto the path of moral decency. As stated by Trull and Carter, citing Chaucer question "If gold rusts, then what shall poor iron do"⁷. That is to say if church leaders whom humanity looks up to fail for lack of integrity, what then would be anticipated of the congregation or members of the society? If anyone must behave badly, society does not expect much to be church leaders who are supposedly custodian of ethical and exemplary living. Church leaders are expected to be honest, upright, sincere and truthful in life and character and live the truth of the scripture they teach modelling the life of Christ in a very sound and robust way that befits their calling⁸. Church leaders are required by society to lead their lives in the community to conform to the gospel they preach (Philippians 1:27). Church leaders are not only to be salts of the earth and light of the world but tasty salts and shining lights to the society (Matthew 5:13-14). This implies that they are to keep themselves away from the pollution of the world; be agents of positive change. Besides, they are to be good examples to the society in speeches, conduct, love, faith and purity as expressed by Saint Paul (1 Timothy 4:12). The church leader who behaves unbecomingly brings reproach to himself, the church and the Lord of the Church (Ephesians 5:1-12). Whenever the character of a church leader becomes questionable, the propensity to influence the society positively is minimized.

Roberts remarks that 'character and integrity' are related words in moral vocabulary; "a person has character if he or she is characterized by such traits as truthfulness, courage, justice and compassion, especially if the person can maintain virtuous action, emotion, and thought despite pressures to slacken his or her measure".⁹ Put differently, a person is said to have integrity if he or she is a complete and definite self and has powers to resist 'disintegration' in the face of temptation, suffering, peer pressure, and other adverse moral influences. Integrity is cardinal to everyone that wishes to win the heart and confidence of those around him, significantly Integrity is very crucial to the church leaders if they intend to impact their adherents optimistically, gain both divine and human applauds. The anticipation of society and God from church leaders is very

high. The Holy Scripture is replete with examples of church leaders who lived up to their divine expectations before God and humanity and were so rewarded. Men like Stephen (Acts 6:3-7; 7:59-60), Saint Paul and Timothy (2 Corinthians 1:12-2:11), Noah (Genesis 6:9), Jesus Christ, Job (Job 1:1; 2:3), Joseph (Genesis 39:7-9) just to list a few are worth mentioning. The society expects the church leaders to conduct themselves in the family, church and society in a way that the ministry is not blamed (2 Corinthians 6:3).

Contextualizing Integrity among Church Leaders

God's standard and nature cannot be compromised in this present age. Part of the communicable attributes of God that is, the character of God that may be reflected in other being is His Holiness (1 Samuel 2:2, Isaiah. 6:3). God is Holy, the word Holy as applied to God means that God is complete without sin or having no capability to sin hence, Church leaders who represent Him here on earth must possess the nature of God and be whole in their affairs in words and deeds. Exclusive areas integrity is required among church leaders in the twenty-first-century church are in the preaching of the gospel, relationship with the opposite sex and the handling of finances.

Preaching of the Gospel

Church leaders must preach and teach God's word in its undiluted manner. The whole counsel of God must be proclaimed with sincerity of purpose. The preaching and teaching of God's word must be to recover lost souls, rebuke, correct and exhort where necessary and not for selfish ambition (2 Timothy 4:2-4), in other words, the gospel of Christ must not be commercialized (Philippians 3:18-19). Regrettably, some church leaders in the twenty-first-century church have bastardized the gospel, preaching and teaching for personal gains and living big with the gospel of prosperity and less on the message of No Cross, No Crown. Since sin is hardly condemned or preached against from the pulpit to the pews by such preachers, sinners become more comfortable in their sins even in the church. The prosperity gospel and such preachers which emphasise more on material acquisition and less on soul winning and transformation has now become the order of the day. Surprisingly, preachers of this gospel promise their members an el dorado when they the preachers are not

willing and ready to be there. They do this using scriptural passages based on giving and nothing more than giving. For instance, “Give, and it will be given unto you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom” (Luke 6:38), “And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:19), “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you” (Matthew 7:7).

A Prosperity gospel preacher once delivered this message “It is more blessed to give than receive...the next thing is to give. You’ve got to give, don’t let anyone tell you that you are too poor to give. It is a good thing to give what you are in need of. If you need clothes, well give away some clothes. God is able to stretch your income, give first, generously and in faith”.¹⁰ Most Messages in contemporary times are not too far from the message stated here and the question remains, where is the place of integrity-that is soundness and wholeness in such messages? By prosperity preaching and teaching, some church leaders have turned the church of God into a den of robbers where members are cheated and exploited under spiritual guise not minding the source of their resources. This is accomplished by creating an atmosphere of bliss to their dying followers while tactically relieving them of their hard-earned resources. Also, this is usually done by re-interpreting scriptural passages to suit their motives of extortion. In Biblical Hermeneutics, this is called eisegesis (reading meaning into the text). Peter Young affirms that “the general approach of prosperity teaching to scripture and its interpretation has been to quote isolated texts and treat them almost exclusively as proportional realities or promises without recourse to the historical context, the nature of the text or the original intendment of such writings”.¹¹

Amidst the personal enrichment and deceit perpetrated by most prosperity gospel preachers they admonish their followers by encouraging them to continue to confess positively by claiming that they are rich even when they remain impoverished, they further assert that they are poor because they do not have faith even when their living conditions continue to deteriorate.¹² The gospels of prosperity preachers are a humanly calculated mechanism to exploit their adherent and enrich themselves.

Those who twist the gospel for the transformation and possession of human pockets have they displayed integrity by such acts?

Relationship with the Opposite Sex

The church is a mixed congregation of both males and females thus, Church leaders are required to relate with the opposite sex whether they be male or female with decorum in and outside the church. Not relating decorously with the opposite sex has caused many church leaders to lose their integrity and some involved in illicit sexual misconduct. In the electronic and print media, there are cases of sexual scandals and immorality, fraud, and cultic practices by some church leaders in contemporary times. Just recently according to *Daily Post* of October 7th, 2019 “Dr Boniface Igbeneghu a lecturer from the University of Lagos and head pastor of Foursquare Gospel Church was caught in a secret video camera demanding sex from a female candidate seeking admission”.¹³ This unwholesome act has not only drawn lots of criticism from the wider society but has led to his suspension from all ministerial assignments in the church and academic activities from the University. Similarly, *Premium Times Nigeria* of June 20th 2018 reveals that Professor Richard Akindele a lecturer from the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife, and an Anglican priest from the Diocese of Ife, Osun State was dismissed from the institution for demanding sex from Miss. Monica Osagie to help her improve her grades.¹⁴ The two lecturers and pastors cited above were suspended and dismissed respectively for their inappropriate relationships with their students a case which borders on their moral integrity. Integrity is very essential in relationship with the opposite sex. In 2006, a Lagos High Court found Rev Chukwuemeka Ezeugo popularly known as “Rev King” of the Christian Praying Assembly, Ajao Estate, along Oshodi-Airport Road, Lagos guilty of the murder of late Anna Uzor King, a member of his church, who was also said to be his "sex partner". He burnt her to death amidst pleas for mercy from the late Anna. He was sentenced to 100 years imprisonment for the attempted murder of Onuorah Chizoba, Olisa Chiejina, Uche Chukwu Iwoba, Vivian Ezeocha, Jessica Nwere, Kossiochukwu and Ezenwankwo, whom he burnt by the use of petrol and matches while accusing them of various offences.¹⁵ It is said that whenever he is coming into the church everybody around must give way for him or else the

person will be brutalized by his security personnel. He is said to persistently flog his congregations on their buttock undermining their ages, marital and societal status.

Another example is in *The Punch Newspaper* of July 26, 2012, where Ihuoma Chidozie writes about Pastor Princewill, the General Overseer of the Mountain Movers Fire Ministries International, Nyanya, a satellite town between Abuja and Nasarawa State who was taken to court for having had canal understanding of two 14-year-old female members of his church, one of whom had also aborted for him after lying to the medical Doctor that he was her father. The pastor was arraigned in court with his co-accused, Miss. Paulyn Ode on charges of conspiracy, criminal impersonation, criminal intimidation and assault. Surprisingly, the pastor was not perturbed with the allegations but was rather making connections to recover his transnational passport¹⁶. This reveals the level of decadence in the lives of some church leaders.

Handling of Finances

Money is good and not evil but can be tempting if not prudently managed. Money is essential to serve the basic needs of humanity. No institution can thrive without money. The church; family; school and government need money to function effectively and efficiently. The poor management of finances is one major area some church leaders in the present age have fallen short of their Christian spirituality. *Sahara reporters New York* of February 25th, 2015 captures this fact with the headline “Pastor Insist that Jonathan Bribed CAN with 7 Billion Naira”.¹⁷ The report has it that in 2015, 7 billion naira was given to the Christian Association of Nigeria an umbrella body comprising of all Christian denominations by the then-president Goodluck Ebele Jonathan under the leadership of Pastor Ayo Oritsejafor and the money could not be properly accounted for. Although the Christian Association of Nigeria refuted the claim, Pastor Kallamu Dikwa who leads the voice of Northern Christian Movement restated that Christian Association of Nigeria received the funds on 21st of January, 2015 and gave three million naira to each of its state chapters. This act by the then leadership of Pastor Ayo Oritsejafor of the Christian Association of Nigeria which defies the fourth objectives for the establishment of CAN by the founding fathers “To be a watch-dog of the spiritual and

moral welfare of the nation” led to the conclusion by many critics that the association was political and not spiritual. The reaction of the congregation toward the numerical strength of the church may be passive during annual reporting on what is traditionally termed synod in the Anglican church system by the church leaders but when it relates to finances; both the donors and spectators want an explanation especially when the figures on paper are not corresponding. When adequate and convincing explanations are not given, this could trigger conflict between the donors, spectators and church leader. This is one of the reasons parishioners clamour for the removal of their church leaders.

It is important to note that the ways and manner money are managed or expended is what constitute a major problem between the church leaders and their members. Recently, An Anglican clergy east of the Niger and a legal practitioner who knew the implication of impersonation was suspended from service in the ordained ministry of the church for forging the signature of the church treasurer and withdrawing the sum of seven hundred and fifty thousand naira. When he was later discovered by the church financial committee, he tried to cover up his guilt by requesting the church to write it off as part of his monthly stipend. The very act of the clergyman is a miniature of the many cases of moral rottenness prevalent among today's church leaders. It is a known fact that whenever members of an organization discover that there are inconsistencies in the financial account of the organization, the reactions of the members are not always pleasant but repulsive. This amounts to why even though members of the group may not pay due attention to other agenda in a meeting but when it comes to matters of finance there is absolute silence in the venue of the meeting.¹⁸ Church leaders need to express prudence in the handling of public funds.

Way Forward

The suggested way forward if church leaders must thrive and remain a voice in the twenty-first-century church are as follows:

1. Church leaders must not see their call into the ordained ministry as a profession working tirelessly for the upkeep of the stomach

but for the recovery of lost souls (Romans 16:18; Philippians. 3:19).

2. Church leaders must live out the gospel which they preach through their daily conduct (Titus 2:7-8). Character must come before preaching and teaching. It is the man behind the sermon who makes the sermon weighty and powerful. It is the church leader who lives his religion who will lead others to do the same.
3. Church leaders life must be in conformity with the scriptures (Romans 12:1-2)
4. Church leaders must live a life of self-contentment

Conclusion

The main thrust of this paper is the need for church leaders in the twenty first century church to demonstrate integrity in the body of Christ, to themselves and their families and the society at large which constitute what they teach and preach from the Holy Scripture. The present day church and some of her leaders have not been able to affect the society positively because some of the church leaders have been unsuccessful in upholding the virtue of integrity. As people often say in the contemporary world “bother about the message and not the messenger” the truth as presented in this paper is that there is no way one can separate the message from the messenger. The messenger is as important as the message. Therefore, the only way God’s message would be accepted in the twenty first century from church leaders is by portraying the message across through their actions, which is living out the message rightly. The present day church needs church leaders who are conscious of the fact that they are custodian of the sacred traditions of God wherever they find themselves whether overtly or covertly. The church needs leaders who are self-disciplined, steadfast, and resolute and not having double standard. The society can be better if the church leaders practise what they preach.

Endnotes

- ¹<http://www.ahdictionary.com/word/search.html?q=integrity>, Accessed on 03/10/2019.
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- ³ Parker I. Maxey, *A Guide to Ministerial Ethics and Etiquette* (Lagos: WATS Publishers, 2017), 75.
- ⁴Samuel Aluko and Joyce Aluko. *The Church and the Society*. (Lagos: CSS Bookshop, 2011), 46-48
- ⁵Williams Barclay. *The Daily Study Bible the Letters to Timothy, Titus and Philemon*. (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2006), 73.
- ⁶Wellington O. Wotogbe-Weneka, “Towards the Perfect Priesthood”, *The Anglican Church in Nigeria Trends, Issues and Activities*, ed. S. N. Adiele (Ikot Ekpene: Clean Hands, 2001), 236-238.
- ⁷J. Trull and E. Carter, *Ministry Ethics: Being a Good Minister* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1993), 14.
- ⁸O. A. Oderinde, “Ethical Misconduct among Nigerian Church Leaders in the Context of 1 Timothy 3:1-7”, *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences* 4, no. 7 (2018): 28-29, <http://www.researchgate.net/publication/328133398> (accessed September 19, 2019).
- ⁹R. C. Roberts, “Character”, in *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, eds. D. J. Atkinson and D. H. Field (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 65.
- ¹⁰ Allwell Onuoha U, “The Proliferation of Churches in Nigeria Today Causes, Effects and Cures”, *WAGGOM International Journal of Humanities* 1, no.1&2 (1999): 84.
- ¹¹Peter Young, “Prosperity Teaching in an African Context”, *African Journal of Evangelical Theology* 15, no.1 (1996): 8
- ¹²Celestina O. Isiramem, “Pentecostalism and the Nigerian Socio-Economic Debacle: A Therapy or a Delusion”? in *Religion and the Nigerian Nation: Some Topical Issues* eds. C. O. Isiramem et al (Ibadan: En-Joy Press, 2010), 319.

¹³Seun Opejobi, “Foursquare Church asks Pastor Boniface Igbeneghu to Step Down Over Sexual Harassment”, *Daily Post*, <http://www.dailypost.ng/author/seun> (accessed October 7, 2019).

¹⁴Adejumu Kabir, “OAU Dismisses Professor Involved in Sex-for-mark-scandal”. *Premium Times Nigeria*, <http://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/273135-breaking-oau-dismisses-professor-involved-in-sex-for-marks-scandal.html> (accessed October 8, 2019).

¹⁵Celestina O. Isiramen, “Corruption in the Nigeria Society: Suggestions for Moral Rearmament”, in *Religion and the Nigerian Nation: Some Topical Issues*, eds. C. O. Isiramen *et al* (Ibadan: En-Joy Press, 2010), 73.

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