

Integrity Challenge Among Contemporary Nigerian Church Leaders

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Abstract

Corruption, though a global phenomenon, has become endemic and systemic in both the public and private sectors of Nigeria and has eaten deep into the moral fabric of Nigerian society. This has affected the integrity of both the secular and religious institutions including the church and its leadership. Previous studies on corruption in Nigeria have largely focused on its conceptualisations and assessment in its varied forms, x-raying its causes, effects and solutions, and policy formulations. However, this study sets out to examine the challenge of integrity among Nigerian church leaders concerning the subject matter of corruption. Church leaders and church members were the primary sources of data while books, journal articles and internet materials were the secondary sources of data. Data was gathered through phenomenological and documentation methods of research and they were analysed using the content analysis method within the ambit of consequentialism theory. Clerical corruption, perpetrated mostly by Pastors and church elders

through the unbridled pursuit of material possessions and wealth is on the increase. And only exemplary lifestyle by the church leadership in collaboration with the state will curb this evil menace. It is recommended that the pastors and church members should be trained in ethics and spiritual formation.

KEYWORDS: Integrity, Corruption, church leaders, Contemporary Churches.

INTRODUCTION

Corruption, though a global phenomenon is cancer that has eaten deeply into the fabric of Nigeria polity and it is generally acknowledged that corrupt practices are endemic and systemic in both public and private sectors of Nigeria.¹ As Oliyide and Odeku state, corruption is as old as Nigeria.² Many have defined corruption in various ways. Osimen, Adenegan & Balogun define corruption as “antisocial behaviour conferring improper benefits contrary to legal and moral norms, and which undermine the authorities to improve the living conditions of the people”.³ For Okolo and Akpokighe corruption is “any act or behaviour or omission, committed, intentionally or not, to influence the actions of another”.⁴ It is a misapplication and misappropriation of public goods to private ends.

Corruption occurs when a person chooses to enrich him or herself at the expense of the general society by misusing his or her official position. So, corruption goes beyond financial misappropriation. Whatever a person does to satisfy his or her selfish desire at the expense of the other person or the society as a whole is corruption. Corruption has been divided into seven distinct types: autogenic, defensive, extortive, investive, nepotistic, supportive, and transactive.⁵ Scholars have looked at the phenomenon of corruption in Nigeria by describing it and giving a general assessment.⁶ Some others have examined the causes, effects and proffered solutions to corruption in Nigeria.⁷ On his part, Onyiloha looked at the policy formulations to counter corruption.⁸ However, these scholars have not linked their discourse on corruption in Nigeria to the concept of integrity among the contemporary church leaders in Nigeria.

Therefore, this study sets out to highlight corrupt practices in the contemporary Nigerian church and to proffer solutions to such corruption from the standpoint of integrity. Primary data are sourced from selected Bible verses referencing Christian integrity, while secondary data are sourced from books, journals and internet materials. These furnished data for what was necessary for the comprehension, insight and analysis of the subject matter x-rayed in this research work. Data are content analysed within the ambit of consequentialism theory.

Consequentialism (Plain) theory is a teleological theory that holds that the consequences of one's conduct are the ultimate basis for any judgement about the rightness or wrongness of that conduct.⁹ Consequentialists hold that a morally right act (or omission from acting) will produce a good outcome.¹⁰ Thus, we intend to examine the wrongness and rightness of the actions of church leaders in Nigeria in line with biblically construed integrity and its attendant consequences for Christianity in Nigeria.

GENERAL OVERVIEW OF CORRUPTION IN NIGERIA

Corruption has been broadly defined as a perversion or a change from good to bad.¹¹ Specifically, corruption or corrupt behaviour involves the "violation of established rules for personal gains and profit".¹² For Lipset and Lenz, corruption is "efforts to secure wealth or power through illegal means- private gain at public expense".¹³

Corruption is exemplified by a wide and diverse array of phenomena with political corruption topping the list and this does not only take the form of "cash and carry" syndrome but can also take the forms of 'trading in influence' or granting favours that poison politics and threaten democracy or the use of official power and government resources for sordid and disreputable personal gains.¹⁴ The varied forms of corruption in Nigeria have been identified as the following, but not limited to these: political corruption, bureaucratic corruption, electoral corruption, bribery, fraud, embezzlement, extortion, favouritism, and nepotism, falsification of documents and records, money laundering, illegal payments, drug trafficking, false declaration, examination fraud, and tax evasion.¹⁵

There are many other reported events in the Nigerian polity that can be summed up as corrupt practices that have become the perpetual traits of many Nigerians. These include police officers collecting money from motorists at mounted checkpoints; sexual abuse of detainees at police stations; payment of bail bond for detainees; inflation of government contracts; humongous salaries and allowances and exclusive privileges for members of the legislature; fraudulent preparation of corporate organisations' financial reports and concealment of such from government monitoring agencies; sexual and financial gratification in the educational institutions; and the prevailing culture of consumerism rather than production.¹⁶ And some of the highlighted effects of the aforementioned corrupt practices in Nigeria are reduction of economic growth; reduction of government's capacity to respond to the needs of the impoverished masses; enhanced socio-economic inequalities; the increased gap between the rich and poor with the resultant concentration of national wealth in the hands of few; depletion of national wealth; mistrust of the political leadership; abuse of power; careless exploitation of natural resources; erosion of moral values; and disregard for the rule of law, among others.¹⁷

APPRAISAL OF CORRUPTION IN THE NIGERIAN CHURCH

Corruption in the church takes the forms of denominationalism, expressed extreme beliefs, gender marginalisation, ecclesiastical recklessness, covetousness, political bigotry, financial misappropriation and mismanagement, worldliness, and hierarchical dictatorship.¹⁸

Some of the identified corrupt practices that reportedly go on in many social contexts of the church in Nigeria include but are not limited to the following: sexual misconduct among some church leaders; unethical appointment of Pastors; prioritizing of spiritual powers above godly character; mismanagement of church funds; proselytization of church members; interference of transferred Pastors in the former place of Christian service; undue exercise of power brokerage by influential church members; unscrupulous congregational pressure on pastoral leadership for pecuniary gains; sycophancy; proliferation of churches.¹⁹

INTEGRITY AS PANACEA TO THE PHENOMENON OF CORRUPTION IN THE NIGERIAN CHURCH

The credibility of Christian leadership is hinged on their ability to regulate personal ethical behaviour. This pointer points to a lifestyle of integrity. The Bible condemns various practices, which amount to corruption because corrupt practices are seen as a violation of God's covenant relationship with his people.²⁰ The Old Testament prophets provide sufficient ethical resources for social justice such as justice and care for the poor, the widow, the orphan, the oppressed and the marginalized (Cf. Amos; Hosea). Also, the prophets condemned several practices like bribery, fraud, extortion, greed and dishonesty, which result in a violation of the covenant relationship between God and his people (Isaiah 56:9-12; 58:6-7; Ezekiel 34:4; Jeremiah 22:13-16). These subversions are regarded as corruption. God repeatedly redirected his people to ethical behaviours that exemplify justice, equity, and fairness.²¹

Similarly, in the New Testament, persons like John the Baptist (Luke 3:10-14; Mark 6:17-18); Jesus Christ (Matthew 5 – 7), and Paul (Colossians 3:14; Galatians 5:24-25; 1 Timothy 6:6-10) emphasised high moral and ethical standards in private and social life and condemned every manifestation of social injustice.²²

Ecclesial corruption can be fought to a standstill by promoting a culture of integrity in the church. In the context of this paper, integrity is considered the inner sense of "wholeness" deriving from qualities such as honesty and consistency of character. In essence, one can judge others as having integrity to the extent that they act according to the values, beliefs and principles they claim to hold in consonance with the ideals of the society.²³ In essence, "a person of integrity does not live a fragmented or dualistic life in which there is a separation between what they proclaim and how they act".²⁴ They may make unintentional mistakes, but they own up to their mistakes and turn around for the better.

According to Green, three themes can help promote integrity, which is useful for Church leaders in Nigeria: moral accountability to ourselves, others and to God; relational consistency; and personal discipline.²⁵

Christian leaders should set the example through their conduct and activities, by ensuring that all they do run accordingly to biblical norms and principles. They should put structures that ensure transparency and accountability in place, in the management of the church's financial resources; deepen their spirituality and that of church members by teaching, preaching and running programmes that are focused more on developing Christian and godly character rather than materialism. Also, church members are to use their time, talents, and treasures to take a stand against corruption by applying biblical principles to all their actions and activities. They can find examples in persons like Daniel (Cf. Daniel 6:14; 13) and Nehemiah (Cf. Nehemiah 5:14-19). In this way, church leaders and members will demonstrate an alternative way of living contrary to the norms of Nigerian society.

To maintain integrity that will eliminate corruption in the Nigerian church, the church leadership need to imbibe and exhibit the following attitude: love (John 13:35; 1 Peter 1:22); humility (Philippians 2:3-8; James 4:6-10); mercy (Matthew 18:21-23; Luke 6:35); grace (2 Corinthians 8:7-9; 1 Peter 3:8, 9; 4:10); teachability (Proverbs 1:5; 18:15; Colossians 3:16); accountability (Romans 14:12; Hebrews 3:13); respect (1 Peter 2:17; Romans 12:10); submission (1 Peter 2:13, 14; 1 Thessalonians 5:12, 13); and servant-leadership (Mark 10:35-37; 1 Peter 5:2, 3).

RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations are made for church leaders based on the exigencies of plain consequentialism theory which affirms that morally right actions will produce good outcomes and within the framework of a biblically construed integrity.

1. Church leaders must have clear, well-defined biblically-normed values and act and speak in line with them in every situation and instance.
2. There should be a biblically construed ministerial code of conduct for church leaders in every Christian denomination and these leaders should be trained in Christian ethics and spiritual

formation. This will help the leaders to live by the highest Christian standards possible.

3. Church leaders should not use state funds to finance church projects nor counsel the opposite sex alone or in lonely places.
4. Church leaders should not convert church funds or resources for personal or private use. And there must be appropriate documentation of available and approved professional expenditures.

CONCLUSION

There is a great need for church leaders to be persons of integrity, whose professional lives uphold the highest ethical ideals. They should be people who are obedient to Christ's moral imperative in the Sermon on the Mount. A call to Christian leadership is a call to trust, worthiness, prudence, truthfulness, and integrity.

The Christian churches in Nigeria have an institutional responsibility to provide ethical resources that will help Christians, especially in public life, to have a life imbued with integrity. This is when Christians become transformative agents in Nigeria. The emphasis should be on biblically-normed integrity.

ENDNOTES

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