

NIGERIAN PENTECOSTALISM OBSERVED: THEOLOGICAL EXPLORATION ON MIRACLES, DELIVERANCE, AND PROSPERITY GOSPEL

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Abstract

This article examines the phenomenon of Pentecostalism from its pristine origins to how it has come to be a global force in Christianity and Nigeria in particular. Nigeria today is home to some of the most renowned Pentecostal churches in the world, and it is exporting same to other parts of the world. Phenomenological method is applied in this exploration of the Pentecostal style of messaging and practice in the areas of miracles, deliverance, and prosperity gospel. Nigeria today is plagued by numerous economic challenges, social negligence and political myopia that has pauperize the greater percentage of the population. People therefore seek solutions to their problems in God and religion. Pentecostalism has proven handy in responding to this need. Tapping into the existing African highly spiritualized cosmology, it has spiritualized every problem and made their members dependent on God for solutions to basic human problems, nowhere is this more visible than in the phenomenon of miracles, deliverance, and the prosperity gospel.

Keywords: Pentecostalism, classical Pentecostalism, neo-Pentecostalism, miracles, deliverance, prosperity gospel.

Introduction

As in most parts of the world, Pentecostalism is a big influence on Christianity in Nigeria. The presence of Pentecostal churches is everywhere felt. James D. G. Dunn calls Pentecostalism the latest, and most flourishing branch of Christianity.¹ Pentecostalism is now a movement of world-wide importance, a third force in Christendom (alongside Catholicism and Protestantism), any serious study of the phenomenon lends credence to this.² The zeal of Nigerians for religion, is

¹ James D.G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 2.

² Dunn, *Baptism*, 2.

boundless. Thus, since after independence, the only sector in Nigeria that has been experiencing growth and expansion is the religious sector.³ This growth is seen especially in Christianity, and Pentecostalism in particular.

Nigeria today is confronting a lot of economic hardship and political challenges that has not delivered good governance for the people, as a result, a lot of people find solace in God and religion. Who will rescue the poor, simple, innocent, hungry man on the street, who even with a first-class university degree, can neither find job nor capital to start a business? Capitalists too seize on the situation to exploit job seekers by paying them peanuts or not even paying them at all. They are too powerful to be reproached. The last hope of the common is not the government or the law enforcement agencies but God. It is situations like these that make Pentecostalism together with the attendant emotional relief it brings, very attractive. These same situations give it the oxygen on which it survives and thrives. Pentecostalism is on the front foot in Nigeria. And for a people whose love for religion is boundless, Pentecostalism provides some succor.

This paper shall examine the phenomenon of Pentecostalism from its global origins to how it has come to be embraced in Africa and Nigeria in particular. Specifically, this paper shall make some theological explorations on the phenomenon of miracles, deliverance, and the prosperity gospel.

Pentecostalism on the Global Stage

Generally, Pentecostals trace their genealogy to a recovery of the character of the early church.⁴ A claim to the Pentecost experience which they believe can be reenacted today. As a movement, Pentecostalism belongs to the 20th century, but its roots lie deep in the time of the apostles with inspiration from the book of Acts 2—the Pentecost experience when the Holy Spirit descended on the apostles, and they spoke in tongues, declaring the praise of God (2:1–13).⁵ Similar experiences with the attendant gifts of the Spirit were at work in Pauline churches—sadly, negatively—to the point that Paul had to step in and call for order (I Cor. 1:10–17,

³ John O. Magbadelo, “Pentecostalism in Nigeria: Exploiting or Edifying the Masses,” *African Sociological Review* 8, no. 2 (2004): 19, 20.

⁴ Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 7.

⁵ Mark J. Cartledge, “Pentecostalism,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 588.

12:1–31). The experience and appropriation charismatic gifts as wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy discernment of spirits, tongues, and interpretation of tongues (I Cor. 12:8–10), have come to stay as part and parcel of the Pentecostal tradition.⁶

Charismatic gifts or their manifestations are no alien to church history. At the 3rd century of Christianity, there was the Montanist movement. The fathers showed a great deal of Charisma in their preaching and writing, and their heroic witness to the faith. Every era of Church history had seen some rise of one form of charisma/charismatic figure or the other. Gregory the Great (540–604), Simeon the New Theologian (949–1022), Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1178), Joan of Arc (1412–1431), Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556), to mention but these.⁷ The Quakers, the Moravian brothers, and John Wesley, all added different charismatic side to the equation. Edward Irving and the holiness movement of the Methodist church in the nineteenth century provided the immediate catalyst for the Pentecostal movement in the 20th century.⁸

The Azusa Street revival is usually seen as the reference point for the definitive beginning of Pentecostalism in the 20th century.⁹ There are, however, similar

⁶ Cartledge, “Pentecostalism,” 588.

⁷ Cartledge, 588; See also Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, vol. 2 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1997).

⁸ Cartledge, 588; whereas Holiness tradition believed that the Pentecost story did not need to be interpreted literally in modern times, Pentecostalism will be committed to seeing the baptism of the Holy Spirit as an absolute re-enactment of the day of Pentecost. With further emphasis on the results which should be seen in speaking in tongues, and miraculous manifestations (“Pentecostalism,” http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/Christianity/subdivisions/Pentecostal_1.shtml).

⁹ The Azusa phenomenon started when a holiness preacher, William Seymour was invited from Houston to Nazarene mission on Santa Fe Avenue, to preach to a Holiness congregation. In a sermon, he maintained that baptism of the Holy Spirit is not mere sanctification, but something more—to be verified by speaking in tongues. The congregation found this offensive and threw him out. But friends invited him to their home where they worshipped. It is in this home worship that on April 9, 1906, some seekers, seven in number, received Spirit baptism, and spoke in tongues. The services so blossomed that they had to look for a bigger venue. An old building, a one-time Methodist Church on 312 Azusa Street, became handy. Their services were spontaneous as they were characterized by speaking in tongues, healings, testimonies, shouting, dancing, and other manifestations of religious enthusiasm. All these took place at the worship centre of the Apostolic Faith Gospel Mission on Azusa Street. (Richard

revivals in different parts of the world that had similar outcome. Pyongyang in Korea (1903), Wales (1904), Poona India (1905–1907), Azusa (1906), UK (1907). With all these revivals, it is difficult to assign one place of origin to Pentecostalism.¹⁰ However, born out of these is a truly global Christian movement–Pentecostalism. At its infancy, it emphasized holiness, the experience of spirit baptism, speaking in tongues, miracles, and healing.¹¹ Classical Pentecostalism came to be associated with all the churches that were born out of these early revivals.

Rise and Spread of Pentecostalism in Nigeria

Classical Pentecostalism, came as a liberating movement from the shackles of the dogmatism of the mainline churches, setting out on the course that allows for individual, and personal experience of the Holy Spirit. “The leaders of the Azusa Street Mission, the epicenter of the early Pentecostal movement, once observed that whenever people got too caught up in “talking thought,” Pentecostal fervor seem to decline.”¹² Thought talking is what the conventional churches had been doing for Millennia.

In Nigeria today, two streams of the Pentecostal movement can be distinguished, classical and neo-Pentecostalism. While having so many things in common, neo-Pentecostalism has dimensions that are relatively new and alien to the holiness emphasis of the former.

Classical Pentecostalism

In Africa, classical Pentecostal churches are fewer in number than the indigenous ones that did not originate from the classical group. Among the latter, many devotees did not know about Azusa Street, and do not refer to themselves as “Pentecostal.” Disparate situations are said to account for the emerging of the movement in different parts of Africa: The aftermath of the Second World War, the impact of the influenza epidemic, varying racial policies, land alienation, and

Quebedeaux, *The New Charismatics: The Origins, Development, and significance of Neo-Pentecostalism* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), 29.

¹⁰ Cartledge, 589.

¹¹ Quebedeaux, *The New Charismatics*, 29.

¹² Douglas Jacobsen, ed., *A Reader in Pentecostal Theology: Voices from the First Generation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 6.

political disenfranchisement of Africans, all combined to give vent to an increase in spiritual movements which gave Africans succor in prayer. Thus, in Southern Africa, they were called *Zionists*; *Abaroho* in Eastern Africa; and *Aladura* in West Africa. All were united by prayers accompanied by miraculous healings. Indigenous symbols were respected, and the worship was typically African.¹³

Pentecostalism in Nigeria, as in other parts of the world, was born in the early 1900. Between 1910-1920, Christ Army Church was born. This extended to what came to be known by the Yoruba word *Aladura*- “praying people.” Some of the initial *Aladura* churches are the Eternal Sacred Order of the Cherubim and Seraphim Society, 1925, and the Church of the Lord (*Aladura*), 1930. Welsh Apostolic Church came to Nigeria in 1931, and the Assemblies of God 1939. Joseph Babalola of Faith Tabernacle between 1930-1940, leads a revival that convert thousands. In 1941, he started the Christ Apostolic Church (in present day Ekiti state). Foursquare Gospel Church came in 1954. In the 1950s the Celestial Church of Christ arrives in western Nigeria from Benin. In 1952, Pa Josiah Akindayomi, started the Redeemed Christian Church of God. Under Enoch Adejare Adebayo, the church becomes neo-Pentecostal in theology, and practice.¹⁴

All these churches share the classical Pentecostal believe in holiness, sanctification, personal experience of the Lord, spirit baptism, miracles, and healing. The 60s and 70s witnessed a lot of student revivals giving rise to a lot of churches. In 1972, Benson Idahosa established the Church of God mission international. By 1975 deeper life bible church was born.¹⁵

Neo-Pentecostalism in Nigeria

When Benson Idahosa founded his church of God Mission International in 1972, neo-Pentecostalism in Nigeria was officially born. This brand of Pentecostalism was heavily influenced by American tele-evangelists, effectively made use of electronic media, and preached a gospel of prosperity, health, and wellness. One great achievement of neo-Pentecostalism is that it succeeded in blurring the

¹³ Kalu, *African Pentecostalism*, 24.

¹⁴ Pew Research Center, *Historical Overview of Pentecostalism in Nigeria*, Report Oct 5, 2006, Spirit and Power—A 10-Country Survey of Pentecostals, accessed April 15, 2022.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2006/10/05/historical-overview-of-pentecostalism-in-nigeria/>.

¹⁵ Pew Research Center, *Historical Overview of Pentecostalism in Nigeria*.

scruples for riches in the presentation of the gospel message (Mt. 19:24, Mk. 10:25, Lk. 18:25, Lk 16: 20-27). Indeed riches/wealth can be used to spread the gospel.

In 1986, David Oyedepo founded the Living Faith Church, aka winners chapel. Oyedepo revealed that he received a mandate from the Lord to liberate the world from oppressions of the devil through preaching the Word, in an eighteen-hour long vision.¹⁶ Winners chapel has a well-developed theology on tithes and offerings, believe in material prosperity also forms part of its tenets of faith.¹⁷ Other prominent neo-Pentecostal churches with very similar outlook include Mountain of fire 1989, Dunamis 1996, and many others too numerous to mention. These churches all emphasize miracles, perform deliverance, and preach prosperity as the high point of their gospel proclamation. Living faith (winners chapel) has fifty thousand seating capacity auditorium in Nigeria while Dunamis built the Glory Dome which can seat a hundred thousand worshippers. Such is their fame and glamour.

Theological Exploration on Miracles, Deliverance, and Prosperity

This section shall give some theological reflection on these three aspects of Pentecostal Christian messaging in Nigerian context. The method used in this section is basically phenomenological based on the observation and the lived experience of the writer, as seen in Nigeria today. Three variables of the need, the faith, and the pastors, shall determine the direction followed.

Miracles

The Need. Prayer demands for healing or miracles cover a wide range: biological sickness, barrenness (fruit of the womb), success in business or examinations/admissions, safe delivery for pregnant women, employment/job security, life partner for the unmarried, stable marriages,

¹⁶ The Website of the Living Faith Church, Living Faith Online, <http://davidoyedepo.com/livingfaith/the-liberation-mandate>.

¹⁷ I was personally in winners chapel for participant observation in July 2019, right from the very beginning of service, the prayers displayed on the large screens were invocations on God to change the lives of their members financially. The sermon by the bishop carried similar undertones. After the service, our welcome as newcomers included orientation that if we learn their principles, we are going to be wealthy. The convert to Catholicism from that same church who took me there confirmed that every Sunday is the same message—prosperity, miracle, breakthrough.

success in life for children, long life, and even visas. People look for spiritual solutions to all these problems in part because the government does not have functional structures that address most of these problems, and partly because of their belief that with God all things are possible (Luke 1:38). There are also cases of people who go to the hospital in search of orthodox solutions but are referred to their church or pastor for prayers.

Typical Pentecostals and other Christians in Nigeria, prefer to see to believe. This explains why healing crusades—which are commonplace—attract large crowds. Some of the attendees at such crusades are not necessarily looking for miracles themselves but want to see. Seeing is believing. The spectacular is always intriguing. The spiritually saturated African worldview also plays a part. Nigeria is a place where nothing happens by chance, some force or spirit somewhere is responsible. The natural remedy therefore is to seek spiritual solution. The Church is the harbor and the place of refuge in such situations.

The Faith. These needs go to the church because of the simple faith of the believers. When simple Nigerian Pentecostals and Christians generally read the bible, they read it as true and take it literally. So, they want to see those miracles narrated in the bible happen in their lives too. Christ himself has given the assurance that anyone who believes in me will do greater things than these because I am going to the father (John 14:12).

It is their belief that whatever it is that happened in the time of Jesus can happen today.¹⁸ They see themselves as an extension of the biblical times, and thus praying in faith, and following the scriptures, they have both the bible and experience as living witnesses. Consequently, they take these scriptures at face value, and openly practice them in their church. They do not claim to be successful 100 percent of the time, but they persist in asking God to show his love, and concern in tangible ways when the human body is suffering. And he does.¹⁹

¹⁸ Paul Alexander, *Signs and Wonders: Why Pentecostalism is the World's Fastest Growing Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 6.

¹⁹ Alexander, *Signs and Wonders*, 7.

One of the things that makes Pentecostalism attractive is the kind of power of control that it gives the individual. "Pentecostals believe that all humans can learn how to trust God for miracles, cast out demons, and heal the sick. Becoming a Pentecostal is like finding out that you're really a wizard; you really can change the world with supernatural power."²⁰ There is a Pentecostal maxim, "*The Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it.*"

The Pastors. This need for miracles by the believing Christians has in turn put a lot of pressure on pastors (men of God) to organize healing services/crusades where people come to receive their healing. Naturally, the pastors will want to deliver. Thus, they pray, fast, and perform other acts of penitence that their supplications on behalf of the people will find favor in the sight of God. They also employ the use the media, to make known their mission and activities. The airwaves of both radio and TV outlets are filled with evangelists who advertise both themselves and their churches. These religious channels are mostly used for the purpose of broadcasting miracle stories and sharing testimonies of the same. Such outlets are many.

Deliverance

The Need. Closely tied to the search for miracles is deliverance. Deliverance basically from cases of demonic possession, witches, wizards, and sorcerers. These cases not lacking in Nigeria. Other cases for deliverance are kindred spirits, ancestral curses which most people believe is responsible for their backwardness and lack of progress in life. Premature deaths are blamed on witches who take the lives of others to prolong their own life.²¹ Poverty, illness, and disease—are all inflicted by the same witches and wizards who don't want anything good for anyone. There abound secret cults/societies, fraternities of the underworld, which people willingly join to seek power, influence, or control.²² Membership of all these cults/groups comes at a price. When members of these cults or fraternities

²⁰ Alexander, 12, 13.

²¹ Sasha Newell, "Pentecostal Witchcraft: Neoliberal Possession and Demonic Discourse in Ivoirian Pentecostal Churches," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 37, no. 4 (2007): 466. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27594432>.

²² Nigerian movie industry—Nollywood—has a lot of movies that depict the situation of the occult world in graphic terms. It presents—what it entails to be a member, the prize paid for membership, the power or influence enjoyed from such cults, and the cost of trying to leave the cult. In fact, even the premier movie in the Nigerian movie industry—*Living in Bondage*—is a story with such message.

come to conversion and want to leave, deliverance which in this case is not easy, comes as the solution.

The Faith. Ezenweke, blames Pentecostalism for creating fear in their adherents to perform deliverance. It also could be that Pentecostalism simply taps into existing cosmology and make viable ministries out of it. The research of Shasha Newell into Pentecostalism and Witchcraft in Cote d'Ivoire is a case in point.²³ The Nigerian experience is very similar. For believing Pentecostals, exorcism was part of the ministry of Jesus, (Mk 1:34, 39; Lk 4:35; Mt 17:18), What is clear, however, is that the Lord Jesus involved the disciples in his mission and through their commissioning continued the work of exorcism begun by Jesus himself (cf. Mt 10:8; Mk 3:14-15; 6:13; 16:17; Lk 9:1; 10:17). It was not a work they did in their own names, but in the name of the one who had bestowed it upon them.

Thus, the ministry of exorcism continues in the life of the Church as part of the regular pastoral care of souls.²⁴ The mainline churches may not have particularly feature exorcisms as a major part of their ministry, this may have created the opening for the Pentecostals to thrive. The need is real and genuine. But like Jesus himself who was accused of casting out devils by the power of Beelzebul (Mt. 12:24-27, Mk 3:22, Lk 11:18), Newell levels this accusation against Pentecostalism.

The Pastors. Deliverance prayers are generally directed against the "enemy" who must be vanquished. This invisible enemy in Pentecostal cosmology is everywhere inflicting poverty, sickness, disease, and death. This has made the "back to sender" prayer very popular in Nigeria today. So too are other slogans like "Holy Ghost.....fire," and "covering with the Blood of Jesus." Consequently, "many Pentecostal pastors argue for Africa's spiritual deliverance as an avenue to economic development."²⁵ Underlying this paradigm is that "the continent has been mortgaged to evil forces and it needs to be brought back by persistent, and fervent prayers."²⁶ Pastors on this side of the grave, think about Africa's economic

²³Sasha Newell, "Pentecostal Witchcraft," 466.

²⁴ USCCB, "Exorcism," <https://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/sacraments-and-sacramentals/sacramentals-blessings/exorcism>.

²⁵ Nimi Wariboko "Pentecostal Paradigms of National Economic Prosperity in Africa," in *Pentecostalism and Prosperity*, 45.

²⁶ Wariboko, "Pentecostal Paradigms," 45.

predicament in spiritual terms, even leaders who looted monies are little blamed while fidelity to Jesus is advanced.²⁷

Many Nigerians believe that all the various ills, misfortunes, sickness, accidents, tragedies, sorrows, dangers, and unhappy mysteries, which they encounter, and experience are caused using powers in the hands of a sorcerer, a witch or wizard. Nothing happens by chance—even students' uprisings are seen as being engineered by demonic spirits—someone causes everything by the use of mystical power.²⁸ Consequently, “many Pentecostal pastors argue for Africa’s spiritual deliverance as an avenue to economic development.”²⁹ Underlying this paradigm is that, “the continent has been mortgaged to evil forces and it needs to be brought back by persistent, and fervent prayers.”³⁰ It is the same phenomenon that Kalu was referring to, when he said, “in Africa...the rulers, and ruled act from a sense of the presence, and ultimateness of the spiritual forces.”³¹ Pastors on this side of the grave, think about Africa’s economic predicament in spiritual terms, even leaders who looted monies are little blamed while fidelity to Jesus is advanced.³² It suffices to say here that the many oppressed people who seek help can always find one thanks in part to Pentecostalism.

Prosperity Gospel

The Need. Prosperity gospel is very popular in Nigeria. This gospel is intricately tied to the quest for miracles, and it is in fact the miracle of financial breakthrough that has sent so many to the Pentecostal churches in Nigeria, hoping to escape the pangs of poverty that is biting across the land. Commonplace in prosperity preaching are expressions like, “Receive your miracle!” If you have a need, “sow a seed!” Faith is shown by giving money; sowing to reap. The prosperity preachers teach that the poor are poor because of sin in their lives and a lack of faith.

²⁷ Wariboko, 45, 46.

²⁸ Elizabeth O. Ezenweke, “Pentecostalism and the Culture of Fear in Contemporary African Communities: A Paradigm Shift,” *American International Journal of Contemporary Research* 3, no. 5 (May 2003): 91. See also Saibu A. Owoeye, “Healing in Some Pentecostal Churches in South-Western Nigeria,” *European Scientific Journal* 8, no. 3 (December 2012): 109.

²⁹ Nimi Wariboko “Pentecostal Paradigms of National Economic Prosperity in Africa,” in *Pentecostalism and Prosperity*, 45.

³⁰ Wariboko, “Pentecostal Paradigms,” 45.

³¹ Kalu, 201.

³² Wariboko, 45, 46.

Therefore, if they would quit sinning and have more faith, they could be wealthy. They use the terminology of claiming to get what they want.³³

Nigerian economy has been on a downward spiral for ages and showing no signs of recovery. Such bad economic situation makes prosperity gospel with its promises of wealth attractive to a people who are doing their best to escape the pangs of poverty that is ravaging the land. While prosperity gospel may attract more cat calls than scorecards; nevertheless, does it offend anyone to say that God wills prosperity for them. In the same vein, can the celebration of the near abject poverty of the masses in Nigeria be presented as the will of God for them? Virtue lies in the middle. People want the necessities of life, and they believe that God can provide, it is the hope of this divine provision from Jehovah Jireh that makes the appeal of prosperity gospel enduring.

The Faith. Prosperity Gospel says that God wants to bless Christians spiritually, physically, and materially. Pentecostal Christians believe that God is working in the world, and that God's ongoing work includes granting believers' prosperity, and wealth.³⁴ Sickness and poverty are the vestiges of Satan's power over God's people. Jesus' death paid the penalty for human sin, thereby breaking Satan's power over God's people. As a result, believers have been redeemed from poverty, sickness, and eternal death. Christ's death entitles believers to salvation, to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and to prosperity and material benefits. Each Christian should therefore be "physically healthy and materially prosperous and successful." Healing, and prosperity are available; indeed, they are the rewards of being followers of Christ. Nevertheless, it is up to the believers to claim them.³⁵

The Pastors. The prosperity preachers teach and practice what they teach. Prosperity is evident in their lives and their ministries. They are among the richest individuals in the country—owners of private jets and mega church auditoriums, some of the largest in the world. However, the biblical basis for prosperity gospel

³³ Alexander, 61.

³⁴ Katherine Attanasi, "Introduction: The Plurality of Prosperity Theologies and Pentecostalism," in *Pentecostalism and Prosperity: The Socioeconomics of the Global Charismatic Movement*, eds. Katherine Attanasi and Amos Yong (Palgrave: Macmillan, 2012), 3.

³⁵ Attanasi, "Introduction," 3, 4, 5.

has for long been a cause for some concern.³⁶ George Folarin who wrote in favor of prosperity gospel conceded that, a major problem with the prosperity gospel as presently practiced in Nigeria is that it is not fully delivering on its promises. Its theology needs reformulating to make it conform more to the scriptures and to incorporate the reality of Christian suffering.³⁷

Concluding Reflections

The religious landscape in Nigeria is unique. Unique because churches have become like start-ups but even easier to establish than start-ups. This calls for reflection on our understanding of ecclesiology. What is church, what is ecclesia and who can establish a church? What is the canon for measuring what is true church and what is not? The situation in Nigeria today makes it look like anyone can start or own a church. Every nook and cranny of towns and villages are lined up with churches both new and old, competing for members. The sheer number of churches raises some concern as to whether believing Christians are being confused or properly guided; scandalized or edified. Crusades are the order of the day. Posters, placards, handbills are all over the place, and promises are made of miracles and spiritual advancement in the name Jesus. Are Christians being deceived by self-proclaimed men of God or are they on course to the promised land? Be this as it may, Pentecostal churches in the country have continued to prosper on the psychology of the masses who are desperately looking for relief from their precarious circumstances.³⁸

The economic hardship on the Nigerian soil is real. Successive generations of leaders have not been able to find solution to the economy that seems to be on the reverse gear. Could this socio-political and economic situation of the country be contributing to this upward glance for solutions to basic human problems? If things were economically better, if things were better in terms of income and means of livelihood; would these churches still be multiplying at this exponential rate? You can hardly cover a quarter mile without seeing a church or many. Individuals found churches indiscriminately or at the slightest provocations from their mother churches. Are they responding to a call from God, is that the work of

³⁶ Frank D. Macchia, "A Call for Discernment: A Theological Response to Prosperity Preaching," in *Pentecostalism and Prosperity*, 225.

³⁷ George O. Folarin, "Prosperity Gospel in Nigeria: A Reexamination of the Concept, Impact and Evaluation," abstract, *African Journal of Biblical Studies* 23, no. 2 (2006): 79.

³⁸ Magbadelo, "Pentecostalism in Nigeria," 15.

the Holy Spirit or of the flesh? While it is true that some pastors could be sincere in both their calling and mission, several others continue to pursue their preoccupation as a commercial venture, using every means at their disposal to acquire wealth.³⁹ Indeed some started reading the bible when they discovered that they could profit from it.⁴⁰

Miracles are the mainstay of some of these Pentecostal pastors and churches. Some of them derive their credibility and popularity from the miracles they perform, or the miracles associated with their ministry. From miracles also derive the power of their evangelization. Little wonder that miracle crusades are commonplace. The veracity or otherwise of the miraculous feats of healing and restoration in some Pentecostal churches in Nigeria has remained a very controversial point in discussing Pentecostalism for a long time. There have been instances of publications by journalists who uncover fake pastors who utilized magical powers. Allegations of fake miracles also abound. The government of Nigeria through her National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) took out many Christian television channels based on reports it received about the airing of fake miracles.⁴¹ This notwithstanding, healing evangelists still use the largely unregulated airwaves of radio and TV in Nigeria to their maximum advantage.

The need for miracles [on the side of the people] and desire to meet those needs [on the side of the pastor(s)] coupled with other factors like; the gains associated with being a renowned healing evangelist, the attendant popularity, and financial benefits, have all combined to make some of the supposed healers dabble into the dark world of the occult or other secret societies to gain power and satisfy both themselves and their followers. Thus, allegation of magic, voodoo, occult practices are rife among some healing pastors. In his tell it all out book, *The Church Mafia*, Pastor Makhado Ramabulana⁴² of South Africa attested to this. His search for dark powers took him to Nigeria,⁴³ among other places. However, this has never been

³⁹ Magbadelo, 16.

⁴⁰ Newell, 469.

⁴¹ Geoffrey Ekenna, "Miracles or Magic?" *Newswatch*, April 19, 2004, 12-13.

⁴² Makhado S. Ramabulana, *Church Mafia*, (Self-pub., 2018).

⁴³ This revelation is implicit of the complicity of some healing pastors with the forces of darkness, or of the underworld.

a barrier to the rise and spread of Pentecostal churches. As pastors get disgraced and fall by the side, others arise in their stead.⁴⁴

Religion and religious bodies are generally seen and revered as the custodians of morality in the society. A religious society will generally be expected to be a morally upright society. In the same vein, the Nigerian society, in which the most thriving “industry” is religion should ordinarily be presentative of the religious views of the religion(s) it offers the public. Unfortunately, this is a far cry from the case. Here, not only Pentecostalism but Christianity as a religion and Islam are all in the mix. It is a shame to the practice of religion in the country that moral standards are low, while bribery, corruption and other societal vices are on the rise.

If the economic situation in Nigeria is not improved, many poverty-stricken believing Christians will continue to look up to God for solutions and breakthroughs through miracles and divine interventions. This should be sobering moment for all those who stand before God on behalf of the people. It also calls for humility. Religious leaders should be humbled by the trust that people have in them to deliver them from their very miserable situations. People who come knocking for miracles, be it of healing or financial breakthrough should be treated with respect and compassion as Jesus would, they should never be used as objects of gain or be exploited for whatever reason.

Religious leaders in a country like Nigeria should be mindful of the Christ they preach, Christ came not be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mk 10:45, Mt 20:28). It is the same Christ who reminded his followers that “Foxes have dens and the birds in the sky have nests, but the son of man has no place to lay his head” (Mt 8:20). The about forty recorded miracles of Jesus recorded in the gospels served to bring relief to the beneficiaries and to glorify the father. Miracles done for personal glorification or financial gain, should be unheard of in the Christendom. More still, prosperity preaching despite the good side, obscures the gospel’s call to poverty of spirit and simplicity of life demanded for followers of Christ.

Christians look up to miracles as signs of their faith. For some Christians, miracles validate what they believe. Miracles also enliven faith and can also lead to faith

⁴⁴ Magbadelo, 15.

both for the beneficiaries and the witness. The sincerity of miracle seekers should be seen in those who perform the miracles. Jesus cautioned against publicity after most of his miracles, though he performed others for the sake of those assembled (John 11: 42). Healing pastors should be humbled by the gifts they have received and glorify God in humility and quiet. The gift of healing should be given freely just as it was received– “freely you received, freely give” (Mt 10:8).

Be this as it may, “Pentecostalism is one of the most interesting, vibrant, exciting, and problematic traditions in world Christianity today.”⁴⁵ In Nigerian Christianity, where God is still very much in the center, Pentecostalism will continue to thrive because it provides answers to some very pertinent issues in the land. But will ministers of Pentecostal extraction be true and sincere in their call to the service of the majority poor people, for whom they minister? The salvation of souls which should be center of the gospel proclamation has become tangential, while healing, deliverance and prosperity have taken center stage. Ministers with a calling should eschew compromising the gospel thesis for worldly attractions. As Paul would say: I preach Christ crucified...the power and wisdom of God to save (I Cor. 1:24, cf. Jn 3:16).

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⁴⁵ Cartledge, “Pentecostalism,” 587.

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