

God Will Supply All Your Needs According to His Glorious Riches: The Problem of Extreme Materialism among Nigerian Pastors

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Abstract

Over the years, the church in Nigeria has been God's agent, turning the heart of a people to God. But recent activities in the church today betray the expected role of this agency in different parts of the world; to the point that many see Christianity as the root cause of major problems in society. In the past, churches in Nigeria stood up against immorality, corruption in moral defiance of societal norms. The reverse is the case today. Contemporary pastors in Nigeria are aids for committing modern-day fraud because of extreme materialism. Some ministers of God in Nigeria today have turned the church to money making venture. It is disheartening that in the recent time, many pastors' measure success in the ministry by the size of congregations, numbers of houses as well as cars owned, and many more. The Nigerian pastorate has replaced the goal of faithfulness in the work of God with material, temporal things. In Nigeria, the church is seen as a means of filling one's own pockets using various illegal and unbiblical means. As a result, this paper engages the vice ravaging Nigeria pastorate via the biblical lens of I Corinthians 9:13. In view of this, material things are not bad in themselves but 'extreme materialism' and the 'lust' attitude which has enslaved the contemporary Nigeria pastorate must be addressed through a correct re-definition of Call to ministry as well as a deeper level of faith on the path of the so called 'pastors'.

Introduction: Statement of Problem

Wherever deep need, fear and suspicion exist together, so do the possibility of exploitation. Many Nigerians, rich, poor, old and young seek pastors for spiritual protection and fortification from known and imaginary enemies (Adeboye 2019, 96). Ministers of God in Nigeria take advantage of those who seek miracles and healings. Exploitation and extortion abound. Worshippers are cajoled, through the sales of holy oil, holy water, holy handkerchiefs, and other supposedly powerful artifacts (Agina, 2010).

It is self-evident that Nigerians live in a very materialistic society (Nihilola 2013, 54). A materialist value system empowers vices such as bribery, corruption, kidnapping, armed robbery, terrorism, perpetrated

throughout the wider Nigerian society today. In like manner ministers of God in Nigeria today use their ministry as a means of accruing wealth to themselves, competing for status symbols in the form of prestige cars and even jets and flaunting this wealth on social media. This makes an average member of the congregation both materially and spiritually apprehensive. In that context church ministers emphasize material prosperity to a ready audience at the expense of integrity and faithfulness. While some locate this problem within Nigerian Pentecostal churches because of their unapologetic emphasis on the acquisition of wealth as a part of a spiritual salvation, certainly, the damage which prosperity preaching has caused to the social, religious, economic and political landscape in Nigeria is apparent to all.

The shameless display of affluence of materialistic preachers alongside the seeming indifference of a government that remains insensitive to the needs and yearnings of her people, distorts the value of Nigeria's economy (Silvers 2005, 341). Prosperity religion has taken the scope of an industry. Much of this has to do with the dramatic spread of Pentecostalism throughout the last century in Africa and its many aberrant offshoots.

Pentecostalism with its unapologetic emphasis on the acquisition of wealth at all costs (as part of a spiritual salvation), the shameful deception of the materialistic preachers with their openly-displayed affluence and the seeming indifference of a government that remains insensitive to the needs and yearnings of its people, have all combined to distort our value systems as a nation. The sad news is that untold damage may have been caused to our social, religious, economic and political landscape" (Fakoya 2008).

Some Nigerians now even call Pentecostalism "the theology of the Money." But the problem of extreme materialism in Nigeria pastorate today is not limited to Pentecostal denominations alone but Christendom at large.

This article addresses the following issues;

- a. How the issue of extreme materialism has disturbed the normal culture of Christianity in Nigeria; in particular the role that pastors play in fueling this vice.
- b. An evaluation of this debacle in the light of 1 Corinthians 9.13
- c. What it would take to curb the influence of extreme materialism in the church.

Materialism

Materialism is the acquisition of wealth through ill-gotten means (Agha 2010, 4). This is a mindset where physical well-being and worldly possessions constitute the greatest good and highest value in life. Materialism is also defined as the concern for possessions or material wealth and physical comfort, especially to the exclusion of spiritual or intellectual pursuits. In practical theological terms a materialist is one who puts his physical possessions before God. Materialism is an attitude that temporal things are

more important than the eternal. Some scriptural references that identify and condemn materialism include:

1. Jesus Admonition– “You cannot serve God and mammon” (Matt 6:24). Mammon refers to wealth and riches usually with a negative connotation.
2. Also, the parable of the rich, and covetous, fool (Luke 12:13-21).
3. Paul’s Admonition (1 Tim 6:9-10) – “The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil.” (1 Tim 6:9f). It is the attitude of one who desires to be rich (1 Tim 6:17).
4. Materialism is closely associated with covetousness or the desire to have more.

Remarkably “... covetousness, [which] is *idolatry*” (Col 3:5) .

Covetousness describes an attitude of one who is not satisfied with what he possesses. The covetous person’s pursuit in life is to possess things and he doesn’t care how it affects others. In the parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:13-21), the fool is identified as having both a covetous attitude and materialistic worldview. He assumes material things can satisfy soul hunger. In this light, one can posit where this spiral of materialist corrosion of values begins. I would suggest that there are several related and reinforcing attitudes that lead to materialism becoming entrenched within the pastorate in particular:

- a. Possibly the problem takes root in people who lack a certain level of self-control to start with: One reason some ministers of God become materialistic is because they have not learned to live disciplined lives. People become desperate when they lack both materially and lack of self-control.
- b. Discontentment leads to compromise: When ministers of the gospel are not satisfied with what they have materially nor the significance of their Gospel calling, they often compromise what is right to obtain what they want. And yet as getting more does not resolve this discontentment. They are ‘never satisfied’ (Prov 27:20).
- c. This leads to a type of addiction: The ‘bishop’ who is a lover of money finds the very acquisition of money alluring as a life quest (1Tim 3:3). And ...
- d. This leads to an even further lack of self-control and with that a sense that one is not even accountable to God or God’s word in other areas of life. The Spiral is complete.

Extreme Materialism in Nigerian Pastorate

While there are thousands of churches across different denominations in Nigeria, regrettably this does nothing to reduce the social and moral evil witnessed in the nation. There are several so called ‘mushroom churches’ evolving at dramatic pace. Some start church ministries with a root desire to pursue money and desire to ‘make it big’ materially in the ‘twinkling of an eye’.

As a result, there is a corresponding paradigm shift in Nigeria pastorate. Ministers of God in Nigeria are no longer hungry for saving lost souls but for accumulating money material wealth and fame. This is not new. Even in the 1970’s preaching was big business, almost as profitable as the oil commerce in Nigeria

(Taylor 1979). Materialism is so rife now that pastors in Nigerian churches preach prosperity as an indicator of spiritual salvation (Marshall 1993, 8ff).

The Public face of Spiritual Fraud

A report on Gist Online News 24th November, 2016 gives an account of a man who allegedly dies during fake miracle. The man of God in question had paid the man who is a trader, the sum of N500, 000 to pretend to be dead and to be carried in a coffin to the venue of a crusade where the pastor would perform the fake miracle and allegedly raise him from the dead. But before the coffin could get to the venue of the event, the trader had reportedly died probably due to suffocation.

According to Punch Online News on 25th of October, 2019; “Pastors come under fire for alleged stage-managed miracles”: the founder of Mountain of Liberation and Miracle Ministry, aka Liberation City, Dr Chris Okafor, has come under fire on social media after a video clip showing him performing what appeared like a miracle created a controversy. However, the same woman was shown in another video clip claiming she had the same problem as another unidentified pastor prayed for her in the public.

Even the New-York Times recently reported that an unnamed Nigerian priest, whose names was not mentioned having been recruited temporary at the St. Michael the Archangel Catholic Church, in the Diocese of Owensboro, Western Kentucky, was sacked after he requested for three pairs of eye glasses, when he was offered one for free. This sense of entitlement is evident, even in those pastors who reside outside the country (Nigerian Muse, 2009). And in 2005 during a healing crusade conducted by Benny Hinn in Lagos, major rancor and counter-accusations ensued among the organizers concerning the handling of funds (Nihilola 2009, 56).

Extreme materialism erodes the cherished Christian virtues of honesty, truthfulness and contentment in Nigerian pastorate. This Nigerian mentality admits no exceptions when it comes to pastors and other church leaders and reinforces the ‘get rich quick’ syndrome typical of the Nigerian mentality (Ayantayo 2010, 58). This commercialization has led to corruption, immorality and other forms of indiscipline in the Nigerian Church today (Adeboye ,2019, 98). Pastors and Church leaders in Nigeria have succeeded in institutionalizing falsehood, idleness and laziness (Ayantano 2010,.63).

Thousands of believers listen weekly to messages by religious fraudsters who will stop at nothing to transfer the listeners’ wealth to their own accounts (Folarin 2014). It comes easily to such pastors to also make false claims and exaggeration to impress their followers. Manufactured testimonies flourish. Mass media spreads their claims. While they claim to have been inspired by the Holy Spirit, the so-called ‘messages’ are often logically incongruent with biblical doctrine. When their plans materialise, these so-called ministers will have more congregations, which boost their personal pockets.

But this only matches a parallel feature in the wider cultural life of the nation. In the political sphere, the incumbent leaders also steal in various forms. Government officials misappropriate funds and receive kickbacks while public servants convert state funds into private use, down to the ordinary messenger who collects bribes as a condition of performing their assigned duties. It is far worse when such theft is perpetrated in the name of the Lord.

The Irony of the Prosperity Message

This corrosive drift of wider culture into the church is seen in a shift in the content of the preached message. The preacher's former mantra of *'Repent or you will perish'* is generally scorned as archaic. A mantra of *'You are blessed and highly favored'* with its inherent permissiveness takes centre-stage and signals a watering down of ethical standards. Churches with the new message fill quickly and so pastors became richer and even more influential (Chery 1989, 124). Many churches in Nigeria have become more like 'social clubs', existing more for religious frivolities and social gathering than spiritual quickening; caring more about the 'here and now', or, what the New Testament terms 'the world' with a corresponding loss of interest in the world to come, or 'eternity' (Ayantayo 2010, 59). In terms of sheer volume, this preaching on present riches now far outweighs the volume of preaching on great themes of the faith, such as salvation from sin, eternity or holy living and so on.

The appeal of a message of materialism is fueled and sustained by lust (Nihola 2013). It is a gospel that plays on the people's greed rather than condemning it (Dada, 2004,.36) It is targeted at the spiritually gullible or scripturally ignorant (Cherry 1989, 134). The results of this phenomenon corrode the fabric of church life. Some believers are frustrated out of the church or the Christian fold by the virtue of being relegated, isolated and intimidated. Others become stark unbelievers by the virtue of the incongruence between the promises of prosperity preaching and their actual socio-economic position. If prosperity is evidence of eternal salvation, they then must question their own standing in their own minds when they look at their earthly situation.

Ecclesial Reactions to the Materialistic Pastorate

On 29thSept, 2013, in an address at St. Peter's Square, Pope Francis cautioned the faithful against the danger of losing their personal identity.

Whenever material things, money, worldliness, become the center of our lives, they take hold of us, they possess us; we lose our very identity as human beings.

He further explained that Christians must be on guard against ...

The danger of complacency, comfort, worldliness in their lifestyles and in their hearts, of making their well-being the most important thing in their lives; when materialism takes over, people end up becoming self-absorbed and finding security in material things which ultimately rob us of our face, our human face (Lenatowick 2013).

Prosperity preaching is a gospel that teaches that personal wealth is an indicator of a person's spirituality, righteousness or holiness must change our understanding of what it is to be human. Prosperity gospel is a self-centered gospel; a worship of an unholy Trinity of "me, myself and I". It teaches that faith can be used to acquire wealth, fame and power when the truth is quite the opposite and such things can result in the loss of one's soul.

Local Cardinal Arinze traced the idea of materialism among Nigerian pastor to Church members.

Although, this can be viewed as a 'shift of blame syndrome', he argued that because a portion of the Bible is applied to various situations of the church membership with needs for babies, marriage, progress in business, healing of their sicknesses or other spiritual problems in a manner they do not like, some members would seek out churches where the same passage is interpreted in ways that soothes them (Ugwuanyi, 2014).

On this note, Rev. Oritsejafor the immediate past President of the Christian Association of Nigeria expressed displeasure over how 'so called men of God' have now turned the church into a business centre and live correspondingly flamboyant lives. Ironically, this development was the reason kidnappers now see the church as a place to ply their trade! In a recent interview in Punch magazine he put forward a sobering view of the motives of the pastorate.

The problem we have in the church is that a lot of these pastors are not the men of God they suppose. Instead they are mercenaries, commercially minded people. The duty of the church is to preach morality not materialism and because Nigerians are very gullible; they are easy victims of deceit. They fall prey to some of these pastors or prophets of doom. The way they live gives a wrong impression of what should be in a church of God. There should be no room for material possessions (Ogbeche 2016).

This issue not only affects the integrity of the ministry within church life. Christ's Pastors in Nigeria today have contributed to the social upheaval the nation is going through in this age. They laid the foundation of greed and social discontentment from which the society is yet to come to terms.

Pastoral Materialism in the light of the Corinthian Instruction

The church in its infancy also had to contend with similar corrupting influences that threatened the fabric of the church and its witness in society. Paul addresses these issues in 1 Corinthians 9 in particular.

Don't you know that those who serve in the temple get their food from the temple, and that those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar? 1 Cor 9.13 (NIV)

In speaking of the Old Testament priesthood Paul reminds his readers of what they already know. It is worth conjecturing on this basis what the apostle would have made of the Nigerian 'congregation'. Levites

in this context are analogous to the ministers of the word of God in the new covenant church; pastors, prophets, evangelists, missionaries and teachers. They are God's ambassadors, God's messengers of reconciliation (Rom 15:16).

The phrase "*Do you not know*" occurs often in the letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 3:16; 5:6; 6:2, 3, 9, 15, 16, 19; 9:24). Although it sounds like a 'question'¹ the phrase is a kind of intentional 'rebuke' of the believers, prompting him to remind them of what they do know in the form of a question. This also suggests that Paul must have expected the Gentile Christians in Corinth to be familiar with the Old Testament stipulations concerning priests and Levites (Lev. 6:8–7:38; Num. 18:8–31; Deut. 18:1–5) as well as the message of the gospel (Adeymo, 2006, 1413). Starting the statement with shows that the Apostle turns to address a serious issue among the believers; stressing what he said in verse 11 (Twelftree, 1992, 821). The statement is suggestive that the readers should have known better but instead they reveal a disturbing inconsistency in their religious conduct and their profession.

The rights of the ministry to be supported by the Church are established by an appeal to ordinary life and to the Jewish law; and the statement has been made that the Apostle having that right, did not, for prudent reasons, use that right (Kirstermaker et al 2001). Paul appealed to the Old Testament for the principle of support of ministers (Hodge 1995). This directive was not only a principle of Jewish law which Christ might have abrogated, but it was a provision of the Jewish economy which Christ Himself formally perpetuated (Cherry 1989, 125).

What Paul says here is true of all religions, though he is only referring to Judaism. The Gentile Corinthians knew that priests at the pagan temples also received their income from the people who came to worship, even though this income was used for purposes other than food and clothing. He asserts as common knowledge '*...that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple*'. The phrase "*those who are employed*" or better still "*serve*" was used more generally in Greek to mean "to concern oneself with," "*to be engaged in*" (Ellingworth et al, 1995). It was used in religious texts, and in this case in the context of the altar and it refers to the priests in the temple at Jerusalem, who have the responsibilities of slaying the preparing, and burning the sacrifices. The temple priests and Levites of the Old Testament received material aid for their ministry (Nu 18:8-24). This redistribution was needed in the Jewish culture because the Levites did not have any inheritance among the people; their life was consecrated and dedicated to serving Almighty God.

So, 'food' refers to the necessities of life and the expression 'temple' alludes to the divine worship services (Ellingworth 1995). The temple priests and Levite workers of the Old Testament (Nu 18.8-24)

¹ Especially with the addition of the question mark in the Byzantine text: *The New Testament in the Original Greek: Byzantine Textform 2005, With Morphology* (Bellingham : Logos Research Systems, 2006).

received material aid for their ministry (Morris 1985, 13). However, exploitation and extravagant living is not part of the divine directives for the remuneration of ministers who serves at Yahweh's altar Calvin observes the difference between services in pagan temples and Jerusalem temple; the revenues of the pagan priests were not devoted to necessities like food and clothing, but to costly furnishings, regal splendor and extravagant luxury (Kirstermaker and Hendrickson 2001, 297). This implies that exploitation and extravagant living is not part of the divine directives for the remuneration of ministers who serve at Yahweh's altar.

In like manner, Paul implies that Corinthian Christians should understand that the provisions for the priests and Levites are similar if not identical for the preachers of the gospel. It is not the form of the liturgy but the principle behind these provisions that must be observed (Kirstermaker and Hendrickson 2001, 297). Since they attend regularly to the service of God as a way of life, they need to be provided for. The Levites in this context are analogously the ministers of the word of God in the new covenant church; pastors, prophets, evangelists, missionaries and teachers.

In the same way the Lord has commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel. (I Cor 9 vs. 14)

Just as the Levites serve at the altar before the physical provision is given, the principle also implies that service precedes provision. It is the Levites duty to serve God and his people and it is God's duty to provide and meet their needs. Jesus himself commanded the right of financial support in ministry (Matt 10:9,10; Luke 10:4,7). Therefore, earning a living from the gospel implies that God will meet the needs of ministers through beneficiaries of the gospel they proclaim. So, it is Jesus injunction, not the law per se, that continues to have authority within the early church and by extension to today's church. There is an ethical nexus between the Levites, Jesus, the Corinthian correspondence and the ministers of God in Nigeria today.

Pastoral Materialism in the light of the Corinthian Instruction

Today's pastors like the priests of Jerusalem and the pastors of Corinth are supported through provision that belongs to God. They benefit from what is offered to God. Unlike the Jewish priest, they don't receive a literal remnant after which the major share is then offered to God, but their support is still an expression of the believers' worship; an indirect 'spin off' from the worshipper's devotion to God.

Also, just as the Levites serve at the altar before the physical provision is given, the principle is that service precedes provision. It is the Levites duty to serve and it is God's duty to provide and meet their needs. This makes the succeeding verse important to this discourse.

In the same way the Lord has commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel. (I Cor 9 vs. 14)

Earning a living from the gospel implies that God will meet the needs of ministers through beneficiaries of the gospel they proclaim.

There is a nexus between the Levites, Jesus, the Corinthian correspondence and the ministers of God in Nigeria today. Though, altar food is said to be given by the dictates of God according to Paul's teaching; Nigerian pastors should not be driven for rewards and remunerations. The repeated series of fraudulent scandals within the Nigerian pastorate sheds light on a powerful and unregulated force in Nigeria's economy; the hazardous effects is not only on the church but the nation Nigeria at large. Jesus preached the gospel of love, peace and redemption, but many Nigerian pastors have short-changed this for extreme materialism and now bear the brunt of public ridicule. While majority of Nigerian Christians can hardly afford three square meals, some Nigerian 'men of God' are accumulating billions and flying in private jets (Ikenga 2010). The people have been starved of genuine divine knowledge. An informed people would constitute a threat to the interests of the prosperity preaching Churches. The moral fabric of the nation is already appalling, yet Nigeria boasts of thousands of Churches with rich ministers colored with deception actively pursued under the guise of Christianity. Instead of being supported sufficiently for their ministry, their own lavish support levels are more in line with the pagan background which the Corinthians had left behind!

Re-conceiving of the 'ministry' and concept of 'service' in the Nigerian Pastorate

In the light of this widespread and systemic malpractice and with 1 Corinthians 9 as a guide, we must address what measures can possibly be taken to redress and redirect the Nigerian church and especially its pastorate.

A Redefinition of Calling to Ministry

Extravagant living which leads to exploitation is a clear contradiction of the directives for minister's remuneration. The apostolic correction of what the Corinthians had neglected has been taken out of context as a mandate for material accumulation by pastors. Therefore, contemporary ministers in Nigeria cannot sufficiently hide under a canopy of this divine injunction because it does not condole swindling of worshippers for personal gain. Its principle is modelled on the Jewish temple worship not the opulence of pagan priests. If it was the latter, then there would be no distinction between Christ's ministers of the Gospel and pagans. Therefore, to redress this assumption a total re-understanding, or reformation, of the 'ministry' and the concept of 'service' is required in the Nigerian Pastorate.

A Deeper Faith

It is important for ministers of God to get the right sense of Paul's imperative as it concerns support of the ministry they are called into. "*When God gives an assignment; he gives along the needed consignment*" (Akanni, 2008, 8). As church ministry is not a man's business but God's business, the ministry of the Gospel is not a means to another end, to enrich one's self, but to sincerely serve in the ministry in which one has been placed.

Those who serve in Christ's name must sincerely believe that God is responsible for his work and workers. This calls for an adequate theology of Pastoral ministry; one that reconstructs and restructures the perception of Nigerian pastors concerning its remuneration systems as well as their *modus operandi*. 'Dependence' on God should be the watchword of Nigerian pastorate; absolute dependence on God at that! Paul's statement does not in any way exempt Nigerian pastors. If deeper level of faith would be practiced; this in turn would automatically differentiate between ministers of God and pagan equivalents.

A Creative Compassion

The Purpose for which the church exists is to affect the society positively, therefore, Churches in Nigeria should and could promote socio-economic empowerment of the majority of its members and non-members who are drastically economically disadvantaged across the wider society. The act of God prohibiting the possession of inheritance by the Levites provides a telling model of the sort of selfless 'service' God has called pastors into today. If only some of the ostentatious wealth of the Pastors is converted to alleviate critical poverty, the church would be effective in the service to God and humanity and would stand out from society at the same time.

Conclusion

The issue of extreme materialism is a serious challenge in Nigerian society. Prosperity is the key driver in life for many Nigerians as a result. This is taken on board uncritically as God's will for his own people. And this assumption then distorts ministry. In view of this, the correct understanding of the ministry as service to God first and humanity second, is both the goal and the clear means through which the evil of extreme materialism which has eaten deeply into the culture of the Nigerian church can be curbed. Those of us who hope for the restoration of the past glory of the Nigerian church and its pastors have a role to play if ever the power of the former Nigerian church is to be restored.

But this is the responsibility of the whole membership. Fake churches and ministries, the platforms for extreme materialism, predominate in contemporary Nigerian Christendom because the genuine have failed to rise up to their responsibility of providing solutions to the plight of their members. The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) could and should devise viable means in curbing the menace of extreme materialism in the Church. Activities of the so-called pastors and prophets should be thoroughly investigated and appropriately controlled by CAN. Church members could be encouraged to exercise their responsible freedom, reporting any minister who attempts to defraud their flock to the appropriate accrediting authority. A disciplined people begins with a disciplined pastorate.

At the same time genuine Nigerian pastors must rise to their God-given spiritual responsibility and take matters of exercising genuine spiritual gifts more seriously. Ministers of God should seek for God-given talents and spiritual gifts and use the same in the church freely without restrictions or for personal profit. If

people receive solutions to their problems when they come to the church, they will be less likely to fall victim of materialistic ministers.

The root problem with contemporary pastors in Nigeria towards is one of attitude. They attach much more importance to present material wealth more than their eternal riches in heaven. Extreme materialism distorts the goal of pastoral ministry. A New Testament understanding of the ministry as service to God first, then, humanity is a viable medium through which this debacle of extreme materialism can be curbed.

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