



HISTORICAL DISCOURSE ON MISINTERPRETATION OF THE GOSPEL MESSAGE AMONG SOME MEN OF GOD IN NIGERIA AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

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Abstract

This study examines the historical discourse on the misinterpretation of the Gospel message among some men of God in Nigeria, exploring the causes, consequences, and possible solutions. Through a critical analysis of biblical teachings, historical context, and contemporary practices, this research reveals that misinterpretation often stems from cultural, theological, and socio-political factors. The study highlights the impact of these misinterpretations on the Church and society, including theological confusion, moral ambiguity, and social division. By engaging with biblical scholarship, historical perspectives, and practical theological insights, this research proposes solutions to mitigate these issues, promoting a more accurate and contextualized understanding of the Gospel message in Nigeria. The findings of this study have implications for theological education, pastoral practice, and ecclesiastical accountability, contributing to a more faithful and effective proclamation of the Gospel in Nigeria and beyond.

Introduction

The economic situation of Nigeria in all shades is bad. Poverty in Nigeria has eaten so deep into the bone marrow of majority of the masses. The pain of hunger is very excruciatingly written on the faces of so many Nigerians. The governmental policy stifles businesses, and government does not provide stimulus packages to the citizens. There is frustration everywhere, and this began after the oil boom, when the country was thrown to socio-economic crisis chiefly caused by mismanagement of public funds. Among the ruling class, corruption is enthroned to guide their affairs. In the face of these challenges, Pentecostalism, with the material prosperity gospel arose to offer hope and solutions to these teething human problems facing the populace.

In the main, material prosperity gospel is a fast growing ministry that apparently began in the United State of America, and overtime spread through the Pentecostal churches globally while making formidable mark in Africa. It eventually developed in Nigeria through American influences introduced in the 1970s by notable figures like Benson Idahosa, who synthesized it with indigenous Pentecostal revivalism. The marriage of gospel prosperity and indigenous Pentecostal revivalism appealed to Nigerian population already facing socio-economic hardship and insecurity (as a result of the civil war), leading to its widespread adoption by some powerful Nigerian preachers like David Oyedepo and Chris Oyakhilome. As a matter of fact, the new movement focus on divine success in areas like health and finances, often promoted through mass media, attracted a wider following across Nigeria denominations including some clergymen of mainline churches.

The prosperity gospel is a theological belief that emphasizes financial success, physical well-being, and overall prosperity as evidence of God's blessing. This doctrine, particularly prominent in many Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, is often based on scriptures such as 3 John 1:2 ("Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers") and Malachi 3:10, which encourages tithing with the promise of abundance. However, the prosperity gospel has



been widely misrepresented and criticized for promoting materialism, exploiting vulnerable believers, and distorting biblical teachings. This paper examines the misrepresentation of prosperity gospel within Pentecostal churches and proposes solutions to address these challenges.

From the above, it follows that the surges in Pentecostalism, with their gospel of material prosperity, are hugely explainable from the point that they promise economic, as well as spiritual liberation (Obadare, 2016). This is so, since many Nigerians, in the face of insecurity, hardships and hopelessness need hope and they go extra mile to boost their hopes.

Historical Perspective of Gospel of Material Prosperity in Nigeria

i. Early Christian Influence and Pentecostal Growth (Pre-1970s)

Christianity in Nigeria dates back to the 19th century with missionary efforts by the Church Missionary Society (CMS), the Roman Catholic Church, and other Protestant groups (Diara, 2013). Early missionaries emphasized salvation, education, and social services, establishing schools and hospitals. The gospel they preached focused on moral transformation rather than material wealth (Wallace and Rusk, 2011).

Pentecostalism in Nigeria began to gain prominence in the mid-20th century, influenced by American and European evangelistic movements (Abolaji, 2024). The Apostolic Church, Christ Apostolic Church (CAC), and other indigenous movements emerged, emphasizing the power of the Holy Spirit, healing, and miracles (Adedapo, 2014). However, financial prosperity was not yet a dominant theme. It was a later development in the Pentecostal movement.

ii. The Rise of Prosperity Gospel (1980s–1990s)

The 1980s marked a turning point with the emergence of charismatic Pentecostal churches (Ojo, 2018). Influenced by American televangelists like Kenneth Hagin and Oral Roberts, Nigerian pastors began to emphasize faith-based prosperity (Coleman, 2016). Churches such as The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), Living Faith Church (Winners' Chapel), and Christ Embassy gained national prominence, preaching a gospel of breakthrough, divine favour, and financial abundance.

During this period, Nigeria was facing economic crises due to civil war, military rule, oil price fluctuations, and structural adjustment programs (SAPs) imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). As poverty and unemployment rose, many Nigerians turned to churches for hope. The prosperity gospel resonated with people who saw faith as a means of escaping economic hardship (Ijaola, 2018).

iii. Commercialization and Exploitation (2000s–Present)

From the 2000s onward, prosperity theology became deeply embedded in Nigerian Pentecostalism (Smith, 2021). Many churches promised financial breakthroughs in exchange for tithes, offerings, and seed sowing. Pastors accumulated vast wealth, with some owning private jets, luxurious mansions, and business empires, while their followers remained in poverty. Televangelism, Christian megachurches, and the rise of celebrity pastors reinforced the idea that wealth was synonymous with divine favour (Ukah, 2020).

This era also saw an increase in controversial fundraising tactics. Some pastors encouraged believers to “sow seeds” by giving their last money, promising miraculous returns (Agazue, 2013). Fake miracles, manipulative teachings, and financial scandals emerged, leading to criticisms from both religious and secular circles.



Misinterpretation of Message of the Gospel: Main Features from 1970s till date.

i. Materialism over Spiritual Growth

Many Pentecostal preachers present the prosperity gospel as a formula for wealth acquisition, often reducing faith to a transactional relationship with God (Barron, 2022). This misrepresentation shifts the focus from spiritual development, righteousness, and service to God to the pursuit of material wealth. The emphasis on financial breakthroughs and miracles often overshadows teachings on holiness, discipleship, and selfless service.

ii. Selective Biblical Interpretation

The prosperity gospel often relies on selective interpretation of scripture while neglecting teachings on suffering, sacrifice, and contentment (Barron, 2022). Biblical figures such as Job, Paul, and even Jesus Christ himself exemplified suffering as part of the Christian journey. However, some Pentecostal churches downplay these teachings, presenting hardship as a result of a lack of faith or giving.

iii. Exploitation of Vulnerable Believers

Many pastors and church leaders exploit the prosperity message to manipulate believers into excessive giving, promising them supernatural financial breakthroughs in return (Wangari, 2024). This has led to instances of financial extortion, where churchgoers, especially the poor, give beyond their means in the hope of divine rewards. This practice often benefits church leaders more than the congregation.

iv. False Promises and Disillusionment

The overemphasis on financial success and miraculous wealth has led to many believers becoming disillusioned when their expectations are not met (Wangari, 2024). Some end up abandoning their faith, feeling betrayed by a gospel that did not deliver on its promises. This damages the credibility of the church and contributes to scepticism toward Christianity.

Consequences of Misinterpretation of Message of the Gospel in Nigeria

i. Positive Consequences

Through the prosperity gospel, people are inspired to give. And most times, what they give, if used properly, has a lot of benefits, including:

i. Assists Members

One important benefit of the material gospel in Nigeria's modern churches is the role of the church in helping the poor (Adeyanju et al., 2017). Unquestionably, a large number of Nigerians are living in poverty. Most of them affiliate with a certain church. As a result, the church assumes responsibility for helping their poor members by providing food, giving scholarships, offering employment, paying house rents, offsetting hospital bills and empowering their members through skill acquisition programmes (Adogame, 2016).

ii. Encourages Church's Development



Many churches in Nigeria are currently observing significant infrastructure development. This is accomplished through donations and seed-sowing efforts that are designed specifically to strengthen the church (Ogbe, 2019). With the money earned from tithe and seed planting, the majority of Nigeria's rapidly expanding Pentecostal churches were able to establish their church branches around the country, especially in isolated rural areas (Akabike et al., 2021).

iii. Assistance with Church Ministries

The revenue generated from the material gospel is very important for the upkeep and operation of churches. Tithing and seed-sowing are therefore sources of funding for the church's ministries, particularly those of men and women of God, as well as for the ongoing operations of the church and its growth.

ii. Negative Consequences

The detrimental effects of the prosperity or material gospel on the church and the wider Nigerian community are worrisome. This is because they have undoubtedly contributed to the promotion of fraud and corruption in Nigeria and damaged the reputation of Christianity. Below, the study examines some of the detrimental effects.

a. Promotion of Fraud and Corruption in the Church and Society

Today, the church in Nigeria has evolved into a business because so many ministers of God have made it that way (Princewell, 2017). They place more emphasis on tithing and seed-sowing because they are more concerned with how to get money from followers than with rescuing souls. As a result, some churches' teachings on the material gospel make this a prerequisite for financial success and use scripture as the foundation for their financial manipulation of their followers, portraying it as a non-negotiable financial responsibility to God (Akabike et al., 2021).

Some preachers utilise the argument that if one doesn't donate now, they will be begging on the street tomorrow. This kind of teaching instils fear in the hearts of believers, especially those who may not want to give. They use quotations from the Bible, such as Jesus Christ's instruction in Mark 4:24 KJV, - "the measure you give is the measure you receive" - they take advantage of their adherents. This does not just give a wrong impression about God, but casts Christianity in a bad light.

b. The Material Gospel is Deceptive

The development of orthodox Churches' moral tradition and teaching are weakened by the material gospel as it is promoted by Pentecostalism. The fact that the material gospel denies space for suffering and brokenness has grave implications. The cross and its representation of rejection are ignored. The promise of quick achievement contradicts biblical commands that call for perseverance and patience. Thus, material gospel provides a shortcut to success. All of these detrimental effects might not have aided the cause of Christianity, especially in Nigeria, where pervasive corruption has put the continent's economy in a coma.

c. Declines the moral standards of the church and society

Because of the attitude of church leaders and preachers, the church, which was known for its high moral standards based on the teachings and example of Jesus, has lost its moral standards and value in our modern Nigerian society (Akabike et al., 2021). The decrease in moral standards is partially



attributable to the men of God whose teachings emphasise the material gospel and who frequently forget to warn their followers about immorality and sin while educating them about legal and illegal ways to amass wealth. Because they are afraid of losing them, which would also cause them to lose their tithe and seed, they do not condemn or speak out against the immoral life that they observe among their followers. Most churches in Nigeria are afraid of losing their source of income, which prevents them from speaking out against corrupt officials (Ngwoke, 2021). Because of this, morality has been declining in both the church and society.

d. Gives the incorrect idea that the church was a way out of poverty

Due to the high rate of suffering, poverty, and unemployment in Nigeria, many jobless people have viewed the church as a business opportunity to profit from followers through tithing and seed-sowing (Eyo et al., 2020). And when they open these churches, they come up with strategies aimed at taking advantage of their followers by scattering various sorts of seeds. They view the church as an enterprise, and every tactic necessary is used to ensure that money keeps coming into the church. The result of this is misleading the people.

e. Increases the level of poverty in the church and society.

It is simpler to state that Christianity has turned into Nigerians' greatest undoing based on what is happening in the nation at the moment. Thus, while Nigerians turn to the church for assistance to experience a financial and spiritual breakthrough, they end up being victims of some men of God who extort money from them. Some of the self-called men and women of God take advantage of the faith of these defenceless Christian believers and extort money from them in a covert manner since the majority of Nigerians visit churches in search of spiritual guidance to free themselves from the grips of sickness and poverty. Some people are persuaded by their church or pastor to plant the first salary or earning as a first fruit seed of breakthrough, miracle, anointing and favour in hopes that God will reward them materially or financially. Some preachers still state the amount of money that has to be sown as fruit for each degree of blessing in some churches. Unfortunately, a large number of Nigerians have been forced into poverty as a result of some pastors' extortion tactics (Akabike et al., 2021). Some people pledge gifts they are unable to fulfil, and they frequently borrow money to fulfil their commitments to receive God's blessings. And in the midst of this, the preachers become richer, whereas the members wallow in poverty.

f. Encourages easy money

The majority of churches in Nigeria no longer encourage hard work; instead, they have shifted their emphasis to money gain, turning Christianity into a large business enterprise tainted by evil. The primary goal of the church, which is to win souls as instructed by Jesus in Matthew 28:19, has been delegated as a result of this strategy. Additionally, some churches in Nigeria appear to have changed from their primary role to impact adherents with religious and moral teachings to one that now emphasises prosperity. This has fuelled a growing level of corruption and fraud in the church and society at large, which is evident in the lives of many people, including church leaders. As a result, the church exalts and blesses those who amass wealth by dishonest, dishonest, and unlawful means.

Politicians today think that God only cares about their tithes and sacrifices in exchange for anything they want. Thus, the emphasis on affluence has encouraged corruption among the political class. This claim would lead one to believe that the church is to blame for the get-rich-quick syndrome, which encourages young people to pursue wealth at any cost to be counted among the prominent



people in the church or society in general. Thus, dishonest and dishonest methods of accumulating riches have taken over.

g. It contributes to society's rising crime rate

The high crime rates in our society are a result of the men of God whose teachings to their followers emphasise God's blessings to those who pay tithe and sow seed without teaching them the part of the gospel that condemns all forms of criminal ways of life, including criminal means of acquiring wealth. The majority of Nigerians, particularly the young, have been misled by the message that anyone who gives tithe and plants seeds will receive God's blessing (Ughaerumba, 2016; Lauterbach, 2019). As a result, they engage in a variety of criminal acts to supplement their revenue while maintaining the conviction that God has blessed their company since they pay tithe and plant seeds.

This is the reason why people do all kinds of crimes, such as stealing money from their employers to pay tithes and plant seeds. It also explains why some people give tithes and plant seeds purely for show, or to stroke their egos and maintain their notoriety in the church. This is because the majority of prosperity preachers in Nigeria have turned away from the teachings of holiness and are instead emphasising the teachings of materialism. This has, in a significant sense, led some people to engage in a variety of unlawful and dishonest activities, with the belief that, once they start paying their tithe and planting seeds, God will increase the success of their venture. As a result, a large number of young people are now participating in a variety of unlawful and criminal enterprises, including ritual, kidnapping, yahoo, and other cybercrime crimes, to name a few.

Possible Solutions to the Misinterpretation of Message of the Gospel in Nigeria

i. Balanced Biblical Teaching

Pentecostal churches should adopt a holistic approach to biblical teaching, incorporating themes of contentment, stewardship, and the reality of suffering. The prosperity message should be presented alongside scriptures that emphasize spiritual growth, humility, and perseverance in trials (e.g., Philippians 4:11-13, 2 Timothy 3:12).

ii. Accountability and Ethical Leadership

Church leaders should be held accountable for how they present the prosperity message. Theological training and ethical standards should be emphasized to ensure preachers do not manipulate or exploit their congregations for financial gain. Independent church councils or governing bodies can help regulate teachings and financial practices.

iii. Financial Literacy and Empowerment

Rather than promoting a mystical view of wealth acquisition, churches should encourage financial literacy, entrepreneurship, and responsible economic planning. Workshops on budgeting, investments, and wealth creation through legitimate means can help believers achieve financial stability without relying on misleading doctrines.

iv. Encouraging Discernment Among Believers

Christians should be taught to critically engage with biblical teachings and assess the authenticity of prosperity messages. Encouraging Bible study groups, theological education, and personal devotion can equip believers with the knowledge to distinguish between true biblical prosperity and deceptive teachings.



v. **Redefining Prosperity in a Biblical Context**

The concept of prosperity should not be limited to financial success but should include holistic well-being—spiritual growth, health, family stability, and peace of mind. Churches should emphasize that God’s blessings come in various forms, not just material wealth.

Conclusion

The misrepresentation of the material gospel in Nigeria has become a growing concern, reshaping religious beliefs, social structures, and economic behaviours in profound ways (Diara and Mokwenye, 2019). From the discussion so far, it is evident that preachers who emphasize prosperity over spiritual depth have cultivated a culture where faith is often equated with financial success, shifting the focus of Christianity from salvation and service to personal wealth accumulation. This distortion has led many to prioritize miracles and financial breakthroughs over moral integrity and hard work, fuelling unrealistic expectations among believers.

At the heart of this trend is the commercialization of religion. Many religious leaders, presenting themselves as custodians of divine wealth, encourage their congregants to make significant financial sacrifices, promising supernatural rewards (Stark, 2017). For the poor and desperate, these promises offer hope, but in reality, they often lead to financial ruin. The vulnerable pour their savings into churches, believing their offerings will yield material blessings, only to find themselves trapped in cycles of poverty while their pastors amass extravagant wealth.

Beyond individual consequences, the social fabric of Nigeria has not been spared. The prosperity gospel has nurtured a mind-set that downplays the importance of diligence and strategic planning (Oluoch, 2011). Many young people, instead of pursuing education and skill development, cling to the belief that faith alone will catapult them into wealth. This perspective has contributed to a decline in work ethic and an increase in fraudulent activities, as some seek shortcuts to financial success under the guise of “divine wealth transfer.”

For many Nigerians, the long-term impact is a crisis of faith. Disillusionment sets in when promised prosperity fails to materialize, leading some to abandon religion altogether. The need for theological reform and greater public awareness has never been more pressing. Without addressing this distortion, Nigeria risks deepening its economic and social inequalities, leaving a generation trapped between misplaced faith and harsh realities.

From the discussion so far, one can conclude that many churches in operations, attitudes, and excessive desires about the monetary prosperity gospel in Nigeria, appear to divert from Jesus Christ's teachings and ways, as well as what Christianity incorporates. Sadly, some churches seem more concerned with collecting donations from members than they do with highlighting righteous and godly behaviour and salvation. In Nigeria today, there appears to have a high rate of immoral behaviour, criminal activity, and corruption (Ekpo et al., 2016; Folarin, 2021). The people who commit these atrocities, unfortunately, are those who go to churches and do not allow Christianity to bear or reflect on their daily lives.

The church is typically expected to place more emphasis on how to help people develop the positive attitudes that will lead to salvation (Brosius, 2017; Parsons, 2017). Of course, there might be a decline in crime and corruption in Nigeria if the various churches focused less on the prosperity gospel and more on morality. As a result of the constant quest for seed sowing, many men of God have become burdens to their congregations, with less focus placed on their obedient service to God.

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