

A Contextual Analysis of I Corinthians 9:13 and Extreme Materialism among Nigerian Pastors

Asia Pacific Journal of
Multidisciplinary Research
Vol. 8 No.2, 11-17
May 2020
P-ISSN 2350-7756
E-ISSN 2350-8442
www.apjmr.com
ASEAN Citation Index

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Date Received: January 15, 2020; Date Revised: April 7, 2020

Abstract - *Over the years, the church has been God's agent of spirituality, turning the heart of people to God. But recent activities in the church today betray 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 and moral defiance in the society. The reverse is the case today. Contemporary pastors in Nigeria are efficiently committing modern-day fraud because of extreme materialism. Some ministers of God today have turned the church to money making venture. It is disheartening that in the recent time, Nigerian pastors' measures success in the ministry by the size of congregations and number of cars owned, among others. They have replaced the goal of faithfulness in the work of God with material wealth. In Nigeria, the church is seen as an avenue for ministers to reward themselves using means. As a result, this paper offers a biblical critique based upon I Corinthians 9:13 concerning this materialism and its extremes in Nigerian pastorate.*

Keywords: *Materialism, Pastors, Nigerian.*

INTRODUCTION

A clear understanding of the nation Nigeria reveals the need for revival, almost all the phases of the nation seem to need transformation; they are: politics, religion and social life.[1] However, the focus of this research is the Christian religion angle; to be specific, the Nigerian Christian Pastorate. The study opines that; wherever deep need, fear and suspicion exist, so does the possibility of exploitation. Many people, rich, poor, old and young seek pastors for spiritual protection and fortification from known and imaginary enemies; this is a typical African syndrome, of which Nigeria is no exception! As a result, ministers of God in Nigeria, take advantage of those who seek miracles and healings in God in the recent time. Exploitation and extortion in the sense worshippers are being cajoled through; the sales of holy oil, holy water, holy handkerchiefs, and other supposedly powerful artifacts.

In the wider society the fact remains that materialism constitutes vices such as bribery, corruption, kidnapping, armed robbery, terrorism, etc. perpetrated in the Nigerian society today. Ministers of God in Nigeria today use the ministry as a means of accruing wealth to themselves; competing with each other on the basis of their prestige cars and even jets

and flaunting this wealth on social media; liable to make an average member of the congregation materially 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 part of a spiritual salvation), certainly, the damage which prosperity preaching has caused to the social, religious, economic and political landscapes in Nigeria is apparent to all.

The shameful deception of materialistic preachers with their openly-displayed affluence alongside the seeming indifference of a government that remains insensitive to the needs and yearnings of her people, distorts the value of Nigeria economic sectors [2]. Prosperity religion has take the scope of an industry. In view of this, Brick asserts that "Pentecostalism is a modern-day commercial enterprise garbed in the cloak of a religion with deception and exploitation as its foundation; its goal being the complete monetization of the ignorance of its multitude of adherents." [3] 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

the Pentecostal denominations; but Christendom at large [3].

Conceptual Clarifications

Fortunately, we can critique this problem of rampant materialism within the biblical purview of 1st Corinthians 9:13. But before this can be done, there is need to be precise in understanding of the theological significance of some of the key concepts within the passage.

The Altar: The Hebrew word for altar is ‘*mizbeah*’, meaning to slaughter. In other words, an altar is any structure upon which offerings, such as sacrifices are made for religious purposes. It was usually a raised platform with a flat surface. There are over four hundred (400) references to the ‘altar’ in the Bible. Although the idea was present as early as when Cain and Abel brought sacrifices (Gen 4:3-4), the word altar is first used in Gen 8:20 when Noah built an altar to the Lord after leaving the ark. ‘Altars signify a representative of the Lord, and burnt-offerings the worship of Him thereby, is plainly evident in the Prophets.’[4] An altar is also a designated place for consecration (Gen 12:7, 26:24). [5]

Materialism: is theory or attitude that 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. [6] In practical terms it is one who puts his physical possessions before God. Materialism is an attitude that temporal things are more important than the eternal.

The concept overlaps closely with the notion of ‘covetousness’, which means, “the desire to have more.” It describes one who is not satisfied with what he possesses [7]. Nigerians live in a very materialistic society. ‘Success’ is often associated with the possessions one has. There are several related attitudes that lead to materialism becoming entrenched within the pastorate: lack of self-control: man becomes desperate when there is lack of self control. Cases when ministers want to get things here and now. Another one is, discontentment: when ministers of the gospel are not satisfied with what they have, they often compromise what is right to obtain what they want and yet are ‘never satisfied’ (Prov 27:20). This leads to 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.

This complex is visible within the Nigerian context. Meanwhile, Pastors who (who were first believers) are enjoined to seek first the kingdom of God and it’s righteousness and every other thing will be added (Matt 6:33).

The Problem of Extreme Materialism in Nigerian Pastorate

From a critical point of view, one cannot deny the fact that there are thousands of churches (different denominations) in Nigeria, in the hills and valleys. It is unfortunate that the population of churches in Nigeria does not reduce the social and moral evil witnessed in the nation. There are several mushroom churches; this is because the church is now seen as a source of livelihood. Thus, ministers of God in Nigeria are no longer hungry for lost souls [8].

Thousands of believers listen to messages of religious fraudsters; who will do anything to make the people’s wealth become theirs. This only matches what is a feature in the wider cultural life of the nation. Nigerian political officials steal in various forms, Government officials misappropriate funds and receive kickbacks, public servants convert state funds into private use, down to the ordinary messenger who collects bribes as a condition of performing their assigned duties. But when stealing is perpetrated in the name of the Lord it is far worse.

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 now viewed as sadistic barbarism, whereas a mantra of ‘you are blessed and highly favored’ with all its permissiveness takes centre stage and signaled a watering down of ethical standards. Churches with the new message filled up and pastors became richer and more influential. [9] 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’, what the New Testament terms ‘the world’ with a corresponding loss of the hereafter or ‘eternity’. This preaching on riches now far outweighs the volume of preaching on great themes of the faith, such as salvation from sin.

Materialism is fueled by lust and sustained by lust.” It is a gospel that plays on the people’s greed rather than condemning it. It is a gospel targeted at the spiritually gullible or scripturally ignorant. [9] The

results of this phenomenon are deleterious to 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. Some of them become stark unbelievers by the virtue of the incongruent prosperity preaching. Prosperity preaching raises several questions in their minds, having to do with the fact that prosperity as said by such preachers is an evidence of salvation.

Ecclesial Reactions to the Materialistic Pastorate

Pope Francis cautioned the faithful against the danger of losing their personal identity.

“...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.” [10]

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. [11]

Pastors in Nigeria today have contributed to the social upheaval of the nation in this age. They laid the foundation of greed and social discontentment from which the society is yet to come to terms; simply because members of the Church are from various families; meanwhile, this is a cardinal unit which constitutes the society. Contemporary ministers in Nigeria departed radically from the preaching of the Lord Jesus which emphasized contentment with greed and avarice into the social lexicon. They offer wishy-washy holiness and continue to inundate people with the doctrines of prosperity. They decide to build a temple of materialism from which they hold the befuddled populace in a trance-like grip.

Rev. Oritsejafor the immediate past President of the Christian Association of Nigeria expressed displeasure over how ‘so called men of God’ have turned the church into a business centre and living flamboyant lives.

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. [12]

Nigerian church leaders are concerned about the infiltration of what they call heretical teachings by some pastors and have formed a Concerned Ministers Forum to deal with the problem. The leaders say contributing factors include ministers who are eager for materialism, overemphasize the "prosperity gospel," are ignorant of Scripture, "merchandise" the gospel, steal in the name of the Lord, and introduce occultism into churches [13].

A significant segment of the Christian church in this country is gradually but steadily departing from the basic goals of Christianity," says Peter Ozodo, chair of the Nigeria Evangelical Missions Association. "The entire church is in danger of losing its basic direction."

Pastors preoccupied with material gains are hindering the church's discipleship task, according to Ozodo. "The ministers involved in this distractive act claim that focusing the church's message on the things of this world is the way to be relevant to the listeners' needs," he says. "Focusing on materialism causes Christian leaders themselves to become worldly [13]."

Raphael Okafor, secretary-general of Scripture Union in Nigeria and a pastor of the Chapel of Redemption at the University of Nigeria in Enuga, says some ministers are most concerned about their own financial desires. They seek to be popular and cannot seriously call people to repent from sin, lest such people turn away. Several church leaders say ignorance of Scripture and lack of theological training has contributed to errant teachings [13].

Dennis Nweke, general superintendent of Living Word Gospel Ministries, says financial abuse has

resulted. "Before our very eyes, bishops plunder church coffers, alter accounts, and milk our gullible simple-hearted brethren," Nweke says. In addition, occultism has become part of many liturgies [13]. Joseph Mohammed Ali, senior pastor of Christ Assembly in Ilorin, says, "Some gospel preachers have now resorted to using some metaphysical concepts and spiritism to induce 'spiritual power' they need to solve people's physical, material, and social problems." [13]. In the face of such challenges, the Concerned Ministers Forum, which brings together ministers from different denominations, has been organizing workshops aimed at correcting false teaching.

Analytical Engagement of 1st Corinthians 9:13

The relevance of this biblical text is enshrined on the fact that this sort of phenomena have been seen before in the early church especially the Corinthian situation.

Translation of the Text

Οὐκ οἴδατε ὅτι οἱ τὰ ἱερά ἐργαζόμενοι ἐκ τοῦ ἱεροῦ ἐσθίουσιν, οἱ τῷ θυσιαστηρίῳ προσεδρεύοντες τῷ θυσιαστηρίῳ συμμερίζονται; [14]. Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings? (RSV)

Exegetical Analysis of the Text

οὐκ οἴδατε - translated as "Do you not know" occur severally in Paul's letter to the Corinthians (I Cor 6:2, 3, 9, 15, 16, 19; 3:16; 5:6; 9:24). It sounds like a 'question' with the addition of 'εἰ' in the original Greek Byzantine text form which means question mark (?). [15] Οὐκ οἴδατε can also be interpreted to mean a kind of 'rebuke' of the believers prompting him to remind them in form of question. οὐκ οἴδατε suggests that Paul must have given them the teachings of the Old Testament and the message of the gospel. Starting the statement with οὐκ οἴδατε shows that the Apostle turns to address a serious issue among the believers; stressing what he said in verse 11 [16]. Thus, the statement is in a manner suggestive of the fact that the readers should have known better but instead they reveal a disturbing inconsistency in their religious life. But then, are the Gentile Christians in Corinth expected 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.

The rights of the ministry to be supported by the Church have already been 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 [17]. From the Scriptures, the Corinthians should know the divine directives that relate to the provisions for those who minister to them in God's service. 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 [9]. Hodge opines that What Paul says here is true of all religions, though he is probably only referring to Judaism [18]. The Gentile Corinthians knew that priests at the pagan temples received their income from the people who came to worship, even though this income was used for purposes other than food and clothing [16]. Either way, the study posits that οὐκ οἴδατε connotes Paul reminding his readers of what they already know. Thus, it is worth conjecturing on this basis what the apostle would have made of the Nigerian 'congregation'.

'...that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple'; οἱ τὰ ἐργαζόμενοι – "those who are employed" or better still "serve" was used more generally in Greek to mean "to concern oneself with," "to be engaged in." [19] 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. Paul again appeals to the Old Testament for financial support of ministers. The temple priests and Levite workers 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 the Almighty God.

ἐσθίουσιν – 'food' refers to the necessities of life and the expression ἱεροῦ – 'temple' alludes to the divine worship services, specifically in Israel. This part of the statement expresses a general statement about the work and ministry of all those who are connected with temple services. 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 [16]. This implies that exploitation and extravagant living is not part of the divine directives for the remuneration of ministers who serves at Yahweh's altar.

Is Paul distinguishing between those working in the temple and those serving at the altar? Obviously not; Paul writes a parallel statement elsewhere in this epistle (7:2–3, 21–22, 27; 8:6). It is possible to translate “...those who serve at the altar and when they offer sacrifice...they get their share of the sacrifices.” It is more likely that Paul says the same thing twice to give greater emphasis.[18] *παρεδρεῖω* – ‘serve’ is found no other place in the New Testament or in the Greek Old Testament but typically found in pagan authors who are referring to the work of pagan priests [20]. However, Paul alludes to the altar in the court of the priests at the temple in Jerusalem [21]. The priests received a share of what was offered on the altar; meanwhile, the Corinthians should have known about these temple regulations, yet they realized that Gentile Christians did not have to observe these ceremonial laws (compare Acts 15:19–21). Either way, the study argues that Paul’s statement cannot be divulged from Jewish or pagan background. Thus, Paul connotes that Corinthian Christians should understand that the provisions for the priests and Levites are the same for the preachers of the gospel; not the form but the principle behind these provisions must be observed.[16] Since they attend regularly to the service of God as a way of life, they need to be provided for [22].

A Critique of Extreme Materialism in the light of 1st Corinthians 9:13

The study sees the need to establish the applicable-nature of the text understudy and the Nigeria-Church situation before a contextual critique through the biblical texts. In view of this, the study posits that Levites in this context are analogously 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).

Various religions in the Nigerian context have good understanding of the welfare of the religious leaders entails; in other words, an average non-Christian do not see anything bad in materially blessing the one who spiritually blesses someone. Therefore, minister’s welfare is a commonly-known activity in the Nigerian Church. The study posits that Pastors in the contemporary time are actually supported through provision that belongs to God; they benefit from what is offered to God. This implies that they get remnant after which the major share has been offered to God. So, their support is an indirect spin off

from the worshipper’s devotion to God. And 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. “Even so hath the Lord ordained that they which preach the gospel should live of the gospel (KJV) vs. 14. This shows that Jesus commanded the right of financial support in ministry (Mt 10:9,10; Lk 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 that continues to have authority within the early church. Thus, there is a nexus between the Levites, Jesus, the Corinthian correspondence and the ministers of God in Nigeria today.

The series of fraudulent and extortion scandals involving pastors in Nigeria sheds light on a powerful and unregulated force in Nigeria’s economy; this points to the hazardous effects of extreme materialism on the church and the nation Nigeria at large. Having examined the text (1st Corinthians 9:13) in the preceding part of the research, the exposed biblical framework can be a thermometer for the concept of extreme materialism in Nigeria pastorate.

It is important to note extravagant living which leads to exploitation is not part of the directives for minister’s remuneration. Therefore, contemporary ministers in Nigeria cannot sufficiently hide under a canopy of divine injunction because it does not condole dwindling of worshippers for personal gain as explicated in the temple worship; if others, then there is no distinction between ministers of God and pagans. Though, altar food is said to be given by the dictates of God Nigerian pastors are driven for rewards and remunerations all their lives above and beyond provision. Instead of support these pastors view material things as the ultimate reward in the God’s service. Therefore, this study proposes a re-understanding of the ‘ministry’ and the concept of ‘service’ in the Nigerian Pastorate. We need to then ask, in the light of this widespread and systemic malpractice what possible measures can be taken to redress and redirect the church and pastorate.

It is important for ministers of God to get the right dictate of God as it concerns the ministry they are called into. Bearing in mind that the ministry is not a means to enrich one’s self but to sincerely serve in the capacity God has placed them. Gbile Akanni “*When*

God gives an assignment; he gives along the needed consignment.”[23] This means, God is responsible for his work and workers. Church ministry is not a man’s business but God’s business. In other words, the study recommends an adequate theology of Pastoral ministry such that re-entrenches and restructures the perception of Nigerian pastors concerning remunerations and its *modus operadi*.

The Purpose for which the church exists is to affect the society positively, therefore, Churches in Nigeria should promote socio-economic empowerment of members and non-members who are poor, less privileged and physically challenged in the society. The study agrees with a common saying; ‘God’s work done in God’s way will never lack God’s resources.’ Paul’s statement in the explicated biblical text reveals that ministers are solely dependent on God for provision and remuneration; this does not in any way exclude Nigerian pastors. Therefore, a deeper level of faith should be practiced; this in turn marks the difference between ministers of God and heathens. The act of God prohibiting the possession of inheritance by the Levites depicts the extent of the ‘service’ God has called several individuals into today. Thus, the study posits that if only some of the ostentatious wealth of the Pastors is converted to alleviate critical poverty, the church would be seen as much effective in the service to God and humanity.

CONCLUSION

Wealth in itself is not condemned in the Scriptures; in fact, it is often considered a gift or blessing. However, the Bible warns against the dangers of wealth and gives instruction about its proper use. The observed issue of extreme materialism is a serious challenge in Nigerian society contributing to the ravaging devastating and deteriorating trend in Christendom. Its emerging influence on the contemporary Church cannot be denied. Prosperity as it were, is God’s will for his people; having observed the debacle in the light of 1st Corinthians 9:13; it is noteworthy that correct understanding of the ministry as service to God first and humanity is a clear means through which the evil trend of extreme materialism which has eaten deep into the church can be curbed. This would therefore constitute hope of restoration and return of the lost glory of the church, especially among Nigerian pastorate.

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