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PENTECOSTALISM IN NIGERIA: THE MYTHS AND IMPACTS ON THE CHURCH AND THE SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

Modern Pentecostalism is a branch of Protestantism that started over a century ago in microcosm but has spread across the globe like wild fire. The movement which started with few people who were students of Bible College in the wake of the Twentieth Century in Topeka, Kansas, United States of America became a force to reckon with. As people from different countries and

continents of the world travelled to America to attend the movement's meetings, they brought home the message and many became part of it. In Africa including Nigeria, people who attended those meetings brought the Pentecostal message back home and many people keyed into it. This became a phenomenon that spread like cancer across the mainline churches which inevitably, affected the people. Though the movement received wide acceptance in Nigeria and it has had great impacts on both the church and the society, there are skirmishes regarding the practice and teachings associated with it. This paper examines Pentecostal movement in Nigeria, the myths associated with and the impacts it has had on the church in particular and the society in general.

Key words: Pentecostalism, Myth, Impact, Church and Society.

Introduction

Christianity and colonialism were said to be Siemens twins who came to Africa with a view to dominating and creating conducive atmosphere for the colonial masters to achieve their aim of coming to the continent. The first batch of Christian missionaries came to the southern part of the country wherein they established their base with the traditional rulers, who were used as vital tools in getting the populace. However, the palace monarchic and diplomatic Christianity later became channel and instrument for slave trade. The traditional religious leaders whom the colonial masters used were not genuine converts but they were in diplomatic relationship with the western missionaries.¹

Nevertheless, a new wave of Christianity emerged in Nigeria between 19th and 20th Centuries wherein the protestant missionaries came with the toga of “abolitionism” of slave trade that characterised the first wave of Christianity. The main aim of this set of missionaries was to separate Christian faith from colonialism that encouraged slave trade which was antithetical to true Christianity. It has been contended that:

The second and third epochs of the Christian faith in Africa are historically connected. For 1, the “filthy commerce of slaves” dealt a deadly blow on the “second journey”, the move to assuage and, consequently, to abolish this commerce provided the spring-board for the third visit of the Christian church to African continent. Both the missionaries, who by the middle of 19th century resumed the efforts to evangelise the continent, and the colonial adventurers and explorers, although with certain differing, if not contradicting motives, claimed to have been moved this time by the goal of stopping the trade. The missionaries tried to replace the slave markets with churches and schools, while the colonial politicians tried to replace the same with raw-material supplying centres and political protectorates. Thus, right from the start, this third venture ran the risk of laying foundation that would create future difficulties in the form of the confusion of the Christians church with colonialists.²

It has been observed that, this new wave of Christianity was not a unified message. It was a shattered dissemination of both Protestantism and Catholicism which were more or less fighting the supremacy of the

new world. The seeds of what is regarded as “evil” eventually blossomed in the 'normalisation' of multiplicity of churches in Nigeria that birthed Pentecostalism.³

The inability of the mainline churches established by the western missionaries to foster Christian principles that were culturally liberating and anthropologically enhancing as well as religiously fulfilling in the African context was the bleeding ground for the emergence of Pentecostalism in Nigeria. The coming of Pentecostalism was viewed as welcome development and a liberation tool in the hands of Africans who were suffering in the hands of the colonial masters who preached Christianity to them in one breadth but were at the same time using dictatorial powers to rule. The action of the colonial masters was diametrically opposed to the Christian faith they claimed to have been propagating. At this point, independent and Pentecostal groups were now considered to be the vanguards of consciousness in Nigeria.⁴

One of the essential characteristics of the new African Christianity that came by way of Pentecostal movement was the emphasis placed on prayers in the power of the Holy Spirit. According to Ukpog, “The peculiar situation in the Nigerian society of the early 20th century contributed immensely to this spiritual consciousness. Since then, Pentecostalism has spread to Africa thereby having greater impacts on the church and the society. Before now, there was acute demonic operation in the area of witchcraft which was alleged to have caused poverty and diseases in the land”.⁵ But with the emergence of Pentecostal churches, people's spiritual, emotional and physical needs were attended to thereby making them feel relieved. When African prophets arose

who spoke to the needs of the people from the depths of their own religious consciousness, they counted their converts in hundreds of thousands.⁶

Conceptual Context

Pentecostalism: It is defined as a Protestant Christian movement that emphasises direct personal experience of God through Baptism with the Holy Spirit⁶. The term Pentecostal is derived from the word “Pentecost”, which means fifty, an event that commemorates the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the followers of Jesus Christ fifty days after His ascension. In Greek, it is the name for the Jewish feast of weeks.

Myth: The term myth used in this context means a commonly held belief or idea that is false. It is “A commonly-held but false belief, a common misconception; a fictitious or imaginary person or thing; a popular conception about a real person or event which exaggerates or idealizes reality”⁷. There are many views people hold about Pentecostalism which are not true, yet they spread as if they were true.

Impact: It means effect or consequence of a thing. Impact of Pentecostalism therefore means the effect that it has had on the Nigerian church and the society in general.

Church: The concept church comes from the Greek word 'ekklesia' which means an assembly of people.⁸ It is the community of believers in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Society: This is a community, nation or broad grouping of people having common traditions, institutions, and collective activities and interests.⁹ In this paper, the society here refers to Nigeria as a nation which feels the impacts of Pentecostalism on it.

Misconceptions or myths about Pentecostalism:

There are many misconceptions and myths surrounding Pentecostalism across the globe, and Nigeria is not an exception. Many mainline church Christians and theologians spread myths about Pentecostalism without knowing the reality of what they spread. As it was in the days of Jesus Christ, when He was accused of using demonic power of Beelzebub to heal the sick and perform other miracles, so it is today with the church especially Pentecostalism. (Matthew 12:22-30).

First, Pentecostalism is considered as a small group. Many believe that most Pentecostal churches are small independent assemblies therefore they are nothing to write home about unlike the mainline churches who have organized and established structures spread across continents. This is wholly a fallacy. Studies have shown that Pentecostalism as a movement is ranked next to the Roman Catholic Church.¹⁰ Though there are some Pentecostal organizations who are independent movements without central administrative control, if all the Pentecostal groups are brought together, they far outnumber many of the mainline churches.

Second, it has been contended that Pentecostalism is a cult group. This is far from being true. It was reported that Reverend Campbell Morgan had described Pentecostalism as the last vomit of Satan.¹¹ To the critics of Pentecostalism, Pentecostals are occult groups that promote demonic doctrines instead of propagating the gospel of Christ. Some link them to Hindu Kundal demons that control Pentecostal churches. Some assert that Pentecostalism has involuntarily tightened personality cult in the contemporary Christianity¹². According to them, in the Pentecostal circles the personality of the pastors commands more respect or

admiration than what an authentic Catholic devotion reserves to the Blessed Sacrament, “the presence of Jesus Christ.” Since there is a belief in the pastors' person as instrument or medium for divine power, the healers or miracles workers exercise tyrannical authority over their followers. The assertion is not truly so. The scriptures enjoin believers to give honour to whom honour is due; not to regard any pastor as god or tyrant. The few who do such are not real Pentecostals because a true born again Pentecostal imbibes the true virtues of Christ, one of which is humility. You shall know them by their fruit, is the scriptural injunction (Matthew 7:16).

Third, Pentecostals are said to be too emotional in their practices. When believers pray and cry it shows the level of emotional attachment and not Holy Spirit who moves them to do so.¹³ It must be stated that while some extreme Pentecostals demonstrate some characters that are not spiritually propelled, it is a mistake to generalise that Pentecostals are emotional people.

Fourth, it is a widely held belief that Pentecostals are fundamentalists. It is asserted that fundamentalism is characterised by biblical literalism, a clear-cut doctrine of what they believe to be the “fundamentals” of Christian orthodoxy, a unique view of history called dispensational premillennialism and the establishment of the separatist church and schools in an attempt to shun not only the corruption of the society but also the corrupting influence of Christians who believe differently. But this view was rejected by some evangelical leaders who saw such description as the anti-intellectualism and parochialism of the concept of fundamentalism.¹⁴

Fifth, another myth held about Pentecostalism is that Pentecostals do not use medicine. Pentecostals believe in the miraculous healing power of God yet majority of

them believe in the God's gift of medical knowledge to doctors and allied health workers. Some early Pentecostals such as Charles Parham Fox and William Seymour taught that believers should eschew medicine and trust God for healing. It was reported that Seymour had once written in his news letter "The Apostolic Faith" that "medicine is for unbelievers, but the remedy for the saints of God we find in James 5:14"¹⁵ Today, some Pentecostal churches acknowledge that God has given the gift of medicine to mankind as well as divine healing therefore they establish hospitals and other medical facilities to attend to the sick members. While the sick are treated in the hospitals, prayers are offered for quick healing as the doctors themselves know that they only treat but God heals.

Sixth, it is also a widely held view that Pentecostals preach only prosperity gospel. According to Fayomi, "there is evidence that many are just charlatans looking for means of livelihood. Many are perhaps genuinely religious".¹⁶ The position above is clear that though there are some who are out there to get what will meet their daily needs, there are genuine ones who are there for gospel work. There are some assemblies that do not collect tithes and offering at all. They believe in willing contributions of those who are touched by God to donate to His work. That view is therefore not correct.

Seventh, some critics of Pentecostalism hold a view that Pentecostal clerics or pastors are not trained pastors. It is asserted that while mainline Christian traditions require their clergy to be well educated, most Pentecostal groups have no requirement that clergy pursue university or seminary degree.¹⁷ It is further contended that Pentecostals believe that the Holy Spirit will teach them all things (John 14:26) therefore they do not undergo theological training. According to them, that makes

Pentecostal pastors to be shallow in understanding the Bible as they believe the literal interpretation of the Bible without more. This position is not wholly correct.

There are many Pentecostal churches which have established theological schools and seminaries for the training and theological equipment of the workers in the vineyard of the Lord. Most of them who depend only on God's call have realised the need to train themselves to be able to face emerging challenges in the ministry. Those who are trained ministers go farther in the work than those who are not trained. Many ministries use the case of Paul in the Bible who laboured more abundantly than his contemporaries because of his educational background and training as yardstick of training their clergy. Today, there are professors in the ministries who are using their knowledge to effectively propagate the gospel of Christ.

Impacts of Pentecostalism on the Church and the society

The Pentecostal movement started and spread like wide fire globally thereby having greater effects on the global scene including Nigeria. According to Kenneth Archer:

Pentecostalism began as and continues to be a complex, heterogeneous and eclectic movement in both theological and social composition. During the period that ran roughly from the American Civil War to the Great Depression, American society was caught in the vortex of change as mass migration, urbanization, and industrialization re-sculptured the Northern American landscape. As a result, societal problems became much more complicated and acute. Yet 'most public-spirited Protestants still felt that the key to a better life together lay in personal moral reform.' Thus the most prevalent

evangelical Protestant attempts to reform urban life was based on principles of private action and personal responsibility.¹⁸

The American Civil War was a very significant factor leading to the spread of Pentecostal spirituality at the beginning of the 20th century in America. Due to the depression and general malaise of the populace, there was craving for new spiritual hope. This situation offered fundamental religious motives for Pentecostal renewal. Therefore Pentecostalism found a natural ambience as the people were coming out of the Civil War.

Spiritual Impact

The explosion of global Pentecostalism in Nigeria emanated from the religious and political scenario of the country between 1950 and 1970. The goal of self-affirmation was glaringly evident in the projects of the nationalists, seeking liberation from clutches of European Imperialism¹⁹. Despite the opposition generated by this movement, there was undeniable attraction for it. From the spirit of this event, any situation that was wholeheartedly in conformity with the pre-colonial status quo, that fostered self-esteem and cultural identity, and perhaps offered practical solution and gave greater impetus for liberty was welcomed by the people. And the global Pentecostalism was handy to provide the needed window.

Some scholars opined that the religious yearnings of the people were not met by the mainline churches and their missionaries, who compounded their problem through slave trade. Pentecostalism being a liberation movement found its place easily in the lives of the people. As it is argued:

Their (Members of mainline churches) expectations from the churches were not met. The

missionaries of the older churches failed to address the type of questions the African situation raised for them: witchcraft, demon possession, haunting by evil spirit, the cult of ancestors; the use of protective charms, talisman; sorcery, and the traditional dancing form of worship at the shrines. The tendency among the missionaries was to dismiss these questions as due to ignorance arising from a pre-scientific mentality.²⁰

Failure to answer these questions brought dissatisfaction among church members and the general public; there was quest for more appealing religious platform. The general dissatisfaction opened door for new religious experiences among members of the mainline churches and general populace at large. Pentecostalism therefore offered the needed solutions to the questions.

The social deprivation theory as applied to Pentecostalism is eloquently supported by the explosion of Pentecostalism especially in Nigeria. The factors that are considered to be responsible for the spread of Pentecostalism are considered to be deprivation, disorganization and defectiveness. Also, people embraced Pentecostalism because of its scripturally appealing message and its self-authenticating and community validating religious experiences.²¹

Numerical Impact

Studies have shown that the Pentecostal movement that started in less than two hundred years has spread across the global sphere and is ranked next to Roman Catholicism. In 1995, David Barrett estimated that there were 217 million “Denominational Pentecostals” throughout the world.²² In 2011, a Pew Forum study of global Christianity found that there were an estimated 279 million classical Pentecostals, making 4percent of the

total world population and 12.8 percent of the world's Christian population Pentecostals.²³ According to scholars, the largest percentage of Pentecostals are found in Sub-Saharan Africa (44 percent), followed by the Americas (37 percent) and Asia and Pacific (16 percent).

²⁴ Among the over 700 Pentecostal denominations, 240 are classified as part of Wesleyan, holiness or “Methodistic” Pentecostalism.

In addition to denominational Pentecostal churches, there are many Pentecostal churches that choose to exist independently of denominational oversight.²⁵ Some of these churches may be doctrinally identical to the various Pentecostal denominations, while others may adopt beliefs and practices that differ considerably from classic Pentecostalism, such as Word of Faith teachings or Kingdom Now theology.

It has been postulated that the Assemblies of God, the largest Pentecostal denomination in the world, had 69,200,000 members as at 2018. The other major international Pentecostal denominations are Apostolic Church with 15,000,000 members, Four Square church with 90,000 churches and 8,800,000 members and the Church of God (Cleveland) with 36,000 churches and 7,000,000 members.²⁶ In Africa, the dominant Pentecostal denominations include Redeemed Christian Church of God, Deeper Christian Life Ministry, Living Faith Church Worldwide among others. No doubt, Pentecostalism has had numerical impacts on all the continents of the world. The movement is increasing day by day like wide fire consuming everywhere.

Educational Impact

Education and Christianity are inseparable. The colonial masters who came with Christianity to Africa used education as a medium of training their converts to be able to communicate with them and the people effectively. Through those schools, they trained interpreters and others who worked with them.²⁷ When the second batch of missionaries who were mainly slave returnees came with Christianity, they established schools and other training centres in order to reach their target audience with the gospel.²⁸

It has been posited that some Pentecostal churches have been commended for their investment in education as this has had a great impact on the standard of education and access to it in the country. According to Akanbi, the success of these churches to the development of western education in the country may not be unconnected with the fact that many of the leaders and founders of such churches are members of elite class, and men who have attained a good height in formal education themselves.²⁹

Some Pentecostal churches such as the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Deeper Christian Life Ministry, Living Faith Church, Church of God Mission etc. have established universities for higher education. The Redeemed Christian Church of God has Redeemers University, Deeper Christian Life Ministry has Anchor University, Living faith Church has Covenant and Landmark Universities, Church of God Mission has Benson Idahosa University and other Pentecostal churches that have established their universities.

Moreover, some educational programmes of study created by some Pentecostal universities that were not in

existence in tertiary institutions in the country in the past, such as entrepreneurial studies, have been successfully introduced into the nation's curriculum. Apart from that, one of the Pentecostal church universities in Nigeria has been rated as one of the best in Nigeria and the world at large.³⁰ The above educational institutions provide quality academic and spiritual training for the students, and employment for members of the public.

In addition to the above, many Pentecostal churches have established seminaries and theological colleges which offer qualitative training for their pastors and other ministers in the country. One of such is Dynamic Theological Seminary, Port Harcourt, Rivers State in Nigeria. These educational institutions produced and parade best brains that can compete anywhere in the globe.

Some scholars have argued that education in the private sector, Pentecostal churches' schools inclusive, are too expensive in Nigeria and that it is meant for the children of the elite class, especially those who siphoned state resources.³¹ But it is indisputable that it is the only educational sector wherein quality education with modern, state-of-the art learning facilities can be obtained. Also, private mission institutions are better than the public institutions when it comes to students' victimisation, high level of corruption, sexual harassment, cultism and indecent dressing. The sector is also known for stable and uninterrupted academic calendar, which has helped many young people to graduate within the stipulated time and to build their careers.

In the nutshell, Pentecostal churches have left indelible mark in the annals of education in Nigeria. The programmes of those schools established by Pentecostal

churches have reshaped the academic curriculum and studies in the country. The bursary allowances put in place by some Pentecostal churches have greatly changed the life some indigent children who not have attained education ordinarily.

Negative Impacts of Pentecostalism.

In as much as there are positive impacts of Pentecostalism on the people and the society at large, there are also negative effects of Pentecostalism. Scholars have considered the following as being the negative impacts of Pentecostalism. (a) *H e a l i n g* , deliverance, dreams, visions and prophecy. According to Udoette, in Pentecostal spirituality, healing and deliverance are not just considered to be an extraordinary “*charism*” and peculiar grace emanating from the treasury of the church, but they are seen as the ordinary rights and privileges of every Christian.³² There is tendency of separating spiritual gifts from sacramental life of the church, and at worst, sacramental mediation of grace is considered merely as ritualistic Christianity lacking in power. That for some priests and pastors of the mainline churches, there is nothing sacramental about healing and deliverance but simply a ministration of personal spiritual power by an individual. The Christian faith is considered as a manifestation of the power of Jesus in the everyday of life. But in reality, this is degenerating into a superstitious Christianity, where experience is separated from doctrine.

Therefore the practice of visions, dreams and telling of prophecies are subtly entering into mainline Christianity thereby influencing their practices. This situation is compounded by the Marian vision, especially in Africa

wherein many Christians are now out there to consult, and spiritual direction or counseling is often confused with sorcery or divination. This conforms to the African version of religiosity in which dreams and visions of the angelic and deceased hosts are seen as very natural. The emphasis placed on these phenomena in Africa can easily lead to conclusion that there is an emergence of neo-paganism in the guise of Pentecostalism.³³ This is not far from the truth. Today, there is a resurgence of prayer houses in every street of each town and villages wherein those former herbal practitioners and sorcerers have turned to self-acclaimed prophets who are seeing visions and prophesying to unsuspecting public who are gullible for 'spiritual things'. This is indeed a challenge to the church to reflect on her worldview and cosmogony, particularly in Africa.

(b) Fundamentalism and Gullibilism. Fundamentalism refers to acceptance and application of scriptural text at face value, so that, anything out outside that is not acceptable no matter its authenticity. This leads to the danger of neglecting the sacred traditions of the church as true source of revelation beside the scriptures. It also neglects the theological interpretation or hermeneutics that give the background of the scriptures so relied thereon. Gullibilism on the other hand refers to the belief in anything purportedly emanating from the spirit without necessary caution or security. The obvious danger here is false illuminism with its attendant deceitful darts. According to Otonko, the above positions are as extreme as they are unreasonable.³⁴

(c) Clerical Flamboyance. As it is natural with man to take advantage of any available situation, so it is in the church. The clerics take advantage economically whenever there is spiritual reawakening. The success and

validity of ministers of God now seem to be measured by their flamboyance and materialism. This fabric has eaten deep into Christendom in Nigeria. The clergies live far above many of their members and it has become a competition in the church of God. According to Achunike, “Pentecostal flamboyant lifestyle affects priests and seminarians. This is precisely because we belong to a society that is flamboyant, a society that worships wealth or money or possession”.³⁵ This lifestyle contradicts the Biblical presupposition that the Son of man (Jesus) had no place to lay His head (Luke 9:58). The challenge of “living good and giving the best to God” as encouraged in most Pentecostal churches, is having negative effects on the church.

(d) Financial and Material Prosperity. The flamboyant lifestyle is affecting not only the clergies but it is becoming a pandemic among the laity. Pentecostalism with the message of prosperity and blessing is making material prosperity a yardstick for divine favour, whoever is poor is considered to be a sinner and not a born-again. In the perspective of the promoters of this gospel, it is the prosperity of the members of the church that shows which church is really worshipping God in the right way.³⁶ Many Christians in a quest to live “above board” indulge in all manner of unscriptural things to belong.

(e) Spiritual Titanism and Religious Tyranny/Feudalism. According to scholars, Pentecostalism has involuntarily tightened personality cult in the contemporary Christianity. It has succeeded to turn attention of the faithful not simple to “deceased saints” but to “the living saints”. This attitude is creating what we may call “spiritual titanism” among Christians, that is to say, those with spiritual gifts exercise them in a titanic manner,

using their gifts to lord over others and to bring them under servitude.³⁷ It has been observed that in the Pentecostal circles, the personality of Pastors commands more respect or admiration what a Catholic will reserve to the “Blessed Sacrament”, the real presence of Jesus Christ. Their commands and advice are unquestionable, while their whims and caprices are executed without questioning or observation.

This has negatively affected even the mainline churches in Nigeria. As observed:

The problem of “priest-healers” has not left the Nigerian Bishops at ease. A conference or consultation held in 1991 in which most of the well known “healers” participated does not seem to have introduced order and restraint in the exercise of this charism. Again I see the problem as related to the “sacred power” of the priest. In Port Harcourt, Onitsha, Enugu, Orlu, and Aba dioceses, to name a few, our bishops find it difficult at times to exercise their supervisory ministry over the power priest-healers. The charismatic priests appear to be very conscious of their power- a power which is often times maintained through the exploitation of the superstitious and the irrational, of which distressed faithful are the victims.³⁸

Some of these pastor-healers exercise power in tyrannical and dictatorial manner thereby creating a kind of selfdom which transfers the desire and hunger of the faithful for God to themselves and into a religious enslavement. Some hold unto power with threat of cursing anyone who dared question or disobey them, making their victims to believe that a separation from their feudal holds is an automatic malediction. It takes the special grace of God and genuine repentance to be free from their strongholds.

Other perceived negative effects of Pentecostalism include close fraternity wherein only the brethren receive help from members and sometime this result in immorality. It also introduces spiritual “ethnicity, nepotism and tribalism” which does not portray the church in a good light. There is also introduction of unchristian traditions in the church which is affecting the church negatively. Some ministers make their members to do unspeakable things in the name of obedience to daddy G.O. and spiritual godfathers. Some obey their spiritual leaders to the extent of committing crimes against the state. A case of a particular man of God who asked his members to burn some members, who were perceived to have committed immorality, readily comes to mind. That so called man of God has been tried, convicted and sentenced to death, yet his members have turned his prison cell to become a pilgrimage site. The above activities and many more are said to be negatively affecting the church of Christ and the society. Though the New Testament church is said to have spiritual gifts and does exercise them, as the Bible says, let everything be done with moderation and in line with the scriptures so as to bring God's glory to the church. Anything outside the scriptures is inglorious and unacceptable to God.

Conclusion

From the exposition above, it is undeniable that Pentecostalism is a movement that has come to stay in the Christian world. Despite the widely held misconceptions about Pentecostalism, it has had some footprints that cannot be easily erased but they can stand the test of time. Spiritually, Pentecostalism has brought light to many Nigerians who were living in darkness before now. It has also brought socio-economic changes that make life

better for the church members and the society in general. The few bad eggs within the movement should be identified and dealt with so the purpose of its revelation will be achieved holistically. Calling the movement Satanic evil amounts to attacking the Holy Spirit which will attract eternal damnation.

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