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The Origin, Impact and Challenges of Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria 1930-2018

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Abstract

Pentecostal Church started many years ago as a small mustard seed. Presently it has recorded various social, spiritual and economic growths. More so, it has contributed in the building of mission schools and other noticeable economic ventures that continued to change the social and spiritual life of many in Nigeria. The study adopts analytical, descriptive and historical methods of research and brought to the fore the impacts of the Pentecostal churches on the growth of Christianity in Nigeria. Most of the Pentecostal churches have become a stakeholder in the annals of Christianity in Nigeria and beyond. Structurally, many Universities, industries and other establishments have been built by some of these Pentecostal churches. It was however discovered that through the style of worship of Pentecostal churches they were able to contextualise the Christian faith and thus enhanced growth. Moreover, the study recommends that the Pentecostal churches should concentrate on the message of the cross that led to the death of Jesus Christ at the Cross of Calvary. In addition, a message of total unity should be placed at a high premium particularly as it concerns all Pentecostal churches in Nigeria.

KEYWORDS: Church, Worship, Faith, Pentecostal, Calvary

Introduction

Nigeria has witnessed tremendous growth in the history of Christianity through the Pentecostal denomination in Nigeria. This development made Nigeria a leading figure and spiritual stakeholder in the global Christian community. Presently Nigeria continues to play an important role in the growth of Christianity in unique ways not only in Africa but in other continents. (Sanneh & Carpenter, 2005).

The global Pentecostal denomination has various forms of “independent” churches in Nigeria and other parts of the world. It is therefore difficult to identify Pentecostal churches from various African Initiated Churches in Nigeria.

Pentecostal churches usually spring up on most occasions in an area where the Christian religion has been in existence before or places where the Christian faith has not been planted. It has contributed tremendously because of the style of operations and methods of leadership based on the influence of the Holy Spirit.

The proliferation of Pentecostal churches in Nigeria started after the Nigeria Civil War which was fought between 1967-1970. The independence of Nigeria encouraged religious freedom in the country. This gave rise to a situation whereby the strong tie of membership of the mainline churches develop the spiritual habit of worshipping in Pentecostal denomination. Many Christian groups that were once a fellowship were converted to churches. The Pentecostal churches over the years have dominated the Christian community in Nigeria in various ways. For instance, some of the Pentecostal denominations like Redeemed Christian Church of God, Living Faith Church, Assemblies of God, Christ Apostolic Church and a host of others are the leading Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria with many branches at home and abroad.

General Origin of Pentecostalism

Pentecostalism is a Christian movement that gave rise to several Pentecostal churches in many parts of the world in the 20th century. Recalling the Holy Spirit's baptism of the disciples of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, (Acts of the

Apostles 2–4), this experience appears to have been common in the Christian movement during its first generations.

Denominations that were known for revivalist fervour were subdued. Emotional modes of religious expression, enthusiastic congregational singing, spontaneous testimonies, prayer in unison, and extemporaneous sermons on simple Biblical themes by lay preachers gave way to order, formal worship services that were conducted by “reverends,” ministers trained in homiletics (preaching skills), who were influenced by higher Biblical criticism (J. Gordon Melton, 2021). Lecture centres and elegant sanctuaries replaced camp meetings and crude wood-frame tabernacles. Although Pentecostal fellowships generally emerged as the result of doctrinal differences, nonreligious factors, such as the outbreak of World War I, contributed to their development. For example, the majority of Pentecostals were pacifists when the war started.

The Pentecostal movement in the 19th century was affected by

racial issues. For instance, the Azusa revival was led by an African American minister who welcomed worshipers regardless of their race, and the first formal Pentecostal denomination, the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World, was organised as an interracial fellowship. This liberal racial attitude bred controversy, however, as Pentecostalism spread into the Deep South the movement became segregated along the same racial lines as the older denominations (J. Gordon Melton, 2021).

Wider national and international expansion, however, resulted from the Azusa Street revival that began in 1906 at the Apostolic Faith Gospel Mission at 312 Azusa Street in Los Angeles. Its leader, William Seymour, a one-eyed Holiness church pastor and former member of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, had been exposed to Parham's teachings at a Bible school in Houston, Texas (J. Gordon Melton, 2021). Under Seymour's guidance, the old frame building on Azusa Street became a great spiritual centre that for many years attracted rich and poor, blacks and whites, Anglos and Latinos, as well as many preachers whose own

ministry had become staid. Spiritually energized and convinced that they had been charismatically endowed, scores of men and women from Azusa and other Pentecostal churches began extolling the reality of speaking in tongues. By the beginning of World War I, new congregations emerged as storefront missions, small tabernacles in sparsely populated rural areas, and upper-story lofts in squalid urban neighbourhoods. These modest dwellings, found across North America, housed poor but lively groups of Pentecostal believers under such names as the Pentecostal, Apostolic faith, Latter Rain, or Full Gospel churches.

Brief Origin of Pentecostal Denomination in Nigeria

Pentecostal churches started in Nigeria due to hunger for God. Many worshippers in Nigeria got tired of the traditional system of worship in Nigeria. When Christianity began to grow in the African continent, there came agitations from the African adherents of the Christian faith of the need to have indigenous Churches (Peter Olanrewaju Awojobi, 2020 1–10). The indigenous Nigeria worshipper claimed that European and

American Christianity has numerous spiritual deficiencies. Some of these Pentecostal churches that emerged include Christ Apostolic Church (CAC), Cherubim and Seraphim (C&S), Deeper Life Bible Church, The Redeemed Christian Church of God, Winners' Chapel, Christ Embassy, Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries, etc (Ojo, 2006, Kalu, 2008). Study reveals that most of the founders of these brands of Churches belong to mission-established churches at one time or the other. Some were forced to leave while others left voluntarily because of doctrinal differences (Ojo, 2006, Kalu, 2008).

Also, it is viewed in some quarters that the mission churches are “dead”. This informed the popular slogan at that time: “come out from among them and be separate.” Many came out because of the fear of “death” to join the “living” church. They claimed to have a better approach to Christianity than the mission churches (Ojo, 2006, Kalu, 2008).

The Impact of Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria

The Pentecostal Movement has recorded a lasting impact on the history of Nigeria's Christianity. Spiritually, economically, and socially ample impacts have been recorded by many of the churches that are classified as a Pentecostal denomination.

Spiritually, one of the things that Pentecostal Church leaders usually emphasise on is the message of holiness and miracle. They are interested in the spiritual development of the worshippers and where they will spend eternity. They introduce different types of spiritual activities, prayers, and messages that are capable of meeting the challenges many members are facing. They operate at a level of spirituality that appeals to the spiritual culture of African people and beyond. This development made many Christians migrate from the frontline denominations to the Pentecostal denomination. The issue is that while the strength of the frontline churches rests on liturgy, the Pentecostal churches focus on spiritual gifts and demonstration of the power of God. This has

made some of the mission churches introduce elements which the Pentecostals employ in their strategy for drawing members (Awojobi, 2013:8). Presently in some frontline churches, things like praise and worship, night vigils, anointing service, breakthrough services, deliverance hour, healing service and other attractive activities have been introduced. This has reduced the rate of migration of members from mission churches to Pentecostal churches. However, these are not without intermittent opposition and complications, especially from diehard members and clergy of the church who are bent on maintaining the tradition and practises of the church as they have been from the beginning (Awojobi, 2013:8).

Notwithstanding, Pentecostalism has brought a new dimension in the annals of Nigeria Christianity in impacting different classes of people around the globe. The African independent churches and the Pentecostals, with the spiritual approach to human challenges, have been able to handle many spiritual challenges and thus encourage growth in many dimensions.

Pentecostalism in Nigeria has reawakened a general desire and love for the Bible as the written word of God, and as a perennial document of authentic Christian moral life. Many Christians are not taking the Bible seriously and it is no longer considered a book meant for the clergy. There are many Bible study groups in the mainline churches in Nigeria and some of them are operating vital ecclesial ministries. (J. Azodo, 1993, 13).

Christian music has taken a new shape as a result of many gospel artists that have emerged in Nigeria. It has witnessed a remarkable innovation since the emergence of Pentecostal Churches. Many people had discovered a new dimension of being a Christian through gospel music. The fluidity of Pentecostal rhyme and rhythm has made it easy for people to sing and play the same tune in various languages and diverse cultural ambiences. Pentecostal music is homogenising the Cultural spectrum of the country. The youths of various ethnics background and religious affiliations can now come together to sing and enjoy a common religious tune.

According to Columbanus Udofia: “Music is a central part of African culture and especially in African religious culture.” (C. A. Udofia, 2004, 38)

Pentecostalism has fostered the flourishing of African rhythm in Christian worship, making the Church more at home in the African soil. The presence of Pentecostal music and accompaniments has helped many young Africans to realise that religious services can be “pleasurable” and has created a common identity for people of various denominations and ethnicities in the one big family of God. Moreover, Pentecostal music has reawakened the religious life of the people. Many churches are now giving attention to the formation and training of choristers in the church. Resources are being allotted for the provision of a state of art musical instruments as singing and dancing is becoming an integral part of the liturgy. Pentecostalism has led to the integration of African music into Christian worship in a significant manner and style (H. C. Achunike, 106).

The Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria have made many to be serious in the area of prayer and evangelism. There is a noticeable quest for a spirituality based on a personal relationship with the Lord, which for instance in the Catholic Church is manifested in love for private Eucharistic adoration (Schubert, 1991). Pentecostalism is noted for encouraging a spirituality that abhors confinement and standardisation while provoking an intimate experience of the Holy Spirit (. H. C. Achunike, 95-96). Many people in Nigeria are now serious about prayer, evangelism, message of holiness and the consciousness of God.

Socially and economically, the Pentecostal churches have made ample impact in many dimensions. They continued in the building of schools and the provision of employment for members and non-communicants. They preach prosperity messages to worshippers and thereby many that have faith are blessed by such messages. Some of these churches assure worshippers of financial breakthroughs and good jobs. Many Pentecostal churches even

make effort to source employment for the unemployed worshippers and introduction of loan schemes to members. (Awojobi, 2013:8). Most of the mission churches have these activities for their worshippers. Besides, most of these Pentecostal churches are seriously involved in community development like digging wells, sinking boreholes, building roads, developing health care centres, and the provision of scholarships to members and nonmembers. Similarly, they also have programmes for widows, orphans, widowers, and the less privileged in society.

Challenges of Pentecostal Denomination in Nigeria

The Devil is not happy with the good work genuine Pentecostal churches are rendering in Nigerian society. As a result, the movement continued to be attacked by various means. However, these are the challenges of the Pentecostal denomination in Nigeria.

It has brought the era of the rise of false prophets. In the Old Testament particularly the time of Moses and Elijah, they were a lot of false prophets. During Moses's encounter with Pharaoh, his

false prophets were in operation. Elijah also witnessed numerous false prophets during his dispensation. Most of the prophets were performing magic. These false prophets were prophesying in Israel, while Elijah remains the recognised prophet with other prophets in Israel. Today many of these prophets appear as an angel of light. They have made many hate Christianity through their negative activities.

Denominational challenges is another vices that have eaten deep into Nigeria churches. This does not only concerns the Pentecostal denomination but all the churches in Nigeria. The church is expected to be united and work together as one body. Commenting on this G.S.Chukwuemeka notes that

The denominational issue can be seen in the following ways; When a member of the Church refuses to attend a nearby church when he or she travelled even when he or she knows that the church has a Biblical doctrine; Refusal to give communion to another believer that is not worshipping in your church even when the pastor knows that such a believer is a born again Christian; Laying of emphasis on your

denomination alone in the area of church building, holding of crusade and financial assistance. This is spiritual selfishness. Though some churches are not a victim to this, but numerous churches usually emphasise on this; Having the belief that it is only your church that is preaching the truth, and thereby all other churches are preaching false doctrines; Fear of inviting other pastors to preach in your church because of fear of losing your members to him or her even when you know that a person is a man of God (Gold S.Chukwuemeka, 2021, 115-116).

This issue remains one of the problems causing disunity in Nigeria Churches. The problem can be solved if all men of God resort to the message of the Cross that led to the death of Jesus Christ for the sins of the world.

Another issue that needs to be addressed in Pentecostalism is the Selling of Indulgences. Jesus Christ gave us salvation and the gift of the Holy Spirit for free, thereby we should reciprocate his kind gesture. Today many pastors are making merchandise of the believers in the name of a miracle. Many pastors sell water, candle, anointing oil, egg, honey, mantle belt and stone at an exorbitant

price. Such prophets fail to tell their flock the truth because of the acquisition of wealth (Gold S.Chukwuemeka, 2021, 117).

Unhealthy competition is another factor bedevilling Nigeria churches. Various men of God and Christians see the ministry as a sport where people compete. They forgot that we are one body working for Trinity. This development has led to faking of miracles and wearing of indecent dressing particularly the female folk all in the name of competition. (Gold S.Chukwuemeka, 2021, 117).

In addition, position and power remain one of the reasons why many people are opening churches. Nobody wants to serve, everybody wants to be a founder, general overseer and master. For this reason, they engineer little quarrels in their present church and take a few members along to establish their church (Gold S.Chukwuemeka, 2021, 120).

Conclusion

From the look of things in the history of Pentecostalism in Nigeria, it is quite clear from every indication that many Pentecostal

churches have lost the earlier vision that some received from the Lord. But notwithstanding many are still with the first vision which they received from the Lord. It is therefore advisable for other denominations to work together to ensure that the spiritual health of Nigeria churches, continues to robust and flourish spiritually. God is waiting for all Nigerian church leaders and worshippers to carpet themselves with the spirit of love, holiness and unity.

It is good for various denominations in Nigerian society to see themselves as brothers and sisters working in the same vineyard that belongs to the Almighty God. This is because racism, church monopoly, envy and jealous spirit is very glaring among various leaders in Nigeria churches.

Notwithstanding, the Pentecostal denomination has left an indelible mark in the annals of the history of Christianity in Nigeria and beyond. Inarguably Nigeria through the influence of Pentecostal Churches remains the number one spiritually revived

nation in the world. Most of the big church buildings can be found in Nigeria. She continues to raise ministers of the gospel that are shaking the world with the gospel of signs and wonders, love and holiness.

Recommendations

Since we are one in the Body of Christ working together in the vineyard of God all, Christian leaders and worshippers in various denominations should join hands together to ensure that all the gospel churches remain in good spiritual health. This will create a peaceful avenue to preach the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The spirit of Church monopoly, denominationalism and racism continue to be visible in various churches in Nigeria. This omen is seriously affecting the spiritual health of Nigeria Churches. Therefore, it becomes very important for all churches to start preaching the message of unity and oneness which Jesus Christ brought from heaven.

All church members should seek the God of the Church than the pastor of the church. This is because many Christian have been distracted from God because of miracles. This development in Nigeria Churches continues to affect the spiritual health of the church because many Christians on most occasions usually go to the church to seek men of God because of a miracle.

To all truthful men of God in Nigeria, a high premium should be placed on the salvation message which is deliverance from sin, sickness, diseases, poverty and fear. Many preachers are not feeding their flock with a balanced diet. Some only focus on deliverance from poverty and sickness messages and thereby leaving the sermon that concerns deliverance from sin. This development has made a lot of Christians in Nigeria to keep suffering from spiritual malnutrition.

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