Ethical Audit of Prosperity Gospel: Psychological Manipulation or Social Ministry

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ABSTRACT

Emerging manifestations in contemporary studies regarding Pentecostal spirituality in Africa reveals two dramatic findings for scholarship. First, success in the Christian world is defined by prosperity gospel replete with economic message that wealth is a sign of God’s blessing and a compensation for prayer as well as “sowing of seed”. Second, the notion of an abundant God and the propensity to claim innocence of any motive other than fulfilling God’s will for human beings. Drawing upon an extensive contemporary research on prosperity doctrine and based on content analysis, this article examines prosperity teachings and claims and identifies ethical issues that relate to the doctrine. Findings reveals that though prosperity preachers use Bible to support their claims, prosperity gospel does not surmount social misery, poverty and corruption, rather, it entrenches the ills as exemplified in excessive incomes, lavish and flamboyant lifestyles of church leaders at the expense of impoverished church members.

KEYWORDS

Christianity, Ethical Audit, Faith Movement, Pentecostalism, Prosperity Gospel, Psychological Manipulation, Salvation, Social Ministry, Sowing of Seed, Wealth

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary prosperity gospel movement in different parts of the world depicts a predominately anthropocentric, rather than Christocentric theological orientation. It constitutes a sizable component of the readily-exportable Pentecostal phenomenon where adherents superstitiously treat faith as a magical force that can release the power of the Spirit to bring them health and wealth (Adeleye, 2011). It can boast of the most attractive message that Christians are entitled to health, wealth and prosperity through faith. This however presupposes the development of ideas regarding the power of the mind to transform thought and speech into health and wealth. This growing trend in the development of prosperity gospel movement is today exerting an enormous influence and budding presence globally (Zablow, 2006). However, the rapid expansion of Pentecostal movement in the religious landscape of Africa in the past century is commonly associated with its adaptability to the modern world system as well as the modern faith movement (Mill, 2009). Since the inception of Christianity in the first century, it has been evolving as a social institution, changing its organizational shape, redefining its mission, and creating new expressions of worship. This has resulted in the rise and growth of prosperity theology and the decline in membership in the mainline denominations.

In this regard, independent churches as well as the charismatic Pentecostal movements are challenging established religion with ecstatic, vibrant worship replacing routinized liturgical forms (Ojo, 2012). Nonetheless, the major engine driving this transformation in contemporary time is the

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modern-day orientation in Pentecostalism, an expression of Christianity that dates back to the first century when a small group of Jesus’ followers had an encounter with the Holy Spirit. This experience made them to speak in “other tongues” and afterward healed the sick, prophesied, and established a network of churches throughout the then Asia Minor (Acts 2).

This argument’s corollary therefore is that, the rapid expansion of charismatic theology in contemporary time is primarily due to the popularity and attractiveness of prosperity gospel teachings garbed with its allure for material possessions and hope of physical healing. This lends credence to the reason why prosperity gospel possesses the mass appeal of popular religion with unmatched audiences beyond denominational history and formal church structures into extra-ecclesiastical realm for success in the spiritual marketplace (Ball, 2003). Scholars are however inquisitive to ascertain whether Pentecostalism as a religious orientation has the capacity to address the changing bodily and material needs of the people’s lives prompted by modernization and social change in order to give them a greater sense of agency in a period of social, economic, and spiritual uncertainty. While there is evidence suggesting the layering of this model of Christianity on materialism, materialistic Christianity or the prosperity gospel continues to gain ground in not just the big evangelical circles; but also rooting itself into small and medium churches across the African continent guised in translucent theology which influence is permanently altering the African religious landscape (Bowman, 2001).

In reality, it is obvious that the African psyche or worldview is generally open to supernatural experiences which embrace spirituality that seeks after God for physical and material wellbeing. It is against this backdrop that Prosperity Gospel in many countries in Africa has become the fastest growing religious movement within Pentecostalism with a strong global influence and acceptance. Nevertheless, the religious structure of Pentecostalism, especially in its prosperity orientation depicts a scenario of two great realities, that is, poverty and religiosity (Cannon, 2001). This is why poverty is seen as a serious social concern and evil that affects large numbers of people around the world. Across the Christian theological spectrum, prosperity gospel is today spreading beyond the confines of the charismatic movement, where it has been traditionally strong, and is taking root in the larger evangelical church. A recent survey found that in the Nigeria, 49 percent of self-proclaimed Christians agree with the idea that God will grant material riches to all believers who have enough faith (Kitause & Achunike, 2015).

Evidently though, given that the peoples of Nigeria earnestly need a message of optimism that addresses their healing and prosperity necessities and that there is an interesting and significantly influential Christian response to the health and wealth problems in Nigeria, there is a need to note that all that glitters are not gold. This study therefore examines the concept of prosperity gospel in Nigeria, its impact on contemporary social change and ministry for Christianity, and provides an ethical audit of the message and orientation in the face of numerous contemporary challenges (Onwu, 2006).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework that underpins this study is the “theories of causation”. It is presumptuous to undertake a solitary theory of causation for the prosperity gospel movement rather, this study recognizes a wide range of factors that all contributed toward the making of this movement as well as its continued vitality. In this regard, a hybridity of the materialist and the functionalist perspectives of causative factors related to prosperity gospel are adopted for analysis (Barron, 1990). It is evident that the emergence and growth of prosperity gospel in Nigeria over the past decades has witness numerous causes including socio-political factors such as the introduction of a capitalist economy, poverty, secularization, prolonged contact with foreign religion and the African religious belief system (Onwu, 2006). Some however have identified the failure of missionaries and orthodox churches to demonstrate Christian love, and refusal to empower African Christians to lead their own churches. In spite of that, others feel that there is a need to focus on the ability of prosperity gospel to fulfill African religious aspirations such as the desire for spiritual power to overcome all manner of evil
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