

THE PRICE OF FAITH: MONEY IN THE ECONOMY OF SALVATION

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Money, being the energizer, the propeller of human activities, was surely going to be a controversial aspect of the human quest for meaning in life. It is commonly defined as a mere tool for exchange. But where this quest enters into the realm of human happiness, the stakes become very high indeed. To the extent that the human person is flesh, blood and spirit, a crucial and controversial question would inevitably be posed: what kind of happiness does money really give? What are the limitations of this salvation?

Jesus entered the scene at his own time, offering a new way of looking at every other aspect of life. Since then, no fact of life has been the same. "I come to bring fire to the earth", He says, "And how I wished it were blazing already" (Luke 12:49). "Behold", He says, "I make ALL THINGS new" (Rev. 21:5). This intrusion into a world that was hitherto in darkness, a formless void, offers new meaning (Genesis 1:2). It is against this back-drop that money, its use and definition are all thrown into this fire that Jesus has brought to our world. It is therefore natural that all those who have been 'burnt' by this fire, must inevitably show signs of its effect.

This short paper is an attempt at examining the uses and abuses of money and their collective effects on the Gospel. Part One will present a general overview of the historical development of the argument, Part Two will try to address the theme of the Gospel of Prosperity. The Third Part will examine the Nigerian experience while Part Four, by way of conclusion, will suggest some important lessons which we need to draw.

1. Money and the Practice of Christianity.

The basic thesis of Max Weber's Protestant Ethic is that

Protestant Christianity sought to establish a Theological correlation between material/economic prosperity and the blessings of God. This position is in itself based on the narrow definition of what constitutes God's blessings.

In the Bible, we encounter the man whose wealth was so much, he didn't know what to do. His plans were initially to "eat, drink and have a good time" until he was told that his soul could actually be taken from him. Jesus drives the point home by pointing out that: "So it is when a man stores up treasures for himself in place of making himself rich in the sight of God" (Luke 12:19,21).

No where does God/Jesus condemn money as such, rather it is the human attitude towards it. After all, the lack of it altered many conventional things in the life of Jesus. Had Mary and Joseph been rich, they probably would have made a reservation in the inn (Luke 2:6,7); the wealth of a friend enabled the Apostles and Jesus to have the last supper amidst a decent environment (Luke 22:12).

Money of course has tended to blur the image of the institutional churches with civil and political life. This has led to the false belief that the strength of the church can be measured by edifices and other paraphernalia of power. To what degree has our Christian Community escaped these temptations?

2. The Gospel of Prosperity

The Gospel of Prosperity represents a reinterpretation of the Weberian ethic as it concerns the link between God's blessings and prosperity of believers. Simply put, the Gospel of prosperity, capitalising on human greed and the quest for power argues, that believers are not meant to be poor, that to be poor is not consonant with the God of Wealth. Hence, it believes that: God is the source of wealth, to believe in Him truly means enjoying part of this wealth. It comes to believers through the grace of God's chosen instruments - His ordained Ministers. From their own wealth, believers are made to relate to God's wealth, hence, the preacher of this Gospel advises His followers in something like this: "Believe in the God of wealth as you can see this wealth manifested in my own life

style". The logic here is that clerics then start seeking to reproduce this Gospel by way of acquisition of the necessary paraphernalia of power. Thus, his (the Minister's) car, home, attire, etc. are supposed to be the most expensive that money can buy. He has to acquire a sartorial poise that fits his stature; and his new message is simply: "Come to me all you who are poor and I will make you rich".

The Biblical basis of the Gospel of Prosperity goes to selected texts in the Bible which are used to reflect this reality. A few examples are: Mark 11:23-4: "Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received a hundred fold here in this life..." Phil. 4:19: "My God will supply every need of yours according to His riches..." "Ask and you shall receive..." (Matthew 7:7). Preaching a sermon in Zimbabwe, one of the strong protagonists of this Gospel recounted an experience of his, which proves this blessing of God. It was about a farm in which God shows His preference for His own. In this farm!

'... the plots were seeded, and in time, a variety of vegetables began to sprout from the ground. As the growing season waned, however, and the dry winter months approached, something odd began to happen. The plots belonging to the unbelievers completed their production cycle, flowered, and went to seed, and died off as normal. But the plots of those Christians who had believed in God's word continued to produce - not just through the autumn months, but through the dry African Winter as well. There was no natural explanation. It was impossible. Yet it had happened. And it was not the result of the work of some dead ancestor or the consequence of a ritual dance. This winter harvest was the direct result of a people hearing and applying God's word'.¹

To his listeners in Africa, this superfluous story would have stirred an air of expectation that to believe means a bountiful harvest defying all seasons. If being outside the fold means that one runs the risk of not having a good harvest, who will like to run the risk of hunger and poverty? It is instructive to note that the proponents of the Gospel of Prosperity are seen as junior partners in the evangelical schemes of the very rich American "televangelists". Indeed, the Gospel of Prosperity has its origins in the United States

and it has been traced to people like E. W. Kenyan (d 1948). From him, the latter day preachers drew and later on presented a Gospel whose popularity has now got political, economic and social implications. Today, the names of Oral Roberts, Jerry Falwel, Jimmy Swaggart, Tim and Fay Bakker have come to be associated with the Gospel of Prosperity. However, the lurid details of sex and corruption which had eaten into their empires, raised questions about their credibility. Some of their empires of prosperity had to respond to the logic of market forces and their crumbings over the past years has been a lesson.

On the political side, preachers of this Gospel have used their wealth and influence to negotiate their way into the embrace of the powerful corridors of political power. Hence, it is now known that candidates like Reagan and Bush were put in the White House partly due to the power and influence of these preachers. The formation of the Moral Majority as an umbrella to articulate these positions and goals was the climax of their efforts.

It is the process of funding these ambitions that led to such sermons as that preached by Mrs. Gloria Copeland, the wife of one of the Evangelists. She said:

"You give \$1 for the Gospel's sake and \$100 belongs to you. You give \$100 and receive \$1,000. Give \$1,000 and receive \$100,000. Give one air-plane and receive one hundred times the value of the air-plane. Give one car and the return would furnish you a life of cars".²

Is it any wonder then that this Gospel has acquired such acceptability in Africa? Let us now look briefly at the Nigerian experience.

3. The Role of Money in Christian Practice in Nigeria.

The growth of separatist churches which breakaway from parent ones has always been a matter of course. In the case of Nigeria, what seems to have changed with time is the motivation. There is, clearly, a qualitative as well as a quantitative shift from the theological to the mundane in motivational conceptions. Today, one does not hear so much

of groups breaking away due to fundamental theological problems, rather, some of the problems range from say financial disagreement, ethnic squabbles, charges of witchcraft, adultery and so on. In fact, popular thought in Nigeria holds that in the main, religion has become a money spinning venture and that people found these churches now merely to extort and hoodwink unsuspecting adherents. Let us briefly look at the profiles of some of these churches in Nigeria over the last ten or twenty years and the effect of money on them.

3.1. Emmanuel Olufunmilayo Odumosu

Today, hardly any Nigerians living in Lagos and its environs can feign ignorance of the empire of Rev. Emmanuel Odumosu alias Jesus of Oyinbo. Born in 1914, Emmanuel claimed to have had a call in 1952 in which he was asked to abandon his old ways and to carry out a mission for God. He responded by abandoning his job as a cabinet maker with the Posts & Telegraph Department of the Ministry of Communications. He soon began to seek public attention by lectures and bills. One of these called **The Branch**, had the following inscriptions:

"Do not allow the prince of this world to doom you. Meet your man, the messenger of the covenant. Do not look at me as an African, either white, Yellow, Red or Black... Do not joke at this for as it was in the days of Noah, so shall it be in the days of the son of man. It will cost you no money. Come and learn. Knowledge is Power".³

Rev. Odumosu started off feeding his members and helping those who had no jobs to gain employment where he had connections in Lagos. As time went on, Odumosu's empire began to expand; and the need for financial comfort became an important fact in his scheming. Thus, for him, money was an important factor in reconciling man to God. Said he: "You know it takes time to be righteous. If a man is not earning good money, you tell him to be righteous, he can't be righteous. Therefore, I make these people to be comfortable, that they may be righteous, and they are trying". Little wonder then, with more and more money, the self image of Odumosu

began to change. From being an ordinary cabinet maker, the preacher started calling himself "Jesus", "The Beginning and the End", "The Authority". To his people, he believed he was "the maker of their souls and everything that they are", "Their Lord and Master" etc. By the time Odumosu died on January 17th, 1988, his Kingdom had begun to reside in the psyche of most Nigerians as a cult where all kinds of atrocities were being perpetrated. He was said to have sired nearly 400 children from wives, members of his kingdom and, some say, his daughters. These facts, his closest associates have corroborated.⁴

3.2. Olumba Olumba Obu

He has been the sole administrator of his church known as the **Brotherhood of the Cross and Star** with his headquarters in Calabar.

He recognized his powers when at the age of six, he was purported to have raised a woman from the dead. Since then Olumba saw his mission as being threefold: to teach and lead the whole world to the accurate knowledge of truth; to reform sinners unto righteousness and sanctity of humanity; to establish the Kingdom of God on earth.

He is seen by his followers as a man of immense power and charisma. He is said to be a healer, capable of reversing fortunes or ill-fortunes. Perhaps owing to his low level of education, he has not really been in the front-line as his colleagues who have courted and continue to seek popularity through using the media. On the contrary, he rarely grants interviews. Both Pa Odumosu and Olumba would all be of the same generation, though the scope, the direction and content of their messages varied.

On their heels came the late Rev. Oshoffa whose Kingdom also spread across the West African coast and beyond. As I mentioned, these men tended to lay emphasis on their awe, presence and charisma. They were somehow limited (perhaps culturally) in their appreciation of the media - this may account for their lack of concerted efforts to exploit the media - perhaps therein lay their own aura and power.

4. The Media, Money and Christian Evangelists.

The media as a vehicle for shaping and transforming the values of society remains indisputable. It is little wonder therefore that one of the thresholds of the evangelical preachers became the Television. By the late seventies and early eighties, they had become such a pervasive phenomenon that the term "Televangelists"⁵ was coined for them. Their greatest showing came in the wake of the economic deregulation of the Reagan era. The television stations responded to this challenge by commercializing air time and selling the time to the highest bidders. The "televangelists" reached out for this and in a very short period of time, they were beginning to own the waves. Thus, for example, in the mid eighties, Rev. Jerry Falwel's OLD TIME GOSPEL HOUR was reaching some 1.5m subscribers weekly. He was not alone. Along with this money came a change in profile. A writer summed up the situation thus.

"Starting with electronic ministry itself, one enterprise began another, and then another and another. The preachers branched into real estate, records, amusement parks, books, lectures, and personal appearances. They travelled by jets and expensive automobiles, lived in luxurious mansions, and enjoyed lifestyles full of comfort"⁶

Characteristically, the drift into the world of high finance meant that the evangelists had to begin to live out the logic of these mundane pursuits. Their empires were soon beset with skulduggery, back-stabbing and at times, blackmail. Of course, the fact that the Moral Majority⁷ had managed to put Reagan in power served to embolden them. Again, the pull of politics, though seductive, was short-lived, a factor that was to account for the change of fortunes for the various "televangelists" as they contested for advantage in the White House over the years. By the end of the eighties, most observers would later on remember only the steamy side of the lives of these evangelists and their court cases. As time wore on and conformity with the world began to take its toll, a commentator summed it up well by saying:

"Televangelists fell on hard times. In the wake of the scandals, audience ratings dropped. So did the revenues. As donations to ministries declined, lay offs were imposed and broadcast air time was cut back. Public opinion polls sharp shifts from favourable to unfavourable. The great electronic tent show of the eighties, if not struck, was collapsing. The religious empire of televangelism, like temporal ones in American board rooms and corporate headquarters, was riven with dissent and locked in territorial take over and acquisition battles"⁸.

In Nigeria, the eighties also witnessed an unprecedented upsurge in what Nigerian journalists have come to call GOD'S FUNKY PREACHERS⁹. These new groups, mainly part of a motley crowd expressing all forms of belief, power and faith-healing have come under the loose umbrella of what is commonly called the Evangelicals. Their claims to miraculous powers, prophecies, healings, etc., have been the source of their attraction. They are distinct from both the traditional churches like the Catholics, Anglicans or Methodists or the African, Independent churches like the Celestial Church of Christ or the Aladura. They are held together by the God that is preached in the Gospel of prosperity. There is great emphasis in the externals in terms of dress, such paraphernalia like cars, houses etc. After all, their God is not a poor God. It is almost true to say that by their externals, you shall know them. For example, a journalist has observed that:

"The average pastor cuts a clear picture of great accomplishment. His suit, exquisite and modern, exudes the folksy touch of Christian Dior quietly reserves for the elegant and well appointed. His Italian shoes, smart Swiss digital watch blend coolly with an attire that obviously has been selected with a keen sense of fashion"¹⁰.

The relationship between them and the social scene is well captured by the same writer who notes that:

"The go-getting spirit of the preacher's evangelism, their funky American manners and youthful ordinariness appeal to members... As the bandwagon swells, mind boggling financial empires are springing up as fast as Churches can sprout into life. A pointer to the growing wealth are the ambitious building programmes that the funky ministries now embark on"¹¹.

Today, these churches look back at their humble beginnings, when they used to have less than 100 members, to their new symbols of opulence as their worshipping centres now show. Most Nigerians can look back at a Pastor Kumuyi's DEEPER LIFE BIBLE CHURCH, Benson Idahosa's CHURCH OF GOD MISSION, Kris Okotie's HOUSEHOLD OF GOD FELLOWSHIP and marvel at the transformation. They have come a long way, and the issue now is whether we can really move beyond the superficial claims that they have come into being as a means of ripping society off. Their groundswell of support cannot be the sign of people chasing a shadow, nor can it be argued that in these hard economic times, Nigerians are merely being led astray by clever preachers. Let us therefore now assess these Churches, their money and the economy of salvation by way of conclusion.

5. Conclusion

The first point that one has to make is to emphasize the importance of situating this whole phenomenon in its historical context. If we do that we will be in a position to appreciate the realities of the dynamics which have produced the picture that we have just sought to paint. Let us look at a few of these factors.

*It must be understood that nothing we have said here is meant to present the traditional churches as being the angels or the evangelical churches as being the devils. No! Some of the traumas that these churches are going through today, have been faced by the established churches. After all, the Catholic church has a very detailed legal format for accountability towards the usage of church funds. Yet, no church is free from the wrangles of financial bickering, frauds and corruption.

*It must be borne in mind that part of the reasons for the rather aggressive approach to the issue of finance in these churches is not unconnected with the fact that they have nowhere else to turn to, unlike their counterparts whose international, universal and historical origins have placed them at relative advantage.

*The local sourcing for money by these churches proves

that we can make it, as it were, and discourages dependency on external aid.

*The gifts of healing are proving to be such great attractions and sources for people to make all kinds of financial contributions to these churches. The point must not be lost on us that in a society with so much poverty, sickness and death, the prospects of healing for free or attention to a long illness is enough consolation.

*Rev Kris Okotie's Household of God for example has set up what it calls the GRACE project. The target are the poor; and the project is said to be an offshoot of what the members of the Church referred to as the Mercy Department, which as its name implies caters for all kinds of human needs. Of it Rev Okotie said: "We give them (people who come) food, shoes and help them pay their house rents. Some time we help them set up small businesses"¹². That, one may add, is a great way to spend money in the economy of salvation.

NOTES

1. Quoted in: Paul Guifford, **Christianity: To Save or Enslave?** Ecumenical Documentation Information Centre for Eastern and Southern Africa. Harare. 1990, p. 9

2. *ibid.*

3. **This Week Magazine**, February 29, 1988, p. 13.

4. See the views of Alhaji Suaru A. Okuneye in the issue of **This Week Magazine** cited above, pp. 14-15.

5. H. Johnson: **Sleepwalking Through History: America in the Reagan Years**. N.Y.: W.W. Norton and Co. 1991 p. 196. The coinage is credited to Messrs Jeffrey Hadden and Anson Shupe.

6. *Op. cit*, p. 198

7. This was founded by Jerry Falwel.

8. Ibid, p. 198.
9. Quality Magazine, Lagos, February, 1990 p,2.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Sunday Times, Lagos, August 16, 1992.