

# Gaining the Whole World: Pentecostalism and the Changing Face of Christianity

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## Abstract.

*Constantine's reign as Roman emperor A.D. 306-337 dramatically changed the direction of Christianity. This grew out of his strategy for unifying his empire by creating a "catholic" (universal) Church that would blend elements from many religions into one. The "Christianity" Constantine endorsed was already considerably different from that practiced by the apostles and the early Church. The emperor accelerated the change by opening the doors of the Church to all and sundry, there were no striking differences between a Christian and a non-Christian. The freedom that the Church enjoyed from state persecution became freedom of all kinds of practices by Churchmen. Like Constantine, the emergence of Pentecostalism dramatically changed the face of Christianity. It has been severally opined that Africa has the fastest growing Church in the world and also the fastest declining Church. It is also observed that the numerical growth far outpaces spiritual growth and maturity in Nigeria Christianity. The main thrust of this paper is to look into the Nigerian Church that seems to be shifting grounds from biblical Christianity to a Christianity propelled by materialism, nominalism, excitement, and expedient theology.*

Key Words: Constantine, Pentecostalism, Christianity, Church,

## Introduction

The early Church through three centuries survived external hardships, persecution, schisms and heresies. Despite these, a standard form of Church government was established, headed by Bishops, Presbyters and Deacons. The task of the Church was to remain faithful to the teachings of Jesus Christ and the Apostles and to present those teachings to the world around it. The pagan empire was vanquished and the cause of Christ won after AD 311 when religious freedom was granted. With this freedom and stability as observed by Bamm (2009), came the need to codify the basic tenets of the Christian Church in order to protect it against a threat more dangerous than the sword – the poisoned pen of the heretic. The Church utilized its newly acquired authority to call all bishops of the Church together between AD 325 and 451 to put an affirmation on her teachings for the future generations (Brox 1994).

Without doubt one prominent motive of the early Christians was that Christianity met the human desire for truth, that is, for knowledge of the actual truth about God, the world and human beings in the face of frustration and uncertainty. From the knowledge of this truth people were promised redemption, which they sought in liberation from fate and guilt, and which they found in Christianity. The early converts were not promised material prosperity, they were not taught that the risen and ascended Lord was a means to their ends; rather they believed that Jesus their Lord was an end in Himself. Hanegraaff (2002) in his view of the eschatological outlook of the early Church observes that they rightly were convinced that the treasure waiting for them was in another kingdom and considered that they were strangers, ambassadors and pilgrims whose final

destination was forthcoming. That Christ did not come to bring financial prosperity; but that He came to focus their attention on eternal prosperity.

This view is contrary to the changing face of Christianity. Jesus is being presented as a means to an end just as it was in the days Constantine when the cross (Church) was a means of gaining popularity and the people's approval. People flooded the Church in their numbers on every worship day. The cross whose sign aided him in victory (Boer, 2003) was no longer part of Christianity. The Church was now part of the 'world', which, with no future, was now an environment of excitement; there was no more difference between Christians and non-Christians. It was now gaining the entire empire (Brox, 1994) losing the very essence of what it stood for. As with Pentecostalism, conformity to the teachings of ancient scriptures has gradually disappeared giving room to "another gospel", attracting crowds to the Church with little or less emphasis on Christian teachings and virtues.

### **The Message of Jesus**

Jesus preached a simple message. His message was that the kingdom of God was at hand and that men could enter it through repentance and belief in the gospel (Boer: 2003:15). Instruction was his delight, and its effectiveness is well attested by the way in which his disciples remembered his words and repeated them to those who encountered them. Tenney (1970) affirms that there was directness, freshness, and an authority in the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ that made Him more effective than His contemporaries. He was a master teacher whose skill in instructing the ignorant and wayward was unsurpassed. The implication of Jesus message was that he foresaw the unavoidable collision between his spiritual message and the message of external obedience taught by the Pharisees.

### **The Message of the Early Church**

The message of Jesus influenced the eschatological views and message of the early Christians. These people, according to (Brox 1994) were small group of friends, relatives and followers of Jesus of Nazareth, which continued or re-formed in Galilee and Jerusalem after the death of Jesus. They did not dissolve after the depressing experience of his execution; rather they developed into an intensive community life engaged in striking propaganda activity. This was because of the experience that they had in their encounter with Jesus and to which they bore witness in stories and in statements that he is coming back soon. Their basic mood was an enthusiastic experience of newness, their message made people feel that the 'last days' had dawned. The message of the early Church made people to live in apocalyptic expectation of the end of the world and that determined all perspectives and interests, belief and action.

They were expecting the end of the world, with the second coming of Christ and the last judgment in their lifetime. In the face of this tremendous prospect, earthly plans were purposeless. Bamm (2009), commenting on the influence of Jesus' message on the life of the early Church states "so it was that the new faith, though its long-term effect was to be the radical transformation of mankind, in its beginnings had no revolutionary character at all. Their way of life was sometimes represented as communist, rather the opposite is the case; property was so unimportant to them that they renounced it entirely. Their principle was the love for one's neighbour as taught by their Lord and master". Like a sapling, the new group grew into a tree, a tree in whose shade finally half of the human race found room to shelter not for the sake of immediate or earthly possessions and inheritance but for the sake of gaining an eternal (heavenly) treasure.

Their teachings and lifestyle drew large crowds to them on a daily basis, inaugurating what Shelley (1995) refers to as a new age and people whose belief was that they have entered a spiritual kingdom by faith in Jesus as Lord and were ready to witness to that new found faith. Not surprisingly, as with every new thing in a new environment, the actions and words of these people invoked the wrath of the rulers and leaders of the day. They were regarded with extreme distrust and for more than three hundred years after its birth, the Christian Church suffered various degrees of persecution and always remained in danger of it. In the course of these three hundred years it also conquered the Roman Empire.

### **The Message of Paul**

It has been variously argued by scholars that, “no man other than Jesus, had shaped Christianity more than Paul”. A man who had seen the rapid growth of Christianity as threat to what he believed, was the ‘faith of his ancestors’, and was ready to do everything in order to stop its spread was now speaking to convince people to favour it (Shelley 1995, Allen 2005, Frend 1986). His involvement was only after his conversion (Acts 9). His message was borne out of a conviction of what he heard from the glorified Christ who encountered him on the Damascus road. What integrated Paul’s life however, and lifted this almost neurotic temperament out of obscurity into enduring influence was what LaTourette (1976) calls a profound and revolutionary religious experience. Paul believed and reiterated again and again that contact with the living Jesus had transformed his life (Gal. 1:15-16). It is a certainty that his conversion began an inner revolution and no superlatives were too great for him to use in praise and work for God that had brought it about or for his newly found Master and Saviour. This could be seen in what the change meant to him in the exalted terms that he applies to Jesus (Phil. 2:6-11; Col. 1:15), bearing a vivid witness to what he had experienced.

Paul’s urge and consuming desire was not only to preach the Gospel but also to win the gentile world to his new found faith and relationship without any material gratification. From city to city he travelled, taking pride in self-support by means of his trade without depending on his converts (1 Cor. 9:1-18). He longed for their growth in Christian virtues, remembered their names, revisited them, and kept in touch with them by letters. His belief was that the spirit of Christ guided his actions towards his converts, therefore demanding and tasking them for his material upkeep was not of any importance. He had the conception of a Church, which embraced all Christians, sought to promote the unity of that Church, and to heal its divisions and to bind in sympathy the communities he had founded (Allen 2005).

Paul’s conviction about the Christian Church’s need for the pure gospel of Jesus came into full view when he expressed amazement over the Galatian Christians’ behavior in his absence. “I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ for a different gospel (Gal.1).” What Paul saw in the Galatian Church was “the changing face of Christianity” a total deviation from what was handed down to them. How is it that the best news that has ever been preached on the face of the earth, which these people received with great joy has now been given up so quickly? The Gospel of Jesus Christ that promised them heaven, the forgiveness of all their sins, and the understanding that they are to receive the promise of Christ and put their trust in Him alone, yet they are wandering away from it. For Paul this was not funny as the drift was so quick and said “don’t you understand that you are leaving not simply a doctrine but that you are actually turning away from Him, Him who is the Gospel, Him who alone has purchased your salvation?” For Paul, any message that does not project Christ was no Gospel rather it was for selfish purpose and must be discouraged.

### **Christianity during the Persecution**

Under the ministry of Paul, Christianity continued its triumphal march and became dominant in the ancient world. LaTourette (1995) writes, as has frequently happened in the history of mankind, a religion was winning adherents in a period of cultural instability and in connection with a set of ideas and an attitude of mind, which had social or political implication. However, with its Empire-wide organization, its exclusive demands on its adherents, and its abhorrence of the state religion, Christianity, still attracting a percentage of the population, seemed to some Emperors a public menace. Bent on restoring order and saving society, they sought to exterminate it. There followed a series of persecutions so severe that it became a serious threat to its message, but the shock was withstood.

As noted earlier, for the first three decades of its existence, Christianity struggled with persecution, but that could not stop it from conquering the Empire. Harry Boer (2003) notes that the persecution the Church suffered in the Empire during this time was extremely painful, but they were also extremely fruitful. In the very act of suffering the Church was growing; “the blood of the martyrs had been the seed of the Church.” These Christians were not afraid of death. They were only concerned with the preaching the message of Christ’s death and resurrection. Personal and material gains were nothing compared to what preaching, living and dying for Christ would give to them – ‘the kingdom of God.’

### **Constantine and the Changing Face of Christianity**

Constantine's reign as Roman emperor (A.D. 306-337) dramatically changed the direction of Christianity. This grew out of his strategy for unifying his empire by creating a ‘catholic’ (universal) Church that would blend elements from many religions into one. While Constantine supposedly converted to Christianity in 312, he was not baptized until on his death bed 25 years later. In the intervening years he had his wife and eldest son murdered, and from all appearances he continued as a worshipper of the sun god. Long after his supposed conversion he had coins minted with a portrait of himself on one side and a depiction of his “companion, the unconquered Sol [sun]” on the other (Alföldi, 1969).

The “Christianity” Constantine endorsed was already considerably different from that practiced by Jesus Christ and the apostles. The emperor accelerated the change by his own hatred of Jews and religious practices he considered Jewish. For example, at the Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325), Church authorities essentially replaced the biblical Passover with Easter, a popular holiday rooted in ancient springtime fertility celebrations. Endorsing this change, Constantine announced: “It appeared an unworthy thing that in the celebration of this most holy feast [Easter] we should follow the practice of the Jews, who have impiously defiled their hands with enormous sin, and are therefore deservedly afflicted with blindness of soul ... Let us then have nothing in common with the detestable Jewish crowd” (Eusebius, 1979)

Accordingly, Constantine's affection for sun worship had earlier led him to endorse Sunday, the first day of the week and a day dedicated to honoring the sun, as a weekly day of rest in the Roman Empire. This created considerable hardship on those Jews and true Christians who continued to keep the biblical Sabbath on the seventh day of the week.

British historian Paul summarizes how Constantine's approach of merging religious practices produced a corrupted Christianity that meshed paganism with biblical elements: “Thus the followers of Isis adored a Madonna nursing her holy child; the cult of Attis and Cybele

celebrated a day of blood and fasting, followed by the Hilaria resurrection-feast ... the elitist Mithraicism, many of whom were senior army officers, ate a sacred meal ...“Many Christians did not make a clear distinction between this sun-cult [Mithraism] and their own. They ... held their services on Sunday, knelt towards the East and had their nativity-feast on 25 December, the birthday of the sun at the winter solstice ...How could the Christian Church, apparently quite willingly, accommodate this weird megalomaniac [Constantine] in its theocratic system? Was there a conscious bargain? Which side benefited most from this unseemly marriage between Church and State? ... Did the empire surrender to Christianity, or did Christianity prostitute itself to the empire?”

Considering the vast differences between the Christianity of today and the teachings of Jesus Christ and the apostles, one can trace much of the changes to Constantine and the religious system he put in place. Critics point to this shift as the beginning of the phenomenon known as Caesaropapism in its extreme form; such critics say Christianity became a religious justification for the exercise of power and a tool in the expansion and maintenance of the empire, a Christian empire, also known as Christendom. American theologian Stanley Hauerwas names the shift as the foundation for the expression of Christianity in the United States today that is closely associated with patriotism and civil religion (Dayton 2004).

### **The Pentecostal Phenomenon**

Pentecostalism as a worldwide phenomenon has spread practically to every nation in just over a century since its appearance. It is a massive movement that has today appealed to persons of almost every rank. Pentecostalism according to Smith (2002) impinges powerfully on contemporary Christianity demanding attention to the questions of definition and history. Nowhere has it left any deeper mark than on the rebirth of interest in a theology of the Holy Spirit, and interest that has united and divided Christians from vastly different backgrounds. Pentecostalism is so vast and sprawling that it is sometimes difficult for outsiders to know exactly what it is. It has come to appear in a bewildering variety. Perhaps more than any other segment of Christianity, the boundaries of the phenomenon seem tangled in a maze of criss crossing practices and beliefs.

Pentecostalism according to Diara (2005) is a derivation from the word Pentecost as used in the Acts of the Apostles chapter two. It is rooted in the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church on the day of Pentecost. Achunike (2004) observes thus,

Pentecostalism is a product of the Holiness Movement in the United States of America at the turn of the 20th century AD, which hold the view that baptism in the Holy Spirit apart from that of regeneration was the experience of empowerment for ministry available to all believers.

Accordingly, Kalu (1998), argues that Pentecostalism emphasizes the power of the Holy Spirit to enthuse life, the immediacy of Jesus Christ as a living presence, the authority of the Holy Bible as written, relying on the immanence of the supernatural and the traditional in understanding of the inspiration of the Bible expelling evils both in the human heart as well as in society.

### **Pentecostalism, the Nigerian Experience**

Pentecostalism was not a known phenomenon in the Nigerian religious landscape before 1970 when the mainline Churches held sway in the religious scene of the country. Diara (2005) traced the outburst of Pentecostalism to four sources, namely, through the students of Universities Ibadan and Ife who; through secondary school students who were influenced by the Scripture Union ministry during and immediately after the Nigerian Civil war that ended in the early 1970s and the ministry of Benson Idahosa. The fourth likely source is the Aladura connection. Some members challenged the lack of Biblical roots for the use of instruments and objects in worship led to the Schisms that occurred within the Aladura Churches.

A number of prominent Pentecostal leaders in Nigeria today as observed by Mpigi (2014) are products of the schism that arose in the Aladura Churches in Nigeria, such as the Cherubim and Seraphim, and the Church of the Lord (Aladura). These were the most prominent until the arrival of Celestial Church of Christ and several other types. It is significantly worthy of note that Josiah Akindayomi who founded the Redeemed Christian Church of God initially founded it as the Cherubim and Seraphim Church but later changed its doctrines and practices, as it is today in the Redeemed Christian Church of God, now led by Enoch Adeboye. William Kumuyi, founder and Pastor of Deeper Life Bible Church was himself a member of the Cherubim and Seraphim Church, before his conversion and movement to the Apostolic Faith Church from where he founded what today is Deeper Life Bible Church. Indeed, the growth of Pentecostalism in Nigeria today has assumed a phenomenal proportion. As Hollenweger (2005) informs, "it should be noted that this growth is not based on a carefully developed liturgy, doctrine or theology but in its oral liturgy, normativity of theology and witness, maximum participation at the level of reflection, prayer and decision making."

### **The Changing Face of Christianity in Nigeria**

Ajani (2013) describes the changing trend as "new face of Christianity" that is reshaping Christianity in Africa. This reshaping particularly in Nigerian Christianity according to him is different from the mission Church heritage inherited from early missionaries. Green (2004) quoting Jonathan Edwards wrote,

Many have had their religious affections raised far beyond what they had ever had before. There were instances of some people lying in a sort of trance, remaining for perhaps 24 hours motionless, and with their senses locked up. It was as if they went to heaven and there was a vision of glorious and delightful objects. Their joyful surprise has caused their hearts as it were to leap, so that they have been ready to break forth into laughter, tears often at the same time issuing like a flood, and intermingling loud weeping.

From these two quotes, it is clear that Christianity no longer has the features transmitted from its original state today. The wick of faith burns low on the whole. Thousands keep trooping into places of worship daily. Often it looks merely the intensification of quantity at the expense of the quality of adherents. The Pentecostal phenomenon has appeared and has come to stay, bearing the seeds of refreshing, rebranding and reshaping, indicating the 'worldliness' of current Christianity. These are dangerous waters, with plenty of biblical warnings. 'False Christs and prophets will arise and show great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect' (Matt. 24:24). 'Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light' (2 Cor. 11:14). 'Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see if they come from God' (1 John 4:1). This is what

this paper sees as Pentecostalism gaining the whole world but losing the very essence of Christianity.

### **From Growth to Health**

A shift from 'growth' to 'health' is already apparent in Church circles. Warren who wrote extensively on missions and Church growth has turned attention to Church health. His focus has been on outward looking both of members and buildings. This assessment is a shift from what really makes a healthy Church. A healthy Church must be a growing Church characterized by Christ centered leadership, gift oriented lay ministry, passionate and Christ centered spirituality.

A physically healthy Church that makes room for 'all', does a few things and becomes very popular in the environment, creates an exciting and glamorous atmosphere for worshipers may not have done enough to be termed a Christian Church. Murray (2004) observes that the definition of health with which the healthy Church programme works is narrow by comparison with biblical agenda. They do not probe or investigate deeply into the ingrained Christendom legacy or impact on Church culture over many generations. They address neither the anguish of Church leavers nor the bemusement of people attracted to Jesus but repelled by the Church. What this means is that such Churches keep attracting people they already have without adding spiritual quality to their lives. Like the Church in the days of Constantine, Pentecostalism has become guilty of what Jeremiah (6:14; 8:11) refers to as conspiring to 'dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious.' Neglecting the spiritual health and inner life of the Church member undermines the very essence of Christianity. It causes disenchantment particularly with those who begin to belong before they believe 'come as you are' and accelerates the exodus of leavers when hopes are dashed or kept in suspense. Green (2004) observes that building healthy, honest and harmonious communities should be a prerequisite for effective mission. The early Church prioritized quality believing that growth in quality stimulates numerical growth and not the other way round. Church health/growth, then, must be high on the agenda of the Christian Church in Nigeria.

The Church must nurture the attitudes and virtues listed in Ephesians 4, namely, love, humility, gentleness, truthfulness and patience. There should be no compromise in the recovery of sinners who bruise, compete, misunderstand, neglect and disappoint each other in the society and get mixed up in the crowd. A process and practice that challenge unhealthy attitudes and behavior must be a part of the Church, to make it different from what obtains in non-Christian circles.

### **Alternative Process in Relationship to Biblical Interpretation (Prosperity Gospel)**

The Reformers rediscovered the essential truths of the message taught by Jesus and the apostles, based on the teaching of the Bible, not the traditions of men: that we are sinners who need to be saved from the judgment of God by repentance and faith in the sacrificial death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. The authentic message of Jesus is not much heard in the Church and public places any more. An alternative, the 'Prosperity Gospel' has been provided and many have been drawn to it.

The individual most responsible for the spread of the prosperity theology as suggested by Harold Smith (2008) is evangelist Kenneth Erwin Hagin Snr. Born in Texas in 1917 prematurely with a congenital heart disease, weighing less than two pounds at birth but survived to the

surprise of the attending physicians. Hagin is said to have endured a painful childhood. His father deserted the family when he was just six years old, which led to his mother having a nervous breakdown. Hagin could not outgrow the physical problems that plagued him at birth. He was bedridden at sixteen, physically paralyzed, and sometimes unable to maintain consciousness. While in this state, Hagin began to experience a dramatic inward trauma. Smith maintained that, on three different occasions, Hagin believed that his spirit slipped from this world, leaving his lifeless body lying on the bed, and descending into the literal pit of hell. During the months that followed, Hagin began a period of intense Bible study and prayer in which he focused on the words in the Gospel according to Mark 11:23-24:

“For verily I say unto you, that whosoever shall unto this mountain, be removed, and thou cast into the sea; and shall not doubt in his heart, but shall believe that those things which he saith shall come to pass; he shall have whatsoever he saith. Therefore I say unto you, what things so ever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them” (KJV)?

In this moment, Hagin declared, “I saw exactly what that verse in Mark 11:24 meant, I see it. I see it. I say with joy I see what I’ve got to do, Lord. I’ve got to believe that my heart is well while I am still lying here on this bed, and while my heart is not beating right. I’ve got to believe that my paralysis is gone while I’m still lying on my back and helpless.” Hagin’s discovery culminated in a radical faith that took Mark 11:23-24 literally. It marked what Harold (2008) called Hagin’s ‘principle of faith.’ “Believe in your heart, say it with your mouth, and ‘you shall have whatever he saith.’” Exercising his new found ‘faith formula,’ Hagin got up out of his bed, declared that ‘I am healed and that I am going to walk.’ For the next few days he walked privately around his room; by the end of the week he was walking down town.

Hagin’s miraculous recovery launched his ministry as a Southern Baptist preacher. His first belief in divine healing, however, soon placed him in Pentecostal circles, and by the year 1937 he had received the ‘baptism of the Holy spirit’ and joined the Assemblies of God. After pastoring the Assemblies of God Churches in Texas for twelve years, Hagin embarked on an independent ministry that would ultimately seal his place as the most outstandingly prominent of the ‘Faith Teachers’ in the coming charismatic revival.

Emmanuel (2007) agrees that the prosperity theology has its beginning in the United States of America. Tracing his source of information to Peter Young, quips that about the early 1960s and three decades following, American itinerant evangelists like Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth and Gloria Copeland, Robert Tilton and John Osteen among others, began, upheld and expanded the Christian teaching now referred to as prosperity Gospel or theology. He also included Frederick Price, Bob Tilton, A. J. Gordon and Jerry Savelle as proponents of this new theology that would soon turn the Christian Church into something else.

Almost everyone embracing the ‘Faith theology’ today gives credit to Hagin Snr as its originator. The truth, according to Hanegraaff (2002), is that, Essek William Kenyon is the real father of modern day Faith Movements and that Kenneth Hagin Snr merely popularized Kenyon’s materials. Accordingly, Kenyon who began his public ministry as a Methodist Church minister, later established the Bethel Bible Institute in 1900, but resigned as the institute’s superintendent later in the year 1923 under a cloud of controversy and started a radio programme called “Kenyon’s Church of the Air” in 1931. The taped transcripts of this broadcast eventually became the basis for many of his writings, which proved to his lasting legacy. It therefore goes



that many of the phrases popularized by present-day prosperity preachers such as, what I confess, I possess, were coined by Kenyon himself.

In the 1980s, the prosperity theology crept into the African Church particularly in Kenya, Nigeria and Ghana. The Nigerian story is hinged on the ministry of Bishop Benson Idahosa. According to Adeleye (2011), Idahosa is believed to have been the first apostle of the prosperity gospel in Nigeria and the one who also transported it through his evangelistic crusades across the cities of Africa. Adeleye added, “I have seen for myself that these men, like their American mentors live very affluent lives characterized by flamboyant attire, expensive cars and big mansions. They want to live out the American dream in Africa. The philosophy of their gospel seems to be ‘seek ye first the things of this world and the kingdom of God shall be added unto you.’

In the opinion of Dandeson Emmanuel (2007), Benson Idahosa is the major person who popularized the prosperity theology in Nigeria. Idahosa, according to Ojo (2013), against the trend in the society at that time, was preaching that Christians ought to have access to material wealth and live life to the full, insisting that he would no longer ride the two-door Volkswagen Beetle car, which was common and popular then, but would only ride four-door cars such as Mercedes Benz and Peugeot cars. He also insisted that members of his Church should not tithe nor give offerings with coins, but currency notes of high worth. In the book, *while I choose to change*, which Ojo (2013) refers to as Idahosa’s first monograph on Success and Prosperity, he noted that, ‘God created men and women for a better life than many are experiencing ... God never intended that anyone should go through life imprisoned by their own superstitions. He opens the door of success to every believer who will dare to step out and go after the good life. No one in God’s family was ever destined to exist in sickness, fear, ignorance, poverty, loneliness or mediocrity. God’s abundant goodness will be enjoyed and utilized by those who discipline themselves, become decisive, bold, adventurous, believing, daring, risking and determined.’ Adeleye (2011) mentioned David Oyedepo who was consecrated as the Pentecostal Bishop of Northern Nigeria in August 1988 as the leading proponent of the prosperity theology today in Nigeria through his teachings in the Living Faith Church (Winners’ Chapel). Ajani (2013) observes that Pentecostal interpretation of scripture has always been contextual, existential and pragmatic and that this trend continues to influence and reshape the biblical interpretations of several Churches in Nigeria irrespective of denominational affiliations, particularly, the mainline Churches.

## **Health and Wealth**

It is taught within Pentecostal circles that divine health and material prosperity are the rights and privileges of every believer who will appropriate enough faith to receive them. The secret to appropriating such faith comes in making a positive confession and avoiding all kinds of doubt that prayer of faith has been answered. According to Goff (1990), pentecostals have long heralded divine healing as a cardinal theology, indeed, divine healing was an important part of the nineteenth-century holiness movement that gave rise to one of the central wings of the early Pentecostal revival and by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, healing had become an integral part of the theology of many who frequented the holiness meetings.

In the words of MacArthur (2002), health and wealth and the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement have grown up together. To him, Charles Fox Parham, the father of contemporary Pentecostal movement, came to the conviction that divine healing is God’s will for all true believers, from where he developed an entire system of Pentecostal beliefs around that

conviction. This conviction caught hold of many prominent Pentecostal and charismatic televangelists like Aimee Semple McPherson, E. W. Kenyon, Katherine Kuhlman, Oral Roberts, Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth and Gloria Copeland, Benny Hinn, Benson Idahosa, David Oyedepo, William Kumuyi, Enoch Adeboye, David Ibiyeomie and the likes. The message they adopted and preach is that of a radical faith in God to heal all manner of sicknesses without the benefit of man or man-made medicines. Not only that, but also that God was and is capable of turning obscurity into prominence and poverty into wealth. The claims and methods of the prosperity theology of health and wealth range from the eccentric (*deviating from an established or usual pattern or style, in odd or whimsical ways*) to the grotesque (*departing markedly from the natural, the expected, or the typical*).

Quotations from the bible are cited and used to project the teaching such as, “Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health even as thy soul prospereth” (3 John 2. KJV). This passage and others like, Deuteronomy 28:1-14, Psalms 1:3, 84:11 are used as back-up texts for the propagation of the prosperity theology. The health and wealth party looks at success as a corollary to prosperity. According to Scotland (2000) today health has almost become a cult phenomenon. We live in a world of fitness clinics, in-shape centers and health farms; on every street of the road there are joggers. Some of them puffing their way along in the hopes that they will one day see their feet. Keep fit, judo, Yoga classes and healing prayer houses spring up in almost every village hall and community centers.

This is very true a statement, as health has suddenly become to the majority of the Church members the all-important thing today. In Pentecostalism, the theology of Divine healing has constituted from the very beginning a new sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the individual and in the Church, that was why Charles Fox Parham, for example was called “the divine healer” and credited with “miraculous powers”. In Galena, Kansas he preached in January 1904 for several weeks, and during the services, Damboriena (1969) recounts there have been as many as fifty people at the altar at one time seeking to be restored in soul and body. Here people who had not walked for years without the aid of crutches have risen from the altar with their limbs so straightened that they were enabled to lay aside their crutches to the astonishment of the audience

This early tradition remains solidly anchored within Pentecostalism and Charismatism today to the point that among all spiritual gifts, the gift of healing and miracles is the most desired and sought for by charismatic Christians. It is no longer heard; ‘I surrender all,’ rather, what is prevalent is, “I can speak it all into existence through the formula of faith.” The expectation of those in this position is that Christians should aim at success in every endeavour. In the view of Ojo (2013), success and prosperity are perceived among charismatics as a form of healing when the Christian overcomes failure, poverty and backwardness, and lives a life of sufficiency and abundance. To be prosperous accordingly, one is expected to give liberally and sacrificially towards the progress of the gospel, or ‘plant seed-money’ or ‘seed of faith’, as some may say or call it, reckoning that the more one gives to God, the more abundantly the person receives in return.

Pentecostal theology claims that poverty is not the plan of God for our lives as His children... God’s plan for us includes peace, joy, enough provision, sound health, abundant blessings, marital bliss and fulfilling jobs. The principles of covenanting prosperity is proposed by Awolola as including, dreaming big, believing, obedience to God’s command, sowing seed sacrificially, partaking in miracle meals, positive confession, using anointing oil, claiming the power in the blood of Jesus. Hanegraaff (2002) remarked, “Tragically, these purveyors of error

have become adept at misleading their followers with a message that sounds authentic but is in reality a counterfeit. They point to scripture, produce ‘miracles,’ and operate under the banner of ‘Jesus is Lord’

### **Seed-Faith (Seed Sowing)**

A major theme in the prosperity theology is that of Seed- (of)-Faith. Adeleye (2011) refers to it as “The Seed-Faith principle”. Goff (1990) sees it as “Turning dollar bills into twenties”, Dandeson (2007) calls it “Giving and Receiving”, Hanegraaff (2002) makes reference to “Biblical Economics”, “Fast Faith”, and “Success-N-Life”. As true as they may be or have been to their claims and practices, one major thing is tied to all these terminologies, and that is ‘giving more money to receiving more wealth.’ (The more you give, the more you receive)

In Adeleye’s (2011), analysis of the ‘seed-faith principle’ Oral Roberts is cited as one of the fathers of the seed-faith principle whose teaching is based on a thought that is very personal, dating back to the early 1950s. In this thought, Oral taught his audience and maintained, “Whatever you can conceive, and believe, you can do” I could feel my inner man begin to stir. I could feel myself standing up inside. I became excited as I began to see the meaning of the idea that God brought into my mind, *whatever you can conceive, and believe, you can do!* I saw God had first conceived the world and man. I saw He had believed and what faith it was! God had believed in man enough to create him with power to choose good or evil, to live positively or negatively, to believe or to doubt, to respond to God or to denounce Him.

Adeleye (2011) observes that the thought of Oral Roberts was a conviction that everything God did started with the planting of a seed, and that it is only what you give that gets multiplied back to the giver. On the other hand, if one was to give nothing, and God deciding to multiply it, it would still amount to nothing. Tithes and offerings to God in Oral’s view are *seed-faith* which he built the words in Genesis 8:22.

Goff (1990) observed that the belief that faith in God met all human needs led invariably to concern about the material needs of believers. Parham, according to Goff, frequently engaged ‘faith travel,’ trusting that God would provide all his necessities and that led to the running of many early Pentecostal schools were run on the faith principle. They offered courses without any set tuition, running a shoestring budget, which required frequent prayers and fasts to carry the institutions through crisis periods. Accordingly, the pressing financial needs of the evangelists forced a greater emphasis on the need for giving and, with it, God’s promise to bless the cheerful giver.

Harrell (1979) observes that preachers like, A.A Allen, were blatant in their portrait of a God who specializes in financial miracles. Allen according to him, Allen spellbound his audiences with an account that God once answered his prayer to meet a four hundred dollar (\$410) printing bill by turning the one-dollar bills he had into twenty-dollar bills. Of course, some of you do not believe this. Listen, you old skeptic, you have to believe it, because it doesn’t have to happen to you. But it had to happen to me. I’ll tell you why. I decreed a thing.... God said, “Thou shall decree a thing and it shall be established unto thee...” I believe I can command God to perform a miracle for you financially. When you do, God can turn dollar bills into twenties. Accordingly, it was in Harrell’s view that, Allen’s explanation of the miracle that became a very clear pronouncement of the prosperity doctrine of the seed-faith that began to flourish in the charismatic congregations in 1960s. Dandeson (2007) argues that the prosperity theology makes receiving the motive behind giving. To him, giving is seen as a potential avenue to the material enrichment of the giver. He aintains that Tithes are paid so that God would open

the windows of heaven and pour his riches and blessings into the barns of the giver. In fact it is emphasized that we are blessed with material resources in order that we might give, not necessarily to the poor and needy... but to the Church to support the work of evangelism. There is an urgent need for evangelism in order to rescue more people from the shackles of sin, sickness and poverty. He concludes that, giving and receiving finds scriptural support in such passages as, Luke 6:38, 2 Corinthians 9:6, Ecclesiastes 11:1 and Malachi 3:6-12 among others.

### **Positive Confession**

A principal theme in the prosperity theology is the principle of Positive confession. McConnell (1988) calls it 'faith without doubt,' the need to confess positively that prayer had been answered. The emphasis on positive confession and the power of individual faith has gradually established itself with a separate identity within the Pentecostal and Charismatic circles resulting in the profound emphasis on the ability of the believing Christian to effect control over his own situation by the level of his own faith, crucial is the ability to speak in such a way as to induce, rather than deter faith. Clark (2004), a somewhat sympathetic psychology professor aptly summed up the importance of this aspect when he noted: "what a person says is what he gets, say all the faith teachers, and this appears to be the keystone of their system." Identifying positive confession with the faith theologians has ever been and it is spreading like the Canadian bush fire of 2016. It is claimed that all positive confessions are based on scripture and ordained by God. Kenyon raised the banner in claiming that God is a faith God, because He had faith that His word would bring forth creation *ex-nihilo*, and that faith-filled words brought the universe into being and faith-filled words are ruling the universe today. Nigerian preachers like, Idahosa imbibed and spread the teaching, with his background text taken from Mark 11:13-14. David Oyedepo, popularized it (Adeleye: 2011), Adeboye (1989) affirms that God is rich for the whole earth belongs to him including all the gold and silver (Ps 24:1, Hg 2:8). In addition, God's friends (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) are like him, they are also rich. God is the God of the rich, and his closest friends are very wealthy. Therefore, if you become one of the closest friends of God, you become very rich. If it is evil to be rich, it follows that God must be evil, but God is NOT evil. ... Birds of the same feathers flock together. The rich are friends of the rich; the poor are friends of the poor. Therefore, God decided to befriend the rich). The believer is therefore enjoined to say it with faith and believe that he has received whatever he has pronounced whether it has happened or not. This position stands on the 'name it, claim it, and have it' principle.

In contrast to the teachings of prosperity theology, Hanegraaff (2002) submits that, the faith teachers of our day have not conformed their teachings to the ancient scriptures, instead, they have conformed themselves to the American society. American culture to him is obsessed with upward mobility and crass materialism, which is precisely what the faith movement panders to. It thrives on the idea that "God's kids" can acquire wealth without work and dollars without discipline.

True to this observation, a significant portion of Nigerian Christianity has brought into the message of prosperity wholesale, no matter the form in which it may appear; they are all "cons and cover-ups." The begging question is, who is not guilty of this 'prosperity madness'? The Catholics are into it; if not, how do you explain the "tree or fruit of life" displayed in the Church during harvest, Mothers' and Fathers' and Youth day services where members are called upon to either pick or harvest? What about the lucky dip or lottery tickets sold to members who are promised open doors; financial break through; and blessings of different sorts? The Evangelicals (Protestants) have imbibed it, rebranding it with different names. Offering time in

the Church has been tagged “blessing time.” This has become a common slogan in Church services today. Gospel crusades and revival programmes organized for conversion of people into the Church are characterized with various forms of seed sowing or covenant offerings. When reading from posters, banners, envelopes even radio and television jingles used for publicity by any of the non Pentecostal Churches today, one finds it difficult if not impossible to separate the “sheep from the goats.” All in the name of winning people into the kingdom of God and making them prosper here on earth. The fact remains that if one looks through the liturgy and lectionaries of these Churches you will not find what they preach and practice.

In time past, it was Johann Tetzel’s sale of indulgence that made Martin Luther protest against the Church, claiming that it was an unscriptural teaching from the pit of hell, this protest led to division in the Church (Chadwick 1964). Today, is there no need for a new Reformation? The Tetzels are within with their power of oratory, fleecing the people by promising freedom from poverty, sickness, and a lifetime of prosperity, with no Luther rising to throw any challenging blow. What they present is another gospel (Galatians 1:6ff) well packaged in enticing forms. Paul was so disturbed and distressed with the Galatian situation that his words virtually border on vehemence. He was deeply moved, deeply concerned and deeply distressed. What were the things that made Paul feel the way he felt with the Galatians? The apostle declared to the people in the Galatian community that he was utterly amazed about something. A report that came to him, which he received with utter disbelief and could not get over it: “I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel...” This is what Armstrong (2006) calls “apostolic astonishment.” The gospel message is nonnegotiable. A doubt is being thrown into it if Evangelicals and Catholics still understand this in the face of recent theological developments in the Church as was in the middle of the sixteenth century.

All these being said, it is an immense tragedy when in our days people rush to bring and give prosperity, seemingly at any price, when in the real sense of it, it is not in their power. It is very important these days for every teacher of the Bible, theologian and every individual Christian to sit down and ask these questions; “what is the gospel? Is this what I really believe? Is what I teach really the biblical gospel or another gospel?” Miller (1992) quoting John Calvin wrote; “In all the disputes I have had with enemies of the truth, I have never made use of subtle craft nor sophistry, but have gone to work straight forwardly in maintaining (God’s) quarrel.”

### **Advertising Church; Hiding Christ**

Invitation leaflets, radio and television jingle and displays on billboards inviting people to Church services and programmes abound today. It has cut across all denominations and Church traditions. The soothing contents of these adverts appeal to people, they come with some assurances of what the Church and their pastor(s) are capable of offering. One of the most disturbing trends spreading from the Pentecostal movement into Christendom today is the philosophy that ‘God accepts you as you are’, which produces the theology of ‘come as you are because you matter to God’. The Church here advertises its relaxing atmosphere, life messages and, of course, hides Christ behind the altar.

The ‘come as you are God accepts you where you are’ doctrine is closely aligned with what Lucarini (2003) refers to as the tolerance movement that is popular in our society. From the advertising of the Church, lays the foundations for religious disillusionment down the road. The real test of any Christian teaching, however, is not either its short-term or long-term consequences, but whether or not it is found in the word of God. This doctrine does not stand up

to that test. John Makujina (1997) states, “Whereas many conservatives preach what amounts to ‘clean yourself up before you receive Christ’, they preach ‘come as you are.’ The problem however was that come as you are more often meant ‘remain as you are’, at least as far as music, language, clothing and social habits are concerned.”

There is no biblical proof of a God who accepts anyone for ‘who he is’. God is not interested in anybody’s self esteem or sinful habit. When one becomes a Christian, it is expected that worldly affections would be gone and the love for God is activated. Jesus does not accept a person’s sin, but accepts the person. The woman caught in adultery (John 8) was not condemned but was commanded to go and sin no more. The implication is that the woman did not remain the same way that she met Jesus. There was a movement away from her former way of life. She left it and began a new life in Christ. If God accepts one as he is, then surely He accepts the person’s preferences in worship and lifestyle. Pentecostalism’s influence has brought Christianity to the Constantine era where worldly affections and behaviours have become more important than exercising biblical discernment. It is so pervasive that in some congregations members are no longer allowed to question each other’s behaviour or preferences. The Church has traded biblical discernment for tolerance of all forms of worldliness (Davies 2001). So why should it come as any surprise that ‘anything goes’ with music, dressing, preaching and worship in Church today? This false teaching has opened the doors of the Church to the spirits of immorality, divisiveness and deception.

### **Crave for Miracles**

Craving for miracles, signs and wonders pervades the religious landscape in the Nigerian Church. This is a direct effect of the Pentecostal teachings that have crept into every denomination in the country. This overemphasis on miracles has prevented most Nigerian Christians from facing life realistically and pragmatically. The bottom line as argued by Obioje (2004) is that over-emphasis and craving for miracles helps compound the gullibility and vulnerability of many Nigerians. The stress on the miraculous is a direct attempt to encourage materialism that Jesus and the early apostles preached against and discouraged. Realistically, the miracles members of the Pentecostal Churches seek today is usually materialistic in that it is tied to health, wealth, prosperity and the likes. This is the reason worship centers today are usually attracting large crowds of people. The two sides of this coin are that the more the number of people, the more offerings the Church has. The Church is now a market place where the gospel is offered at a give-away-price. The Church has become a commercial center. It is quite an axiom that Christianity in Nigeria today has been overtaken by teachings that are half-truths or no truth at all.

Otabil (2010) observes that when neo-Pentecostalism is viewed through the lens of global revivalism one can get a greater understanding of its inherently missional and cross-cultural dynamism. He stresses that the revival (Pentecostal) paradigm produces an “optimistic fatalism” so desperately needed by an immigrant community struggling for survival and identity. The power of this thinking is couched in the language of prosperity and material gain. Pentecostalism offers promises of hope for miracle, produces messages that are more or less deceptive from the pulpits today. As a result it brings to bare the reality of Karl Marx’s claim that religion is the opium of the people. As opium offers temporary satisfaction and relief to people, that is the same way Pentecostal preachers through their messages offer temporal relief to people with the promise of miracles and prosperity. Here Jesus is presented as a means to an end, the same way it

was in the days of Constantine when the Church became the means to whatever the citizens of the Roman Empire under his Emperorship desired.

### **Redefined Spirituality**

Nothing hits closer to the heart of Christianity than a distortion of the message of holiness. What this simply implies is that of a redefinition of spirituality in the contemporary Nigerian Church. This has very much threatened to undo fundamental Bible understandings and teachings theologies. The central message of the Bible is that of a total reconciliation between God and man. (Eph. 2:8-9; 1Peter 1:15-16; Rom. 9:31-32; Gal. 5:16) It must be taken into consideration that Christianity without a clear focus on holiness is not adequately biblical. Through the centuries, spirit-filled people have been most basically looked up to as exemplars of Christian ethics and personal holiness. However, anyone familiar with the Nigerian Church today would conclude that spirituality has taken a new definition that is alien to antecedents found in the past.

It is according to Maxey (2017) highly lamentable that we have reached a stage in the contemporary Nigerian Church where it is possible for men of God in leadership to become guilty of serious sins that over the years have been considered serious enough to warrant dismissal from the ministry and yet continue on in ministry without serious rebuke or discipline. They can continue all of the outward signs of “spirituality” even while engaged in untoward behaviour.

One of the by-products of the redefinition of spirituality within the Nigerian Church is the rise of leadership marked not by godly maturity but by outward signs and wonders and in some cases by the sheer lure of personal flamboyance and mesmerizing rhetoric. This is particularly true when combined with the attraction of money and material success displayed by the leaders and promised to the followers. It is assumed by all as observed by Maxey (2017) “that too many of these ‘men of God’ who promise to help people “make it,” or to “break through” and who play the part by displays of their own personal material prosperity are the ones to follow.” This syndrome is in many instances the reaping of the harvest from decades of conditioning by continued search for the spectacular. Wherever there is a downplaying of the doctrine and teaching of holiness, it comes to begin to redefine spirituality. It is regrettable that all across Nigeria this type of leadership continues to rise in seemingly unstoppable waves. Quoting Tunde Bakare, Agbenon (2014) writes, “Look at the yuppies! I went to Port Harcourt to minister and we were going to the hotel and I saw a Church there... I saw the skimpy skirts and all kinds of things, my heart was grieved and I said, ‘God have mercy,’ these are babies pastoring babies...”

What is clear here is that with the rise of this kind of leadership within the Nigerian Church the earlier definitions of spirituality are all but forgotten. The focus has gradually shifted away from morality and Christ-like character and is now tilted much more in the direction of materialism, personal success and material prosperity. Anderson (2007) adds more credibility to the changing state of the Church by pointing out that the entrance of Pentecostalism into the African melting pot had the effect of stimulating new and more radically transforming forms of independent Churches.

### **Conclusion**

It is observed that numerical growth far outpaces spiritual growth and maturity in Nigeria Christianity. Many around the world have hailed the rapid growth in the Nigerian Church as a sign of revival but on the other hand, it is also observed how little such growth has impacted the

morality and spirituality of ordinary Nigerian. The Nigerian Church like the Constantinian Church is shifting grounds from biblical Christianity to a Christianity propelled by materialism, nominalism, and excitement. A Christianity that is largely characterized by miracle/prosperity preachers and seekers is evident. The Nigerian Church has lost the sense of a typical Christian community where virtues of love, truthfulness and neighborliness as seen in the early Christian community. The Church has gained virtually everything and space in the nation but the very essence of its existence is being under stressed. Selfishness has taken over the Church, crime and immorality has found its way in. The return to the teachings of Jesus Christ could be the only way that the world could be won by the Christian Church. Jesus said “what shall it profit a if he gains the whole world...”



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