

The Challenge of Nigerian Pentecostal Theology and the Persecution of Scripture

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The emergence and entrenchment of the Aladura (Praying) Churches in southwestern Nigeria in the 1920s and 1930s prepared the way for the charismatic renewal or Pentecostal resurgence of the 1970s. The Pentecostal outburst of being filled with the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues and prophesying, faith healing and display of charismatic gifts swept through a number of African countries including Nigeria. The socio-economic conditions that confronted Nigerians after the Civil War of 1967-1970 helped the Pentecostal experience to spread as fast as the harmattan fire especially in the East which existed as the blockaded Republic of Biafra. The evangelical dimension of being "born again" championed by Bill Roberts of the Scripture Union set the spiritual music which the youths tenaciously embraced to sing and dance indispensably. All the efforts of the mission Churches to stem the tide of Pentecostalism proved abortive, the more they tried, the more the remaining Pentecostal groups turned to new churches.

The details of how the different leading Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria started either as Bible study groups or persecuted minorities from mainline churches are all already documented by many scholars and church historians. It will, therefore, not be very necessary to try repeating the stories here. It is pertinent to note that all the reasons for the emergence of different Pentecostal churches can be summarised into three main causes. The first is the sincere desire of the 'born again' Christians to return to biblical or New Testament Christianity, which desire provoked hostilities from the authorities of the mainline churches. The second reason was that the persistence of the

charismatics in demanding for change led to persecutions, rejection and expulsion of these members who were forced to found their own churches. The third main reason was the deliberate exit from the mainline Churches of those who protested against what they saw as the unbiblical practices and worldliness of their mother churches.

One of the foremost problems facing the leadership of the new churches groups was formulating a theological stand that expressed their new identity. In many cases these leaders found out that their views were not only opposed to those of their former churches but those of some other Pentecostal Churches. Even where they seemed to be the same the human ago to chart a different identity in order not to be subsumed under the leadership of older groups necessitates the task. This state of affairs earned them, rightly or wrongly, the appellation of 'mushroom churches' by the mainline Churches. The argument was that these churches were mushrooming not because they had anything different but the leaders were ambitiously seeking their individual religious empires. But almost all of them had a strong disdain for traditional or a academic theology. I can recall my encounter with an enthusiastic 'born again' student colleague when I was studying for my first degree. The intervention of other 'born again' Christians stopped him engaging me in a physical fight when I countered his confident assertion that there were no Christian theologians. He fiercely contended that theologians were human devils who turned the Bible upside down. What A.C. Thiselton said about Walter Wink's book, 'The Bible in human Transformation' seems to summarise the academic theology. He states:

Walter Wink is sharply critical of what he regards as the professionalism of many New Testament scholars, which he believes leads them to avoid the most important issues of hermeneutics. The community of reference in New Testament interpretation, he complains, has become a professional guild of scholars rather than men and women of the living Church. The Bible was written by ordinary men, he insists for ordinary people who face practical problems in their daily lives. But the scholar is too often insulated from the Bible's own concerns. He examines the Bible, but he himself is not examined—except by his colleagues in the guild ... the outcome of biblical studies in the academy is a trained incapacity to deal with

the real problems of actual living persons in their daily lives (Thiselton 1986:143).

What Wink identified as a trained incapacity to deal with the realities of life is actually the crux of the matter. The sound theological treatise that excites the intellect which is highly valued in the Western technologically advanced societies will be near to cursing in an African milieu. As Manus rightly pointed out, those African world views which bestow an aura of the demon-infested terrain are recognised by the Church leaders and evangelists as tasks for deliverance ministrations ... typical of most of the New Religious Movements in Nigeria (Manus 1998: 1809). It is categorically true that the evil spirit forces are very real just as in the Palestinian world of Jesus' ministry. So evil spirits and their nefarious activities are no figments of imagination in Africa, They are as real as human beings.

In view of the above situation and the seeming ineffectiveness of western-trained theologians who dominate the clergy of the mainline Churches and fact that the leaders of the emergent Pentecostal Churches were products of Bible schools, academic theology was discarded. With time, help was sought from rich and benevolent American evangelists in establishing Bible Schools in Nigeria. Initially the training lasted for six or nine months as the three year theological college training was seen as pure waste of time. The *parousia* consciousness which was a driving force in the New Testament evangelisation served to justify a crash programme in the training of the new Pentecostal ministers who could not afford the luxury of long years of studies even if such studies were 'biblical'.

The Bible and Pentecostal Theology

The Bible is the central source of Pentecostal theology. As M.A. Ojo has rightly noted, the Charismatics who later emerged as Pentecostals initially operated like Bible study groups, holding their meetings only on weekdays and offering Bible studies to their members, in addition to the activities of their regular Churches (Ojo 1995: 115). The Bible study leaders read Bible passages and interpreted them to the members. The perceived meanings of different passages on any topic became the basis of theologising. The vernacular Bibles did no doubt play some significant roles in the Pentecostal revolution of many

African communities as J.S. Mbiti stated. He writes:

Both within mission churches as well as in independent churches, the Bible in African languages is causing a religious restlessness. It drives Christians to examine imported forms of Christian and church life, with a view, consciously or unconsciously, to criticising, questioning, abandoning, modifying, and affirming a wide range of teachings and practices. Some of these teachings may have long historical roots and are supported by strong theological expositions and presuppositions (Mbiti 1986:41).

But in Nigeria the critical appraisal of the imported forms of Christian and Church life is done through intense Bible study based on the King James Authorised Version (KJV) which for the Nigerian Pentecostals is 'The Bible'. All other versions which in some passages differ from the KJV are perverted versions; each new translation is 'an attempt by its translators to corrupt or destroy God's Holy Word' (Weiss 1977:68). But as Weiss has clearly argued, the manuscripts available to the translators of the KJV were late and somehow corrupted even though they did a thorough job. Concerning the Old Testament manuscripts he has this to say:

The oldest Old Testament manuscripts available in 1611 were produced about 800 years after the time of Christ. But some portions of the Old Testament dating back to 200 years before the time of Christ are now available. In other words, these manuscripts are a thousand years older and closer to the original writing than the ones available in 1611 when the King James Version was translated (Weiss 1977:67).

The Nigeria Pentecostal theology centred on the KJV encompasses the entire Bible from Genesis to Revelation. Yahweh or Jehovah, (as He is popularly called) the God of Israel, is recognised as the one Supreme God who in Christ has fully brought in the Gentile believers as the new Israel of God according to Paul's argument (cf. Gal. 3:28). This one and only true God of the universe is delightfully regarded as the God of miracles who can perform any miracle in defence of his people and gratification of his sovereignty. There is,

therefore, special preference for some passages of the Scriptures tending to what J.C. Ortiz termed the 'Gospel according to Saint Evangelicals' (Ortiz 1975: 11-17). This 'Gospel' is a selection of favourite Bible passages from both old and New Testaments resulting in a kind of neglect of difficult or tasking portions. However, as Turner (1967), Mbiti (1986) and Manus (1998) discovered in the Church of the Lord (Aladura), there is meaningful life for the Pentecostals in the Scriptures as the final authority in matters of doctrine, conduct and structures reminiscent of New Testament Christianity, forms and tradition (Manus 1998: 1810). The interpretation of Bible passages and the derived theology result from individual spiritual insights as mediated 'by the Holy Spirit' who is regarded as the author and chief interpreter of the Scriptures. The Nigeria Pentecostal stance is that any literate Christian who has been regenerated and filled or baptised by the Holy Spirit has the capacity to read and interpret the Bible having been enlightened by the Holy Spirit. The Bible is perspicuous enough for the any genuine believer to read and understand.

The Perspicuity of the Scriptures

According to W.C. Kaiser jnr. 'the principle of perspicuity means simply that the Bible is sufficiently clear in and of itself for believers to understand' (Kaiser 1986:122). He went on to expatiate this idea by citing J.S. Wright to the effect that the principle implies three things:

1. Scripture is clear enough for the simplest person to live by it.
2. Scripture is deep enough to form an inexhaustible mine for readers of the highest intellectual capacity.
3. The perspicuity of the Scripture resides in the fact that God intended all scripture to be revelation of Himself to man (Kaiser 1986:122).

Kaiser Jnr goes on to argue that it is an overextension of the principle in using it as excuse against more investigation and strenuous study by believers who were not contemporaries of those who spoke the words. The truths and teachings of Scripture cannot be exhausted. One of the two related problems of the principle of perspicuity which he raised and which is central to our study is,

Why should so much emphasis be placed on advanced training of teachers, preachers, and other interpreters in Christ's Church when all believers have an anointing from the Holy Spirit, by which they know the truth (1 John 2:20)? (Kaiser 1986:123).

Kaiser pertinently argued that 1 John 2:20 was not set to deny the need for explaining of texts otherwise it would be self contradictory. A.C. Thiselton also points out that some writers do sometimes invoke the Holy Spirit to argue that hermeneutics unnecessary and even wrong since it represents an attempt on the part of man to do the work of God (Thiselton 1986:142). I dare to state that whoever claims to have mastered divine rationality is dangerously on the brink of self-deception. The perceived workings of God both in the Old and New Testaments reveal that God works in partnership with human beings. Thus in 2 Corinthian 6, Paul made the claim that he and his Gospel colleagues were 'God's fellow workers'. And when Jesus promised his disciples that they would be clothed with the power of the Holy Spirit, (Lk. 24:49) he did not mollify the earlier charge to them to be as wise as serpents (Matt. 10:16). Therefore the presence, the power or the anointing of the Holy Spirit never implied a dehumanisation or the Holy Spirit making a robot of his guest.

Jesus was reported on many occasions to have stated, in purely human language, possibly Aramaic, the purpose of his messianic mission to the utter misunderstanding of his disciples. The points to be made here is that statements are open to different understandings. A literalist understanding or interpretation of religious statements in particular, is not necessarily the complete meaning or intention of such. From Christian antiquity, there existed specialists in the interpretation of Scriptures. The specialists were however, not always right. Human rationality and traditions could be manipulated to void the original intentions as Jesus pointed out to the Jewish religious leaders (Mark 7).

The Synoptists give the impression that Jesus did a lot of his teachings in parables which according to K.E. Bailey (1983) were peasant stories from everyday life of contemporary Jews. But not even the disciples could grasp the meanings of all those simple peasant stories without the explanation of Jesus. The inferences from the Gospel according to John, tradition holds that Jesus spent about three and half years on his earthly ministry during which the disciples received an on-the-job training for the post Pentecost evangelisation

of the New Testament Church. This and the three year mysterious mission of Paul to Arabia (Gal 1:17-18) might have provided the scriptural basis for the average three year theological training adopted by many orthodox Christian denominations. Teachers whose main duty was the interpretation of Scriptures and training of believers were apart from the apostles and prophets, ranked above all the charismatic personnel of the New Testament Church by Paul (I Cor. 12:28ff). It is evident however that before the institutionalisation of the Church, there were no formal schools for theological training, the charisma imparted by the Holy Spirit seemed the *raison d'être* for their position and operations.

The Challenge of the Pentecostal Theology in Nigeria

The rapid expansion of the Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria and in most cases at the expense of the membership of the mainline Churches is a challenging reality. In the assessment of Manus, they are Nigerianising their biblical theology, ministry and church buildings by using biblical messages to respond to both personal and social problems endemic to Nigerian society (Manus 1998: 1824). In other words, it could be said that they are making the Bible relevant to the existential realities of the adherents. Fortunately they do not address existential issues at the cost of other-worldly convictions of the Christian Church, in their use of the Bible, they emphasise a close link between this world and the world to come (Manus 1998: 1825). In spite of the fact that Pentecostal Churches have largely ignored conventional modern theology and the advantages of the results of the socio-critical studies in biblical scholarship in Africa (Manus 1998: 1821), they have made amazing breakthroughs in the ecclesiastical arena. It is all the more surprising that the champions of Pentecostal ecclesiology in Nigeria are neither opportunist religious charismatics nor articulate theologians but University intellectuals. The three fastest growing denominations in contemporary Nigeria are the Deeper Life Bible Church, the Redeemed Christian Church of God and Living Faith Church, popularly known as Winners' Chapel. The Deeper Life Bible Church is led by Pastor William F. Kumuyi, a former Mathematics lecturer at the University of Lagos. The General Overseer of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, is Pastor Enoch A. Adeboye also a former Mathematics lecturer at the University of Ilorin. David O. Oyedepo is the

Presiding Bishop of the Living Faith Church and an architect turned preacher' (Oyedepom 1996: n.p.), who studied architecture at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. Both Kumuyi and Oyedepo are the founders of their Churches. Biblical scholars and theologians may have a lot of holes to pick in the theology and praxis of these ecclesiastical giants but the point is that conventional theology is progressively losing grounds to this type of results-oriented pragmatic theology. As mentioned earlier, the Pentecostals have a preference for Bible Schools which offer short-term training in the mechanics of evangelisation, Church planting and management.

Anointing and spiritual empowerment override theological training or the charisma of office and heroic, charismatic, even authoritarian figures do rise up to provide the necessary leadership and mediation of power (Hackett 1998: 262).

Perhaps the vital operational ingredients which are visibly absent among the theologically oriented leaders of the mainline Churches are the anointing and spiritual empowerment as pointed out by Hackett. Was Jesus not anointed with the Holy Spirit and power (Acts 10:38) whereby he went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil? A close study of Pauline ecclesiology shows that he could not conceive of any Christian outside the indwelling and animation of the Holy Spirit. Most of the mainline Churches duly acknowledge and reverence the Holy Spirit as a *bona fide* Personality in the Holy Trinity but his Pentecostal functions and manifestations are sidelined. The Anglican Church, for example, operates on the principle that no one can do any useful work for God without the empowerment by the Holy Spirit; Consequently the confirmation rite based on the apostolic laying on of hands in Acts 8:14-17 is a mandatory prerequisite for holding any Church post. But tragically most of the confirming bishops have no Pentecostal encounter with the Holy Spirit with the result that any confirmation candidate who dared speak in tongues and prophesy as Paul's candidates in Acts 19:6 would be highly suspect of strange and indecorous behaviours.

At the centre of Pentecostal theology in Nigeria is the prosperity gospel. The hard times prevalent in the Nigerian economy have occasioned 'the money-making activities' of many of the churches, and the conspicuous salvation/ consumption lauded by some of the more flamboyant leaders

(Hackett 1998: 260). The survival instinct in humans naturally make them adaptable to any system that gives some guarantee of successfully wading through any crisis of survival be it political, economic or religious. In fact, the prosperity gospel is not the preserve of the flamboyant leaders; it is the hallmark of Pentecostalism in Nigeria and beyond. Youth unemployment has of late posed serious national problems. One employer lamented that the employment opportunity for two hundred recently advertised attracted 38,000 applications. Within just one week, the two federal universities in Ibadan and Ife added about 8,000 new graduates to the job market. Unscrupulous individuals employ the jobless youths in violence, communal clashes, religious disturbances, pipeline vandalism and other similar heinous acts. As prosperity gospel preachers thrill their audience on not just how to succeed in life but how to make it to the top, Hackett's remark is appropriate.

Their progressive, goal-oriented attitudes attract the youth, disillusioned with the empty moral claims of their elders and leaders. Those churches with more holiness origins such as W.F. Kumuyi's Deeper Life Bible Church, with headquarters in Lagos, have a much more stringent moral outlook, but still (or because of this) attract large numbers of members (Hackett 1998: 260).

The 'empty moral claims' of elders and leaders imply the Church elders of some churches and the new-breed political leaders who seem to be making laws for the populace with themselves above the law. In contrast to the above elders and leaders who bore the youth with sermons of obedience and good behaviour 'the ultimate icon of conspicuous salvation, displayed by the Pentecostal prosperity preachers, is the Mercedes Benz, which has developed an almost mystical value (surely not anticipated by it stolid German Makers) (Hackett 1998: 264). The theology of the often criticised Pentecostals is more practical and the theologians theologise by examples. It is a well-known fact that diseases and sicknesses are endemic in Africa, Nigeria not excepted. The cost and availability of medical science are beyond the reach of the common people. In addition, the activities of malignant spirits and their human collaborators like witches, occultists and juju-men are as real to Nigerians as physical existence. In these prevailing circumstances, the Pentecostal theology of healing and deliverance cannot but appeal to the millions of patients and

victims of ill-health and spiritual attacks. High churchmen and heavyweight orthodox theologians who usually dismiss healings and exorcisms as religious gimmicks are having a re-think from the miracle crusade of Reinhard Bonke. Newspapers are littered with the testimonies and eye-witness accounts of those who received one kind of miracle or another in those city-wide crusades. The healing miracles and exorcisms of Jesus and his disciples are not lacking in the New Testament but the 'demythologization' carried out by modern theology seems to have estranged orthodox theologians from the biblical view of the miraculous.

According to Manus, 'the success-stories of healings and miracles attract hoards of Nigerians to attend Deeper Life' (Manus 1998: 1817). The hoards cut across ethnic, social and religious boundaries and Deeper Life Bible Church is only one out of many Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria. The exodus of members from the mainline Churches has forced some of them to accommodate the Charismatics in their midst.

Finally, the Pentecostal theology as it concerns work ethics has made a significant social impact. The concept of work as God-given for which everyone is accountable not so much to the employer as to God poses a great challenge to the social norms of selfishness, corruption, laziness and eye-service. M.A. Ojo has highlighted four distinctive approaches of Charismatics (who differ from the Pentecostals only in denominational belonging) to work (Ojo 1996:58-60). First, they are prayerfully selective of the kind of work they do. They would rather remain jobless than accept an employment fraught with corruption such as in breweries, tobacco factories, or customs houses where one must compromise in bribery or face threats of death. Second, secular employments must be done 'as unto the Lord' devoid of gratifications, kickbacks, partiality or pilfering of stationery for personal use. Third, as a follow-up to avoidance of corrupt practices, 'the born-again' Christians are dutiful, conscientious and hardworking. One's seniors whether good or bad must be respected and prayed for. As one's promotion comes 'from the Lord', eye-services or lobbying for positions has no place in the working agenda. Finally, every genuine believer must find something doing in the light of Paul's directive to the Thessalonians that anyone who would not work should not eat. (2 Thess. 3:10). No one should be a parasite on his neighbours or other Christians. In pursuance of this policy, a young man was given an executive post when a wealthy employer met him as a graduate carrying blocks with

labourers at a building site. Manus' remark about the Deeper Life Bible Church is apt for the Pentecostal praxis; he states:

Deeper Life is fully aware that the biblical message promotes the achievement and realization of a just society and that its proclamation is a task which calls for Christian commitment and struggle in Nigeria. Theirs is a belief that the Bible, the word of God, remains the only norm for measuring the sacrosanctity of social justice, fair play and righteousness in a society almost bankrupt in moral and upright living (Manus 1998: 1822).

The Pentecostal theology which seems to lack the refined philosophical ingenuity of Western theology but incorporates new forms, beliefs and structures from the Bible and the rich and religious Nigerian heritage (Manus 1998: 1823) is winning the day not only in Nigeria but elsewhere in Africa. The theology of deliverance from poverty and disease, spiritual vindication and purity of life poses a very serious challenge to the trained incapacity to function as mentioned earlier. This theology is largely based on the theory that the Scriptures are perspicuous enough for any 'Spirit-filled' Christian to read and understand. The trail is blazed not by ignorant fanatics or circumstantial opportunists but seasoned intellectuals who are causing religious and moral revolutions in the stigmatised Nigerian society.

Conclusion

Whatever advancement the world makes, be it in science, technology, medicine or anthropology, the issue of relevance is a recurring factor. Whatever proves irrelevant faces the danger of being done away with. It is more or less an open secret that Western theology is proving irrelevant in the face of rapid technological and scientific breakthroughs. Perhaps the judgement of J.W. Montgomery (1971) that the modern theologian has succeeded in killing himself by eliminating the *raison d'être* for his own existence, is to some extent true. Modern theology, instead of advancing the course of Christianity as a relevant religion seems to have justified the view of Karl Marx that religion is a mere opium of the people.

Since the resurgence of Pentecostalism in the early 20th Century, it has advanced so rapidly that in many African and Latin American countries it more or less dominates the scene in the Christian arena. Despite 'its lack of tradition and scorn of formal theological education' (Maxwell 1998: 257), it is succeeding in areas where orthodox Christianity has failed. The belief that the Bible is perspicuous enough for any 'Spirit-filled' person to understand, leads to the independent and literal interpretation of Bible verses. A flurry of passages from both Old and New Testaments are used as proof-texts for prosperity preaching, healing and miracles of all kinds. The local efforts in making the Bible relevant to the local people are complemented by city-wide crusades of international evangelists like Reinhard Bonke who for sometime has been on a systematic tour of Nigerian state capitals.

For sure, the perspicuity of the Scripture is enshrined in the fact of God's self revelation to man but at the same time the Scripture contains truths that cannot be exhausted by any generation of scholars. The scorn of formal theological training by the Pentecostals is partially justified by the 'trained incapacity' to deal with daily existential problems. At the same time it cannot be a sufficient reason to shun a deeper enquiry into the mysteries of the Bible faith. Studies for a better understanding of God's revelations to humans began in the primal days of divine communication and may never cease till the expected consummation of all things.

The challenge of Pentecostal theology in Nigeria is very real and urgent. Perhaps the best option for Nigeria biblical scholars might be a 're-mythologized' theology of the demythologised Western theology which it is claimed, suits the post-Christian communities of the world where technology and science have relegated faith and the supernatural. The assessment of Manus concerning the New Generation or Pentecostal Churches is that:

The Bible has helped and, in fact, continues to help the Church promote a distinctively African Basic Christian Community patterned on the structures congruent with New Testament Christianity, forms and tradition. Charismatic evangelism derived from biblical religion has forced unwholesome practices of the African Traditional Religion to be condemned, cleansed, purified and what remains to be inculcated into the burgeoning African Christianity (Manus 1998: 1810).

There is no doubt that Pentecostal theology has come to stay in Nigeria and that the religious, social, economic and behavioural impact it is exerting are remarkable. If the mainline Churches had not read the handwriting on the wall and quickly made adjustments to accommodate their charismatic members when the Pentecostal Revolution swept through Africa, they would by now be very worse off for it. Maybe theologians who are well-established in Western-oriented theologizing will find solution to the challenges of Pentecostal theology in the Church's approach of accommodation, adaptation and shift of emphasis.

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