

QUEST FOR MIRACLES AND MONEY IN THE CHURCH: TRIVIALIZING THE WORD AND THE SACRAMENTS

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ABSTRACT

Never has there been a generation of Christians as conscious of miracles as ours. Our generation is a miracle generation. People desire breakthroughs in business, in education, in marriages, in family life, in work places, etc. It is 'because of this quest for miracle that the gospel message being preached in some of the largest Churches in the World has changed. Hence a new gospel message is being preached. The preachers of prosperity gospel deviate from the essential meaning of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The rate at which these preachers preach prosperity leaves a fundamental question in the reflective mind. What is the objective of the gospel preached? Does performance of miracle signify holiness? Why do believers seem to jeopardize their faith by jumping from one miracle centre to another? This work therefore, is an attempt to address these. cravings for miracles and money, which make mockery of the Word of God and the sacraments in the Catholic Church. At the end, attempt shall be made at suggesting that the harbingers of the good news must endeavour to teach and live the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

INTRODUCTION

The rapidly changing nature of our world today makes it difficult to be a courageous Christian in the face of difficulty, temptation, sickness, persecution, poverty and so on. Today, most self-acclaimed deliverers, prophets, evangelists, and tele-evangelist believe that suffering, pain, illness and poverty are not our portions as Christians. Gone are those days when pastors, evangelists compete on the streets in the early hours of the mornings to preach the 'repent for the kingdom of God is at hand' kind of gospel message. Today people are more interested in miracle and money, thereby bastardizing the gospel. As a result these prosperity gospel preachers go about offering them false, and elusive hope with their gospel of miracles and money. Nowadays, healing crusades, deliverance sessions, cleansing ceremonies abound, in which this 'false gospel' is preached. And every now and then, majority of our Christians fall victims to this falsehood and deceit. Many of our Christian members have been brainwashed in such a way that they no longer have regard or value for the word of God and the sacraments of Christ.

With this in mind, one is inclined to ask: what is really at stake here? Is it Christian proclamation of repentance? Is it miracle after the mind of our Lord Jesus Christ or a calculated attempt at exploiting the gullibility of the masses in the pursuit of self-aggrandizement? This work is geared towards finding reasons why many unsuspecting Christians including some gullible Catholics prefer prayer houses and super pastors, evangelists and Catholic priests who deceive them, to the unchanging word of God and the sanctifying sacraments. At the end of this work, concrete suggestions will be given on how to put a check to excessive quest for miracles and money, which trivializes the word of God and the sacraments.

MIRACLE PERFORMANCE: A SIGN OF HOLINESS AND SALVATION?

Being holy does not mean doing extraordinary things like healing of the sick, casting out devils, prosperity, raising the dead etc., but doing ordinary things extraordinarily well (Amasiatu 2004:71). It is believable that one can be performing miracles without being holy. Amasiatu (2004:71) quoting Fernando Armellini says that "God can make use of any person or event to realize his plans." He is free to choose the means he likes and can communicate his salvation also outside the usual patterns; he can make use of a pagan, of an unbeliever, of an atheist (2004:71). For example he used the pagan king of Persia, Cyrus, as a Messiah to liberate the Israelites from bondage in Babylon (cf. Is. 45-48). Jesus says: "it is not anyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord' who will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the person who does the will of the father in heaven. When the day comes, many will say to me 'Lord, Lord,' did we not prophecy in your name, drive out demons in Your name, work many miracles in your name? Then I shall tell them to their faces: I have never known you, away from me, all evildoers!" (Mt.7:21-23).

When Jesus sent out the seventy-two disciples on mission having performed many miracles, they came back rejoicing: "Lord," they said, "even the devils submit to us when we use your name. He said to them,"... Do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, rejoice instead that your names are written in heaven" (Luke 10: 17-20). Even Judas Iscariot was among the disciples that Jesus sent out for the mission and he too must have cast out demons in the name of the Lord. Hence the disciples did not report, Lord, the devils submit to us, except to Judas Iscariot. The Bible never describes Judas Iscariot as a holy man, nor does the Church; for this we do not have or hear of St. Judas Iscariot.' We must keep saying that performing prodigious signs does not make one holy. The true and holy disciple of Jesus is not the one who calls him Lord, Lord, the one who prophesizes, drives out

demons and works miracles in his name, but the one who does the will of God. This does not mean that miracles do not happen again. Surely it does. However, the questions begging for answers include: Does it take people away from God? What is the intention behind it?

ERRORS OF THE PROSPERITY GOSPEL PREACHERS

The gospel preached by a number of pastors and catholic priests today is powerful indication that they lack basic understanding of the Word of God and the teachings of the Church. They appear to take the scripture from the periphery without any attempt at understanding the intrinsic meaning of the Word. In variety of ways below, they display their erroneous understanding of the Word of God as it is in the Bible.

A. The Abrahamic Covenant is a Means to Material Entitlement (cf, Gen 12, 15,22)

This is one of the theological bases of the prosperity gospel. It is very good that preachers of prosperity gospel recognize that much of the scripture is the record of the fulfilment of the Abrahamic covenant, but on the other hand, it is very bad that they do not maintain an orthodox view of this covenant. They incorrectly view the inception of the covenant. More significantly, they erroneously view the application of the covenant. It is understood that Christians are Abrahamic spiritual children and heirs to the blessings of faith. This Abrahamic inheritance does not suppose material entitlement. In other words, the prosperity gospel teaches that the primary purpose of the Abrahamic covenant was for God to bless Abraham materially. Since we are Abraham's spiritual children, we have inherited these financial blessings. To buttress this, prosperity preachers appeal to Galatians 3:14 which refers to "the blessings of Abraham that come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus." In their appeal to Galatians 3:14, they ignore the second half of the verse: "that we might receive the promise of spirit through faith." St. Paul is plainly reminding the Galatians of the spiritual blessing of salvation not material blessing of wealth.

B. Jesus' Atonement Extends to the "Sin" of Material Poverty

In their quest for miracles and money, prosperity gospel preachers claim that both physical healings and financial breakthroughs have been provided for in Jesus' atonement. This misunderstanding of the scope of the atonement stems from two errors prosperity gospel proponents make. Firstly, they have a fundamental misconception of the life of Jesus. The only thing they know about Jesus is 'the miraculous Jesus' not 'the suffering Jesus.' The second error that leads to a faulty view of the atonement is misinterpreting 2 Corinthians 8: 9, which reads: "for you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, that you through his poverty might become rich." The shallow reading of this verse may lead one to believe St. Paul was teaching about an increase in material wealth, a contextual reading reveals he was actually teaching the exact opposite principle. Indeed, St. Paul was teaching the Corinthians that since Christ accomplished so much for them through his atonement, they should empty themselves of their riches in service of God and humanity. .

c. Prayer is a tool to force God to grant prosperity

Prosperity gospel preachers often say "we have not because we ask not" (James 4:2). They encourage us to pray for personal success in all areas of life. For them when we pray, believing that we have already received what we are asking, God has no choice but to make our prayers come to pass. Prayers for personal blessings are not inherently wrong but within prosperity theology, man becomes the focal point of prayer not God. They often ignore second half of St. James teaching on prayer: 'you ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions' (James 4:3).

Prosperity gospel is a false gospel. Scripturally, the prosperity gospel is fundamentally flawed. It is false gospel because of its faulty view of the relationship between God and man. It promotes a manipulative kind of relationship where man remote-controls God. Thus, if prosperity gospel is true, grace is obsolete, God is irrelevant and man is the measure of all things. Whether they are talking about the Abrahamic covenant, the atonement, prayer and so on, prosperity preachers form the relationship between God and man into a quid pro quo transaction (a favour or advantage granted in return for something). ceremonies abound, in which this 'false gospel' is preached. And every now and then, majority of our Christians fall victims to this falsehood and deceit. Many of our Christian members have been brainwashed in such a way that they no longer have regard or value for the word of God and the sacraments of Christ.

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SUFFERING: THE EXISTENTIAL HUMAN CONDITION

What is the good life for man? Many writers and scholars conceive the good life as 'one devoid of pain. Epicurus in developing his hedonistic philosophy thought in this line, for him the good life is a life of pleasure. A pleasurable life is equated with being in heaven while pain is equated with hell. On the contrary, the good life is not simply a pleasurable life. Human experience has revealed that the world is not as hedonistic as its advocates would portray. Man's journey in life is essentially an admixture of pain and pleasure. Pain and suffering cannot be totally removed from the life of man. This does not mean that the good life is a painful life either.

In Jean Paul Sartre's construal, man is a thrown-in. Man is ordinarily thrown in the world to cater for himself. Regardless of the 'thrownness' of man, he was never abandoned by his maker. Man is interestingly thrown-in with varieties of potentials to be harnessed. These human aspirations and potentials are not achieved by engaging in what gives pleasure alone. To realize one's full potential, one must chastise oneself, bear pain and suffering. There is no success story without an accompanying pain and suffering encountered and endured. To become anything one must suffer some amount of, at least, short term pain and suffering. Ibeanu (1995:34) corroborates this by adding that "nobody is born a medical doctor, nobody is born a millionaire, nobody is born a Priest by birth. It Becoming any of the above comes with a price that must be paid. A Christian must accept suffering as part of the overall plan of life. After the fall of man God cursed the earth and made it a *conditio sine qua non* that man must toil and soil his hand before he eats of the earth (cf. Gen. 3:17).

Suffering is not an unnatural condition to human existence. In numerous cases it has proven to be a springboard on which great men of history launched themselves to extraordinary success stories and great achievements. The answer to many of man's problems lies within the innermost self. Suffering ushers in the opportunity to do a retrospect, to go into the innermost chamber of oneself in search of solutions to one's perplexing existential problems. Where will the world have been if suffering and pain were sieved from man's life? Of course, the world would have been redundant and stagnant. The technological breakthroughs that we enjoy today would have been nowhere. It is through great efforts that the world is where it is today. Thomas Edison, for instance, made consistent and persistent efforts in order to invent the electric bulb we use in our homes today.

In contrast to this human existential condition with countless examples from the Holy Writ, some preachers display what I see as their own ignorance and lack of understanding of the word of God or their blatant and damaging insistence on distorting the word of God to suit the social status quo as well as their personal interests. The message prosperity gospel preachers carry today is what catches their fancy, what serves their interests and what the people in their vulnerability want to hear - prosperity.

The prophecies from these prosperity gospel preachers are a wonderful indication that they fundamentally lack the knowledge of Christ. They may have the historical knowledge of Christ but not the knowledge of the 'Real

Christ'. They deviate from the Word and the scriptural examples of the prophets of old as well as the early Christians whose sufferings we reap the fruits today. Christ our role model, even though he is God, suffered and endured great tribulations, the price at which he bought our redemption and salvation. Through suffering, pain and the agony of the cross he paid for our sins and purchased salvation for mankind. Regardless of his innocence, he suffered and bore the shame of dying on the cross with criminals for the good of mankind and a greater glory. As many conceive it, suffering is not necessarily a consequence of sin neither is it a result of some ancestral curse. Sometimes we may suffer for doing the right thing. In the same vein, it may be intended for the greater glory of God. This is exemplified in the scripture when Christ healed the man born blind. The disciples asked Jesus, "Teacher, whose sin caused him to be born blind? Was it his own or his parents' sin? And Jesus replied, "his blindness has nothing to do with his sin or his parents' sin. He is born blind so that God's work might be seen at work in him" (John 9: 1-3).

Suffering and endurance are always antecedent to greater good. In the Old Testament, Job suffered and lost everything though innocent he was. Although he sought intellectual answers to his problems, he refused to succumb to the persuasions to look for immediate overturn of events by speaking ill about God. Unlike today's Christians who betray their faith in the face of difficulties, Job held his faith in God and was greatly rewarded. God gave him sevenfold of all that he lost as a prize for his endurance of pain and suffering. The apostles during the early days of Christianity did not suffer less. The price of the gospel and Christian faith we openly and proudly profess today was paid by the apostles. They endured persecutions from the government authorities. They faced challenges, trials and temptations. Apostles such as Peter, James, Stephen, Paul, etc. all faced trials and temptations. However, the goodness is that the apostles were ready and willing to bear the hardship of their days in defense of the gospel and today they are enjoying eternal bliss with the Father in heaven.

The same thing is applicable and expected of today's Christians, Catholics and non-Catholics. If we can endure pain and suffering a little, we shall enjoy eternal bliss. It is notwithstanding inescapable. Suffering being intrinsically part of human existential condition exposes the uselessness of seeking instantaneous and miraculous solutions to challenges and problems we can frontally face. There is a special joy that comes with achievement and success when one works for it. In a world where one can become anything, one must surely and be prepared to endure some sort of pain as a price.

Today, on the contrary, we find it extremely difficult to withstand the least of pains. To suffer is, therefore, synonymous with being accursed. Little wonder we have the prevalent mentality of and slogan "it is not my portion." This is orchestrated by the one, sided gospel of abounding false prophets today. We can rightly say that they cause greater harm in our society. Fr. Amasiatu (2010:105) captures the harm they cause thus: "they create false alarms and Psychological fears in the people, and put confusions in families and destroy good relationships among neighbours and friends with their false visions and prophecies, they cast doubt in people's hearts thereby jeopardizing their faith in God." They make suffering appear as a sign of abandonment and rejection by God. In their view, being a Christian is an emblem that exonerates one from pain. They preach that by Christ's suffering he took away ours and therefore it is not our portion to suffer any kind of pain.

However, God never abandons his creature for he feeds even the birds of air. Christ during his life on earth identified with the afflicted and the needy to the extent that some complained. He showed compassion on them and made them whole again. He is all that humankind needs for he has "power not only to heal, but also to forgive sins; he has come to heal the whole man, soul and body; he is the physician the sick have need of" (Chikata 2015:134).

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Our Lord started suffering as soon as he was born. Remember that at his birth there was no space in the inn. He was born in a manger, in an unkempt surrounding. He suffered much more during his earthly ministry and endured a shameful death. Although we are, at a time or the other, faced with difficulties, God is always with us. He shares in our suffering and wants the best for us, his chosen people. As humans, we feel frustrated especially when we cannot find intellectually satisfying answers to why even the innocent suffer, it is best that we trust and have faith in God who everything works according to his designs for the greater good. It is therefore important that we submit to God's will since our intellectual curiosity cannot adequately and comprehensively explain the mystery of the human reality-suffering.

Seeking for miracles and money from prayer houses only makes one a prey in the hands of hungry pastors and prophets. The urge and quest for miracles can be said to be at variance with fundamental human existential condition. It is past time when the people were fed with manna and quails. It is time to toil and work. It is time to go to the field. A popular Igbo adage says that "*aruo n'anwu, erie na ndo.*" We cannot reach our best human development folding our hands. Even gold is tested by fire.

REASONS FOR THE QUEST FOR MIRACLES AND MONEY

Africa as a continent is particularly faced with hardship and misery. It is undeniably full of problems, suffering and pain. These are, in most part, orchestrated by the inherent mismanagement of available scarce resources. This concomitantly engenders poverty, poor education, poor health care delivery, collapse of both social and economic infrastructure, among other things. The reality of the above problems drives people and most Catholics to prayer houses in search of miracles and money. For better understanding we shall consider these factors in a more concise and precise manner.

A. Poverty. In Nigeria, the poverty centre of the world for instance, where the vast majority of the population live below the poverty index line, it is very difficult to afford life's basic necessities. Due to this, the masses for example are unable to access good health care. It is unfortunate to say the fact that most part of the country has no hospitals. In some rural areas the hospitals are like abandoned properties. The available well equipped hospitals are exclusive luxury of the rich. Echema (2006:18-19) notes that "in such a situation of wretchedness and despair, they turn to God of miracle whom they are taught is able to make the impossible possible" in every prayer house.

B. Illiteracy and Ignorance. A good number of Christians in Nigeria, especially those in the rural areas, ignorantly believe that certain misfortunes such as sickness, barrenness, mental disorder, premature death, unhappy family life, accidents, lack of material wellbeing are the works of malicious spirits and cannot be curtailed, avoided or treated in the hospital. They attribute such ailments to spiritual/evil forces and therefore seek spiritual

remedies to them. It is on this vulnerability and ignorance of the people that prosperity gospel preachers capitalize to endear, brainwash, manipulate, deceive and extort from them. This kind of ignorance on the side of the congregation makes it easier for the preachers to corrupt the message in the Word of God and commercialize the sacraments for their personal gains.

C. Laziness and Loss of the Sense of Dignity of Labour. It is right to say that today we are growing in laziness and promoting easy life. We abhor work and we want everything on a platter of gold. We still expect God to send down manna and quails as in the days of old. Only few really value the dignity of labour in our days. We want easy ways of making money quick devoid of hard work. The purported miracle centers seem to offer solutions and a great mammoth of crowd rush to claim their own miracles. People who are in pain are accursed. Labour with all its dignity is rebuffed. We turn a blind eye to the part of the scripture that encourages labour. We Christians, Catholics and non-Catholics, quickly forget that the Bible says: "He who does not work, let him not eat" (2 Thes. 3: 10). One must endure pain in order to gain. An Igbo adage says: "*onye ngana kpuchie ute, aguu ekpughee ya.*"

D. Lack of Faith. The lives of many of us are a depiction of grave erosion of faith. To go from one church to another, from one prayer house to another is in the simplest term a show of lack of faith in God. The least adversity jeopardizes our faith. Echema (2006: 17) observes that "in moments of crisis such as cases of childlessness, sickness, death, witchcraft, failure in business, accident or natural disaster ... Christians of both Catholics and non-Catholics betray their faith. They make clandestine visits not only the healing Churches or homes believed to bring desired results." Many have increased their problems by this show of faithlessness. Fake prophets with their fake prophecies abound. They prophesy not the Word of God but their own word. Their prophecies never come to fulfilment, yet people run after them. This calls for questioning. The Bible made us know that we should "test every Spirit" (cf. 1 John 4: 1). However, for such people the Lord promised a disaster of war and starvation to these false and ignorant prophets and to those who accepted their words, their wives, sons and daughters, not even their bodies would be buried after death" (Amasiatu 20 10: 104).

E. Materialism. Materialism has overtaken our world. As Fr. Chikata rightly puts it, "our greatest problem and enemy in living out the life of sacrifice is materialism" (2015:14). It has enormously hampered the practice of true and genuine faith in God as well as the preaching of his Word. To live a good life is equated with living in affluence, abundance of wealth. Accordingly, "living a good life has been redefined to be a matter of having more: having more money, more gadgets, more cars, more security, more comfort, more power and so on" (Chikata 2015: 14). Christians no longer fancy practicing moderation. We fail to learn and emulate the worthy lives of St. Francis of Assisi, St. Anthony of Padua, Mother Theresa of Calcutta, etc., who lived their lives renouncing material possession. Excessive quest for miracle and money is an impediment to the spiritual growth of Christians. Christ, our perfect role model, has not even a hole or a nest to lay his head (cf. Luke 9:58),

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

A good number of Christians have fallen victim to the deceits and schemes of the prosperity gospel preachers. These preachers have consciously and unconsciously shown openly how uninterested they are in preaching the Word of God, They show little or no reverence for the Word. All they care about is their personal gratification. Being that this is the ugly situation, it is pertinent to remind Christians that excessive desire and pursuit for immediate overturn of event - miracle, has, from experience, brought more sorrow and pain than relief. What then can we do to curtail this ugly situation?

Considering the fact that poverty fans the ambers of the quest for miracles and money, Christians, especially the rich amongst us, are encouraged to readily and willingly help the needy. The Lord said to Peter, if you love me feed my flocks. With little sacrifice we might be saving "the sinner's soul." As the quest for material possession, also, significantly affects the issue under investigation, it would be noteworthy to state and indulge Catholics to practise moderation. Wealth acquisition has failed, in many instances, to end people's misery and suffering. It is a wrong belief and an illusion that material things bring about peace of mind, joy and happiness which the practice of moderation can afford.

Fr. Chikata (2015: 131), quoting Kerri Lenartowick says: "Whenever material things, money, worldliness, become the centre of our lives, they take hold of us, they possess us; we lose our very identity as human beings." One of the greatest philosophers, Aristotle, was right when he said that virtue lies in the middle. How can we cure ourselves of materialism? "The cure to materialism is detachment from material things. In concrete terms, what detachment means here is imbibing the spirit of poverty, the ability to rise above material possession, to know its relative worth, to put it in its proper place" (Chikata 2015:15). By emulating the lives of our Lord, practising

moderation and detachment, we can overcome the temptation of looking for quick solutions to problems and miracles.

On the same hand, Christians and Catholics to be precise are encouraged to live and practice the faith they proclaim. It is shameful and ridiculously that Catholic members appear to lack basic knowledge of what they have. In the Catholic Church God gave us everything including the sacraments for our good and sanctification. The Blessed Sacrament, for example, is a wonderful source of strength and centre of our worship to the believers. Seeking for miracles in every house of prayer casts a doubt and jeopardizes the faith that we proclaim. Our God is a compassionate God. He listens to our supplications. He keeps visiting his people at their various points of need. He never abandons us. All that is expected of us is to have faith in God and exercise the virtue of patience. The scripture tells us that "happy are those who remain faithful under trials, because when they succeed in passing such a test, they will receive as their reward the life which God has promised to those who love him" (James 1: 12). As good practising Catholics, we should be aware that there is dignity of labour. Let us guard ourselves against the spirit of laziness and easy life mentality. We learn from the exemplary lives of the apostles; Peter, James and John who were fishermen and Paul who was a tanner.

A good Christian is a prayerful Christian. Let us not lose sight of prayer. Christ gave us a powerful means of overcoming all that assail us through prayer. He was particularly prayerful during his earthly ministry. He goes to the mountain to pray and offer supplications to his father frequently. In Mt. 7:7 he says: "Ask· and it shall be given to you." The Lord is always ready to meet our needs in prayer. It is the master key to our problems. The letter of James also admonishes us to pray in times of trouble.

In conclusion, miracle as God's special intervention in our problems has never stopped. God has continued to meet his people's need in various ways and means. However, this does not call for unexamined leap to every healing centre. There is as a matter of fact suffering and pain in the world since the fall of man. It is part of our existence, part of the universal whole. We should understand that sometimes it comes in order to bring about the fulfilment of God's designs for man. At times when we suffer tribulations, it is better, instead of searching for miracles, to seek the face of the Lord, ask for what his will for us is at each moment of our lives.

Things must have been gravely hard for Christ himself as He cried out on the cross: "Father! Father! Why have you forsaken me?" As an example to us, he succumbed to the Father's will: "it is not as I will but your will be done." As we reflect on the Word of God and the sacraments, we should pray for the gift of understanding. We should pray for the gift of the Holy Spirit who will teach us all things so that we can understand the underlying meaning of the Word of God and value of the sacraments. This will keep us guided and able to decipher those who preach the true Word of God from those who preach the word for their self-aggrandizement. Beware of false prophets who corrupt the Word of God and aberration priests who commercialize the sacraments of Christ in quest for miracles and money. The right time is now for a stitch in time saves nine.

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