

John 2: 13-17 and its Implications for Church Commercialisation in Nigeria

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Abstract

The study examined Church commercialization with emphasis on John 2: 13-17. Religion to an extent in Nigeria is no more a spiritual thing but a means to an end especially among some so- called religious leaders. Although some spiritual leaders postulated spiritual reasons for their actions but majority of it is found out to be against the ethics of Christianity. Therefore for the purpose of clarity, the methodology adopted by the researcher in this paper was descriptive and empirical methods. The paper noted that, Jesus in John 2: 13-17 was angry with temple authorities that engaged in exploiting the poor and rebuked them for the desecration of the house of God. The paper revealed that in Nigeria, most pastors focused on prosperity preaching's and this have caused loss of interest and lack of trust in spiritual activities among many believers. In other words, majority no longer reference God and things of God as it used to be. It has been pastor's wealth versus member's poverty in Nigeria Church of today. These facts have bashed the reputation of the Church; turned commercialization into an aberration that makes it to look like it is against the tenets of Christianity and thus the church is encouraged to work towards promoting good virtues in the face of this anomaly. The paper, on this note recommended that basic theological education needs to be given to people in order to understand the workings of religion and commerce. Religious leaders too who engaged in religion/church commercialization are advised to yield to the mandate of Jesus that freely one has received and freely one must give. This becomes imperatives in order to boost the image of Church that has been tarnished as a result of these unhealthy business activities. Above all, moderation and Godly contentment should be the attitude of professing Christians.

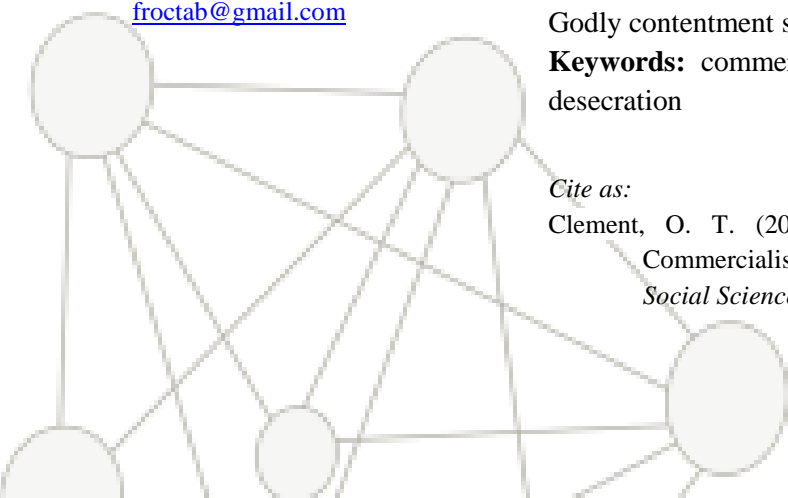
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INTRODUCTION

Commercialization of religion is becoming a world- wide phenomenon. For some, it is a cause for worry while for others, it is normal. Nigeria is not exempted from this issue. In fact, Nigeria is one of the most outstanding or if one may say notorious counties in this phenomenon even though she is rated or regarded as one of the most religious countries in the world. This was attested to in the work of Leonard:

..., they are in the strict and natural sense of the word, a truly and deeply religious people, of whom it could be said that they eat religiously, dress religiously, and bathe religiously. In a few words, the religions of these natives as I have all along endeavored to point out, is their existence and their existence is their religion.

(Leonard, n.d,p. 10)

It may not be fallacious that looking at this rating to say that Nigeria as well tops the category of countries where most commercialization and as well, direct or indirect desecration of the sanctuary is most prominent. There are many clear cases of situations where religious leaders or ministers are taking advantage of religion and their positions to amass wealth. There are many other cases too in which ministers desecrate the sanctuary with jesting and other disdainful behaviors. Most Nigerian ministers in particular is noted for various nefarious acts ranging from embezzlement of church fund, extortion of money from congregation, abuse of positions and offices and worst still, physical and sexual abuse. All these are done in the name of God. There is no doubt that issues such as this call for the attention of well- meaning citizens of the country whether believers or not. This issue spurs the initiatives for this work. Therefore, the paper examines the implications of John 2: 13-17 and its relevance to address the menace of commercialization and desecration of the sanctuary within the Nigerian religious and economic community.

Meaning of Church Commercialization

In a very clear term, church commercialization according to Nwanganga denotes two things, first application of commercial principles in the running of the church or running of it as a business with the aim of making economic gain (Nwanganga 2017, p.30-38). Secondly, Fidelis also says, commercialization of the church is the manipulation of the church, its service (spiritual and emotional) with the implied intentions to exploit members for economic or financial gain (Fidelis 1998 p.23).

Commercialization Discourse in the Old Testament

The Bible which embodies the precepts of Christianity gives series of accounts that depict commercialization of religion. In the Old Testament period, Prophet Amos particularly preached against the evil of desecration of religious practices which includes commercialization of religion, corruption, exploitation and oppression of the poor needy and desecration of the laws of God. (Amos 2: 8:5, 5, 4:1, 5:11, 8: 4:6, 4:4, 5:7, 10 and 6:12). C.O Ogunkunle is of the view that, “the fact that Amaziah and other Priests in Israel had commercialized religion is indicated in his derogatory advice to Amos that he should go to Judah and earn his bread there (Amos 7:12). They believed that religion was for making money. Religious leaders in the Old

Testament were charged of commercialization of religion by serving the people for economic gain. Rather than serving and caring for the people as the shepherds of the nation, these false Prophets were leading people astray (Ogunkunle 2006 p. 30-38). Prophet Ezekiel was also against the false prophets and prophetesses who were into commercialization of religion. He condemned them for turning God's work into profit making business and the means of extorting innocent people. Ezekiel also preached against the evils of oppression of the poor, widows, and orphans.

Commercialization Discourse in the New Testament

The phenomenon of commercialization of religion may not be very pronounced in the New Testament dispensation as in the Old Testament but beside the John 2: 13-17, one can however point to a particular in the New, even though it was an opposite case of the current phenomena in which case it is the member of the church and not the minister who thinks that God's gift, faith, or religion could be purchased by money. This is the case of Simon the magician who wanted to purchase the gift of the Holy Spirit with money (Acts 8:18-20).

Interpretation of John: 2: 13-17

The narrative in John 2:13-17 topically called the cleansing of the temple appears in all the synoptic gospels – Mathew 21:12-17, Mark 11: 15-19, Luke 19: 45-48. Every male Jew, from the age of twelve and above was expected to attend the Passover at Jerusalem. The events of John 2:13-17 happened during the feast of Passover which is the holiest of the pilgrimage feast to which Jews come to make sacrifices at the temple. It was during this period that commercialization of religion usually gotten to its peak in Jerusalem. Every Jew had to pay a tax to the temple and this must be paid with designated coins. The interpretation of this is that, the Jews that came from other nations with difference coins had to change their money and they were charge exorbitantly for this. Also, only unblemished animals were also acceptable for sacrifice at the temple and the interpretation of this is that, people coming from around the world to this festival must buy their animals for sacrifice from the temple at a very high price. Meanwhile, the materials for the feast could be bought at a cheaper price outside but the temple inspectors would find these materials unfit and unworthy for sacrifice to God.

The Passover is a feast celebrated to commemorate the deliverance of the people of Israel from Egyptian bondage. All male Jews were expected to attend this festival, even if they lived a long distance from Jerusalem (George Knight 2007, p. 180). According to William, the Passover is celebrated:

On the tenth of the month Abib or Nisan which corresponds to our march. A male lamb of the first year, without blemish was taken and on the fourteenth day, in the afternoon between three and six o'clock it was killed. The day on which the lamb was killed was followed by the seven-day feast of unleavened bread, celebrated from the fifteenth to the twenty – first of Nisan (William Hendriken 2007,p.121).

During this seven-day feast, a lot of animals were offered as sacrifice to God. Thus, when in John 2:13 we read about oxen and sheep that were sold in the temple court; the conclusion would be that the term Passover here refers to the entire one-week festival (William 2007, p.12). These commercial activities that upset Jesus were being conducted in an outer court of the Jewish temple during the observance of the Passover in Jerusalem. The pilgrims who came for the festival are expected to provide animals for sacrifice on the altar of the temple during the celebration. Merchants were selling animals for this purpose as a convenience so pilgrims would not have to bring them along on their trip to the holy city (George Knight 2007, p.180). The outer court of the temple called the court of the Gentiles would definitely resemble a stockyard or cattle market, full of stench and filth, completed with the bleating and lowing of animals. The worshippers are at the mercy of the merchants; it is not mandatory that the pilgrims buy from the temple dealers, but those judges and priests in charge of the temple treasury would definitely find fault with any animals or transactions not done within the temple.

The dealers in cattle and sheep would definitely be charging exorbitant prices for their animals. They were exploiting the worshippers, for example, ‘those who sold pigeons would charge perhaps \$4 for a pair of doves worth a nickel.’ (George Knight 2007, p.181) The money changers could be likened to our bureau of exchange today. Roman money must be changed into Jewish money to pay the temple tax. These money changers were exchanging the Roman coin for the appropriate coins with which to pay the temple tax (Eldersheim 1897, p.370). The legality of their business was explained by William that, ‘it must be borne in mind that only Jewish coins were allowed to be offered in the temple, and every worshipper – women, slaves and minors excepted – had to pay the annual temple tribute of half a shekel (Ex.30:13), (William Hendriksen 1954, p. 122). But the money changers, also ‘charge a certain fee for every exchange (William, p.122), and these gave them opportunities for exploitation. Hovey was justified when he said, ‘men who desecrate holy things are commonly able to offer some plausible reason for their course’ (Alvah Hovey 1988, p.90). Jesus was angry about the crass commercialism of the scene (George Knight 2007, p.180). The temple officials were profiting personally from the buying and selling. In view of these conditions the Holy Temple, intended as a house of prayer for all people, had become a den of robbers. Jesus’ reaction in verses 15–16 was not an outburst of temper, but the energy of righteousness against religious leaders to whom religion had become a business (Explanatory notes on the Oxford Annotated with Apocrypha).

The dramatic nature of Jesus chasing out the animals and throwing down the tables of the money changers was more pictographically captured in Mathew 21:12. The word ‘all’ in John 2:15 has been a subject of debate by scholars whether it was only the animals and birds or it includes their sellers. William was of the opinion that, ‘Jesus actually drove out all the wicked traffickers together with the sheep and oxen (William Hendriksen 1954, p. 123). Jesus was angry at the activities of the temple authorities who were exploiting the pilgrims and treating them not as worshippers but as things to be exploited for their own selfish and profit making during this important religious festival. He made a whip of cords and threw all of them out of the temple. He equally rebuked the religious leaders for the desecration of the house of God. According to Ogunkunle, it is obvious that worshippers had lost the sense of the presence of God in the temple as a result of commercial activities which was carried out in full scale. In his

word, “Indeed, commercialization of religion is a violation of religious ethics as there is no meaningful prayer and meditation in the context of buying and selling” (Ogunkunle 2006, p.30-38).

EXTENT OF CHURCH COMMERCIALISATION IN NIGERIA

Religion commercialization in Nigeria is as old as history; scholars have argued that the western world adopted Christianity as a camouflage to attract many other societies of the world to commercial enterprises and material well-being. (Abas F. 2017, p.10). However, one unfortunate fact is that religion is the only field, where the incompetent is allowed to self-licensed his/her self as whatever and allowed to fool, deceive, lead or mislead the simple or less matured people (Jemiriye 2009, p.10). This proliferation of the field of religion has caused so much damage to the faith and belief of adherents. Many gullible followers just sink in whatever they are been fed by their religious leaders. Many of such leaders simply take advantage of the people’s ignorance through exploitation and amass wealth for themselves. It is not only the poor and desperate people who are hooked and fed by all kinds of things but many rich folks are also being fooled. The issue of commercialization of religion hinges heavily on the religious leaders.

The glamour and flaunting of wealth by some of these leaders in Nigeria have made others among them to become desperate as well as equate success in service to God to mean status and much acquisition of material things. They take advantage of gullible miracle seekers, who will do anything just to have respite from their troubles. The extent some religious leaders go to, in order to satisfy their curious followers and rip them of their monies is dastardly. Mashaba in a report collaborated this;

In August 2015, media reports exposed several pastors for allegedly feeding people snakes, grass, rats, human hair, pieces of cloth and petrol among other things. Over the months, it emerged that there were church leaders allegedly pouring water over congregants, spraying people with doom, placing them in deep freezers and another supposedly driving a car over them in a demonstration of God’s power.(Sibongile Mashaba 2017, p.10)

All these demonstration of folly is to impress the ignorant crowd, tilt their faith and pass off as a ‘great servant of God’. It is no longer news that many religious leaders sell religious tokens acclaimed to possess powers capable of bringing solutions to the problems of the users. Such items ranges from oil, salt, handkerchiefs, water just to mention a few. Most religious seekers have come to believe that these ‘power carrying tokens’ must always be present, and are therefore ready to go any length in possessing them. Religious leaders, who are greedy for gain, simply catch in on this to exploit their followers. Aside the sales of religious articles, many of the leaders have become fund raisers. Most of the televangelists would not conclude their broadcast without placing calls for viewers to donate generously towards a need with a lot of promises of breakthroughs.

In some churches in Nigeria, tithe payments are used for the promotion of the Pastors, the more money generated through tithe payment means the higher you go in the hierarchy of the church. These prosperity preachers device many ways of passing their information to their

unsuspecting followers, they manipulate the gospel, brainwash their followers, they use threat at times, instead of preaching hard work, they have twisted and upturned the concept of miracle and tithe that means 10% of one's income. The congregation is made to believe that once they give 10% their incomes will be double. They emphasize clichés like “he who sows sparingly will reap sparingly” “you cannot sow maize and reap yam” (Olawole, 2018). Charisma, spiritual gifts and number of souls won to the kingdom of God are not all that important in such churches. Also most crusades are organized in order to get money through the offerings and gifts for the pastors. Miracles are also fabricated in order to attract crowds and make money.

Advances in communication and information technology have made many religious bodies tech savvy, they use these new tools for further fund raising and managing the money, assets, records and crowds they are able to generate (<https://thewire.in/religion/religion/-commercialization>). As income of religious organizations has boomed, so have opportunities for spending by crass commercialization and new technology. As posited in a report, ‘how would Yeshua (*variant form of Jesus*) react if he walked into some of our modern churches?’

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE

There has been serious clamoring in some quarters in the country for the regulation and licensing of religious practitioners. Such advocators even went further to demand that ‘strict laws be put in place to curb the commercialization of religion and abuse of people’s belief systems’. But how should Christians react to all of these, since many of those involved in the commercialization of religion claim to do it in the name of God and are largely from the Christian faith?

The bulk of the responsibility begins with the umbrella organizations such as Christian Association of Nigeria, Pentecostal Fellowship (CAN, PFN, and CCN) and so on. These bodies are fully accredited and acknowledged. They are put in place for religious sanctity and right practices among member bodies. They should do more in providing guidance and leadership by speaking and monitoring activities of affiliated bodies and members of their religion. Strict regulations must be put in place to stop these nefarious activities among Christians. Christian leaders should be matured in faith enough to realize that their actions and utterances have far reaching consequences. Denominations should ensure that their leadership selection processes are thorough and sincere, such that only genuinely called leaders are approved. Covetousness and materialism have brought down many Christian leaders. Christians must not be covetous or greedy for materials things. Moderation and Godly contentment should be the attitude of professing Christians. As Christians, it should be genuine zeal propelled by righteousness that is pushing members to engage in the work of the gospel. Above all, love for God must be the motive for engaging in the things of God.

CONCLUSION

There is great need for more Christian thinkers and leaders in contemporary society to guide against materialism and greed. In as much as materialism is a tendency to consider material possessing and physical comfort as more than spiritual values, to that extent also it becomes

dishonoring to God and incompatible with Christian faith. Any Christian leader who engages in this and more especially at the expense and detriment of his flock is abhorrent to God. No matter what message he preaches or miracles wrought is equally abhorrent before God. The word of God came through Prophet Amos in strong condemnation of such greedy and self-conceited religious leaders:

I hate your feast days, and I will not smell in your solemn assemblies. Though you offer me burnt offerings, I will not accept them; neither will I accept the peace offerings of your fat beasts. Take away from me the noise of your songs and the melody of your viols. But let judgment run down like as water and righteousness as a running stream. (Amos 5:21-24)

Of such leaders, Christ repeated the words of Isaiah and says, “This people honour me with their lips, but their heart are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precept of men” (Matt 15: 8-9). Religious leaders need to be contented with what they have, pursue righteousness, honesty, integrity and love for humanity. They should stop living ostentatious life style at the expense and detriment of their flock. Paul extols contentment in 1Timothy 6:5-10 as follows:

But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we bought nothing into this world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation and trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunges men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many grief things.

Greed, Excessive love of money and material riches will always lead to commercialization of religion and this cannot but lead further into desecration of the holy things as well and the profanation of the sacred name of God. Religious should learn from the apostles who led exemplary life by leaving behind things of the world to live a lives of sacrifice after the fashion of Jesus Christ who called them. The above becomes important so that at the end the religious leaders would be able to say with Paul, “I have fought the good fight of faith, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith...” (1 Tim 4:7) and they shall hear Christ say to them most coveted of all words, “well done, good and faithful servant” (Matt 25:21).

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