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THE IMPACTS OF PENTECOSTAL CHURCHES ON THE GROWTH OF CHRISTIANITY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Christianity came to the African continent many centuries ago as a small mustard seed. Today, it has recorded tremendous growth after undergoing some changes in form of renewal, transformation, reformation, and revivals. Volumes have been written on the Impacts of the mission established churches to the growth of Christianity in Nigeria with little or no attention paid to the Pentecostal Churches that emerged around the turn of the 20th century. This study therefore, is an attempt to bring to the fore the impacts of the Pentecostal movements on the growth of Christianity in Africa with reference to Nigeria. The method used is historical. It was discovered that Pentecostal, churches through their style of worship, have been able to contextualise the Christian faith and thus enhanced growth. Hence, for Christianity to make the expected impacts in Africa, it must embrace the African worldview.

Keywords: Impacts, Pentecostalism, Christianity, Growth, Nigeria.

Introduction

Scholars agree that there is a shift of centre of gravity of the Christian spiritual space from Europe and America to Latin America, Asia, and Africa (Ogungbile & Akintunde, 2010:1). Nigeria, which is popularly called the giant of Africa, is one of the leading countries in the current movement of Christianity (Sanneh & Carpenter, 2005). As at today, Nigeria has continued to play a pivotal and central role in the growth of Christianity in unique ways (Sanneh & Carpenter, 2005) not only in Africa but in other continents as well.

It should be noted that Christianity, from its inception in Nigeria has experienced changes, creativity, transformation, and reformation by reason of revivals that were championed by churchmen and women who claimed to have been divinely inspired to do so. These reformers and revivalists are indigenous church men and women. They are Nigerian Christians who were not satisfied with Euro-American Christianity. They opted for Christianity that resembles the African expression. Studies has shown that the factors responsible for transformation are the impact of cultures, Pentecostals, socio-economic realities and so on (Kalu, 1978:18). Nigerian efforts in the spread of Christianity in Africa and globally are clearly documented on the pages of many literature on Church history and religious studies. The strength of Nigerian participation is displayed in the area of change, reformation and revivals that have enhanced the growth of the Christian faith globally. As the most populous black nation in the world, Nigeria both at home and in Diaspora has made meaningful contributions to the growth of Christianity globally through their innovative and creative abilities (Kalu, 1978:20-21).

Origin and Development of Christianity in Nigeria

The Catholic Portuguese traders in the fifteenth century were the first to introduce Christianity in Nigeria but they failed (Falola & Adeniran, 83, Ryder 1969). However, in 1840s, Europeans and American missionaries successfully planted Christianity in the soil of Nigeria (Falola & Adeniran, 83, Ryder 1969). Since that time attempts have been made by Nigerian Christians to remodel and refine Christianity to have an African face. To many Christians in Nigeria, Christianity will experience tremendous growth if it imbibes the African worldview. In other words, contextualisation of Christianity will bring about the desired growth. This is the reason for the changes, and innovations witnesses from time to time (Olayiwola, 1984:43). This has placed Nigeria in the centre of global expression of the Christian faith. Commenting on this, Elizabeth Isichei observed that, "Christianity in Africa is of global significance and the direction; it takes care of importance to Christians everywhere" (Isichei, 1995). Nigerian participation in Christianity has brought vibrancy and vitality to the faith not only in Africa but also in Europe and America.

It should be noted that the remodelling or transformation of Christianity by Nigerians centred on cultural, spiritual, political and socio-economic dimensions. The first reaction of Nigerian Christians was what they called racial discrimination by the white Missionaries. This eventually led to secessions in some of the mission established churches and establishment of parallel Churches like the Native Baptist Church in 1888, United Native African Church in 1901 and the United Methodist Church (Eleja) in1917 (Omoyajowo,1995, Ogungbile,2006).

However, it must be pointed out that most of these early African indigenous churches only succeeded in placing Africans as leaders or founders of the Church. They maintained the liturgy and worship patterns of their mother churches but with little modifications. They only reacted to what they called 'spiritual colonisation'. According to Adewale, "It was a struggle for the recovery of Africa nationalism….the emancipation and liberation of the Church in Nigeria from foreign political and ecclesiastical bondage…a struggle for an independent African church where the members could worship God in their own way to satisfy their spiritual needs and aspirations" (Adewale, 1998:1)

Besides, there was the emergence of some movements that stressed cultural revolutions. As far as this group was concerned, spiritual independence must go beyond a change in leadership structure and liturgical modifications. To them, African values, cultures and ethos must be integrated into Christianity for it to appeal to the African people. In other words, Nigerian Christians should be able to express their spirituality through indigenous modes and forms. This can be achieved by the use of indigenous languages in their liturgy and music and the use of musical instruments which would serve as a vehicle for entering into their spiritual sense and essence. To this end, Yoruba language was preferred to English. They also introduce local musical instruments like, "Dundun", "Sekere", "Agogo", "Bata", "Gangan", and so on into the worship service (Adewale, 1998:1). This would make the worshippers to have personal encounter and deep intimacy with God. For instance, a church called Ijo Orile-Ede Adulawo Ti Kristi (a.k.a.Ethiopian Communion Church) founded on 1, October, 1919 by Reverend Adeniran Oke, a clergy in African Salem Church in Lagos, Nigeria held strongly to this view (Ogundbile). This church was able to integrate African worldview into biblical messages and faith. The leaders in this church were able to translate words and forms in the Bible into Yoruba language and symbols in a traditional way for worshippers to understand.

There are distinguishing elements that make the *Ijo Adulawo* different from the Mission churches. They include the traditional names they gave to some Church practises and documents. For instance, the Bible was called *Iwe Esin Agbaiye* which means the book of the Religion of the Whole World. The Lord's Supper was called *ounje Imule Pelu Ayanfe,* literally, the covenant meal with the Elects; Good Friday service is called *Ojo Etutu Nla,* literally, the day of the Great Sacrifice; the contents and the forms of Psalms are classified as *Ofo*/*Ogede Dafidi,* David's incantations, etc. It is crucial to mention that the church hymnal presented a unique form of lyrics, tunes and contents which came from moonlight stories, folklores, traditional cosmological myths and other religious forms derived from indigenous festivals and rituals. The movement encourage the use of African curative and orthodox medicine for members facing health challenge. The use of water for therapy was common among them. Polygamy was allowed for members who have no intention of becoming a Bishop someday (Kalu,).

At this juncture, it is crucial to note that it was *Ijo Adulawo* that midwife the current African indigenous churches and the Pentecostals (Kalu,). In the second quarter of the twentieth century, a movement called Nigeria Initiated Churches or the Nigerian Independent Churches had emerged. They are Cherubim and Seraphim Movement (C&S) co-founded in 1925 by Moses Orimolade Tunolase and Christiana Abiodun Akinsowon, the Christ Apostolic Church (CAC) in 1930 by Joseph Ayodele Babalola, the Church of the Lord Aladura (CLA) in 1930 by Josiah Oshitelu and the Celestial Church of Christ founded in 1947 by Samuel Bilewu Joseph Oshoffa. These churches were called "*Aladura"*, owners of prayer. The founders of these movements claimed that they were divinely inspired to start their churches and that what they do from time to time is as led by the Holy Spirit (Peel, 1968. Omoyajowo, 1982, Oshun, 1983).

Furthermore, most central to this group is their ability to receive divine revelation which is characterized by spirit possession, *glossolalia,* dreams, visions, healings, salvation of souls and deliverance from evil spirits or forces of darkness? By reason of this, they have grown in leaps and bounds. They have also made great impacts not only in Africa but globally (Harri,2006, Olupona,2007).

Likewise, these movements give leadership opportunities to women. Women were given free hand to serve in the church. In some cases, women were co-founders of the movements. The Pentecostal and charismatic churches constitute the other phase of Nigerian Christianity and their current manifestations have placed Nigeria on centre-stage within A African and world Christianity. Pentecostalism breaks through cultural, racial, social and rigid or stereotype boundaries in their approach to worship (Harri, 2006, Olupona, 2007). According to Cox, 'The Pentecostals have become an ecumenical voice that speaks to the spiritual emptiness of our time by tapping the core of the human religiousness' (Cox, 1965). This assertion made by Cox does not apply to Africans because there is no spiritual vacuum or emptiness to be filled in the minds of the African people. However, Nigerian Pentecostal Christianity provides a vehicle that carries biblical message and cultural garbage. It taps into indigenous spiritual energies and human religiousness, and weaves them into a new spiritual social context. In a nutshell, Nigerian Pentecostalism could be viewed as an ecumenical force that brews the old wine into a new bottle in a complex and creative manner.

The Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria

As earlier mentioned, as Christianity began to grow in African continent, there came agitations from the African adherents of the Christian faith of the need to have an indigenous Christianity. They claimed that the Christianity brought by Europeans and Americans do not have the African touch. The first group to emerge was called African Indigenous Churches. Later the Pentecostals and the Neo- Pentecostals emerged. In this study, both splinter groups are called the Pentecostal Churches. They include: Christ Apostolic Church (CAC), Cherubim and Seraphim (C&S), Deeper Life Bible Church, The Redeemed Christian Church of God, Winners' Chapel, Christ Embassy, Mountain of Fire and Miracles, etc (Ojo,2006, Kalu, 2008). Study reveals that most of the founders of these brands of Christianity belong to the mission established churches at one time or the other. Some were forced to leave while others left voluntarily by reason of doctrinal differences (Ojo, 2006. Kalu, 2008).

Also, it is viewed in some quarters that the mission churches are "dead". This informed the popular slogan at that time: "come out from among them and be separate." Many came out because of the fear of "death" to join the "living" church. They claimed to have better approach to Christianity than the mission churches (Ojo, 2006, Kalu, 2008). It should be understood that most of the founders or leaders of the Pentecostal churches are University graduates. Some were Presidents of Christian fellowship groups on Campuses. Upon graduation if they felt led or call to full-time Christian ministry, their colleagues on campuses easily join them. Most of them started as interdenominational groups before metamorphosing into denominations today. By reason of their high level of education they are able to attract educated youths and elites in the society to their Churches.

Impacts of Pentecostal Churches on the Growth of Christianity in Nigeria

In this segment of the paper, attempt is made to examine the impacts of the Pentecostal churches to the growth of Christianity in Nigeria. To facilitate understanding, discussions are made under these headings:

Theological Impact

Theology is discourse about God. It is from two Greek words, *theos* (God) and *logos* (word). It is studying about God. It is the task of collecting, interpreting and arranging materials pertaining to God's self-revelation and living in obedience to that which God has revealed (Oxford, 1974, 1363). There are two sources of theology. The absolute source of data for theologising is the Bible, while the relative source is man's contemporary social and cultural settings (Oxford, 1974: 1363). One of the aspirations of the new Christian movements is to have a deeper understanding of God. To many of them, this was lacking in the Mission established churches. In most cases, the leaders of any new movement claimed to have received special revelations from God. This informed the migration from Mission churches to the new movements. Desire for divine encounter and spiritual nourishment were the main factors that attracted Christians to this group. However, because most of the founders of the movements do not have theological training, they interpret the Bible as led by the 'Spirit'. This has led to erroneous teachings, preaching, praying, and counselling which have endangered the lives of their followers (Awojobi, 2013). In Nigeria, for instance, biblical interpretation is based on individual or group view, experiences, cultural heritage, social class, economic situation, gender, etc (Ogungbile). In other words, realities are crucial in the interpretations of biblical passages. This informed the liberation theology in South Africa. This is a theology that

attempt to utilise socialism inspired by Marxist philosophy to overturn the economic and social oppression imposed by both feudalism and capitalism. The God of Exodus is seen as the God of history and of political liberation. The Exodus experience is regarded as crucial and having contemporary relevance to liberation theology. Another one is the black theology in Latin America which is in response to centuries of socio-economic and political oppression (Ogungbile). However, in Nigeria, in an attempt to contextualise the Scripture, biblical interpretation is done in response to cultural practices of the people, political and economic situations and interactions with other cultures (Ogungbile).

Contextualisation in itself is not bad; it is defined as 'a theological formulation from exegesis of biblical texts within a socio-cultural context, and a living out of the theology within the given cultural context, utilizing the Bible as the only authority while recognizing the progress of biblical revelation' (Abogunrin,1986,86). It is seen clearly from this definition that both the kerygmatic and the didactic responsibilities of the church are included. In other words, contextualisation is allowing the Bible to speak to the contemporary issues in the context in which it is found. Some African biblical scholars believe that the mission established churches did not address the felt needs of multitudes of Africans who are constantly in search for security. According to Abogunrin, the mission churches applied the Gospel to the salvation of the soul and never considered the Gospel in relation to man's body, health, victory over demons, protection from demonic agents, provision of daily needs, and man's total well being (Abogurin, 1986:86). In other words, the mission churches did not preach holistic Gospel. Their emphasis has always been how to make heaven. Studies have revealed that Africans can relate better with a saviour that identifies with human situation in all aspects. To this end, Kato asserts that for the mission churches to make meaningful impact in Africa, the preachers must learn to move beyond the divinely revealed source to the human dimension (Abogunrin, 1986:86). According to Chris Manus, the Bible must be read and interpreted from a people's cultural and religious context. He noted that as early Christianity was greatly influenced by Hellenistic and Jewish cultural life, the message of the Bible should also be allowed to speak to the contemporary Nigerian situation in specific ways. For instance, Manus observed that Luke 12:20 where Jesus cast out demon should be noted. He argued that belief in demon possession, witchcraft, cultism and the practise of exorcism is not peculiar to a cultural group; it is a universal phenomenon (Manus, 22).

In other words, practical Christianity is the key to success in evangelistic enterprise. This is because Africans are always seeking for solutions to challenges that confront them daily. Africans are in need of a saviour who can save the soul and the body as well. To Adamo, Africans have their own ways of handling challenges before the advent of Christianity. The western missionaries taught African Christians to discard these ways without offering any concrete alternative (Adamo, 2005:11). However, the Pentecostal Churches presented to the people, a saviour who specializes in meeting all human needs. He is concerned about the feelings of man in all facets of life. This position made them to attract followers from all the existing Christian bodies and other faiths as attendees in worship services continued to give testimonies of how their felt needs have been met. There has been conversion of souls to Christianity by their approach to worship.

It should be noted that the dynamics of Christianity in the contemporary Nigeria arise out of the strong claim to what max Weber calls charisma (Eisenstadt, 1968:24). This is because most

of their activities are based on the demonstration of spiritual gifts. Most of these leaders are creative and innovative. They use their gifts as catalyst for expanding the horizon of the Christian mission and bringing a new vitality and dynamism to it (Ogungbile, 22). However, this approach to Christianity by the charismatic leaders sometimes engender crisis and encourage unethical behaviour among the Christian faithful today.

Spiritual Impact

One of the things the leaders of the Pentecostal Churches emphasis is the spirituality of the members. They claim to be keenly interested in the spiritual well-being of the worshippers. They introduce different types of spiritual activities that are capable of meeting the challenges many members are facing (Ogungbile). They operate at a level of spirituality that appeals to the spiritual culture of the people. This makes Christians to migrate from the mission established churches to the new group. The issue is that while the strength of the mission churches rests on their structure and liturgy, the Pentecostal churches place great emphasis on the spirit. This has made some of the mission churches to introduce elements which the Pentecostals employ in their strategy for drawing members (Awojobi, 2013:8). Today, in most of the mission churches things like praise and worship, night vigils, anointing service, break through services, deliverance hour, healing service and any activity that will meet the felt needs of the people have been introduced. This has reduced the rate of migration of members. However, these are not without intermittent opposition and complications especially from diehard members and clergy of the church who are bent on maintaining the tradition and practises of the church as they has being from the beginning (Awojobi, 2013:8).

According to Kenny as cited by Ogungbile, the phenomenon of prophecy is central to Pentecostal activities (Ogungbile,8). He observed that prophecy is not only found in Christianity but in other Abrahamic faiths; that is, Judaism and Islam. To buttress this position, Kenny compares the practices of prophecy and the activities of prophetic agents in Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. As a priest in the Catholic Church, he suggests that the Catholic Mission needs to understand the current wave and move of Pentecostalism and its legitimacy as an orthodox issue which should be permitted. Kenny stresses that the mission churches will continue to lose their members to the Pentecostals churches if the issue is not properly addressed (Ogungbile).

Furthermore, according to Asaju, two types of Pentecostalism have emerged after the dominance of Protestantism in Nigeria. They are "the fundamental recourse to scripture to justify Pentecostal gifts of the Holy Spirit and the common use of symbols" (Ogungbile). The Pentecostals create symbols from several terms in the practise of Pentecostalism. They are fond of using terms such as 'Anointing', 'Breakthrough', 'Blood of Jesus', 'Fire of the Holy Spirit', etc. Asaju, opines that these symbols typify Nigerian expression of Pentecostalism and modern evangelicalism.

It should be stated at this juncture that Pentecostalism has brought a new dynamism into Nigeria Christianity in impacting not only the Pentecostal movements alone but other groups of Christians as well. Also, the activities of a German Evangelist called Reinhard Bonnke who founded the Christ for All Nations Ministry in 1974 is worthy of note. His ministry in Nigeria has impacted a number of lives positively. It has brought meaningful interactions among different denominations and reinforces unity and a sense of brotherhood of Christians across

Nigeria. However, this has continued to inspire hostility from the Islamic community in Nigeria (Asaju, 103).

Central to the practise of Christianity in Nigeria is the issues of healing. Healing is a concept and practice that is found in almost all the cultures of the world. Healing include restoration of health after a period of ill-health. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely absence of disease or infirmity (Asaju). This definition is inadequate because it did not consider the spiritual aspect of man which is crucial to his existence. Sickness is anything that is contrary to man's total well-being spiritually, psychologically and physiologically (Asaju). On the other hand, healing is the complete and successful functioning of every part of the body in harmonious relationship with other parts and with its particular and relevant environment (Asaju). He stresses that man does not only consist of the body and mind only but that he is made up of body, mind and soul.

Prior to the advent of Christianity in Nigeria, healing was going on through traditional herbal medicine for both curative and prophylactic needs of man. Healing was made possible through the mixture of herbs, vegetables, animals and mineral substances. Sometimes these ingredients were accompanied by rituals that invoke the power of deities or powerful incantations to activate the healing effects in the prepared substances which were administered by either Babalawo (Ifa priest) or onisegun (traditional physician) (Asaju). But when Christianity came, the Missionaries introduced western education, dispensaries and hospitals which they ran for a long time before the Government took them over and even established more to take care of the medical needs of the citizenry. It should be noted that the Missionaries used both the western education and hospitals as strategies for conversion of many Nigerians to Christianity. They did not emphasise faith-healing. Nigerians were seen either patronising traditional healers or orthodox medicine. However, the African independent churches and the Pentecostals, with the spiritual approach to human challenges, have been able to handle many spiritual challenges and thus encourage growth.

Leadership Opportunity

Unlike in the mission established churches, leadership opportunities are open to gifted members irrespective of gender. In fact, some of these revival movements are co-founded by women. In African Christianity, especially Nigeria, women have become agents of transformation and change in the spiritual space of contemporary Christian faith. According to Kalu, the mission churches are still bewitched by their hierarchical polities of male priest craft. He goes further to assert that:

> There seems to be a relationship between polity and gender practice among African churches… Among the Congregationalist polities, there have been enormous shifts; for instance, the Presbyterians ordained women as ruling elders and, from the mid-1960's, started the ordination of female ministers who have full parity with male ministers. Among the African indigenous churches, the utilization of African forms, which appeared to be one of the elements of creativity, produced a biased attitude towards the role of women in decision-making processes; except where they are the founders, they cannot head whole organizations. However, women have vast opportunities for creative roles

> based on spiritual power or charisma…Among the Pentecostals, the distinctive character in Africa includes the large corps of ordained women in churches, there have been a resurgent of lay power. Within this ambit, the power of the women's organizations has become considerable (Kalu).

Kalu, appraised the formation of women organization in Africa by some women theologians in order to reinforce liberation theology in Africa context. Kalu further notes that the woman's easy exercise and potency of her spirituality has given her a lot of power in the church and religious space. In Nigeria for instance, women play more active part in all worship services than men. Globally women are forces to be reckoned with in any sector (Kalu).

Besides, the Pentecostal churches extend leadership opportunities to other Christians and youth. Some Christians who were bench warmers in the mission churches after migration became Elders and Pastors in the independent churches. While the mission churches maintain that long theological training is essential for ministry, the independent churches arrange for short time training for all categories of workers in the church. In the process hidden talents are discovered. (Awojobi, 2013:8) Every gifted Christian is allowed to exercise their gifts and this encourages growth.

Socio-economic Impact

The Pentecostal churches engage in social and economic activities. They build schools and provide employment opportunities for members. Some of these churches assure worshippers of financial break through and good jobs. Some of the Pentecostal churches even make effort to source for employment for the unemployed worshippers. They operate loans schemes for their members. (Awojobi, 2013:8) It should be noted that some of the mission churches also have these activities in place for their members. In addition to these, the independent churches engage in community development service. They dig wells or sink boreholes, build roads, health care centres, provide scholarship to indigent students and so on. They also have programmes for widows, orphans, widowers, and different categories of indigent members and these have encouraged growth.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, the Pentecostal churches have made tremendous impacts on the growth of Christianity in Nigeria. They imbibe African worldview in the presentation of the gospel message to the people. This was made possible by relating the gospel message to the daily needs of the people who are constantly looking for solutions to the challenges they are facing. For the gospel to be relevant in any culture or context, it must be seen to be meeting the needs of her adherents.

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