

Discipleship in Luke 9:23-24: A Critique of the Prosperity Gospel

Caroline N. Mbonu

Abstract

The propensity to equate wealth or prosperity with divine blessings affects, in a profound way, an understanding of the Gospel message. Wealth as a divine favour, however, did not begin today or with the New Testament Christians. Certain aspects of theology in the Hebrew Scripture give credence to the divine blessings/wealth parallel. Prosperity Gospel is fast becoming the central message of Christianity in Nigeria. In effect, Christianity without the Cross dominates most Christian religious landscape. Fundamental Christian values like love of neighbour, prayer, and charity receives little emphasis from the pulpit. This paper addresses the problematic situation. The study draws insights from the Hebrew Scriptures, the New Testament and theological works to explore the prosperity Gospel phenomenon as well as propose a solution to Christianity devoid of the cross.

Introduction

The prerequisite for discipleship hinges on the requirement of love of the neighbour. Love is the crux of life in Christ. Without love, there can neither be community nor covenant. A century and half of Christianity in Nigeria has now postulated various approaches to this fundamental Christian virtue. However, the Gospel of love

predicated on the Cross seems to yield ground to the Gospel of prosperity in the Nigerian contemporary Christian milieu. Pentecostalism with its various strands of prosperity Gospel dominates church pulpits and airwaves. Manifested in the fragmentation of churches and denominations, the prosperity gospel cannot be separated from money, power, and pleasure (mammon). Some Roman Catholics and many mainline Protestant churches have jumped on the bandwagon. Places of worship have become gardens where worshipers are coerced to “sow seed” for a prosperous future. The different manifestations of the prosperity gospel have penetrated into diverse areas of human endeavour. The get-rich-quick syndrome, the culture of wealth without work as well as the impervious layers of corruption that continue to plague the country is traceable to some strands of the prosperity gospel. In all these currents, the cross becomes an abhorrent subject, something that must be ‘rejected.’ Proponents of the prosperity gospel reject suffering. “Suffering,” they say, “Is not my portion.” They seem to ignore the fact that the Christian faith is born out of the suffering, death and resurrection of the Christ. Prosperity gospel preachers hang their convictions on some Old Testament impressions of wealth being a sign of God’s favour and poverty an indication of God’s curse. Is this new evolving version of Christianity in Nigeria acceptable? The question becomes: What version of Christianity has developed in Nigeria? The prosperity gospel in light of the Christian discipleship as found in Luke 9: 23-24 provides the insight for interrogating the new expression of faith anchored on prosperity. Christian discipleship demands a radical embrace of the evangelical counsels. Jesus stated categorically: “If any wants to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9, 23). Nowhere in the Gospel did Jesus ask his followers to take up their property and follow him. The rest of the paper is set out under three points: 1.) A survey of wealth and poverty in the Hebrew tradition; 2.) An understanding of discipleship in the teaching of Jesus (Luke 9, 23); 3.) Prosperity and poverty, the jewels of a Christian crown.

1. A Survey of Wealth and Poverty in the Hebrew Tradition

Poverty was judged a scandal in biblical times. To be poor was considered by many as an act of divine retribution. Riches, on the other hand, meant an affirmation of one's worthiness, a reward for humility and the fear of the Lord: They are like trees planted by streams of water which yield their fruit in its season and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper (Psa 1: 3); (Happy are those who fear the LORD, who greatly delight in his commandments . . . wealth and riches are in their houses, and their righteousness endures for ever (Psa 112: 1, 3). For the ancient Israelite, wealth was proof of a person's acceptability to the LORD. Albert Gelin (1964), "Wealth is one of the clearest proofs that the just man is rewarded in this world; he who fears the LORD prospers in the land of the living and enjoys long life, security, light, blessing, peace, salvation".

Wealth and possessions are integral to the enjoyment that Qoheleth recommends. Although the ancient Israelite celebrated prosperity, they also honoured the poor. Though not a desired state, the poor were an essential part of the religious life of the people. Exemplified by the widow, the orphan, and stranger, attention to the poor was an important part of covenant theology.

The term poverty has a varied shade of meaning in the Hebrew Scripture. Each shade relates to a particular aspect of the concept. In general, however, poverty denotes 1) a lack of economic resource or material goods, and 2) political and legal powerlessness and oppression. Neither a social class nor a political party in ancient Israel, the poor constituted a diverse body of social actors: peasants, unskilled workers, small farmers, day labourers, construction workers, beggars, debt slaves, and village dwellers. Thus, the Hebrew has some words representing different degrees of poverty: *'ebyon, dal, mahsor, misken, ras, 'ani, 'anawim*. Suffice it to have a brief note on the *'ebyon* and the *'anawim*.

The *'ebyon*, for example, are the economically distressed members of society. These occupy the lowest rung of the socio-economic ladder. The *'ebyonim* are the economically exploited. The large landowners, as well as the ruling class of society, prey on the *'ebyonim*. The prophet Amos captures the plight of the *ebyonim* thus:

"We will buy the lowly man for silver and the poor man for a pair of sandals" (Amos 8:7). Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel deplored the situation of the 'ebyonim with harsh words for those who perpetuate their plight. God's closeness to the 'ebyonim is manifest in Psalm 40, 18 thus: "Though I am afflicted and poor, the Lord keeps me in mind." That the Lord keeps the poor in mind offers hope. The Psalmist makes clear that being poor does not constitute a curse.

The 'anawim, on the other hand, represents another category of the poor. Biblical scholars have taken much interest in the discussion of the 'anawim. *Anawim* stands out as a merger between poverty and piety, possibly a political movement among the pious poor. In this sense, we find some degree of voluntary acceptance of poverty among the pious poor, the 'anawim. There is also some suggestion of a remnant here. The prophet Zephaniah sees the 'anawim as those who follow God's law and who seek 'anawa, a word that in this context appears to mean humility. The prophet exhorts the people to the poverty of spirit thus: "Seek the Lord, all you humble ('anawim) of the earth, who have observed his law; seek justice, seek humility" (Zeph 2, 3). Righteousness and humility will characterize the LORD's holy remnant. Zephaniah goes on to say how the LORD will purify his people, leaving the humble and lowly:

For then will I remove from your midst the proud braggarts, and you shall no longer exalt yourself on my holy mountain. But I will leave as remnant in your midst a people humble and lowly, who shall take refuge in the name of the Lord: the remnant of Israel. They shall do no wrong and speak no lies; nor shall there be found in their mouths a deceitful tongue (Zeph 3: 11-13).

The prophecy contrasts the position of the lowly with that of the rich proud in the new Israel. In a subtle manner, the prophet points out the reversal of role in the reign of God. In God's reign, the poor will have an exalted position. In other words, the poor who trust in the LORD become prosperous in the land. This point is significant when weighed against prosperity Gospel.

Furthermore, Israel's sage captured the humiliation that may arise from deprivation of resources in the Book of Proverbs: "Give me neither poverty nor riches, lest, being full, I deny you, saying, who is the Lord? Or, being in want, I steal and profane the name of my God" (Prov 30: 8-9). Further reflections on wealth and poverty in Jewish life developed during the Second Temple Period.

Judaism in the late Second Temple Period brought another meaning to poverty. During this time, a Jewish sect called the Essenes (probably exemplified by the Qumran community), in response to the religious crisis of the time, introduced another level of meaning to poverty: a voluntary renunciation of wealth for a spiritual purpose. The Essenes voluntarily embraced poverty and renounced wealth to devote themselves to a life of perfection in the community in preparation for the coming of the Messiah-King. Thanks to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, many details of the lives of the Essenes are now known. Among the usual wisdom topics covered in their writings, wealth, poverty, and financial matters stand out as exceptionally prominent. Scholars identify financial issues in several of the larger fragments found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. Words having to do with riches and poverty are scattered throughout even the very small fragments (Wright, 2012). The frequency with which the ancient sages addressed issues connected with wealth and financial dealings demonstrate the significance of poverty in the religious life of the people. The apocalyptic nature of the Essenic community evokes the sense of people on pilgrimage and, as such, faith and life in covenant assume a spirit and actuality of poverty. Shreds of the Essenic thoughts can be found in the New Testament, for according to Raymond Brown, some evidence of this is seen in Jesus' teaching, for the 'Word-made-flesh' spoke the language of his time. (Brown, 1997)

2. An Understanding of Discipleship in the Teaching of Jesus (Luke 9, 23)

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life would lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it ..." (NRSV)

The teaching of Jesus was set in the context of ancient Judaism. In many respects, that teaching must have been variations on themes from the religious life of the time. The authors of the Gospel present Jesus' teaching according to those themes that have a significant influence on the people. The meta-narratives that make up the synoptic Gospels carry disproportionate themes of prosperity and poverty. Indeed, the Gospel authors introduce the element of prosperity and poverty in the call of the disciples. Jesus' first followers were portrayed as men of means who left behind trade and means of livelihood. Simon Peter, the fisherman, is said to own a fishing boat and all the paraphernalia of the trade. James and John, the sons of Zebedee, were Simon's business partners (Mt. 4: 18-22; Mk 1: 16-20; Luke 5: 1- 11). These men left property behind to become close companions, indeed disciples, of an itinerant preacher, the one, who, unlike the beasts of the field, had nowhere to lay his head (cf Luke 9, 58). Luke's condition for discipleship in Luke 9: 23 translates Deut 6: 5: "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." To love the LORD with all that one has (heart, soul, might), carries the full weight of abnegation, *arnçsasthô*. Informed by their religious tradition that is bound up with exile narratives and a longing for freedom, which places a premium on self-denial, Luke presents Jesus' first Galilean followers as persons who gave up all they had to live on, in order to be companions of the Messiah (Luke 9: 20). The following of Jesus implies *ton stauron*, the cross, symbolically, suffering and death.

Jesus' teaching on admission into the reign of God, can be seen in the various interpretations he offers on Deuteronomy 6, 5: "Therefore you shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your strength." To love God with one's all, strongly suggests self-emptying; an absolute position of humility, a lack of power and possession. Possessions, according to Scripture scholar, Luke Timothy Johnson, are what men use to preserve their life, to gain security against the threat. Johnson (1977) To love God implies vulnerability, a life of sacrifice *ton stauron* of the cross.

In the Lukan periscope under study (Luke 9:18-28), Jesus presents *ton stauron* as the portal, the threshold, through which a seeker enters into life. Peter's confession of faith in the preceding verses, (9:18-22), provided the moment for Jesus to teach his disciples the lesson of the Cross: the "Son of Man" must suffer greatly and be rejected (Mk 8: 31-33). Not only must the Messiah suffer, but all who would follow him must also be willing to take the same path. This invitation of the Messiah establishes suffering as the "Christian portion." *Ton stauron*, the cross, remains a mark of Christian authenticity, the crystal in the crown of a follower of Jesus.

Immediately following Peter's confession (9: 18-21), Jesus gives his disciples the blueprint of following in the Way: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me" (9: 23). Eight days later (9: 28-36), on the mountain, Jesus reveals to the three (Peter, James, and John) a glimpse of what awaits a disciple.

Although we are separated from Jesus' first-century audience by time, space and culture, the path to discipleship remains the same. This road still moves from call to cross, from confusion through betrayal to reconciliation for us, just as it did for Peter and the others who first walked with Jesus (Spohn (2000) Discipleship is inconceivable without the cross: "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14, 27). Note the phrase "whoever"; whoever in this context is all-embracing. It shows that the Gospel counsels are enjoined on all Christians, pastors, and peoples in the pews alike. The call to take up the cross *daily* is not enjoyed to a particular group of Christians. When Christians under whatever guise begin to proclaim a life with Christ Jesus outside of the cross, such proclamation raises critical questions bordering on the fundamentals of the Christian faith. Unquestionably, the growing mentality to equate wealth with divine blessings relegates the cross, the germ of Jesus Christ Resurrection, to the background.

Jesus renews the teachings of Moses and the prophets for the peoples of his time. During this era, oppression under Roman rule and a dire socio-economic environment impinged greatly on the life of the average Jewish family. These harsh social conditions gave new meaning to Jesus' teaching, particularly on the subject of

property and poverty. The frequency of Jesus' discourses on wealth and poverty underscores the significance of these values. His teaching challenges his hearers and, indeed, his followers to renounce wealth for the Kingdom of God and called the poor blessed (Luke 6: 20). His teaching on the disciple's attitude towards worldly goods became a binding force in the early Christian community. We read in the Acts of the Apostles of the common fund of wealth in the early Christian community. They had a common patrimony. Shared faith as well as material goods in common so much so that no one was in need (Acts 2: 44). Even when complaint arose concerning Hellenists widows, the group redefined its structure to meet the needs of the community. They appointed seven deacons to take care of the poor. Convinced that possessions have the power to dominate the mind and entice it away from God, founders of religious institutes in the first centuries of Christianity made the renunciation of property (Vow of Poverty) the first of the statutory requirements for those seeking this particular way of life. Prosperity is not limited to material goods; it also includes seeking places of honour.

Jesus presents the cross as a condition for any office in the reign of God. Luke's account of the encounter between Jesus and the two brothers, James, and John, is instructive for those who seek honour. A Christian response to actively seeking prosperity through exalted position, either in the village, government or religious institute rests on the text under review. Positions in the Christian community are for service; to serve is to reign. The evangelical counsels challenge every follower of Christ to avoid mammon (money, power, pleasure) in all its forms and seek God in humility.

3. Prosperity and Poverty, Jewels in a Christian Crown

Abject poverty or excessive wealth is contrary to Christian value. Humans of all times have aversion for poverty. No one desires to be poor. Prosperity remains the goal you want. The human leaning towards prosperity comes as natural as the sunflower follows the movement of light. In Jesus' manifesto (Luke 4: 18) in which he proclaims the LORD'S favour, prosperity rings clear. The manger-born Messiah proclaims: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor..." An

interpretation of this text suggests a denunciation and an annunciation. Jesus denounces unjust structures and systems that restrict as well as deprive people the full realization of their personhood. At the same time, he announces a “prosperous” future for those who follow in his footsteps; footsteps that would be steeped in controversies, suffering, and death. In this way, suffering becomes the portion of any who authentically desires discipleship. Suffering copiously suggests that the Christian must prefer salvation and happiness of soul before any secular concern whatsoever. The Christian must accustom self to all instances of self-denial and patience. Moreover, only through these processes can one attain life. His glorious resurrection was born out of suffering and death.

Most of Jesus’ parables, like the writings of sages of the Hebrew Scripture, deal with both rich and poor. The Gospel according to Luke, for example, has an array of such parables. The parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), which is recorded only in Luke, is but one. Present-day preachers have become selective in their preaching the Word. A selective preaching of prosperity with the corresponding ignoring subject of poverty in our local churches and denominations does not seem to represent fully the Good News. Such discourses run contrary to the eschatological vocation of discipleship (Mtom, 2010). Regardless of the craving and craze for the prosperity promised followers by their pastors, a significant percentage of the congregation still reel in abject poverty. While exploiting the ignorance of their congregations, these gospel preachers nestle in affluence. With so much poverty, material as well as anthropological, the inordinate quest for prosperity among Christians tends to support Karl Marx’s critique of religion being the opium of the people (Marx-Engels, 1966). That should be the case when a peanut seller or ‘pure water’ hawker dreams of possessing the latest automobile in town, for instance. The happy, clapping, church-goers’ uncritical appropriation of the prosperity idea can be rather unwholesome for society as a whole. However, the multiplicity of Christian churches and denominations thrive on the naïveté of their congregations. The sheer number of persons who flock to these churches is indicative of the magnitude of our concern. It also reveals the number of persons affected in the

mammon pursuit. Just like a supermarket or store chain that has its store in every street corner, some denominations have a place of worship in every nook and cranny of every town and village. This supposed evangelism is intended to rake up the gains and hard-earned income of trusting, uncritical, worshipers, many of whom are deluded into believing that their miracle is on the way. One may ask: What miracle? Perhaps, the miracle can be found in restoration to health, a job opportunity or reconciliation. However, for most, the miracle consists of money, power, and pleasure. Granted that for the person of faith, as Richard Gula puts it, “the nagging craving for more is a divine invitation to seek what is genuinely fulfilling,” the desires to own be it material or people can get hijacked along the way by what spiritual writers have called inordinate attachments to the world’s created goods (Gula, 2003). That is to say that the seeker becomes addicted to created goods. Addiction to worldly goods does not make the spirit quiet. Withdrawal from addictive behaviours or pursuits is at the heart of Jesus’ invitation “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9: 23). Thus, true prosperity is found in detachment from worldly goods.

Prosperity-driven faith, religion, is inconsistent with the Cross of Christ. Self-denial, mortification, and contempt of the world are hardly heard from most pulpits. Rather, self-indulgence that negates toil, weariness, and poverty for Christ is the order of the day. Such thinking is manifest in the lifestyle of many church leaders, pastors and priests alike. They do not support the sacrificial way of life. In addition to luxurious accommodation, some parade the latest sleek automobiles in town. Furthermore, several preachers bear in their bodies a manifestation of their affluence; they carry around bulging bellies. Undoubtedly, bulging bellies in many of these cases have more to do with consumption than genetics. These persons consume more than what their bodies would normally require; they consume the food that should have been given to the widow, the orphan and the stranger, the poor of the LORD. In the complexity of the Nigerian economic environment, material benefits and gains arising from pasturing religious groups, have given rise to a proliferation of churches.

Churches and denominations of one description or another are found in almost every nook and cranny. Diobu, a densely populated area in Port Harcourt City, is a case in point. Diobu and its environs are about eight square kilometers in area. A 2006 research on “New Religious Movements in Diobu, and its Environs,” yielded over three hundred well establish church denominations Wosah (2006). A walk around Diobu and the surrounding area show that there has been a significant increase in the number of churches in the last five years. The number is not abating. Isiodu, in Emohua Local Government Area, provides another example. With a population of about 15 thousand people, the community has more than 30 different church denominations (Oral interview Obineche 2012). Rather than promote the Gospel of Jesus Christ, these churches endorse a magical existence, a life of miracles centred on prosperity. Disproportionate emphasis on acquisition of wealth borders on obsession. None of the virtues that can enable one overcome daily afflictions or acquiesce in the will of God is within the ambit of worship. Discipleship, on the contrary, consists of taking up the cross, carrying it after Christ and making the best of it.

In the Roman Catholic tradition, martyrology celebrates persons, Martyrs, and Saints, who became “prosperous” denying themselves, and faithfully carrying their cross daily. These times call for action. There must be a genuinely Christian response to the seeming bastardization of Christianity. The Poverty Movement in the Early Middle Ages that produced the Waldensians, the Franciscans (St. Francis and St. Clare of Assisi) and others, was a response to the signs of the time.

Conclusion

Discipleship in the Gospel tradition is not without suffering, trial and pain. It is unchristian to assert, “Suffering is not my portion.” Jesus’ followers accepted the cross; they drank the cup, walked the walk and, in the end, won the laurel: Christian prosperity per excellence. Hardship guarantees entry into the ultimate prosperity, the reign of God. The challenge for Christians, therefore, remains avoidance of every manifestation of mammon. Pastors and preachers especially owe it to Nigerian Christians to preach both by word and

lifestyle; Christ crucified the one whose wound makes us whole. By their lifestyle, the Essenes offered a response to the religious crisis of their time. Christians, who claim orthodoxy, cannot continue to allow themselves to be evangelized by prosperity preachers. The burden rests on every Christian to live and preach a Christ-centred faith so that the glory of the LORD will dwell in our land.

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