

## **THE IMPLICATIONS AND EFFECTS OF COMMERCIALIZATION ON ECCLESIAL COMMUNITIES IN NIGERIA**

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### **Abstract**

The study examines the derogatory effects of commercialization on Ecclesial communities in Nigeria. The qualitative phenomenological method of research was adopted by this work. The study observes that Christianity to a very large extent is no more a spiritual thing but a means to an end among some so-called Church leaders in Nigeria. These Church personnel have shown more interest in commercial activities and profiteering than in spiritual endeavours as sacred objects like anointing oil, holy water, handkerchiefs, prayers, prophecies and even the Gospel are not just being sold for money by merchants of Christianity but at exorbitant market prices in Nigeria. This development is antithetical to the Church and her mission and the original tenets of Christianity. How this phenomenon affects the credibility of the Church especially in Nigeria therefore is the task this work tackles. It was discovered in this study that commercialization in Ecclesial communities has some derogatory effects on the credibility/reputation of the Church by promoting materialism and mundane pleasures over spiritual endeavours such that the Church is now being considered as mere business centres instead of the house of God. The study therefore concludes that the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) should put certain measures like setting up machinery to closely monitor the operations of the Nigerian Ecclesial communities, spelling out the objective of the universal Church to them and if there be any contravention by any Ecclesia community, such should be sanctioned to serve as deterrent to others. Also, the Nigerian government should try and make job opportunities available to the teeming youths since unemployment is a possible precipitant for commercialization in the Church.

### **Introduction**

In the contemporary Nigerian Christendom, many Christian Clerics and prosperity gospel preachers have turned to the commercialization of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ and other things of faith in order to have ends meet. These Church merchants present false teachings and deceptive practices in very subtle or crafty ways that make their congregants to be convinced in patronizing them. Their actions or deeds which have the undertone of making monetary or materialistic profits at all costs from the preaching of the gospel, are undoubtedly contrary to the Lord's command "And as you go, preach, saying, The Kingdom of heaven is at hand. Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons. Freely you have received, freely you must give" as contained in Matthew 10:7, 8. This ugly phenomenon has therefore turned many of the Ecclesial communities in Nigeria especially the Pentecostals to mere market places or business centres where vendors of sacred relics, of painted beads and inscribed ribbons, of coloured candles, of anointing oil, and bottles of holy water are now being sold.

It is quite appalling that as these commercial oriented crowds of buyers and sellers and even money changers babble, sway and bargain in the holy assemblies that are supposed to be sacred to the memory of Jesus Christ, it becomes frustrating, inconvenient and even impossible for simple and well-meaning Christians to worship in the house of God which Jesus Christ has designated as "a house of prayer" rather than "a house of merchandise" (John 2:16). Suffice it to say that the interference of commercial activities in one form or the order in the Church distracts the attention of believers and makes the

contemporary Ecclesial communities in Nigeria especially the Pentecostals uncondusive centres for well – meaning Christians to worship God. With this shift from the path of spirituality, her original tenets which include sound biblical teachings on moral and ethical codes and purity to the pursuit of mundane things, the Church today is making no or minimal impact in character building that could ensure societal peace and development.

When emphasis on commercialism and profiteering which are more of mundane endeavours have taken the place of the mission of the Church and the original tenets of Christianity the Church, without doubt, will lose her credibility. This is the very sorry state that the Ecclesial communities in Nigeria have found themselves and it is therefore the concern that this work seeks to attend to.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The word Ecclesial is the adjectival form of the word “Ecclesia –“Ἐκκλησία”, which is translated “Church” in the English Bible in the New Testament. It is the Septuagint’s translation of the Greek adjective “kuriakon”, used first of the house of God (Church), then, his people. Ecclesia (Church) is taken from the Greek word “κλησία” which means (to call), with the prefix “Ἐκ”, which means (out). Thus, the word “Ecclesia” means “the called out”, or “the called out ones”. According to Strong (2001), this word stresses a group of people called out for a special purpose. Arhawho (2017) posits that:

Ecclesia simply means a Church. In the New Testament, ecclesia is used to refer to the community of God’s people as in Matthew 16: 18; 18: 17, the assembly of people who profess faith in and allegiance to Christ. It simply refers to the assemblage of the people of God. (p. 3).

According to Strong (2001), this word stresses a group of people called out for a special purpose. Harrison (2000) asserts that:

The word “ecclesia” means the assembly or congregation of the Israelites, especially when gathered before the Lord for religious purposes. Accordingly, it is used in the New Testament for the congregation which the living God assembles about his Messiah Jesus. (p. 123).

Succinctly, an Ecclesial community simply means a Church, a fellowship or meeting of believers or Christians who assembles for religious purposes like prayers and worship of God as Cruden (1937) asserts “The Church is a body of Christians with the same general creed and under the same ecclesiastical authority. It is a body of worshippers of God as the Jewish congregation in Acts 7:38” (p. 658). The concept of the Church or Ecclesia without doubt could also refer to the picture or representation of the Tabernacle, Synagogue and Temple worship in Bible times (Exodus 27:21; Matthew 13:54; Psalm 65:4; John 2:14-16). It is in the light of this that Dafiewhare (2019) affirms, “The Church is represented as the tent of meeting, the gathering in the booth, the Synagogue, the Tabernacle and the Temple in the Old Testament” (p. 11).

There are some metaphoric terms which the Bible uses to capture the Church or an Ecclesial community. In the first place, Exodus 6:6-7; Leviticus 26:9-14; Jeremiah 7:23; Acts 15:14; 2 Cor. 6:16 and Revelation 21:3 give such a metaphor as “the people of God”. Thus, the people of God or the gathering of the people of God are found in the Old Testament and the New Testament as a metaphoric description of Ecclesia. According to Nwanganga (2017), this description of Ecclesia or the Church stresses on one hand, the continuity of the Church with Israel and on the other, the Church’s potential universality. Another metaphor that the Bible uses to uniquely define the Church is “the body of Christ” as contained in Romans 12:4-5; Ephesians 4:7-16 and Colossians 1:18. This metaphor defines Christ as the head and Christians form the members of this body. Arhawho (2017) affirms that, “The main purpose of this metaphor is to establish the interrelatedness of diversity and unity within the Church about her spiritual gifts which aims at the edification of the body of Christ” (p. 4). The bride of Christ which is an image of marriage, is another imagery the Bible uses to denote the Church as could be seen in both the Old and New Testaments in Isaiah 54:5-6; 62:5; Hosea 2:7; Ephesians 5:25-27; 2 Cor. 11:2.

There are certain marks that distinguish the Church or an Ecclesial community from non-Christian organizations and gatherings. Elwell (2001) affirms that:

God's voice is heard in the proclamation of His Word and His acts are seen in the administration of his sacraments. Accordingly, these with prayer and praise are the marks of the visible Church, the means the Holy Spirit uses to bring individuals to personal faith and to nourish believers in the corporate worship of the Christian community. (p. 247).

From a theological perspective, the Church is believed to have four marks: She is believed to be One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic. The Church is affirmed as one because she believes in and confesses one Lord and is animated by one Spirit. Arhawho (2017) affirms that "The Church is empowered from one source: God, through the Holy Spirit" (p. 12). She is holy because God himself states it to be so. The Church is catholic (universal) because it goes beyond all the division of humanity and the Church is apostolic because the apostolic teachings and mission remains the core business and focus of the Church. For Barth (1932), these marks are attributed to the Church in faith and hope in the recognition that the visible condition of the Church often does not correspond to them.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The root of commercialization of the gospel and other things of faith in Ecclesial communities in Nigeria can be seen in what Kalu (2008) describes as the market theory. Here, Kalu links commercialization or merchandising of the things of faith in Ecclesial communities to the market theory built around the idea that sees the religious space as being similar to the market place and considers the Christian religion in the manner or way it is being practiced and propagated today as a commodity because messages, prophecies, prayers and other elements of Christianity are being packaged as products in a competitive market place. He considers religious leaders as religious businessmen/women who capitalize on marketing strategies to dupe innocent followers as consumers by selling their books, videos, stickers, audiotapes and all manners of waves, using the sales techniques associated with the secular market place.

According to Ogunbible and Akinade (2010), 'marketing' God and His word is fast becoming a top bracket business in Nigeria and all over the world. Obiora (1998) had earlier asserted that:

There is a market value for everything under the sun; religion is not even an exception. When you visit "a man of God who claims to see the past, present and future", you pay the "gate fee" and also the "consultation fee". (p. 52).

In recent times in Nigeria, commercialization in Ecclesia communities with the aim of financial profits by Church leaders or Clerics has become a "life changer", changing lives from the backwaters of poverty to the enviable high grounds of affluence in the society. Ogunbible and Akinade (2010) assert that, "It has become the lubricant, the energizer, the accelerator and the inspiration of new found 'market system' in Nigeria" (p. 196). The Ecclesial or Church merchants in this new found market system, more often than not, capitalize on the secret of oratory, some very interesting unfounded testimonies, miracles and healing to raise the morale of gullible followers and then trick them into believing that God is behind this "modern business organization". Followers are then told to offer thanksgiving on account of "what the Lord has done". This draws money in thousands of naira and thus the gullible congregant is exploited and manipulated. It beats one's widest imagination like in the case of Jesus in John 2:13-16 that market bargains take place in God's house. A great percentage of the modern day Ecclesial communities especially in Nigeria, therefore are no more than business centres where sellers and buyers of special ministries like the word of God, prophecies and other religious elements are bargained as Obiora (1998) puts it, "There, God is haggled and sold; His word is sold, so also His power" (p. 52). For him, this phenomenon of "Ecclesial communities marketing" is now like discovering a goldmine, where men and women who once walked the "ghettos" some years ago can proudly today become multi-millionaires.

### **The Task and Mission of the Church**

The task and mission of the Church as entrusted by God according to Bowen (1996), consists of different parts which centers on evangelism and exercise of spiritual gifts. This mandate is summed up in the great commission as recorded in Matthew 28:19 “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”. If this passage is given a missiological interpretation, it could be inferred that the effective proclamation of the gospel is the paramount responsibility, aim and objective of the Church. This is why Tasker (1979) posits that the Church is commissioned by Christ to preach the good news of justification and redemption to the world. In addition to this, Anyafo (1997) asserts that, “Churches are service enterprises established primarily to satisfy people’s spiritual needs. The need for love includes desire for affection and for association with others. People’s spiritual needs cannot actually be met without love and compassion for them” (p. 46).

This is true because the Church/Christianity according to Nwanganga (2017) provides paths that deliver individuals from bondage of sin, immorality, ignorance and other types of impurity or disharmony and lead them towards a state of purity of soul, spiritual knowledge, wisdom, godliness, enlightenment or even eternal life. Corroborating this assertion that soul winning is the core task or mission of the Church, Dafiewhare (2019) says:

Soul winning is the supreme task of the Church. In all, the Church must feature as a catalyst to morality, constructive cultural values and deal with the corruption and all forms of socio-ills in our contemporary society. In so doing, the society will be well evangelized and the gospel is extended and preached in every nook and cranny. People will then be rescued from the devil’s bondage into the Kingdom of God. This is the supreme task of the Church. (p. 15).

This mission of the Church, according to Jesus Christ in Matthew 10:7-9 is to be carried out by the apostles without focus on personal monetary or material gains. Contrarily, many Church personnel in Nigeria today have turned the Church and her mission into money-making ventures as they commercialize religious elements in Ecclesial communities.

### **The Concept of Commercialization in Contemporary Nigerian Ecclesial Communities**

Frankly speaking, commercialization in Ecclesial communities should be conceived as every action, endeavour or activities of Church leaders, apostles, prophets, pastors, Bishops and other Church officials that have economic, materialistic and financial profit making intentions or undertone. This phenomenon is simply the art of conducting the Church’s core mandate for soul winning and meeting the spiritual and emotional needs of members with the sole aim of benefiting financially. Nwanganga (2017) explains the concept of commercialization in Ecclesia communities or Church in two lights:

Firstly, it is the application of commercial principles in the running of the Church or applying business principles to Church administration and running it as a business with the aim of making economic gain. Secondly, the manipulation of the Church/Christianity and its services (spiritual and emotional) with implied intentions to exploit the members or prospects for economic or financial gain. (p. 28).

The concept of commercialization or merchandising in Ecclesial communities which is simply a scheme to make financial or economic gain rather than soul winning which is the major mandate or mission of the Church, could be considered as an aberration which dents the image or reputation of the institution called Church. Obviously, this phenomenon is an antithesis of the Church’s mission or objective and tenets and cannot be considered as a promoting factor for the credibility of the Church or Ecclesial community. This is because, the way and manner some of these Ecclesial communities or Churches conduct the business of the Church indicates a string of profanities.

Ordinarily, the word “Εκκλησια” (Ecclesia –Church) according to Harrison (2000), evokes the idea of the supernatural and the mystical. Elwell (2011) affirms that “The Church is the spiritual family of God” (p. 246). However, the word “commerce” from which commercialization takes root, according to

Abioje (2011) refers to one of the most mundane human activities. It is associated with one of the most materialistic endeavours of man. On this premise, the concept of commercialization of Church programmes and other things of faith in Ecclesial communities without doubt appears either contradictory or out rightly negative. Yet, there seems to be no doubt that commercialization or merchandising of the gospel and other elements of religion in various ways is a predominant phenomenon in contemporary times in Ecclesial communities especially the Pentecostals in Nigeria as it were in the Jerusalem temple in the time of Jesus Christ as recorded in John 2:13-16. It is in the light of this that Marshal (1993) rightly affirmed that:

One of the most remarkable trends of the last decade among the Christian population of Southern Nigeria has been the dramatic rise of the so-called “Charismatic” or “Pentecostal” movements and the increasing rate at which these movements tend to commercialize the gospel message. Literally thousands of new Churches and evangelical groups have cropped up in cities and towns, forming business-based religious movements which are rapidly becoming a powerful new social and religious force. (p. 18).

Nwadiakor (2015) agrees with the above assertion when he said, “In the last few decades an important development has occurred in Nigerian Christianity. This phenomenon is the commercialization of the gospel message by some religious groups, Churches and ministries, nearly all are Pentecostals” (p. 1270).

In view of her dramatic departure or deviation from her original mission or objective and tenets, the Ecclesial communities especially Pentecostals in Nigeria have drawn a lot of criticism to herself from both well-meaning Christians and non-Christians like the Temple in Jerusalem in John 2:13-16 from Jesus Christ. This is because there is seldomly an Ecclesial gathering that is called by Christian clerics without first considering how much financial gain that would be made from it. It is on this note that Ugwueye (2002) affirms that “Religion is now business which borders on commercialization or financial endeavours” (p. 221).

Most of the Ecclesial communities or Churches have business or commercial arms. Some have founded educational institutions, primary, post primary and even tertiary. This is good. One thing that has however saddened many people is the fact that most of these schools run by these religious organizations charge fees that cannot be afforded by even the members of such Ecclesial bodies. Nnadi (2012) completely agrees with this fact when he remarks that when our contemporary Church establishes a school, the fees suggest that the school is made for the rich and not for the poor masses whose financial contributions the Church used to build the school.

Among the enabling grounds for commercialization in Ecclesial communities are the get rich quickly syndrome or the quest to make quick money, economic hardship or poverty, unemployment and other social uncertainties while the mass media, proliferation of Churches and the prosperity gospel preaching are undoubtedly some of the precipitants.

### **The Implications of Commercialization in the Church**

It is true that some people consider commercialization in Ecclesial communities as having some positive implications on the Church and the society in general. Such implications may include the provision of job opportunities or means of employment and even poverty alleviation. However, since the Bible does not support the art of commercialization of the gospel and other elements of religion in Ecclesial communities (Matt. 10:7-9; 21:12-13; John 2:13-16; Acts 8:18-20), this work will focus on the negative implications, more so as the negative by far outweigh the positive implications of this phenomenon. The negative implications of commercialization in Ecclesial communities on the Church and society include:

### **1. Commercialization in Ecclesial communities dents the reputation/credibility of the Church**

The art of commercialization in Ecclesial communities no doubt, is antithetical to the objective of the Church and the tenets of Christianity. The Church lays emphasis on spiritual values (the spiritual growth of the people of God). However, the way and manner some of the Ecclesial communities especially Church personnel conduct the business of the Church indicates a string of profanities. These Church leaders exhibit a strong appetite or hunger for the love of money which is the root of all evil (1 Timothy 6:10). This emphasis on mundane pleasures at the expense of spiritual value and the original tenets of promotion of truth, purity and holy living which the Church is known for has both directly and indirectly reduced the credibility and reputation of the Church such that she is no longer being considered by many people as better than ordinary business centres in Nigeria. Suffice it to say that because religious elements are now being sold for money in many of the Ecclesial communities in Nigeria today, the Church is no more regarded as a place of worship and prayers but now seen as centres for financial businesses.

### **2. Commercialization in Ecclesial communities encourages Fraud and swindling**

There is no doubt that commercialization in Ecclesial communities has directly or indirectly encouraged and promoted fraud and swindling among Christians in Nigeria. Fake prophets and fake miracle workers who counterfeit, arrange or stage-manage miracles are springing up like dandelions in the spring in every street of the cities and villages of the country and because of their unsuspecting quest for mundane pleasures, they employ all sorts of dupious business strategies and gimmicks in the name of religion to defraud and swindle both gullible and innocent Nigerians. Owoeye (2006) affirms that, "Their emphasis on money can encourage some if not many to engage in some unethical, unconventional and incongruous practices" (p. 190). As these prophets and miracle workers perform these so-called miracles and claim to see the future, gullible people seeking solutions to their problems troop to these communities in thousands. Sometimes even the innocent people who seek solutions to their spiritual needs who do not know that these places are mere business centres are asked to "sow seeds" with their money, cars, land and other valuables. Thus they are defrauded and swindled.

### **3. It encourages materialism.**

Materialism is the belief that money, possessions and physical comforts are more important than spiritual values. Iwe (1991) asserts that, "In Nigeria the spirit of materialism is fast invading and shadowing our traditional values and Christian ethics; traditionally our society laid more emphasis on spiritual and social dimension of human nature and value" (p. 28). The quest for wealth therefore is a driving force behind the commercialization of the gospel and the things of faith in Ecclesial communities by Church leaders.

### **4. It encourages distraction and frustration at worship**

Commercialization in Ecclesial communities distracts and frustrates the attempts of Christians at worship. It was the prophet Isaiah who said in Isaiah 56:7b "Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted upon my Altar, for my house will be called a house of prayer for all people". God makes it clear from this scripture that the Church is a house of prayer for all people who comes there and it must therefore not be thought that everyone who comes there is for sight-see. Some, at least, must have come with serious longings in their hearts and souls to worship God and pray for solutions to their spiritual needs. But as the crowd of people who have been attracted to these places of worship by the fake prophecies and miracles of so-called men and women of God, babbles, sway and bargain religious elements in the Church that is sacred to the memory of Jesus Christ, this uproar of buying and selling, bargaining and auctioneering makes it frustrating and sometimes even impossible for well-meaning worshippers to meditate and have their spiritual dealings with God. It is in the light of this that Barclay (2006) affirms that, "The worship of God and the disputes of men can never go together" (p. 248).

### **5. Commercialization in Ecclesial communities encourages sorcery and divination**

In Nigeria today, some well-known sorcerers and diviners have suddenly become prophets, apostles and general overseers of Churches. This is because they have realized that Church business have become more lucrative than divination. They make soothsaying and divination appear like prophecy and sorcery like miracles with their victims not even suspecting it because they are very crafty and even carry copies of the Holy Bible for camouflage. Their shrines have been re-named Churches where they

commercialize the gospel and other Church-related things to make financial profits. It is on this note that Diara (2011) asserts that

Diviners and native doctors have decided to disguise themselves on the cloaks and garments of prophets and priests to deceive the poor and helpless masses who are desperate for one miracle or the other but who on the basis of their faith resolved not to consult the diviners and native doctors for solution to their problems. In this way, many people consult occultic and diabolic personnel today in the name of “men of God” without knowing. (p. 66).

#### **6. It Breeds Biblical and Spiritual Deficient Christians in the Society**

It is unarguable that when emphasis of pastors and prophets in Ecclesial communities centers on commercialization which advances materialism and prosperity, worshippers are bound to be deficient in biblical teachings and tenets of Christianity. This accounts for why some people come to Church and even steal while still there during worship services. It could be clearly observed in some Ecclesial communities today that because of emphasis on money and financial gains, many Christians have drifted from trusting God to trusting wealth; from the pursuit of God to the pursuit of material possessions. This drift according to Biwul (2016) has caused some contemporary Christians a spiritual decline and less sensitivity to the things of the Spirit. Thus, the Church by her too much emphasis on money or material things, instead of sound biblical teachings on the tenets of Christianity has failed to a very large extent to have much spiritual impact on the lives of people who congregate in them. This failure is partly due to the inability of Church personnel to teach biblical or Church doctrines that should build worshippers spiritually and to make them live godly lives of contentment. It is on this note that Biwul (2013) documents that:

It is quite a paradox that Nigeria, one of the most religious countries in the world, is also voted one of the most corrupt, crises-prone nations on earth. The quality of her spirituality does not match the quantity of her Christianity. The influence and impact of Christian presence in her society is minimal vis-à-vis the plethora and paraphernalia of her religiosity. One identifiable factor that could be said to be the culprit responsible for this situation is poor and substandard preaching of the Bible among most Christian congregations. (pp. 124-125).

Thus, as the focus is on commerce many worshippers appear to be more concerned about material possessions rather than spiritual formation. When emphasis in Ecclesial communities is “Just sow a seed and before you get home now, you will receive credit alert on your bank account” and the chorus is “Amen”, when one has not in the first place done any work or business that should warrant such credit alert, does it not make God to be understood as a magician? This is biblical or spiritual deficiency. The Church personnel ought to have taught the worshipers that God does not bless emptiness and that there is dignity in labour. This is what of course would warrant the credit alert.

As a result of spiritual and biblical deficiency, even yahoo boys and girls who flood some of the Ecclesial communities today do not see anything wrong with whatever they do to make money as being against biblical teachings and standards. Suffice it to say that because of the shift from spiritual formation to commercial attitude by some Ecclesial communities, the values and essence of life and earthly existence which Christians should seek has evaded our society. It is in this vein that Ejiogu (2000) says that, “A disruptive moral crisis has regrettably overtaken the contemporary Nigerian society as fake Churches keep on increasing by leaps and bounds, parading millions of fake born again(s)” (p. 25). When Christians are spiritually deficient, there could be a rise on criminal activities that have the propensity to hinder the peace and development of the society.

#### **Conclusion**

Honestly, commercialization in Ecclesial communities in Nigeria has done more harm than good to the Church and society. It emphasizes materialism and mundane pleasures over spiritual endeavours and so it is antithetical to the Church’s objective and mission and therefore an aberration to the Christian tradition and tenets. The implications are so harmful that if not checkmated, the Church would have no positive impact on the society and she would virtually lose her credibility and Christianity, her worth and value. This, of course, would mean a return to obnoxious religious practices like ritual killings,

human sacrifices, diabolism and the likes which the Church kick against because they can never promote societal peace and development. The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) should therefore put certain measures like setting up machinery to closely monitor the operations of the Nigerian Ecclesial communities, spelling out the objective of the universal Church to them and if there be any contravention by any Ecclesial community, such should be sanctioned to serve as deterrent to others. Also, the Nigerian government should try and make job opportunities available to the teeming youths since unemployment is a possible precipitant for commercialization in the Church.

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