

## **BALANCING KERYGMA AND PARAENESIS IN RESPONDING TO POVERTY BY THE CHURCH IN AFRICA**

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### **Abstract**

*The church as a collection of the called-out ones is saddled with the basic responsibilities of preaching the gospel and nurturing the members spiritually, economically and even physically. The later becomes more important due to the prevalence of multi-dimensional poverty that is ravaging the African continent. These kerygmatic and paraenetic functions characterized the earthly ministry of Jesus. However, there exists an imbalance in the discharge of these roles in the contemporary church. On the one hand, there is a group, who put more emphasis on the kerygma i.e., preaching and spiritual nurturing of souls. On the other hand, is a group whose focus is on ensuring the comfort and welfare of members through financial, psychological and material empowerment for members, which has heightened the crave for prosperity. This paper investigates this imbalance between kerygma and paraenesis through a descriptive method within the context of the church in Africa, and juxtaposes a model in 1 Cor. 8:1-5. Thorough and unbiased biblical hermeneutics is advocated for in maintaining such a balance.*

**Keywords:** Kerygma, Paraenesis, Poverty, Prosperity

### **Introduction**

One of the common problems confronting humanity in recent time is poverty. This has not been limited to Africa alone, rather, it has become a global phenomenon with various measures to curb or eradicate it. Its prevalence has led to its inclusion in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).<sup>1</sup> It occupies the first place on the list of the SDGs which is entitled *End Poverty in all Its Forms Everywhere*. Its focus is to eradicate unemployment, hunger and low income. Several attempts have been

made, and new ones are been designed to address the situation. The church has also not been left behind in the scourge of poverty in spite of her emphasis on salvation and prosperity. Much emphasis is put on the government whenever issues of poverty is raised.

The response of church as a body of believers needs serious re-appraisal in combating poverty in all ramifications and fostering unity in Africa. The main claim of his paper is that the realization of united and prosperous Africa largely depends on how the church respond to poverty. As more efforts are been expected from the church, theological education, which is a means of equipping church leadership also needs to be adequately equipped to face the trite challenge of poverty in Africa. The task of this paper is to discuss two main approaches that should serve as the basis for church response; and how to properly handle them using the models in Acts 6:1–5 and 2 Corinthians 8:1–5 as examples.

### **The Quest for Prosperous and United Africa**

The vantage position of Africa in the global map cannot be underscored. Apart from its growing human population, the growing attention of African economy is a thing of positive concern to many nations. Although, Africa is usually referred to as a developing continent when compared with others in terms of infrastructural development, a fact that cannot be ignored is that the high deposit of abundant human and natural resources makes it a much-coveted hub for international investors. The fertile land and teeming population have made it a viable market for foreign investors. As much as all of these need to be appreciated, the *in-situ* realities run on the contrary. In fact, the contemporary African situation is an absolute paradox of poverty in the midst of wealth. The continent with such abundant resources is witnessing abject poverty, its economy remains in comatose with perpetual begging for global intervention and bailouts. The 2022 Global Gross National Income (GNI) index shows that Africa is a poor continent with ten poorest countries in the world, and with lowest Purchasing Power Parity (PPP).<sup>ii</sup> Many Africans are running to other continents in droves in search of greener pastures and prosperity.

This has rendered the continent as a dependent albatross, and a dumping ground for all kinds of junk goods and exploitative services. To put it bluntly, the continent largely depends on importation of goods and services for survival. Even local products are despised, while imported goods, even if not as good as the locally-made are preferred. Furthermore, the social bonds which characterized Africans is fast-depleting. This is visible in the extension

of the ugly trend of kidnapping, militancy and insurgency that have now become hydra-headed monster tormenting Africa as whole. Once a peaceful continent that was characterized by communal bond and social intimacy is now polarized along culture, tribe, religion and language as visible in xenophobic attitudes among many Africans. It must be submitted that the source and the aftermath of all these misdemeanours is poverty which needs urgent attention.

### **Poverty in Biblical Perspective**

Poverty in the Old Testament is described in the Hebrew term and other variants such as *rash* (Prov. 6:11; 30:8); *res* (Prov. 28:19; 31:7); *yaras* (Prov. 20:13; 23:21).<sup>iii</sup> These words describe a condition of economic lack or insufficiency. In other words, they express a condition of not having enough. It must be noted with utmost significance, that the Bible never concerns itself so much with poverty as a concept, rather, much of its concerns has to do with the plight of the poor. As a result, the Old Testament speaks so much about taking care of the poor as an attempt to eradicate poverty. The poor in biblical perspective refers to someone of low economic status. Some Hebrew words used to describe the poor are *'oni* and *anav* "oppressed," "poor" or "humble" (Deut. 15:11; Lev 19:10; Job 29:12; Psa. 10:9).<sup>iv</sup> These terms are used to designate someone who suffers from poverty that is caused by wrongful impoverishment or dispossession. Such an individual described by these terms does not suffer from self-inflicted poverty. The two words are results of oppression and exploitation by the rich and powerful. This fits into the African context, whereby the rich, and mostly, the leaders embezzle the commonwealth of the citizens.

Another word for the poor in the Old Testament is *'ebyon*, which connotes "needy" or "poor" (Deut. 15:4; Job 31:19). This term originally refers to a beggar and the homeless. *Da'al* is used to refer to the "weak," "lowly," "poor" (Exo. 23:3; I Sam 2:8; Job 5:16). Its major emphasis is the physical weakness in its strict sense, it is used to describe the Southern kingdom in 586 B.C. *Ra'ash* is another word for the poor that is used with respect to low economic and social status in the gnomic literature (Prov. 13:8; 14:20; 18:23).<sup>v</sup>

*Yahweh* denounced poverty in a very strong term in the Old Testament. In fact, he affirmatively declared that "There should be no poor among you" (Deut. 15:14). However, the abolition of poverty by *Yahweh* is consequent upon obedience to his laws and statutes. In furtherance of *Yahweh's* intention to eradicate poverty, the sabbatical year was institutionalized (Lev. 25; Deut.

15). The sabbatical year, actually means “a year of solemn rest” (Lev. 25:5). Deuteronomy 15:9 considers it as “a year of release.” This refers to every seventh year as a fallow year for the land, and a year of remission of debts. This was to balance the inequality among the community of *Yahweh*. *Yahweh* even commanded his people never to be harsh or stingy to their fellow brother in anticipation of the sabbatical year (Deut. 15:7–1).

As a way of dealing with poverty in the land of Israel, *Yahweh* gave certain rights and privileges to the poor. Some of these will be considered. The poor had the privilege of gleaning the vineyards and orchard farms after the harvest. In fact, *Yahweh* commanded that sheaves forgotten as well as those produced in the sabbatical year are meant for the poor (Lev. 19:10; 23:22). No interest was to be taken from loans to the poor (Exo. 22:25; Lev. 25:36). Judges and kings are warned against perverting justice against the poor, because *Yahweh* would defend the cause of the oppressed (Psa. 72:2, 4).

### **Poverty in the New Testament**

Two Greek words adequately fit into the Hebraic words for poverty. These are *husteresis* and *husteria*.<sup>vi</sup> Another word is *ptochos*, which means “beggarliness,” “humiliated,” “weak” or “frail.”<sup>vii</sup> The word is used 34 times in the entire New Testament to refer to a person of who must acquire the basic necessity of life through begging.<sup>viii</sup> It must be noted that the New Testament gives greater concern to the plight of the poor than the Old Testament. This is as a result of the fact that the coming of Jesus Christ inaugurated the eventual advent of the kingdom of God. In his earthly ministry, Jesus always demonstrated great concern for the poor and the needy in the society in his teachings. For example, in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19 – 31), and the story of the generous Samaritan, Jesus emphasized the need to have concern for the poor. On one occasion, Jesus instructed the “pious” young man to go, sell all his possessions and give the money to the poor.

Another important dimension about poverty in the New Testament has to do with the relationship of the gospel and the people that believe in it. While Jesus recognized the fact that he had been commissioned to alleviate the plight of the poor as he read in his ministerial manifesto in Luke 4:6–18, he never omitted spiritual dimension. The quotation from Isaiah 61:1ff has both physical and spiritual connotations. In the physical sense, Jesus healed the sick, the lame and many people, while in the spiritual sense, he liberated those that have been bound in utter darkness of sin. Therefore, Jesus spoke about

blessing for the poor in the spirit in the “Beatitudes,” a section of his Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:1ff).

### **Poverty in Africa**

While it must be emphasized that poverty is a global phenomenon, its magnitude varies from continent to continent, and from country to country. Majority of African countries are under heavy burden of poverty. According to a United Nation (UN) list of 2022, 31 out of 46 countries of the Least Developed Countries (LCDs) are from Africa.<sup>ix</sup> Also, the 2021 UN quality of life index has shown that 27 countries of Africa occupy the bottom spots.<sup>x</sup> Statistics has also shown that in many African countries, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capital income is less than 200 US Dollar per year, while majority of the populace are living far below it.<sup>xi</sup>

Several factors have been adduced as causes of poverty in Africa. Some of these are bad governance, poor policy implementation and poor economic planning. While all of these factors can be said to be important, they all hinge on leadership deficiencies. However, it is not that African countries lack the potentials for self-governance, self-dependence, financial and economic sufficiency, the major problem has been on poor leadership and administrative styles. African countries have been moving in vicious cycles as a result of series of civil wars and variegated *coup de 'tat* that have rendered all progressive efforts stagnant. African leaders have been accused of high level of corruption. They are been accused of money-laundering, massive foreign transfer and all sorts of economic mal-practices. All these factors have rid the masses of the basic necessity of life. The situation, therefore, has always been that the rich are getting richer, while the poor are getting poorer.

The increase in poverty level has resulted into many disheartening and condemnable ends. Some of these are child abuse, child and women trafficking outbreak of epidemic, famine and inflation.<sup>xiii</sup> The rate of inflation has increased enormously, thereby making basic necessities of life unaffordable for the common populace. People are forced into prostitution and enlistment in militancy and insurgency. The poverty situation in Africa therefore has been an issue of concern to Africans as well as the global community. Hence, many steps have been taken to address it. Several nomenclatures have been given to various programmes initiated by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), the governmental agencies as well as religious groups. On the government side, plans such as Poverty Alleviation Programme (PAP), Poverty Eradication Program (PEP) and various financial empowerment programmes are being set up. The church has also not been left

behind in these efforts. In recent time, the church of God has risen to the challenge of empowering people economically.

Several programmes such as financial breakthrough seminars and workshops are always on jingles and posters in nooks and crannies of towns and villages. In fact, more than ever before, the church of God has seen the need to incorporate financial prosperity into the gospel of Christ. This new awareness becomes widely accepted as result of the astronomical increase in poverty level, and the emphasis of Pentecostal and Charismatic preachers who consider poverty as a curse. Some passages of the Bible are used to support this claim (cf. Hag. 2:18; Phil. 4:19). They often claim that poverty is not biblical, since *Yahweh* is the owner of gold and silver (Hag. 2:8). The financial empowerment programmes of the church have been yielding positive result as many people are now aware of diverse ways of investing their God-given material and human resources. Likewise, the acquisition of skills and ideas through empowerment programmes have been beneficial to both the individuals and the church.

Doubtlessly, this has led to a strong drive among preachers of various denominations to engage more on skill acquisition and profit-making workshops and seminars. Several professionals and experts are brought to educate church members on different ventures and investments. Even some churches now run cooperative programmes, go into share and capital investments, and establish schools. All these are good steps toward complete poverty eradication. While the church needs to be commended for not swimming against the tide in the efforts to reduce poverty, there is a need for caution. This is necessary because financial empowerment programs in the church setting can easily be abused if not properly managed. There is always a thin line between right use and misuse. In fact, the major task of proclaiming the *kerygma*, the message of the crucified Christ stands the risk of becoming the minor at expense of *paraenetic* task of financial empowerment. With the crave for liberation from poverty, the contemporary church stands a risk of over-emphasizing financial prosperity far above the gospel. In such a situation, the gospel preachers, simply become motivational speakers and career instructors. When that happens, people will no longer go to church service with the aim of spiritual edification, but for acquisition of new financial principles.

## **Roles of the Church in the Quest for Prosperous and United Africa**

### ***Kerygmatic Roles***

According to Donald J. Mac Nair, a healthy church "...must express the presence of Christ on earth as her purpose and mission, this must be expressed through her four – fold function: worship, nurture, mercy and outreach."<sup>xiii</sup> This four–fold function can be categorized into perpendicular dimension as worship to God; and horizontal dimension as *koinonia* or fellowship within the body of Christ. *Kerygma* is the Greek word that means "preaching."<sup>xiv</sup> However, it does not really refer to the act of preaching, rather, it has taken up theological meaning as the content of what is being preached.<sup>xv</sup> This implies that the core of the message given to the early church was the *Kerygma*. C.H. Dodd has outlined the basic elements of the early church as follow: the core of the message was the death and resurrection of Jesus as mentioned in all speeches. The crucified Messiah is now exalted as Lord and Christ. The disciples were empowered by the Holy Spirit, Christ will return very soon, therefore people needed to repent of their sins.<sup>xvi</sup>

The proclamation and the teaching about Jesus are the primary tasks of the church. It must be noted that without the propagation of the gospel, Africa will remain a dark continent. While Christians cannot be totally exonerated from the social and moral decadence that has pervaded the contemporary society, the involvement of unbelievers is always on the high side. This indicates that there are many people to be liberated by the gospel of Christ. Through the gospel, a new orientation will be inculcated about God, human values, ethics, morality and inter-personal relationship. Sound biblical teaching that is devoid of manipulative tendencies should be the focus of the church. Some churches have over-emphasized this fact to the extreme by only asking people to continue to pray and fast without rendering any social and physical help. Pastors of such congregations keep organizing spiritual programs without providing for the needs of their people.

### ***Paraenetic Roles***

The church does not exist for worshipping alone; there is the need for interaction among members. This is embedded in the *koinnonia*. *Koinnonia* in the classical Greek was always used of business partnership, sharing and relationship. Yet, the spiritual dimension cannot be totally ruled out.<sup>xvii</sup> It is one of the *paraenetic* functions of the church. *Paraenesis* in Greek means "advice" or "admonition." It is a combination of the preposition *para* and the noun *nein*, which connotes speaking about something. It does not exist as a word but under *parakaleo* or *paraklesis*.<sup>xviii</sup> It focuses more on practical

persuasion on social issues. It includes all kinds of recommendation, advice and encouragement to enhance one's personal life. On the level of practicability and personal persuasion, the contemporary financial empowerment programmes of the church fall under *paraenetic* roles of the church.

The early church also engaged in *parenetic* issues. Apart from preaching the *kerygma* of Jesus, they properly took care of the needs of individuals within the community of believers. Such *paraenetic* issue was discussed in Acts 4:34. The early church was so concerned about one another to the extent that "there was one in need." In fact, the altruism appeared to be their watchword. The contemporary church needs to embark on aggressive empowerment programmes, that is geared towards job creation, self-reliance and care-giving coupled with generous donation. This has also been abused in some quarters by relegating the gospel of Christ to the bottom on the list of human needs, in the name of prosperity preaching. This was not the *modus operandi* of the early church.

### **Striking a Balance between *Kerygmatic* and *Paraenetic* Efforts of the Contemporary Church**

There is the need for the contemporary church to maintain a balance in the discharge of her *kerygmatic* and *paraenetic* roles. The church needs to know how to prioritize her function. Two biblical examples will be used to show how this can be done. First, in Acts 4:1ff, there was a problem of fair distribution of food between the Jewish and Hellenist widows. The problem was *paraenetic* since it concerned personal need. The submission of the apostles clearly indicates how poverty eradication efforts of the contemporary church should be handled. Certain facts need to be noted. The apostles never overlooked or trivialized the problem, rather, they promptly and adequately responded to it. Indeed, their response indicates their priority. In verse two, they unequivocally declared, "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables." The two conflicting elements in this sentence are *kerygma* as contained in the word of God" and "serving tables." This response points to the fact that the apostles considered the word of God first in all ramifications. This does not connote a refusal to perform administrative functions rather, it is an indication of setting good priority.

Secondly, in 2 Corinthians 8:1–5, Paul mentioned the fact that the Macedonian church did well in responding to the plight of the church in Jerusalem that was poverty –stricken. Paul recognized and applauded them for giving generously and voluntarily in verse 3. However, far more than that,



he commended them for giving themselves first to the Lord and by the will of God as contained in the adverb “first” points to something first in the sequence of arrangement. More so, the giving was not for self-aggrandizement but total submission to God.

Striking a balance between *kerygma* and *paraenesis* calls for recognition of the significance of the message of Christ first. Any teaching or act of giving that is done outside the *kerygmatic* sense does not portray the will of God. No matter the level of financial investment, principles, teachings, seminars and workshops, the foundation of the message of the crucified Messiah must not be ignored. Theological education must also focus on making the message of the Bible relevant to the people in their domain through proper contextualization. People should be taught on how to improve their standard of living. However, the church must also emphasize the fact that spiritual prosperity supersedes any kind of financial and welfare teachings. Pastors as well as the church must not be oblivious that the *kerygma* of Jesus should be given the first priority.

### **Conclusion**

The paper has embarked on an overview of the biblical understanding of poverty. God never desires that anybody should be poor. He has great concern for the poor right from the Old Testament by enacting several laws that protected the poor and the needy within the community of *Yahweh*. The poor had the freedom of gleaning grain fields and vine orchards after harvest. The sabbatical year law allowed them to be free of debts. However, being poor in the Old Testament perspective has to do with someone’s disobedience to the law of *Yahweh*. During the time of Jesus, the plight of the poor was also cared for. Jesus demonstrated the need to take care of the poor in his ministry by healing and providing for them. The contemporary church in Africa has also not been left out in the efforts toward poverty eradication. This is as a result of increase in the level of poverty. However, the church needs to tread cautiously to avoid misplacement of priority. Pastors, evangelists and all the people that direct the affairs of the church must see that their church members are well-grounded in the word of God, then, other *paraenetic* issues can be properly attended to.

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