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THE ROLE OF CHURCH LEADERS IN CURBING CORRUPTION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Corruption is a vice that has eaten deep into every aspect of life in Nigeria and this has contributed to the high rate of poverty in the nation. The privileged few that are in positions of leadership used their power to drain the resources that are supposed to be shared in form of providing social amenities to the citizenry. This situation has dashed the hope of many; goals were rendered unattainable because several ills are recorded in every nook and cranny of the nation. The church of God that should provide solutions to this menace is also neck-deep in corruption to the extent that such evils as embezzlement, exhortation, bribery, rape, ritual killings and the likes are found among church leaders. Some Nigerians on attaining power attempt to eradicate corruption but their effort is yet to produce the desired result. This paper argues that church leaders are supposed to serve as a vanguard of truth and justice in order to checkmate the activities of the secular authority. An attempt is made through utilizing historical, narrative and sociological methods to consider the issue of corruption conceptually, the Nigeria's situation vis-à-vis the role Christian leaders should play in eradicating corruption in Nigeria. The paper concludes by discussing essential qualities church leaders should possess in order to move the country forward. It is established that the church as a united body of Christ has a sacred duty to play and be the nation's conscience.

Keywords: *Corruption, Church, Leadership, Church Leaders*

Introduction

In the contemporary Nigeria, several vices coupled with corrupt practices had eaten deep into the fabric of the society. The political and the religious sector are not left out of the menace of corruption. Even the civil service is guilty of the offence, in fact, virtually every sector in Nigeria is affected. In an attempt to fight this evil called corruption in Nigeria, Economic and Financial Crime Commission (EFCC) and Independent Corrupt Practice and other related Offences Commission (ICPC) were formed through an act of parliament in order to checkmate the activities of people in their various places of work. Corruption is not seen as a sin in the

life of some so called Christians and their leaders of our days. In the words of A. Jega, "the teachers who should be moulders of characters of the Christian youths actually introduce them to the culture of cheating, lying, smuggling, forgery, examination malpractices and other forms of evil acts of corruption."

Former President of Nigeria Olusegun Obasanjo while speaking at the convention of Victory Life Bible Church International Abeokuta said "there is no doubt that all our institutions have been tarnished by the brush of corruption... if the church as an institution does not take a bribe or get involved in other corrupt practices, the behaviour of some of our men of God leaves much to be desired. They not only celebrate but venerate those whose sources of wealth are questionable. They accept gifts (offerings) from just anybody without asking questions." This gives the impression that anything is acceptable in the house of God. Obasanjo opined that: "while miracles, signs and wonders are the expectations of true believers such must be based on righteousness. To preach that one can acquire wealth without labour is not only deceitful; it is a call to corruption."³ This assertion implies that church leaders of today are corrupt. The churches urgently need a spiritual revival in order to remove corruption among them.

Conceptualizing Corruption

In the words Vito Tanzi, "corruption is difficult to define though easy to recognize when observed". In the English lexis, the word "corruption" is derived from the root word "corrupt" which means "to influence a person (especially a public official) or to be influenced improperly."⁴ This implies dishonesty or illegal acts committed by someone in a position of authority anticipating personal gain. S. Eriwo opined that corruption covers a wide range of meanings, corruption is viewed from various perspectives" "Dishonesty in discharging one's duty, insincerity and false information in the completion of Revenue Tax Forms are all manifestations of corruption. Tribalism, Nepotism, Racism, apartheid, all forms of domination, exploitation of the poor by the rich one are all indications of corruption in human society" In *Thorndike English Dictionary*, corruption is defined as "a making or being made evil or wicked, evil-conduct, wickedness, bribery, dishonesty, changing for the worse, making impure or incorrect, as the corruption of a language, rot, decay; computing influence, things that cause corruption."⁶ The word corruption thus covers a wide range of meanings.

According to O.P. Oke, corruption is a dishonest, illegal or immoral behaviour, especially from someone with power. It has equally been

described as the misuse of power, it is for private gains."⁷ This implies that it is not all acts of corruption that involve monetary gratifications. For instance, a civil servant who reports late to work and yet sign a wrong time on the time book misuse his power even though he does not receive a bribe, he engages in an act of corruption. This singular act of corruption destroys the civil service, therefore, corruption means destruction. P.E. Igbinova sees corruption as "all forms of bribery, abuse of office and nepotism, any favour done in expectation of material or non-material gain or even in reward of an earlier deed."⁸ From the discussions above, we can deduce that corruption is rampant in activities that involve financial dealing, though it includes other unacceptable behaviour in the society.

Corruption in the Bible

Corruption is universal; it does not exist in the modern society alone. It is as old as human race. In the Old Testament, the fact that corruption is condemned at various points confirms that corruption has been practised among the Israelites, evidence abounds in some passages in the Old Testament. For instance, in I Sam. 12:3 Samuel would not have cleared himself of any corruption if some other people were not corrupt. Also, Prophet Amos condemned the regime of Jeroboam II of corruption. During the reign of Jeroboam II, the poor were denied their rights, bribes were taken and the just were afflicted (Amos 5:12). Prophet Isaiah pronounced woes on those who "free the guilty for a bribe at the expense of the innocent (Isaiah 5:23). King David slept with Uriah's wife and planned Uriah's death in (2 Sm 11). This act confirms that corruption was practised in high places in Israel.

Exodus 23:8 says "And you shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the discerning and perverts the words of the righteous". Deuteronomy 16:19 also testifies that "you shall not pervert justice, you shall not show partiality" Deut. 10:16-18 says: "He, God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes..." This sentence implies that God is a God of justice who does not support corruption in any form. Ecc. 7:7 says "exhortation turns a wise man into a fool, and a bribe corrupts the heart". In Psalm 62:10, the exhortation is linked with robbery; "Do not trust in exhortation or take pride in stolen goods; though your riches increase, do not set your heart on them". Despite all the condemnations, corruption was still being practised. Examples can be seen

in Prov. 6:35, where an adulterous woman was trying to bribe her husband in order to pacify him. Also, King Asa tried to bribe Ben-hadad because he wanted to break a political agreement (I Kings 15:18-29). Even in the New Testament, corruption was brought forward, for instance, Judas was bribed so as to betray Jesus (Luke. 22:3-5), the Chief Priest bribed the guards at Jesus' tomb (Matt. 28:11-15), Felix, who was a public officer contemplated bribe before he could consider Paul's release from prison (Acts 24:26).

These events made people believe that money can be used to get anything from the house of God. This reared its ugly head in Acts 8:18-24 where Simeon offered to pay money in order to have the power of the Holy Spirit. The word of God condemned corruption and even talked about its harmful effects on those who practice it. Proverbs agree that "a greedy man brings trouble to his family, but he who hates bribe will live (Prov. 15:27). The main reason why corruption should not be allowed to thrive in a country and the house of God, is because it violates the law of God. A country that tolerates corruption will be ruined, for God says "be holy because I, the Lord your God am holy". This is re-emphasized in the New Testament because of the importance attached to this law. And since our God is not corrupt, His followers should shun corruption. From the above discussions, it is deduced that corruption is not a new phenomenon.

Causes of Corruption in Nigeria

Corruption comes in various forms, and the implication on Nigeria is mismanagement which has on many occasions led to many vices such as nepotism, fraud, extortion, bribery, embezzlement and the likes. This has led to a great moral decay around us. Corruption has a long history in the development of human societies. A good number of scholars have tried to explain the causes of corruption; one of such scholar is Ayoola Emmanuel and former justice at the Nigerian Supreme Court and a onetime chairman of the Independent and Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC). Ayoola attributed the evil call corruption in Nigeria to greed, weak enforcement mechanisms, nepotism, lack of positive values, excessive materialism, societal pressure, job insecurity among others. He said further that "corruption thrives in situations where office holders enjoy large discretionary powers in a monopolistic situation with no mechanism for accountability."⁹ In a lecture delivered by former president Olusegun

Obasanjo in Abeokuta, Ogun state on 8/4/2017, he says; "the rise of public administration and the discovery of oil and natural gas are two major events seen to have led to the increase in corrupt practices in the country"¹⁰

Apart from the reasons enumerated above, there seems to be a popularly held opinion that corruption is inevitable in human society because man by his nature likes to be noticed and appreciated especially when he performs commendable acts, and desires one kind of favour or the other in the course of his interaction with others. This seems to be the nature of man from a psychological point of view. Although, this does not provide enough and sufficient rationale for the practice of corruption in the society. During president Buhari's broadcast to the nation on Oct. 1st 2016, he described the national malaise of corruption as pervasive. In the words of Philip Agbese, "Buhari painted graphic pictures of the phenomenon thus: corruption is a cancer which must be fought with all weapons at our disposal. It corrodes the very fabric of government and destroys society. Fighting corruption is key, not only to restoring the moral health of the nation but also to freeing our enormous resources for urgent socio-economic development."¹¹ According to Agbese, President Buhari disclosed to Nigerians that he has traced the country's stolen crude oil wealth and discovered it was stashed in banks and institutions or proceeds invested in properties in some foreign countries. The EFCC carried out a mass arrest of former public office holders suspected to have embezzled public funds. One of the most popular cases involved Sambo Dasuki, the former National Security Adviser to the former President Goodluck Jonathan. Agbese writes: "The office of the presidency discovered that the 2.1 billion dollars voted for the procurement of arms to fight the insurgency in the Northeast part of Nigeria; had been diverted. During investigations, it was discovered that the actual amount of money was 15 billion dollars that were embezzled and prominent politicians were named."¹² Some suspected persons returned the amount they were been indicted under the plea bargain clause of the EFCC Establishment Act, while scores are being prosecuted in various courts.

For instance, the News Agency of Nigeria (NAN) reports that Nyako, one-time governor of Adamawa state and seven others are standing trial before justice Okon Abang on a 37 count charge bordering on money laundering (Pulse news Dec 1st 2016). Among offences tendered against Nyako include opening multiple bank accounts and stealing to the tune of N

29billion (twenty-nine billion naira)"¹³. This is a clear case of office abuse.

However, the prosecution process has been rather slow due to the unwillingness of the judiciary to speedily conclude corruption cases. In spite of the setbacks, the government resolve to fight corruption remains unbroken. Recently, a list of corrupt politicians was made public and it was said that more of such list will be made public soonest. The fact that corruption affects citizens of Nigeria adversely, especially the poor, made one to believe that it was so because they depend on the government and its institutions and partly because much of the stolen wealth is never kept or spent in the country. While the teeming population live in abject poverty, which results to not being able to afford three quality meals a day, and groaning under the yoke of economic recession, "members of the national Assembly (NASS) comprising the senators and members of the House of Representatives received a total sum of N6.78 billion as their official salaries and allowances in one year".¹⁵ This is a clear case of insensitivity to hunger, suffering and the agony experienced by the masses. The religious circle is not exonerated from this vice, therefore, we shall now discuss Church leaders and corruption in Nigeria.

Church Leaders and Corruption in Nigeria

The most disturbing issue in the Church today is about those who use the name of God to do evil and engage in corrupt practices. The fact that corruption exists in the ecclesiastical leadership is no more a secret. We hear of Church leaders who embezzle church funds, greedy, immoral, selfish, quarrelsome, proud and pleasure loving. In fact, the list of vices among the church leaders of contemporary church is endless; though the laity is not in any way better than the Church leaders. This may be the reason why Bengt Sundckler opined that "you cannot expect the fellowship to be virtuous when the leadership is corrupt."¹⁶ This, therefore, means that both the laity and the leaders grieve the Holy Spirit (Eph: 4:30). Though it is not all Christians that are corrupt and grieve the Holy Spirit, there are still faithful ones that lead exemplary lives both in leadership and the fellowship, but generally speaking, Christians are getting worried about the rate Church leaders acquire wealth through gimmicks. In Nigeria and beyond, "Marketing" God is fast becoming a top market business. Oke quoted Sunday Mbang, the former prelate of Methodist Church Nigeria, who said in an interview he

granted some years back that: "the church has turned into a den of robbers. He said further that marketing God has led to high level of corruption, immorality and other forms of indiscipline in our society today."¹⁶

In the same vein, E.A. Adesokan (the former President of Scripture Union of Nigeria) while addressing the press some years back said: "the churches have concerned themselves so much with material wealth that their energies are often directed at preserving their positions and titles rather than saving souls."¹⁷ This is a misplaced priority. A visit to see "a man of God" for spiritual help has turned into a money making venture because such "men of God" use "sugar coated tongue" stories of miracles in order to raise the morale of the "victim" into believing their stories, and viewing them as genuine "men of God." They eventually trap the victim in the name of spiritual help; if such victims are unlucky, they may even be used for ritual.

It is pertinent to state that a greater percentage of the new breed of religious sects claims are no more than business centres and thus has continued to draw comments and reactions from well-meaning leaders in the society. As earlier mentioned in the introductory part of this paper, former President of Nigeria, Olusegun Obasanjo condemned the activities of these corrupt Church leaders that through their unholy activities, they give the impression that anything is acceptable in the house of God.¹⁸ Obasanjo opined that: "while miracles, signs and wonders are the expectations of true believers, such must be based on righteousness"¹⁹

Corrupt messages that are introduced to the pulpit also contribute to producing corrupt practices in the society. For instance, a pastor could announce to the congregation that in less than three months someone among them would become a millionaire and they would all shout "amen" without clarifications from the pastor that the message was just for the person who had worked for it; every member would then be thinking of how to claim what does not belong to him thinking it is God's provision. Such a member would then give testimony and others would be envious of him and wish they could get their own miracles. This is how corruption gets from the pulpit to the society. To be preaching and teaching that one can become rich without hard work is itself corruption. It should be noted that it is God's desire that his followers to prosper but it is to help others and not for selfish reasons or at the expense of others. Some church leaders own multi-million dollar homes, private jets, spend lavishly on decorating homes and purchasing expensive

automobiles while their members live in penury. The poor among the congregation is not been catered for; the irony of it is that most times it is the money of the poor that is being used by the church leaders through gimmicks to help themselves to live a luxurious lifestyle. It should be noted that in the book of Acts of the Apostles, the early Christians shared all their belongings including money in common so that none of them would lack. This is an example that should be emulated by all.

It has been established that corruption exists both in the Church and the society at large, and the fact remains that Christianity is expected to find solutions to the menace because the church is being looked up to as an influential integral part of the society. There is still hope that God is able to use the Church despite its failures in so many areas. What then can the church leaders do to eradicate corruption in the society? We shall try to focus on this question in the next discussion.

The Role of Church Leaders in Curbing Corruption in Nigeria

Corruption obviously is an offence against God and humanity. It is a sin because it blinds those who see and twist the words of the righteous (Ex. 23:8). God created a perfect world, He did not create a corrupt world because all that God made was very good (Gen. 1:31). Church leaders are supposed to be God's agent in the society because they are His people. God expects them to represent Him to His people, and bring His values to bear in the society. This should be manifested through teaching and speaking out whenever the need arose, or when the values are trampled. In the fight to curb if not eradicate corruption in the society, the church leaders have a unique role to play. It is therefore expedient for them to take the position and provide moral front on the society. George Ehusani is of the opinion that: "in order to fight corruption, religious leaders must denounce institutionalized violence, political corruption and all forms of exploitation of people. They can help turn many Nigerians away from what appears to be an incredibly high sense of devotion to the cult of material prosperity and material success towards the spiritual values of truth, justice, holiness and purity,"²⁰ Christian leaders should teach and uphold a modest lifestyle that will contradict materialism, selfishness, greediness and all other corrupt practices in the society.

They need to do a thorough soul searching. They have to purge themselves of any act of complicity in corruption, repent of the evils of the

past and make an irrevocable commitment to a life of truth, probity, transparency and accountability in their individual and corporate lives in churches and institutions. It is only when this is done that church leaders will have a moral to teach the much-needed lessons in a life of integrity.

Church leaders can help fight corruption by constantly emphasizing passages in the Bible such as Isaiah 33:15 where God says that for a person to qualify to stand in His presence, such a person must "act uprightly and speaks honestly, who scorns to get rich by extortion, who rejects bribes out of hand, who refuses to listen to plans involving bloodshed and who shuts his eyes rather than countenance crime...". A genuine church leader should constantly remind his congregation of passages like Micah 6:8 that Christians should "love tenderly, do justice and be humble" before God. John the Baptist condemned the kind of religion that thrives along corruption as empty ritualism. He told those who had gathered to hear his teachings among whom were soldiers and tax collectors. Exact no more than appointed rate..., No intimidation! No extortion! Be content with your pay" (Luke 3:13-14).

Christian bodies like Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, Pentecostal fellowship of Nigeria, Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) do not deny the fact that corruption exists in the country and even in the church. Cornelius Fawenu, a former CAN secretary in Kwara state opined that "we are in the last days, if we do not see the traces of corruption, it will be contradicting what the Bible says about the last days"²¹. According to him, many people only identify themselves to be Christians just corroborate what is written in Matthew 24, "...many shall come in my name, saying I am Christ and shall deceive many...". In an attempt to eradicate corruption in Nigeria, some years back, the Catholic Church at its annual Catholic Bishops conference, composed a special prayer against bribery and corruption in Nigeria which is still recited at most masses. The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) while under the leadership of Ayo Oritsejafor, led a program titled, "Be the change" in October 2012; where awareness was created through print media such as stickers, handbills and others in order to sensitize the populace to distinct themselves from corruption. The church is expected to live by the highest standard as prescribed in the scriptures. Church administration must be transparent and most importantly the church must continue to pray. The church must not shy away from speaking

and preaching the truth even to rulers, politicians and all other members of the society.

Concluding Remarks

The church has a vital role to play in curbing corruption in Nigeria. Morality must be preached frequently in all churches. Church leaders must live exemplary lives and must shun all vices including questionable characters and 'unclean' tithes and offerings. The proclamation of the Gospel needs to be done within the church itself because there are nominal Christians in the ranks, and these need the words of God. Church leaders can only produce good deeds only if they themselves are good. It is when they make a good tree that they can bear good fruit. Having said this, it should be noted that we are not saying that Christianity has been doing nothing in an attempt to eradicate corruption in the society, we are saying that new methods should be explored in tackling corruption. Though setbacks, discouragement may occur, Christian leaders must remember that they are doing their master's work who has promised to be with them to make them victorious. Therefore, they should be uncompromising in denouncing the evil acts practiced in the church and by national leaders. They should not forget to present the Christian message in order to bring hope to the people. The church is moving forward despite its problems; this can be established in God's words which says: "my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness... for when I am weak then I am strong (2 Corinthians 12:9ff).

Endnotes

¹A Jega, "Corruption" in *Corruption in Governance Forms, Causes and Remedies* (Ilorin: Nathadex Publisher, 2007), 8.

²Olusegun Obasanjo while speaking at a Church Conference in Abeokuta, on April 8th, 2017.

³Olusegun Obasanjo, "How Nigerian Churches are encouraging Corruption" A speech delivered at Victory Life Bible Church International Abeokuta on April 8th, 2017.

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- ¹⁴Philip Agbese "War against Corruption". (Np).
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- ¹⁷E.A. Adesokan (the one time president of Scripture Union of Nigeria).
- ¹⁸Olusegun Obasanjo, "How Nigerian Churches are encouraging corruption".
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- ²⁰Cornelius Fawenu, "A former Secretary of Christian Association of Nigeria". Kwara State Chapter.