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Preaching Biblically in the Nigerian Prosperity Gospel Context

by Joel Kamsen Tihitshak Biwul

Abstract

The one who lays claim to the pulpit ministry has no other business but that of preaching the Word of God. This article argues that biblical preaching is fast disappearing from the Nigerian pulpit because of wrong motivation. It also argues that this situation has adverse effects on Christians' spirituality and the Christian witness. It concludes that preachers of a different gospel in Nigeria must make the Scripture central and be willing to submit themselves to adequate and proper training in hermeneutical principles and homiletical rudiments for effective biblical preaching.

Introduction

In a strong imperative mood, Paul commanded Timothy to “Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction” (2 Tim 4:2 NIV). In the same tone, he instructed him, “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15 NIV). These biblical texts indicate that Christian preaching should be biblical both in its content and expression. As Homer Kent demonstrated some time ago, the Church needs Scriptural preaching.¹ The early Church gave attention to biblical preaching – preaching Christ as Saviour and Lord, and about his kingdom.² As a consequence, many came to faith in Christ, because “by preaching the Word they turned on the light so that their hearers could see themselves as God saw them.”³ Also, the

¹ Homer A. Kent, Jr., “The Centrality of the Scriptures as Reflected in Paul’s First Epistle to Timothy,” *JETS* (Vol. 14.3, 1971): 157-164. Kent posits that the preacher should be a specialist in the Word of God, but then notes that Scriptural preaching is being relegated to the background in favour of other secondary elements (157). He asserts that the church through its ministry should solve its problems through a thorough application of the Word of God in every case (158). Timothy Palmer adds, “The task of biblical preaching and exegesis is to allow God to speak through his Word to people in our time and culture. If biblical preaching does not happen, then God’s people will not hear the word of God proclaimed from an individual text.” See Timothy P. Palmer, “Dividing the Word Correctly: An Evaluation of Exegetical Models,” accessed January 7, 2011, http://www.tcnr.org/index_files/rb50.palmer-exegesis.html.

² Leon Morris’ masterpiece on the theological pillars of the salvific ministry of Jesus Christ whom the disciples and early Church preached is quite useful here. See Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (3d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965).

³ Jerry Vines and Jim Shaddix, *Power in the Pulpit: How to Prepare and Deliver Expository Sermons* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 21.

Church Fathers devoted much attention to doctrinal and theological issues and arrived at biblically based conclusions. As a result, they have bequeathed to subsequent generations of Christians credible church history and Christian doctrine and theology.

Nigeria boasts of many local churches, one on almost every minor street, and many Christian preachers.⁴ One only needs to turn on the television to pick and choose which preacher to listen to. In a sense, this is a good development for the Nigerian church given the challenge of other opposing faiths. Every true Christian minister is called to proclaim the Word of God, because "it is the Word of God in its entirety, understood by the most diligent of scholarly study, and empowered by the Spirit of God, which holds the final solution for man and his needs."⁵ However, does the Church in contemporary Nigeria, with all the plethora of new local churches and myriads of preachers in her, give the Bible its deserved priority as the centre of her preaching? Is the emerging current trend of indiscriminate Christian preaching not suggesting that the Bible may be losing out as the centre of attraction to enthrone the preacher himself? If the centrality of the Bible is not preserved, the church risks losing the force, flavour, and transformational power of the gospel that Christianity proclaims.⁶ If the content of the Bible and the gospel message of the cross are distorted, then the church risks preaching a heretical and non-functional Christian spirituality.

This paper's aim is to advance some reasons why the Scriptures, Jesus, and the cross are gradually losing out as the centre of preaching among some contemporary Nigerian preachers. Because of these changes, Christian preaching is losing its evangelistic grip, and is failing to deepen Christian spirituality to the levels exemplified by the early church, or during the Reformation and Reawakening periods. It also considers the effects of such lapses on Christian spirituality and Christian witness in contemporary Nigeria.

Understanding the Concept of Biblical Preaching

To preach God's Word is to risk both misrepresentation of the Word and being misunderstood by the world. First of all, the preacher of God's Word needs to understand the concept of *biblical preaching* and its importance to

⁴ See Olu Ojedokun, "The Challenge of Biblical Expository Preaching Amongst Nigerian Pentecostals," Friday, August 31, 2007, Accessed Wednesday January 05, 2011 from <http://nigeriaworld.com/articles/2007/aug/313.html>.

⁵ Kent, "The Centrality of the Scripture," *JETS*, 164.

⁶ Ian M. Randall notes that evangelicalism is essentially a distinctive stream of Christian spirituality with a 'lived experience' in personal relationship to Christ. He concludes that evangelical missional spirituality is transformational as the Scriptures and the cross form part of its central focus. Ian M. Randall, "A Missional Spirituality: Moravian Brethren and Eighteenth-Century English Evangelicalism," *Transformation* 23/4 (October, 2006): 204-213.

global evangelisation and Christian spirituality. What separates Christian preaching from other forms of religious preaching is the centrality of the Bible⁷ and its preachers as heralds and ambassadors.⁸ The Bible remains the core of Christian preaching not only because it is the Word of God, but also because it is the only source of spiritual transformation. The Bible is therefore the warrant for Christian preaching. As Haddon Robinson rightly states, “God speaks through the Bible. It is the major tool of communication by which He addresses individuals today” (2 Tim 2:15-17).⁹ Therefore, to preach, in Christian understanding, is to lay claim to an authority that is God’s revealed and spoken words written in human words and preserved as the inspired, infallible, and inerrant Word in its earliest documentation.

What then is the import of *biblical preaching*, since we are here making a case for the necessity of biblically based Christian preaching in contemporary time? Although scholarly opinion is at variance, the majority opinion understands the concept as expository preaching. Vines and Shaddix define *preaching* within Christian circles as “the oral communication of biblical truth by the Holy Spirit through a human personality to a given audience with the intent of enabling a positive response.”¹⁰ What makes Christian preaching *biblical preaching* is the presence of a biblical truth, propelled by the illuminating role of the Holy Spirit, and channelled through a prepared human instrument who serves as its carrier. The Bible is the meeting point in Christian preaching. When Christian preaching is biblically centred, there is always “a living interaction involving God, the preacher, and the congregation.”¹¹

Biblical preaching is engaging the biblical text in an exegetical and hermeneutical manner to arrive at relevant contextual application. In the drama that played out between the risen Christ and some of his disturbed, disenfranchised and confused disciples as they walked to Emmaus from Jerusalem (Luke 24:13-27, 44-48), Jesus taught them from the whole

⁷ John Piper says, “True preaching is not the opinions of a mere man. It is the faithful exposition of God’s Word.” See John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004), 9, 10, 11.

⁸ John R. W. Stott and Greg Scharf, *The Challenge of Preaching* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Langham Preaching Resources, 2011), 3.

⁹ Haddon W. Robinson, *Expository Preaching: Principles and Practice* (2d ed.; 2001; repr., Leicester: IVP, 2004), 20.

¹⁰ Vines and Shaddix, *Power in the Pulpit*, 27. The role of the Holy Spirit in Christian preaching is highly consequential. Vines and Shaddix explain, “He inspired the Word we preach. He illuminates our understanding as to its meaning. He anoints our communication of it. He enlightens the minds of listeners. He convicts their hearts and prompts them to respond. Preaching is the Holy Spirit’s event. If He is left out, preaching does not happen.” See p. 25. Also, see J. Daniel Baumann, *An Introduction to Contemporary Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), 277-91 on the Holy Spirit in Christian preaching.

¹¹ Robinson, *Expository Preaching*, 21.

Scriptures (the Jewish Scriptures) beginning with Moses, then the prophets, and lastly, the Psalms. Jesus' model of preaching here underscores the fact that Christian preaching must, of necessity, be biblically based; for it is the content of the Scriptures rightly exposed that brings about conviction and transformation of lives (see also Acts 2:11-41; 6:8-7:53). This is made effectual when the biblical text is appropriately applied to the context of the listener as in Jesus' case.¹²

The State of Preaching in Contemporary Nigeria

It is said that the force of Christianity, and indeed the changing centre of gravity of the Christian gospel, is moving to the global South from the North.¹³ This shift in the "Christian centre of gravity" can be explained by the fact that "Africa is one of the continents where Christianity has experienced rapid growth."¹⁴ While the continent of Africa is a major player in this paradigm shift, Nigeria is also among the key participants in that Nigeria has many churches, preachers, and professing Christians. She is a nation full of religious zeal such that being religious is synonymous to being a Nigerian. This country is particularly unique by the measure of her black population, by the socio-political and ethno-religious tolerance of her citizens, even by the enduring economic elasticity of the people.¹⁵ Her embedded positive characteristics have possibly earned her recognition in this global shift.

The irony however, is that despite her large and colourful presence in the religious arena, the quality of her Christian spirituality is low. It is quite a paradox that "Nigeria, one of the most religious countries in the world, is also

¹² In Christian preaching, the preacher must ask if the sermon "says what the Bible wanted to say" and whether the points raised in a particular sermon are "what the author intended to convey and what the original audience understood" them to mean. Ferguson explains that the goal of exegetical preaching is to expound the meaning and significance of Scriptures. Sinclair B. Ferguson, "Exegesis," in *The Preacher and Preaching: Reviving the Art*, ed., Samuel T. Logan, Jr. (Philipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1986), 192-3.

¹³ See Andrew Finlay Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (2002; Fourth printing, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books 2007), 118.

¹⁴ Philomena Njeri Mwaura, "Women and Evangelization: A Challenge to the Church in the Third Millennium," in *Challenges and Prospects of the Church in Africa: Theological Reflections for the 21st Century*, eds., Nahashon W. Ndungu and Philomena Njeri Mwaura (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2005), 119.

¹⁵ The majority of Nigerian peoples have suffered political and economic oppression and enslavement under their bad and evil leaders who consciously collaborate with a few of her wicked and evil powerful citizens to enslave their fellow citizens because of greed, even though they sing, ". . . The labour of our heroes past shall never be in vain." Yet, the brutalised majority are always and ever happy people, because they hold to the simplistic ideology of ordinary life which believes that, "No wahala, God dey;" and "One day, e go better;" meaning, "not to worry, God exists;" therefore, the ugly situation will change one day for better.

voted one of the most corrupt, crises-prone nations on earth.”¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ Palmer rightly asserts: “we have a similar problem in Nigeria. Sermons here too are often based superficially or vaguely on the Bible. The exposition of the text is not regularly heard. Sound exegesis is not regularly done.”¹⁸ So, when Christians are fed with spiritual chaff by men and women who claim to know the Bible, yet live a contradictory lifestyle and preach a different gospel as Adeleye noted,¹⁹ its effects are at best endemic on the Christian community and at worse contagious to the Nigerian society. This situation has certain causative agents that should be understood.

Prosperity Preaching is Motivated by Personal Experience

The concept of “ministry” in contemporary Nigeria, particularly the pastoral and preaching ministry, for the most part has lost its meaning. Most of the founders and presidents of some new generation churches or ministries in Nigeria do not seem to have the right motivation for ministry. Such people are only looking for popularity or economic benefits, though they will not admit the fact. Even some young people joining the pastoral ministry in the orthodox missionary churches are not sure what the ministry entails. When it comes to preaching the Word, such preachers use the “cut and paste” approach. “The Lord/God said to me” is a regular phrase used by such Nigerian preachers whenever they are preaching. Although this characteristic is found within the Pentecostal-Charismatic circle, preachers from other circles are gradually being infected. They either enter the pulpit and preach without reading from the Bible or they read a passage, but close the Bible soon afterwards and go on to tell some experiential stories. This presupposes the preacher’s personal experience as authority in place of the Bible. Since the Bible that should be preached with every conviction and every sense of seriousness is dethroned, this type of preaching focuses on the preacher, who often claims a certain measure of spiritual superiority and authority over the listeners.²⁰

¹⁶ Folarin Samson, “Of Perverted Religion and Nigeria’s Problems,” in *This Day* Vol. 16, No. 6153 (Monday, February 27, 2012), 19.

¹⁷ See the descriptive paradigm shift in Femi Adeleye, *Preachers of a Different Gospel* (Nairobi: WordAlive/Bukuru: ACTS/Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), xi-xii.

¹⁸ Palmer, “Dividing the Word Correctly,” accessed January 7, 2011.

¹⁹ Adeleye describes such preachers of a different gospel as “prosperity merchants” and preachers of the “gospel according to the stomach,” who, he says, “. . . get richer and fatter while the flock is kept happy with new slogans and gimmicks.” Adeleye, *Preachers of a Different Gospel*, 42-43.

²⁰ These preachers claim superiority and authority because they consider themselves as “Men of God” (MOG) or “Women of God” (WOG), “Papa” or “Mama,” and “Senior

Preaching based on personal experience is not only self-centred and weak but it runs the risk of dethroning God and preparing fertile soil for glaring heresy. This type of preaching sidelines Christ and his cross, the very centre of Christian preaching, to deify the human self. Bryan Chapell submits that truly Christian preaching is distinctive because of the all-pervading presence of a saving and sanctifying Christ. Jesus Christ must be at the heart of every sermon preached; failing to mention him warps the biblical message.²¹ Any preaching that dethrones God sidelines Christ, robs the Holy Spirit, and empties the cross of its power. It becomes devoid of divine authority and the power to convict and transform souls. Such preaching momentarily satisfies the emotional and sociological needs of the listeners but robs them of spiritual blessings. It preaches everything else but the Word of God. Preachers who “fail to preach the Scriptures . . . abandon their authority. No longer do they confront their hearers with a word from God. That is why most modern preaching evokes little more than a wide yawn.”²² It is the spiritual experience that is gained from a direct encounter with God in his Word that is the antidote to a sinful attitude, sinful behaviour, and sinful lifestyle. As Robinson asserts, “Through the preaching of the Scriptures, God encounters men and women to bring them to salvation and to richness and ripeness of Christian character.”²³ When the backbone of preaching is dethroned, committed Christians as well as non-Christians are literally robbed of the benefits from an “explicitly Christ-centred preaching today.”²⁴

Prosperity Preaching is Motivated by the Philosophy of Blessings

An emerging trend in the contemporary Nigerian pulpit is an emphasis on financial and material blessings and a de-emphasis on spirituality. Truly, every human being wants to enjoy comfort and the good life. No one wants to suffer because suffering is sociologically, psychologically, emotionally, and physically traumatic. Suffering can only be endured when it becomes unavoidable. Much of the preaching in Nigeria, particularly in Pentecostal-Charismatic circles, is both premeditated and predicated on the ideology of blessings in pursuance of the good life. If you were to find your way into a Nigerian Christian congregation worshipping on a Sunday, for instance, one of the songs you would frequently hear the worshippers sing is,

“Eh-eh-eh-eh, my Lord is good O;
Everything na double, double.”

Apostle” or “Bishop.” In this context, no member dares to contest whatever any of these persons says or does because they are dreadful and authoritative tyrant lords.

²¹ Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (2d ed. 2005; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 274, 277.

²² Robinson, *Expository Preaching*, 20.

²³ Robinson, *Expository Preaching*, 20.

²⁴ Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 14.

Such a song is motivated by the quest for double personal blessings from the good Lord. Worshipers are taught to imbibe the power of positive confession and to claim what they desire, as negative confession deprives them of the double blessings that are theirs from the good Lord. As such, everyone wants, for example, the blessing of a good car, of befitting personal shelter, of admission into good schools, of good employment in a well-paid job, of either a good wife or husband, of a spectacular promotion, and of huge contracts for business contractors. Herein lies the ideology of the prosperity gospel, described as a gospel of champagne versus a gospel of the cross.²⁵

As a result of such preaching, the listeners believe that failure in life is not their portion; that nothing bad or evil will ever befall them; and that whatever they claim by faith, they will always have. The implications of this ideology are that the preacher will manipulate the Scriptures to maintain his or her status. Also, since such preachers claim a “child of God” can never be the tail but always the head,²⁶ their listeners are not prepared to listen to any sermon that discounts material blessings. Yet church members run the risk of a backslidden life when the realities of life dawn on them and these material blessing don't appear. This “gospel” is grounded in falsehood and self-aggrandisement. The third Lausanne Congress asserts, “We cannot build the kingdom of the God of truth on foundations of dishonesty. Yet in our craving for ‘success’ and ‘results’ we are tempted to sacrifice our integrity, with distorted or exaggerated claims that amount to lies.”²⁷

Prosperity Preaching is Motivated by a Hunger for Miracles

One of the statements that Jesus made to his disciples before his ascension was that they would do many things that he himself had not done (John 14:11-14; Matt 21:18-22). His earthly ministry was also characterised by miracles as he mentioned in his response to John the Baptist's emissaries (Luke 7:22; Matt 4:23-25). The gospel accounts are replete with Jesus' miracles: Jesus raised the dead (Matt 9:18-26; Mark 5:22-43; Luke 7:11-16; 8:41-56; John 11:38-44; Luke 7:1-10), healed the sick (Matt 8:14-16; Mark 1:29-34; Luke 14:38-41), restored sight to the blind (Matt 9:27-30; John 9:1-34), made the lame to walk (Matt 9:1-8; Mk 2:3-12; Luke 5:18-26), set free the demon-possessed (Matt 8:28-34; 9:32-33), fed thousands with a few loaves of bread and some fish (Matt 14:13-21; 15:32-38; Mark 6:32-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-13; see also. John 6:25-26), stilled the storm and caused Peter to

²⁵ See Adeleye, *Preachers of a Different Gospel*, 15-28.

²⁶ One among the major texts for prosperity preachers is Deut 28 where Moses told the community of Israel they would be the head and not the tail when they possessed the Promised Land. See article on prosperity gospel by George O. Folarin, “The Prosperity Gospel in Nigeria: A Re-Examination of the Concept, Its Impact, and an Evaluation,” *Cyber Journal for Pentecostal-Charismatic Research* (Accessed January 7, 2011 from <http://www.pctii.org/cyberj/cyberj16/folarin.html>).

²⁷ Julia Cameron, ed., *The Cape Town Commitment: A Confession of Faith and a Call to Action* (Peabody, Massachusetts: The Lausanne Movement, 2011), 63.

walk on the water as he himself did (Matt 8:23-27; 14:22-33; Mark 4:36-41; 6:47-51; Luke 8:22-25; John 6:16-21), and many more. Much preaching in contemporary Nigeria is largely anchored on the ideology of miracles, because these are prominent in Jesus' statements and actions.

Also, in a society where the idea of "cheap," "free," and "have it quick" is a dominant factor in people's drive for the things that life demands, consulting mediums and false prophets for miracles becomes commonplace. When people seek cheap popularity and cheap blessings under the guise of prosperity on their way to greatness, they may go to any length to achieve their ends. Worse still, the atmosphere for seeking miracles will be charged especially when some church members electrify others with their testimonies about God's miracles in their lives, whether such claims are factual or fictitious. Adeleye understands this as strange times with a strange gospel:

These are times in which it is becoming more difficult to differentiate between faith and fantasy, and between devotion to Christ and religious delusion. We live in times when the line between churches and cults is thin and people easily mistake spiritism for spirituality. These are strange times indeed. Times when people wholeheartedly follow strange teachings and philosophies even within the church; times of strong addiction to seducing spirits; and times when leaders feed their flock with false doctrines. As regards the content and practice of the gospel, only those with discernment, who understand the times and refuse to compromise their vision, know the difference between the true and the counterfeit gospel.²⁸

All this is traceable to the preaching and teaching that worshippers receive most Sundays. When miracles and not sound biblical exposition become the centre of attraction, the Lordship of Christ will diminish; personal commitment to God and total devotion to his service will be eroded in the minds of truth-seeking saints; and miracles will then become the central message of the gospel and the Christian faith. *The Cape Town Commitment* affirms:

. . . we deny that God's miraculous power can be treated as automatic, or at the disposal of human techniques, or manipulated by human words, actions, gifts, objects, or rituals . . . But we believe that the teachings of many who vigorously promote the prosperity gospel seriously distort the Bible; that their practices and lifestyle are often unethical and un-Christ-like; that they commonly replace genuine evangelism with miracle-seeking, and replace the call to repentance with the call to give money to the preacher's organization. . . . We therefore reject the excesses of prosperity teaching as incompatible with balanced biblical Christianity.²⁹

²⁸ Adeleye, *Preachers of a Different Gospel*, 5-6.

²⁹ Julia Cameron, ed., *The Cape Town Commitment*, 64-65.

Prosperity Preaching is Centred on the African Worldview of Demonism

The hermeneutical understanding of the Pauline imperatives in Eph 6:10-18 (see also Acts 16:16-17; Eph 1:20-21) indicates a case of engaging in power encounter by Christians. The context of Nigerian Christians makes demonology a characteristic element in preaching, taking the form of “deliverance” or “power encounter.” Coming from a worldview that perceives the world as permeated by evil spirits who live in forests, graveyards, caves, body of waters, and so on, the Christian life in Africa generally is characterised by fear of these evil spirits. In order to dispel such fear in the hearts of members, elements of spiritual warfare always find their way into African Christian preaching. The description of some preachers as “liquid anointed,” “fire brand,” “demon bulldozer,” and so on, is characteristic of this fact. Statements like “I bind you,” “I command you,” “I cast you into the abyss,” “holy ghost fire,” and the audience responding with a chorus of “amen!” to the preacher’s, “In Jesus’ name,” are also characteristics of such a worldview.

It is quite proper to preach and teach on biblical demonology among the Christian community. Denying the presence and power of demons is tantamount to denying the presence of evil and the reality of the Christ event itself. What is at issue however is the shift in focus from the source of the supreme authority to deal with demonic powers to the object of confrontation itself. The effect of such undue attention makes demons dreaded and venerated by the same people who lay claim to God’s ultimate power. The quest to acquire power in order to maintain the status quo has literally pushed some professing Christians and some preachers into the practice of spiritism and even a type of Christian witchcraft.

The Effects of Nigerian Prosperity Preaching

Clearly, Christianity in Nigeria is becoming afflicted by the prosperity gospel which threatens the integrity of biblical Christianity. The failure of preaching in contemporary Nigeria to make the content and message of the Bible, and Christ and the cross the nerve centre of Christian preaching, no doubt has some attendant effects on the Christian community’s lifestyle and the Christian witness in society at large. This failure leads, amongst other implications, to shallow Christian spirituality and low moral ethics. These serve as breeding grounds for spiritism, negative ethnicity and tribalism to flourish.

Shallow Christian Spirituality

Jesus did not mince words when he used the salt and light metaphors to teach his disciples their crucial role in society (Matt 5:13-16). Jesus’ basic intention here was that his disciples would replicate his lifestyle and message to the world after he returned to the Father (see John 13:34-35). Similarly, in giving instructions to Timothy on the ground of pastoral theology and ethics, Paul said, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16-17 ESV). True

Christian competence and full equipping in the Scriptures for quality spirituality and service can be attained only when biblical principles are consciously, vigorously and carefully applied to life (see Ps 119:10-11, 105).

Christian maturity and spirituality are attained through personal discipline in the Word and dogged determination to put into practice what the Word says. John Wesley decried the low level of Christian spirituality in his time when he stressed that the biggest problem is getting Christianity into life. Iain Duguid echoes this concern when he says, "Christians know a great deal about how they ought to live. Their problem is that they don't live up to what they know. The gap is not in their knowledge but in their obedience."³⁰ Olu Ojedokun wonders "why with the emergence of many 'born again' Christians in government their impact is not being felt in addressing issues in Nigeria, such as, bad governance, bribery, corruption and greed," nepotism, favouritism and negative godfatherism, and the like. He wonders if the lack of grounding in proper expository teaching is the reason why there has been little impact by Christianity on Nigerian society.³¹ The answer is obvious. To hold only to the form of Christianity by professing the Christian faith without practicing it makes the message of the Christian gospel ineffectual. The world needs more confessing Christians than professing ones as the latter only hold to religious formalism while the former practice the tenets of Christianity (see 2 Tim 3:1-5).

The difficulty of getting Christianity into life is simply a failure of conviction and self-discipline to live by the dictates and precepts of the Scriptures. It is this obvious lacuna among the Christian community in contemporary Nigeria that accounts for shallow Christian spirituality. When the Bible, though considered to be the final authority in matters of the Christian faith and life, and the only guide book for life, is not made the core of Christian preaching; if its content is not properly expounded by a trained and qualified expositor, by a committed and Spirit-filled preacher; and if its message is not adequately related to the modern context, substandard Christianity and spirituality will inevitably be the result. The knowledge of the Bible should not only stay in the head; it must stir the heart to transform life and society.

A Low Standard of Biblical Ethics

Biblical preaching must hang on the precepts of ethical codes prescribed by the Scriptures. When biblical principles are shoved aside in preaching, a low understanding and application of the principles of Christian ethics will certainly characterize the Christian lifestyle. While ethics is generally understood as "the process of determining right and wrong," Christian ethics or biblical ethics is perceived as revolving "around God's specially revealed

³⁰ Iain M. Duguid, *Ezekiel: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 34.

³¹ Olu Ojedokun, "The Challenge of Biblical Expository Preaching Amongst Nigerian Pentecostal," Friday August 31, 2007. Accessed on January 5, 2011 from <http://nigeriaworld.com/articles/2007/aug/313.html>.

commands.”³² J.J. Davis asserts that in biblical ethics, “The teachings of Scripture are the final court of appeal for ethics. . . . The Bible functions normatively in evangelical ethics through its specific commands and precepts, general principles, various precedents, and overall world view.”³³ The Scripture not only “constitutes the ‘bottom line’ of the decision making process” and “must cast the deciding vote,” but crucially, the “canonical Scriptures are the very Word of God, the only infallible and inerrant rule of faith and practice, and consequently are the highest authority for both doctrine and morals.”³⁴

In contemporary Nigerian Christian experience, it seems the world has entered the Church instead of the Church entering the world to infect it with the message of the gospel of righteousness. Her contemporary Christianity is fast conforming to the patterns of worldly values rather than transforming the world with biblical values (Rom 12:1-3). It appears that the Christian understanding of right and wrong and the sense of moral judgement in Nigeria is being blurred by the standards of morality set by humanistic ideologies and the monster of corruption and the quest for materialistic gain. It is no longer the Scriptures but society that is the final arbiter in matters of morality. Something has gone wrong with the ethics of the twenty-first century Nigerian Church. This laxity in Christian morality of thought, words and actions stems from the poor exposition of the Scriptures and lack of a radically Christian lifestyle. Knowingly or unknowingly, preachers fail to teach their listeners basic ethical, biblical and theological principles from a divine perspective. But doing this would help form the basis for their moral judgements, decisions, actions, and choices as they relate to society. Stott states that as models of Christian spirituality and morality, as those who should lead by integrity and sincerity, “preachers must mean what they say in the pulpit, and must practice what they preach when out of it.”³⁵

Negative Ethnicity and/or Tribalism

The practice of ethnicity and tribalism in Africa, and Nigeria in particular, is still commonplace in the 21st century. Turaki says, “Ethnicity and tribalism are currently the most pervasive and powerful destructive forces in Africa.”³⁶ While Barje Maigadi concedes that, “Ethnic diversity is a gift from God” to the human race, he observes that “the negative influence of ethnicity” not only stays at the global political scene, but is sadly infiltrating the Church which is “now

³² Scott B. Rae, *Moral Choices: An Introduction To Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 15, 19.

³³ John Jefferson Davis, *Evangelical Ethics: Issues Facing the Church Today* (2d ed.; Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1993), 3.

³⁴ Davis, *Evangelical Ethics: Issues Facing the Church Today*, 3.

³⁵ Stott and Greg Scharf, *The Challenge of Preaching*, 69.

³⁶ Yusufu Turaki, *Tribal Gods of Africa: Ethnicity, Racism, Tribalism and the Gospel of Christ* (Nairobi: Ethics, Peace and Justice Commission of the Association of Evangelicals in Africa, 1997), 3.

increasingly becoming ethnically divided.”³⁷ Ethnic and tribal ties are very strong in Africa. To be African is to belong to a tribe or ethnic group, and without that link a person’s identity is lost. This ideology is so strong that, in Nigeria for instance, the concept of tribal identity is fast becoming an issue that is taking on both political and religious implications.

This natural sociological identity did not change or die when people from different tribes and kindred came to faith in Jesus Christ. African Christians still maintain their tribal roots and ethno-cultural heritage wherever they find themselves just as a citizen of a country maintains his citizenship wherever he goes. To extricate oneself from such social identity on the part of the Christian is quite an uphill task as one’s feeling of ethnic and tribal lineage would always naturally pop-up automatically because it is embedded in the subconscious mind. African Christians still cling to their tribal roots and ethno-cultural heritage because it is part of their identity, answering the question, “Who am I?”. The issue is that of belonging to a whole group to give an individual essence. As John Mbiti rightly submits, “a cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man” is located in the concept of “I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.”³⁸ This anthropological and sociological ideology is synonymous to the Africanness of the Africans. Mbiti states further,

In traditional life, the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately He is simply part of the whole . . . for the individual depends on the corporate group Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual.³⁹

Christianity in Africa will have to fight harder through the preaching of the gospel to overcome this sociological attachment because African Christian converts were not severed from their ethno-tribal ties when they came to faith. A Christian convert still maintains his/her tribal identity, but that identity must be subjected to the Lordship of Christ and must not be promoted over the new identity. Christians are to demote their loyalty to tribal lineage and enhance their allegiance to Christ as members of a new community. The consciousness of the individual as an integral part of the ethnic group and the strong sense of identity derived from being a member of a specific ethnic group must be taken seriously and given their proper place in the minds of believers.

Biblical preaching about the believer’s ultimate loyalty to God and his kingdom will help African Christians place their ethnic consciousness and identity under God’s transforming grace. When people see themselves as Christians first, with their highest allegiance reserved for God alone, then they

³⁷ Barje Sulmane Maigadi, *Divisive Ethnicity in the Church in Africa* (Kaduna, Nigeria: Baraka Press, 2006), xv.

³⁸ John Samuel Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (2d ed.; 1990; repr., London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 2008), 106.

³⁹ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 106.

have the perspective to see that God loves all people, and that they can do so as well, whether they are Igbo or Yoruba, Kikuyu or Luo, Swazi or Zulu. They become Christians first and Zulus second. This places tribal identity in its proper place without breaking the best aspects of the bonds that unite an ethnic group. Only when Africans of all ethnic groups love God with their entire beings can they learn how to love their neighbours as themselves. This perspective can only be perceived when these issues are addressed biblically from the pulpit.⁴⁰

Conclusion

This article has made a case for the necessity for biblical preaching in Nigeria. The discussion has revealed that sinful pre-occupation with prosperity theology is among the factors that account for the lack of biblically centred Christian preaching in Nigeria. It was argued that this homiletical dislocation takes a great toll on Christian spirituality and the Christian witness in the Nigerian society with such results as a low standard of morality and negative ethnicity. In order to reverse this ugly trend, the need to raise the level of biblical literacy of Nigerian Christians is quite apparent and urgent. This is achievable when untrained and half-trained preachers submit themselves to adequate training by credible theological seminaries and strong Departments of Religious Studies in Nigerian universities in the area of Christian theology, biblical hermeneutics, biblical ethics, and effective homiletical principles.

Within orthodox Christian circles, the biblical text is inevitably the centre for preaching; the centrality of the cross is the focus of preaching; spiritual transformation is the goal of preaching; and eternity with Christ is the end of preaching. "Reformation in the pulpit will come about only as God-called men [and women] return to the basics of the preaching event"⁴¹ and when their listeners are willing to adopt the Berean approach to the sermons they listen to and to the study of the Bible itself (see Acts 17:11-12).

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⁴⁰ See Turaki, *Tribal Gods of Africa*, 146, who insists that this task of teaching about ethnicity, racism and tribalism is the job of the Church.

⁴¹ Vines and Shaddix, *Power in the Pulpit*, 16.

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