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The 'Born again' Concept in the Charismatic Movement in Ghana

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THE PURPOSE OF THIS paper is to analyse the 'born again' concept in the Charismatic movement in Ghana both as a category of salvation and also as a social status. The paper will further examine the soteriological assumptions behind this concept and the social context that brought it to prominence as an important form of Christian social identity in Ghana. The sources include recorded radio and television sermons, interviews and the manuals of instruction for new members of charismatic churches.

The impetus to write this paper came from an interaction I had with a Muslim lady who had been recently converted to Christianity through the instrumentality of one of the charismatic churches in Ghana. In a conversation, the lady retorted ebulliently to a question, 'If I were not born again, that lady would have had a few lessons

from me!' This testimony convinced me that for her and many others like her who have been attracted to the charismatic movement the status of 'born again' is seen as a spiritual status as well as a form of social identity and a badge of identity that come with one's membership of a charismatic church. That is, the status of 'born again' is invariably regarded as a new form of identity that must distinguish those claiming it from ordinary Christians because this status is believed to be a new spiritual reality that demands radically new patterns of behaviour

A proviso is instructive here because the category of the 'born again' does not have the same status and prestige as it used to enjoy at the beginning of the charismatic movement. This is because the prosperity promised to the born again is becoming more important than their moral identity. As one of my informants puts it, 'These days we do not care about being born again because it can restrict the enjoyment of prosperity.'¹

¹ Interview with a charismatic member, Accra.

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I Historical Perspective

The charismatic movement in Ghana represents what I have described elsewhere as a relatively recent expression of African spirituality in the historical development of African Christianity.² The charismatic movement is part of a continuum that can be traced directly to African spirituality through the instrumentality of what has been described as African independent or indigenous churches (AIC). This AIC movement has been shaped principally by the questions regarding salvation which are posed by African Christians.³ Its point of departure is the application of the spiritual resources of Christianity to daily mundane issues and problems which are very much part of African traditional religion. Ironically, the charismatic movement distances itself from African traditional religion because it perceives the latter as demonic and therefore something from which its adherents must be saved (very much like the message of missionary theology).⁴ This created the conditions for the profound and radical Africanization of Christianity at deep levels of thought, making possible the use of traditional categories and language for articulating the message of Christianity.

The emergence of AIC as a spiritual movement within African Christianity goes back to the end of the 19th century

and early 20th century. The movement was spearheaded by African prophets who believed that they had been called by God to bring the message of Christianity to their people as a religion of salvation that could address their concerns and problems. In a process of what could be described as the spiritual appropriation of Christianity on the basis of African spirituality, a movement was set in motion whose aim was to interpret Christianity in such a way that it could deal with concerns which hitherto had been on the periphery of missionary theology of salvation.

The process of the Africanization of Christianity in the African indigenous churches and the later Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal churches in Africa is continuous with African spirituality and the regulative principles that define the structures of salvation in African traditional religion. The controlling paradigm of this Africanization process initiated by the African indigenous churches is based on the idea that there are spiritual resources that can provide solutions to human problems, both physical and spiritual.

The Christian message was generally introduced into Africa as a message of salvation that was meant to save the African people from the debilitating effects of the paganism of African culture.⁵ Therefore, on becoming Christians, African converts were expected to reject African culture in favour of western civilization. These converts reacted to this situation in two related ways. First, they silently endured the devaluation of their culture in the mis-

2 Abraham Akrong, 'Salvation in African Christianity', *Legon Journal of Humanities* Volume xii (1999–2000), 9–13.

3 Akrong, 'Salvation in African Christianity', *Legon Journal of Humanities*, (1999–2000), 25.

4 Abraham Akrong, 'The historic mission of African Independent Churches', *Research Review, New Series* vol 14, No2, (1998), 12.

5 Ebousi Boulaga, *Christianity Without Fetishes* (Mary Knoll, NY: Orbis, 1984), 19.

sionary churches while they were secretly combining Christianity and African traditional religion as two complementary or parallel systems that addressed different needs and concerns. Secondly, this silent protest in the missionary churches found expression in movements in African Christianity which began with the phenomenon of African indigenous churches.⁶

This protest was institutionalized in the AIC which made it possible for Africans to apply the principles of African spirituality to their understanding and interpretation of Christianity. The contribution of this movement to the growth of Christianity in Africa resulted from the fact that it was able to make essential elements of African spirituality the presuppositions for the appropriation of Christianity as a religion that can address the salvation concerns of Africans. This allowed Africans to use categories derived from African culture as the medium through which the Christian message could be translated. More importantly, the movement initiated a process of Africanization of Christianity which today is expressed in many unique forms of Christianity in Africa

II African Christianity

The African indigenous churches prepared the grounds for the reception of the Pentecostal traditions in many parts of Africa. It is important to note that the modern Pentecostal movements and the African Indigenous

churches emerged around the end of the 19th century and early 20th century as movements in search of the tangible experience of the divine in the lives of believers. For this reason, when the Pentecostal tradition came to Ghana, it found a fertile soil in AICs which had already developed concepts and language based on the African world-view that could be used to appropriate and interpret Christianity to bring out its spiritual dimensions

African Christians found in Pentecostalism a form of Christianity that resonated with their own Africanization of Christianity project initiated by the African indigenous churches. The emphasis of African Christianity on life mediated through the spirit found correspondence in the Pentecostal emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. Pentecostal spirituality, whose constitutive element is the active presence of the Spirit by means of which God can deal directly with the believer, was seen by African Christians as similar in many ways to the Christianity developed by the AICs and hence its attraction.⁷ The spiritual perspectives of Pentecostal theology gave to African Christians a theological frame of reference that could justify their own theology of salvation that brings spiritual solutions closer to their immediate needs and concerns. Thus, once Pentecostalism had been contextualized and interpreted on the basis of the African world-view, it was seen as a form of

6 David Barret, *Schism and Renewal in Africa* (Nairobi, Kenya: Oxford University Press, 1968), 127.

7 Juan Sepulveda, 'Reflection on the Pentecostal Contribution to the mission of the Church in Latin America', *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, 1992:1, 100.

Christianity appropriate to African salvation concerns.⁸

The charismatic movement emerged in the late seventies in Ghana and was presented as a new and popular version of Christianity that promised easy access to spiritual power that could provide solutions to all kinds of problems. The Charismatic movement could be described as a form of African Pentecostalism with influences from evangelical Christianity and the faith movement of America and Europe.⁹ Due to its Pentecostal roots, it has also been categorized as Neo-Pentecostal.¹⁰

The message of the charismatic movement is very simple and attractive: The power of the Holy Spirit is available to deal with all types of problems, including protection from witchcraft, deliverance from ancestral curses, deliverance from demons and witches that prevent women from getting husbands and spirits that make married women barren, demons that may hamper the prosperity of traders and prevent workers from getting promotion or students from passing examinations or couples from stable marriages, and demons that may block opportunities to travel abroad to improve one's lot. The message is dominated by these key words associated with salvation: total wellbeing of the

believer, especially the born again—progress, blessings, opportunities, victory over evil and prosperity.

III Sociology of the Charismatic Movement

The charismatic movement appeared on the Ghanaian scene in a period of very stressful social circumstances which resulted from the turbulent socio-political and economic situation in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The youth of the nation were particularly affected by this situation; many of them saw radical social change as the only way of dealing with their plight and therefore they embraced the revolutionary rhetoric. For this reason, some social commentators have argued that the series of coups and revolutions of this period was a kind of protest of the youth against the status quo, and their desire for a new order.

Some charismatic leaders believed that the message of the charismatic movement emerged at this critical period in the life of the country as a message of hope and empowerment that promised the availability of spiritual recourses for dealing with problems and contradictions in one's life. Thus Bishop Bob Hawkins, one of the pioneers of the charismatic movement in Ghana, argued in a television program that the charismatic movement emerged at crucial time in Ghana to provide an alternative to despair among the youth that could easily have led to violent social revolution.¹¹ There

8 Akrong, 'Salvation in African Christianity', *Legon Journal Humanities*, 14.

9 Akrong, 'Salvation in African Christianity', *Legon Journal Humanities*, 20.

10 Elom Dovlo, 'A comparative Over-view of Independent and Charismatic ministries in Ghana', *Trinity Journal Church and Theology* (1992), 15.

11 GTV Programme, 'In the light', Contribution of Bishop Bob Hawkins, 25 June 1999.

are also charismatic preachers like pastor Eastwood Anaba who emphasize the social and political significance of the charismatic movement in providing an alternative to the revolutions and coups of that time.¹²

The Charismatic movement presented a Christian message that espoused spiritual principles that could be used for organizing one's life based on one's relationship with God. The category of 'born again' was presented as a definitive status that would make it possible for one to lead a victorious life in the midst of the prevailing debilitating socio-economic and political circumstances. Being 'born again' became a function of the new possibilities of self-definition which linked the spiritual benefits of being born again to the creation of a new social identity with possibilities of a victorious and prosperous life.

The 'born again' status was presented by Charismatic theology as a guarantee of the success and prosperity promised in the Bible because when one becomes born again, one acquires a legal status as a child of God that qualifies one to an inheritance of prosperity and success in life. The covenantal language that is used to describe the status of the born again is instructive here. The notion of birth suggests that one has been born into a spiritual family that confers a status, and with this status come privileges and rights

due the fact that one belongs to God in a special way.

In practice, many people whose lives had been dislocated and shattered because they could not cope with the challenges of the time found in the charismatic message an opportunity to rebuild and transform their lives for the better. Those who turned to drugs and alcohol as a way of dealing with the social dislocation found in the 'born again' concept an opportunity for a fresh start. The category of 'born again' thus became the preeminent symbol of belonging to the family of God that confers on one the right to the material benefits of the spiritual birth. It was thus seen as a status that brings about the type of spiritual and social transformation which empowers one to deal with the debilitating forces of social change.

The charismatic movement initially saw itself as a new Christian community of Christians who were different from others. In fact, Mensa Otabil, the General Overseer of the International Gospel Church, in his initial messages called on all born again Christians who been disappointed in their various churches to come out to form a new fellowship of believers.¹³ The aim of these born again fellowships was to create the nucleus of a new Christian community that could lead believers to become born again Christians and also sustain that status. The structured life of the charismatic fellowships which later evolved into churches became the

¹² Eastwood Anaba, *God's End time Militia: winning the war within and without* (Accra: Accra Design Solutions, 1997; see also Asamoah Gyendu, *African Charismatic Studies of Religion in African* (Accra: Christian Press, 2005), 121.

¹³ Kingsley Larbi, *Pentecostalism: The Eddies of Ghanaian Christianity* (Accra: Centre for Pentecostal and Charismatic Studies, Accra, 2001), 359.

outward expression of new Christian community of the born again.

The charismatic churches are usually leader centred, but they manage nevertheless to create opportunities in the movement that make it possible for many people who are otherwise invisible in the society to perform leadership roles which bring them dignity, self-worth and respect. The 'born again' community thus provided the social space for everyone to acquire dignity through the various roles they performed and the leadership functions which they exercised. This allowed for what might be described as the democratization of charisma in the service of God through the leadership roles and functions made possible in the church. The visibility that came with the 'born again' status helped people to concretize their new identity in real leadership performance roles.

The democratization of leadership roles in the movement also provided different types of pastoral services to the members of the community which enhanced their sense of worth and importance. The 'born again' identity provided a blue-print for the articulation of the cherished interest of individuals in the group in the form of a new identity that comes with more social visibility. In this process, the charismatic movement was able to mobilize symbols and language associated with success in life or the victorious life as a resource for facing existential challenges of life for those privileged to be part of this movement.

a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.' The concept is linked with the eschatological destiny of the believer. In 1 Peter 1: 23 it is seen as a new status: 'You have been born anew, not of mortal parentage but of the immortal through the living and enduring word of God.' In 2 Corinthians 5: 17, Paul describes the 'born again' status as the occasion for the transformation that takes place when one becomes a new creation in Christ because of the filial relationship with God through Christ: 'I will be a father to you and you shall be my sons and daughters.'

The biblical concept of being born again implies a new status that distinguishes one from the old nature through new attributes that the new creation brings.¹⁴ Thus Ephesians 4:23-24 states: '...you must be made new in mind and spirit and put on a new nature of God, which shows itself in the just and devout life called for by the truth'. So we can see that the biblical idea of being born again means an inner spiritual experience that is expressed in a qualitatively superior moral life.

The mainstream Protestant doctrine of salvation focuses on justification by grace through faith. The focus of this view of salvation is the legal status one acquires before God as result of justification. However, this juridical interpretation of salvation contrasts sharply with the Pentecostal theory of salvation which is based on experiencing the benefits of justification in the

IV Biblical Perspective

The *locus classicus* of the biblical concept of 'born again' is John 3:3: 'Unless

¹⁴ Gordon Fee, *Paul, The Spirit and The People of God* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1977), 21.

form of holiness and sanctification. The Pentecostal emphasis on the experience of the benefits of justification in terms of personal holiness is similar to the pietistic order of salvation which lays similar emphasis on the changes that justification brings in the life of the justified—call, repentance conversion, justification sanctification and eschatological perfection and glorification.¹⁵

The antecedents of the Pentecostal view of salvation as spiritual transformation that brings about holiness or sanctification can be traced historically to the Wesleyan holiness movement where the idea of second baptism and perfection were regarded as a crucial part of individual salvation. In its theology of salvation, the Pentecostal movement appropriated this idea of salvation which includes the notion of second birth.

V Classical Pentecostalism and the Charismatic Movement

To be born again in mainstream Pentecostal theology means to be born from above.¹⁶ It is not understood as reformation of character nor becoming religious or a change of heart, but the communication of something which was not previously there. Being born again gives the individual the benefits of sal-

vation through the regenerative work of the Holy Spirit which makes one a new creature. People who are born again are engrafted into Christ through baptism which makes it possible for them to acquire the qualities of Christ. It is this transformation that qualifies the born again to be designated as children of God, and joint-heirs with Christ.

As children of God by adoption, they can call God Father because now they belong to the family of God with all the privileges of children of God.¹⁷ As a result, the born again person can live victoriously over the world and also be set apart for Christ to be sanctified as a saint. This Pentecostal view of 'born again' is interpreted in Charismatic theology as a new spiritual status. This status empowers believers to face personal, spiritual, social and economic problems based on the assurance that they have access to spiritual power on account of the status they have acquired as children of God.

The various charismatic preachers have articulated views on the 'born again' concept that bring out the theological underpinning and ontological structure of the concept. Rev Dr. Koranchi Ankrah, the General Overseer of the Royal House Chapel, taught that we are all creatures of God but not all of us are children of God—only the born again are the children of God. Because they are born again they have these rights: prosperity, deliverance and protection from the devil, well-being and success, and the privilege to call on God and God being obliged to

15 Abraham Akropong, 'Akan Christian view of Salvation from the Perspective of John Calvin's Soteriology' (Th. D. Diss., Chicago 1991), 173.

16 Guy Duffield and M. N. Van Cleave (eds), *Foundations of Pentecostal Theology* (Los Angeles: Life Bible College, 1983), 228.

17 Duffield and Van Cleave, *Foundations of Pentecostal Theology*, 224.

help them. The 'born again' have a special legal status before God which entitles them to an inheritance that guarantees the benefits of success and victory over evil. The 'born again' have by birth become new creations that allow them to receive the Holy Spirit which links them up to God so that they can have direct access to God. As new creatures, their lives are set on God and not on the flesh because they have been delivered from sin of the flesh; God has given them spiritual insight that allows them to imagine a 'break-through' and because they are children of God whatever they will imagine happens.¹⁸

Pastor Ashimolowo proclaimed in a television sermon that God has allotted a portion of property to all the 'born again' as part of their inheritance which pre-ordains them to success and the victorious life. Therefore any failure or problems in their lives means that someone—demon or witch—is tampering with their pre-ordained allotted success.¹⁹ Archbishop Duncan Williams proclaimed in one of his television sermons that '... the born again are moved to the very presence of God where they can speak to God directly'.²⁰ Chris Gakyilome also affirmed in a radio sermon that the 'born again' have an inheritance based on their status as children of God and failures in their lives mean that they

have allowed Satan to rob them of their rights.²¹

On the personal level, the born again must possess the gift of speaking in tongues; many born again persons spend hours practising how to master the art of speaking in tongues. Speaking in tongues is believed to be the visible sign that one is born again and it gives one special access to God. As one charismatic preacher puts it, 'speaking in tongues moves the born again to the very presence of God where they can have unlimited access to the blessings of God'.²² The gift of speaking in tongues also acts as a medium of protection that shields the prayers of the 'born again' from the disruption of the devil. Indeed, the gift of speaking in tongues allows the born again to communicate with God in a language that the Devil cannot comprehend, thus enabling one to reach God safely. Speaking in tongues is an important gift that comes with the status of being born again because it is one of the outward signs that one is a child of God

VI Analysis

The charismatic view of being born again has continuities with Pentecostal doctrine, but it is appropriated and interpreted as a category of salvation within a wider view of salvation that includes material prosperity and well-being. The classical Pentecostal view of salvation, which is continuous with the pietistic idea of salvation, on the

18 Television Sermon by Rev Dr Koranchi Ankrah, Channel 2, Pentecost Hour, Accra, 20 Feb. 2002.

19 Television Sermon by Ashimolowo, Channel 2, Pentecost Hour, Accra, 29 Aug. 2004.

20 Television Sermon by Archbishop Duncan Williams, Channel 2, Pentecost Hour Accra, 27 Oct. 2002.

21 Television Sermon by Chris Gyakilome, Channel 2, Accra, 6 Oct. 2005.

22 Television Sermon by Chris Gyakilome, Channel 2, Accra, 5 May 2005.

other hand lays great emphasis on the personal salvation benefits that accrue to the saved in terms of the experience of radical moral and spiritual transformation. The general Pentecostal view of salvation is expressed in personal categories because of the emphasis on the expected changes that should occur in the moral and spiritual life of the believer. In continuity with the Pentecostal tradition, the charismatic understanding of salvation is also expressed in personal terms but is not limited to moral and spiritual transformation; it includes prosperity and the victorious life.²³

So the theory of salvation that underpins the charismatic 'born again' concept is a view of salvation which emphasizes moral and spiritual transformation as well as existential and material wellbeing. Also, the critical difference between the charismatic theory of salvation and classical Pentecostalism is that while in the latter the emphasis is on moral and spiritual transformation, in the former the moral and spiritual transformation is viewed as the status that qualifies one to enjoy wealth and prosperity. This view of salvation with primary emphasis on prosperity is based on the idea that believers have had their debts paid by Christ through his sacrifice on the cross. What is left for the 'born again' is the inheritance that belongs to them by right as children of God, or, to put it in other terms, a reward which is material and physical prosperity.

The idea that the forgiveness of sin accomplished by Christ amounts to debt paid creates a tendency in the charismatic theology to treat sin lightly—as something that belongs to the life prior to becoming born again. The result is that the moral and spiritual aspect of holiness that should accompany the experience of being born again is often ignored. The focus then becomes prosperity that comes with the 'born again' status. This tendency has given rise to the perception that the charismatic prosperity message has attracted to itself doubtful characters who exploit the people. The weakness in the emphasis on prosperity alone as the most important element in salvation allows the moral and spiritual aspects of 'born again' to be ignored, thus presenting a truncated theology of salvation.

The emphasis on material prosperity as the main focus of salvation leads to a demonology that sees evil in terms of the obstruction of one's prosperity. According to this view, evil enters the life of the 'born again' in the form of demonic interventions that obstruct and deprive the 'born again' of the right and access to prosperity. The use of this demonology as an explanation for problems and difficulties in life can easily lead to what has been described as a 'witchcraft mentality' that attributes all problems to the devil and his agents. This type of mentality can create an unhealthy dependence on men and women of God.²⁴

One further problem of the 'born

23 J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *African Chrismatics: current developments within Independent Indigenous Pentecostalism in Ghana* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2005), 206.

24 Abraham Akroong, 'Neo-Witchcraft Mentality in Popular Christianity', *Research Review (New Series)*, (2000), volume 16, 11.

again' concept in the message of the charismatic movement is that it is imprecise. One is not sure whether being born again is a status that one acquires in the process of salvation or if it is a status that is conferred on one by just becoming a member of the charismatic movement. Usually the claim to being 'born again' in evangelical Christianity is accompanied by personal narratives which show experiences that mark the beginning of the born again life. In my research on 'born again' in the charismatic movement, these personal narratives are absent. What we have instead are the external features like speaking in tongues that mark one out as 'born again' and the promises that come with being born again.

One therefore gets the impression that in the charismatic movement today, the 'born again' status starts when a person is initiated into the charismatic movement through various ceremonies which include the acceptance of particular teachings. It appears therefore that the 'born again' status is conferred by the movement on those who become full members. Here the sociological dimension of the 'born again' status becomes more important than the spiritual and moral aspects. This peculiar interpretation and use of the concept of being born again constitutes a transformation of a salvation

category into a social category that confers the privileges and benefits of salvation.

VII Conclusion

The charismatic movement appeared on the Ghanaian scene at the period in the history of the country when it was facing a lot of socio-economic and political problems. These crises manifested themselves in the lives of many people in the form of social dislocation which, especially for the youth, meant a crisis of identity because the normal socialization process that defined identity through education and the job market had been disrupted. This produced a general mood of despair and disillusionment. The charismatic message came on the scene as a wonderful message of hope that would help them reorganize their lives. The charismatic movement provided a message that claimed that there is spiritual power which is available and can solve all problems in life. What one needed was to be 'born again' and the problems of life would be solved. Many people rushed to join the movement because of the harsh realities of the situation and the enticing promises of the movement. The category of the 'born again' became a badge of identity that assured and guaranteed access to the power that could make the successful life possible.