

Challenges of Ecclesiastical Corruption and its Implications for the Contemporary Church in Nigeria

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Abstract:

Corruption is a serious pandemic ravaging almost all societies across the globe. It has become almost impossible to differentiate between the corrupt acts that have become the normal way of life in many nations and the norms of social, political and religious life. In Nigeria, not only is corruption evident in the public, business and religious sectors, it has become prevalent in the church as well. Ecclesiastical corruption, traced to the Imperial and Papacy era of the Church, seems to be more prominent as the church grew wealthier and became more powerful through the simony, and sales of indulgencies and benefices. In the contemporary church in Nigeria, financial misappropriations, sexual immoralities, political power tussles and nepotism are common forms of ecclesiastical corruption. These occur in the church and among Christian leaders in form of embezzlements, fraudulent acts, self-enrichment, adultery and fornication, giving and receiving of bribes in exchange for leadership positions and more. Some church leaders, who are involved in scandals, are charged to court for acts of corruption done under the guise of the church and in the name of Christ, the Head of the church. Using historical, literary and observatory collections, the various challenges of ecclesiastical corruption are found to include desecration of ministerial office, moral degradation, quest for materialism, accumulation of wealth, and proliferation of churches. The implications of these challenges of ecclesiastical corruption include hindrance to evangelism, loss of ministerial integrity and poor leadership and governance. The recommendations are that church leaders should be proactive in fighting corruption, live exemplary moral life by upholding their integrity, and to teach and preach against corruption through all available means.

Key words: Challenges, Church, Contemporary, Corruption, Ecclesiastical, and Implication

Introduction

Corruption has become a pandemic ravaging societies across the globe. In many nations of the world, corruption is so prevalent that it is almost becoming a norm and a way of life in political, social and religious sectors. There is hardly any facet of the national life that is not affected with the evils of corruption. In Nigeria, corruption as a growing menace is evident in

virtually every aspect of public life including academic environment, public institutions, the armed forces, the judiciary, the business sphere, political settings, business outfits and religious bodies. Most disturbing is that the church is also succumbing to the menace of corruption which is evident in various forms of money embezzlement, fraudulent acts, extortions, exploitations and illegal practices. Christian and church leaders get involved in corrupt practices involving money and sexual immoralities (Deji Ayegbonyin, 2001). Perhaps most frightening is the fact that some acts of corruption are done deceptively in the name of God. Some religious leaders have been charged with lawsuits of corruption scandals which mostly include financial fraud and sexual immorality. These various forms of corrupt acts have tainted the Christian faith, the church and the name of Jesus whom they profess.

In many contemporary African societies, accumulation of material wealth and cravings for luxury are obvious causes and consequences of corruption. These reflect in the possession of exotic cars, fashionable clothes, vast land, housing properties, and fat bank accounts in local and foreign financial institutions across the continents (Abraham Olutoye Odeleye 2017). The sound biblical preaching and Christian education activities of the church seem to be getting replaced with raising of funds and accumulation of material blessings and assets. Paradoxically, according to Ogunwole, these anomalies which have lingered for more than two decades in the contemporary church, had distorted the image and integrity of the church. Some ministers convince their parishioners to do away with their hard-earned money, and valuable personal belongings in the name of “sowing” quality seeds for bumper harvest which never materialize (2000). Sowing here implies that victims of ecclesiastical corruption unquestionably give in to the demands of so-called ministers who extort them. These practices of accumulating resources

to self through illicit and fraudulent manners by church leaders at the expense of the defrauded is corruption.

This paper, therefore, argues that corruption by church leaders and members in the name of Jesus through manipulations and deceptions are evident in the Church and this is affecting the integrity and acceptability of the Christian faith in the contemporary Nigerian society. The paper highlights the concept of ecclesiastical corruption, examines four basic forms of ecclesiastical corruption, discusses the challenges posed by the forms of corruption and identifies the ethical implications for the church. Finally it presents some recommendations for curbing the menace and draws a conclusion.

II. The Concept of Ecclesiastical Corruption

Ecclesiastical corruption as a term is a combination of two words; ecclesiastical and corruption. Ecclesiastical is derived from the Greek word *ecclesia* which means “the church,” the “called out” or simply the community of believers in Jesus Christ. Dictionary of Contemporary English defines corruption as “dishonest,” illegal or immoral behavior, especially from someone in position of power. According to Deji Ayegboyin, the word corruption means a misuse of public power for private gains (2001). This is in consonance with Leslie Palmier’s description of corruption as the use of public office for private advantage (1983). Corruption is thus an act that promotes self-gains at the expense of public resources. The scope of the definitions of corruption however extends beyond the issue of money or office matters since it could be found in the ministerial and social life. Simon Ishola defines corruption as whatever a person does to satisfy his/her desires at the expenses of other persons or the society as a whole (2011). It involves such practices as embezzlement of funds, self-enrichment through exploitation of others, and satisfying self-emotional cravings which include sexual desires and

other forms of pleasure (1989). Corruption is viewed as a violation of moral code or normative standard within the society if viewed from the social perspective. It is a social problem embedded within the strand of the society and it's considered as catalyst of all crimes or breeding ground of all illegal and criminal behaviors.

The above discussion indicated that corruption has different forms. For example, Katsnelinbogen identified two basic types of corruption; the first include actions with harmful effect on the society but are questionably redesigned to suit the leaders thereby legalizing the same as immoral actions for the other people in the society. The second are actions that unambiguously harm the society(nd). Whichever form it takes, acts which harm the people abruptly or otherwise particularly as a result of the selfish gains of those entrusted with leadership authority should be treated as corrupt and criminal. Such acts are observed as proliferating in the contemporary Nigerian society and worse still in the church.

Historical Basis of Ecclesiastical Corruption: Corruption in the church can be traced to the period of the early church and more specifically the Papal Era when church leaders were politically, materially and sexually corrupt. As the church grew wealthier and more powerful, especially during the reign of Constantine, the involvement of the church in politics significantly modified the law and custom of the society which appeared to be in favor of the church but not without the consequences (n d). As the Emperor, Constantine also ruled as Christian Bishop, demanded unconditional obedience to official pronouncements even when they interfered with church matters. This way Constantine and his successors used the church as basis for gaining authority and political influence for themselves.

Some of the acts of corruption by early church leaders included inconsistency of rules and what constituted an offense. The excesses of the church leaders in financial corruption were

evident in receiving the *annates*, or first fruits, reservation of richest benefices of each country, and the simony. Similarly, appointments of church officers were done from sales of office to highest bidder well before the demise of the incumbent. Other corruption behaviors were in immoral acts of raising illegitimate family, and nepotism (Lars P, Qualben. 1961). In support of these Justo Gonzales also affirmed that through the sales of indulgences for committed sins and sins of omission, the financial gains of the church leaders increased. Sales and purchase of the sacraments and ecclesiastical offices in order to assume an ecclesiastical position after the demise of an incumbent also became more prominent (Justo Gonzales. 1984).

Notable church leaders in church history who were involved in acts of corruption included Sergius (788-970) who openly sold church office, and Alexandria VI who illegitimately fathered Cesar and Lureacea, and appointed them as leaders. They both became more involved in corruption practices than their father, Alexandria VI (Walker Morrison, 1936). In 1513, Giovanni de Medici was elected as Pope Leo X and in his further quest for materialism; he attempted to raise money to rebuild the abandoned St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome which had been in ruin for many years (Walker, Morrison. 1936). Thus, ecclesiastical corruptions in form of political, sexual, financial gains and nepotism by the early church leaders at the expenses of the church and society were evident.

In the contemporary time, corruption has remained a social menace that has permeated every facet of life. Olubisi Ohakah observed that corruption is highly prominent in the contemporary Nigerian society so much that the church is invaded by people who could be described as false prophets, and prophetesses and fake pastors (Olubisi, Ohakah. 2005). Ecclesiastical corruption in Nigeria is evident in various forms such as exploitations, and manipulations for material and financial gains. This implies that many people who portray

themselves as church leaders and ministers of the gospel with various titles and wearing priestly garments get involved in practices of money extortions and unlawful accumulation of church properties. Emotional forms of ecclesiastic corruption are evident through sexual self-gratification and nepotism.

III. Forms of Ecclesiastical Corruption and Challenges to the Society

The Church as the community of God is saddled with responsibilities of practically influencing the ethics, life patterns and conduct or ways of life of the society they belong while promoting peaceful co-existence. However, the church would not be able to set the moral standard for the society if the different forms of corruption and practices continued to be apparent. Although there are many forms of ecclesiastical corruption and the list may be inexhaustible, this paper has identified four main forms of corruption from its historical background in the church namely financial corruption, sexual corruption, political corruption, and nepotism (Zaka, Ahuche P. 2013).

a. Financial Corruption: This is an act of diverting public funds for self-benefit or advantage. This act is practiced by some pastors and church leaders by stealing from money contributed by church members such as offering, tithes or special offering. This happens because they felt that they are the ministers in charge. Some pastors or church leaders in various capacities such as treasurers, financial secretaries or chairman of some financial committees misappropriate church funds by diverting it in part or whole for self-enrichment. Those who get involved in corrupt practices in the church are usually those who have access to church funds one way or the other because they hold leadership positions such as pastors, deacons, elders, or being in charge of church finances. Consequently, financial corruption manifesting in mismanagement

of church funds by leaders would result into betrayal of trust and other crises with gross consequences.

b. Sexual Corruption: The act of gratifying sexual desires outside of the marriage covenant is another form of corruption prevalent in the contemporary church in Nigeria. Sexual corruption in the church is evident among leaders through illicit sexual relationships with the opposite sex. Collaborating this, O. B. Oladejo commented that the cases of immorality among church leaders and their members is becoming increasingly outrageous as daily newspapers report scandals involving church leaders in their captions of sexual immoralities (2012). There are reports of the involvement of some choir leaders and those who play the instruments in sexual vices with members of the choir or those whom they were to lead. There are cases of pastors and church leaders who have children out of illicit sexual relationship with church members, some kept this undisclosed from the church and family members. When some of such pastors die, their secrets get revealed when the mothers showed up with their children at the funerals (Estep Williams. 1986).

Other forms of sexual corruption are those involving church leaders who are pedophiles. They exploit the innocence of young children with whom they have sexual relationships and threaten them with death if they disclose the secret. Sometimes, the corrupt church leaders pamper their victims with gifts as bribes to keep them mute from disclosing the illicit acts of such leaders. Akiode, G. S. noted that when church leaders get involved in sexual scandals, they attempt to defend their actions by referring to King Solomon as a royal flirt who was still loved and blessed by God in spite of his many wives and concubines. (nd). Hence sexual corruption is evident in different ways of illicit sexual requests and relationships for self-gratifications of the leader at the expense of the led who are treated as underdogs. This sexual exploitation and other

forms of sexual harassment in the church pose lots of challenges against the wellness of the society. Sexual corruption causes embarrassment and dishonor to the church which is the body of Christ.

c. Political Corruption or Power Play: Political corruption is sometimes evident whenever leaders scramble to fill up vacant church leadership positions at all cost. When this happens, discord, disunity and fights erupt, some resulting into legal battles between or among opponents and the loyalists. Politically corrupt church leaders sometimes go to the extreme of causing crises in the church and getting involved in the use of diabolic powers to harm their opponents in order to satisfy their quest for power acquisition. When church leaders scuttle for position at the demise of the incumbent, different kinds of corrupt practices are observed, such as secret campaigns for positions for which only nominations or selections are required. Some of these power enthusiasts engage in blackmailing of possible opponents and in bitter rivalry with contenders of such vacant positions.

Political corruption also shows when selection or electoral committee members and candidates involve in bribery or exchange of gifts which influence the decision of the committee. In some cases, qualified candidates may be deprived while the less qualified candidate is preferred if the latter had influenced the process through inducement or threat. Favoritism becomes a political gimmick in which leadership positions are ascribed to people who are considered loyal to those in charge. Such practices result in crisis and cause schism.

d. Nepotism: This is another form of ecclesiastical corruption in the contemporary Nigerian society which features restriction of church leadership positions to only family members or relatives. Simeon Kehinde affirms this by in his observation that some church founders appoint their wives or children to the Board of Trustees to ensure that the

administrative affairs of the church remain in their control and favor (2006). This becomes a form of corruption when those who are endorsed for power lack the required qualifications for such office, or when their being in such positions will not allow for transparency and proper accountability. Nepotism is an act of injustice to the unprivileged in the church and it prevents fairness among church members.

IV. Challenges of Ecclesiastical Corruption to the Church

Having identified the financial, sexual, and political corruption with nepotism as the four forms of ecclesiastical corruption that are apparent in the Nigerian church in Nigeria, the challenges that these acts of corruption pose to the church and the society are discussed below:

1. Desecration of Ministerial Offices: The office of gospel ministers is a sacred one. Dan Agbese described corrupt church leaders as puppeteers who pull the strings to make their misguided followers engage in atrocities and severely strain the mission purpose of church for societal unity (1991). When church leaders are corrupt, sacred offices become disrespected, and so their words are no longer believed or followed. Ecclesiastical corruption thus promotes false prophets who develop false visions for the government and the society at large. They engage in falsehood as a means of livelihood, for material acquisition or self gratification. There are cases of Nigerian prophets who prophesied victory for some politicians for financial gains and other material benefits. However, when such politicians who have received their prophecies lost in the election, the false prophets lose their respects. Another implication of the non-fulfillment of their prophecies is the damaged identity of the Church instituted to be the body of Christ. The government and other political appointees of the state ultimately lose regard for the church because of this corrupt identity.

2. Moral Degradation: Another challenge posed by ecclesiastical corruption is moral degradation. When moral values are lost within a society, it is expected that the church should be an institution for its recovery. When the church also condone or indulge in amoral acts, however, finding solution to moral issues would be almost impossible. It is not enough that the church preaches good manners and moral values; much more is expected from the church as the light and salt of the world. Christian leaders are especially required to live by example being the epistle that the world reads daily. The society would continue to have the challenge of moral degradation if ecclesiastical corruption continues. It is a difficult battle against corruption in any institution when the leaders are involved in the act. To avoid absolute moral decadence, the church in Nigeria must begin the process of restoration of sanctity in the church operations and among the leaders.

3. Respect for and Celebration of Wealth: The challenge of celebrating wealth and giving undue respect to the wealthy is evident in a corruption-driven church. This includes a situation when only the well-to-dos are being honoured as the chairman of the harvest and thanksgiving programs and other special occasions of the church. Church leadership positions are sometimes acquired with money. In some churches, leadership positions are given according to financial contributions of those who desire such positions without considering other criteria especially their spirituality. Many people want to be rich by all means because it is the rich who are usually honored by the church elders; constituting them as chairman and leaders of one committee or the other. Moreover, in some situations where the care and welfare of the church leader becomes the responsibility of a particular rich person rather than collective responsibility of all the church members, the pastor may be left at the mercy of such wealthy members of the church.

4. Proliferation of Churches: Proliferation of churches is one of the challenges of ecclesiastical corruption. As a result of the corrupt practices of some church leaders, some aggrieved members of the church may decide to pull out to start new churches. Commercial gain is one of the reasons for starting new churches by some founders while the quest to satisfy areas of grievances on faith and doctrinal issues is factor for proliferation of churches. Olusegun Oke noted that proliferation of churches in Nigeria and other places around the world could be connected with making the church a top market business (2012). Some church leaders operate like the church was a personal business venture sometimes because they were instrumental to the starting up of the church. When the church leader is corrupt, some members may continue to tolerate such a leader while some other church members would leave the church to start another as they regard acts of corruption as deterrent to church values.

V. Implications of Ecclesiastical Corruption to the Church

The challenges posed by ecclesiastical corruption to the church have some implications for the fulfilment of church's given mandate to the society. Some of the implications include;

1. Hindrance to Evangelism: Evangelism is the act of proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the non-Christians so they could become believers. The paramount task of the church is the proclamation of the gospel and the nurturing of believers through discipleship as stated in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20). The early apostles and missionaries not only preached the gospel, and nurtured the believers by sound biblical teachings, they also lived exemplary lives. In the contemporary church in Nigeria, preaching the gospel and evangelization is getting more difficult because of the acts of corruption in the church. Evangelism in the contemporary church is declining and it is no longer performed with the zeal and enthusiasm of the early church because of the evils of corruption perpetrated by some church leaders and their members.

Oyeronke Olajubu, asserts that the basic quality of a Christian is a regenerated mind which is made possible by the power of the Holy Spirit. However, non-Christians may not have such state of mind since they lack the power of the Holy Spirit (2007). Regrettably, the church hinders the Holy Spirit from regenerating the mind of believers thereby preventing effective evangelism due to practices of corruption.

If evangelism continues to be hindered as a result of ecclesiastical corruption, fewer conversions would be achieved and the Great Commission would not be fulfilled. The failure of the church in her obligation as salt of the earth and the light of the world is also a reflection of the inability of the church to fulfil the Great Commission given by the Master, Jesus Christ.. The church that has lost these two basic functions to corruption cannot redeem the world from its rottenness and gross darkness.

2. Loss of Ministerial Integrity: Ecclesiastical corruption constitutes impairment to integrity which is a virtue of high importance to humanity. Integrity connotes faithful support of a standard of value, uprightness and being blameless (Olumide, Kehinde 2014). In biblical term, it represents an idea of singleness of heart or mind, because a man of integrity “walks securely but whoever takes crooked paths will be found out” (Prov. 10:9, NIV). This implies that ministerial integrity can be inferred as the strength and firmness of character, or utter sincerity and honesty of a minister in his relationships and duties in the context of Christian faith.

According to Rick Ezell, integrity is a God-like life of sincerity and consistency without pretense or deception in both the public life and the private life (2017). This shows that openness and genuineness in the character and the behavior of a person with a good integrity in private matches the public life. Ishola Simeon Adewuyi described integrity as wholeness or being totally or completely sound (2011). Thus, integrity is the quality of a minister to be honest in affirming

moral principles, doing the right thing in a right way and at the right time, irrespective of the difficulties encountered in doing so Olumide Kehinde asserted that the calling of a minister of God is different from other callings and vocations hence, ministerial integrity entails not only having personal knowledge of God, but also living the way of life which is godly characterized by humility, sincerity, truthfulness and steadfastness (2014). Thus, the Christian ministers are viewed as special and noble people in the society. This suggests that the church minister is expected to live a higher level of character and conduct without which the minister may lack the respect necessary for leading the church. A godly character and lifestyle of Christians, being free of corruption, will foster lifestyle evangelism in their society.

3. Poor Leadership and Governance: Corruption has been likened to fish that begins to rot in the head (Nihinlola, Emiola. 2014). The statement is metaphorically affirming the poor state of leadership in the Nigerian society which also spills over to the church or of the church leadership influencing the society. The present state of corruption in churches in Nigeria is no doubt a reflection of bad leadership especially within the Christian fold. Oke Olusegun noted that “It is more obvious today that carrying the Bible is one of the quickest means of getting money (2012). This statement depicts what those described as false or fake church ministers or leaders in priestly garments do to extort their victims and involve in other selfish practices at the expense of people who trusted them because they profess the Christian faith. The church ought to set good example for the society.

The resultant effect of poor leadership particularly on the youth is an increase rate of different vices such as armed robbery, fraud and corruption in the church. When the youth are unemployed as a result of bad governance and they could not turn to the church for guidance either for non-availability of sound teaching or godly example, such a society will linger in

hardship. The challenge of unemployment and seeing church leaders accumulate material possessions through corrupt practices may drive some of the youth to seeing the church as avenue for self-enrichment through corruption. O. K. Babarinde described such people as employment driven pastors (2017). Many leaders of churches planted with such motivation have sometimes turned their churches into a den of robbers where members are cheated and exploited under the guise of spirituality and religion. They are those involved in corrupt practices and could be referred to as those who became ministers for the sake of their bellies (Rom. 16:18). They take the work of ministry as a business venture and a means of livelihood rather than as a divine calling it is meant to be.

Having established that ecclesiastical corruption apparently poses challenges with critical ethical implications on the church and society at large, the following recommendations are hereby proposed for the church and the leaders:

1. Taking proactive measures against corruption: Church leaders and Christians should be proactive against corruption within the church. It is important that the church must combat the pandemic at all cost by giving out appropriate measure of discipline to anyone found guilty in any scandalous acts of corruption such as financial misappropriation, sexual immorality, or those who are caught in acts of corruption such as political power play and nepotism.

2. Living exemplary moral life: The church is expected to be the epitome and custodian of high moral standard. Church leaders and Christians therefore are to live exemplary moral life in all areas including finances, sexuality, politics and fairness against nepotism. Leadership entails trust vested on the leader, therefore the church must maintain the integrity of the faith which is professed so that it can be a worthy example for emulation.

3. Teaching and preaching against corruption: the church through the leaders and Christians are tasked with the responsibility of teaching and preaching the word of God. What the church teaches and preaches must be the truth and sound doctrines which negate ecclesiastical corruption in every form.

Conclusion

Behaviors including quest for materialism, and exploitations depicting lack of discipline and integrity are major reasons why many church leaders engage in corruption. The general overview of this study revealed that ecclesiastical corruption on the part of those entrusted with authority at the expense of others could be traced historically to the early church. Regrettably, this menace remained evident in the contemporary church and the Nigerian society. The various forms of corruption in the church identified and highlighted in this paper are financial misappropriations, sexual immorality, political power play and nepotism. Corruption is absolutely against the teachings of the church and continual acts of corruption only reveal gross indiscipline and lack of integrity on the part of the church and particularly the leaders.

The challenges ecclesiastical corruption pose against the church include desecration of ministerial office by fake ministers who promote corruption. The quest for accumulation of wealth will eventually bring loss of trust in the church or the leaders. The implications are that ecclesiastical corruption would prevent effective proclamation of the gospel, and result in loss of potential Christians for the kingdom of God. If corruption lingered in the church, then the hope for good leadership and governance for the society would be lost. The church and all Christians must set the pace to fight against corruption first from within the church so that it can combat the menace in the society at large.

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