



MAKING SENSE OF THE TWO FACES OF CHRISTIANITY IN NIGERIA: THE HERMENEUTICS OF THE PROSPERITY MESSAGE

Lawrence Nchekwube Nwankwo

Department of Religion and Human Relations
Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka

Abstract

Christianity is expressed in different forms and configurations. In the Nigerian context and for analytic purposes, we group the different configurations into two broad categories – the traditional expressions of Christianity and the Pentecostal-Charismatic type, especially the Prosperity Gospel. These faces refer to what are pejoratively named ‘powerless Christianity’ and ‘cross-less Christianity’ respectively. Both expressions of Christianity draw from the Bible. But with different, and sometimes opposing, emphases. This is an attempt to make sense of this phenomenon of drawing from one source (the Bible) with divergent conclusions. We do this by highlighting the importance of foregrounding in every hermeneutical engagement and the remarkable differences in vision this can introduce, as shown by the Gestalt theory of perception. We hang our discussion on the assertion in Deuteronomy 21:23, “cursed is he who hangs on a tree” as on a peg.

Keywords: Foreground, Hermeneutics, Gestalt Psychology, Perspectivism, Prosperity Message, the Cross, Deuteronomistic theology of history

Introduction

Christianity in Nigeria can be said to have two faces. This over-simplifies and over-generalizes. But it captures a fissure in the mindscape of Christians in Nigeria. One of the faces is traditional. It is seen more in the mainline Churches. Here, the emphasis is on the mystery of the cross and of divine providence on the one hand and an emphasis on life with God over earthly wellbeing. The other face is represented by the prosperity message with its emphases on prosperity, that is, health, wealth, fertility and longevity, as the divine intention for every Christian. Although they appeal to the Bible for support, these two faces of Christianity, if one may call them that, have different interpretations of the same Bible. They have different views about the place of suffering and deprivation in the economy of Christian salvation; about the mystery of divine providence, about prayers, etc. For example, while in one, prayer is supplication, a request made to God with a proviso that God’s will may be done, even if this is contrary to one’s desire, in the other, prayer amounts to the mobilization of divine power for the realization of one’s desire.¹ These faces of Christians have also given each other pejorative names. While one is accused of presenting a cross-less Christianity, the other is caricatured as powerless Christianity.

Beyond the name-calling, there is a need to make sense of the difference between the so-called “cross-less” and “powerless” forms of Christianity. In this write-up, we shall focus on their operative principles of interpretation with particular reference to the prosperity message or

¹ See Lawrence Nwankwo, “‘The Victim as Culprit’ – Re-appropriating Herman Beseah Browne’s Conceptualization of Negative Experiences in African Traditional Religion,” *Journal of African Traditional Religion* 2:1 (2018) 1-11, <https://www.journals.ezenwaohaetor.org/index.php/JATREP/article/viewFile/820/787> (accessed January 30, 2023).

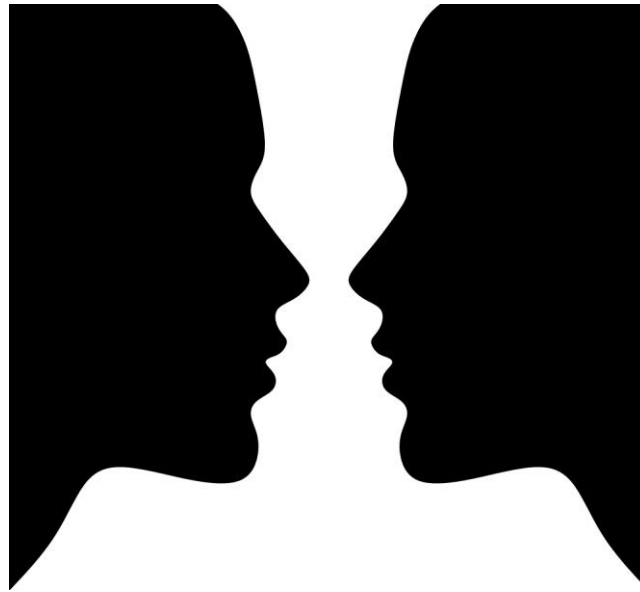


cross-less Christianity. At the risk of once more over-simplifying what is very complex, one can say that the difference lies in the fact that the prosperity messengers interpret the New Testament in the light of the Old Testament while the mainline Churches read the Old Testament in the light of the New Testament and with the proviso that the long journey from the Old to the New Testament represents a period of education on the divine purpose. The focus of the write-up is on the prosperity message. That is why the reflection is hung on the assertion in Deut. 21:23 “cursed is anyone who hangs on a tree” and is referenced in Gal 3:13. This is chosen because of the many layers of meaning that the imagery has on the issue at hand. First, it represents a line of interpretation of negative experiences as evidence of a curse. This way, it links up with the Deuteronomic theology of history, which I shall argue is central to the vision of proponents of the prosperity message. Second, it links up with their understanding of the redemptive work of Jesus Christ as the one who hung on a tree and thereby removed the curse and opened up the flow of the blessings granted to Abraham (Gal 3:13-14). Finally, hanging on a tree or carrying a cross is used in a metaphorical sense for anyone who has fallen on hard times in terms of challenges as regards finances, health, fertility, posterity, etc. In this way, the imagery of hanging on a tree or one’s cross also speaks to the emphasis of the other form of Christianity being studied.

Before going on with the reflection on the issues, I will first of all draw attention to the pivotal role of foregrounding in every interpretive or hermeneutical venture. This will hopefully clarify what is meant by the fact that the putative two faces of Christianity take different approaches to Scripture. When this is done, I briefly present the approach of the traditional form of Christianity. This will serve as background to the exploration of the approach of the prosperity messengers.

The Role Of Foreground In An Interpretive Venture

Meaning-making is an active process. This is one of the core insights of hermeneutics, which reflects on the conditions that interpret or meaning-making possible. One of the conditions for the possibility of interpretation is that there is a foreground. This is the point of focus or centre in relationship to which the form, “*Gestalt*” or outline of meaning, emerges. Change of this point of focus or centre can result in the emergence of a new meaning or new emphasis. Gestalt psychology and perspectivism have wonderful illustrations that make one aware of the importance of the point of focus in determining what is seen. The illustrations also show the shift that takes place in perception when a new point of focus is taken. I will only present two of those images to illustrate what is being said.



In this picture, one either sees two human faces staring at each other or one sees a chalice. The first, that is, the two faces emerge when the white is taken as the background against which the black colored part of the photo is set. If, however, the white area is taken as the foreground and the black part as the background, what is seen is the chalice.



In the second photograph, what strikes one immediately is the image of two elderly people facing each other. But one can also see three young fellows, two of whom are wearing hats and facing each other. Among the two facing each other, one has a moustache and is playing a guitar, while the other is using both hands to support the hat. Funnily, when the image is seen as that of young fellows, what were the noses, the chins, and the foreheads of the old fellows turn out to become, respectively, the bent arms, bent legs and hats of the two young fellows. What was the ear of one of the elderly folks appears as the image of a young maid in a striking posture.

Other things can be made of the pictures. Suffice it to note that what one sees depends on what is made the foreground or the background. Although it is the same image that is presented, what is foregrounded or placed at the back, as the case may be, changes what is perceived. A similar thing takes place in the meaning making process. Many and different interpretations of



the same text or piece of art emerge when it is placed within different contexts or when different elements of it are placed at the foreground. One person can give different interpretations of the same texts depending, among others, on what he or she is focusing on or bringing to bear on the text.

The Foreground Of Traditional Form Of Christianity In Nigeria

As already pointed out above, the traditional form of Christianity, in the main, foregrounds the New Testament and reads the Old Testament in the light of it. This is in line with the principle of divine *paideia* proposed by St. Irenaeus of Lyon. Unlike the apologists, Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria, who engaged pagan philosophy by proposing Christianity as the true philosophy, Irenaeus focused on the economy of salvation. For him, the particularity and diversity of human life is the theatre of God's saving works and like a teacher, God instructs human beings and leads them through different stages unto eternal life. According to him, the "economy unfolded in Scripture—creation and animation by a breath, apostasy, preparation, adoption, and finally life through death—[is] the pattern for the whole human race and for each human being."² This notion of divine *paideia* presents the New Testament as representing a stage of maturity in human development as well as in the revelation of God. In other words, although all Scriptures is inspired and profitable for teaching as noted in the letter to the Thessalonians (2 Tim 3:16), the New Testament occupies a higher position in relationship to the Old.

The hermeneutical principle derived from Irenaeus' teaching is in line with the presentation of Jesus in the New Testament as the new lawgiver who has come not to abolish but to fulfill the law and the prophets by resetting them to their original divine intention (Matt 5:17-48). After affirming that he has come not to abolish the law and the prophets but to fulfill them, Jesus went on to insist, "you have heard that it was said to our people in the past: "Do not commit murder.... Do not commit adultery Do not break your oath An eye for an eye" and went ahead to recontextualize these injunctions. He went so far as to correct a practice seemingly approved by Moses with regard to divorce and explained that Moses allowed the people to divorce their wives because of their hardness of heart. He then restated the primordial divine intention as regards marriage (Matt 19:8-9). Against the belief that negative experiences were the result of disobedience to God, Jesus taught otherwise. This is seen in the Gospel of John where the disciples asked Jesus whether a man was born blind as punishment for the man's or his parents' sin. Jesus' answer did not affirm any of the options. He insisted that it was so that God's power might be shown in him (Jn 9:1-3). Jesus' disavowal of the link between negative experiences and sin, his invitation to all to carry their crosses and follow him and other affirmations in the New Testament of the salutary effect of unmerited suffering borne in faith (Rom 5:3-5; Heb 12:5; 1 Pet. 4:12-16), gave rise to the dominant emphasis in the mainline churches on the need to offer up to God the negative experiences in union with the cross of Jesus (Col 1:24).

A fully developed belief in the afterlife is woven in the tapestry of the New Testament witness. The birth of Jesus is celebrated as the taking flesh of the Son of God, the second person of the Blessed Trinity, who preexisted with the Father before taking flesh in the Virgin Mary at the fullness of time (Gal 4:4). His resurrection, his ascension and promise that his disciples would be with him thereafter (Jn 14:1-4) once more underscored the afterlife with God. In the story

² John Behr, *Asceticism and Anthropology in Irenaeus and Clement* (London: Oxford, 2000) 216.



of Lazarus and the rich man, reward in the afterlife is highlighted as being of higher value than earthly wellbeing (Lk 16:19-31). The story of the widow who suffered from hemorrhage for twelve years (Matt 9:20-22) shows that God acts at His own time. Jesus taught his disciples about prayers with assurance that one receives if one asks in prayer (Matt 7:7). He also prayed (Heb 5:7) and the conclusion to his prayer at the Garden of Gethsemane (Matt 26:39) provides a model of the attitude to build up; an attitude of trustful openness to the divine will.

There are other sides to the traditional form of Christianity. The elements that have been highlighted are to trace the emphasis of the traditional form of Christianity back to the New Testament and to provide the background against which to project the emphases of the Prosperity message as mainly from the Old Testament. The last thing to comment on the traditional form of Christianity in Nigeria is that it bears the mark of the Enlightenment's disenchantment of reality. Consequently, the cosmology of the New Testament and the influence of evil spirits are de-emphasized. In the next section, we shall show how this element of the New Testament was retrieved from the perspective of the Old Testament.

Blessings And Curses: The Heart Of The Old Testament

Over the years, some themes have been presented by different theologians as the heart of the Old Testament, that is, as a theme that runs through and can be used to hold together the disparate elements in the Old Testament. Covenant³ had been presented as such, as well as a blessing and a curse.⁴ But these two themes are related. In the Old Testament, covenants are followed by stipulations of blessings when the covenant terms are followed and curses or punishment when there is infidelity to the terms of the covenant.

The Old Testament documents a series of covenants. In analogy to the covenants made by suzerains with their subjects or vassals, God enters into a pact or relationship, often ritually ratified, with human beings or the people of Israel. Though diverse, these covenants are related. One begins with the covenant with Noah, the one with Abram, the covenant with the Israelites at Sinai and finally the covenant with David. We shall concern ourselves more with the Sinaitic covenant. The story of the making of this covenant is given in Exodus 20. Comparison between this covenant and suzerainty treaties by Hittite kings has proved illuminating as regards the different components of its formulation. But the renewal of the covenant, as reported in Deuteronomy 27-30 will be our focus. This is because it leads us directly into the elaborate blessings and curses, which are stipulations for covenant fidelity and disobedience, respectively. These stipulations are in the background of the Prosperity message.

The catalogue of blessings and curses attendant on the observance or non-observance of the terms of the covenant is found in Deuteronomy 28. The blessings include that "Yahweh, your God shall raise you high above all the nations of the earth.... Yahweh will bring down all your enemies who rise against you, and put them at your feet" (v. 1-2). This implies that the Israelites are to dwell in security in the promised land on condition that they remain faithful to the terms of the covenant. The people and their land will also be fruitful since Yahweh will increase "the fruit of your womb, the fruit of your livestock and the fruit of your land" (v. 11). The people will be prosperous: "Yahweh will open the heavens for you, his rich treasury, to give rain in its

³ See Ernest W. Nicholson, *God and His People: Covenant and Theology in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986).

⁴ Jeff S. Anderson, *The Blessing and the Curse: Trajectories in the Theology of the Old Testament* (Portland Oregon: Cascade Books, 2014).



season which your fields need, and he shall bless all that you plan to do. You shall lend to many nations but it shall not be necessary for you to borrow anything from them” (v. 12). The nation will be exalted above all others: “Yahweh will set you at the head of the nations and not at the tail; you shall always be on top and never below, if you fulfill the commandments of Yahweh” (v.13). Disobedience would bring curses. “Yahweh will send misfortune, destruction and fear upon everything you do until you are destroyed and perish quickly on account of the evil deeds you have done in forsaking Yahweh” (v. 20) Sickness, crop failure, famine and ultimately exile in a foreign land are included in the misfortunes to befall the Israelites in the event of disregard of the commandments of Yahweh. As part of the conclusion, the editor remarked that “the secret things belong to Yahweh, our God, but what he made known to us belongs to us and our children forever. So we have to put into practice all the provisions of his Law!” (Deut 29:28).

The link between misfortune and covenant disobedience runs through most of the books of the Old Testament. In the narratives of the history of the Israelites, the state of the nation is often linked with the fidelity or lack thereof of the king. The common refrain in the historical books (1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles) is that the king did what was evil in the eyes of the Lord. Therefore, the Lord allowed the Israelites to be defeated in battle or to suffer from one misfortune or the other. In other words, the theology of history presented in these books is that the movement of the history of the Israelites depended on the covenant faithfulness or otherwise of their ruler. This theme also ran through the prophets. The ministry of the different prophets can be summarized as calling the people of Israel to covenant faithfulness with a threat that they would face disaster – military, economic and personal – if they persisted in their disobedience. However, Yahweh is rich in mercy and would take them back if they came back to Him.

The book of Job can be read as an engagement or critique rather than a rehashing of the Deuteronomistic theology of history. If the prologue, which presents the events narrated in the story as the result of a bet between God and the sons of God, is discountenance as an addition, one is left with a story that questions the adequacy of the Deuteronomistic view for accounting for human experiences of evil. Job, a just man, one who is faithful to God is plunged into misfortune. His three friends – Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar – were defenders of the Deuteronomistic theology of history. They insisted that Job’s suffering must have arisen from an offense to God and urged him to confess. The speech of Elihu, son of Barachel the Buzite however introduced some new elements. According to him, God could make people suffer in order to safeguard them from falling or cure them of pride or rejuvenate them physically (Job 33:16-25). More importantly, people may suffer for their sins of omission and hidden faults and even for one’s tendency to wrong-doing (Job 36:17). In other words, the suffering of the righteous is admitted and effort is made to justify God by insisting that the suffering is for the refinement of their righteousness. When this is placed side by side with Job’s submission about the tales from travelers about how “the evil man is spared from calamity, delivered from the day of God’s fury” (Job 21:29-30) one sees an acknowledgement of the limits of the retributive scheme of the Deuteronomistic theology of history. This also marks the limits of the scheme of blessing and curse for the interpretation of history.

Cursed Is He Who Hangs On A Tree: Prosperity Message In The Nigerian Context

Notwithstanding the shortcomings, foreseen even in the Old Testament, of the scheme of curses and blessings for the interpretation of history, it has become dominant in the vision of Christianity being peddled as prosperity message. One of the interpretive links of this scheme



to the New Testament and to the Jesus event is the text of Galatians 3:13. Here, St. Paul writes that “Jesus rescued us from the curse of the Law by becoming cursed himself for our sake, as it is written: there is a curse on everyone who is hanged on a tree.” This text serves as the basis for the articulation of the soteriological significance of the life of Jesus, which in turn guides practice.

In their essay titled, “Cursed be Everyone who hangs on a Tree: Pastoral Implications of Deuteronomy 21:22-23 and Galatians 3:13 in an African Context” Eliud Wabukala and Grant LeMarquand, argue that the text of Deut. 21 can be translated to mean someone who had been executed by other means but hung on a tree for display.⁵ This was a practice common in Old Testament times (2 Sam 4:12). The text could also be translated to mean that the person was executed by hanging (Jos 8:29, 10:26-27). By appropriating the imagery of hanging on the tree, St. Paul applies both the sacrificial and the exchange metaphors to make sense of the death of Jesus. In the Prosperity message, the death of Jesus is seen as removing the curse and restoring believers in the blessings enunciated in the Old Testament, especially in Deuteronomy 28. The death of Jesus is seen as making it possible for believers to partake of those blessings. The non-verification of those blessings in any Christian’s life is seen as calling for explanation.

This explanation is often given in terms of the interference of evil spirits. Here prosperity message retrieves elements of the New Testament cosmology, which resonates with the traditional cosmology of many African communities where spirits and deities are seen as involved in directing the world and determining the fate of human beings. On the tree of the cross, the transaction that brought back divine blessings was sealed. It is therefore expected that the blessings enunciated in Deuteronomy 28 will follow every believer. These blessings promised to an agrarian community are transposed onto modern life. Instead of the fertility of the land or one’s flock, it is about the steady stream of income and abundance of capital, economic and social. Where this is not verified, for example, as regards ill health, evil spirits are to blame. These are seen as blocking the flow of the divine blessing that one had been opened up for believers. Nothing short of the dislodgment of these spirits would be an adequate response. The so-called men and women of God, who are seen as possessing the ability to mobilize divine power, offer their services for this task. It is because of the deployment of this putative divine power to open up the flow of divine blessings, through signs and wonders, that those involved in this discourse derisively call the others, who do not share their emphasis, proponents or advocates of powerless Christianity.

The question of how those affected by negative experiences got entangled with the evil forces in the first place takes us back to the vision in Exodus 20:3-6 about God punishing the sons for the sins of their father up to the third generation. Although this transgenerational retributive scheme was already questioned in the Old Testament by Ezekiel (18:2,4) and in the New Testament by Jesus (Jn 9:3), it is still an important piece of plank in the edifice that props up the prosperity message. The harsh intrusion of negative experiences is often explained in terms of entanglement that came about as a result of the omissions and commissions of one’s forebears. The consequence is that the self-understanding of those who buy into the vision of the prosperity messengers are reconfigured in such a way that they estrange themselves from the extended family network since this is a possible source of entanglement.

⁵ Eliud Wabukala & Grant LeMarquand, “Cursed be Everyone who hangs on a Tree: Pastoral Implications of Deuteronomy 21:22-23 and Galatians 3:13 in an African Context” in Gerald O. West, Musa W. Dube, ed. *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories, and Trends* (Boston: Brill, 2000) 351



Conclusion

We have tried to show that the two faces of Christianity in Nigeria can be explained in terms of what is foregrounded in their interaction with Scriptures. What is made the foreground becomes the reference point to which all the other elements are structured. The images developed by Gestalt psychologists demonstrate how different things are seen in the same image depending on the reference point taken. The foreground becomes the reference point and every other thing is structured therefrom. In the rest of the essay, we tried to show that the two faces of Christianity, described derisively in reference to each other as ‘cross-less’ and ‘power-less’ Christianity, foreground the Old and New Testaments respectively.

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