

# First Fruit Sacrifice as Practiced among Contemporary Churches

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## Abstract

The gospel of prosperity, popularised by some Neo-Pentecostal pastors has drawn a negative perception among the generality of the Nigerian public in recent years about the emphasis on sowing and reaping by many Neo-Pentecostal churches, with many calling them ‘business centres’ and some state governors planning to impose taxes on churches because of the excessive show of wealth by some General Overseers (Church leaders). The recent teaching on first fruit offering by many churches has only increased this negative perception shown in the social media, national newspapers and even response to giving by church members. First fruit offering should not be made compulsory by any church because there is no punishment from God for those who do not practice it. Those who freely want to dedicate their first salary or income to God are welcomed, however, that must remain their personal decision which must not be expected or demanded from any other member. Pastors must avoid preaching new revelations which have not been proven to be consistent with the teachings of Jesus Christ and His Apostles. Bible study programs where members can search the scriptures and ask questions should be encouraged in the church before new doctrines are made in the church. There is the need for pastors to work in synergy with Biblical scholars on doctrinal matters. Giving in the New Testament and by extension the church today must be from a willing and cheerful heart inspired by the Holy Spirit. The church needs to do more in terms of giving to the society, the needy in and out of the church to change the negative perception about the church and its leadership.

**Keywords:** First fruit, offering, Neo-Pentecostalism, Prosperity, feasts

## INTRODUCTION

The principle of sowing and reaping is an old principle taught in many ways and used in various ways by different groups to communicate the relationship between input and output. Paul in Galatians 6:7 (RSV) said “Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap”. This principle has been used among many Churches in many different ways, one of which is that, this principle of sowing and reaping is one of the secrets to divine financial prosperity.

Traditionally, Tithes, Church offerings and Prophet Offerings are taught by many preachers as Kingdom principles for financial prosperity. Members are taught that if they do not pay their tithes to the church, life here on earth will be difficult for them and they will surely pay such money to the devil through sickness, death and other disasters. In this prosperity teaching, the tithes, offerings and prophets offerings is seen as a seed which members are to sow and they will reap divine prosperity, promotion, divine protection, increase in their businesses and so on and so forth.

Interestingly, in the last ten years in Nigeria, there has been an increase in a new additional principle for financial prosperity, which is called first fruit sacrifice or in some churches first fruit offering. Even though the concept is not entirely new, it has received great attention as one of the principles of prospering recently. The teaching of first fruit sacrifice is gaining momentum among Nigerian Churches currently and as such this paper intends to investigate this phenomenon. This new principle requires every Church member to give their entire first salary in the year or profit from their businesses to the church or the Pastor in some cases who is seen as the present day Priest and Levite. Whenever a member of the church receives salary increase, the difference between the new salary and the old salary at any point in the year is seen as his/her first fruit also. This offering or sacrifice is to be given in addition to the other conditions for kingdom financial prosperity (tithes, church offering and prophets offering). It is taught that holiness alone is not enough to attract divine prosperity; you need to sow finance to reap finance.

It becomes necessary to find out the biblical bases, practice and relevance of the first fruit sacrifice to contemporary Christians. The question therefore in the case of first fruit sacrifice is whether Nigerian pastors, especially those of the Neo-Pentecostal churches are simply greedy asking their members to sacrifice more for their own sake or it is simply a way to honour God which has been neglected over the years.

The origin of the teaching and practice of First Fruit offering is not very clear, some believe it originated from some Pentecostal pastors from the United States of America while others say it originated from the cultural practice in some Nigerian communities where a child is required to present to his/her parents the first income he/she receives. The parents will then bless the child and it is believed that, that child will prosper because he/she has honoured the parents who laboured over their lives to make them what they are today. It is therefore believed that since it was God who gave humankind the power to make wealth, He must be honoured

with the first income every year and every increase on the salary or business profit during the year.

### **The Concept of First Fruit offering**

According to the Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch (2003), the word first fruit is used in two ways in the English Bible. First it simply describes the first portion of the produce of the land. Second it refers to specific ceremonies related to the first portion of the harvest. Two Hebrew words are translated 'firstfruits' in the English Bible. The first Hebrew term is *bikkurim*, which is translated firstfruits eight times in the Pentateuch (Ex 23:16, 34:22; Lev 23:17, 23:20, Num 8:13, 28:26) the same term is also translated early ripened things (Lev 2:14) and first ripe (Num13:20). It refers to first-ripe agricultural products, including fruits, grains and grain products such as flour and bread. The second Hebrew term is *resit*, which is translated 'firstfruit' four times in the Pentateuch (Lev 2:12; 23:10, Num 18:12, Deut 18:4). Additionally, it is translated choice (Ex 23:19) and first (Ex 34:26, Lev 2:12, 23:10, Num 15:20-21; 18:12, 24:20; Duet 18:4, 26:2,10; 33:21). It refers to grain, wine, oil and even wool from the first shearing of the sheep (Deut18:4).

The first instruction by God is seen in the book of Exodus:

Three times in the year you shall keep a feast to me. You shall keep the feast of unleavened bread; as I commanded you, you shall eat unleavened bread for seven days at the appointed time in the month of Abib, for in it you came out of Egypt. None shall appear before me empty-handed. You shall keep the feast of harvest, of the first fruits of your labour, of what you sow in the field. You shall keep the feast of ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in from the field the fruit of your labour. (Exodus 23:14-16 RSV)

According to Thomas (2008), First Fruits were offered to the Lord during the 'Feast of Weeks'. This was a seven week festival in which offerings of the first of the harvest of various crops were presented to the Lord in the tabernacle. Some specific instructions concerning the statute of First Fruit are found in the book of Leviticus: "And you shall eat neither bread nor grain parched or fresh until this same day, until you have brought the offering of your God: it is a statute for ever throughout your generations in all your dwellings." (Leviticus 23:14 RSV)

The First Fruits offering begins the harvest season. It is a joyful sign of the abundance of the harvest to come. By this offering, the whole ensuing harvest is presumed blessed. It is assumed that the offering of the First Fruits of the harvest makes all the harvest holy with the blessings of God. The First Fruits offering is expression of thanksgiving to God. It recognizes that all things come from God and belong to God. It is only right that the giver of Life should be given a portion of what is His. This offering honours God and returns thanks to Him for His providential mercy.

### **The Concept of First Fruit in the Old Testament**

The Practice of First Fruit can be seen across the Old Testament as follows:

Exodus 23:19, talks of the first of the first fruits, which gives the idea of the very first sign of increase. Lev 23:17 quantified the quantity of First Fruit to be brought as two loaves made of two-Tenths of an Ephah (3.6 litres) of fine flour baked with yeast as a wave offering of first fruit. Leviticus 2:14, shows the method of presentation of the First Fruit to the Lord, which is that, it should be crushed heads of new grain roasted in the fire.

In Leviticus 23:20, the Lord began to state the purpose for the first fruit offering, He says it shall be Holy unto the Lord for the Priest. It is a sacrifice to the Lord but used by God's representative the priest that does not have inheritance of land in Israel. This instruction is re-echoed in Deut 18:4 which says the priest should be given the best of the first fruits of grain, new wine and oil and best of your sheep. God's intention was simple to compensate and provide for the priest and his family since they are not expected to have physical farms of their own but were separated to work for God. Another purpose for giving the first-fruit was to thank God for what He has done as seen in Duet 26:10 which says "And behold; now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which thou, O LORD, hast given me. And you shall set it down before the LORD your God, and worship before the LORD your God" and to honour the Lord with the best increase as shown in Proverbs 3:9 which says "Honour the LORD with your substance and with the first fruits of all your produce"

Numbers 28:26 shows that first fruit had a specific date and on that day the people were to observe it as a public holiday and do no secular job. This shows that first fruit offering was not practiced as an individual event but as a national event. Even though all the farms do not have their First Fruit at the same time, they all had to wait for the national day declared for first fruit festival.

Nehemiah 10:35, shows the practice of offering the first fruit every year while Nehemiah 10:37 makes the distinction between the First fruits and tithes. However Deut 26:12 reveals that at the time when Israel practiced first fruits, tithing was only practiced in the third year which is the year of tithing. In the year of tithing,

you give the tithe to the Levite, the alien, the fatherless and the widow so that they eat and be satisfied. In Jeremiah 2:3, Jeremiah 24:2, Ezekiel 48:14 and Hosea 9:10, First Fruit is used symbolically to represent choice gifts unto the Lord.

### **The Practice of First Fruit during the Feast of Unleavened Bread**

These are the appointed feasts of the LORD, the holy convocations, which you shall proclaim at the time appointed for them. In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month in the evening, is the LORD's passover. And on the fifteenth day of the same month is the feast of unleavened bread to the LORD; seven days you shall eat unleavened bread. On the first day you shall have a holy convocation; you shall do no laborious work. But you shall present an offering by fire to the LORD seven days; on the seventh day is a holy convocation; you shall do no laborious work. And the LORD said to Moses, say to the people of Israel, When you come into the land which I give you and reap its harvest, you shall bring the sheaf of the first fruits of your harvest to the priest; and he shall wave the sheaf before the LORD, that you may find acceptance; on the morrow after the sabbath the priest shall wave it. And on the day when you wave the sheaf, you shall offer a male lamb a year old without blemish as a burnt offering to the LORD. And the cereal offering with it shall be two tenths of an ephah of fine flour mixed with oil, to be offered by fire to the LORD, a pleasing odor; and the drink offering with it shall be of wine, a fourth of a hin. And you shall eat neither bread nor grain parched or fresh until this same day, until you have brought the offering of your God: it is a statute for ever throughout your generations in all your dwellings. (Leviticus 23:4-14)

Verses 5-8 give the law for the first of the annual feasts, the Passover and unleavened bread. The Passover lamb was to be slain and eaten on the evening of the fourteenth day; and thereafter, for seven days, they were all to eat unleavened bread. The first and seventh days of unleavened bread were to be kept as a 'holy convocation;' in both of which 'servile work,' that is the usual occupations in the field or in one's handicraft, were forbidden.

The feast was a most suitable commemoration by Israel of the solemn circumstances under which they began their national life: their exemption from the plague of the death of the first-born, through the blood of a slain victim; and their exodus thereafter in such haste that they stopped not to leaven their bread. Whereas, secured by the sprinkling of blood, they then fed in safety on the flesh of the victim, by which they received strength for their flight from Egypt. Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible (1976) opines that the unleavened bread had more than a historic reference; it is of the opinion that since leaven is the established symbol of moral corruption; it was signified in symbol that the redeemed nation must not live by means of what is evil, but be a holy people, according to their calling. And the inseparable connection of this with full consecration of person and service, and with the expiation of sin, was daily symbolised (verses. 8) by the 'offerings made by fire,' burnt-offerings, meal-offerings, and sin-offerings, 'offerings made by fire unto the Lord.'

On "the morrow after the Sabbath" (verses. 15) of this sacred week, it was ordered (ver. 10) that "the sheaf of the firstfruits of the (barley) harvest" should be brought "unto the priest;" and (ver. 11) that he should consecrate it unto the Lord, by the ceremony of waving it before Him. This wave-offering of the sheaf of firstfruits was to be accompanied (verses. 12 and 13) by a burnt-offering, a meal-offering, and a drink-offering of wine. Until all this was done (verse. 14) they were to "eat neither bread, nor parched corn, nor fresh ears" of the new harvest. The consecration of the firstfruit signifies the consecration of the whole, of which it is the first part, unto the Lord. By this act, Israel, at the very beginning of their harvest, solemnly consecrated the whole harvest to the Lord; and are only permitted to use it, when they receive it thus as a gift from Him.

For Israel was declared in Exodus 4: 22 to be God's first-born; that is, in the great redemptive plan of God, which looks forward to the final salvation of all nations, Israel comes historically first. "The Jew first, and also the Greek," (Romans 1:16) is the New Testament formula of this fundamental dispensational truth. The offering unto God, therefore, of the sheaf of firstfruits, at the very beginning of the harvest,—in fullest harmony with the historic reference of this feast, which commemorated Israel's deliverance from bondage and separation from the nations, as a first fruit of redemption,—symbolically signified the consecration of Israel unto God as the first-born unto Him from the nations, the beginning of the world's great harvest. Singer (1901) opines that all who acknowledge the authority of the New Testament will recognise a yet more profound, and prophetic, spiritual meaning. Passover and unleavened bread not only looked backward, but forward. Apostle Paul addressing all believers says; "Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our paschal lamb has been sacrificed. Let us, therefore, celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth." (1

Corinthians 5:7-8)

Following upon the Passover, on the morrow after the Sabbath, the first day of the week, the sheaf of firstfruits was presented before the Lord. Apostle Paul also narrates in (1 Corinthians 15:20), that Christ, in that He rose from the dead on the first day after the Sabbath, became "the first fruits of them that are asleep;" This agrees with John 12:24 where Christ speaking of Himself said "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

### **The Practice of First Fruit Offering during the Feast of Harvest (Pentecost)**

And you shall count from the morrow after the sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering; seven full weeks shall they be, counting fifty days to the morrow after the seventh sabbath; then you shall present a cereal offering of new grain to the LORD. You shall bring from your dwellings two loaves of bread to be waved, made of two tenths of an ephah; they shall be of fine flour, they shall be baked with leaven, as first fruits to the LORD. And you shall present with the bread seven lambs a year old without blemish, and one young bull, and two rams; they shall be a burnt offering to the LORD, with their cereal offering and their drink offerings, an offering by fire, a pleasing odor to the LORD. And you shall offer one male goat for a sin offering, and two male lambs a year old as a sacrifice of peace offerings. And the priest shall wave them with the bread of the first fruits as a wave offering before the LORD, with the two lambs; they shall be holy to the LORD for the priest. And you shall make proclamation on the same day; you shall hold a holy convocation; you shall do no laborious work: it is a statute forever in all your dwellings throughout your generations. (Leviticus 23:15-21)

Next in order came the feast of firstfruits, or the feast of weeks, which, because celebrated on the fiftieth day after the presentation of the wave-sheaf in Passover week, has come to be known as Pentecost, from the Greek numeral signifying fifty. It was ordered that the fiftieth day after this presentation of the first sheaf of the harvest should be kept as a day of "holy convocation," with abstinence from all "servile work." The former festival had marked the absolute beginning of the harvest with the first sheaf of barley; this marked the completion of the grain harvest with the reaping of the wheat. In the former, the sheaf was presented as it came from the field; in this case, the offering was of the grain as prepared for food. It was ordered (verse 16) that on this day "a new meal offering" should be offered. It should be brought out of their habitations and be baked with leaven. In both particulars, it was unlike the ordinary meal-offerings, because the offering was to represent the ordinary food of the people. Accompanied with a sevenfold burnt-offering, and a sin-offering, and two lambs of peace-offerings, these were to be waved before the Lord for their acceptance, after the manner of the wave-sheaf (verses 18-20).

As a consecration, it dedicated unto God the daily food of the nation for the coming year. As Passover reminded them that God was the Creator of Israel, so herein, receiving their daily bread from Him, they were reminded that He was also the Sustainer of Israel; while the full accompaniment of burnt-offerings and peace-offerings expressed their full consecration and happy state of friendship with the Lord, secured through the expiation of the sin-offering.

Singer (1901) states that for after that Christ, first having been slain figuratively as Passover, then risen from the dead as the Firstfruit, fulfilling the type of the wave-sheaf on the morning of the Sabbath. After fifty days passed; and the day of Pentecost was fully come, came that great outpouring of the Holy Ghost, the conversion of three thousand out of many lands (Acts 2.), and therewith the formation of that Church of the New Testament whose members the Apostle James declares (James 1: 18) to be "a kind of firstfruits of God's creatures." Thus, as the sheaf had typified Christ as "the Firstborn from the dead," the presentation on the day of Pentecost of the two wave-loaves, the product of the sheaf of grain, no less evidently typified the presentation unto God of the Church of the first-born, the first-fruits of Christ's death and resurrection, as constituted on that sacred day. This then was the complete fulfilment of the feast of weeks. The complete redemption was not attained by that Church of the first-born on Pentecost because the two wave-loaves were to be baked with leaven and on earth the leaven of sin still abides.

### **Concept and Practice of First Fruit Offering in the New Testament**

In the Canonical Gospels, the concept of the harvest of First Fruits is used metaphorically and allegorically. (*ἀπαρχή*, usually *ἀπαρχαί* from *ἀπάρχομαι*, 'offer firstlings or first-fruits'). The word occurs six times in the Pauline Epistles, once in James, and once in Revelation. Its significance depends largely on the belief, which the Hebrews shared with many ancient nations, that first-fruits were peculiarly sacred, and on the custom which prescribed them for the services of Yahweh. The offering of first-fruits made the rest of the crop lawful.

Apostle Paul also referred to Jesus' resurrection as a type of 'First Fruit' when he says: "But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1Corinthians 15:20). Another usage of the concept of First Fruit by Apostle Paul is seen in Romans 11:16 which says "If the dough



offered as first fruits is holy, so is the whole lump; and if the root is holy, so are the branches”, where the allusion is to the heave-offering mentioned in Numbers 15:16-21. The Pauline argument is what Hastings (2001) has called an argument from tendencies—as the beginning is, so shall the completion be; as the cause is, so shall the effect be; as the part, so the whole.

In James 1:18 Christians of apostolic times are called ‘a kind of firstfruits.’ Thus 1 Corinthians 16:15 says; “Ye know the house of Stephanas, that it is the firstfruits of Achaia, and that they have set themselves to minister unto the saints”. These men, with all likeminded, were the first-fruits of a new creation achieved by the spirit of Christianity, and they were the pledge of others who would follow their inspiring example.

In Revelation 14:4 the reference is to a specially favoured class who has been purchased from among men, the firstfruits unto God and unto the Lamb. Romans 8:23 speaks of Christians who have already been blessed by the Spirit, and who have the sure hope of a greater harvest of blessing when mankind shall be fully sanctified. The most notable passage is 1 Corinthians 15:20-23, where Christ is called the ‘Firstfruits.’ Just as the first-fruits are the earnest of later harvesting, so the Resurrection of Christ is the guarantee of resurrection. ‘Christ is risen! Christians are risen!’, and shall rise.

According to Roberts (1994), the church father Irenaeus teaches that there were sacrifices in the Old Testament and there are still sacrifices in the Church. Yet because of the death and resurrection of Christ, the nature of these sacrifices has changed. The former sacrifices were made by slaves: the present ones are done by freemen. The former were done out of obligation: the present ones are done in freedom. But the change of the nature of the sacrifices is even more dramatic, according to Irenaeus, the offerings are no longer the sacrifices of bulls and goats, burnt offerings, and sin offerings (Hebrews 10:4-6). The Lord Jesus Christ has offered one sacrifice forever’ for sin and sanctification (Hebrews 10:12-13).

The First Fruits offering foreshadow the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul describes the Risen Christ as First Fruits when he said “

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. (1Corinthians 15:20-23 RSV).

Hapgood (1996) opines that the Divine Liturgy of St. Basil echoes this teaching when it says of Jesus Christ:

He...rose again from the dead on the third day, making a way for all flesh through the Resurrection from the dead—for it was not possible that the Author of Life should be holden to corruption—that he might be the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep, the first-born of the dead; and he shall be all things, the first in all things. (p.99)

The meaning is clear. The First Fruits are only the beginning. The rest of the harvest of the resurrection is to follow. But as the First Fruits, the Risen Christ not only is the pledge and guarantee of the resurrection of those that are His. He also sanctifies those who belong to Him whom God will raise from the dead as the new harvest of God.

In the Old Testament, First Fruit offering was a sign of the harvest to come, a means of blessing that harvest, and a recognition that the harvest belonged to God who gave it. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is a sign of future resurrection, a sanctification of those to be raised from the dead, and recognition that it is God who gives the New Life of the Resurrection. Furthermore, the idea of First Fruits was so compelling that Paul also applied it to the Holy Spirit. He said, “...we also who have the first fruits of the Spirit, even we groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body” (Romans 8:23b). In speaking of the seal of the Holy Spirit given in baptism, Paul says that the Holy Spirit is “... the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory” (Ephesians 1:14.) Again, the First Fruits assures the harvest. Finally, the Church itself is called the First Fruits. James says “Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures” (James 1:18).

Just as the Old Testament offering of the First Fruits was made holy to the Lord and with it the entire harvest, so believers are also made holy as an offering to the Lord. Schmemann (2003) puts it this way: “For if Christ’s life is offering and sacrifice, then our life in Him and the whole life of the Church are offering and sacrifice...” (p.101)

Paul sums up this understanding when he said: “I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” (Romans 12:1RSV).

### **Contemporary Practices of First-Fruit offering**

The first fruit concept is widely believed among Christians but selectively observed. In the Pentecostal fold, aside the tithes and offerings, first fruit offerings are collected as the first salary of the year.

There are others who do not see first fruit as either a Biblical or ancient concept. To this group, the practice is rooted in African cultural practices, they disagree with the notion of Israeli-Palestinian origin theory; rather it is an ancient Yoruba culture. Among some Yoruba families, When a child earns his first salary, he brings it to his parents and honours them with it” (Leadership Newspaper, 2013). He said he remembers his first salary as a Youth Corper was given to his parent as his first fruit. Another proof that the Firstfruit offering is rooted in the African culture can be seen in an article by Ogunade (2004) in which he states that, during harvest, the Yoruba farmer must not eat the first fruits. These farm produce are meant for the kings and the poor in the community. The belief is that such category of people should be taken care of by the community. The king will offer his prayers and blessings to the farmers. The *Ori* (inner-head; personality-soul; guardian angel) of the poor will also shower blessings on the farmers. This way, goodwill permeates the entire community. In addition to these, Ogunade (2004) opines that some form of ceremonies must take place among the Yoruba before some food items are harvested. For instance, Yam, Palm-oil, palm-wine, cocoa, groundnut, and rubber cannot be harvested without the Yoruba pouring libation to the soil, in appreciation to Mother Earth’s generosity. This is particularly essential since they are coming back for planting next seasons.

According to Daniels (2007), the New Yam festival of the Igbo (Igbo: *Iwa ji*) is an annual harvest festival by the Igbo people held at the end of the rainy season in early August. The condiments that are usually used to cook the tubers of yam for a New Yam Festival are usually Fresh Palm Oil (*mmanu nri*), Salt, *Utazi*, Pepper, Onions, Crayfish just to mention a few are used in the preparation of the tubers of yam for the New Yam Festival. (Daniels, 2007)

Tunde Bakare (2009), one of the known neo-Pentecostal pastors in Lagos, in his television program explained his understanding on the debate of first fruit offering. He said there is a difference between first fruit and tithe, that first fruit offering is the first salary you receive while tithe is 10% of your subsequent salary or profit. However, whenever you receive a salary increase, that increase is also first fruit offering. He disagrees with pastors that demand first fruit offering every year from their members.

### **Comparing Biblical Practice of First Fruit and contemporary practice of first fruit offering**

It is observed that there are different understandings on whether to give first fruit offering or not and for those who give, the modalities of how to practice the first fruit sacrifice. The Biblical bases for this principle, how it should be collected and administered differs from one church to another. For example some churches insist the first fruit offering has to be collected in January to honour the Lord with the first income, others say a convenient time to honour the Lord is acceptable. While some pastors insist it has to be every income and gift one receives in January, that is gross income, others say the member should determine a worthy amount to honour God within the first month of the year which can be their net income.

The teaching of first fruit among the Neo-Pentecostal churches is based on Bible verses like; Proverbs 3:9, which states “honour the Lord with your wealth, with the first fruits of all your crops” and Deuteronomy 18:4 which states that “you are to give the priest the first-fruits of your grain, new wine and oil, and the first wool from the shearing of your sheep”. The yearly requirement for the first fruit offering is derived from the commitment of the Children of Israel to observe the laws given by God to Moses after their third return to Jerusalem. Nehemiah 10:35 states “we also assume responsibility for bringing to the house of the Lord each year the fruits of our crops and every fruit tree”. The Neo-Pentecostal pastors preach that first fruit offering is different from the monthly tithes because Nehemiah said

Moreover, we will bring to the house of our God, to the priests, the first of our ground meal, of our grain offerings, of the fruits of all our trees and of our new wine and oil. And we will bring a tithe of our crops to the Levites, for it is the Levites who collect the tithes in all the towns where we work (Nehemiah 10:37)

This Bible verse above is seen as justification for collection of tithes and first fruit offering by pastors, who are seen as the Levites today in the Neo- Pentecostal churches. The Jews were majorly farmers and were asked to bring products of their farms and not money to God, to be used by the priest who had no inheritance of land. Today, using the Nigerian context for example, there are few farmers and more of salary earners and business men and women. Consequently, the emphasis by the church today is on asking the people to bring money as profit and not the products of their farms. However the question remains, should a pastor who earns salary also request first fruit offering from the people? The answer is no, because there are a lot of bi-vocational pastors today and even those who work in the church alone are already on salaries and benefits from the Church. Leviticus 23:20 which states that “the priest shall raise them with the bread of the first fruits as an elevation-offering before the Lord, together with the two lambs; they shall be holy to the Lord for the priest”. The key word in the scripture above is ‘for’ which indicates purpose. One of the major reasons why God commanded the Jews to bring their first fruit was so that the priest and Levites who had no income because they did not have lands allotted to them to farm will also have food for their families.

The contemporary practice of First Fruit offering is based on the approach adopted in understanding the

Old Testament. Proponents of practicing First Fruit offering today have a fundamentalist approach, which while it gives a high degree of authority to the Old Testament, reads the text in a very literal way. Inconsistencies tend to be harmonized and differences played down, while harsh elements of God's activity are taken seriously. This often results in a Christian theology in which the aspect of divine judgement looms large. This group are those who pick certain portions of the Old Testament and apply it literally to the contemporary Church. The challenge however with this approach is that, it leads to selective interpretation of the Old Testament.

The book of Deuteronomy gives a clear description of the practice of First Fruit offering, as it states:

When you come into the land which the LORD your God gives you for an inheritance, and have taken possession of it, and live in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from your land that the LORD your God gives you, and you shall put it in a basket, and you shall go to the place which the LORD your God will choose, to make his name to dwell there. And you shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, 'I declare this day to the LORD your God that I have come into the land which the LORD swore to our fathers to give us. Then the priest shall take the basket from your hand, and set it down before the altar of the LORD your God. And you shall make response before the LORD your God, 'A wandering Aramean was my father; and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage. Then we cried to the LORD the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice, and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression; and the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror, with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which thou, O LORD, hast given me.' And you shall set it down before the LORD your God, and worship before the LORD your God; and you shall rejoice in all the good which the LORD your God has given to you and to your house, you, and the Levite, and the sojourner who is among you. When you have finished paying all the tithe of your produce in the third year, which is the year of tithing, giving it to the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, that they may eat within your towns and be filled, (Deuteronomy 26:1-15 RSV)

Subjecting the above Bible verses to the literal approach of understanding the Old Testament leads to the following deductions:

The first deduction from Deuteronomy 26 verses 1 and 2 is that the first fruit was only required when the Children of Israel settled down in the promise land. First Fruit was specifically about products from the Land. The requirement for first born redemption is different from that of First Fruit offering. Will it therefore be correct to apply first fruit requirement on all kinds of income today? The answer will be no. Is the prayer in Deuteronomy 26:5-11 literally applicable today? The answer will also be no, because the prayer in Deuteronomy 26:5-11 represents the history of the Jews and we are not Jews but Christians. The Jews were commanded to give their First Fruit of the Promised Land (the Land of Israel in Palestine) which does not literally apply to us here in Nigeria.

Deuteronomy 26:12 states that tithing should be done on the third year and not every year or every month as it is practiced today. Therefore, any church that request for yearly first fruit offering can only receive tithes on the third year. It is obvious that even those who approach the Old Testament literally, do not apply every aspect literally, they choose and pick, which leads to using the Old Testament to achieve their own aim.

In the Old Testament Ministers are not expected to bring First fruit offering themselves because from the gifts brought by others, a portion is given to the Lord as a burnt offering while the rest is to be used by the Ministers in the temple. However, this is not the practice in many Churches that practice First Fruit offering, everyone is asked to bring their first fruit offering and sometimes the Minister tells the members he has paid his own to encourage the members pay their own since the bulk of the money will be sent to the head quarters.

#### Conclusions

This study compares the practice of First fruit offering in the Old Testament, the New Testament and the Contemporary Neo-Pentecostal church in Lagos, using the Redeemed Christian of God (RCCG) Lagos as a case study. The attempt by some contemporary churches to practice First fruit offering which was one of the yearly feasts the Jews were commanded by God to observe when they enter physically the land of promise (Canaan Land) has been shown to be putting unnecessarily extra burden on contemporary Christians which was not taught by Jesus Christ nor His Apostles but popularized by some wealth seeking contemporary Pastors from the United States of America.

The New Testament model of giving has always been that each person gives what he/she has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves and accepts only a cheerful and willing giver.

From the foregoing, we strongly recommend that First fruit offering as practiced in the Old Testament is no longer applicable to today's Christians because the practice of First Fruit offering in the Old and New Testaments is not the same with what obtains among churches that request members to bring their first income every year to God via the Church. Pastors should therefore no longer demand First fruit offering from their members as though it is God that is requiring members to bring their first income every year to the church.

It is not sinful for any Christian who wants to willingly dedicate his first salary or income every year to God, however this must be his/her personal decision which must not be forced on any other Christian who does not want to be part of such sacrifice. Paul the apostle writing to the Corinthian Christians says "Each one must do as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver". (2 Corinthians 9:7)

For churches where members are not subtly coaxed but willingly want to bring their First salary, any kind of increase or income to the church, only those serving in the Church with no other vocation, widows and the poor with no one to help them should be allowed to use such money because one of the major reasons why God commanded the Jews to bring their first fruit was so that the priest and Levites who had no income as a result of the fact that they did not have lands allotted to them to farm will also have food for their families.

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