

Ethical Misconduct among Nigerian Church Leaders in the Context of 1 Timothy 3: 1 - 7

Oderinde, Olatundun Abosede Ph.D

Department Of Religious Studies, Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago – Iwoye, Ogun State, Nigeria

E-MAIL: olatundunoderinde@yahoo.com

Abstract

The character of uncorrupted virtue, especially in relation to truth and fair dealing is expected from ministers of God. The Pastoral Epistles attached unequivocal importance to ministerial integrity in terms of godly character, holiness, blamelessness, and skillful hands that are consistent. The life of integrity enhances the credibility and effectiveness of a minister. The number of ministers of God in Nigeria today who meet this expectation is very few. Many Church leaders thrive on corruption, some take advantage of the psychology of an average Nigerian who is always in search of miracles and wonders, they exploit their followers financially and materially. Preaching the Gospel has become a business venture to a large extent. The paper attempts a re-appraisal of the relevance of the apostolic precepts in the Pastorals, with regards to the obligations of bishop and deacons, to the Nigerian context through a re – reading of 1 Timothy 3:1-7. The state of ministerial integrity in Nigeria was examined and the paper concluded that adopting and enforcing the qualities required of Church leaders and Overseers in the Pastorals in the selection and appointment of ministers today will help the Nigerian Church redeem her battered image and raise persons of good moral characters and virtues as Church leaders.

Keywords: Ethical Misconduct, Church leaders, 1 Timothy 3:1-7, Nigeria

Introduction

Christian leadership as portrayed in the Pastoral Epistles is expected to serve as a role model of faithfulness, truth, honesty and chastity. The focus of these epistles is on the organization and governance of the Christian community. The central concept is conduct that is pleasing to God; a regular and reliable ecclesiastical hierarchy with clear assignment of responsibilities (Schrage, 1988:257). The New Testament strives to shape Christian life and concrete conduct in detail. It is concerned that Christians be “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world” (Matt.5:13-14) and maintain their distinctiveness even in their “good works” (Schrage, 1988:11). Christians are called upon to lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way. The proven character of those who seek leadership in the church is more important than personality, preaching gifts, administrative abilities, or academic accomplishments (Stamps, 1992:1908). A pastor whose quality of life is an illustration of the faith is absolutely essential for Christian leadership. Church leaders have the obligation to live by the norms of Christian ethics as stipulated in 1 Tim.3:1-7, Tit.1:3-8. A bishop as God’s steward, must be blameless; he must be hospitable, must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy. In this epistle, much emphasis is laid on the character of prospective Church leaders rather than the position.

The expectations of God and the society for ministers of the Gospel is very high, this is because Christianity is an ethical religion hence when ministers of the Gospel, leaders from whom much is expected lacks integrity and misbehave, the result leaves so much to be desired. There is lack of respect for ministers and consequently the weakening of his expected godly influence over Parishioners and other persons in the society. The present state of the Nigerian nation could be a reflection of the state of the Nigerian Church. The lack of integrity or the loss of it among gospel Ministers in the recent time have reached an alarming rate which has caused a high level of deterioration not only in the quality of Christians but also reflected in the current deplorable state of the Nigerian Nation.

The over-emphasis on materialism occasioned by the gospel of prosperity has not left the Church the same way it met her, it is the underlying factor of most ministerial misconducts. The loss of respect and influence occasioned by misconducts among gospel ministers has impacted negatively on parishioners and members of the society who are key players in the different aspects of national leadership. Everyone who has been in national leadership goes to a religious centre and comes under the influence of a religious leader or a Pastor and their performance in office could be related to what influence their religious leaders had on them. At the moment, government institutions seem to be weak and failing, there is a lot of decay and rotteness in most areas of national leadership. The Political class has not been able to stay clear of corruption and there are clear evidences that despite the increase in the number of churches of different denominations, the impact of Christianity is not much felt in the society today. There is a lot of moral decadence in the lives of the citizenry such that the cultural value once celebrated as a nation such as honesty, faithfulness, patriotism, trust, and so on, are being eroded. In the light of the fore goings, it becomes necessary to understand the role that ministers’ lack of integrity or the loss of it have played in all of these and proffer solutions that can help reverse the trend.

1Timothy 3: 1 -7 and the Characteristics of Prospective Church Leader

The epistle to Timothy is one of the Pastoral Epistles, so called because they addressed ecclesiastical issues – order and structure – in the body of Christ. Though the authorship of the epistle is controversial, its content is not less relevant than any of the other canonical books. In fact, the content of the Pastorals is more traditional, practical, set down didactically in fixed rules of conduct and morality (Schrage, 1990:257). The Pastorals call on Christians to lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way. They emphasise reverence, piety, conduct that is pleasing to God as requirements that apply to all Christians. The ethical conduct urged on believers is an essential part of their missionary witness to the world. The practical, day –to- day conduct of all believers is, for the Pastoral Epistles, an integral part of their faith and worship (Freedman, 1992:567).

The ideal Church leader is described in 1Tim. 3: 1-7 with a catalogue of virtues, though all the qualities listed in the text are expected in any serious Christian, they are more especially necessary in the life of Christian leaders. Anyone whose moral and spiritual qualities do not commend them to their contemporaries are not going to have much influence as Christian minister. A great deal of damage has been done by those whose inconsistent living has been noticed and criticized by the non – Christian world (Carson, France, Motyer & Wenham 1994:1299). Pastors are expected to serve as models of unflinching perseverance in faith, love, and purity. They are to maintain high moral and spiritual standards.

The Overseer then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach; not an excessive drinker, not violent; but forbearing, not contentious, not covetous; one who manages well his own household, having his children in subjection with all dignity. He must not be a new convert; he must have a good report from those outside (1Timothy, 3:1 -7).

The minister here is expected to oversee the needs of his followers, the life of the flock. He is required to be blameless – he must have a blameless reputation; a proven observable conduct which is above reproach. “Above reproach” (*anepileptos* means not only of good report but deservedly so) this is indispensable to the Christian minister’s character (Guthrie, 1990). His Christian life and character must reflect Christ. His steadfastness in the faith can be set before the congregation as pre-eminently worthy of imitation. He is expected to be a married man who has only one wife.

He must have self-control, be able to control his passions; have a sound and sane mind that is emotionally self-restrained. He must be a respectable and honourable man in the society; have a well-ordered life and generous. He must have teaching skill to be able to teach the word of God effectively. This quality involves mental skills. An overseer must have the propensity to pass on the advice and doctrine to enquirers. The church has been at its weakest when this basic requirement has been absent in its leaders (Guthrie, 1990). The Christian leader is not to indulge in excessive drinking. He must be a gentle man, patient with the imperfections of his followers. He must not be covetous; the focus of his life must not be for the purpose of accumulating wealth. He must have proved his ability to work with people by his correct handling of the affairs of his own family. Any man unable to govern his children graciously and gravely by maintaining good discipline, is not suitable for government in the church.

The parallel between the church and the home brings impressive dignity to Christian home-life, a dignity as imperative in the twentieth century as in Paul’s day (Guthrie, 1990:93). He must not be a new convert but someone who is knowledgeable in the word of God. All these qualities are expected in both the men and women who aspire or claim to have been called to be Church leaders.

Societal Expectation from Gospel Ministers

Gospel ministers are mostly called by different, numerous titles in Nigeria. Some are called pastors, reverends, apostles, bishops, General Overseers or Superintendents, prophets and so on. Generally they occupy the position of a spiritual guide and community leader in the society. They are believed to be God’s representatives on earth and ambassadors of God’s kingdom; hence they are respected and treated with much honour. The status of the minister of the gospel in the society is a unique one and it is the expectation of all and sundry that he or she is above board both in character and in the discharge of his or her ministerial assignments. He is seen not only as the representative of God among men, but also as a Priest who represents the people before God. Consequently, there are high spiritual and moral expectations from him since he is supposed to be a person of integrity in the human society. If the society expects members of the community to exhibit integrity, then it expects the highest level of integrity from ministers of the gospel. He is expected to be truthful in life and character and live the truth of the scripture he teaches modelling Christ in a very sound and robust way that befits his calling.

One of the qualities expected of the gospel ministers is integrity. People will repose their trust in those who are reliable and in many cases, it does not matter the title a man is carrying in the society, once he is

discovered to be a man whose character is questionable, his tendency to influence the world around him is reduced. According to Roberts (1995: 65) character and integrity are associated word in moral vocabulary; “a person has character if he or she is characterized by such traits as truthfulness, courage, justice and compassion, especially if he or she is able to maintain virtuous action, emotion and thought despite pressures to slacken his or her measure”. In other words, “a person is said to have integrity if he or she is a complete and definite self and has the powers to resist ‘disintegration’ in the face of temptation, suffering, peer pressure, and other adverse moral influences”. Integrity is essential to every person who hopes to earn the trust and respect of those around him and more importantly is very crucial to the gospel minister if he hopes to influence his followers positively.

Trull and Carter, (2004) cited Chaucer who asked “If gold rusts, then what shall poor iron do” (p 14). If ministers whom the society looks up to fall for lack of integrity, what then should be expected of lay persons? If any person is going to misbehave, the society does not expect it to be ministers of God who are supposed to be custodians of morality and exemplary living. Ministers are expected to be people who have given themselves to serve others, to serve the needs of others through the preaching and teaching of the word of God. They must not be one against whom a just accusation can be made by any man.

The Pastor, in addition to teaching and preaching, also visits, counsels, encourage, do some administration and engage in social ministry in order to meet the holistic needs of his Parishioners. He is also probably a family man who must take care of his family and see to it that they are built up in the way of the Lord. The society does not want to know whether his wife and family receives ministerial training or not, they expect them to be godly and behave well. His pastoral ministry is not confined to the four corners of his Church. He is a public figure and consequently must make every effort to protect his integrity in the discharge of his duties. The lifestyle of a minister is an important element in his or her total witness. The lifestyle should confirm rather than contradict the gospel he or she proclaims

Ethical Misconduct among Nigerian Ministers

Religion has become a means of cheating and committing so much atrocity in the society today. The national dailies are replete with stories and news of prophets who dupe; engage in financial fraud and sexual immorality and a host of Holy Spirit tricksters who prowl about in priestly cassocks to rob their victims of money and household property worth of millions of naira (Oke, 2012). There are scores of one misconduct or the other about ministers of the gospel in the recent time, if it is not a Pastor burning the hand of a child suspected of having a witchcraft spirit, it would be another Pastor in a sex scandal with a member’s wife, if it is not a Rev King (2009) treating his Parishioners in a dehumanizing manner, it would be another Pastor stealing or diverting Church money for his personal pleasure and luxury at the Parishioners’ expense; if it is not a Pastor patronizing an herbalist who uses human parts for spiritual power, it would be another Pastor faking a miracle .

Mbang, cited in Oke, (2012) lamented that the Church has turned to a den of robbers; marketing God has led to high level of corruption, immorality and other forms of indiscipline in the society today. Tanu (2012:252) compared the sins of the sons of Eli with the immoral acts of ministers of God in Nigeria. While sons of Eli defiled innocent women, today children and women are being defiled by the priest who is supposed to be their guiding parent and spiritual leader. The children are raped at home and illegal abortions are committed regularly by men of God. She concluded that the society no longer respects the pastors as shapers of conscience and communicators of moral values. Audi (2004) cited in Tanu (2012: 252) added that the materialism of the world has come into the Church. Many are ready to sacrifice their integrity and conscience at the promise of material gains. Some will be willing to change or abandon their call to service if it will not yield expected material benefits. People go to the Church in order to trade with God. They must receive material returns for their faithfulness and their sacrifice in cash and kind.

Cases of moral failures on the part of ministers in Nigerian litter the air space of the electronic media and the print media. The story of “Rev King” of the Christian Praying Assembly, Ajao Estate, along Oshodi - Airport Road, Lagos, has it that whenever he is coming everybody around must be cleared from his way with the help of his security personnels, it’s so serious that whenever anyone for any reason did not get out of the way he or she is brutalized. In Nworah’s (2012: 1) words:

A member of his church speaking under anonymity narrated his ordeal at the hands of Rev. King to the Sunday Independent newspaper in these words, “He is used to having everybody cleared from his way whenever he is entering or coming out from the church, one day, in the church, I was physically manhandled by King because I laid in the direction that he was facing and was unable to move away due to a sickness that made me nearly unconscious, he beat me in my unconscious state until my limbs were broken. I was admitted in the hospital.

Another example is in *The Punch Newspaper* of July 26, 2012 where Ihuoma Chiedozie writes about Pastor Princewill, the General Overseer of the Mountain Movers Fire Ministries International, Nyanya, a satellite town

located between Abuja and Nasarawa State who was taken to court for having had carnal knowledge of two 14-year old female members of his Church, one of whom had also aborted for him after lying to the Doctor that he was her Father. The pastor and his co-accused, Ms Paulyn Ode, were arraigned on charges of conspiracy, criminal impersonation, criminal intimidation, and assault. He was not even too bothered with the charges but was rather fighting for his International Passport. This shows the level of depravity in the lives of some ministers in the Nigerian society, some ministers apart from sexual misconducts also tell lies, cheat, and move about without shame on a consistent basis, as long as they can still preach powerfully. A Nigerian publication reported that:

The Cameroonian government has blacklisted Prophet T.B. Joshua of the Synagogue Church of all Nations, Nigeria, saying that he is an agent of Satan hoodwinking unsuspecting members of the public with 'diabolical miracles'. Cameroon Foreign Affairs Minister, Mr. Henry Eyebe Ayissi, in an official communiqué titled 'The Devil is in the House' described T.B. Joshua as a 'son of the devil' pretending to be 'a man of God' (Weekly Star, 2010: 7).

In the recent time in Nigeria, the number of Jet acquiring pastors has increased; this has generated a number of reaction and comments from the impoverished Nigerian public many of which are still struggling to make ends meet (Alonge, 2012). There seem to be quiet competition among Pastors and General Overseers for wealth, fame and popularity while the country's citizenry and even Parishioners languish in poverty. Ministers of the gospel today eat the curds, clothe themselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but they do not take care of the flock. They have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. It is a fact in the Nigerian society of today that most Church members are greatly impoverished by the extravagant lifestyles of Pastors and ministers. They rule them harshly and brutally and there by scattered the flock and make them food for wild animals (Ezek. 34: 1-10).

There is a mad rush to get rich quick, the unemployment and the divers vices of the Nigerian society has also pushed many into becoming ministers. There are so many churches in Nigeria today yet there is no transformation; crime, prostitution, embezzlement, corruption, tribalism and the likes are yet on the increase and it is already in the church. The case was reported by *The Sun Newspaper* of 27th November 2012 where two ministers of God, Prophetesses, sold day-old baby for N.3m at Aba (Sampson, 2012). The news which was hoisted on the front page and on the website of the Newspaper actually had it that they had to lie to the mother of the baby that her child died from a feigned sickness, went to the extent of threatening the mother not to ask for the baby again and when the matter was reported to the Police they had to relocate their ministries before being caught. According to the report:

Luck ran out on the two women when following a fresh complaint by Grace, the police in Aba, led by one Rotimi with other security agencies, arrested the two prophetesses who confessed to the crime. They were said to have admitted selling the baby to a lady in Port Harcourt, Rivers State with the help of Ijeoma, the nurse who was still at large, for N300, 000 (p.2).

The church could not perform its function to the society simply because most of the ministers have failed to uphold their integrity. Many have fallen and disappointed the society while many make no difference between what is called sacred and the secular. There was the story of a Baptist Pastor (2007) who in spite of being fairly comfortable went ahead to sell some of the Church's landed properties, and forged the signatures of the church account signatories so as to collect money by himself from the Church account. Saturday Punch (2013) reported the case of a woman who accused her husband, the General Overseer of Eternal Glory Bible Church, of being fetish and adulterous before a Customary Court in Lagos. She pleaded with the court to dissolve her marriage on the grounds that it lacked love, the Pastor is not honest, he already had nine children with another wife before he married her but did not disclose this to her.

There are several dimensions of this seeming loss of integrity among ministers today. It ranges from misconducts relating to issues of abuses of position which has to do with the minister making use of his privileged position for his own end; counselling abuses which has to do with the inability of the minister of God to keep to counselling ethics; financial misconducts which relates to a minister's inability to handle corporate money transparently, the unjust and ungodly ways some ministers employed in order to make money, sexual misconducts which relates to improper handling of the relationship with opposite sex and the improper means some have adopted in an attempt to get the power needed for ministry.

Ethical Principles of 1Tim.3:1-7 as a Panacea to Ministerial Misconduct

The standard of God as contained in 1Tim.3:1-7 is that ministers must have the nature of God and be right in their relations to Him so that they could be right in their relations with their followers. God expects a high moral standard from his ministers; they are expected to honour God and keep his name, temple and altar

holy in the presence of the people in all the nations. It becomes necessary to apply the principles outlined in 1Timothy3:1-7 in the selection and appointment of church leaders; the word of God must confirm such call, and effort must be made to ensure that such a person has the qualifications listed in I Timothy 3. Lutzer (1998) explained that this could be done by asking the following probing questions rhetorically “Is he mature? Does he have the necessary gifts? Has he disqualified himself through moral or doctrinal compromise? A code of ministerial ethics patterned after 1Tim.3:1-7 will go a long way in curbing ethical misconduct among ministers of the Gospel.

Conclusion

The minister must have a reasonable level of education and training adequate for the setting in which he operates. He must also demonstrate the capacity for continuous learning and knowing. He must be spiritually minded, regenerated and divinely empowered by the Holy Spirit. . Effort must be made by the pastor to prevent any lifestyle that will bring stigma or reproach to the name of God in his life and family. Churches and ministries should see the need to take good care of their Pastors as very important as this will help the ministers to overcome temptations with regards to money and it will also help the church. The remuneration of Pastors should be improved and adequate welfare package should be put in place for their families. . Churches should have policies about standard of conduct, screening procedure, supervision guidelines, adequate insurance coverage, honest pastoral referees, and procedure for handling allegations of unethical behaviour and misconduct by ministers.

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