

WHITHER BOUND: CHURCHIANIZED NATION?

**A Passionate Review of
Christianity in Southern Nigeria
(and a Probable Clue to the
Condition of Christendom)**

**Featuring a Collection of 3 related,
dated, author-designed, color printed
materials: Didactic 001, Thinking
Aloud—2, Thinking Aloud—1, and
other didactic essays and
commentaries.**

Michael O. Ojewale

Long ago, the Prophet Jeremiah had lamented:
“An astonishing and horrible thing
Has been committed in the land:
The prophets prophesy falsely,
And the priests rule by their own power;
AND MY PEOPLE LOVE TO HAVE IT SO.
But what will you do in the end?”
(Jer. 5:30, 31; uppercase mine).

“Because from the least of them even to the greatest
of them,
Everyone is given to covetousness;
And from the prophet even to the priest,
Everyone deals falsely.
They have also healed the hurt of My people
slightly,
Saying, ‘Peace, peace!’
When there is no peace.
**Were they ashamed when they had committed
abomination?
No! They were not at all ashamed;
Nor did they know how to blush...**”
(Jer. 6:13-15a; emphasis mine).

Unless otherwise indicated, all scripture quotations are from the NKJV, © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc.

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What Exactly, in plain language, is **WHITHER BOUND:** **CHURCHIANIZED NATION?**

It is:

- Essentially, a Collection of 3 related, dated, author-designed, color printed materials, preserved and presented here in their original booklet format, as they were earlier circulated (from February to May 2022) in some parts of Lagos, Nigeria
- A compounded medication, in the spirit of 2 Timothy 3:16b (NIV) and Revelation 3:19, concocted and served with love, for the purpose of
 1. Teaching
 2. Rebuking
 3. Correcting and
 4. Training
- A 100,000+-word book that literally gave birth to itself because it had to be written
- For some, a hard pill to swallow
- For others, it is “a word spoken in due season... a word fitly spoken,” and “open rebuke... the faithful wounds of a friend,” (Proverbs 15:23; 25:11; 27:5, 6)
- For the author, simply storytelling.

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WHITHER BOUND: CHURCHIANIZED NATION?

A Passionate Review of Christianity in Southern Nigeria
(and a Probable Clue to the Condition of Christendom)

FOR THE SPECIAL ATTENTION OF
Church Leaders & Church Founders in the
Motherland

Nigeria: Churches, Churches, Churches, Everywhere, Especially
in the South, Yet Authentic Eyewitness & Newspaper Reports
From This Land Are Always Dreadfully Bad News. Why?



How “Truth is Stranger
than Fiction,” (Mark Twain),
Strangely Described
Religious Practices in Some
Quarters in Nigeria.

Could this be a
warning to other
Nations?

From the Pen of a Gifted
Storyteller

A modern-day Macedonian appeal to Heaven:
“Spirit of the Living God,
‘Come over to [Nigeria] and help us’ be
CHRISTIANS, not CHURCHIANs”

Chaplain (Dr.) Michael O. Ojewale



April 2022: 9-month-old Princess IbukunOluwa and her dad. She was very much a part of the mission.

IbukunOluwa (translation: The blessing of the Lord) is a 6-syllable name/word (/I/bu/kun/O/lu/wa), as in 6-syllable words such as *rehabilitation* (/re/ha/bi/li/ta/tion) and *decategorizing* (/de/ca/te/go/ri/zing).

My Scriptures of Inspiration and Prayer for this Assignment

(2 Thessalonians 1:11; Philippians 2:13 and Ephesians 2:10)

“So we keep on praying for you, asking our God to enable you to live a life worthy of his call. May he give you the power to accomplish all the good things your faith prompts you to do” (2 Thess. 1:11; NLT).

“For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him” (Philipp. 2:13; NLT).

“For we are God’s masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago” (Eph. 2:10; NLT).

Father in heaven whose footstool is the earth, the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, my God, Redeemer, Master, Friend, and Father through the grace of Your Son, Jesus Christ, my Lord and Savior. Above all things, I sincerely ask for Your power and grace to enable me *“to live a life worthy of [Your] call.”* I’m a dreamer, and a deep thinker. I know You gave me the ability to envision and dream, and a mind to think and reflect deeply. I pray that You *“give [me] the power to accomplish all the good things [my] faith prompts [me] to do,”* because I believe, as the Scripture says, that You are *“working in [me], giving [me] the desire and the power to do what pleases [You].”* I pray that I may walk in and perform all *“the good things [You] planned for [me] long ago.”* I pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

A Project for the Motherland

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Logistics: How We—Your Church/Organization and Back to Basics Ministry—May Work Together on This Project

1. From our friend/volunteer, you receive a few copies of our promotional booklets, **“My Story of God”** and/or **“Fondly Remembering Dad and Mom”** – the appendix published as teaser to the book, *Whither Bound*, and/or bookmarks for your perusal. If available, you may also receive a copy (or a few copies) of WHITHER BOUND for review and vetting. All these materials have information that directs the readers to the e-book/audio-book editions on our website
2. After a week or two, the volunteer returns to ask for your decision or opinion and how many copies, if any, of the booklets, *My Story of God* and *Fondly Remembering Dad and Mom*, and/or the book, *Whither Bound?* to bring to your church or organization for free distribution on **“Take one copy for any donation you can afford”** basis.
3. Since the booklets and/or book aren’t for sale but for education, edification, motivation for prayers, and to raise support for its further distribution, you decide the minimum contribution from your members to obtain a copy
4. You choose a deacon, pastor, or usher to promote and oversee the display of the book, WHITHER BOUND, as well as the free distribution of our promotional booklets, **“My Story of God,” “Fondly Remembering Dad and Mom”** and the bookmarks. These materials have info to our website for free access to the e-book/audio-book editions
5. You decide when the friend/volunteer may return for a lump sum check to *Back to Basics Ministry* to cover the donations from the **“Take one copy for any donation you can afford”** basis, and whatever your church/organization is willing to add on top of that
6. You receive from us an acknowledgment letter of thanks and gratitude for your partnership and friendship, if possible, along with free donation of other titles.

Modus Operandi in Nigeria

- Phase 1: Free circulation of the booklets, **“My Story of God,” “Fondly Remembering Dad and Mom”** and countless bookmarks advertising WHITHER BOUND as a free e-book/audiobook on our website. With the authority’s permission, our volunteers may display or exhibit our promotional materials on tables and counters in high traffic areas, such as, libraries, dorms, chapels, and dining areas of universities and colleges in US/Nigeria for whosoever desires a copy.
- Phase 2: Periodic national newspaper ads in Nigeria offering WHITHER BOUND, CHURCHIANIZED NATION? as a free e-book and free audio book, read by a professional reader, available on our website.
- Phase 3: Complimentary copies delivered by courier services to identified national and regional Christian leaders, church founders, and denominational leaders
- Phase 4: Complimentary copies sent by courier services to seminaries, bible colleges and bible schools. Theological institutions have the author’s unqualified permission to teach this book or use it as a textbook for any course.
- Phase 5: Enlist the partnership of some university and college chapels to serve as coordinating centers

Author's Prologue

In some uncanny ways, like the story of Jacob and Esau in the Bible, Northern and Southern Nigeria depict twins with different destinies, temperaments and aspirations. For example, historic and contemporary church buildings are constantly and methodically desecrated and burnt down and faithful Christians are slaughtered for their faith in the Northern parts of Nigeria by infidels. In the same breath, in the Southern and coastal States, church buildings of different sizes and architectural designs perpetually keep springing up hither and thither, and worshippers in their thousands attend church services Sunday after Sunday, for the most part, without fear of harassment or intimidation from any quarters.

While Christian communities in the North are periodically ravaged, looted and set on fire, and the church leaders, missionaries, non-natives and indigenous Christians are systematically being maimed, murdered, beheaded, shot at, tortured to death, burnt and massacred in the most gruesome manners, many Southern Christian church founders are busy protecting their investments and exploring more novel exploitative ways and manipulative methods to outdo each other in the open market of the lucrative, power-wielding, all-comers venture called “church planting” or “church founding”. The obvious results of this free-for-all, no boundary religious enterprise in the South are mind-boggling, founder/owner-formulated syncretic doctrines and practices. In practical terms—politics aside, there’s no “Northern” and “Southern” Nigeria; Nigeria is a tale of two countries, (or many countries, as some would say).

Whoever coined the phrase, “church growth,” never considered the possibility of an exponential growth of *Churchians*¹ as a result or a multiplicity of church growth enterprises that are at variance with the Great Commission, as the story often reads in Southern Nigeria. *Churchians* will no doubt include miracle seekers, celebrity worshippers, pilferers, fun-seekers, husband/wife hunters, gospel music lovers, business contract hustlers, aerobic exercise dancers in lieu of gym membership, and sociable and religious individuals who feel good about themselves when they hang around churches. Some of these are not terribly bad reasons for attending church. However, looking ahead through the corridor of time, the Master had said, “*Let both (the wheat and the tares, the Christians and the Churchians) grow together until the harvest,*” (Matthew 13:30).

In science, the condition of abnormal and uncontrollable cell growth in the body of an organism is called in English by the much-dreaded, six-letter C-word, @#&\$£π. May that never be descriptive of the Body of Christ in Southern Nigeria. (More on this in didactic 004 under: “Abnormal or Uncontrollable Church Growth”). This book is an effort to put some “work” behind that prayer. If you are not unaware of the core Evangelical doctrines, you will be dazed how all over the map, in some quarters, “Truth is Stranger than Fiction” (Mark Twain) aptly described religious

¹ I did not coin this word, Nigerian Christians did. See my source in the Didactic 002 from page 89

practices in Nigeria. By nature, I have a critical mind. The older I get the more intentional I am to rein in that critical spirit. I hope you see past mere criticisms in these pages.

It Was a Family Matter

It was leave without pay that lasted more than six months for both husband and wife. However, God was our Source. Thankfully, our employments were still guaranteed on our return. (Now you know why I sing, “God bless America.”) We stayed afloat even with bills running in the US and Nigeria, were able to bless family and friends in Nigeria, as well as financed several planned and unplanned projects. All because, unbeknownst to us, Providence, being also Omniscient, had had us covered long before we envisaged the journey. It is another testimony that God is true to His character of supplying our “*need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus,*” (Philippians 4:19).

As a family of faith, we knew we were on God’s assignment. Little did we know that the Lord had “an assignment within an assignment” for us. The “assignment within an assignment” soon took center stage. We couldn’t think of it any other way than **MISSION TO CHURCHIANIZED S. NIGERIA**, except that this is not a mission report loaded with information, charts and data. It is a storytelling filtered through the lens of a veteran educator, theologian, Biblical counselor, clinical chaplain, pastor, senior citizen, pastoral caregiver and a gifted storyteller.

Ultimately, this is a clarion call and a prayer: “Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on Nigeria and make them Christians, not *Churchians*.” Amen.



In the picture: Praise, Michael – the storyteller, and 9-month-old Princess IbukunOluwa, aka IBK or Ministry.

IbukunOluwa’s entrance into this world and into our lives has changed our lives and may as well have changed the trajectory of our ministry. IBK is a child with “an assignment”, just as Jeremiah, John the Baptist, Saul of Tarsus/the Apostle Paul, and you and me, were beloved, chosen and sent with “an assignment” to this material world from the world of spirits where

the “I AM WHO I AM” dwells. As she has been to us, may we also be God’s vessels to facilitate the delivery of her message and dancing in tune to the melody of the Spirit all the days of her life.

Chaplain Michael O. Ojewale, Ph.D.
Educator, Pastor, Clinical Chaplain, Senior Citizen, Storyteller

Introductory Letter to Church and Organization Leaders

Dear pastor, chaplain, Christian leader, and Christian friend,

My name is Michael Ojewale, the author of the book, “Whither Bound, Churchianized Nation?” By whatever means you came to receive a copy of this book, through a volunteer, by mail or courier service, or from a friend, kindly peruse the book or give it to a trusted associate who can do so, vet it, make comments and/or recommendations to you on the book. I’ll like to distribute this book nation-wide, God willing, beginning in the southern parts of Nigeria, as a tool to educate and enlighten the public, starting with the campuses. Simultaneously, we offer this book to other countries as well, because *“As it is, there are many parts, but one body... If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ...”* (1 Cor. 12:20, 26, 27a; NIV).

Always striving to be collegial and never wanting to dabble into another person’s field, evangelism and discipleship, especially of the next generation had been my passion. In my wildest dreams I never thought I would be drawn into writing a piece to address my colleagues, peers, seniors and elders in the ministry specifically and forcefully. A recent 6 months stay in Nigeria changed all that. Now I can better understand Paul’s agonizing feelings behind his comment regarding the people of Israel, when he penned *“that they [“my countrymen,” Rom. 9:3] have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge”* (Rom. 10:2). I wasn’t writing with a smile on my face; it was with a tear in my eye. I struggled deeply if I was the right person for this assignment, not because I was afraid of making enemies, but because I was self-aware that I could be very critical. I then considered the tone of Jesus’ letter to the seven churches in Revelation chapters 2 and 3, and other New Testament Epistles by the Apostles, especially, Paul and James. That gave me a green light and peace.

The Danger of “Cut and Paste” Theology and Literalism

We can claim that the Bible supports any doctrine or position—political or spiritual—by putting together two or three disjointed scriptures and then proclaim that our position is categorically biblical. That, however, does not make the doctrine or position reflective of God in the face of Jesus Christ our Lord. For example, are these three scriptures suggestive that suicide is biblical?

1. “Then he ... departed, and WENT AND HANGED HIMSELF” (Matt. 27:5).
2. “Then Jesus said to him, “GO AND DO LIKEWISE.” (Luke 10:37c).
3. “Then Jesus said to him, “WHAT YOU DO, DO QUICKLY” (John 13:27c; uppercase mine).

Do these suggest suicide by hanging and doing so quickly? Of course, not! However, that's the kind of situation to which "cut and paste" theology leads. In like manner, a literalist who does not appreciate the sarcasm of prophet Amos, may read Amos 4:4, 5, and conclude that the prophet or the Sovereign Lord was urging the people to visit Bethel or Gilgal for the purpose of committing sins and bragging and boasting about their tithes and offerings. The Prophet Amos had said, "***Go to Bethel and sin; go to Gilgal and sin yet more. Bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three years. Burn leavened bread as a thank offering and brag about your freewill offerings—boast about them, you Israelites, for this is what you love to do, ' declares the Sovereign Lord.***" (NIV; emphasis mine). What do you get when you take that literally?

The late Reverend (Dr.) Bisi Orebayo always told me there was hope for any church or denomination founded on the foundation of solid Biblical doctrines, no matter how far new leadership wandered from their roots, but not for a church that was started on shaky foundations of doctrinal beliefs. After you've looked through this book or have had it vetted by one of your associates, if you agree with its content and will like to have your church or facility work with us as partners, kindly get back to us through the volunteer.

"Take One for Any Donation You Can Afford" Basis

The distribution is not free. Yet, it is not for profit. It is based on "TAKE ONE FOR ANY DONATION YOU CAN AFFORD." No amount is too small or too large. He who has more can give more; he who has less can give whatever he/she has. The donations are not payments for copies of the book but indicative of the person's (1) support for this readership sponsored literature distribution ministry and (2) commitment to read the book, having "donated" something, even if it is a pittance. People tend to value something more when they have to part with some hard-earned naira, dollars, or pounds to obtain the item. Seminary and bible college students preparing for leadership and pastoral roles in the church and Christian students in universities and colleges—our leaders of tomorrow—may receive free copies, as funds permit.

Whatever amount of support that comes through individual "donations" and your church's/chapel's contribution may be sent to us by mailed check, online deposit on our secure website, or direct deposit into our Nigerian account—this method is often the preferred in Nigeria. Yes, unashamedly, we ask for your organization's free will offering to continue this work. See logistics on page 4.

Some local churches in Nigeria had found the *Thinking Aloud* series thought provoking when they incorporated them into their home fellowship, cell group or small group meetings. I hope you find plenty of ways to use this book in your ministry/local church. I didn't believe I could be so audacious, but I had to do

so. **May the Lord of the harvest use this little work to stir up or renew intercessory prayers for Nigeria, your nation and other nations of the world.**

Global Village Phenomenon

If we learned nothing else from the Covid-19 global pandemic, it reminded us that our world is a connected community. We now know that if you sneezed on one hemisphere the people on the other hemisphere could get sick from inhaling your virus. The pandemic made it clear that viruses, unlike humans, don't discriminate on the grounds of creed, religion, race, education, financial status or political affiliation.

Please don't be fooled or put off by the reference to Nigeria. A world-renowned, well-traveled Christian evangelist who was familiar with the Nigerian situation had been mentioned to say, "The Nigerian church is a mile wide and an inch deep." You and I know that though he was right, the same assertion could as well be said of many other nations, especially African nations. Personally, I'd gladly take an "inch deep" of authentic truth any day than the heavily infested, infected and compromised "inch deep" that I encountered in 6 months in some southern parts of Nigeria.

This book has a word (or warning) for Christians in all nations. Some friends and colleagues who had read the first in the series, **Thinking Aloud 1 and 2** had urged me to take out the reference to Nigeria and make them more appealing to a wider, non-Nigerian reading audience. I, however, couldn't. For the simple reason that, in these writings, I was simply responding to what I had listened to and observed on the ground in the context of my family's prolonged visit to Nigeria. It will not be happy news; yet, it will not be surprising, if the Nigerian case, as reported here, really mirrors Christianity in other nations. On the surface, the symptoms and presentations may be different from place to place but deep down, the disease or malady is the same. Believe me, there's so much in this little book that, as you read, from time to time, you will pause, ponder, pray or praise God; at least, that's my desire and prayer.

I have a little confession to make, though. I am no longer as short-winded as I once was. I am counting on you to be so kind and forgiving that you'd gloss over this little idiosyncrasy of a senior citizen. I thank you for being so kind. May God's richest blessings, and my collegial and elderly/senior citizen's blessings as well, be on you and on your ministry. Hoping to receive a heartwarming response from you.

Christian love to you from the three of us on this mission:

1. My daughter, Princess IbukunOluwa,
2. My wife, Praise and
3. Myself, Michael—the storyteller

PS: BACK TO BASICS MINISTRY USA INC. is registered as a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization. BACK TO BASICS MINISTRY NIGERIA INC. is also incorporated in Nigeria with the Corporate Affairs Commission as a not-for-profit organization.

“Dear friends, I had been eagerly planning to write to you about the salvation we all share. But now I find that I must write about something else, urging you to **defend the faith that God has entrusted** once for all time to his holy people. I say this because some ungodly people have wormed their way into your churches,” (Jude vv. 3, 4a; NLT, emphasis mine).

I don't mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection. But I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me. No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us. Let all who are spiritually mature agree on these things. **If you disagree on some point, I believe God will make it plain to you. But we must hold on to the progress we have already made** (Philippians 3:12-16; NLT; emphasis mine).

FREE—NOT TO BE SOLD

Complete with critical thinking questions for small group discussions

BEING JUSTIFIED FREELY BY HIS GRACE

Chaplain Michael O. Ojewale, Ph.D.

(Pastor, Biblical Counselor, Pastoral Caregiver, Author, Clinical Chaplain, Educator, Storyteller)

**Confronting and Exposing a Gross
Misunderstanding of the Spirit, Intent and Content
of the New Testament, Resulting in Nigerian²
Churches Packed Full with Crowds that are
Overfeeding on an “Incomplete Gospel” and
Vulnerable to the Persistent Dangers of a
“Corrupted Version of the Gospel” that Bordered on
Syncretism and had Downplayed and Undervalued,
“*Tetelestai*.”**

“*Tetelestai*”—Jesus’ Victorious Proclamation to the Universe, meaning: “It is Finished!”
“Paid in Full!” “The Work is Complete!” “Nothing Else Can be Added; Nothing Can be
Taken Away.” “Two Thumbs Up: the Job is Well Done and Completed with Finality.”

(*Back to Basics Ministry* Didactic—001, a follow up on the
treatise, **Thinking Aloud—2**;
For Campuses & the Community)

² **This could be true of other NATIONS as well; decide for yourself.**

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LISTEN AND OBSERVE

As a seminary professor, one of the skills I like to impress on the students is for them to develop right from the first classes of Biblical Counseling or Pastoral Caregiving seminars is the ability to LISTEN and OBSERVE. Without these two skills of **active listening** and **empathetic observation**, pastoral care and counseling cannot happen. By *listening*, we hear another person’s heart stories. We hear with our ears, but we listen with our hearts. By *observing*, we hear (or pick) the nonverbal clues, we feel the unspoken pains, and we, somehow, become one (or partner) with the person we are trying to help. It is commonly believed that a greater part of human communication is nonverbal. It is called body language. Humans communicate all the time, just not with words. All you will read in this book is the result of my swallowing my own pills and heeding my own injunction to LISTEN and OBSERVE. In the first five months of our stay in Nigeria, I **listened** and **observed**, both to individuals and to the crowds. In addition, I had plenty of time for reflections. Also, raising a baby and watching her growth was therapeutic; it was a depiction and reminder of God’s 24/7 attention and care for me.

For example, one day I knelt to pray. I had wanted to “*Come before His presence with singing*” (Psa. 100:2). Would you believe the “praise song” I caught myself singing? “Hickory, Dickory Dock,” a nursery rhyme I had played for my baby and listened to numberless times. God probably loved it and laughed (who knows?). Needless to say, I was all smiles and amused into His presence. I received a good welcome, too. Truly, “*A merry heart does good, like medicine*” (Prov. 17:22a). ☺

PREAMBLE

In Acts 19:1-7, in Ephesus, Paul encountered twelve men who were called “disciples” (v. 1) but knew only John’s teaching and baptism. Paul “*said to them, ‘Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?’*” They replied, “*We have*

not so much as heard whether there is a Holy Spirit,” (v. 2). Paul then asked, *“Into what then were you baptized?”* To which they answered, *“Into John’s baptism,”* (v. 3). Thereafter, Paul expounded to them the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ. These men had been sincere and devoted believers, but they lacked the knowledge of the complete Gospel message of which John had been a Herald. *“Then Paul said, ‘John indeed baptized with A BAPTISM OF REPENTANCE, saying to the people that they should believe on Him who would come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus’”* (v. 4; emphasis mine).

“INTO WHAT THEN WERE YOU BAPTIZED?”

I have a sneaky suspicion that if some Christians were asked the same question today, *“Into what then were you baptized?”* some might reply, “Into Anglicanism,” “Into Methodism,” “Into Catholicism” or “Into Pentecostalism.” Some might even say, “I’m baptized in Prophet ABC Ezekiel’s name”, or “I’m baptized in Bishop DEF Peter’s name.”

Like these Ephesian devotees of John, the Baptist, I dare say that many churches and preachers today stop at the baptism of repentance from sin but have not fully embraced Jesus Christ of whom the apostle wrote *“became for us wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification and redemption,”* (1 Cor. 1:30). If I may ask: What other essential is missing in that partial list of who Christ is to us in this first epistle of Paul to the Corinthians? Jesus is our Wisdom from God, our Righteousness, Sanctification and Redemption. What more to do than to shout “Hallelujah! Amen!”

Some preachers and churches have it altogether, down to a tee, preaching fervently against sin but haven’t embraced God’s gift of righteousness that comes through faith—Romans 3:22, Philippians 3:9. Many, therefore, preach a work-based (or rule-based) righteousness. Sadly, on the other far extreme, the word, sin, has disappeared from many evangelical pulpits and toned down with culturally inoffensive synonyms, such as weakness, disease or disorder. How dare you be so unsympathetic as to challenge a person to repent of a disorder, dysfunction, or disease? He needs therapy, not a rebuke.

I bleed inside when I visit and sit in some church services today. I keep asking myself, “Where is JESUS CHRIST, the crucified and resurrected Savior, in all that’s going on in God’s name? Can we please talk about Jesus and reecho His virgin birth, His cross, His death, and His resurrection?”

They say, “Time is money,” and “Time is life.” I often ask myself: If we multiply the number of working-class adults (or taxpayers) present in the church service by the number of hours spent in the service, can we justify, monetarily and

spiritually, the expenditure of such manpower-hours for what's going on right now, especially if we are renting the space per hour of use? Spending hours in the church, or even sleeping in the church, is not the most appropriate way to demonstrate our devotion and commitment to Christ. We do that in the streets, neighborhoods, and workplaces amongst friends, family and casual acquaintances. The church is the place to be edified, challenged, refueled, refilled and be reminded of who we are, who our God is, our mission, calling, and mandate in the world, and what all these entail in our day-to-day life.

Second-guessing myself, I often wonder, "Am I the sick person here, the one seeing double? Or, why else would people keep coming, taking up every available seat in the church, if there's something clearly amiss as I thought to be?" I could be the sick one, the one *seeing men like trees, walking* (Mark 8:24). I then pray for my soul, "Lord Jesus, heal my heart." Maybe, as the spiritual goes, "It's me, It's me O Lord, standing in the need of prayer." Back at home, I seek my wife's opinion. Almost all the time, she feels the same way as I do. That means we are either not sick, or the sick twosome.

THE SADDEST COMMENTS A CHURCHMAN COULD HEAR

- "I don't go to any church these days. The church has lost her focus."
- "I don't worship anywhere except online."
- "I am still a Christian in heart and practice, but "church" has a new meaning for me. We are the church, not the building. That's why I don't go to any church building for worship. For example, as you and I are talking about Christ now, we've become the church; for Jesus said, *where two or three are gathered in My name...*"

Sadly, during the first five months of our long stay in Nigeria, (Dec. 2021-Apr. 2022), my wife and I heard those statements from disappointed individuals in all strata of society. We heard them on the roads during our paid rides from Uber/Bolt drivers. We heard them in the neighborhood from one of our tenants. We heard them from family friends, such as a single lady, a young architect in her early 30s, whose Sunday services and midweek Bible studies were online with a group of young believers of like mind, who were disgruntled and disillusioned with the established churches. We heard such comments in casual conversations with exasperated pastors fed up with the system and considering quitting, from the elderly who keep their membership just so they may be funeralized and buried by the church they once faithfully served and passionately believed in, and many more. They all had been deeply involved in their local churches. They had served well enough to have gained the trust of the leadership and, therefore, had been ordained as deacons and deaconesses. Some served as ushers, some were staffers. Now, however, they all had one thing in common: *they were tired and fed up with the deception, covetousness, money mismanagement, sexual and marital laxity, and no accountability.*

Some had resigned from leadership positions and taken a back seat in church, not really convinced to quit church entirely. Mournfully, they recited Hebrews 10:24, 25, “*not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together,*” as reason they had chosen to stay. Some openly spoke out against the system before exiting, not minding that their actions and vocals could rock the boat. Others just quit, without saying goodbye; they disappeared into the thin air. As far as church is concerned, regrettably, they now say, “I used to.”

I am a church person, through and through. In my heart of hearts, I wanted to encourage these men and women to get back into the church, to remind them or emphasize to them that YouTube or Zoom meetings are not a church. However, I was always tongue-tied. I knew where some of them were coming from. I could detect the agony of having been so credulous and taken for a ride for so long. They had put their complete trust in the service of the church and its leadership, but all they found were empty lies, phoniness, and disappointment without recourse. On top of that, they were judged unjustly and condemned by the church.

I knew there were good churches where they could worship, connect and raise their families. Yet, I had to tread softly and carefully so as not to throw the sheep back into the clutches of the wolf. When they asked me point-blank, which one? I pulled back from committing myself. I copped out and simply said, “I don’t live here (this is true, nonetheless it’s *baloney!*). I know there are good churches out there. No church is perfect, though. The church is more like a hospital for a sin-sick world where we find forgiveness and healing for our souls. Keep searching prayerfully; you’ll surely find one.” Thereafter, I hated myself for being a part of a system I wasn’t very proud of and couldn’t recommend without a second thought.

You say, “Nothing you’ve said is new.” You are absolutely right. I knew that very well. I had turned the attention of my ministry to colleges and universities for that reason, believing that the hope of the future resides in those young minds not yet corrupted or schooled wrongly. Yet, no one can ignore the masses anymore, not after hearing these unsolicited, sad comments from those who *formerly* belonged and served in local churches but now are sheep without a shepherd.

THE RISK THAT I AM WILLING TO TAKE

The succinct quote, “**In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity,**” is an aphorism variously attributed to St. Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430), John Wesley (1703 – 1791), and to a number of theologians in between them. The quote is full of wise counsel, and yet it also begs two important questions: “What are the essentials and non-essentials? And who determines what they are?”

Regarding who determines what they are, this was the focal question I wrestled with in **Thinking Aloud—2**, using the story/parable of the four blind men and circus elephant. The point of the parable was that neither my clan nor I (nor anyone else) had the monotony right to decide who was on course and who was off course on issues, since each one of us had touched and understood different parts of the same elephant. That leaves us with the first question of what the essentials/non-essentials are.

I don't have qualms with charity in all things (Jesus had taught us, *“love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you,”* Matt. 5:44). I am also pretty certain that we are united on most essentials, because many non-creedal congregations theologically subscribe to the Apostles/Nicene Creeds. However, besides cultural superfluities, I am still wrestling with what those non-essentials that we should accord liberty are. Consequently, the question at the back of my mind as I sat by my laptop is this: **Am I majoring on the non-essentials and treating them as essentials?** I am willing to take the risk of presenting my thoughts in this didactic 001 for you to be the judge whether or not I have labored in vain and it's all “much ado about nothing.” You be the judge. (Please be kind and forgiving in the Spirit of Christ whenever and wherever my style and choice of words are too stern and assuming).

My dear brother and sister in Christ,

I'm happy for your devotion and regular church attendance; if I may ask: In whose name were you baptized?

If you say, “In the name of the Lord Jesus” or “In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,” as I suspect you will, why then are you worshipping a sage or iconic person, spiritual leader, submitting to man-made ethical codes and spiritual disciplines simply for the sake of belonging, or why are you subservient to a religious system that has not, and cannot, save you?

THE APOSTLE PAUL TO THE COLOSSIANS: Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as *though* living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations—“Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,” which all concern things which perish with the using—according to the commandments and doctrines of men? These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, *false* humility, and neglect of the body, *but are* of no value against the indulgence of the flesh. If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ *who is* our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory. (Col. 2:20-23; 3:1-4)

PART 1

THE BURDENS OF AN INCOMPLETE GOSPEL

This is a follow-up to **Thinking Aloud–2**; it’s an explication of it. I want to address two dangers stemming largely from ignorance. (By the way, ignorance is not a bad word or a curse/cuss word. Simply, it’s a state of not being informed, unawareness, or lacking knowledge. We are all ignorant in many areas. It’s been well said that, “Admission of ignorance is often the first step in our education.”) This is what the middle school English language teacher calls, a **D.E.A.R.** time, which is an acronym for her students to **Drop Everything And Read**.

THE TWO-SIDED COIN OF THE COMPLETE GOSPEL MESSAGE AND THE UNCERTAINTIES OF THE INCOMPLETE GOSPEL MESSAGE

The COMPLETE GOSPEL MESSAGE is like a two-sided coin. On one side of the coin are the inscriptions, “GOD LOVES YOU, CHRIST DIED FOR OUR SINS, WAS BURIED, AND HE ROSE AGAIN... CHRIST DIED FOR THE UNGODLY... CHRIST DIED FOR US” (John 3:16; 1 Cor. 15:3, 4; Rom. 5:6, 8). This is the saving and sacrificial side of Christ’s ministry. All evangelical pastors and churches preach this half, this side of the coin, very well with emphasis. The other side of the coin of the COMPLETE GOSPEL MESSAGE has this inscription, “CHRIST LIVES IN ME... GOD IS AT WORK IN ME... I AM IN CHRIST... GREATER IS CHRIST WHO IS IN ME... GOD HAD YOU IN MIND WITH AN ASSIGNMENT FOR YOU, EVEN BEFORE YOU WERE BORN” (Gal. 2:20; Philipp. 4:13; 2:13; Eph. 1:4-6; 2:10; 3:20; 2 Cor. 5:17; 1 John 4:4; Jer. 1:4, 5). This is the empowering and resurrected side of Christ. Most pastors and churches gloss over this or preach it

with less emphasis than it deserves. Happily, it was this two-sided gospel message into which I was converted. I had received a gospel message of Christ who died for me, lives for me, lives in me, empowers me, and walks with me every day.

One danger, which is excusable, is the INCOMPLETE GOSPEL. The incomplete gospel message has one principal feature: You are saved by GRACE but JUSTIFIED, or sanctified, or made fit for heaven by WORKS. Therefore, you are on your own to work it out after confessing Jesus as your Lord and Savior. It does not really minimize Christ’s death and resurrection; it simply fails to appreciate the inexhaustible fullness and depth of Christ’s death and the power of His resurrected life in the believer (See Eph. 3:20; Philipp. 1:6; 2:13; 1 Thess. 5:24; 1 Pet. 1:3-5; 1 John 4:4; 5:1-5). These believers thereby rob and deprive themselves of the boundless

blessings Christ already purchased for them.

It's like the story of the man who had saved enough money to buy traveling tickets for his family on a trans-Atlantic ship to relocate his family to another part of the world. Thinking they were too poor to save enough money for food on the ship's canteen, the family came on board with two weeks' supply of cracker biscuits and cheese for breakfast, lunch and dinner during the voyage. With longing eyes and salivating watery mouths they watched daily as the other passengers enjoyed the sumptuous meals served to all who showed up at the vessel's dining hall.

As they disembarked on the last day, the captain of the ship asked the head of the family why his family never showed up for any of the meals. He was thinking that, perhaps, they detested the meals or the company of the eaters and wanted to know the reason for such disdain. The father replied that they did not have enough money saved up to pay for the meals. To which the captain asked to see

their tickets. Aghast and sympathetic, the captain told the father, "Your boarding tickets included all the meals and wines served during the trip, with no additional or extra cost to you. In the value of your tickets, you've already paid for all the meals, entertainment, and services on board—everything came fully paid for in your tickets."

Everything had been paid for—as in "Jesus paid it all"—but this family, like many Christians today, didn't enjoy the blessings that came with the package of their tickets. That's the pitiful side of the "incomplete gospel message" that stops at forgiveness and cancellation of sin without offering all the benefits in Christ, such as, the power of attorney to use Jesus' name in transacting Kingdom matters, the rights and privileges of adoption, being heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, the communion and presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. The apostle Paul clearly and especially spelled out the complete gospel in his epistles to the Romans and Ephesians.

THE CORRUPTED VERSION OF THE GOSPEL MESSAGE AND THE DEPENDENCY IT PRODUCES

The other danger, which, in the mindset of the Apostle Paul, warranted a sharp rebuke, is the **CORRUPTED GOSPEL**, because it minimizes the "finished work of Christ." Christ is preached; it's just that the good news that's totally paid for, or salvation as God's free gift requiring no human input, is too good to be true. Christ is an element in this corrupted version of the gospel; but Jesus alone cannot be enough. The preachers and proponents cannot afford the risk of putting the totality of their hope for meaningful life and eternal life entirely on Jesus without doing something.

In **Philippians 1:15-18**, though the intention, motive and motivation for preaching were wrong, Paul nonetheless rejoiced that the good news of Jesus

was being preached. The content was okay—“*Christ is preached*”, the motive was selfish ambition. Paul could live with that.

Some indeed preach Christ even from envy and strife, and some also from goodwill: The former preach Christ from selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my chains; but the latter out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel. What then? **ONLY THAT IN EVERY WAY, WHETHER IN PRETENSE OR IN TRUTH, CHRIST IS PREACHED; AND IN THIS I REJOICE, YES, AND WILL REJOICE** (Emphasis mine).

However, when the content of the message was burdensome rather than liberating, the same Paul didn't mince words. He lashed out at the Galatians, “*O foolish Galatians...*” The apostle Paul wasn't this mad and name-calling in his rebuke of the Corinthian church that had condoned the worst form of adultery. It's because Paul regarded “Jesus Plus The Law” as “*a different gospel*” or “*another gospel*,” dissimilar to what the apostles preached.

I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed... **I DO NOT SET ASIDE THE GRACE OF GOD; FOR IF RIGHTEOUSNESS COMES THROUGH THE LAW, THEN CHRIST DIED IN VAIN...** O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified? This only I want to learn from you: **DID YOU RECEIVE THE SPIRIT BY THE WORKS OF THE LAW, OR BY THE HEARING OF FAITH?** Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?” (Gal. 1:6-9; 2:21; 3:1-3; uppercase mine).

WHAT'S THE FUSS ABOUT?

I can guarantee it that >80% of all the items on the prayer list of the average Christian would disappear with an understanding of the COMPLETE GOSPEL MESSAGE. “Jesus paid it all,” and “God loves you,” are more than church lingos; they are the gospel truths.

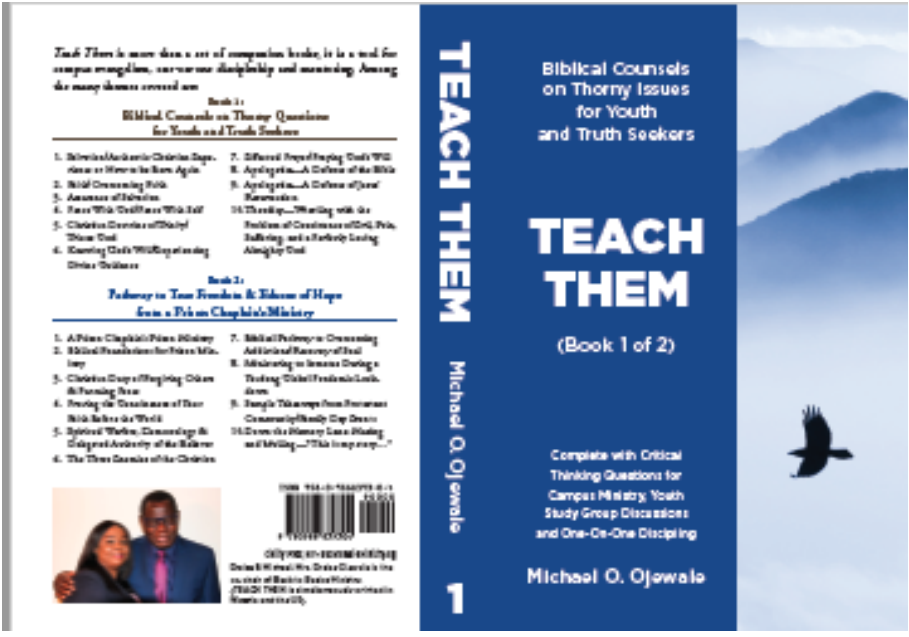
What is the incomplete gospel? I'm glad you asked. First, what I refer to as the incomplete gospel is, to me, excusable, because it is usually out of ignorance. Many sincere preachers preach a half or incomplete gospel all their lives and ministry. The half they preach is CHRIST DIED FOR YOU; JESUS' DEATH PAID FOR YOUR SIN PENALTY. This is indeed the Gospel, only it's half of the Gospel Truth. This part is the removal of sin, the forgiveness, or the negative part of the accounting. Forgiveness brings our ledger in divine accounting to zero. In this incomplete gospel, the new believer is left to fend for himself, to prove himself to God, to the church, and to other believers by all sorts of disciplines, self-made rules, and efforts. Discipline is not a bad word in the Christian faith, but we are not commended to God or approved by God by our self-efforts. In Christ, we are unconditionally loved and accepted. Therefore, we are not striving for acceptance by our devotion. In other religions of the world, adherents attempt to win or deserve God's favor by their works of devotion. This is the exact opposite of the concept of devotion in Christianity, because "*We love Him because He first loved us*" (1 Jn. 4:10, 19). We've been unconditionally accepted (Eph. 1:4-6) and unconditionally loved (John 3:16; Rom. 5:8; 1 John 4:19). We strive within our acceptance and adoption—which have been granted freely by grace—to live up to what God has called us and empowered us to be in Christ.

The second half these preachers often fail to emphasize is CHRIST IS SUFFICIENT; CHRIST MAKES YOU RIGHTEOUS; CHRIST DID FOR YOU WHAT YOU COULDN'T DO FOR YOURSELF, THAT IS, TOTAL OBEDIENCE TO ALL OF DIVINE LAWS AND COMMANDMENTS ON YOUR BEHALF. This is the bestowal of

all that Christ is, the funding of our deficit ledger. This brings our ledger from zero to a positive side that's fully funded by Christ's riches and merits. **I will use an extract from my book, TEACH THEM BOOK 1, to explain this.**

By the way, if you thought that I was repeating myself, or kept hammering on the same thing again and again, it's because you were not in my AP biology class. One student pleaded with me that she'd heard enough of 'it' and if I should explain 'it' one more time she'd kill herself. As soon as she finished, another student raised her hand and asked me to explain 'it' again. Shocked and speechless, student A buried her head in her palms. What would you do? Say 'it' one more time and send for an ambulance, or ask student A to explain 'it' to student B? I dared saying 'it' one more time. Student A cocked her fingers like a pistol, pressed the muzzle into her skull, pulled the trigger and blew out her brains. She then slumped on her desk. No one cared. ☺

My point is twofold: (1) It is for Student B that I repeat myself, restate my point, say 'it' in different ways, recapitulate, reiterate, recap, emphasize and reemphasize my key points again and again, like I am doing right here in this sentence, until I nearly bore student A to death. (2) It is also the reason why I strongly believe in peer-to-peer mentoring as the way to go, because, say 'it' a million times, student B will not understand 'it' hearing 'it' from an adult, only by hearing 'it' explained to her by one of her peers, like student A. In the process of helping her peer, student "A" feels happy that she has made an important contribution in another person's life, student B thinks she's got a friend who understands her in student A, thereby making school fun and the classroom healthier.



UNDERSTANDING OF IMPUTATION OR TRADING PLACES WITH JESUS RESOLVES A LOT OF PROBLEMS (Excerpt from TEACH THEM BOOK 1, chapter 4, pp 90-99).

No illustration is perfect. However, for an illustration, let's say someone named Sam owes a large sum of money that he cannot pay to a lender named Brutus. A generous benefactor named Tim learns of Sam's predicament. Tim deposits an amount equal to Sam's debt into Brutus's (the lender's) account in Sam's name. As far as Brutus is concerned, the debt has been paid up and Sam's account is cleared. It didn't matter that the money did not come from Sam's purse. Sam is a free man. However, if Sam is unaware that a benefactor has indeed paid his debt, Sam will still be scared of Brutus for no reason other than ignorance of the fact that his debt has been paid. It is a sad truth that many are still running and hiding from God, because they do not know that someone, Christ, has paid the full penalty for their sins. Let's get back to Sam. While Sam's account is not in the red, it is still not in the positive. This is what forgiveness does. Forgiveness clears the debt, but the account is at zero.

Let's take it a little further; let's say that Tim—the wealthy, generous benefactor—links his fat account to Sam's account. Sam can buy anything, charge his account to any amount, and still not go red. Because Sam's account is now linked to an unfathomably loaded account, Tim's wealth is now at Sam's disposal; Sam's ledger has been credited to an unimaginable level. This is what Christ purchased for us. We are not left with a zero balance; the income side of our account is incredibly funded. The righteousness of Christ is imputed to us. The prophet Isaiah foresaw this transference and imputation of our sins on Jesus in the Old Testament when he said,

“All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all”
(Isa. 53:6).

The Apostle Paul looked back to the cross where our sins were paid for when he wrote,

“For He [God] made Him [Jesus] who knew no sin to be sin for us, THAT WE MIGHT BECOME THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD IN HIM” (2 Cor. 5:21; emphasis mine).

The purpose is that we may be credited with Christ's righteousness and declared righteous.

When writing to the Romans on this issue, Paul exults and jubilantly declares, “There is therefore NOW no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death. . . . Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even AT THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD, WHO ALSO MAKES INTERCESSION FOR US” (Rom. 8:1–2, 33–34; emphasis added).

WHY KJV-ONLY BELIEVERS ARE SOMETIMES THE MODERN-DAY LEGALISTS

This is a little digression. I hate doing this, and I can't remember ever doing it, because every version, translation, or paraphrase of the Bible has its merits. You just have to read the preface to appreciate the guiding principles and passion behind it and the audience for which it was intended. It is just that the KJV-only Christians are not only rigid but often condemn other translations, as

if God had dictated the KJV Bible word for word. (Please note the phrase, “KJV-ONLY”). No translation is perfect. Something is always lost or not fully expressed when we move from one language to another, one culture or era to another. In the light of availability of more earlier manuscripts, better understanding of the historical context, culture, and crowd of the original readers,

even the KJV has words and expressions it can improve on. This brings me back to Romans 8:1.

It is generally believed that the latter part of Romans 8:1, quoted above— *“who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit”*—was not in the original text but was added by the translators of the KJV, which was also carried into the NKJV. Yeah! I guess those translators couldn’t fathom why or how a condemned sinner could walk out a free man from the court of heaven for simply being “in Christ,” without doing anything on his part and without attaching any conditions to his freedom! They must have thought that we need to do some extra work in order to be found righteous. That little rider or caveat, *“who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit,”* is a takeaway from Christ’s work and makes our standing without condemnation a conditional thing. It changes how we perceive Christ’s work and how we understand our faith.

This also explains why the KJV-only Christians and denominations—if you’ve met them—are also preachers of works-based righteousness and are legalists with long list of dos and don’ts for holiness. (By the way, I use NKJV as a pastor for

“political correctness,” if you understand what I mean, just to be less offensive to some. It is a kind of middle of the road—modern English, archaic translation.) This is what puzzles me: if you don’t say to a friend, “Findeth thou not the pen that thou borroweth from me?” why read the Bible, a living book, in that Shakespearean language? I however respect my colleagues who use KJV. Although I admire the poetry of KJV, I choose to release myself from unnecessary struggles with the Elizabethan era language, more so because English is my second language.

Thankfully, virtually other later translations based on original and earlier manuscripts don’t have this condition. It is not that they omit something—as KJV-only Christians often insinuate; it is that KJV added something. However, all agree that that portion is rightly placed at the end of verse 4, as you will read in all translations. Again, I don’t do this kind of thing, and this is probably the only time I’ve ever done it. Unfortunately, that addition to Romans 8:1 is a takeaway from Christ’s work. Christ is enough! “There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.” Period! End of verse. End of discussion. The phrase, “In Christ Jesus” is all that counts; all that matters!

Nobody in his right mind will approach the proverbial Pearly Gate waving his Spiritual Report Card to St. Peter, and proudly saying, “Look, Pete, what I got! Everything’s check, check, check: 100%. Let me in, quick!” No straight-A student in godly living and doing right will get into heaven, only sinners saved by grace. For eternal life is *“the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast,”* (Eph. 2:8c, ^)

JUSTIFICATION

DIGGING DEEPER: (The most enriching, life-changing word study I ever did)

“Being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. . . . Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law. . . . But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness. . . . Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. . . . But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 3:24, 28; 4:5; 5:1; Titus 3:4, 5; emphasis mine).

I want you to take time to study this word *justification*. Once you get an understanding of imputation and justification, it will free you from all guilt and condemnation. You will better understand the word grace.

Justification is actually a word from the law court; it means to treat or to reckon someone as something; in this case, reckoning or declaring as righteous in the sight of God. Some words close to it in our judicial system today will be expunge or vacate, which means to cancel or annul the record of an offense or charge as if it never occurred—to overrule, cancel, render null and void. In computer language, it means to press the reset button and return the machine back to its factory default setting as if it was never used; this process clears all memories. (Read Psalm 103:12; Micah 7:19; Jeremiah 31:31–34; and Hebrew 8:12.) An old preacher defined justification as “just-as-if-you’ve-never-sinned.”

“Justification is the judicial act of God, in which He declares, on the basis of the righteousness of Christ, that all claims of the law are satisfied in respect to the sinner” (Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 513).

Justification and righteousness are inseparably united in scripture—almost the same words. The believing sinner is justified because Christ, having borne his sins on the cross, has become for us “*wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification and redemption*” (1 Cor. 1:30).

JUSTIFICATION

1. Originates in grace (Rom. 3:24; Titus 3:4, 5). Either you work for your salvation or accept it as a free gift; you can't have it both ways.
2. Is by faith, not works (Rom. 3:28–30; 4:5; 5:1; Gal. 2:16; 3:8, 24).
3. May be defined as the judicial act of God (higher court) where He declares righteous one who believes on Jesus Christ. It is the Judge Himself (Rom. 8:1, 31–34) who declares the sinner, “Not guilty. Not condemned.” The justified believer has been in court and has been cleared.

Justify means to declare righteous and does not have any basis in us (Eph. 2:8, 9). It is to regard the sinner as if he never sinned. Pardon deals with the past; justification deals with the past, present and future. The basis of justification is redemption. The price of redemption is so great it cost the righteous Jesus His life (1 Pet. 1:18, 19). The believer is clothed with the righteousness of Christ and now has a right standing with God. God says what Christ did for us was by far more than enough.

IMPUTATION

Imputation—which I mentioned above in my illustration of Sam, the borrower, and Tim, the wealthy benefactor—is charging or reckoning something to a person's account. Three imputations are set forth in scripture:

1. The sin of Adam is imputed to his posterity (Rom. 5:12–14; 1 Cor. 15:21, 22).
2. The sin of humanity is imputed to Christ on the cross (2 Cor. 5:19, 21; Isa. 53:4–6; 1 Pet. 2:24).
3. The righteousness of God is imputed to those who believe (Gen. 15:6; Ps. 32:2; Rom. 3:22; 4:3, 8, 21–25; 2 Cor. 5:21; Philem. 17, 18; Phil. 3:9; 1 Cor. 1:30; Jude 24).

Imputation affects the standing, not the state. This is righteousness from God, apart from all human works, which is unto and upon all who believe (Rom. 3:22). It is the eternal standing of all who are saved. We then live into the righteousness that God has given us, and which we have received, by grace. Imputed righteousness is the basis of justification. God declares the one justified forever whom He sees “in Christ.” Our justification is abiding and unchanging since it rests only on the merit of the eternal Son of God.

RIGHTEOUSNESS

Three kinds of righteousness are also mentioned in the Bible (Rom. 10:1–13):

1. Self-righteousness, which the Bible says is like filthy rags (Isa. 64:6; Lk. 18:11)
2. Righteousness based on the Law, which the Bible says saves no one (Phil. 3:6; Gal. 2:21). The question is: How do you know when you've done enough righteousness to merit a perfect score?
3. God's (or imputed) righteousness, which is our only hope (Phil. 3:9; 2 Cor. 5:21)

Justification is more than forgiveness since forgiveness is the judicial cancellation of sin at the point of salvation while justification is the imputing of righteousness. Forgiveness is negative (the removal of condemnation) while justification is positive (the bestowing of the merit and standing of Christ). The weight of your sins cannot outweigh, and therefore cannot nullify, what Christ has done for you.

Sad to say, but it is true that many well-intentioned evangelical preachers preach half the gospel all their life. The half they preach is the negative side: Christ died for us—Christ paid it all! This is true. The problem is that it focuses only on Christ taking away our sins, which brings our ledger to zero. The second half they fail to preach or emphasize is Christ makes us righteous. This is equally true. Jesus completely obeyed the Law and credits (imputes) us with His obedience and righteousness. This funds our account with all that's Christ's. Our ledger is not zero but fully credited with God's righteousness.

You don't become justified when you do better; then it will be by works. You are justified in your present state: a sinner who believes in God who justifies the unrighteous or ungodly (Rom. 4:5). We have justification from God not as saints but as sinners. The greatest saints have no more merit for justification than the worst sinner. The pardon granted in justification applies to all sins—past, present, and future—and thus involves the removal of all guilt and every penalty. *“For by one offering He (Christ) has perfected forever those who are sanctified”* (Heb. 10:14).

The greatest proof of our justification is our union with Christ. We were “in Adam” when he sinned. We are “in Christ” when we put our trust in Him. We are now “in Christ” just as we were “in Adam.” We are now incorporated into Christ just as we had been incorporated into Adam. The one who is justified by faith is the one who is “in Christ”; and because he is “in Christ,” he has what Christ offers: righteousness, peace, joy, access to God, love, etc. All that

Christ is and all He has becomes ours, and all we are and all we have become Christ's by our union with Him.

THE PEARLY GATE CHECKLIST—For Illustration Only

Let's imagine that there's this checklist for anyone, Christian or not, intending to go through the pearly gates to the other side of a blissful eternal life. This is not the case; it is just for illustration's sake. Okay, use your imagination. The three questions on the checklist at the Pearly Gates are:

1. Are his sins forgiven?
2. Is he righteous?
3. Has he fully obeyed the Law?

Many Christians will feel comfortable with the first, because they've learned about and also accepted God's forgiveness. Some Christians will have knocked knees on the second, because, in their understanding of salvation in Christ, they have not moved from forgiveness to justification. In justification, we are clothed with the righteousness of Christ. It will surprise you that only few will feel no sense of condemnation by the third question: "Has he fully obeyed the Law?" Some Christians will pee in their pants at that question. Anyone who answers yes is a liar, because none of us has fully obeyed the Law. That's where Christ and His imputed righteousness and imputed obedience come into play. The answer is yes, not because of us, but because of Jesus. Christ fully obeyed the laws and credits our accounts with His obedience. So when you stand at the pearly gates and, for the sake of illustration, those three hypothetical questions surface, you can smile because, based on the merits of Christ and His grace, you will get a check for those three questions. Yes, your sins are forgiven. Yes, you are the righteousness of God in Christ, and, yes, Christ's full obedience of the Law is your obedience. He has credited or imputed your account with all that He has and all that He is. You are Christ's, and Christ is yours. (This ends the excerpts from my book, *TEACH THEM, BOOK 1*, pp 90-99).

PART 2

THE DANGERS OF A CORRUPTED GOSPEL

The second and last error, which demanded Paul's sharp rebuke, is the corrupted gospel. The apostle Paul regarded any semblance of the gospel message that minimized, left out, took away from or lessened the supremacy of Jesus, the Son of God, as "another gospel". Paul had written to the Colossians that Jesus is "*the Image of the invisible God... in [whom] all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible... all things created through Him and for Him... and in Him all things hold together... so that in everything He might have the supremacy*" (Col. 1:15-20). The preeminent, supreme Jesus is enough, and it is Jesus plus nothing and no one else. Even the apostle Peter or Paul could add nothing to complete Jesus. The "Jesus plus this or that" gospel is anathema to the apostles and pillars of the early Church.

We either preach JESUS ONLY or JESUS PLUS XYZ (XYZ equates WORKS, RITUALS, ENDLESS RELIGIOUS FASTINGS, THE INDISPENSABLE PASTOR, PROPHET OR SPIRITUAL

LEADER, SACRIFICE, LAW, SELF-ABASEMENT, or anything to earn some merits, deserve or curry God's favor). That is, Jesus is either ENOUGH or NOT ENOUGH. As the apostle Paul pointed out, it deserved a sharp rebuke. The first part of this didactic has dealt with the problem to some extent.

This much we know: the apostles discouraged, even detested, any form of leadership or human worship and undue loyalty to spiritual leaders. Paul regarded any idea of "I'm of Paul" or "I'm of Apollos" (or, "I'm of Bishop Michael of St. Michael's Church of USA") as signs of carnality and sectarianism (1 Cor. 1:12-17; 3:4-15; Acts 10:25, 26; 14:11-18). Sadly, spiritual leaders today prefer hearing their members say, "I'm of Bishop Michael's church."

As I mentioned in THINKING ALOUD—2, we have one of two extremes to avoid regarding our spiritual leaders: defiance and deification. The middle of the road is honor, respect, loyalty, admiration but NEVER worship.

TESTIMONY TIME IS OFTEN A CLUE IN A "JESUS PLUS LEADER" CONGREGATION

Listen carefully in the church assembly when members give testimonies of breakthroughs and spiritual victories in the congregation of a "Jesus Plus Leader." In their culture and mindset, for

results and answered prayers, a good portion of the praise or credit must go to the leader, to boost his/her ego and strengthen his/her credibility as a worthy leader to follow. The testifier, almost

always, has to include the input of the pastor, prophet or spiritual leader; that he or she prayed, laid hands on, anointed with oil, gave a prophetic declaration, fasted and pulled some strings. If the testifier fails to include such, guess what? The pastor, prophet or spiritual leader will then finish, edit, corroborate and substantiate the report as necessary to point to himself or herself as the vessel, or Man/Woman of God for whose sake and devotion Jehovah listened and answered the prayer. Why is that so? The environment or culture is not “Jesus Only”; it is “Jesus Plus the Spiritual Leader,” and you dare not leave the spiritual leader out of the spotlight. That’s reprehensible.

You recall that Moses had kept on the veil to cover his face long after the shining

glory had faded so that he might continue to maintain an appearance before the people that the Shekinah glory was still shining on his face. In like manner, the leaders in this “Jesus Plus” movement also have to keep the members’ testimonies coming, piling and well embellished to present themselves constantly as “the Prophet of God” in the consciousness of their followers. These leaders need the testimonies of miracles to validate themselves more than the people need the miracles to restore their health or fortunes. The leaders actually feed on those reported miracles, signs and wonders. If the miracles are short in coming, trust me, the leader could resort to gimmicks to manufacture or fabricate some, for the sake of keeping up the appearance.

Another big clue: you will NEVER find the books of any other Christian author or minister on display in their assemblies except those penned by you-know-who. What does that suggest to you? How else do you spell “mind control”? Correct me if I am wrong; in my book, these church members are being conditioned to be disciples of their spiritual leader, not disciples of Jesus Christ.

UNLIKE WHAT “JESUS PLUS THE LEADER” THEOLOGY DEPICTS, PRAYER, And Praying Alone, Is Not the Panacea or Cure-All Solution to All Problems, Otherwise, the Pharisees Would Have Been the Best Problem Solvers

Another feature of “Jesus Plus Leader” congregation is panic praying or panic prayers. (Please understand that I am an academic; I’m supposed to be objective and factual. I’m also a strategic/deep-thinker and a gifted storyteller. I am not necessarily out to criticize or find fault. I’m simply reporting, as it is. Actually, I’m telling stories, to the best of my ability and integrity as a Christian leader

in the community. I admit that I may be wrong and even biased, in some of my inferences and conclusions; however, my reporting and storytelling is down-to-earth; I never meant to do any harm or damage.)

The religious system especially in a “Jesus Plus Leader” congregation is programmed to instill fear in the people.

They are, thereby, conditioned to ALWAYS NEED, and be DEPENDENT ON, the spiritual leader as deliverer. Therefore, everything and everyone is a suspect, a potential enemy and “destiny blocker”. They are conditioned to fear real and imaginary enemies that exist only in their minds. Consequently, they distrust their blood relatives and longtime friends, having been indoctrinated by their spiritual leaders that those friends and family members are insincere and out for one of two evils. Either, out of jealousy they are currently plotting to block their apparent progress in life or with premonitions into their future, those fake friends and family are poised to steal or block their potentially glorious destiny. Regrettably, such doctrines and mindset sell fast in the culture, and it is a hot cake, readily believable in their midst. Their gospel or salvation message is therefore more on the negative side.

In political parlance, the prayer strategy is more of preemptive attack on the enemies: attack them first spiritually before they have the chance to attack you. Sounds right and wise thing to do, wouldn't you say? Unfortunately, sugar-coating or masking up is an old marketing tool in the devil's arsenal. Therefore, some things that sound good are not always the truth, and some things that are popular are not necessarily right.

In those environments, the prayer content is more of praying against this and that, than praying for this and that. Mostly, they pray to prevent or sabotage the enemy forces working against them. Yes, ENEMIES spelled with uppercase letters; it's always about enemies and unreal problems. If “worry” is having anxiety about tomorrow and things that may never happen, then this type of praying is the best definition of a nervous, troubled, vexed and worried soul. That's why I

tagged it panic praying. They are always praying against, or praying for deliverance from sickness, demonic attacks, poverty, joblessness, auto accidents, fire accidents, flooding accidents, tripping, slipping or falling, choking while eating or drinking water, drowning (even when they don't own a bathtub, don't live near any body of water and there's no rain or flooding), death in the family, praying against failure and all obstacles in life, against stagnation and backwardness, against spiritual tornadoes and earthquakes, against wickedness in high and low places, against blood-sucker witches and wizards, and blood-sucking demons when asleep, against whispering and murmuring demonic agents, and spiritual eavesdroppers, etc. To tell you the truth, I give credit to those creative minds who manufacture such prayer tactics and prayer points. They cover all bases.

Back in the day when I was traveling teaching schools of prayer, I remember teaching that the devil does not care that you pray; he loves that, as long as you pray using the devil's prayer list. That way, the devil can get you engaged and spiritually busy, while contributing nothing that damages or halts the progress in the devil's kingdom. The devil's prayer list consists of unscriptural and religiously high-sounding prayer points that keep you in bondage to church, yet remaining a stranger to the abundant life in Christ.

The people have been taught to come to church looking for miracles rather than seeing everything as miraculous and being thankful. Would to God, that they had been taught to live a lifestyle of praying that, by what they do and say, they might be the miracle—the long-awaited answer—to someone's prayer and life.

In this respect, we can learn a big lesson from our African-American Christians. In gratitude to God and simplicity of faith, they dance and stomp their feet in their churches, Sunday after Sunday, happily shrieking and yelling at the top of their voices the refrain, *“He woke me up this morning; started me on my way; The Lord is blessing me, right now.”* From their jubilation, you would think they won the big lottery. No; it’s just *He woke me up this morning*—just the grace of waking up, putting feet on the floor, not gasping for breath in an ambulance racing to an emergency room, not being made ready to be put six feet below, and being in their “right mind” was MIRACULOUS and miracle enough for them to shout glory to God. Not to mention their regular items for thanksgiving, which are: “Food on my table, shoes on my feet, clothes on my back, a place to lay my head, a reasonable portion of health and strength.” I say, “Kudos” to them for simplicity of life, faith, appreciating grace, a sense of gratitude for daily blessings others take for granted, and childlike awe at seeing another sunrise—one more time! Amen to such thankful lifestyle. (For my two cents on miracles, please see the didactic 004.)

Today, the highly sought-after guest preachers, are the “prophets”. As should be expected, prophetic declarations, not Biblical expositions, feature in those church services. This achieves nothing more than perpetuates a sense of helplessness and dependency. It, of course, adds another pin to the prophet’s spiritual regalia.

I do not discount or despise prophecy or prophesying (1 Thess. 5:19-22). It’s just that, foundationally, I do not need a prophet or dreamer telling me certain

things that the scripture and the Spirit have made abundantly clear to the public. For example, I don’t need a prophet or dreamer reminding me that Jesus (or the Rapture) is coming very soon, very, very soon. I already know and believe that from the Bible (1 Thess. 5:1-3; 2 Pet. 3:10; Rev. 22:12, 20). I don’t need any prophet or motivational preacher telling me my future is bright, or that God is on my side. I know I am connected to the “I AM”, the Sun of Righteousness, the Resurrection and the Life (Mal. 4:2; John 11:25; 14:6). It doesn’t get any better than that! I don’t need a prophet, dreamer or “prayer contractor” warning me about dangers and enemies lurking around. Jesus and scriptures already gave me ample hints (Matt. 5:10-12; John 16:33; Rom. 5:2-5; Acts 9:15, 16; 20:22-24), along with assurances of victory and God’s divine presence. I don’t need a prophet or dreamer telling me the will and plan of God for my life. I am a child of God; I have the Holy Spirit of God living inside of me, and the Spirit leads and guides me (John 3:8; 14:26, 27; 15:26, 27; 16:7-15; Rom. 8:14-17, 26-30; 1 Cor. 2:9-16).

I don’t need a prophet or dreamer fanning enmity and distrust between my neighbors and myself when Proverbs 16:7; 25:21, 22; Romans 12:14-21 and Matthew 5:43-48 are still in the Book. *“When a man’s ways please the Lord, He makes even his enemies to be at peace with him... If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink,”* (Pr. 16:7; 25:21). *“Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you,”* (Mt. 5:44). *“Repay no one evil for evil... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good,”* (Rm. 12:17a, 21).

One more thing, unless he or she is an entertaining, gifted comedian in the pulpit—which is an incredible asset in pulpit ministry today, I don't need a pastor, preacher, evangelist, prophet or bishop belaboring a long-winded sermon, in his/her attempt to save or salvage my soul. As if to impress us with their wealth of disjointed knowledge of the scriptures, they often jump from Genesis to Revelation, back to Isaiah and then to Romans, flying again to Leviticus. I don't need further saving, because Jesus already saved my soul, and He saved me completely. *He is able to save to the uttermost*—Heb. 7:24. I come to church for encouragement, fellowship, edification, to be challenged, nurtured, corrected, to serve and be served, and to receive “a word in due season from the Lord.” However, if a prophet is forth-telling Biblical truth, as in Matthew 10:40-42, he's absolutely welcome to tell forth.

I recently listened to a message by one of the protégés of the Reverend (Dr.) R. A. Vernon of *The Word Church*, Ohio, US. I like the way the preacher played on words. He said for a long time he was fighting outside enemies to no avail, until he realized he was fighting a wrong enemy, that his real enemy was “inner-me” (Get it? That is, the enemy inside of himself). To his soul recovery and sanity, he realized “inner-me” (syllabic as “ene-me”) was his real enemy. How I wish my people will soon realize that the real enemy and destiny blocker they need to conquer and master is the “inner-me”.

If praying alone (that is, praying religious prayer) solves or resolves all problems, spiritual, political, civic, educational, physical, health, and material, then all problems in Nigeria would have disappeared overnight. Nigerian Christians pray! They pray, pray, pray,

and pray, pray, pray again. Why? They have to pray and pray again, simply because the problems still persist, unabated, unbending and unyielding. Contrary to expectations, the problems never go away, despite the prayer (and fasting). However, praying is a good activity; it soothes the mind, numbs the pain and pacifies the psyche that you are doing something about the problem, even if it is unproductive.

Pardon the comparison. For lack of a better example, please pardon this comparison to Baal's prophets' prayers. We read that the prophets of Baal, believing that Baal, credited as being god of fire, could answer by sending fire. They therefore prayed with earnestness and fervency from morning till sundown, even cutting themselves, on Mount Carmel—1 Kings 18:20-39, esp. vv. 26-29. Yet, desperate, earnest prayers alone, to a false deity, could not deliver the goods. In like manner, earnest prayer alone, even to the true God, would bring no result, as it is typical of the Pharisees. Jesus never derided the Pharisees for their prayer habit, only for their wrong motives and ostentatious, long religious prayers, (Matt. 6:5-8; 23:14; Luke 18:9-14). However, I can guarantee it that Nigerians would beat these Pharisees of old hands down in any prayer contest.

Yes, God, in His mercies, answers prayer. This is clearly evident by the supernatural restraining force against the merciless onslaught of Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria. Nigeria does not have the medical facility, drugs, and vaccines to combat Covid-19 or its predecessor, the Ebola virus, but God put the viruses at bay for Nigerians. These viruses could have wiped away a big chunk of Nigerian populace without divine intervention. So, my people, let's keep on praying. Let's do ourselves some

favors by adding corresponding actions to our prayers. Doesn't the scripture say that prayer without work (corresponding faith actions) is dead (James 2:14-28, esp. v. 20)?

As James pointed out, one of the features of religious prayer or "*faith without works*" (Jam. 2:26) is that it is devoid of appropriate action. It shrinks back from being part of the answer to its own prayer. For example, in John 9:1-12, esp. vv. 6 and 7, Jesus healed a blind man by spitting on the ground, making mud with

saliva, rubbing the man's blind eyes with the mud and sending him to go and wash in the Pool of Siloam. What if we had read that the blind man then prayed to Jesus, "Jesus, You can heal me by a simple touch or word, why don't You just do that? Why put me through the hassle of having to tap my way to the pool? I'm blind; You are sovereign, do I have to go through all that when a word from You would do? That's not how You healed blind Bartimaeus." That would have been a religious prayer; aka mere complaint, apathy, or passivity.

Background scriptures to GRACE ONLY or JESUS ONLY; NO ADDITIONAL WORKS NECESSARY theological construct:

Romans 4:5-8—"But TO HIM WHO DOES NOT WORK BUT BELIEVES ON HIM WHO JUSTIFIES THE UNGODLY, HIS FAITH IS ACCOUNTED FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS, just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God IMPUTES righteousness apart from works: 'Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, And whose sins are covered; Blessed is the man to whom the Lord shall not IMPUTE sin.'" (Uppercase mine).

Did you notice that word again, IMPUTE and the phrase WHO DOES NOT WORK?

Ephesians 2:8-10—"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is THE GIFT OF GOD, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them." (Uppercase mine).

Notice again the phrase, "the gift of God", just as in Romans 6:23b—"For the wages of sin is death, but THE GIFT OF GOD is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Uppercase mine).

Contrasting works, merit or rightly deserved wages with God's free gift by grace through faith, Paul had earlier argued:

"Now TO HIM WHO WORKS, THE WAGES ARE NOT COUNTED AS GRACE BUT AS DEBT. But to him WHO DOES

NOT WORK BUT BELIEVES ON HIM WHO JUSTIFIES THE UNGODLY, his faith is accounted for righteousness,” (Rom. 4:4, 5). (Uppercase mine).

BIBLICAL RECORDS AND BIBLICAL PRECEPTS

In some church circles with JESUS PLUS theology, the panacea to every situation is a prescription of 3, 7, 21, or 40 days of fasting, if not more, depending on the severity of the case. In addition, some have holy water—that is, water that’s been prayed over, anointing oil from Jerusalem or some other holy grounds, handkerchiefs prayed over, or pieces of cloths that had touched a handkerchief that had the sweat and/or prayers of the holy man or woman.

Granted, we read that Peter’s shadow healed the sick (Acts 5:15) and handkerchiefs and aprons from Paul’s body (Acts 19:12) healed the sick. These were reported as historical records but never set as precedents, precepts, patterns, and practices of the church. Otherwise, we would have read that Paul sent his handkerchief, holy water, and bottles of oil to the many churches he founded. Paul, Timothy, Silas, Barnabas, Titus and all missionaries and emissaries from the Early Church hubs in Jerusalem or Antioch did not set out with special handkerchiefs or anointing oils, which

had been prayed over by the apostles and elders, to distribute these to converts, church leaders or local churches in distant islands. Jesus was their message and Jesus was enough. (I hear you. For me, the oil from the local grocery store will work for James 5:13-16, not necessarily oil imported from Israel. I’ll find other ways to support Israel). The early church emissaries went out in obedience to Jesus, believing the Spirit of Jesus was with them in their mission. They went out in the Name of Jesus, relying on the Holy Spirit, believing the promise of Jesus’ presence, carrying scrolls and parchments of scriptures, basking in the prayers and support of the saints, and sometimes carrying letters of endorsement and recommendation. Nothing more! The leaders of the Jerusalem church, Peter, James, and others did not claim any power or anointing that was not available in Christ to other believers and preachers they had prayerfully sent off as missionaries and evangelists to other parts of the world. Sadly, today, it’s a “**No One Else but Me,**” spiritual leadership style mentality.

The sum total of JESUS PLUS XYZ is a gospel of Jesus that needs to be supplemented with works, rituals, the pastor, prophet or spiritual leader, ceremonial services and activities, because Jesus is not enough in their theology.

You ask: Aren’t those things scriptural—anointing oil, holy water, and prayed-over handkerchief? Yes, and it is also reported in the Bible, the law of Moses, for parents to bring their disobedient child to the elders for sentencing by

stoning the child to death (Deut. 21:18-21; 27:16). Why aren’t we practicing that today? It is in the Bible, isn’t it? In our churches today, we have many active, prayerful, tithing, devoted parents of unruly children who give unmitigated

sorrows and pain to their parents, don't we? Is it that the laws of the land now supersede the Biblical injunction from Moses to have these kids brought forward for stoning? Upholding civil laws above "Biblical laws" is contrary to the avowed statement of most pastors. They say that, in their books, God's law or the Bible trumps the laws of the land. Are there now exceptions? The patriarchs and leaders of faith, Moses, Jacob, Gideon, King David, not to mention King Solomon, were polygamous with many wives and sometimes concubines. It is in the bible. Does that normalize polygamy as a biblical doctrine? Also, Jesus says you should pluck out your right eye and cut off your right hand if they cause you to sin—Matthew 5:29; 18:9; Mark 9:47. Who of us has not committed sins by our eyes or hand? Why aren't we cutting off our hands and plucking out our eyes? Aren't those words in the Scriptures as well? (A preacher I often listen to on

YouTube said of himself, "I take the Bible seriously, but not literally.")

The Bible does not prescribe all that it describes. The Bible faithfully describes the dirty secrets of Bible heroines and heroes without embellishing their stories. Yet, the Bible does not normalize their practices (Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:11).

In Acts 4:31 we read of the shaking of the place where the disciples prayed, and in Acts 16:25-27 there was an earthquake following the prayers of Paul and Silas. Why haven't we made a doctrine out of this? That the place of prayer shook, or an earthquake happened following prayer were in the Bible and should be biblical. Why haven't we insisted that the ground must shake, or an earthquake must occur when we pray earnestly? Aren't we praying intensely enough? Wait a minute; I get it now. It's called "pick-and-choose." Take what's convenient for you in the Bible and discard the rest.

Yes, Deacon Philip evangelized Samaria with miraculous signs following. He then sent for the leaders of the church, Peter and John, who came to pray for the new converts to receive the Holy Spirit. In Acts 8, we read:

Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them. And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, **hearing and seeing the miracles which he did. For unclean spirits, crying with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed; and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed.** And there was great joy in that city (Acts 8:5-8; emphasis mine).

The Philip who singlehandedly could do all that in Samaria—performed miracles, cast out demons, restored the withered limbs of the lame and healed the paralyzed—might as well pray for the Samaritan believers to receive the Holy Spirit. I believe it was necessary for him to have the delegation of elders from Jerusalem visit Samaria so as to connect the Samaritan believers to the Mother Church (essentially Jewish) in Jerusalem as one body in Christ—Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles. I believe the visit was for the purpose of mutual fellowship, and also to endorse and affirm Philip's ministry and converts (Acts 8).

ADAPTABILITY, SIMPLICITY AND PROFOUNDNESS OF THE TRUE GOSPEL

The true Gospel is “Jesus Only,” “Jesus is Enough.” The corrupted version is “Jesus Plus This” or “Jesus Plus That” for salvation, deliverance, healing, and eternal life. The gospel is so simple we find ways to complicate it.

I’m so thankful I didn’t have to learn a new language—Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic or Arabic—to be a Christian because God, the Father of our Lord Jesus, hears and speaks my native language, Yoruba. I also don’t have to visit a holy land—Jerusalem, the Jordan River or Mount Sinai—to be an authentic Christian, because, with “Christ in me,” every part of God’s earth I step on becomes a holy ground, and every place where I can look up and call on the name of Jesus is holy land and the gateway to heaven. If authentic faith experience comes through a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, then countless millions of faithful Christians who live from paycheck to paycheck would be shut out of genuine faith. Thankfully, that’s not the case. I am also thankful that I do not have to be baptized in the River Jordan, in the exact spot where Jesus was baptized, for me to feel the presence of God. Nor do I have to be re-baptized in the River Jordan, if I ever make the holy pilgrimage to Jerusalem, a vacation experience for which yours truly never craved. If by some happenstance I do go to Jerusalem, it will be for educational purposes, not for any spiritual reasons. Didn’t Jesus say to Thomas, “*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed*”? (John 20:29). Happily, in my theology, when sanctified with prayer, the water in the inflatable portable swimming pool at my backyard will equally “chill the body, but not the soul,” when used for believer’s baptism. For my first Communion as prison Chaplain,

before we ordered pre-sealed, individual cups, I would have consecrated broken pieces of cracker biscuits and diluted contents of a bottle of coke soda to serve the Lord’s Supper to spiritually hungry men in jail, had not the Catholic priest come to my rescue by providing “acceptable” communion elements. (The coke soda was the anathema to the priest.) Firstly, from my science background, we learned to improvise and achieve the same results when ideal materials and situations were scarce or not available; that is the crux of scientific thinking. Secondly, with the right heart and holy intentions, when prayed over, crumbs of cracker biscuits, wafers, matzah, a bread slice, wine, fruit juice, or coke/soda, can be consecrated and used to recreate, relive, and retell the story, “*Take, eat; this is My body.*’... *Drink from it, all of you...* *For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins,*” (Matt. 26:26-28).

WHAT IS GOD’S NAME? How do we address God? By the way; here is a worthy side talk on this consideration of the simplicity of the Gospel and why we don’t have to make it any more complicated by invoking some high sounding, mystical Hebraic names of God. I want to ask: “**What is this fascination or new trend being popularized especially by (Nigerian) gospel singers that God’s name is Adonai, Elohim, Yahweh, Jehovah, etc.?**” These are some of the names of God in Judaism. Although Christianity has its roots in Judaism it is an entirely New Covenant of God with His creation; otherwise, Christ died in vain. Back in the day, as anyone in my age bracket can testify to, the group that addressed God in

those Hebraic names, Adonai, Yahweh, Elohim, etc., were the spiritual—more appropriately, the spiritist—white garment churches, in their efforts to mystify and dazzle us with their spirituality. If my opinion counts, it is my well-considered observation that Gospel singers and gospel song lyricists are sometimes better theologians, with deeper insights into the mysteries of the Kingdom, than many pastors. However, I have an objection on this one point about God's name. These high-sounding names are descriptive names as God, the eternal "I AM", was revealed to, and experienced by, the people of old. Every name identified and described a part of the elephant but not the whole (see *Thinking Aloud*—2). The fullness of God came to us only in the one name, JESUS. Thankfully, I too have a relationship with this "I AM" through Christ that, like Jesus did, I also pray to *Abba* Father, because relationship trumps titles. For example, in public, I am Dr. Ojewale to seminary students, Mr. Ojewale in public schools, Reverend Ojewale to church members, Pastor Ojewale to certain church members because there's an unwritten, covenant shepherding role involved, or simply "Chaplain" to many of my co-workers. Those titles are not my name but descriptive of how I am perceived, experienced and related to those individuals. Presently, my baby mumbles *Daadaa* (she meant Daddy), because we have a deeper relationship that no title can capture or encapsulate.

Those in spirituality, (or deeply spiritual individuals such as, Lao Tzu in *Tao Te Ching*), often display a deeper insight into the nature of the eternal God. For example, it was attributed to *Lao Tzu* in *Tao Te Ching* to have said, **"The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao. The name that can be named is not the eternal name. The nameless is the**

beginning of heaven and earth. Naming is the origin of all particular things." This Lao Tzu's perception of the Eternal was almost along the same line with the Judaic notions and concepts, significantly akin to the tetragrammaton: *Yod, Heh, Waw, Heh; YHWH/JHVH*, articulated as Yahweh or Jehovah, the name revealed to Moses in his encounter with the eternal "I AM". Hence, when Moses asked God what to say should the children of Israel ask him the name of the God who had sent him, "*God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM.' Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you,'*" (Exo. 3:13, 14). The Eternal God is too big for any human language to name. In the new covenant, the *'I AM WHO I AM'* took on flesh, moved into the neighborhood and had a human face in JESUS. Jesus boldly declared, "I AM the Way, the Truth and the Life"; "I AM the Bread of Life"; "I AM the Resurrection and the Life", etc. During a heated argument about His deity and claims, Jesus told the Jewish leaders and the hostile crowd, "*Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM.*" For the Jewish leaders, that was the last straw that broke the camel's back. "*Then they took up stones to throw at Him,*" (John 8:58, 59).

This much I know: For New Testament Christians, one name opens the doors of heaven and shuts the gates of hell; that name is JESUS. One name ushers us into the presence of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the "I AM" before whom Moses stood, and the Father of our Lord Jesus; that name is JESUS. "*And whatever you ask in My name [that is, in Jesus' name], that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask anything in My name, I will do it... Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be*

saved [only the name of Jesus]... For in Him [Jesus] dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principalities and power... Therefore God also has highly exalted Him [Jesus] and given Him THE NAME WHICH IS ABOVE EVERY NAME, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (John 14:13, 14; Acts 4:12; Col. 2:9, 10; Philipp. 2:9-11; inserts and emphasis mine).

My people, in Jesus Christ, God has given us *“the name which is above every name,”* what else do we need? My saintly

Mother wasn't schooled in any tongue twisting Hebraic name of God. She didn't call God Yahweh or Adonai. In her Yoruba language, my Mama prayed to God, *“Ni Oruko Jesu Kristi Oluwa ati Olugbala wa”* (translation: IN THE NAME OF JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD AND SAVIOR) and the Lord heard her—because the true gospel is simple, profound and adaptable to any culture or language. Even a 5-year-old child can pray, because THE TRUE GOSPEL IS THAT SIMPLE, PROFOUND and ADAPTABLE. If I am accused of oversimplifying the Gospel message, I am willing to plead guilty as charged as long as my accusers are also willing to admit that I have not overstepped the depth and seriousness of the message.

WHY A “JESUS PLUS XYZ” THEOLOGY IS SO APPEALING

By the way, “Jesus Plus” theology has a BIG ADVANTAGE. As has been mentioned, one of the necessary pluses to complete Jesus and bring deliverance to the people is the role of the pastor, prophet or spiritual leader himself/herself. **The big advantage is that this “Jesus Plus” theological framework is patterned after the Old Testament (OT)—meaning, it is biblical. Without admitting it or being conscious of it, the New Testament is an appendage to, not the focal point of, their theological thinking.**

You may quote me on this: CHRISTOLOGY is so foreign in their theological perspective that if you took out and deleted the New Testament from their Bibles, their pulpit ministries and church services would go on as if nothing was amiss. They would not be alarmed that something major was gone. As long as they have

their Old Testament Bible stories of faith and miracles, their Christian message is full and complete. I mean the stories they preach from, such as, David defeating Goliath with only a sling, Elijah praying down fire on Mount Carmel, King Jehoshaphat defeating a coalition of armies by sending a choir into the warfront, etc. It didn't matter much that they've been preaching the same theme from the same Bible passages Sunday after Sunday, year after year. Miracles are all that count.

In the Old Testament, it was usually one towering figure, like Moses, Elijah, Elisha, David, and Isaiah, who could hear from God or had a cherished relationship with the Eternal. The millions and millions of other worshippers listened to and depended on the one towering person to mediate God for them. Anyone who attempted to come near the mountain,

where God’s presence was, would be killed (Exo. 19; 20:18-21; Heb. 12:18, 19). That was the old pattern, and it is beloved in the “Jesus Plus” circle for the visibility, invincibility, and indispensable mediatory and/or intermediary role it assigns the leaders.

Unlike Moses, these leaders would rather hoard or arrogate God’s power to themselves than desire the supernatural for all of God’s people, as Moses had demonstrated. Joshua, Moses’ assistant, fearing Moses might lose relevance or his leadership because God’s Spirit had rested on two leaders who were not present in the tabernacle with Moses had asked Moses to forbid them from prophesying. Moses then chided Joshua, “*Are you zealous for my sake? Oh, that all the Lord’s people were prophets and that the Lord would put His Spirit upon them!*” (Num. 11:29).

Now, with “*Christ in you, the hope of glory*” and the empowering of Holy Spirit of God available to all believers (John 3:8; Acts 1:8; 1 Corinthians 2:9-16; Romans 8:14; Col. 1:27) the old pattern is gone. However, the “Jesus Plus” practitioners need to keep the old pattern alive, because it elevates their leaders, giving them prominence, a semblance of divinity, and, perhaps, aura of deity.

Another feature of “Jesus Plus” theology is a MASKING UP, or veiling up, of some fading glory—just as it was true of their favorite model, Moses. Do you remember a time when Moses spent many days in the presence of God to receive the Ten Commandments and returned with his face shining, which made him scary to the Israelites (Exodus 34:29-35)? What was Moses’ immediate solution? He put a veil over his face when he was with the people and removed the veil only when he went into God’s

presence. The veil was initially necessary for the people—so Moses would not scare them off. We learn in the New Testament that Moses’ shining face, depicting a reflection of the Shekinah glory of God, was a passing thing (2 Cor. 3:7-18, esp. v. 13). It did not last. It faded away BUT THE PEOPLE NEVER KNEW. Why? Moses kept the veil, sorry, the mask, on to keep the appearance that he was the Man. Moses might be the meekest person, as scripture puts it (Num. 12:3), he, however, scored low on integrity in this area.

With the passing or fading reflection of glory on his face, Moses, the Law Giver, needed the veil more than the people. He needed to hide behind the veil. He needed to maintain the appearance of a superman. From that time on, no one knew the real Moses, only the veiled or masked Moses. Long before Covid-19 pandemic hit the globe necessitating wearing masks, that—Moses’ veil—was the origin of cover-up masks in the religious circle. Unfortunately, many people in the church today wear different masks. They project the face and personae they want people to see, not the real person behind the mask. This is one reason why fellowship in the church is often shallow and not deeply genuine.

Many leaders in the “Jesus Plus” theological school need to keep the veil on, despite the reality of a fading glory—physically, mentally, and spiritually, so they may keep the deification alive. Not only that, but they also live under a self-imposed pressure to perform that, from time to time, they have to come up with new manipulative methods to maintain the status quo. Who knows? As it is true with many of us, there might be an insecure, scared child groaning inside of them, begging for attention.

Perhaps, their drive for control, success and everything else these leaders do are indicators of suppressed tantrums and silhouettes of that vulnerable, insecure child inside of them. Who knows?

WHEN THE BIBLE IS NO MORE THAN THE SOURCE OF PRAYER POINTS: WOULD YOU CALL THAT AUTHENTIC CHRISTIANITY? PLEASE TALK TO ME.

Kindly hear me out first. I'm just a storyteller filtering my observations through my theological framework. I thank you for your patience thus far. For example, my people can turn the most quoted verse, John 3:16, into prayer points such as, (1) pray that you may be among the people of the world that God loves (that's from the phrase, "for God so loved the world"), (2) pray to be included in the whosoever that will be saved (that's from "whosoever believes in Him"), (3) pray that you will not perish but have eternal life (you know where that comes from in the verse), etc. Going on to John 3:17, pray that you will not be condemned along with the world (from the phrase, "for God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world"). On and on they go from one scripture passage to another, both in the Old and New Testaments. The latter chapters of the book of Isaiah (chapters 40-66), with many promises of restoration, preservation, and deliverance, are a favorite. Here I am, fidgeting in my seat and mumbling, "Somebody please pinch me; I must be dreaming."

After hours of doing the Bible-prayer-points and earnestly groaning in prayer accordingly, my people would return home feeling excited, wiping off sweat and tears, elated that they'd been to church and had a great time of praying for themselves. On the contrary, I would go home earnestly praying Psalm 141:3, "*Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; Keep watch over the door of my lips.*" It was my 9-1-1 prayer that I might resist the temptation of saying anything whatsoever about what I'd just witnessed in the church, because once I opened my big mouth and blurt out it's hard to retract and close back those blessed thick lips of mine. Would you call that use of the Bible and that kind of praying Christianity? I call it the practice of the religion of Christianity because it is light-years away from what's recorded in the Book of the Acts of Apostles, or how the Old Testament (OT) saints prayed. The bestselling "Christian" books in Nigeria are "Books of Prayer Points Based on the Bible;" that is, of course, based on their understanding and reading of the Bible.

For sure, the prayers of OT saints and prayers in the Acts of the Apostles were infused with scriptures. They quoted God's promises and the writings/sayings of God's prophets to support their petitions. As in Isaiah 41:21—"*Present your case,*" says the Lord. "*Bring forth your strong reasons,*" says the King of Jacob." Isaiah 43:26—"*Put Me in remembrance: let us contend together; State you case, that you may be acquitted.*" "*Come now, and let us reason together,*" says the

Lord...” That’s how Moses, Daniel, and the saints of old used Scriptures in their prayer: pleading God’s words in prayer and asking God to perform according to His Word, or to remember His covenant. See for example, Daniel 9:2—“Daniel spurred to intercede for the exiles based on prophet Jeremiah’s 70 years”; Act 1—praying before choosing leaders; Acts 4—after persecution, praying for boldness; Acts 6—praying before choosing leaders; Acts 12—praying for the release of Peter from prison; Acts 13—praying before setting aside the first missions/church planting team, Paul and Barnabas, etc.

This is what I’ve observed: You hardly hear contextual Bible exegesis³, teaching or exposition of the Bible from many great Nigerian pulpits, especially in the free-for-all Pentecostal churches. What you hear as Bible teaching is a scripture passage that’s taken out of context and turned into prayer points. Yes, the literal reading (eisegesis and pseudo interpretation) of the Bible has transformed the Holy Writ into the Number 1 book of prayers engendering thousands of prayer points. Either prayer points to pray for something into your life, or prayer points of things, scenarios, and events to pray away and out of your life. In that school of thought, there are as many prayer points “from the Bible” as there are verses and phrases in the Bible. This is what Christianity has become in Nigeria. Sadly, it is the fastest growing trend because people are in need—physically, emotionally, materially, and spiritually—and they turn to the church and church leaders as the last resort. Rather than be presented with a God of love who cares and has demonstrated that care in and through Christ, an all-sufficient Christ, the church, and church leaders offer them prayers, prayer points and fasting. That’s Religion 101. Prophetic, declarative, apostolic prayers, as they are described, are what preachers bellow from the pulpit—and that’s what the people crave for and echo their loudest Amen to.

Tell me which world religion does not offer prayer as mediatory process to connect with the espoused Deity or find favor with the Deity of the religion. The content, form and nature of prayer and praying may differ from one religion to the other, but ALL religions revolve around “prayer, meditation, devotion, offerings, sacrifice, alms-giving and rituals” as panacea. It is true for Islam, true for Buddhism, true Judaism and true for countless other world religions. On the contrary, the New Testament does not offer religious prayers and practices as panacea (though the Pharisees did—Matt. 23:14). It offers CHRIST. Yes, you

³ The terms “exegesis” and “eisegesis” refer to how you read the Bible. At the most basic level, exegesis relies on the original context of a biblical passage to determine that passage’s meaning, while eisegesis uses things other than the original context of a biblical passage to determine that passage’s meaning. Eisegesis is the interpretation of a text (as of the Bible) by reading into it one’s own ideas compare to exegesis. Exegesis means using the words of the text in Scripture, through the lens of their original context, to determine their intent. Eisegesis literally means, “to lead into”, as in “leading our own ideas into the text”. Eisegesis refers to interpretation of a passage of Scripture based on a subjective understanding of the text.

pray to God through Christ. Prayer is NOT the answer, JESUS CHRIST is! In Christianity, prayer is the means, the pathway, the doorway to everything, including **salvation** (Rom. 10:9, 10, 13; Luke 18:13), **supernatural peace** (Philipp. 4:6, 7), **provision/resources** (Matt. 7:7, 8; John 14:13, 14; 15:7), **healing** (Jam. 5:13-18; Matt. 8:1-4), **wisdom** (Jam. 1:5-8; Prov. 3:5-8), **supernatural intervention** (Jer. 33:3; Jos. 10:12-14), etc. but prayer is not the end. Prayer is the common denominator, leveler and backbone of all religions, except Christianity. If Jesus, in the Gospel accounts, and the Apostles, in the Acts of the Apostles, had been preaching and spreading the message of prayer, fasting, asceticism and religious rituals they would have been the beloved of the Pharisees and Jewish religious leaders and wouldn't have suffered persecution or martyrdom for their faith and beliefs.

Jesus wouldn't need to come and die on the cross if all that the world needed was prayer. If praying the right prayers had been God's eternal solution to humanity's problems, Jesus would have spent His time on earth teaching and instructing on prayer from one region to the other "*as John taught his disciples*" (Luke 11:1), and as the Pharisees taught; though the Pharisees "*say, and do not*" (Matt. 23:1-4). If prayer and praying were everything, I ask you to consider King Solomon's long and well-worded prayer at the dedication of the Temple (1 Kings 8 and 2 Chron. 6), the Levites prayer in Nehemiah chapter 9, Daniel's prayer in Daniel chapter 9, and compare them to Jesus' longest recorded prayer in John 17. Undoubtedly, you will vote for King Solomon as the "Man of Prayer and Man of God for the Year". Jesus will hardly make it into the runner up list. Yet, Jesus said of Himself, "*Indeed, a greater than Solomon is here,*" (Matt. 12:42; Luke 11:31). Jesus is greater than the Law and the Prophets, and He is greater than prayer.

"Prayer is the key" is one of the beloved choruses we sing in all-night prayers in Nigeria to encourage each other. It goes like this:

 "Prayer is the key/2x
 Prayer is the Master key
 Jesus started with prayer
 And ended with prayer
 Prayer is the Master key."

Absolutely scriptural! I have sung it. I have raised it for congregational prayers. I have even taken it one step further to indicate that Jesus did not end with prayer but continued with prayer, because He is still praying for us right now. The scriptures say, "*Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them ... Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us*" (Heb. 7:25; Rom. 8:34; emphasis mine). I had quoted John Wesley who once said, "**God does**

nothing except in response to believing prayer,” and “God does nothing except by prayer and everything by it.”

I had also buttressed that chorus with a statement attributed to Spurgeon. Spurgeon said, **“Whether we like it or not, asking is the rule of the Kingdom.”** Charles H. Spurgeon went on to say that everything Christ did in His earthly life He achieved by constant prayers to God. Spurgeon insisted that if God did not exempt His Son, Jesus, from this rule of the Kingdom—Jesus spent lengthy times and sleepless nights in prayers and groaning on the mountains, in the gardens and in the early mornings as we read in the Bible—then God will not relax the rules for any of us. In other word, pray we must!

Yes, I am into prayer and for prayer. As part of my job description, I wore two hats in *Every Home for Christ*: I was the Universities and Colleges Ministry director as well as the Prayer School director. As the prayer school director for *Every Home for Christ* in Nigeria from the mid-1980 to mid-1990, I traveled to many States teaching schools of prayers in different denominations. Dick Eastman⁴, bestseller author of devotional and prayer books and the director of *Every Home for Christ*, who had put together the schools of prayer I was then teaching, had said of himself, **“Something happens when I pray that does not happen when I don’t.”** Eastman then stated the corollary, “Therefore, if I have not prayed today as I ought, something in God’s kingdom plan for my life is still pending (because God is waiting for me to ASK.” That was a principle of prayer he experientially arrived at.

I have said all this to highlight the point that I am not a stranger to prayer and spiritual warfare. Today, on my laptop and external storage drives, I have countless prayer school and spiritual warfare materials and PowerPoint that I have developed and taught over the years. Nonetheless, prayer, as indispensable as it is, is not the focal point of Christianity; Jesus Christ is! C. H. Spurgeon was deep into prayer, but he was also the doyen of Biblical exegesis and exposition. Spurgeon, from his Bible commentaries, found Jesus on every page of the Bible, both Old and New. He elevated and venerated Jesus, not prayer. Yet, he believed so much in prayer he had said, “it is the rule of the kingdom” from which God did not exempt even His Son. The same mindset is true of all great prayer warriors and devotional writers of this and previous generations, such as John Wesley, Andrew Murray, George Mueller, Brother Lawrence, Francis of Assisi, J. Oswald Chambers, Martin Luther, Dick Eastman, etc.

The chorus, “Prayer is the Key”, is scriptural, and it is appropriate as means to an end, not an end as my people have turned prayer into. C. H. Spurgeon would expound a scripture with attention to its context, historical background, and

⁴ Dick Eastman, the founder of CHANGE THE WORLD SCHOOL OF PRAYER and author of NO EASY ROAD, THE HOUR THAT CHANGES THE WORLD, and other devotional and prayer books.

variants of the original language. However, regardless of context and history or meaning of language, my people will turn the same scripture into prayer points. Any scriptural passage is a source of prayer point for or against something.

INOCULATED AGAINST THE TRUTH

(False theology = False Beliefs; therefore Bad/False Theology Leads to False Salvation)

By far, the greatest danger of *Churchianity* versus Christianity is the numbing or “inoculation effect” *Churchianity* has against the real faith. To protect us from contracting a disease and fallen sick from it, those in the medical field inoculate us with, that is, they inject into us, a weak or attenuated form of the very disease-causing organism they want to protect us from. Our bodies are then able to fight and combat this weak form of the disease-causing organism. In the process, we develop and build up immunity against a real threat if and when we come in contact with it. *Churchianity* has the same effect. It introduces people to enough of a weak or corrupted version of the message of Christianity and they thereafter develop immunity against, and distaste for, the true message. They appraise the real message with the yardstick of the weak form they have been overfed on and quickly come to the conclusion that the true message is deficient, unpalatable or incorrect. (For the same reason, I wouldn't be surprised if, after reading this work—and I'll be glad if they do, some Nigerian profiteers in church business publicly label me as the latest “antichrist” or “false prophet.”)

This malady, or pathology, of becoming vaccinated against the truth may, in part, actually explain what the apostle Paul meant when he wrote, 2 Timothy 4:3, 4,

“For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own

desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.”

The “itching ears” syndrome, habitually listening to certain “teachers” and turning “ears away from the truth” may be ears that have been conditioned by practice to hear only on one frequency, and, unfortunately, that one frequency is the wrong and familiar old way. That is, such people have ears that have been tuned to the same thing, same wavelength, over a long period of time that their ears have become set and fossilized to function only in that defaulted faulty way. The solution to this is “a new heart” which the true Gospel message of God's New Covenant promises and delivers. “A new heart” guarantees a new set of ears and eyes, and newness everywhere else.

Which Condition is Better, and Which is Worse? Or, If You Could Choose, in Whose Shoes Would You Like to Be of These 3 Scenarios?

This is where I really need your help. Believe me, I am struggling with which condition is worse or better in the following scenarios. First scenario: it's the case of two men in a dangerous situation. One person is on a precipice but cannot read the danger sign and lifesaving manual; the other man on the same dangerous precipice can read but

was handed a lifesaving instruction manual written in a language he cannot read and doesn't understand? He could read and understand and would have taken precautions if the instructions handed to him had been written in English, but they had been written in a Japanese language. Consequently, and sadly, both the illiterate and the educated men died from a bad fall. Whose fate was better or worse?

Second scenario: it's also the story of two sick persons. One man who was sick and dying was also poor. Therefore, he had no access to, and couldn't afford the cost of, lifesaving medications. The second person was a rich man. He was dying, had the means to purchase expensive medications but was offered fake drugs, or was wrongly diagnosed and had spent a lot of money on wrong medications? Consequently, and sadly, both the poor man and the rich man died from the same disease, the poor man for lack of appropriate medications, the rich man from gulping down fake drugs or wrongly prescribed medications.

Third scenario: one man never heard about Jesus of Nazareth all his life, while the second man was born and bred on a wrong Jesus in the local church that was his second home. This man had followed a Jesus lookalike, faithfully served a caricature of the Eternal and had believed an impersonation of the real Jesus, but really never was introduced to the Carpenter from Galilee, the "only begotten Son of God" as the Messiah. Jesus had warned, "For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many. For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect." (Matt. 24:5, 24). Without any doubt, the Nigerian churches today are filled with millions of

MIRACLE SEEKERS (uppercase intentional), who, in Jesus' words are chasing after "false christs and false prophets [who] show great signs and wonders." You know where I am going with these, don't you? **Here is the question that's troubling for me: Whose case is worse, the man who never heard about Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of the Most High God, or the one who was offered a false Jesus, a fake Messiah as the real Jesus?**

One person never heard of Jesus; the other was presented with a fake Jesus (as in fake drugs) or a wrong Jesus (as in wrong diagnosis resulting in treating a wrong disease). Whose case is better and whose case is worse in these three scenarios? Whose story is more pathetic?

How are these scenarios different from Aaron saying to the people that the "Immortal, Invisible, God only Wise" Yahweh was now the visible golden calf? Aaron had presented them with the golden calf, a wrong deity, an Egyptian worship system, and a fake god. Yet, Aaron had the guts to "minister," teach, preach, exhort, and admonish them, **"This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!"** Really, Aaron? Did that come from the first high priest of Israel? Please tell me, Aaron, did you mean it was the golden calf that sent the plagues on Egypt, sent the angel that killed the firstborn of Egypt, parted the Red Sea for Israel and drowned the Egyptian army in the same Sea? Aaron, really? Could this be the same Aaron who was Moses' sibling, same father and mother, born to Jochebed and Amram, who with Moses had approached the Pharaoh and boldly demanded that the Pharaoh let Israel go? We read, *"Afterward Moses and Aaron went in and told Pharaoh, 'Thus says the Lord God of Israel: 'Let My people go,*

that they may hold a feast to Me in the wilderness.””” (Exo. 5:1). Same Aaron? Did Aaron’s later assertion then make Aaron’s molten calf the “I AM WHO I AM” before whom Moses had stood? I don’t think so.

Why aren’t things working in Nigeria despite churches and houses of prayer here and there, especially, all over the Southern parts of the nation, and all-night prayer vigils and countless days of fasting going on here and there? If you asked me that one-million-dollar question, why things weren’t working in Nigeria despite prayers, my intelligent guess—mind you, it is a guess, and I also dare say, an intelligent one—my answer, my intelligent guess, would be THAT MY PEOPLE HAD BEEN SOLD A FAKE JESUS; THEY HAD BEEN OFFERED A WRONG JESUS. Truth be told, even if it is unpalatable; it’s very unfortunate that many of our churches and religious leaders peddle a Jesus quite different from the Jesus of Nazareth that we read in the New Testament. That’s my answer; my intelligent guess. It’s a different Jesus that my people worship. I hope I’m right, because, as they say, right diagnosis is half the cure.

When We Trivialize or Commercialize the “Holy” and Precious Pearls of Heaven, We Trample Them Under Our Feet

Let me clarify myself, lest I am found guilty of making a sweeping generalization or have fallen into the error of throwing away the baby with the bath water. What I meant was especially many churches and church leaders from the open-ended camp of the counterfeit Pentecostals, spurious Spiritualists, bogus prayer houses, fictitious prayer contractors, false prophets, fake

visioners, and phony dreamers in the free-for-all religious enterprise. These so-called churches and spiritual leaders are taking undue advantage of the vulnerable masses that are desperate for help at all cost. These charlatans, fraudsters, impostors, and con artists are playing on people’s intelligence and gullibility. In Matthew 7:6, Jesus said, *“Do not give what is holy to the dogs; nor cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you in pieces.”* Now I am beginning to realize that, perhaps, Jesus had on His mind Pentecostalism in Nigeria when He made that statement. Stay with me please. For, what is holier than the Holy Spirit? What is more precious as a pearl than the Holy Spirit in the heart of a person? Alas, if you make the mistake of throwing the “holy” and priceless “pearls” into the wrong hands and wrong places, what do you get? You get the Nigerian factor! As Jesus concluded, the result is that *“they trample them [that is, trample the “holy” and precious “pearls”] under their feet, and turn and tear you in pieces.”* Yes, Jesus said it; they “turn and tear you in pieces”! Only the heavens can tell into how many pieces Jesus—the Giver of the Holy Spirit, our most precious Pearl from the Father and the Son—has been shredded and torn apart.

Back to my earlier 3 scenarios: If—for argument’s sake—you find yourself pressed between the devil and the deep blue sea, in whose shoes would you like to be of the 3 scenarios, if you could choose? Don’t forget I had asked for your help because I didn’t know which way to lean. Someday, I felt ignorance was bliss; other days I felt no situation was worse than the agony and realization that I’d been deceived, fooled and taken advantage of. Someday, I felt no motion was better than a directionless motion; other days, I felt any motion was good,

even if counterproductive, because it signaled doing something to help myself. I told you: I was confused deciding, which was better or worse, didn't I? What I didn't tell you then was that you weren't really helping me decide, you were going to help Nigerians decide. It is a decision for Nigerians to choose between no motion if directionless or motion for the sake of moving, keeping busy and active, even when it is counterproductive. It is a decision for Nigerians to choose between no religion if it's unauthentic, or religious activities for its own sake, for the practice of religion, even if it is fake, dubious, enslaving and demonic. You decide.

The Sad Conclusion is This: Bad/False Theology Leads to False Salvation and False Expectations, Resulting in Dire Consequences.

I don't intend to answer my own question, but I can show to where I lean. When Jesus in Matthew 11:21 and 22 (or Luke 10:13 and 14) upbraided unrepentant cities that had been privileged to witness His great miracles, Jesus said, *“Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you,”* (Matt. 11:21, 22). What did Jesus mean by this comparison? What did Jesus mean by consequences being more tolerable for deprived Tyre and Sidon than privileged Chorazin and Bethsaida? First, only He was omniscient to know what could be but would not be, and could have been but did not. Only the Omniscient could tell what might be but was not, and might not have been but

happened or did not happen anyway, under all kinds of circumstances and unimaginable scenarios. Among other things, could that statement of Jesus imply, or even mean, that Tyre and Sidon, not having the opportunity that Chorazin and Bethsaida had squandered away, would receive a fair treatment and lesser punishment? That, in the end, their lack of opportunity to hear and see great miracles of Jesus would have made them better off (see Luke 12:47, 48)? By extension, could that suggest that Jesus would upbraid unrepentant cities swamped in churches and proclaim *“Woe, unto them!”* while being more tolerant of equally unrepentant cities with less concentration of churches? Who knows? I rest my case.

Therefore, taking the cue from my scenarios, this may explain why religious Nigeria does not seem to fare any better than nations we would regard as secular or even godless. Yes, I said it. RELIGIOUS NIGERIA is not better—or, is probably even worse—compared to countries Nigerians would proudly and arrogantly refer to as secular, atheistic or even godless nations. Fake religion—let's call a spade, a spade—fake Christianity is doing to many Nigerians caught in its web what fake drugs do in the bodies of the desperately sick patients: **they give you the impression that you are helping yourself to recover and get well, while unbeknownst to you, you are actually dumping money into a bottomless pit and inadvertently digging your own grave.** Now, that I've gotten that off my chest, if you wish to, you may go ahead and stone me for saying that. I'll die a happy man. *“For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain,”* (Philipp. 1:21).

“AUTHENTIC CHRISTIAN FAITH” VERSUS “THE RELIGION OF CHRISTIANITY”—IT’S EITHER/OR

In closing, we are faced with a choice between “**Authentic Christian Faith**” and “**The Religion of Christianity.**” “Jesus Only” is the authentic CHRISTIAN FAITH. “Jesus Plus XYZ” is the practice of THE RELIGION OF CHRISTIANITY. They are close because they both proclaim Jesus. They both have relationship with Jesus, which often makes it hard to distinguish one from another. Yet, they are nonetheless far apart, because, while Jesus is sovereign in the true Christian faith, Jesus cannot stand alone as the “I AM THE WAY, THE TRUTH AND THE LIFE” in the religion of Christian faith. Therefore, it needs plenty of support from saints, angels, visits to holy geographic places, use and elevation of sacred materials such as altar, water, oil, ascetic practices, religious fasting, and many other self-denying sacrifices. In the **religion of Christianity**, we have engaged, devoted, and dutiful practitioners of the religion; in the **authentic Christian faith**, we have people who embody grace and simplicity, reflect Jesus, represent and manifest the life and power of Christ in a sick world.

Not to be confused, “Authentic Christianity” is not monolithic, uniform, or “one size fits all”. It is superbly diverse and positively pluralistic. It embraces and embodies many different spiritualities and cultural variations, yet all steeped in “Jesus only” as the center. It also branches into many denominations, traditions and practices while still rooted in the New Testament doctrines and practices. These many acceptable diversities may appear to weaken my case except that with all the differences and transformations, each still manifests and espouses the same “Jesus only”, mantra. This is just like we may have many differently sized and shaped branches and twigs on the trunk and stem of a tree, yet all displaying similar foliage, flowers and fruits that are intrinsic to the genetic makeup of the plant. Many branches but all from same, one stem; twigs dissimilar in shapes and sizes but all shooting out from one tree. The problem ensues, and “the practice of Christianity” (or churchianism) begins to thrive, when the focus is no longer on Jesus and the New Testament is no longer central.

THE PARABLE OF TWO TEMPLE BUILDERS: KING SOLOMON & KING JESUS

King Solomon built a temple, a magnificent structure, for Jehovah, using forced labor, not dissimilar to what the Pharaohs had done to their forebears in Egypt (Exo. 1:11; 1 Kings 5:13, 14; 9:15, 20-22). He thus enslaved and **overburdened God’s people** (please, keep that phrase in mind) in the process of building God’s Temple, his palace, houses for his many wives and other gigantic projects. The question that provokes asking is: a temple to which God was that? This raised further questions for me:

- (1) Was King Solomon building a temple to the God that would add to people's burdens and even enslave them for the sake of His beautiful Temple or to One who relieves burdens and sets the captives free at His own cost? [Simply put: Would Jesus have used Solomon's methods of forced labor if Jesus were to build a physical temple?]
- (2) Was the Temple built for a God for whom the end justifies the means, or to One whose eyes cannot behold evil or oppression in any form or shape and for Whom both the method and product must reflect His creative and loving nature (Jer. 31:3; Hab. 1:13)?
- (3) Is it possible to serve God, as in doing things for God, while we are working out of sync with the inherent nature of that same God?
- (4) Is it possible to do projects for God while devaluing people made in the image of God? In simple terms: Can we love God and hate (or abuse, defraud, violate, oppress) our neighbor, or any person?
- (5) What do all these mean in the light of the one eternal God, Jehovah, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ? [Simply: Did Jesus flout Jehovah's Sabbath laws when He healed on Sabbath days, or should He have done otherwise? See John 9:16; the Pharisees had said of Jesus, "*This Man is not from God, because He does not keep the Sabbath*".]
- (6) Can we obey God—as Solomon did in building a temple for God—yet displease God by the means and process we use to achieve the goals when they fall short of the nature of God?

In my own opinion, it appears that Solomon violated and used his people—God's people—for his pet projects and self-aggrandizement. He valued and treasured the glory of materials, real estate, and property above human lives. It translated into a mission without love, for we cease to love God when we lose sight of the image of God in our fellow human beings. One cannot but wonder: Was the joy of worshiping in such a beautiful temple often marred by the painful memories of their backbreaking experience, working tirelessly like slaves? Did some hate the temple, because they had been conscripted to work and forced to make sacrifices that they were powerless to protest against?

Centuries later, Jeremiah would prophesy against the kings of Judah,

“Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness

And his chambers by injustice,

Who uses his neighbor's service without wages

And gives him nothing for his work” (Jer. 22:13; emphasis mine)

As it turned out, the people complained to Solomon's son and successor to the throne, King Rehoboam, to lighten the heavy yoke his father had placed on them (1 Kings 12:3, 4). Following the wrong counsel of his age mates against the better counsel of his father's counselor, Rehoboam, chose heavy-handedness. Consequently, the people stoned to death Adoniram, the officer in charge of the

forced labor, the symbol of their slavery, and the Kingdom of Israel was split into two (1 Kings 12:18, 19). Maybe, the lesson from Solomon, precipitating the fall of the United Kingdom of Israel, is: **Value people; use materials, and not the other way around.**

Jesus, on the other hand, built a Temple, not of physical structure but of people who were blood bought and redeemed from slavery through His sacrifice (1 Cor. 3:16, 16; 6:19, 20; 2 Cor. 6:16). Jesus built His temple not on the sweat and blood of others but His own blood and sweat. *“Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are,”* (1 Cor. 3:16, 17). Jesus died for our sins—Rom. 5:8, 15; 1 Pet. 1:18-20. Jesus laid down His life to build His Kingdom and save humanity. Solomon built his temple on the sweat and blood of others; Jesus built His Temple at the cost of His own life.

Where is Solomon’s magnificent temple today? Google search or “Hey Siri” can best answer that question. Where is Jesus’ temple today? It’s here, in our midst. We are the “temple of God” today. God dwells in us and we embody God; a truth that’s hard to figure out. Jesus’ temple is still waxing strong. *“Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s,”* (1 Cor. 6:19, 20). May we who claim to work for the building the Kingdom of God learn a lesson from this.

COULD THE WORDS OF THE RISEN LORD JESUS TO THE CHURCH IN SARDIS (REVELATION 3:1-6) BE ALSO DESCRIPTIVE OF OR APPLICABLE TO THE NIGERIAN CHURCH? SARDIS WAS THE CHURCH WITH REPUTATION IN NAME FOR BEING ALIVE, BUT JESUS THOUGHT OTHERWISE

Revelation 3:1-6

¹“And to the angel of the church in Sardis write, ‘These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars: “I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive (“a reputation for being alive” NIV/NLT), but you are dead. ²Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God. ³Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you. ⁴You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy. ⁵He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels. ⁶He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’”

Lest I Am Misunderstood, Let Me Make Myself Clearer: In this “Jesus Only” versus “Jesus Plus” discussion, here is the most important summary:

If there is any hint of Jesus plus anything, or Jesus plus anyone, in the Scriptures, it is **Jesus Plus the Church**—the body of Believers in Christ. Of course, **Jesus and His Church are one: Jesus is the Head and Bridegroom of the Church; the Church is His Body and Bride.** Large portions of most of the Epistles to the churches, especially of the apostle Paul, clearly bear this out, such as Ephesians, Colossians, Romans, 1 Corinthians, and, Revelations, the last book of the Bible by the apostle John. We cannot separate the Head from the Body or the Bridegroom from His Bride and expect a healthy, functioning, living organism. **Therefore, “Jesus Only” is actually, “Jesus Plus His Church.”** It is in the church and through the church that the Great Commission of “*making disciples of all nations*” is carried out (Matt. 28:18-20). The pastors and elders are the leaders, not the heads or semi-god leaders, of the church. They are members of the church elected (with or without any titles) into leadership positions for smooth running of the organization—a living, functioning, divinely constituted organism called the church. The pastors, bishops and elders of the church—like every member of the Body without title or office—are representatives of Christ who manifest His love and care in the community. The human body, for example, consists of many cells, tissues, organs and systems, all working together. Organs such as, the heart, lungs, eye, ear, etc. and systems such as, digestive, circulatory, respiratory, etc. perform their specific functions by working in sync to maintain a healthy body. All these have their parallels in the functioning of the church. Please read 1 Cor. 12:12-31; Rom. 12:3-8, Eph. 1:22, 23; 2:19-22; Col. 1:15-18; 1 Pet. 2:4-10; Matt. 25:1-12 and Rev. chapters 19 to 22.

“There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.” (Eph. 4:4-6).

PS: You will recall that I mentioned in the prologue that I am by nature critical and that, the older I get the more intentional I’ve been in trying to rein in that critical spirit. I hope I’ve had a measure of success here. As I appealed to you then I want to repeat the same appeal that you be kind enough to read past mere criticism in these pages. However, for someone with a background in the sciences, keen on objective facts, an inquisitive, analytical or critical spirit may actually a virtue.

PART 3

WHO AM I? —AUTHOR’S STORY OF GOD [1 of 3] I’M A CHILD OF GOD, A SLAVE OF CHRIST

“All My Life You Have Been Faithful, All My Life You Have Been So, So Good” (*Bethel Music*)

I Had My Roots in the SCM/SU⁵ of the early 1970s. As I mentioned in chapter 1 of TEACH THEM Book 1, I was the first lay president of the *Student Christian Movement* (SCM) branch in my alma mater, *Iloro Baptist Grammar School* (IBGS or Ilograms). That thrust me into Christian leadership position from the word “go”! Prior presidents of the group had been ordained Baptist ministers who were students as well. They had enrolled in school to complete high school, and I wasn’t a member of the SCM during their time. That put a little pressure on me to perform, as the so-called number 1 Christian student in the school. My record wasn’t at all exemplary though I had been the Sunday school superintendent for the school in the year before. The SCM group had a regular weekly Bible study and prayer meeting, which I had to facilitate or lead as the president, in addition to coordinating the Sunday service for the school. Stepping into the shoes of ordained ministers was no joking matter. To complicate matters, I was elected president on my second meeting with the group when a new leader was needed to fill the vacuum of leadership left by the sudden departure of the last president. However, the pressure was helpful in accelerating my spiritual growth. Not wanting to disappoint or let

them down on the trust put in me, I began to read any spiritual literature I could lay hands on. I gulped down the small epistles of the New Testament. I memorized Bible passages. I took devotional (or quiet) time, intercessory prayers and fasting more seriously. On top of all these, I attended the Scripture Union (SU) four-day Easter 1972 youth camp where being born again was clearly explained to me. The experience was transformative for me. For some reasons, possibly for not being a clergyman and being “one of them” or “one among equals,” I had a larger membership than my predecessors, and members—fellow students—were more vulnerable relating to my leadership.

I had planned on witnessing and sharing Christ, one-on-one, to every student in the school. I didn’t achieve this goal but I nearly did. I probably spoke with two-thirds one-on-one. However, as consolation, I had the privilege of addressing the whole school—with teachers in attendance—during the evening Sunday worship service under the auspices of the SCM of which I was the leader. Sometimes, while preaching Christ to one student another student or two would be keenly listening in because many wanted to know what had led to my change. I usually asked the small group that we go to the school chapel to continue the discussion and prayer. In

⁵ Student Christian Movement/Scripture Union

this way, many prayed with me to ask Jesus into their lives.

Thereafter, if preaching and witnessing to students in my school weren't enough, I also visited other neighboring high schools to preach and teach Christ, especially during their own SCM/SU fellowship meetings. The highpoint was my regular visits to teachers of other high schools who were known to be leaders in the Scripture Union (SU). I visited them in their homes in Oyo, many kilometers from my school hostel. (At that time, we didn't have any known born-again, SU-type of Christian teacher in my school from whom to seek counsel.) Extending to me Christian brotherly love and hospitality, they encouraged me, gave me a sumptuous meal, some pocket money and transportation fare for my return journey. Believe it or not, one of those SU teachers I was visiting was eventually transferred to our school. I had invited him to preach during the Sunday evening service for the school. His title was, *"Alas! It was borrowed,"* (2 Kings 6:5). For emphasis, he repeated the title many times, each time echoing with profound emotions amplified by his deep, rich bass/baritone and Ghanaian accent. (Apparently, he had grown up in Ghana). Many teachers, including the principal, his wife and the vice principal, were in attendance. They were pleased with his sermon; it was a breath of fresh air. They wondered how I came to know such an insightful, deeply spiritual and anointed preacher. Needless to say, that my spiritual stocks as a leader went through the roof. At the same time, the teachers could witness and acknowledge my spiritual transformation, knowing very well my background that I had narrowly escaped being expelled from school for

misbehavior in the last school term of 1971.

The preacher did not own a car then and had come in a taxi. The vice principal—one of the few car owners in the town at the time, offered to give him a ride home. Those of us in the leadership of the SCM had been praying for revival and God's visitation to the school, following our reading of Christian magazines such as, "Herald of His Coming" and "The Watchman". We didn't know what that visitation would look like or what it would entail. The next thing we knew was the guest preacher, Brother⁶ Adesoye Adebayo, was posted to Ilora Baptist Grammar School as a teacher. Other teachers of the born-again, SU-type would soon join the staff. Those who say God has a sense of humor must certainly have a point.

"I, The Lord Your God, Will Hold Your Right Hand"

In 1973, I was working (with T & E, a div. of UAC of Nigeria) in Kano City, in the Northern parts of Nigeria, about 1000 kilometers away from my alma mater and from home, when the results of our high school West African School Certificate (WASC)⁷ were released. The results of every student who sat for the exams in my school, IBGS, came out EXCEPT yours truly. Many of my classmates had also sat for the General Certificate of Education (GCE) in addition to the WAEC exams. My pocket wasn't rich enough to afford the payment for the safety net or extra buffer that the GCE, a WAEC equivalent exam, provided. All my eggs were therefore in one basket not because I had wanted it that way but

⁶ The more appropriate title in school and society was "Mr."

⁷ Supervised/monitored by the "West African Examination Council," (WAEC).

because I couldn't afford more than one basket. Mind you I was the "number one" Christian student in the school, as it were.

At that time, the boys' hostel where we were housed was a rented building by the school. It had an outhouse within the walled compound, which could have served as a kitchen or boy's quarter for the house owner. In 1971, that outhouse within the walled compound was the rendezvous of my group and me. We were usually a group of five: "If you offend me you offend a group of five." It was there, in the outhouse that we congregated to smoke cigarettes—something that was outlawed in the Baptist school. At the end of 1971 three in the group did not make the promotion exams and were asked to repeat the class. However, they would not; so they voluntarily transferred to other schools. Four of us had served punishment for almost a whole term of about 3-4 months in the fields, cutting grass and wood, filling up a large roundabout with topsoil, etc. A final year student, a first offender, who had been registered to sit for his upcoming WAEC exam in the school was tried for a lesser infraction than mine, the same day that my case was tried. He was expelled; I was spared. His candidacy for WAEC exam was changed to "external student." He roared and wailed like a lioness robbed of her cub as he staggered away from the assembly into an apparent oblivion. He was the scapegoat on many levels. Talk of grace that's so amazing; (details in chapter 1 of *Teach Them Book 1*).

[Side talk: According to the grapevine, at this time, the captain of the ship, also a Baptist deacon and church organist, was having an affair with one of his lady passengers. On one hand, this dampened the morale of his subordinates and younger crewmembers; on the other

hand, it made it morally difficult for him to keep the young men on his crew from attempting the same. Therefore, some of the drastic actions at this period could be smokescreens. Sadly, the ugly rumor, which began to erode the Baptist spiritual atmosphere of the ship, eventually bloomed and ballooned into a polygamous situation for the captain. "*How the mighty have fallen in the midst of the battle!*" (2 Sam. 1:25)]

My group had no classes, but we did go to the dining hall during mealtimes. This was in lieu of being expelled from school. I'm not sure such drastic measures would be allowed as punishment in schools today, but those were the primitive "good old days". The punishment was on my account, but we were a group. We were released from the field only to be able to sit for our final promotion exams. I was the only one of the four who passed. It was the first time ever, in my school career up until that time, when I did not come first in class; I took the fourth position.

I, therefore, resumed school in January 1972 as the only remaining member of the old group. (Back then, elementary and secondary school calendar was three terms from January to December; not September to June with a long school break/summer vacation. We were the last set with the school calendar ending in December. Thereafter, secondary school calendar was synchronized with the practice in tertiary education institutions, which was, from September to June.) This was the reason I had walked into the Student Christian Movement (SCM) meeting, just for me to explore a quieter lifestyle, because all eyes were on me. If I made another stupid move I would have been expelled from school before you could blink an eye. On my second meeting with the SCM I was elected as

the new president of the group. Thereafter, I moved into the outhouse with a mattress and turned it into my sleeping room, prayer and study closet. Any student who needed prayer or a “word from scriptures” would meet me there. Prior to the WAEC exams I fasted for 40 days, omitting breakfast only and spending the time alone in prayers in the uncultivated bushes that surrounded the school. (Would you blame our concerned parents for insisting that our heads should be examined and charging that we had taken this SU/SCM thing too far? I probably wouldn’t ☺). One of the key verses I had claimed and memorized for my exam was Isaiah 41:10, 13, especially the latter part of verse 10, “*Yes, I will help you, I will uphold you*” and the first part of verse 13: “*For I, the Lord your God, will hold your right hand.*” I am right-handed and I sincerely asked God to, and believed, that God was holding my right hand, as He had promised, when I was doing my exams. Faith wasn’t complicated then.

Fear not, for I am with you; Be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, Yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand. ... For I, the Lord your God, will hold your right hand, Saying to you, ‘Fear not, I will help you,’ (Isa. 41:10, 13).

As we prepared for our final WAEC exams, many of my classmates studied in groups. They studied and discussed past questions together. I didn’t set my eyes on a single past question paper. I studied by myself alone and prayed in the outhouse, which had become my “sanctuary”. As soon as I finished any WAEC paper I handed the question paper to Michael Ayodele, one year my junior. He had become a born again Christian earlier than me. He was a great

encourager to me. At that time, the students in his set had chosen the subjects they would sit for. Michael Ayodele wasn’t going to sit for Economics. As we stepped out of the Economics exam room the students in the penultimate class warmly greeted us and wished us well. I lifted up the Economics question paper I had just finished and announced, “Who wants this?” They didn’t take me seriously, but one student finally yelled, “I do.” I handed it to him and walked away. As far as I was concerned, I had committed my exams to the Lord, and I didn’t want to look over any question papers thereafter so I wouldn’t begin to doubt and second-guess myself.

Fast forward to 1973. I was in Kano. WASC results in my school were out EXCEPT mine. I was told that the principal and vice principal made several trips to WAEC office to find out the reason. My father was worried. He visited the school, but no one had an answer. I learned the results were generally disappointing, with many “mighty” fallen (and failing) woefully. Thankfully, many of them did well in the GCE exams in the same subjects that they had failed in WASC, which compensated for their deficiencies in pursuit of tertiary education. With the passing of days and my results still being withheld, I was told that the attendance in the SCM group began to drop. Zeal for the Lord began to wane. Some non-members were sneering at SCM members, “See what happened to your leader! Pass or fail; his result was withheld. Maybe he failed or was found to have cheated. Who could tell what he was doing by himself in that room, all alone by himself? It’s fanaticism—Bible, prayer, and fellowship all the time. Too much of anything is bad!”

Just at that time—I cannot tell how many weeks. Definitely, at the appointed time,

like a divine setup, my results were released. I had the best results in the school that year, with the least aggregate. I made six A's in mathematics, English and the sciences. I was told that the attendance in SCM immediately soared again; members raised their heads and testified to a faithful God. The highpoint was that I got letters from many current students at the time and from some of my former classmates, all testifying to the impact the delay and eventual release of my results had made in the school and its boost to the morale of the SCM members. In their letters, they all encouraged me to continue to "serve and hold on to this your God." I still tear up whenever I recall how friends and "enemies" talked about God's faithfulness and goodness regarding my results. (Please read a more detailed version in *Teach Them I*, chapter 1. Thanks).

The University of Ife, Ile-Ife (Sept. 1974-June 1979) Was My Further Training Ground

Consequently, I resumed in the university of Ife, in September 1974, prelim class (or freshman year), as one you would regard as a mature Christian youth. This was noticeable and I was immediately absorbed into the executive team of the Christian group on campus. While working in Kano, that is, in between high school and university, I had become heavily involved in the *Campus Crusade for Christ* ministry. I used their tools and taught the mini-books and transferable concepts by Dr. Bill Bright.

My university days, especially my undergraduate days, were further training days for me on many levels. I was in leadership positions in Christian circles from my first year until I graduated. I fondly remember my disappearing leadership style back in my university days. As a leader of a Christian group on campus, if we had a special program coming up and the heat was on me from every area as

leader to make decisions to tidy up various loose ends in the few hours before the event, I would just disappear into a secluded place to pray and center myself. When I eventually reappeared after several hours, I would hear from every quarter: "Brother Mike where have you been?" "Everybody's been asking of you and looking for you." "We've looked everywhere for you." "Where were you?" (This was before the mobile phone era.) I would ask, "What were you looking for me for?" "For so and so," they would say. "So, what happened when you didn't find me?" They would reply, "We did so and so," or, "Brother/sister So-and-so did so and so; it took care of it." I learned a great lesson from those experiences that I would find useful later in life. The lesson was: **No one is indispensable**; it's foolishness and self-deception to think otherwise.

This disappearing act or, "What if I am not around?" mindset later engendered my mentoring and training style. The same way I had been thrown headlong into Christian leadership position in my high school—sink or swim—became my training and mentoring style. It may sound silly and harsh, but please promise me you won't resort to name-calling. Yes, after watching me or tagging along for few times, I would throw the mentee into the waters to sink or swim. Either, I would be there with him/her. That was something I didn't have. I didn't have someone to model for me or hold my hand, steady and guide me along. The important thing was that sink or swim, I would be there. I had their back; I would defend them, shield them from ridicule, and be proud of them for taking the risk and accepting the challenge. Any fault or blame was mine, not the mentee's. Surprisingly, rescuing or defending rarely happened, because people rose to the occasion when they were entrusted with a task, knowing that fail or succeed, they were still loved and trusted, and that their failure was seen as part of the learning process. For some reasons, I can say it was the same way I had

been mentored by my key mentors. Years later, during my chaplaincy (CPE) training, I learned a difference between mistakes and errors of the head (which are excusable, resulting from lack of experience or as faltering steps in the learning process) and mistakes and errors of the heart (springing from callousness, outright wickedness, and punishable). In other words, errors from “good heart bad head” are allowable but errors from “bad heart good head” are not.

My key mentors (see chapter 10 of *TEACH THEM* Book 2), Evangelist Bola Sanni, founding chairman of *Advertisers of Jesus Christ*, and The Reverend (Dr.) Bisi Orebayo, national director of *Every Home for Christ*, (both of blessed memories) would give me tasks that I had no experience or training for and assured me I could do them. They could just highlight a problem and asked me, “What can you do to fix that?” believing I would come up with a workable solution. Sometimes, they would take me along with them, or send me to represent them, in some high-powered meetings or to serve on committees where I would hobnob with bishops, ministry and denomination leaders from around the nation. I was never treated as an employee or their carry-my-briefcase or carry-my-Bible assistant. Rather, I was taken along or sent and introduced as a colleague or partner in ministry with the big title of “Director of So-and-so ministry”, which often caused some of those bishops and leaders to keep an eye on me and probably wondering, “Is Saul also amongst the prophets?” Trust me; I just observed and listened. I never voiced an opinion in those meetings. Rev. Bisi—bless his heart—would raise up three or four of my publications and announced that I had published dozens of books. At that time I had six or seven publications to my name. I would correct him thereafter, privately. However, Rev. Bisi would repeat the same thing, “dozens of books,” at our next meeting. I now know that he was being prophetic then. Somehow, I always made

my mentors very proud of me by my performances in those situations.

My disappearing act and “no one is indispensable” mindset from university days also helped me in managing my social media. Today, there are text messages and calls for help from ghost families to whom I often choose not to respond, because I refuse to be a RESCUER. The problem of being a rescuer is that you have to do it again and again, that is, keep on rescuing again and again, because the person who is being rescued had learned to be dependent, thus creating a codependency case where both the rescuer and the person being rescued are sick. Therefore, I treat those texts as if I never read them, and somehow the senders never bother to call me or ask if I got their messages. My refusal to be a rescuer, and my “What if I am not here?” attitude often forced the “needy” person to come up with a self-generated, homegrown solution. It also helped me from encouraging dependency, taking up an assignment or responsibility that’s not central to my calling and God-given assignment or acting in anyway as if I was the indispensable solution-man. Somehow, those so-called urgent matters always sort themselves out. They always got resolved without my input, which further buttressed my point: NO ONE IS INDISPENSABLE (More of my university days in *TEACH THEM*, Book 2, chapter 10).

Unfortunately, all (good and bad) things must come to an end. When pressures mounted and deadlines piled up, only God knows how many times I had wished I could still employ my disappearing act today, but I couldn’t. Being a leader among peers and equals in the University was completely different from being a leader in the society. Where would you disappear to, and to make what point, as a responsible husband, father, teacher, pastor, mentor, supervisor or leader? However, it was good while it lasted. Now I know a bit of what the Psalmist, David, had in mind when he

said, “*Oh, that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest. Indeed, I would wander far off, And remain in the wilderness. Selah. I would hasten my escape From the windy storm and tempest.*” (Psa. 55:6-8).

Bye-bye to Student Mentality

With the benefit of age, I began to reconsider my “no one is indispensable” mantra. While it may be true that no one is indispensable, it is a good feeling to be needed. Nature is so kind that, in the absence of a key factor or person, life somehow readjusts or recalibrates and finds new and alternate paths for people and events, the same way that a GPS recalculates new routes after missing your turn—and still gets you to your destination. This pokes a hole in the idea of “no one is indispensable.” However, we may never be able to tell what could have been or might have been if the key factor or person had not been missing, which is one of the mysteries and beauties of life. We also know that the GPS rerouting might take you through a longer, winding, rough and unpaved terrain. This kind of detour also has its parallel in life. “*Thru many dangers, toils, and snares... grace will lead me home [or to my destination]*” wrote John Newton in *Amazing Grace*, third stanza (insert mine).

While it makes sense to function with the idea of “no one is indispensable”—and I still do, I now believe that it is a good thing, a sacred privilege, and a good feeling to be needed, to be dependent upon, to be valued as essential, to feel responsible for someone else’s wellbeing. As a senior citizen, I believe the best way to live is to posture oneself to be a “Dorcas” (Acts 9:36-42) in people’s life, to be able to add so much value and meaning to other lives that, indeed, one is irreplaceable; that a lot will be missing in society and people’s lives because one has exited the stage. Dorcas

was “*full of good works and charitable deeds*” that when she died “*all the widows stood by weeping, showing the tunics and garments which Dorcas had made*” for them (Acts 9:36, 39).

It is not possible to wake up everyday and live a life of purpose and significance without a deep sense that you matter; that you are needed, valued, wanted, important, and relevant in family, neighborhood, and community. The world may or may not grant you this feeling of importance and worthiness. You get that deep sense of worthiness at the core of your being in your identity and relationship with God. That’s why the secular term is self-esteem—because it’s rooted in self, in your understanding of your origin and worth. This brings it back to the fundamental questions of life that have been asked through the ages: *Who are you? Why are you here? And, what is the purpose of life?* Are you a product of chance, the outcome of some biological happenstance in the evolutionary process, or are you a created being that emanated from a Creator God? Nevertheless, the worst way to live is to live for self—me, myself, and I, to help no one, and serve no one. That, to me, is the dispensable life, if ever there’s one. Another way of saying that my university student mentality of “no one is indispensable”—good as it was—has now been amended.

Hence, in 2 Samuel chapter 18, verse 3, the captains and the generals of king David’s army protested and warned the king, “*You [king David] shall not go out [to the battlefield]! For if we flee away, they will not care about us; nor if half of us die, will they care about us. But you are worth ten thousand of us now*” (insert mine). This, no doubt, was an acknowledgment of the indispensable leadership qualities of king David in the nation of Israel. His loss was valued to be equivalent to losing 10,000 soldiers.

WHO AM I? —AUTHOR’S STORY OF GOD [2 of 3] I’M BAPTIST AND PENTECOSTAL TO THE CORE

Ordained into the Ministry. Strange as it may sound, I am in the same boat with many Christians of my age and generation. I have been born again, filled with the Holy Spirit, baptized in the Holy Ghost and speaking in tongues, mostly in private during my personal devotion and worship, for close to five decades. I am fully Pentecostal and a Baptist, though not a Baptist-ordained minister. My parents, from Fiditi-Oyo, were Baptists. My father was buried in the cemetery of Fiditi Baptist Church, Fiditi-Oyo and my mother is resting in peace in one of the graves in the cemetery of Otu-Okaka Baptist Church, Otu-Oyo, both awaiting the time when *“The Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout... And the dead in Christ will rise first”* (1 Thess. 4:16). I attended Ilora Baptist Grammar School, Ilora-Oyo (1968-1972).

On the recommendation of my mentor and boss at *Every Home for Christ*, the late Reverend (Dr.) Bisi Orebayo, a senior minister in the Foursquare Gospel Church, I was ordained by a Pentecostal denomination in the Eastern parts of Nigeria in December 1989. He had a mentoring relationship with the denomination and served as an adviser to the board. I had no relationship with this denomination, both before and thereafter—except that my ordination certificate bears the **“SAVE THE LOST MISSION, INC.”** denomination’s name. That did not make me a freelance or lone ranger minister.

For both my covering and shepherding, my loyalty and submission have ALWAYS been to the local pastor of any church denomination that I join or with whom I have a kindred affinity. That is, join, as in officially receiving a right hand of fellowship and/or getting on the local church’s membership list, beyond being a regular guest at church services and special

programs. (I said this, because I was a known face and often regularly worshipped, especially mid-week and attended special programs in many churches within reasonable traveling distance at which I had not signed their membership register. So much so, that a neighbor in Brooklyn had charged me with “spiritual adultery.” She was wrong; I simply enjoyed sharing fellowship across and beyond denominational boundaries.)

For example, The Reverend (Dr.) Gary V. Simpson of *Concord Baptist Church of Christ, Brooklyn*, New York, was my pastor and spiritual umbrella while I was in the City. I was an associate pastor—the pastor for prayers—and the Concord Baptist church was my “home church,” meaning I was a “Concorder” for about 25 years until I relocated to Albany, in 2017. I then transferred the same to Pastor (Dr.) Paul Beck and the *Loudonville Community Church, Albany*, New York, while I still continued my fellowship in the spirit with Concord, in line with the church’s cliché, *“Once a Concorder, always a Concorder.”* I have a kindred relationship with the *Christ Life Ministries and Bible Church* in Brooklyn, NY, where my friend and brother, a visionary man of God, Dr. Julius Abiola is the presiding (Pentecostal) Bishop, along with his wife, Dr. Matilda Abiola. If I needed an ecclesiological endorsement from a denomination, or a personal need that only a kid brother (from the Motherland) would understand, I ran to Christ Life, Bishop Abiola, for shelter and emotional support.

That December of 1989, during the national convention of “Save The Lost Mission, Inc.” my gifts and calling into the ministry were recognized and endorsed. I was publicly set apart for Gospel ministry to “save the lost.” Hands were laid on me and anointing oil was poured on my head from

the hands of the visiting Pentecostal bishop and senior ministers of the denomination. I am, however, proud of my Baptist background and heritage. I was undergoing formal theological education and training (off campus, long distance learning, Trinity Theological Seminary, Newburgh, Indiana, US) when I was ordained into the ministry, and later became the chaplain of University of Lagos Protestant Chapel. Consequently, that transformed my study and pastoral ministry into an on-the-job training experience.

I'm As Baptist as Could Be

As Baptists, we believe so much in the priesthood of every believer and inerrancy of the Word of God. Our pastors are, therefore, our employees. We hire them and can fire them, because the ultimate wisdom and authority resides in the body, in the local church, not in the pastor. I love that system of church administration until “thy kingdom come.” If a Baptist pastor fails to educate, teach, and build relationships in order to get members on board with his God-inspired vision and mission, his best ideas will be tossed into the wastepaper basket. It is clear that either God hasn't spoken to him or he hasn't learned the first principles of Biblical leadership in a local (Baptist) church setting. The same Lord (or Spirit) who spoke to the pastor must speak to the members (or majority of members) on the issue as well for headway. However, some tactician politicians in a Baptist pastor's garb often maneuver their way to secure the board of deacons under his/her thumbs.

As a person, I'm scared of having too much authority for decision making and unlimited power for leadership on my shoulders. I just want to preach, teach, pray, serve and be served, build relationships, share and fellowship, baptize new believers, wed young lovers, bury departed saints, etc. I can then leave every other things like budget, payrolls, building

projects, facility maintenance, carpeting, choir robes and songs, etc. in the hands of those smarter than me to handle them. My neighbors then (one in the same building, the other in the adjacent building) on Community Road, Akoka, Lagos, and spiritual mentors, of blessed memories—Rev. (Dr.) Bisi Orebayo and Rev. (Dr.) James Boyejo (aka Papa Foursquare, and Pastors' Pastor), had counseled me, “**Build the people, the people will build the church**”. In my book, they were right.

An average Baptist church is an enlightened congregation. Yours truly is born again and sanctified both in the head and the heart. I don't check my brain at the door before stepping into a church building. I worship God with my MIND and HEART, my SOUL and SPIRIT. Coming from a science background, I question everything. (God never gets angry with me for this; He's never struck me on the head). I have no space for gimmicks, playing on people's intelligence, or abracadabra in the name of God. Way back as a young Christian, I had made up my mind that I wouldn't hold a brief for God; that I wouldn't defend the indefensible; that if this “born again” thing didn't work, I would be the first to admit it and quit. I made up my mind that I might be guilty of many things, but deception would not be one of them, especially, falsehood, trickery and dishonesty in the name of God or in defense of God, rationalizing or making excuses for God, should God “fail” to deliver as we had expected. The decision was mine but upholding that commitment had been by the hands of a saving and keeping Savior.

I Listened, Learned, Found My Rhythm and Ministry as the First Chaplain of the University of Lagos Protestant Chapel

Three reasons were clearly spelt out for me in June 1990 by the chapel committee why the congregation was seeking to hire the

services of a chaplain, though the committee was still struggling and unsure how to find the money to pay the salary of a chaplain. One, to grow the membership, which was measly and diminishing, consisting mainly of a few core Anglican and Methodist staff members. (In my book, these were the visionary university staffers who “stuck with it” when it seemed nothing was happening. They had chosen to stay and worship on campus rather than going to well established churches in the metropolis in the hope of keeping and maintaining the presence of a Protestant chapel on campus.

[PS: This was one reason why I kept fighting for “them” when some, who later joined the chapel, wanted us to go all out Protestant/Pentecostal by eradicating any historical footprints of Anglicanism in the chapel. If these “Anglicans” had not stayed with the mission when other university residents were worshipping in the city, there probably would have been no Protestant *Chapel of Christ Our Light*.])

Two, to raise (or source for) funds to complete the chapel auditorium that was jointly owned by the Catholic and Protestant congregations, as an ecumenical building. The building had been completed to its then skeletal stage (with perennial leaking roof problems) largely through foreign endowment, either congregation not being on strong financial footing. And, three, to make the chapel “a church” where students worship, because it’d been largely few staff members in regular attendance.

(Side note: As chaplain, I took a salary much lower than I was earning in *Every Home for Christ* (EHC). Nevertheless, I was still a fulltime, paid staff of the EHC for approximately the next two years, meaning that I had two jobs, two offices, was technically seconded to the chapel by the EHC, and was testing the waters. However, things took off very well in terms

of increased membership and financial status, so much so that within the first three months of my chaplaincy, the chapel was able to match what I was earning in EHC. Thankfully, the EHC office, my residence and the chapel were all located in the same vicinity of Akoka. The EHC office and my house were probably within five minutes’ drive or less than 5 kilometers to the chapel. Details in *Teach Them* Book 2, chapter 10).

I do believe it’s a calling and blessing, to build edifices to God’s glory and the comfort of God’s people. If history remembers King Solomon and credits him for anything; it was that he built a top-class, one of the ancient wonders of the world temple, for the worship of Yahweh. Today, any imposing architectural building dedicated to the worship of God beautifies and adds value to the environment and community, simply by its stunning features. It is also a witness and powerful testimony to a beautiful and attractive God, who endows humanity with such skills. I stand in awe, mesmerized, when I visit some church facilities around the country, enthralled and awestruck because such is not something I would do, or ever felt called to do. In my book, functionality is a must; aesthetics is optional.

However, I didn’t have a building vision or passion for architectural structures during my pastoral ministry in Unilag⁸ Chapel, Nigeria, (July 1990-Sept. 1996), for two reasons. One, a senior and elderly pastor had mentioned to me that once you start with a building project as a pastor, you never stop; it would be one building project after another, and another. He was one of those who had counseled me, “Build the people, the people will build the church.” He cited many distinguished pastors that were known to me who started with one church auditorium-building project and had continued with building one edifice after another, because they never stopped

⁸ Short form of “University of Lagos”

(fundraising and) building. The sprawling edifices had become a status symbol for them.

The second reason came from one of the members I baptized in the chapel I pastored, a senior executive in the banking sector. She learned of the fund-raising drive for another building project by the chaplain of a sister institution—the College of Medicine of Lagos University. She was well familiar with the chapel. She commented that it was “building for building sake.” She said they could easily have solved the space and congestion problem by having two services. This was doable, since the chaplain, also a professor of medicine, was an Anglican canon and the chapel was patterned after the Anglican mode of worship, which was typically an hour-long Sunday service. I didn’t ever want to have someone say behind my back that I was “building for building sake.” Simply, I’m called to build the people, not build architectural edifices, though it’s a good thing to do, and a blessing, if one is called to do that.

Notwithstanding, even with prayerful lobbying and heavy canvassing behind-the-scene, nothing could be unilateral or made to happen by fiat. There was a chapel committee (loaded with professors) responsible for fiscal and administrative policies for major decisions. Not surprisingly—because it came with the territory of being called “lecturers”, some professors on the committee came alive only when they had aired their opinions (or lectured others) and debated for debating sake. The chapel committee began to gain momentum in many of its projects when it was broadened to include cost saving and time sensitive specialists and professionals in the corporate sector. These had joined the membership and were non-university staffers or residents. They had a different mindset of less debate and more action. Several of those time-and-money-conscious experts from the business sector

injected a new spirit when they were given the reins as chairpersons of committees of projects in their areas of expertise.

Every pastor has to do fundraising at one time or another for building, feeding the less privileged or awarding scholarships to deserving indigent students. Fundraising is scriptural. Moses did it. The Early Church did it. The Apostle Paul was fully engaged in fundraising, especially moving resources from an endowed part of the Body of believers to help a struggling and suffering sector of the Body. Faithful prophets of old, like Haggai and Zechariah, preached and encouraged the returning exilic people to give sacrificially for the rebuilding of the Temple. I, however, struggled with fundraising. I wasn’t keen about it and wasn’t good at it; putting it mildly. Beyond preaching one or two sermons to initiate a project, I refrained from keeping the emphasis on giving on and on, as if money was the goal. This was probably one reason why focusing on building the people resonated well with me. I believed in teaching discipleship and stewardship and trusting that the people would give generously out of their love for God, because they’d bought into the vision and out of a deep sense of stewardship of their treasures, talents, time and all of their life to God. If I succeeded in this area, it’s over and done; if I didn’t perform well, it’s behind me for good.

I still remember one of the things Rev. (Dr.) Bisi Orebayo, my boss at the *Every Home for Christ*, had told me about one of the blessings of being a pastor. He noticed my reticence to different churches and denominations in Lagos seeking to have me join their pastoral staff, following my ordination. I was comfortable with being a Christian worker in *Every Home for Christ* and teaching the young adult Sunday school class at the *New Estate Baptist Church* whenever I was in town rather than being saddled with the weight of pastoral ministry. I had enjoyed the freedom of

being able to travel all over the nation teaching schools of prayer and doing missionary activity of evangelizing and empowering students in colleges and universities with Christian literature. The freedom to travel would definitely cease or be curtailed with the tag of “pastor.” Reverend Bisi told me that as a pastor, you don’t have to do or be everything: the evangelist, prayer warrior, church musician, missionary, gospel financial, etc.; because under your faithful ministry God will raise all these people and ministries—evangelists, missionaries, helpers, etc.—called and sent forth under your leadership. I found him to be right.

In September 1995, I recommended nine of my assistants—including two women—for ordination under two renowned Pentecostal denominations—the same way that I had been recommended by Rev. Orebayo. Thereafter, I gave the newly ordained pastors assignments in the chapel according to their ministry gifts. From then on, it was on-your-marks, set, go! Everything bloomed and flourished in the chapel, to God’s praise. One of those pastors became the substantive chaplain after I relocated to the US, thus facilitating a seamless transition. The *Chapel of Christ Our Light*, University of Lagos took a chance on me to be their first paid staff chaplain. I am eternally grateful to the people and thankful to God for the trust and the mutual growth therefrom.

Although I didn’t embark on any major or impressive building project, thankfully, it is evident that one of the many gifts of my successor is the vision, passion, and desire to transform both the spiritual and physical environments through awe-inspiring architectural designs. Today, the *Protestant Chapel of Christ Our Light* (COCOL), University of Lagos can boast (sorry, are we allowed to use that word, boast?). If it’s okay, then, the COCOL can boast of an imposing, envy-of-the-town ministry office complex of many floors as one of her on-

campus real estate accomplishments, in addition to an auditorium cum office space for children and youth services and the main sanctuary building, as well as a chaplain’s mansion, all facilities fully air-conditioned.

What Reverend Bisi didn’t tell me, which I equally found to be true, was that God could just as well transform the services and skills of so-called secular workers, such as, architects, structural engineers, accountants, bankers, physicians, etc. in the membership into ministries of the church that bless the community and enrich the presence of Christ and His church in the community. The same God who had given the heavenly pattern of the Tabernacle to Moses also endowed the artisans, Bazalel, Oholiab, et al with special skills to do the project (Exo. 31:1-11). This, of course, happened when the church endorsed the “secular” worker members, provided opportunities for visibility and volunteerism, such as, chairing or serving on a special task committee in their area of specialty, providing free medical consultation, free legal advice, free tutorial services, free marriage and career counseling, etc. to members who needed such.

Jesus said, “*It is more blessed to give than to receive,*” (Acts 20:35; also, Luke 6:38). Therefore, the results were mutual blessings and feelings of life enrichment that were on a two-way track: Both the people who served and those that were served gained a sense of life fulfillment, belongingness, and affirmation. Their secular skills, employment and businesses had been sanctified into services for Christ’s church.

What Always Made My Sundays; Now and Then

Sundays were the high points of my week and earnest preparations began on Thursdays. I always knew that every

Sunday service I conducted would—in one way or another—be meaningful, relevant, and spiritually beneficial to all seekers who were thirsty in attendance based on my understanding of John 3:16—the Good News in its most succinct form. I had this confidence not only because I had prayed, studied and prepared the best I could but much more because I knew I was doing something at the core of God’s heart. It was God’s work and mandate, not mine. I was just an available vessel or tool in God’s hand. I’ve been told that God does not need our ability, only our availability. God then supplies the ability.

I knew my assignment was a mission that God was so vested in and committed to that God sacrificed His only Son to achieve God’s end. I had that at the back of my mind and always repeated it to God in my prayers. This was much like Moses had reminded God in his intercession for Israel that the rebellious Israelites God had intended to wipe out for their idolatrous practices were God’s covenant people whom God had redeemed for Himself, with His outstretched arm and power, from Egyptian slavery (Exo. 32:9-14; 33:16). Therefore, even when passing judgment, God should be mindful that God’s reputation as a merciful, covenant-keeping Deity was at stake before the watching pagan world.

Hence, I was operating with the mindset that God genuinely and passionately loved and cared for the people to whom I wanted to minister and to whom God desperately wanted His message of love to be passed. God would use a DONKEY to get the message across if God had to resort to that. (I was probably that donkey.) God Himself, out of His kindness, had chosen me, and He who had sent me was with me. I wasn’t smart enough for the work. I couldn’t do anything by myself if left alone to myself. That God would be faithful to His Word and His mission. That God, the Father, God, the Son, and God, the Holy Spirit,

God, Three-in-one would become real in the service and minister to each person as that individual’s situation warranted. Many preachers had such confidence for their pulpit ministry based on Isaiah 55:11—“*So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the things for which I sent it.*”

However, I pitched my confidence for my ministry of *presence* (that is, as an ambassador or a representative of Christ in the church and community) and my ministry in the *pulpit* (that is, as a spokesperson for Christ, and God’s messenger of the word of reconciliation) on this: “*HE WHO CALLS YOU IS FAITHFUL, WHO ALSO WILL DO IT... FOR IT IS GOD WHO WORKS IN YOU BOTH TO WILL AND TO DO FOR HIS GOOD PLEASURE,*” (1 Thess. 5:24; Philipp. 2:13; pardon the uppercase—I wasn’t yelling, just excited; also Eph. 3:20). It’s in the same spirit of a chorus we sang back then, “I hold not the Rock, but the Rock holds me.” God was the One who had to do His work through me; it couldn’t happen any other way. Presently, what gives me joy as a prison chaplain—in addition to the occasional outburst of “Jesus is here!” from the incarcerated individual with an open heart in the service—is that WE—preacher, choir, ushers, and congregation—did it in one hour. (Details for reasons why a one-hour Sunday service has a sentimental importance for me is in *TEACH THEM* Book 2, chapter 1.)

My assignment as prison chaplain further reinforced that sentiment. Incarcerated individuals would love nothing more than the chance to spend many hours of their Sunday afternoon in church, away from the negative environment in their dorms. While I sympathized with their plight, I discouraged the notion that spending many hours in church on Sundays could make one a better Christian. The corporate worship provides us with the opportunity for our

spirit to encounter the Spirit of the living God, and thereby, spiritually, refuel, recharge, and refocus; the dorm, community, or society is the place we live out the Christian life, and reveal who we truly are in Christ.

Most Evangelical/Pentecostal pastors believe in **prevenient grace**⁹. I do, too. Believing that enables me to lead a church service with confidence and intentionality knowing fully well that God has gone ahead of me wooing, entreating, confronting, convicting, comforting, forgiving, saving, justifying, delivering, healing, calling, setting apart, and passionately doing all that the Good Shepherd does for His sheep. From this standpoint, I don't believe that any incarcerated individual walked into the Sunday service because doing so had been a good family practice in the streets and he had wanted to. Rather, that God had drawn and brought him (John 6:44). I believe this more so because I had prayed so, that God would bring them and give me a word for each person.

What gave me utmost joy then, as a university chaplain in COCOL, in addition to each worshiper encountering God in his/her own way, were the comments I heard from visitors and first-time comers after service. They would shake my hands and say to me, "I enjoyed the service immensely. Thank you very much. The service was meaningful to me. **It was like our church service back home. I felt so much like I was in my home church; it was like home away from home.**" Often, I said to them, "If I may ask: What's your church or denomination back home?" They said, "Baptist," "ECWA," "COCIN," "CAC," "SIM," "Nondenominational," "Anglican," "Methodist," "Pentecostal." That always made my day to hear that the

service was a little bit of this, and a little bit of that, so much that everyone felt it was like their home church. It was what I had desired and prayed for, a welcoming community for all who sought after God through Christ, be it in a university chapel or prison chapel.

Just for the record: It was for the same reason of "a little bit of this and that" that I had found the *Concord Baptist Church of Christ*, Brooklyn my home church, and presently, the *Loudonville Community Church*, Albany, a home away from home.

The Power of the Ministry of (Pastoral) Presence

I didn't really appreciate the power of the ministry of presence until I worked as a hospital chaplain in Beth-Israel Medical Center and Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in Manhattan, New York City, in 1997-1998. I would encounter a patient or patient's family for a brief time and later hear their unbelievable comments and great appreciation for my ministry to the patient or family. I would ask myself, "What did I do?" This could be an encounter with patients in their pre-op/post-op or on their hospital bed, or in the pharmacy area. I didn't preach, didn't share a scripture, and very rarely touched or held their hands, regardless of their gender or age. All I did was sit with them, for 5, 10, or 15 minutes on the average, listened to them attentively as they poured out their heart, oftentimes with raw emotions, anguish, and sobs. When necessary, I breathed or sighed deeply and said, "Tell me more"—no advice from my part and no solution offered, just listening. Every instance was an opportunity to put my Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) training into practice by active listening with my

⁹ Prevenient grace (or preceding grace or enabling grace) is a Christian theological concept that refers to the grace of God in a person's life which precedes and prepares to conversion. It is divine

grace that is said to operate on the human will antecedent to its turning to God.

posture and facial appearance communicating, “I hear you; that’s tough,” and occasional “Hhmmm” as my empathic listening response. Most times, I ended with a prayer no longer on the average than 45 seconds (that’s less than one minute), and with no drama or spiritual gymnastics. In every case, I ended my prayer—hold your breath, please—without mentioning the name of Jesus! Being conscious of and respectful of the religious biases and preferences of the patients, I always ended my prayer with, “In Your Name I pray” or “In Your Precious Name I pray,” or simply, “Amen.” I knew who I was praying to regardless of the religious inclination of the patients. Yet, men, women, Caucasians, Asian-Americans, African-Americans, Jews, Gentiles, and In-betweens, at my next visit, or if I encountered the family members in the lobby, they told unbelievable stories of how impactful and helpful my ministry had been in their lives and their healing process. In my head, I was asking myself, “What did I do? I didn’t even mention the name of Jesus!” On top of that, the patient or patient family—even of a deceased patient, often mailed to me a “Thank you” card after the discharge or hospital episode for the roles I had played.

Although I was an ordained Christian minister, I wore no clerical shirt/collar, or cross around my neck. More like a Baptist minister, I was always dressed in a shirt, tie and suit, and my chaplain’s badge around my neck. I would approach a patient or patient’s family and introduce myself, “I’m a chaplain. I visit and chat with patients or their family members in the hospital. I listen to their stories and offer pastoral care. Is this a good time to visit with you?”

Now, I know better. It is not what I do, or don’t do. It is Who I represent in the consciousness of the people I encountered. I represented God to them. In that brief encounter, they could see past me into the workings of a loving, compassionate God

assuring them of His presence in their crisis hours in all the uncertainties surrounding hospital visits. As a pastor, for years I had labored on studying, praying, fasting, researching, and preparing for my sermons, believing in the ministry of proclamation. I still strongly believe in the ministry of the Word, for “*Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ*” (Rom. 10:17; ESV), but I equally believe in just being there with the people, voicing nothing, but prayers for them in my heart under my breath. It is not what I say; it is the presence of the invisible One, Whom I represent by being there. I now know that we bring into the room and pastoral relationships the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, “Christ in you” and a loving Heavenly Father visiting through us (or making His tabernacle with) the people He loves.

[Side note: I presented a case study during my CPE on a patient who was an avowed atheist. To my polite request, “Is this a good time to visit with you?” on my first visit, he flatly had objected and retorted with his hand raised, “No! It’s NEVER a good time to be visited by a CHAPLAIN because I am an ATHEIST.” I thanked him for letting me know that. I told him that his atheistic or nonreligious stance shouldn’t be a barrier because I visited patients simply to chat with them on their hospitalization. He immediately blurted out some angry words against the hospital system. I took a chair and listened to his ranting. After this first encounter, he told me I could visit him again. From then on, he was always looking forward to my visit. I visited him more than five times before he was discharged to a rehab center that had no taint of religion, not even the 12 steps. He was an alcoholic and had bluntly refused going to any detox or rehab center that had any mention, program, or artwork suggestive of a Higher Power. His hospital stay was prolonged because it was difficult to find a rehab/detox facility to which to discharge him that was completely secular and had no

12 steps or Higher Power connotation. It took some searching, but they eventually found one to which he was agreeable. Religion never came up between us. At every visit, I just listened to him tell me his life story because he was worth my time and worth listening to. I reasoned, if religion or God couldn't be a bridge between two souls, God certainly shouldn't be a wall between them. (Unfortunately, religion might). He remained an atheist when we finally said goodbye. However, I had a feeling that he probably had a change of mind about Christian ministers, that pastors could be nonjudgmental, good listeners whom he could entrust with the dark stories of his life without being condemned. From my understanding of scriptures, God will give this man, labeled an alcoholic, space to rehearse his broken, messed-up life to God, which, unbeknownst to him, he was doing as he told his story to one of God's agents. Here, again, I was reminded of the aphorism, "There but for the grace of God go I".]

In 2012, on behalf of the ChristLife Bible College and Seminary in New York, I visited Nigeria as one of the institution's professors to teach Biblical Counseling and Pastoral Care in Nigeria for a doctoral class. Unfortunately, the candidates who least valued my presentations, and showed little interest in the seminars, because, as far as they were concerned, they could not be in anyway beneficial to them, were the Pentecostal bishops who had registered for the doctoral class. Those who valued it best and participated most meaningfully were the nurses, retired high school principals and other professionals who had no ecclesial titles. These nurses had been in the trenches with suffering individuals and knew the little value of religious platitudes in those circumstances. Ironically, many of the bishops did not attend the sessions but sent their secretaries or someone else to sit in class, mark attendance, and take notes for them. As far as they were concerned, all those talks about counseling, empathy and

active listening were a waste of time. All they wanted to do, or were supposed to do as spiritual leaders, was cast out demons in those to whom they ministered. In their theological reasoning and their understanding of the etiology of human problems, demon possession was the root of all problems. Civility prevents me from voicing what I thought of those bishops except to say that I would rather talk to and ask for prayers from one of those nurses than seek out any of those bishops if I had any spiritual or physical problems.

One retired high school principal and his wife, both in attendance, were my contemporaries in the same Christian fellowship in our undergraduate days in Unife, now Obafemi Awolowo University. They hosted me during the trip. My friend, Bisi Oyelami, of blessed memory, said Nigerian pastors were no longer satisfied to be called "men of God." Now they postured themselves and behaved like "gods of men."

I'm As Pentecostal as Could Be

Can you keep a secret? Like it or not, Pentecostalism is the vogue, the trend, in Nigerian Christianity today. That's one reason why many talented Nigerian Christian musicians and professional gospel singers often inject glossolalia into their performances and recordings.

As a young Pentecostal believer exploring and experimenting with spiritual gifts in my campus days, I had stood up in the congregation of students' fellowship to give prophecies or prophetic messages. (*Experimenting* was not a bad thing to do; how else would you know your spiritual gifts without the boldness to first experiment?) Yes, I had stood and prophesied, as in Isaiah's or Amos's style, declaring boldly, "*Thus says the Lord...*" Since I couldn't be 110 percent certain that it was the Lord indeed speaking, not my spirit, all the time, yours truly

thenceforward decided to tone it down, play it safe, and say something like, “I feel the Lord is impressing so and so on my mind,” when strongly moved by the Spirit. I loved God—no doubt about that, but I was scared of Him, too. He’s the Almighty, the Most High God; that’s no child’s play. I couldn’t bear the thought of declaring, “Thus says the Lord...” when the Lord had not said so specifically. I’d rather share and expound scriptures, if necessary, boldly prefacing it with, “the scripture says ...” than stand to prophesy in the name of the Lord even some harmless generic indisputable eternal truth such as saying, “Thus says the Lord, ‘I love you ... I am in your midst’” when God hadn’t specifically sent me to give such a message at that instant. Along the same line, I had wanted to have a private conference with my fellow prophets and prophetesses in both the SCM and ECU in the University of Ife back in the mid-to-late-1970s, to warn or advise on the need to exercise some caution out of a holy fear. To this day, I regret that I never did so.

I was radical enough in my own way as a young convert (or newly born again) that I had decided that I’d rather be a Moslem than remain a Christian if I had to learn a new language (Greek or Hebrew) or visit some holy land (such as Jerusalem) to authenticate my faith in Christ. Happily, I didn’t have to do either. (Good Muslims learn the Arabic language and make holy pilgrimage to Mecca, at least once in their lifetime).

The Christian faith is home grown in any culture and on any part of the globe. The gospel message is often confused with the culture and lifestyle of the messenger, but these are two different things. Pulpits, robes, pipe organs, hymn books, collection plates, PowerPoint, architectural designs, etc. are accessories or the messenger’s creativity, and not integral parts of the gospel message. The message is simply this: *“God was in Christ reconciling the*

world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:19).

Today, if I am in a new environment, I will walk ten times faster into a Baptist, Episcopal, nondenominational, or interdenominational congregation than I would into a Pentecostal church. I go to such places more because of my relationship with the pastors or leadership, usually a bishop. Why? There’s too much subjectivity, claiming undue authority with “the Lord told me,” as preface and veneration tending towards “leadership worship” in many Pentecostal churches, not to mention some spurious fundraising tactics, and hocus-pocus behind the scene. Being essentially leadership and/or founder-centered, there are fewer checks and balances. The system that operates in most—not all—founder-led Pentecostal churches is by the way of “the Lord told me.” The sad part is that the world is watching. The church members may have been fooled and tricked; the cynical and skeptical world is not so easily fooled and can see through the deception.

That notwithstanding, the advantage and beauty of the bishopric, authoritative and/or autocratic (not a bad word if the leader has a good and kind heart) over the democratic, congregational or presbytery church leadership system is that it speeds up progress in the kingdom. Many successful Christian organizations are run this way, because the momentum for action is dependent on the pioneering and entrepreneurial energy, charisma and skills of the founder. A charismatic leader does not wait for the consensus of a committee before (singlehandedly) going ahead with a project. The late highly respected, charismatic, Pentecostal leader and church founder, Archbishop Benson Idahosa, of Benin City, Nigeria, said, “A committee set up without commitment will soon commit crime and become a nuisance in the society.” Great advances in God’s kingdom

and many social transformations in the community can be traced to good spiritual leadership of a Pentecostal minister of an authoritarian, go-getter style.

Unfortunately, those charismatic go-getter leaders are themselves often responsible for the collapse of their empires or stain on their legacy. This might happen during their lifetime as a result of some self-inflicted wounds and corrupt practices, or immediately after their deaths, for their failure to adequately develop and prepare a carefully chosen successor, who necessarily may not be a blood relative.

I had read a statement somewhere a long time ago, shortly after my conversion that had stayed with me. It was: **No one is a true success without a successor.** It was so ingrained in me from the onset of my Christian journey that I think I might have taken it to an extreme, because I often engage in finding a successor even before I start. Long before a project gets on the way or is established, I find myself already looking for a successor, which then tends to an attempt to quickly pass the buck.

They say, “each one his own.” For me, I prefer a democratic structure. If we are right, let’s be right together, and if we are wrong, let’s be wrong together. Don’t crush me with any pride of success or guilt of failure when we can rejoice or groan in both together.

If “praying in tongues” confuses Satan, as some allude to, with the quantity of unknown, strange tonguing going on daily in Nigeria, the devil should have been so confused and lost his mind by now that there shouldn’t be any demons or demonic operations in Nigeria today. Maybe the devil has been confused and chased away. Maybe there isn’t any demonic activity or demons troubling Nigeria. Maybe the reality is that many Nigerians have taken it upon themselves to do the devil’s work for him (and are so ardent, committed, and

good at it) that the real devil is on furlough from Nigeria. Just a couple of plausible maybes. I might be wrong, but I reasoned this way because once in a hot exchange with the Jewish religious rulers, Jesus chided, “*You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do*” (John 8:44a). The people in Jesus’s audience loved to do the desires of their “father, the devil.”

To some Nigerian ministers “speaking in tongues” is like a badge of belonging to an elite spiritual group or caucus. However, any keen observer, with rudimentary knowledge of scriptures and psychology can discern that most of the hyper-spirituality in the church is a coverup, behind which is an individual avoiding responsibility to look in the mirror, repent and deal with the real issues in his/her life. This reminds me of the warning Jesus gave towards the end of the Sermon on the Mount, “*Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, [prayed and sung in tongues in Your name] and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’*” (Matt. 7:22-23; insert mine).

“Judge Not!” This is Simply Storytelling and Letting History to Be the Judge

Sitting side-by-side on a large stone and chitchatting in the cool of the Saturday evening, I listened to a carpenter, nicknamed “Pastor” on the streets, who had his workshop in an undeveloped plot adjacent to my house. I learned from my conversation with him that a Pentecostal bishop fired a dozen of his pastors, because the branches these pastors were assigned to were not financially vibrant and did not generate enough money to meet their quotas. The carpenter, whose street pet

name is Pastor, then showed me on his smart phone the picture of a gigantic auditorium, an edifice architecturally designed like a coliseum, that the bishop was raising funds for. He asked rhetorically, “Were the church branches planted to generate funds or to win souls for Christ?” He answered his own question. He said, “These dozen pastors were not disciplined—they were fired. They were not offered opportunity of a second chance after further training for their failure to win souls; they were fired for not generating enough money for the leader’s project, which means the bishop was not concerned about souls, just money. It means those pastors were his employees, not ministers of Christ. It’s all about money, money, money, money, and more money for their family business or their empire.” If I didn’t know this carpenter next-door to my house to be a shrew and all about the profit margin himself, I could have been fooled to think that I probably was speaking with the Carpenter from Galilee (Mark 6:2, 3). They say it takes one to know one of their own.

This middle-aged carpenter, who was always humming or whistling a church tune, told me there was a public outcry against this same Bishop during the covid-19 pandemic lockdown. Rather than helping his members and the hungry masses he was busy marketing new strategies and outlets for his members to continue to donate to his coffers, as if there were no hunger and suffering in the land.

I went to church the following day and the church sang, “*Ho, my comrades see the signals*” composed in 1864 by Philip Paul Bliss, during the American Civil War. *Hold the Fort*, lyrics below, relates to something that happened during the War and he used it to illustrate a parallel truth in our spiritual warfare.

1. Ho, my comrades! See the signal waving in the sky! Reinforcements now appearing, victory is nigh.

Refrain.

“Hold the fort, for I am coming,” Jesus signals still; Wave the answer back to Heaven, “By Thy grace we will.”

2. See the mighty host advancing, Satan leading on; Mighty ones around us falling, courage almost gone!

3. See the glorious banner waving Hear the trumpet blow! In our Leader’s Name we triumph over ev’ry foe.

4. Fierce and long the battle rages, but our help is near; Onward comes our great Commander, cheer, my comrades, cheer!

Refrain again.

“Hold the fort, for I am coming,” Jesus signals still; Wave the answer back to Heaven, “By Thy grace we will.”

I wept through the singing of the hymn as I recalled the historical event behind the composition. I question within myself if we are seeing the signals and listening to Jesus, saying, “Hold the fort, for I am coming.” Bliss, the composer of other hymns based on contemporary events, had taken the event during the Civil War to illustrate our spiritual conflict, and the need to remain faithful to our charge, and continue until Christ comes again. After the singing, the preacher mounted the pulpit. He said he wished we could keep on singing that hymn because it was “an old-time religion” hymn. I also kept wondering, “How did we, the blood-bought people of Christ, wander off from that mindset to where we are today.” It then dawned on me that we, the church, are our own worst enemies.

Under the guise of building God’s kingdom, the sacrificial giving and tithe of faithful supporters are often diverted either to fund some private, family enterprises or furnish a lavish and ostentatious lifestyle. There’s little or nothing anyone can do about it; you either belong or you don’t. You should know that those “churches” and “ministries” are led by their OWNERS and FOUNDERS (uppercase intentional). The unwritten ethical code is: “This church is a private enterprise and we run it like a family business. Dissidents beware

WHO AM I? —AUTHOR’S STORY OF GOD [3 of 3] I’M A SPIRIT BEING HAVING A HUMAN EXPERIENCE, NOT THE OTHER WAY AROUND

I Didn’t Know What I Was Doing

“I don’t know what I am doing” or “I didn’t know what I was doing” are two phrases I have confessed to myself or to God in prayer, again and again, meaning that I don’t fully understand what I am doing but I can feel a Power carrying me along (or, from hindsight, I didn’t fully understand what I was doing, but I could feel a Power carrying me along). Either at the point of action or from hindsight, regarding major decisions I have made in my personal life and ministry since 1972 when I gave my life to Jesus.

For certain, this “*not knowing what I am doing*” is not in the same sense of struggling with sin, which Apostle Paul wrote about: “*What I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice, but what I hate, that I do... Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me,*” (Rom. 7:15, 20). This has no tendency towards sin or sinning. It’s about having a sense of being “*moved by the Holy Spirit*” (2 Pet. 1:21), “*carried away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain,*” (Rev. 21:10), or, as the prophets of old would say, “*the hand of the Lord was upon me,*” (Eze. 1:3; 3:22; 8:1). This is without my human initiative or intentionality.

For example, I usually keep my computer away from the bedroom, if possible, on another level of the house. Yet, countless times in one night I could be awakened with a strong “word” and would make my way down to the computer. Along with this is Providence arranging circumstances leading to open doors, finding the right information, meeting the

right persons, and divine provision of resources. In those circumstances, I just kept praying and moving, stepping into open doors and backing off when I banged my head against a closed door, not really knowing why or what. Looking back, I often chalked them down to John 3:8, “*The wind blows where it wishes... So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.*”

However, lately, I gained a new understanding. Since I have the Holy Spirit [and the Godhead] dwelling in me (John 14:23; Rev. 3:20), I believe **I have a sanctified mind**. According to Philippians 2:13 (also John 14:16, 17, 26; 16:13-15; 2 Cor. 5:17; 1 Thess. 5:24; Eph. 3:20 and Rev. 3:20), God’s Spirit is not only resident in me, **but God is also at work in me both TO WILL and TO DO for His good pleasure**. Consequently, my speech, steps (and stops) are being directed by the Lord (Mark 13:11; Psalm 37:23).

This posture and spiritual understanding has helped to simplify my decision making greatly. Here is my simple checklist:

If ANYTHING, or intended ACTION is

- Not immoral, or dishonorable,
- Not taking undue advantage of the weak,
- Not sinful, or tending to sinfulness
- Will harm or hurt no one,
- Has the potential to extend the Kingdom of God,
- Is likely to enrich other lives, and add value to the community,
- Is more likely to receive the approval of other Christian leaders,

Then, I AM DOING IT because IT IS GOD'S WILL FOR MY LIFE. If it is not God's will, it's up to God to stop me. God has 1001 ways to stop or block me. For that, I do keep an open mind for any real stop signs, not the devil's distractions. Here is my roadmap: If it is God's will, or something with God's blessings, I expect divine resources from known and unknown sources to manifest, some synchronicities to further serve as confirmation, and the peace of God to keep assuring me as I go on. As long as doors remain open, resources are available and I don't have a troubled mind, it has to be God's will. I no longer wait for the sky to part or thunder roll to decide God's will, when, the scripture says, "*God is at work in me both to will and to do for His good pleasure.*" That scripture has to mean something. It suggests to me that I am in union or partnership with God; or, simply, that I have a sanctified mind.

As at today, I can say, "I don't know what I am doing" regarding **Thinking Aloud—2** and **Didactic 001**. However, according to my roadmap, (1) I see an open door for ministry, (2) I have resources divinely made available, and (3) I have the peace of God going ahead, even though I fear unfair criticism from some quarters. My first allegiance is to Christ and the Scriptures. As you would have noticed, my theological persuasion is a hybrid—is that a good word?—between Evangelical Baptist and Charismatic Pentecostal. Maybe grafting is a better word; that is, like a Pentecostal twig grafted into a Baptist trunk. What product do you expect from such union? Manna! [Aramaic; "What is it?"]. It is what it is! It is my prayer that one day when I look back and say, "I didn't know what I was doing" these works would prove to be one of those God-led moments of my life. AMEN.

The Greatest Truth I Ever Unearthed in Scriptures: that I Am a Divine Spirit on a Human Assignment, Beloved and Chosen from Eternity by the "I AM"

One of the most liberating and empowering truth I later learned in my walk with Jesus was that I was a divine spirit, that I came from God and that I was therefore a piece of God. God is a Spirit and God is my Source of origin; I am therefore a spirit being.

At my conversion, I already learned about being born again, born from above, being regenerated, having the Holy Spirit living in me, becoming a new creation in Christ, etc. This was the change on the inside working and showing on the outside. I was happy with that. I later began to understand that everything did not happen or begin in Easter 1972, that I had been in God's mind and His eternal blueprint even in my pre-existent state, that I had been chosen, adopted, ordained, and prepared for a task—as part of the storyline of God's Story—way, way, deep into eternity. This realization was on a deeper, personal level than Calvinism, Arminianism, and other isms they teach in seminaries. If anything, those seminary postulates had traveled from my head to my heart. (By the way, did you notice the pronouns I have used? It's been—I, I, I and my. Take it or leave it; this is my story, my truth.)

[Side Comment: By the way, this is not about New Age doctrine or Psalm 82:6—"*I said, "You are gods, and all of you are children of the Most High."* Jesus alluded to this verse in John 10:34 to affirm the portion of divinity in each one of us. However, some teachers have carried this too far. Deity-gods are immortal; they

don't die. Yet, for their failures, the Elohim judged the lower-ranking elohims in the divine council in this difficult Psalm with death sentence or same fate as humans. Anyone fooling himself to be a god only needs to read the next verse of the very Psalm 82, verse 7—It reads, “*But you shall die like men, And fall like one of the princes.*” That’s your “god-ness” gone up in smoke. Yes, you shall die; your pastor who clowns like a god or some deity shall also die. Someday, for you and the one who teaches you that you are a god, it will be, “Ashes to ashes, dust to dust” when your spirit returns to where it came from. I know enough to know that I am not a god. Even the yearly common cold, hospital visits, medicine cabinet and arthritic pain, reminds me daily that I am human. At best, I am a divine soul housed in a frail, dying human body. I am not a god. I am a divine creation. I emanated from God. I bear God’s fingerprints. The Holy Spirit of God is pleased to live inside of us, mere mortals. The Apostle Paul says we have this treasure in earthen vessels (2 Cor. 4:7).]

In the beginning God had breathed into a handmade mold of clay—molded by the fingers of God—and that piece of dirt and the Eternal *Ruach* (Breath/Spirit) became a living soul (Genesis chapters 1 and 2). Being an offspring of the first Adam, redeemed by the last Adam, this means there’s a part of me that was never born and will never die, because it came from the eternal Godhead. **I am a spirit being having a human existence and human experience, not a human being having a spiritual existence and spiritual experience.** I’m on a divine assignment here. Having been sent from the world of spirits, I had to pick up flesh because my assignments here required a human skin. I will shed the flesh as soon as my

assignment is over and return to the world of spirits from where I originated.

This is true for every member of Adam’s race. As the apostle Paul later postulated, none of us lives or dies to himself (Romans 14:7-9). All the unexplainable, irreconcilable intricate details of how, or the way and manner, a person arrives on Earth—through biological parents, or sadly, through incest or rape, and departs the Earth—through old age, cancer, or beheading as in John the Baptist, is all part of the mysterious assignment that soul is sent to deliver in the storyline of the one great story of God. You will always struggle with sleepless nights if you believe otherwise. God has to be sovereign or He’s not God at all.

Everything—educational, financial, material, human resources—which I need on earth to carry out my divine assignment, for which I was sent here, arrives on time. It cannot be any other way. I’m sent here, and He who sent me is with me. Did I arrive at this truth the first year I was saved? No. Maybe it’s even past the first decade of being saved and serving Christ faithfully before this truth began to really dawn on me. I finally came to realize that what God had said of Jeremiah, in Jeremiah 1:4, 5, (verses I had loved and memorized since 1972), is true for all of us. The same Eternal God, who chose me and sent me on assignment, is able to connect the dots and poll resources. I’ve truly got to believe that God, the great Master Planner, does arrange and rearrange the circumstances of my life, moves people and resources around in a divinely choreographed fashion and synchronicity that cannot be explained. I’ve got to live with the consciousness that God does all these that my “destiny helpers” [using a popular phrase you hear in prayer in many circles today in Nigeria] may show

up at the right time and place. Did I get this at my first year of conversion? No, but I matured into the truth. It freed me from >90% of my worries. Why worry when God is working on it and everything will arrive on time—on His time?

Does that mean no more problems or hassles? You wish. Ask Moses, Joseph, Jeremiah, Isaiah, John the Baptist, Apostle Paul, the nation of Israel—the Lord’s chosen seed of Abraham, or even Jesus, who had been called and sent from eternity. They’d tell you that pain and sorrow, doubts and disappointments, suffering and deprivations, persecutions and unjust imprisonments, are part and parcel of the package of being called, chosen and sent by the “I AM WHO I AM” (Exo. 3:14).

Ephesians 1 alludes to this. My birth certificate reads October 1952, (the date is unnecessary to make the point). Presumably, the conception, the beginning of my life when my Mama’s egg and Daddy’s sperm fused, the fertilization resulting in a zygote, happened early in the year—9 months before birth. However, if the Scripture is true, then my true identity predates all these, reaching far into timeless eternity. For, I was in God’s mind even before the world began. That’s way, way, way back to an undated past, even before my great, great, grandparents were born.

For several years, esp. 1973-1976, I always carried with me copies of the *Four Spiritual Laws* (by Dr. Bill Bright, *Campus Crusade for Christ*), as a witnessing tool. Old school saints will recall that the opening statement of the *Four Spiritual Laws* was: GOD LOVES YOU AND HAS A WONDERFUL PLAN FOR YOUR LIFE. So, I always knew and taught that God had a plan for

each of us. However, it is on a different level to live with a consciousness that this *wonderful plan* God has predates one’s biological existence or date of conversion; that each one of us—like Moses, David, Paul, or even the Messiah—had been chosen, beloved and sent with a unique assignment prior to the time God “*formed my inward parts in my mother’s womb*” (Psa. 139:13-16).

The apostle Paul believed he was “separated” and “called” from his mother’s womb (Galatians 1:15). John the Baptist “*was a man sent from God*” (John 1:6), “*filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb*” for the assignment God had for him, (Luke 1:13-17). Without attempting to save His neck, Jesus boldly declared to Governor Pilate, “*For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world,*” (John 18:37).

Sin put us out of alignment with God and God’s purpose for our lives, but “*the grace of God that brings salvation to all*” (Tit. 2:11) has brought us back into alignment with God, and God’s purpose for our lives.

It was like being born again a second time when I realized from Scriptures and truly believed that “*He [God] chose [me] in Him [Christ] BEFORE THE FOUNDATION OF THE WORLD, that [I] should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined [me] to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made [me] accepted in the Beloved... For [I am] His workmanship [meaning that God’s fingerprints are on me], created in Christ Jesus for good works, which GOD PREPARED BEFOREHAND [implying some predetermined divine assignments]*”

that [I] should walk in them.” (Eph. 1:4-6; 2:10; uppercase and inserts mine).

but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you,” (John 15:16).

Jesus told His disciples, and us, His disciples today, “You did not choose Me,



P.S. I am an academic, a deep thinker, or strategic thinker—it’s how I understand and self-define myself—and a storyteller. If I’ve stepped on toes, it was not intentional; it was unavoidable. Forthrightness and impartiality are the hallmarks of a credible academic, especially one from the old

school. I also surprised myself that I was this audacious, never wanting to offend anyone, but the matter at stake deserved it. Who can claim to be blood-bought and Spirit-filled and yet remain passive when the popular theological practices embraced by the masses are apparently not rooted in the New Testament doctrines? Who could be nonchalant when the significance of Jesus’ sacrificial death and glorious resurrection is not fully grasped and Jesus’ atonement is presented as if incomplete and needing something/someone else to complete it? Who can remain silent in a culture where extra-biblical practices—right or wrong, scriptural or unscriptural, are not the questions—overburden the people (read Matthew 23) and devalue *tetelestai*? I will also have you know that no one and no system pay this piper, which renders the saying, “He who pays the piper dictates the tune” inapplicable to me. For me, “*To whom much is given, much is also expected.*”

Please, consider this as my invitation to come and let’s dine together. We can then talk and exchange ideas when we are seated at the homey dining table. **Thinking Aloud 2** and **the Didactic 001** for the community were *assignments within an assignment* for me; I never saw them coming. Free literature distribution ministry of the TEACH THEM publications on campuses had been my focus. However, God seems to be calling me into a new ministry; somehow leading me to focus on (educating) the community. I’m (unapologetically) a Christian educator and Biblical counselor.

I Am Who I Call Myself; Not What/How Anyone Chooses to Label Me

You'd have observed that I kept defining myself again and again and projecting a self-affirmed image of myself. Such as, "I am a deep thinker," "I am a strategic thinker," "I am an academic," "I am a storyteller," etc. In part, it's because over the years I've been told I was **not enough of this and not enough of that**, but they never stuck on me. I must admit that I am partly responsible for this.

For example, from the onset of my Christian journey, I was disciplined by one or two elderly Christians who considered speaking in tongues as gibberish and of the devil and had warned me against it. Equally, soon after, I was disciplined by one or two elderly Christians who insisted that praying in tongues was edifying yourself (1 Cor. 14:4) and building up your holy faith (Jude 1:20) and had urged me to seek it. It was this kind of spiritual environment and spiritual formation that forced me to pray, study, ask questions and decide for myself how and what the pages of the New Testament spoke to me for my spiritual nourishment and empowerment. Thankfully, I couldn't say that I saw the light and was saved under the ministry of any particular local church or denomination. Therefore, I never considered myself a denominational person in a strict sense.

In addition, as far as possible, as a matter of personal principle, I always strive to walk the middle of the road or strike a balance on many issues; eventually leaving me not fully here or fully there. The problem with straddling the fence is that no one from either side of the fence will stretch out his/her hands and heartily embrace you as one of their own. For that reason, I am not offended if/when a true Baptist, on account of glossolalia, chooses to keep me at arm's length, or a true Pentecostal, on account of fully embracing sense and spirit, decides to discount me.

Back in my university days, as a Christian leader, 1974-1979, I was one time accused by some that I stifled and restricted the move of Holy Spirit and was **not spiritual or Pentecostal enough** because I dared to call for brakes in some areas and insisted that sense and spirit were not enemies. As a Nigerian in Diaspora or an African immigrant in the United States working and worshiping among Black people (or African Americans), especially in the inner city, some have accused me of **not being black enough**, some even considered me a traitor having been indoctrinated by the Western educational system, because I dared to be objective, to reason differently rather than conform to the stereotype. Believe it or not, a middle school student, a black boy in his teens once dubbed me a "White-N*gg*r."

Some pastors with Doctor of Ministry degrees considered me **not theologically deep enough and certainly not one of their professional peers**, because I was not a product of some traditional seminaries for which Hebrew and Greek were nonnegotiable prerequisites. (By the way, that’s one of my reasons for always writing Ph.D., by my name, leaving out Dr., MS or MDiv.). Not unexpected then that some Bible College and Seminary students accused me of being too secular and **not Christian enough**, and even prayed against me, because I dared to challenge their shallow mentality and questioned some of their theological reasoning in those doctrinal positions they had considered unquestionable.

This is to have it on record that, after reading this, whatever else anybody intends to add to the list of what I am “not enough of” will not stick on me.

PS:

Regarding Biblical languages (or languages in general), I must have been cheated on the left hemisphere of my brain—the side that’s responsible for language and speech. For example,

1. Yoruba is my mother tongue; however, I can hardly say three sentences of coherent, meaningful prayer in Yoruba.
2. I’ve been learning English all my life yet, I’m still often confused by those harmless, often monosyllabic words, called prepositions, such as, in, out, to, at, for, of, etc. for which a wrong choice or placement significantly changes the meaning of a sentence. For example, consider with me how merely changing the prepositions—for, at, to, on, over, through and with—alter the meaning of this phrase: Looking *for* me; looking *at* me; looking *to* me; looking *on* me; looking *over* me/looking me *over*; looking *through* me; and looking *with* me. If you ask me, that’s giving too much power to a little word!
3. I had a similar experience when I had wanted to learn the Hausa language. I realized that the Hausa language, like the English language, has gender pronouns, he/she, him/her, which are lacking in Yoruba language. That was the end of my learning Hausa.

You can’t imagine how relieved I was to find non-traditional seminaries that would spare me the agony of leaning Hebrew or Greek, which, for yours truly, would drain out sooner and faster than they had seeped into my brain.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSIONS (Questions 1-9 are from end-of-chapter questions in TEACH THEM BOOK 1, chapter 4, pp 99-103)

1. The author explains that being forgiven is half of what Jesus did for us and that the other half is the imputation of righteousness (or justification). Forgiveness is negative; it is the removal of sin that brings our account to zero. Imputation of righteousness (or justification) is positive; it is the crediting or linking of our account to Jesus's unlimited righteousness and complete obedience to the laws of God. Just as Jesus took the penalty for our sins, He also completely obeyed and fulfilled all the demands of the laws on our behalf, thus bringing us to a state as if we had kept all the laws and never broke one. Why is it important to understand the gospel in these two dimensions? Has this always been clear to you or is it a new understanding of the gospel? Discuss.
2. What if I sin again after being forgiven or after claiming God's forgiveness for a sin? Does that mean I am not genuinely saved? (See 1 John 2:1, 2).
3. What if I commit again the very same sin I just confessed to God and repented of? Should I still ask God for forgiveness? Isn't that like playing games with God—even if that's not what I was doing or wanted to do? Will I still be forgiven? (See Matthew 18:21, 22. Remember that God does not use double standards. If God asks us to forgive seventy times seven times, then God will not do less than that.)
4. Define or explain justification and forgiveness. How is justification different from forgiveness, and why is it more than forgiveness?
5. Mention the three imputations in the Bible. How is imputation the basis for our justification?
6. Mention the three forms of righteousness. Why is righteousness based on the Law insufficient for salvation? (Read Romans 10:1–13 for the apostle Paul's burden over Israel in their quest for righteousness.) Discuss the stage of personal holiness and devotion that a religious person must attain to become certain finally that he or she has done enough self-righteousness and self-denial to eventually merit salvation by self-efforts.
7. Why has the concept of sin disappeared from the pulpits in most American congregations? (a) Is it a movement in the right direction? Yes, or no? Explain your answer. (b) Knowing that Christ died for sinners and only sinners can be saved and restored to fellowship with God, how do we restore the concepts of sin and sinners back to the pulpit on Sunday mornings without further damaging the sense of worth or self-esteem of those who are already beaten down all weeks?
8. What if you had a dream in which you stood at the Pearly Gate? An angel in black robes says to you, "Sure, your name is written in the Lamb's

Book. I suspect this may be a mistake because, according to my own record, you didn't fully obey all the laws of God. They may call me a liar and the father of lies [Jn. 8:44], but you and I know that I am not lying on this. Would you say that you fully obeyed the Laws of God while on earth?" What would you say, as a Christian, to that accuser?

9. One favorite prayer you hear from Christians in Nigerian congregations is "We pray that none of us will miss heaven in Jesus's name" or "We pray that we may all make it to heaven at last in Jesus's name." I don't say such prayers, and believe it or not, I might not even say amen to the prayer. Why? To me, it is like praying, "Jesus, please don't leave me or forsake me. Please, Jesus, be with me always." That's a religious prayer to me, not a Christian prayer, because Jesus already gave me His Word not to leave me or forsake me to the end of the world. (See Matthew 28:18–20; Hebrews 13:5, 6). I should rather be concerned that I don't leave Him, not the other way around. If people pray such prayers out of reverential humility, I will have no problem with it, but you can—sorry, I can—always detect a tone of uncertainty in the prayer. I don't pray that I may make it to heaven, not out of pride but because of my understanding of the word **justification**. If God says in His Word that I've been "*justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus*" (Rom. 5:1), what part of justified freely do I not understand? Or what is left out in that that I have to make up by my own efforts? And why do I have to doubt such eternal counsel in the Holy Book? The Judge of the Universe in the court of heaven declares me "justified." What else do I ask for?

Let's say the governor, out of the kindness of his heart, grants clemency; he signs a pardon letter for a condemned criminal, what next do you expect from the prison administrators? They unlock the gates and release the "criminal" into the streets as a free citizen. He's free indeed just by the stroke of the governor's pen! What if the pardoned criminal, with the governor's letter of pardon tucked in his pocket still goes around in the streets saying, "I'm guilty; I'm guilty"? Does he understand the meaning of the governor's pardon? Some will say such a person is crazy, ungrateful, and unappreciative of the governor's kind gesture. If the governor's signature is good enough to free a condemned criminal, should God's verdict, signed in the blood of Jesus, be any less credible? What do you think? It is in black and white that "*there is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus*" (Rom. 8:1). For me, getting to heaven is settled for the simple reason that I am not going on my ticket; I am going on Jesus's ticket and by His grace, not by my works. For all my soul's eternal need, I choose to piggyback on Jesus. "*Therefore He [Jesus] is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them*" (Heb. 7:25; emphasis mine). Many of my Christian friends do

pounce on me on this, and I won't be surprised if you do the same. Some quote the Apostle Paul, "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall," or "But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified," (1 Cor. 10:12; 9:27). I always steer away from the fruitless debate on "Once saved; always saved," or "Whether or not a believer can lose his salvation," because it's usually argument for the sake of argument and no one ever rethinks or changes position thereafter. All I ask from you is to be kind enough to reexamine the biblical phrases such as saved by grace and justified freely by grace, the gift of God is eternal life, to them He gave eternal life, and He is able to save to the uttermost and see if I make sense or not. Do those phrases or verses mean what they say or suggest? Please note that God's gift of eternal life is *eternal*, not temporary or limited life. Just tell me I make some sense, a little sense, and I will be happy with that. How do I score on a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being no-sense, 3 some sense, and 5 being great sense? Discuss how and why you rate me on this, whatever the number, in your group.

10. The author repeatedly charged that many faithful evangelical preachers preach one half of the gospel message—CHRIST DIED FOR OUR SINS—with emphasis but fail to preach the other half—CHRIST IS ALIVE AND HE LIVES IN US—with equal emphasis. (a) Do you agree with him on this or not? Explain your answer. (b) What would it be like for a person to truly believe, and live each day with the consciousness, that Christ is really alive and lives in him or her? (c) Would that state of awareness and spiritual consciousness make any difference in attitude and quality of life? Yes or no? Give reasons.
11. In my university days, we teased each other by inquiring, "What's your pointless point?" In that cheery, lighthearted mood, what's the "pointless point" the author had in mind in this portion? He had written: "They say, 'Time is money,' and 'Time is life.' I often ask myself: If we multiply the number of working-class adults (or taxpayers) present in the church service by the number of hours spent in the service, can we justify, monetarily and spiritually, the expenditure of such manpower-hours for what's going on right now, especially if we are renting the space per hour of use?" What's his pointless point? Discuss.
12. He followed the previous statement with this portion: "Spending hours in the church, or even sleeping in the church, is not the most appropriate way to demonstrate our devotion and commitment to Christ. We do that in the streets, neighborhoods, and workplaces among friends, family and casual acquaintances. The church is the place to be edified, challenged, refueled, refilled and be reminded of who we are, who our God is, our mission, calling, and mandate in the world, and what all these entail in our day-to-day life." Unpack and discuss this portion in the light of your church's programming.
13. Explain how some Christians are like the family that cheated themselves out of the meals and entertainment they had paid for and to which they were

- entitled, because their tickets had included all meals on board, but they subsisted on cracker biscuits and cheese due to their ignorance.
14. Discuss: “You don’t become justified when you do better; then it will be by works. You are justified in your present state: a sinner who believes in God who justifies the unrighteous or ungodly” (Rom. 4:5). Explain how this statement is the bedrock of authentic, that is, New Testament, Christian faith and the Christian life.
 15. The author writes, “In Christ, we are unconditionally loved and accepted. Therefore, we are not striving for acceptance by our devotion. In other religions of the world, adherents attempt to win or deserve God’s favor by their works of devotion. This is the exact opposite of the concept of devotion in Christianity, because *“We love Him because He first loved us”* (1 Jn. 4:10, 19). We’ve been unconditionally accepted (Eph. 1:4-6) and unconditionally loved (John 3:16; Rom. 5:8; 1 John 4:19). We strive within our acceptance and adoption—which have been granted freely by grace—to live up to what God has called us and empowered us to be in Christ.” (a) Explain what he meant by “We are not striving for acceptance by our devotion... We strive within our acceptance and adoption.” (b) How is that concept different from reasons for devotion and worship in other religions, and how is it unique to the Christian faith? (c) Challenge yourself to read/listen to Romans.
 16. (a) How do you understand the author’s ideas of INCOMPLETE GOSPEL and CORRUPTED GOSPEL? Does he make himself clear? Explain. (b) Give examples where you have seen or experienced some of what the author classifies as “incomplete gospel” (a product of ignorance) and “corrupted version of the gospel,” (Jesus + something/someone = Truth). (c) How does Ephesians 2:8-10 factor in?
 17. The author writes, “The second and last error, which demanded Paul’s sharp rebuke, is corrupted gospel. We either preach JESUS ONLY or JESUS PLUS XYZ (XYZ equates WORKS, THE INDISPENSABLE PASTOR, PROPHET OR SPIRITUAL LEADER, SACRIFICE, LAW, SELF-ABASEMENT, or anything to earn some merits). That is, Jesus is either ENOUGH or NOT ENOUGH”. (a) Unpack that short paragraph in the light of what the Apostle Paul referred to as “another gospel”. (b) Why does the author think it deserves the kind of sharp rebuke the apostle Paul levied on the Galatians? (c) Give examples of JESUS PLUS XYZ gospel message that you witness around you. (d) What does JESUS ONLY GOSPEL look like reduced to its bare bones?
 18. The author charges, “The people have been taught to come to church looking for miracles rather than seeing everything as miraculous and being thankful”. How do we attain and maintain such a state of spirituality (evident in African-American churches)? (See Philipians 4:4-8).
 19. “The gospel is so simple we find ways to complicate it”. Discuss/explain.
 20. “If praying (religious prayers) alone solves or resolves all problems, spiritual, political, civic, educational, physical, health, and material, then all problems in Nigeria would have disappeared overnight”. Unpack and discuss what else is missing or needed.

21. Agree or disagree: “The devil’s prayer list consists of unscriptural and religiously high-sounding prayer points that keep you in bondage to church, yet remaining a stranger to the abundant life in Christ”. Discuss.
22. If I ever met one, I have chosen to deal with my enemies and haters according to Proverbs 16:7; 25:21, 22; Romans 12:17-21 and Matthew 5:43-48. How do you handle your enemies and haters? Does your style make you a disciple of Jesus or of Moses?
23. Read part 3 again. Formulate 5 open-ended, not yes or no, questions for your small group discussion in addition to questions 22-24 below.
24. Discuss; agree or disagree: “**I am a spirit being having a human existence and human experience, not a human being having a spiritual existence and spiritual experience**”. If true, what are the implications?
25. Unpack this scripture and the inferences from it. “Philippians 2:13 ... God’s Spirit is not only resident in me, **but God is also at work in me both TO WILL and TO DO for His good pleasure**. Consequently, my speech, steps (and stops) are being directed by the Lord—Mark 13:11; Psalm 37:23.” Additionally, how do you understand Philippians 1:6; 2:13 and 4:13?
26. In your own opinion, how did my Baptist background and Pentecostal leaning feed into each other to make me the person that I am today?
27. It appeared I took off the gloves, was bold and audacious, even too bold and audacious for my own liking—yet I had to be, as I pressed home my points, especially, in the concluding subtitle, “**INOCULATED AGAINST THE TRUTH.**” What’s your reaction to that section? Was my conclusion on point or off point? Was my analogy or comparison of fake religions to fake drugs applicable or too extreme? Discuss.
28. From all you’ve read, jot down 3 items you will include in your prayers for Nigeria or your own nation.
29. This is for pastors and church leaders/founders: If you were to relocate to another country or State, and you could establish a church, would you found one belonging to your denomination (meaning: export your denomination hook, line, and sinker to the new locale), or one that’s welcoming to all and nondenominational? Explain your answer and give reasons why you’ll do one and not the other.
30. From the previous question, let’s say you opt for the latter, that is, establish a nondenominational congregation, how much do you have to disrobe your mind and your denomination (from all its denominational layers and trappings and accoutrement) to make the new church/congregation look like basic, authentic New Testament church?

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Your Friend, (or Uncle Mike),
The Reverend M.O. Ojewale, Ph.D.

For: Back to Basics Ministry; www.BackToBasicsMinistry.org; April 2022

Publications of *Back to Basics Ministry*: **TEACH THEM**, Book 1, 371pages; and book 2, 452pages, by yours truly. For free distribution in universities, colleges, seminaries and Bible schools in Nigeria as the Lord provides.

Both *Teach Them 1* and *2* are available as free e-books, PDF format, on our website, along with other Christian spirituality and educational resources. However, many university and college students in Nigeria do not own a personal computer (PC) or laptop computer. Their only access to online services and internet is on their smartphones. These books, the *Teach Them* series, are too cumbersome for reading on the phone screen, hence the free distribution of the hard copies.

Back to Basics Ministry is a literature ministry to, and in partnership with the local church/chapel, for equipping the youth of today, leaders of tomorrow, through free distribution of **TEACH THEM** Publications by Dr. Michael O. Ojewale in higher education institutions.

1. **TEACH THEM (Book 1 of 2): *Biblical Counsels on Thorny Questions For Youth & Truth Seekers (371pp)*** and
2. **TEACH THEM (Book 2 of 2): *Pathway to True Freedom & Echoes of Hope from a Prison Chaplain’s Ministry (452pp)*.**

Teach Them is more than a set of companion books; it is a tool for campus evangelism, one-on-one discipleship and mentoring. Among the many themes covered are:

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 for Youth and Truth Seekers

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| 2. Faith/Overcoming Faith | 8. Apologetics—A Defense of the Bible |
| 3. Assurance of Salvation | 9. Apologetics—A Defense of Jesus' Resurrection |
| 4. Peace With God/Peace With Self | 10. Theodicy—Wrestling with the Problem of Coexistence of Evil, Pain, Suffering, and a Perfectly Loving Almighty God |
| 5. Christian Doctrine of Trinity/Trinitarian God | |
| 6. Knowing God's Will/Experiencing Divine Guidance | |

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TEACH THEM

Michael O. Ojewale

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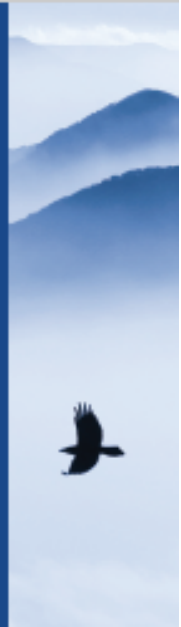
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TEACH THEM

Michael O. Ojewale

2

Pathway to
 True Freedom
 & Echoes of Hope
 from a
 Prison Chaplain's
 Ministry

TEACH THEM

(Book 2 of 2)

Complete with Critical Thinking Questions for Prison Ministry, Addiction Counseling, Youth Study Group Discussions and One-On-One Discippling

Michael O. Ojewale



DIDACTIC 002

More About Pentecostalism (in Nigeria)

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PREAMBLE: Not About Persons/Personalities But About Issues

Not infrequently, some young, vibrant Christians sample my opinion when they suggest that certain TV Preacher So-and-so is a false prophet, false teacher or fake preacher. While I don't consider it a legitimate or appropriate question from a youngling, nonetheless, I think of it as a classical question stemming from overzealousness and uncurbed enthusiasm. We as well once played the same game during our high school days as young Christians, and we were equally confident that we could discern false and correct doctrines or preachers. Happily, I outgrew that many, many years ago. I was able to reconsider when I began to ask myself questions such as: Have you been the pastor or the leader of as many hundreds or thousands of people as this fellow has? Have you visited as many countries, cities and towns as this person has? Have you greeted and shaken the hands of as many dignitaries, business executives, and civil rulers that this person has encountered? If my answer was a "No" which was usually the case, then I had not earned the right to criticize, condemn or label him/her. This posture enabled me to be respectful of others, especially religious leaders, and also keep my doctrinal disagreement to myself. Thankfully, with the blessing of having the TV remote control in my hand, I don't have to watch or listen to anyone whose opinions and practices may turn my stomach.

So, when I'm asked such questions today, or when they expect me to join in the conversation and affirm that Preacher So-and-so is a false or fake teacher, I ask them: "Is your church or congregation as large as his/hers? Have you raised the kind of money he/she has raised, built edifices, and sponsored programs and projects this person has achieved or is attempting to do for the kingdom of God? Have you met with as many reputable pastors and ministers, civil rulers and leaders in the community that this person hobnobs with? Have you traveled as

widely as this person?” If the answer is “No”, which is usually the case, then reserve your comments and name-calling until you at least match his/her credentials. *“Who are [we] to condemn someone else’s servants? Their own master will judge whether they stand or fall. And with the Lord’s help, they will stand and receive his approval”* (Rom. 14:4; NLT).

That notwithstanding, from Genesis to Revelation, true messengers of God—prophets, priests, apostles, kings—were not promised immunity against persecution, criticism, opposition, or even martyrdom. We hear these words from the lips of our Master: *“What sorrow awaits you who are praised by the crowds, for their ancestors also praised false prophets... This is what God in his wisdom said about you: ‘I will send prophets and apostles to them, but they will kill some and persecute the others’... God blesses you when people mock you and persecute you and lie about you and say all sorts of evil things against you because you are my followers. Be happy about it! Be very glad! For a great reward awaits you in heaven. And remember, the ancient prophets were persecuted in the same way”* (Luke 6:26; 11:49; Matt. 5:11, 12; NLT).

I mentioned this mindset of mine to emphasize and bring to the fore that Didactic 002 is not about persons or groups but about issues. Its main issue concerns the core—the very heart—of the Gospel message of *“God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)”* (Eph. 2:4, 5). This was the purpose for which Jesus left the glories of heaven to become a man and die the shameful and inglorious death on the cross to atone for our sins and reconcile us to God. Any departing from or de-emphasizing or minimizing of the all-sufficiency of *“Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures,”* (1 Cor. 15:3, 4) should not be glossed over.

Our reason for praying to God or worshipping God is much more than, and not in the same category as, seeking friendship or being in favor with one of the richest persons in the world. Friendship and favor with Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, Warren Buffett, Bill Gates—some of the wealthiest individuals in the world, may get you the newest and latest models of cars every week, five star pent houses in the biggest cities in the world, fund the greatest and most magnificent cathedral in modern church history, and the best care from the topmost physicians, but will not reconcile your soul to God or infuse you with *zoe*, God’s eternal and abundant life. Humanity’s greatest problem is spiritual, not material, and the real solution is spiritual. You don’t need God or faith—you need a business hook up, effective networking or the right social connection—if a handshake with Elon Musk or Jeff Bezos will solve your problem.

It’s been said, “Small minds discuss people. Average minds discuss events. Great minds discuss ideas.” (A quote often attributed to Eleanor Roosevelt). “Strong

minds discuss ideas, average minds discuss events, weak minds discuss people”—Socrates. I neither have a small mind (Eleanor) nor a weak mind (Socrates) to engage in discussing other persons or groups. Thankfully, I live a full life.

MORE ON PENTECOSTALISM (IN NIGERIA)

It wasn't intentional to end Didactic 001 with an autobiographical section. Believe me, Part 3 (“*Who Am I?*”) just happened. I had wanted to simply mention that I was “Pentecostal” as well, in order to disabuse the minds of those who might consider me a stranger to that sector of the faith, and to shock those who could never have imagined me in that light. (I’m not controversial; just more complicated than you might think.) However, once I place my fingers on the keyboard of a word processor my fingers usually take over, guiding my mind for the rest of the journey. Writing is not hard work for me; it is as natural as breathing or thinking. It’s simply the way I think and process my thoughts; it’s when I play my music and dance my dance.

“You Shall Receive Power...”

We have some churches in Nigeria, tagged *white garment* churches, which are also loosely called “Spiritual churches.” In a sense, they border on spiritism and spiritualism. They are known for fetish and cultic practices, ritual washings, dreams and visions, and concoctions that the members drink. My (Yoruba) people have a saying that if anyone would give you a new garment as a gift, you should first look at the quality of the garment in which the person was clad. Meaning: anyone who was in a capacity to bless you with a gift should himself have a track record of successful and abundant life. Many (professional)

prophets, especially in the white garment churches, are in it as a means of livelihood or prominence and the more people that they are able to suck in, the better their bottom line and visibility in the commune.

Pentecostalism is often confused with spiritism and spiritualism, both of which predated Pentecostalism in the strict sense (Exo. 22:18, 19; Deut. 13:1-11; 18:9-12; 1 Sam. 28). While they have spirits and spirituality in common, Pentecostalism originated with the coming of the Holy Spirit on believers, in fulfillment of Jesus’ promise to His disciples (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8). This event happened on the Day of Pentecost, and it is recorded in the Acts of the Apostles Chapter 2. While I am in no shape or form a postal boy for Pentecostalism, we have to come to terms with the fact that something happens in a person and that he or she is not the same person again when that individual is BAPTIZED, immersed, submerged, and infused by the HOLY GHOST (*Ghost* is intentional as is typical of Pentecostal ministers). For example, after their “Pentecost” experience, the hitherto timid apostles of Jesus gained an uncommon boldness to preach the resurrection of Jesus, a renewed sense of commitment, a new surge of power and dynamism and, even at the risk of losing their lives, an unusual daring of the same authorities that had crucified their Savior.

There are several theological interpretations, understandings and meanings of “baptism” and especially, of being baptized into Christ and His church, which I don’t intend to get into. When, specifically, the discussion comes to the baptism in the Holy Spirit, most Pentecostal ministers would, however, add, “Baptized with the Holy Ghost with the initial evidence of speaking in tongues.” The latter part, “*initial evidence of speaking in tongues*” is emphasized because in the recorded events that we have in the Acts of the Apostles, those accounts were always accompanied by something tangible, dramatic and visible to any unbiased outsiders and dispassionate onlookers. Noticeably, in Acts of the Apostles chapters 2, 8, 10, and 19, so much so that onlookers knew something strange had happened or was happening, and the commonest evidence was speaking in other (unknown) tongues.

Having been on all sides of the aisle (remember: I am Baptist and Pentecostal), I want you to understand that I heartily respect any interpretation of those instances that represents your theological point of view. However, we cannot escape the fact that SOMETHING happened that became the EVIDENCE that these people were changed from having an encounter with the living God,

the GOD OF POWER. Years later after the reported Pentecost of Acts 2, Paul had asked the Ephesian Christians, “*Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?*” This question was suggestive that it was the norm. When Paul laid hands on them we read, “*The Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke with tongues and prophesied [undeniably, another norm],*” (Acts 19:6b; insert mine). The observers noticed and heard something.

Coming from a Baptist background, I don’t go the length of adding, “*with the initial evidence of speaking in tongues*”, which is one reason why no Pentecostal pastor in his/her right mind will ever ask me to speak on the topic of Baptism in the Holy Ghost. You ask, “If you don’t add “*with the initial evidence of speaking in tongues*”, how then would you know or tell if someone has received the Holy Spirit or been baptized in the Holy Ghost—especially from the backdrop of those instances in the Acts of Apostles?” To that, I ask you, “How do you know if someone has received Christ and been born again or how will anyone be certain he/she has received Christ and been born again?” Whatever your answer is to that question about salvation, I humbly return the same to you when it comes to the Holy Spirit.

TRUE PENTECOSTALISM IN ACTION

“All Authority Has Been Given to Me in Heaven and on Earth. Go therefore...”

There are 365/366 days in the year. Benin City in Nigeria was known to have a different deity, god or goddess that was worshipped every single day of the year. Every day of the year, in one corner of the streets of Benin, the natives would be in festive mood, celebrating the annual festival of a deity or god for which the day had been dedicated. Every house in Benin City had a clearly visible shrine or altar to a god or deity, in its front, at the entrance or in the backyard. The late Pentecostal Archbishop Benson Idahosa, mentioned earlier, changed all that. (Archbishop Benson Andrew Idahosa was often popularly referred to as the father of Pentecostalism in Nigeria). Prior to this time, Christians in Benin City worshipped Christ in the church on Sundays and paid homage on weekdays to their family deity as well. Bishop Idahosa forbade all his members from worshipping any family deity in addition to Christ.

Also, there were many fetish rituals associated with births of new babies and deaths in the family in Benin, such as, total head shaving regardless of gender, ritual washing, seclusion, ritual meal, nocturnal séance, etc. Archbishop Idahosa challenged these fetish practices and singlehandedly transformed the Christian image in that society. None of his members was to be subjected to, or subject himself/herself to, any fetish rituals at the birth of a baby or departure of a family member. He taught his people about the power in the name of Jesus, the efficacy of the blood of Jesus, victory in Christ from all the powers of darkness,

deliverance and protection from the tactics of the devil by the Greater One who was in them, etc. Contrary to the prevailing fears that had kept Christians in bondage and subservience to these deities, there were no repercussions, misfortunes, calamities, deaths, or unusual illnesses for defying the gods and goddesses in the name of Jesus. The Pentecostal archbishop, a bold and audacious man by any standard, had taught his people to fear no god but Jehovah. Other churches and denominations had acquiesced to society until a new sheriff, Idahosa by name, came to town. Many Pentecostal believers with no ministerial ordinations have done similar things in their towns and villages. They rebuked the territorial demons that had ruled their towns in the name of Jesus, and thereby forcefully dethroned those dark powers.

There’s Power in The Name of Jesus

A missionary couple served with the late Archbishop Benson Idahosa/Church of God Mission in the 1980s. Armed robbers attacked the couple in their home. The couple was rough handled despite their avowed cooperation with the armed robbers so they might not harm or kill them. The couple was tied up. Their wedding rings were confiscated. The husband was slapped, and his glasses whisked off so he couldn’t see much of what was going on. They were questioned and harassed and shoved here and there. The armed robbers kept demanding that they surrender items they didn’t have. Out of frustration, when he couldn’t take it anymore, the man shouted, “Get out in Jesus’ name!” The

missionary himself least expected what happened next. He said it was like a bolt of lightning hit the men. The armed robbers all ran out of the house with the speed of lightning through the door and window. It was after they had left that the family discovered a loaded gun the robbers left in their hurry. Besides, they didn't take anything with them in their haste to get out of the house. The missionary couple said they learned something they never learned before about the name of Jesus. They said if all that God had brought them to Benin City was to learn the power in the name of Jesus, it was worth it. Yes, it's not just the lyric of church hymns and songs; it is the gospel truth: THERE'S POWER IN THE NAME OF JESUS. It was a dire situation that made this missionary couple learn the efficacy of the power in the name of Jesus.

In Acts 3, Peter and John encountered a 40-year-old man who was crippled from birth, and had been carried to the spot, sitting at the temple gate and begging for alms—as he did every day. The man turned to the two apostles and asked for some loose change. Peter made eye contact with him and said,

“Silver and gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you: IN THE NAME OF JESUS CHRIST OF NAZARETH, RISE UP AND WALK.” And he took him by the right hand and lifted him up, and immediately his feet and anklebones received strength. So he, leaping up, stood and walked and entered the temple with them—walking, leaping, and praising God. and all the people saw him walking and praising God. Then they

knew that it was he who sat begging alms at the Beautiful Gate of the temple; and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him” (Acts 3:6-10; emphasis mine).

Pentecostal Anglican Priest

Another case in point: My brother, same mother and father, now a Venerable in the Anglican Communion, was posted to a tough parish as a young, newly ordained Anglican priest. A cultic chieftain in the community had founded the church. The name of the community, (which literally translated as the coven or headquarters of the cults/spirits), also depicted the fetish and cultic nature of the community. The name of the community was enough to instill fears in outsiders. The church had been known as the “demise” of many priests. The saying, “He who runs lives to fight another day” never had a greater application than in this commune.

My sibling brother and his wife were “Pentecostal Anglicans” if there's a phrase like that. He and his wife, filled with the Holy Spirit and baptized in the Holy Ghost (*Ghost* is intentional©) walked around the premise. In the name of Jesus, they rebuked and cast out the demon spirits that had inhabited the place. They reclaimed every square inch for Christ and established the authority and rulership of Christ over the place. They announced their arrival as messengers for Christ. They prayed in tongues, pleading the blood of Jesus and laying hands on cabinets, shelves, fencing walls, gates and on different objects. Thereafter, he removed the emblems and insignias of cults and fetishism from the church sanctuary and

compound. By that he had dared the cultists, occultists, witches and wizards to do their best, which they did in the spirit realm.

All this while his bishop was watching at a distance and keenly following reports from some powerbrokers. The bishop was himself probably wondering what this neophyte was getting himself into and why he would decide to go against the grain. The people later acknowledged to my brother that he had some special powers or the backing of some superior

powers, when they noticed that they could not harm or kill him or afflict him with an insane spirit. The best part was that he won the admiration and respect of the head of the cults as “a man of God.” The next thing you knew was my brother was posted to another hot spot in the diocese by his bishop. Only he could tell you how many sleepless hours he and his wife spent praying and fasting, nevertheless the spiritual victories always overcompensated for any sacrifices or deprivations. I can tell more stories, even on a personal level.

HOW A PENTECOSTAL CHURCH ALMOST ROBBED ME OF MY CELEBRATION OF EASTER, APRIL 17, 2022

This was the most difficult experience for me to narrate. However, it broke my heart so I must. I knew deep in my heart that those concerned meant well; it's just a matter of what the apostle Paul referred to as "*zeal without knowledge*," (Rom. 10:2). I also didn't intend to damage or hurt anyone, any local church, or any organization but I still must be factual, for the greater good. I hope and pray that my love for Christ and His church may be visible in this portion.

Churches Everywhere

We had some guests, two adults and a child spending Easter 2022 with us in Nigeria. We had been attending this church near our home. Although I can, and will, worship in any church near me where the name of Jesus is mentioned this was not a church or denomination that I would join its membership. It is not an okay denomination; it is a GREAT denomination. It simply isn't the right fit for me. I have some of their pastors and members as friends and family members.

Talking about churches, God is my witness; I had counted and recounted (because I kept losing my tally count, something not uncommon at my age) 16 to 18 churches in all the different directions, nooks and crannies, in the vicinity of my house. I mean churches within easy walking distance to my house. You wouldn't necessarily sweat or be tired on a normal Nigerian sunny day before you trekked to the farthest place of worship from my house. These were places of worship of different sizes and congregations meeting in rented or owned buildings and cathedrals. (I mentioned this phenomenon of the city being submerged in or swamped by churches in **Thinking Aloud—2.**)

This particular church is the second closest to us. One plot of land (on which

stood two houses—each on one half of the plot) separated our house from the Sanctuary of the closest church. Whoever is the worship leader in that church had my wife's vote. Soul lifting, praise worship songs from the church always filtered into our bedroom during their early morning devotionals and midweek services, getting my wife to sing along and dance in our bedroom. Two reasons I can think of why I haven't ventured into that church are, one, that it is "the unknown" while the other church—which belongs to possibly the largest and fastest growing denomination in Nigeria, is a known face. The unknown always gives you an eerie feeling and goose bumps until you venture to investigate. The second reason in addition to "the devil-you-know-syndrome" is the name of the church. The name, which to me, reads like a sermonette, kind of pushed me off. The name is, "GOD IS FAITHFUL UNIVERSAL ASSEMBLY (Divine Favor and Prosperity Chapel), aka VOG." I searched online, even their Facebook page, for what VOG stood for but I never found a place where it's spelled out. Possibly, I might one day visit the church. Why not this Sunday,

April 24, Michael?¹⁰ (No offense, please, to any member of the church reading this. I am a storyteller. But I am not a dispassionate storyteller who stands aloof from the story (that’s what reporters do or are supposed to do). My head, heart and hands are part and parcel of the stories I tell. That’s why I clearly let you see my biases or inferences and why any incident is of human interest to me. I hope we are still good neighbors, **God Is Faithful Universal Assembly** on 30/32 Samuel Opara Street, aren’t we? Let’s give 3 smileys ☺☺☺ to ourselves for that.)

Post Script: VOG—Voice of the Gospel.

I made a two-week vacation to Nigeria at the end of October 2022. As serendipity would have it, I came across the resident pastor of VOG on the evening of Thursday, November 3. He was distributing fliers for an upcoming event. He handed me a flier with an invitation to attend a church youth program tagged, “Xceptional Youth Night of Worship” on Friday, Nov. 11 @ 10:00pm, with the theme: “In the presence of YAHWEH.” That got my attention. I engaged him about YAHWEH and why “In the presence of JESUS”, “the name above all names”, the Savior and one sure Mediator between God and humanity, wasn’t enough and why the fascination with Hebraic OT/Torah names of God, such as Adonai, Elohim, Jehovah, Yahweh, etc. in the light of a “New Covenant”. He was an open, highly intelligent, and teachable man and we bonded immediately. I asked what VOG stood for, and he explained it meant “Voice of the Gospel.” I told him why I hadn’t stepped into the church; that I couldn’t commit myself to a 3 1/2-hour service. (No, I didn’t add: “without coffee/bathroom breaks” but I thought

about it ☺). I asked for the best time to attend and experience the meat of the service, excluding the housekeeping matters. He said that due to “African time” factor, the Sunday school starts at 8:15am. I promised him that now that I had a friendly face to associate with the church I would worship with them the next Sunday, November 6, 2022. I gave him a copy of this manuscript to read. He called me the following day and said he had been feeding on the manuscript.

I kept my word and worshipped with them on the promised Sunday. The sanctuary was spacious; the walls were plain with no decorations, no altars or shrines, a chancel (raised platform) with a glass lectern. There were no pews on the nave floor, but plastic chairs arranged to maintain the 6-foot Covid-19 restriction for the “little flock”, about half of which were the energetic and animated youth that made up the choir. Although I could only participate for about one hour and forty-five minutes (9:15 to 11:05am), and had to leave before the preaching was over, it was a good way to debunk the fear of the unknown.

I had lived in Brooklyn for 25 years, so, I agree with those who refer to Brooklyn, New York, as the borough of churches. I wonder how they would categorize Lagos. May I suggest “the amorphous jungle of churches” or “the marketplace of churches” as possible appellations or labels? By *jungle* I mean a free-for-all wilderness of wildly growing plants and animals, where only the fittest survive and thrive while others serve as feed, food and fodders. By *marketplace* I mean as in eBay, Amazon or Wal-Mart where anything and everything is sellable as

¹⁰ April 24: Unfortunately, I couldn’t commit to a 3 1/2 hours service in an unfamiliar territory. Sunday service, tagged “Miracle Service” was 7:30-11 am

long as it has the dollar sign (\$). If the criterion had been that every street in Lagos that could boast of having 6-10 churches qualified to be named or renamed CHURCH STREET, then Google map would soon be meaningless because virtually every Lagos Street would qualify to be named or renamed *Church Street*.

Easter Sunday, 2022

I was born again in Easter 1972, so Easter is always a special time for me. Four adults and two children entered the church for the second service. It was full to the overflow sections, being Easter. Everything going on in the church was celebratory and festive, befitting Easter and resurrection. The choir robe was festive, as well as the worshippers in their Sunday (best) dress. The guest speaker, a father-in-the-Lord to the pastor and a senior minister in the denomination was introduced. He took the podium, a short man. I've learned that great gifts often come in small packages; so, with raised expectations I adjusted myself in my seat. In the first few minutes, he focused on the resurrection and its importance. It was excellent and beautiful. He led us in singing two short choruses, which were unknown in the church, and he had to teach the congregation. My spirit soared and my hands were raised in praise. My baby was full of smiles, bouncing in my arms and flailing her arms with excitement. The guest minister then announced that he had been given a topic for the day. His topic was, **THE REDEMPTION OF THE FIRST BORN**. He also connected it with two other things, which were, the offering of the first fruit and tithe. These were things God had revealed to him, which he had been practicing and preaching/teaching

in the denomination. He said the sermon would be more of teaching than preaching.

The Offering of the First Fruits

Back in the days of the Exodus, the Israelites brought the first harvest of the produce from their farms as first fruits to the priests for the services and sustenance of the tabernacle. Since we no longer live in an agrarian culture, as the Old Testament Israelites, we wouldn't have any farm produce to bring from our farms, such as baskets of yams, baskets of tomatoes, or corn/maize harvest, etc. to the priest. The guest preacher then clarified the "first fruit" as your first salary/paycheck of the year, including all gifts, honorariums, and all passive income that had come for you in the month of January. You give everything to God as your first fruit.

If you wondered how you would survive, feed your family, pay rent/mortgage in January, it's because you weren't listening to him. At the onset, he had testified that he and his wife had been practicing this since 2013 and God always came through for them; they hadn't been thrown on the streets begging for sustenance in the month of January. Sorry, you have to pardon me, because I wasn't paying enough attention to remember how he spelled it out for private business owners, who were not salary earners, to calculate their first fruit. He clearly explained that this teaching was not for young believers; that he and his family started on this journey nine years ago. Tithe or tithing, which he didn't spend much time on, was of course ten percent of your income. For certain, he read the favorite Malachi passage (3:8-12) on tithing. He briefly explicated the blessing of obedience and the curses

or repercussion of disobedience with regards to tithing. All well and good; he quickly jumped to his main theme for the day, which was, *the redemption of the first-born.*

Redemption of the Firstborn

He read some passages from Exodus 13 where the Israelites were asked to redeem their first born children. The angel of death had spared the first born of the Israelites families and livestock when the angel had killed all the firstborn of the Egyptian families and livestock, beginning with the firstborn of Pharaoh to the lowest servant in Egypt. God then claimed that all the firstborn children and livestock of the Israelites were God's and should be redeemed with a redemption sum. Any livestock, specifically a donkey, that's not redeemed, would have its neck broken; neck breaking wasn't mentioned or stipulated for unredeemed firstborn human child. First, the preacher found a way to broaden "first born" to include everybody, no matter your birth order. For example, the preacher himself was the last born in his family, but he was the first to give his life to Jesus, so that now qualified and established him as the firstborn. He also read from Exodus 30 the number of shekels and gerahs (the Hebrew currencies of those days) to be paid as redemption price. He then calculated the equivalent price of redemption in today's currency.

On this once-in-a-year glorious Easter Sunday, the preacher went on to indicate that you could redeem yourself or be redeemed by a family member. He mentioned the consequences of failure to redeem, or be redeemed, which was to break the neck (Exo. 13:13; see also Exo. 34:19, 20) and theologized a bit about responsibilities and calamities that often

befall "first born" children who were not redeemed. Cain and Esau were his examples and scapegoats in this regard. This was to be a clue to parents listening to him who had first-born children who were not doing well, because their necks had been broken, spiritually, (as stipulated in Exodus 13:13) for having not been redeemed. Now those parents could identify the source of their children's problem. (I envy you if you could believe what you are reading, because I am still shaking my head in disbelief.) I kept saying to myself: If you want my money, please tell me plainly. I was partly listening and partly wishing this wasn't happening.

As Christians, every Sunday is resurrection Sunday; agreed? There are 52 Sundays in the year and only one had been solely dedicated to commemorating the ultimate price Jesus paid, by His sacrificial death on the cross. Jesus paid for our redemption and His glorious resurrection should have been the reason for today's emphasis. Why would you rob me, not to say rob Christ, of this one Sunday to emphasize His resurrection? Earlier, the local church pastor had read Matthew 28:1-6 and also referenced 1 Corinthians 15:19 in his prefatory speeches. I didn't know those were "by the way"; I had thought they were the staples for an Easter Sunday meditation.

This guest preacher and his message had been announced for weeks before Easter Sunday, and had been slated for Easter, for its importance, so that a larger crowd might be exposed to the teaching. In a national poll of 1,000 Protestant pastors, Lifeway Research asked what the three highest attendance Sundays were throughout the year. Mother's Day (59 percent) ranked third behind the standard

religious powerhouse holidays of Easter (93 percent) and Christmas (84 percent).

With just my Sunday school thinking cap on my head, I could tell everything was mumbo jumbo. At one point, he had said, “You may say that Jesus paid for our redemption. That’s for the whole world. Jesus did that for the whole world; you have to do this for yourself.” I mumbled to myself, “Michael, please tell me you didn’t hear that. Tell me he didn’t say that.”

My head was swirling with all sorts of questions. Do we have to be Jewish before becoming Christians? How far would you go in sustaining the old covenant that God had set aside to create a new covenant? What has *tetelestai* (Jesus’ “IT IS FINISHED!”) got to do with buying back ourselves, again, by paying the price of our redemption to the pastor? Did I tell you he had attempted to estimate the equivalence of redemption price in today’s currency for us? Did I also mention that he had specified that since we couldn’t take that redemption price to their “high priest” we have to give it to the local pastor, the representative of that “high priest”? Why is this happening on a day we should be singing jubilantly “Jesus paid it all”?

The apostle Paul was Jewish, and a special apostle of Christ to the Gentiles. Paul was, beyond any argument, the best interpreter of Jesus and His mission of redemption. Lost in thoughts, I began to imagine, fantasize, and ask myself: If Paul was sitting in one of the pews here and listening to this, would he be smiling or weeping? Paul had attempted, unsuccessfully, to free the Jewish believers in Christ from syncretism (Judaic practices mixed with “saved by grace” and faith in Christ). Paul had also

spent his life shielding the Gentile believers from being lured and enticed (by Jewish Christians of the circumcision party) into embracing Judaism in the same pot with the Christian faith. From what exactly did Jesus die to redeem us? Believe it or not, I found myself wishing for Rabbi Gulack to suddenly appear. I said under my breath, “Rabbi Gulack, where are you when I needed you most? Please show up and take the microphone from this preacher and set things straight for him.” [Rabbi (Dr.) Susan Gulack is my colleague in the office, Albany, New York. She’s my Old Testament/Torah consultant. If she had been in the congregation, she would have laughed until she nearly cracked a rib. She then would magnanimously have spread a red carpet and invited the preacher to come over and join Judaism and be better tutored in the Old Testament/Torah].

The preacher ended by acknowledging that his topic was often troublesome and controversial for many and he would gladly welcome questions to make himself clear. I was glad he admitted that much. The first questioner did not challenge him but only asked for clarification. That was abysmally disappointing. I couldn’t take it anymore, because I had expected someone to raise an objection. “I’m out of here.” I grabbed my baby from her mother, who at that time was sitting in the narthex, and gingerly walked the few steps home.

Ritualized Anointing upon Anointing

Incidentally, it was not the first time I had carried my child home before the service was officially over. One Sunday, at the beginning of a new month, the pastor announced that they would anoint every child in the congregation with oil.

Nursing mothers carried their babies towards the altar. The Sunday school teachers marched children from the Sunday school classes into the main church auditorium for the anointing. I grabbed my then 6-month-old baby from the mother and walked home. If anyone would anoint my child with oil, it would be me. The oil would not be one imported from any local or international Jerusalem; the oil would come from our local grocery store to be prayed over and sanctified in the name of Jesus. Prayer in the **NAME OF JESUS** is all I need to make anything holy, sanctified or consecrated for a divine or special service. What does the Scripture say? *“For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving; FOR IT IS SANCTIFIED BY THE WORD OF GOD AND PRAYER,”* (1 Tim. 4, 5; uppercase mine). A couple of Sundays after this, when the pastor had just returned from their local Jerusalem or headquarters, he said he had come back with a mandate to anoint every person in church with oil. The oil was from their local Jerusalem and had been prayed over by their highest ecclesiological minister. Again, I took the baby from my wife and headed home; my wife was free to join me whenever she wanted to.

The story was different this Sunday. In the church’s calendar, this day was the high point of our faith, and the preacher was talking about paying a redemption price to secure our ransom. About an hour after I had left the church, my wife and others came back from church. By that time, I had changed the diapers and rocked my now 8-month-old baby to sleep. They said some other questioners took this highly sought-after guest preacher to task and apparently shook

him so much he evaded some other questioners.

For all adults in my house, for the next thirty minutes or so, the disappointing Easter service message was the point of discussion. I was happy to be surrounded by those who considered it a slap in the face of Easter. Additionally, for me, it was “one of those things” when you confused Moses with Jesus or Jesus with Moses and concluded that they were one and the same. My wife and the other two adults said the sermon could have been preached on any other Sunday but not Easter; that it was contradictory to the redemption story of Easter and a negation of what had transpired in the church before the sermon. I said **IT SHOULD NEVER HAVE BEEN PREACHED, ANY DAY, ANYWHERE**, not even on the streets of Israel. It’s this kind of open playing field where every Dick and Harry was an expert, which I mentioned in **Thinking Aloud—2**, that weakens Pentecostalism.

Back in Brooklyn, New York, when I had cable TV—that was before I became cheap and settled for Roku and Amazon Fire Stick streaming devices (I might again go back to cable TV now that I have a baby)—the Catholic TV channels were my favorite channels that I tuned to all through the Lenten and Easter season. The Catholics have a greater appreciation for the passion and mission of Jesus. If I could turn back the hand of the clock and had premonitions about what I had coming, I could have opted to attend Easter service in a Catholic church in 2022, but for the fact that I wouldn’t know when to turn, bow, knee or say, “Hail Mary, Mother of God.”

Tuesday after Easter

Brace yourself for the next thing. I thought I had heard it all, but no. The Tuesday of the week of Easter, my brother, the Anglican Venerable mentioned earlier, visited us. The Easter Sunday service came into discussion again. My wife then narrated other details of which I had not been made aware. It was then I learned the worst part. After converting the Hebrew shekel/gerah to Naira, the Nigerian currency equivalence of the redemption price was two thousand Naira (N2,000.00). Please block your ears or stop reading. (I warned you!) There was an altar invitation for worshipers on this Easter Sunday to come forward with N2,000.00 to pay for themselves or for their loved ones, their redemption price. Many worshippers went forward with N2,000.00 or multiples of it, for their redemption and that of a loved one. What if someone had a troubled firstborn child or was himself a troubled firstborn child but did not have N2,000.00 to redeem himself or the child? What's their hope for redemption in this culture of **redemption for sale to the highest bidder**? I leave that for you to help me find an answer to. Although I wasn't present to witness the crowd that went forward with N2000, I could say with a measure of certainty that many that paid the money were not convinced it was an appropriate doctrine. They nonetheless complied either out of fear, just in case the preacher was right, or not to be seen as dissidents but be seen as supportive and on the same page with the leadership of the church, or both. (On a side note: I feel sorry for the church ushers who received and counted the "redemption money," because, redemption money, or ransom price, typically and technically, anyway you slice it, is **blood money**).

Jesus, I can't believe I would say this, or even wish it: but I sincerely hope You were not in that church to listen to all that was said and preached on an Easter Sunday. I would be a happier person if I could be sure that You, Jesus, were not anywhere near the assembly. Moreover, I hope You didn't see or watch Your gullible sheep going forward to pay for their redemption, for which You had already paid. Jesus, I fear if you had heard and had seen everything, I'm afraid; no container would be large enough to hold Your tears. It was a sad commentary reading, "Jesus wept," at the tomb of Lazarus. It would be the saddest commentary reading, "Jesus weeps" 2000 years after He had paid the price for our redemption and rose from the dead to seal the deal.

Mind you, I didn't see, and couldn't have foreseen, any of this happening on Easter Sunday when I had charged and subtitled Didactic 001 to indicate that a big chunk of the church in Nigeria was eroding or downplaying *tetelestai*. This is part of my front-page subtitle: **"Corrupted Version of the Gospel" that Bordered on Syncretism and Had Downplayed and Undervalued, "Tetelestai"**. Need I say more? Except that this Easter Sunday sermon was not a corrupted version of the gospel; it was NO GOSPEL AT ALL!

Some well-known Pentecostal ministers often crack jokes deriding seminarians by referring to "seminary" as "cemetery." They triumphantly pat themselves on the back that they did not have "cemetery" training for their pastoral ministry. I wonder: Is this then the kind of their best performances without sound seminary training? Please talk to me; I'm listening.

Back to one of my opening subtitles in Didactic 001: **The Saddest Comments a Churchman Could Hear**. Can you now see why I was tongue-tied and couldn't summon any moral or logical explanation to counter the decision of those men and women I mentioned in the beginning, even though I had wanted to? I had encountered them in different places in their despondency. They were once deeply involved in the church but now had deserted the church. What if I had encouraged them to try any local assembly of the largest and fastest growing denomination in Nigeria, and they just happened to visit this assembly I was in on that very Easter? (It would be shame on me!)

It's a pity you couldn't know how much I shudder each time I think, or write, *"The largest and fastest growing denomination in Nigeria"*. You'd be sorry for me. Somehow, I wish this wasn't true. Yet, they also have big congregations of the denomination all over the world. It gives me a mixed feeling of sadness and joy. Two thumbs up and joys galore for church growth. Two thumbs down and tears unabated for the spread of syncretism and corrupted versions of the Good News that pay lip service to *tetelestai*.

Thursday after Easter

With my head still unfocussed from my Easter hangover, I visited some elderly saints of the old school on Thursday following Easter. I just wanted to ask them how they were surviving under the spiritual climate. They wanted to talk Nigerian politics; I wanted to discuss Nigerian Christianity. Thankfully, old school is always reliable. They reminded me that the Owner of the Vineyard, the Ruler of the Universe, and Builder of His

Church wasn't asleep; that He would fix things in His own way. They referred me to the Old Testament sin cycle of rebellion, punishment, repentance, and restoration, and recent church history to emphasize the cyclical nature of spirituality, and that the pendulum would swing again back to some sanity. I was probably impatient, wishing too soon that the pendulum would move quickly back to some normalcy. I then remembered something a sage, of blessed memory, Dr. Wayne Dyer, had said in one of his recorded messages to the world. He had said that wars, famines, earthquakes, and pestilences, as bad and devastating as they were in a world created by a Moral, Good, and Divine Intelligence, were not accidental and shouldn't be considered foreign. They had to be integral parts of God's world in the original design. He contended that for anyone to question God or charge that such shouldn't happen in the world was to accuse God of incompetence in running His creation and suggesting that he/she could do a better job than the Almighty was doing. He said all we could and should do was to attempt to fix the problems, as best as we could. That even our desire and passion to notice and work towards rectifying such situations, was also part of God's original design. (In a way, I had developed the same concept in chapter 10 (Theodicy) and especially in the bonus chapter of *Teach Them*, Book 1, pp 281-342. In the bonus chapter, I used John 9:1-12, Luke 13:1-5 (which Jesus regarded as no-blame-necessary mishaps and accidents in life; the sad events were not the consequences or punishment of sin), and Ephesians 2:10, as springboards for the theme: IT HAPPENED BECAUSE IT HAD TO HAPPEN. As I mentioned in *Teach Them*, Book 1, the bonus chapter is a "must read.").

One of them said “church” was big business. This assertion was quite believable. I remember that at the turn of this century there was a crash in the hitherto untouchable oil and banking sectors in Nigeria, which led to shake-ups at the top management levels. As a result, many highly paid, senior staff and higher up officers of the sectors had to be laid off. In addition to the severance packages for these executive cadres, seminars and workshops were organized for them to learn new ways to make decent living in a recessive economy. Believe it or not, I was told that one lucrative, money-making venture that these over-pampered, high-ranking men and women of timber and caliber were encouraged to look into was—you guessed right—to **consider starting a church.** How sad.

This sage also counseled me not to confuse *churchians* and *churchianity* (sorry, Webster, this is not in your forte) with Christians and Christianity. Not to confuse the *crowd* that Jesus fed with physical bread and fish for their stomachs, with the *disciples* whom Jesus fed with Himself, the Bread of Life for their spirits. Not to mistake miracle-seekers that flood the churches with the righteousness-seekers that hunger for God.

As if to make me less irritated, it was from these two gentle giants of the faith I learned that the denomination considered “traditions” and “orthodoxy” as bad concepts. So, they had moved away from, or chosen to merely pay lip service to, any traditions and orthodox practices of the historical church. They therefore downplayed or distanced themselves from all celebrations in the Church’s calendar, such as, Holy/Passion Week, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter, Advent, Christmas, etc. If you took all

those out of the Christian faith, what do you have left? What connections do you have to an historical faith of Virgin Birth, Crucifixion, Death and Resurrection? Hey people, or anyone out there listening, aren’t all the red flags here? Little wonder, their sermon texts are almost always retelling Bible stories—David and Goliath, Elijah and the widow of Zarephath, Elisha and the floating axe head miracle, etc.

By the way, I forgot to tell you that the prefatory remark of the guest preacher was that Easter had its roots in pagan worship; that we should wish one another, “Happy Resurrection” instead of Happy Easter? We then did this heartily and obediently. You can be sure that during the Christmas season he again would be kind enough to remind us that Jesus Christ was not actually born on December 25. He might then suggest that we wish each other “Merry X-mas” instead of Merry *Christmas*, who knows?

“For God so Loved the Pagans...”

May I also remind the preacher that **tithe/tithing**, which he had fondly alluded to in the beginning of his sermon, also had its roots in pagan practice? When Abram gave a tenth (or tithe) of war booties to Melchizedek, Abram was adopting a pagan yardstick of what a vassal state, or a conquered or subordinate city-state king in that culture and age would do to pay homage, tribute, allegiance or tax to the conqueror or superior city-state king or monarch. This was the first and only time we have on record that Abram paid tithe and he didn’t pay the tithe from his substance, personal wealth, livestock, or family resources. Abram paid tithe from war booties. Being already a wealthy man, Abram then turned the remaining 90 percent to the

king of Sodom and the men who had fought alongside him and helped him win the battle—Genesis 14:14-24. In Abram’s words, his rationale was, “lest [anyone] should say, ‘I have made Abram rich’” (v. 23d).

Abram did not invent tithing. God did not inspire him so to do. No angel, not even Melchizedek, urged Abram to do so. (Please read the text again for yourself). Abram simply followed the (pagan) practice of that culture. The Bible makes it clear that Abraham, our progenitor of monotheistic faith, was a pagan, as his ancestors were, and they “served other gods” (Jos. 24:2, 3; Gen. 12:1), before God called Abram. If we denounce Easter and Christmas as having their roots in paganism—which is the case—it is only fair to be consistent and not shy away from applying the same rule to include tithing. Alternatively, we may settle for the idea that it’s okay to sanctify what otherwise had a pagan origin, redefine it, transform it, give it a new meaning, and use it for a higher purpose. After all, “*The Earth is the Lord’s, and all its fullness*” (Psalm 24:1a; see also Mal. 3:7-11 and Matt. 23:23). The same way we have embraced the word, “Christian.” Jesus did not call His followers Christians; the unbelieving world—the pagans—coined it to label the followers of The Way (Acts 11:26). Unperturbed, we took this word meant to deride us as a badge of honor.

I may also proffer here that God often employed and transformed pagan or heathen cultural ideas to communicate His message. It’s the way God could meet humanity where they were. For example, in Genesis 15, especially verses 9-21, God entered into a unilateral covenant with Abram using the pagan’s or heathen cultural methods of transacting and sealing covenants

between two individuals. Also, the first power sign God gave Moses to perform with his rod—the rod turning to a snake—had its roots in pagan magic, yet, God wasn’t sending Moses as a magician. God knew the magicians of Pharaoh could do the same, but God was going to demonstrate His superiority when Moses’ rod that had been turned into snake swallowed the Egyptian magicians’ rods in their snake forms. Only Moses went home with his rod; the magicians’ rods had been swallowed up by Moses’ rod (Exodus chapters 4 to 7). It is noteworthy that Moses was an Egyptian runaway prince who later became God’s servant. The Scripture says that Moses had been educated “*in all the wisdom of the Egyptians*” (Acts 7:22). In that light, you couldn’t be any more “paganized” than the Egyptian prince, Moses!

In addition, they were pagans and pagan world rulers—Pharaoh in Egypt and Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon—to whom God revealed His plan for the world in the dreams and visions they saw, which were interpreted by God’s messengers, Joseph and Daniel respectively. How can we forget Balaam who was a non-Israelite prophet described in Numbers chapters 22-24? Balaam was a diviner who believed in, or at least knew about, the God of Israel, Yahweh, to the degree that the Spirit could influence him. We would think of him as a pagan who had a strange relationship with Yahweh. Above all, although we are not supposed to love the world or intermarry with pagans, God so loved the world full of pagans: primitive, barbaric, and reformed pagans, traditional, modernized and secularized pagans, and many more, that God sent His Son to die for their sins and idolatry (John 3:16). God was kind enough so much so that their “*times of ignorance*

God overlooked” (Acts 17:30). “For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly [pagans]” (Rom. 5:6; insert mine). We are in the world—rubbing shoulders with pagans, just not of the world.

To conclude, I may also mention that God addressed the Medo-Persian Empire king Cyrus as “My Shepherd” (Isa. 44:28) and “My Anointed” (Isa. 45:1). God further said of Cyrus, a Gentile/pagan ruler, “*I have even called you by your name; I have named you, though you have not known Me*” (Isa. 45:4c). I guess the question that’s agitating my mind is this: **On a broader scope, WHO or WHAT is not of pagan origin?** Who knows? God may be saying to us regarding Christmas and Easter and their pagan origins, the same message He had said to Peter, “*What God has cleansed you must not call common*” (Acts 10:15).

Out Of the Mouth of Babes

“Out Of the Mouth of Babes and sucking infants You have ordained strength, because of Your enemies, that You may silence the enemy and the avenger,” (Psa. 8:2). My baby, IbukunOluwa Precious OLU-MICHAEL, was usually quiet in church. Most Sundays, those sitting in the pews in front and behind of us wouldn’t even know a baby was in the congregation. After the service was over, we, her parents, and other worshippers seated close to us, always commended her for her quietness and cooperation. Her practice at home was “eat, change diaper, sleep, smile and play”. In church, it was “eat, sleep, smile and attentively observe” (or listen, who can tell?) All we knew was that judging from her rapt attention you could be led into believing that she was actually listening. (Don’t

even try; you cannot convince her mother that she wasn’t listening☺). It could be my biological science background (in animal husbandry and nutrition with no emphasis on a child’s psychological or cognitive development) that had conditioned me to assign most of what she was doing at this stage of her development to instincts. For her mother, however, her actions were intentional and volitional (including her Mom or Nanny having her point, pick and choose from 3 or 4 dresses spread before her what dress she wanted to wear that morning; this practice was from when she was 4 months old). Besides making a *joyful noise unto the Lord* along with other worshippers during congregational singing and flailing her arms, which her mother interpreted as raising her hands in praise, IbukunOluwa was always quiet and subdued in church.

Not this Sunday. Believe it or not, IbukunOluwa, aka IBK, was unusually and excessively loud this Easter Sunday during the preaching of the sermon. Her mother had to carry her out of the sanctuary to the narthex. This was the first time in all these months that she was taken out of the sanctuary. The loudness was somehow inexcusable. I said my baby was excited because it was Easter. Her mother said she was yelling at the preacher to shut up and be quiet. To back her claims, her mother quoted what the prophet Isaiah had said, “*I and the children the LORD has given me serve as signs and warnings to Israel from the LORD of Heaven’s Armies who dwells in his Temple on Mount Zion*” (Isa. 8:18; NLT). Who could tell? I want to believe her Mom’s version, though. We all know that mothers have special intuition about things. God could be saying something through the baby when adults were muffled and muted. “Ministry” is one of

the names I had given IBK at her birth, though it did not appear on her birth certificate. However, the story behind her name, Ministry, is for another time, God willing and God sparing our lives.

From time immemorial, Yoruba people, from their elemental understanding of the gospel had a slogan, “*Ofe ni igbala*”

which translated, as “Salvation is free.” My people, since when did that change? Are we now saying that the cost of redemption for a soul is not more than N2,000.00 which (as at May 2022) was equivalent to an amount less than four dollars (\$4.00), in both official and black market exchange rates?

LAYING THE MATTER TO REST

It’s been said, “A text out of context, is a pretext.” (Pretext: a reason given in justification of a course of action that is not the real reason; an alleged reason.) There’s probably no better illustration of that than the case in point.

Just for the Record/Putting the Matter to Rest: Back in the US, I had a discussion with Rabbi Gulack. She expatiated on the practice in the Old Testament and present-day Israel. I then had some independent study on the topic. I tried my best to resist the temptation of adding more pages to an already lengthy piece, but I also considered it necessary to put this matter to rest neatly with the following:

- First, she considered broadening the definition of “firstborn” to include everybody—male and female—was ludicrous, because the law clearly specified first to come out of the woman’s womb and the language was masculine, meaning first born son. The service of redemption was never done for a firstborn daughter, because women were not part of the workforce in the tabernacle service.
- Second, she said the whole idea of “redemption” was to release the firstborn sons who were not from the tribe of Levi for secular jobs. This was because, following deliverance from Egypt and God sparing Israel’s firstborn sons when the Egyptians’ firstborn children and livestock were killed; God unilaterally claimed all Israelites firstborn male children and livestock as God’s. Later, God took the tribe of Levi as a substitute for all Israel’s firstborn sons. Rabbi Gulack is from the tribe of Levi; the tribe God already claimed for His own, for His service, therefore her firstborn son did not have to be redeemed (She’s blessed with two sons).
- Third, this was something done by parents for a firstborn son at thirty days; no adult ever did this for himself. I asked, “Why 30 days?” She said it would be after a month before you could tell if a child would live or die.
- Fourth, there was no mention of “unredeemed” firstborn sons, because the price was such that the poorest family could afford. Besides, any ritual or ceremony that afforded or typified the telling or retelling the story of Israel’s Exodus from Egypt was the core belief and practice in any Jewish

community. No Jewish family would disregard this. Therefore, “redemption of the firstborn son” was an admission or acknowledgment by the parents that they and their newborn son were doomed for death and had been redeemed by God. They thereby belonged to God and owed their lives to God who had chosen to spare them when God’s wrath fell on Egypt. The “neck breaking” which the preacher mentioned was applicable only to an ass, because an ass/donkey, being an unclean animal, could not be offered in sacrifice to God and had to be redeemed, or substituted with a lamb (Exo. 34:19, 20). All the firstborn of all clean domesticated animals unilaterally belonged to God and could be offered to God; they therefore didn’t need to be redeemed or substituted with a lamb.

- Fifth, today, in Israel, parents give five silver coins in place of the “five shekels” to any member of the tribe of Cohen¹¹. In most cases, the family will exchange the five silver coins with a check of a larger amount so the family can keep the five silver coins as souvenirs.
- Sixth, back then and presently, no elaborate service was necessary. Today, parents simply find a member of the Cohen family and give him the “redemption price” of five silver coins in lieu of the Old Testament five shekels.
- Lastly, she said the best altar invitation from the service could have been for the worshippers/listeners to dedicate themselves to the service of God, because the essence was to be set apart for God’s service. I also noticed that many translations in my English Bibles subtitled the passage as, “dedication of the firstborn son” or “consecration of the firstborn son”.

The doctrine (or offering) of the “Redemption of the Firstborn”, when viewed with unbiased eyes and no ulterior motives, does not stand up as a TIMELESS PRINCIPLE in the Bible. A timeless principle is a truth or command that is immutable and transcends age and eras in human history and God’s redemption plan. For example, a **timeless principle** is that “the just shall live by faith” (Romans 1:17), and “without faith it is impossible to please God” (Hebrews 11:6,13). Peter said that in the word of God we have “all things pertaining to life and godliness” (2 Peter 1:3). That principle of God’s word – **that in it we have everything we need to live holy and righteous lives for eternal salvation** – is just as true today as it was when it was first written. The word of God is timeless! That “God loves a cheerful (or hilarious) giver” (2 Cor. 9:7) is also a timeless principle that pervades both the Old and New Testaments. “*But this I say: He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver,*” (2 Cor. 9:6, 7).

¹¹ Jewish priest, one who is a descendant of Zadok, and through Zadok related to Aaron.

Augustine of Hippo’s dictum concerning the two testaments, “The New is in the Old concealed; the Old is in the New revealed”—probably his most quoted saying, comes to play here. The transcending (or timeless) principle of the Old Testament redemption of the firstborn is the dedication of ourselves to God’s service, as the second verse of the old church hymn—“I am Thine, O Lord”, goes, “*Consecrate me now to Thy service, Lord, by the power of grace divine.*” That’s the takeaway from this Old Testament Israelite practice to the New Testament era. Paul’s appeal to the Romans equally speaks to this:

So here’s what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you (Rom. 12:1, 2; MSG).

Believe it or not, Rabbi Gulack felt sorry for me, because she—like other rabbis I had been in relationship with—clearly understands the essence and pillars of the Christian faith, especially where, when, why and what places we parted ways from Judaism. So, for a Christian minister not to “get it” was “something else” to her—that’s putting it mildly.

An Easter Message Embedded in the Text

To my surprise, however, I discovered that the passage is loaded with an Easter message in at least three aspects. First, it illustrates **redemption by substitution** by the law for the redemption of unclean animals (v. 13, 15; cf. Num. 3:11-13, 40-51; 8:15-19; 18:16). The firstling of an ass, being unclean, could not be offered on the altar. It was, therefore, to be redeemed by the substitution of the lamb. If not redeemed, its neck was to be broken; meaning, unredeemed life must die. It was on the same principle that the lamb was substituted for the firstborn on the night of the exodus. Jesus has fulfilled this type—He redeemed us by substituting His holy life for our sinful ones (Heb. 9:26-28). We were the unclean ass/donkey; He was the Lamb of God that became our Substitute (John 1:29). Jesus’ life is a ransom for many (Matt. 20:28; 1 Tim. 2:6). In this respect of substitution, the entire tribe of Levi was substituted for the first sons in Israel. However, there were more firstborn sons in the other 11 tribes of Israel than there were sons in the tribe of Levi. Those “extra” not included in the substitution, were then redeemed with five shekels.

Secondly, it illustrates that **the redeemed life belongs to God**, (vv. 1, 12, 15). Regarding the firstborn, God declared in Exodus 13:2b, “*Whatever opens the womb among the children of Israel, both of man and beast; it is Mine.*” The God

who redeemed also claimed ownership: “YOU ARE MINE.” *“But now, thus says the Lord, who created you, O Jacob, And He who formed you, O Israel: ‘Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name, You are Mine,’”* (Isa. 43:1). *“For you were bought at a price, therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s”* (1 Cor. 6:20). Lastly, as a **Memorial or Commemoration**: It was in connection with the deliverance from death of the Israelites’ firstborn by the **blood of the lamb**, and still further to fix the remembrance of the historical facts in the mind of the nation that Moses was commanded to declare all the firstborn of Israel for all future time, and all the firstborn of their domesticated animals “holy to the Lord.” Today, we celebrate Holy Communion to remember and to commemorate the **blood of Jesus shed for us**. In this way, the facts of the gory, brutal and gruesome historical crucifixion of Jesus are further brought into our focus by it. Jesus died that we might live.

JEWISH RITUALS AS SEEN IN JESUS’ CHILDHOOD

Jesus was Jewish and the firstborn child of Her mother. Jesus’ earthly Jewish parents did for Him what would be done for every firstborn child. Luke mentioned some of these (Luke 2:21-40). The events recorded in the childhood of Jesus in Luke 2:21-40 probably spanned many weeks. First, circumcision was done at 8 days (v. 21); second, the mother’s purification (v. 22a), was 40 days after childbirth of a son; the presentation/dedication (vv. 22b, 23), was after 30 days. The purification and presentation could have been done as two-in-one (Lev. 12:1-8; Exo. 13:2; Num. 3:15, 40). Probably past 40 days, as Luke 2:22 seem to indicate: *“Now when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were completed [meaning: 40 days], they [Jesus’ parents] brought Him [Jesus] to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord.”* (Insert mine).

1. **CIRCUMCISION**: *“And on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised”* (Lev. 12:3). *“And when eight days were completed for the circumcision of the Child, His name was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb”* (Luke 2:21). This was done for Jesus at eight days, as it was the practice for every male child. Another example was John the Baptist, Jesus’ cousin: *“So it was, on the eighth day, that they came to circumcise the child; and they would have called him by the name of his father, Zacharias. His mother answered and said, ‘No; he shall be called John’”* (Luke 1:59, 60). Circumcision symbolized the Jews’ separation from the Gentiles and their unique relationship with God (Gen. 17:4-14).
2. **CONSECRATION or PRESENTATION of the FIRSTBORN SON** (Luke 2:7, 22; Exo. 13:2, 12). *“Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Consecrate to Me all the firstborn, whatever opens the womb among the children of Israel, both of man and beast; it is Mine’...that you shall set apart to the Lord all that open the womb, that is, every firstborn that comes from an*

animal which you have; the males shall be the Lord's" (Exo. 13:1, 2, 12). "They [Jesus' parents] brought Him [Jesus] to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord" (Luke 2:22b). "Sanctify unto me" (KJV)—not by any ceremony but by regarding "it" as "set apart unto the Lord" (v. 12). Jesus was the firstborn of Mary. He was therefore consecrated to the Lord as required by the Law, but there's no requirement that this be done at the tabernacle or temple. The concept of presentation at the temple is probably derived from 1 Samuel 1:24-28, where Hannah offered the child Samuel for sanctuary services.

3. REDEMPTION of the FIRSTBORN SON: essentially, dedication to God (Exo. 13:2, 11-16; Num. 3:40-51; 18:15-18; Luke 2:23). The language was specific: "*Whatever opens the womb*" with no reference to later births, and it applied only to sons (or firstborn males of livestock), because it was the firstborn males that had been in danger in Egypt, and only the firstborn males of future generations were to be redeemed. Two things were required: 1) to dedicate all firstborn sons to God, and 2) to redeem or buy back for the purpose of secular life. The clean beasts became God's by sacrifice, but the unclean ones could not and therefore had to be "redeemed" (vv. 13, 15) by sacrifice of clean animals in their place. The Levites were later chosen as substitutes. The Law further stipulated (Num. 3:47, 48) that the firstborn son should be redeemed, or bought back, by the parents through their payment of five shekels to a member of the priestly family. This did not have to be a ceremony. Jesus was born into Judah's family lineage, not Levi, the priesthood, and should therefore be redeemed. Luke's passage is silent on this legal requirement. It could have been done for Jesus on the streets or neighborhood since no special service was required for it; just payment to the priestly family—"*And Moses gave their redemption money to Aaron and his sons, according to the word of the Lord, as the Lord commanded Moses*" (Num 3:51).

After the census of the firstborn sons in Israel, God took the tribe of Levi in place of the firstborn sons. There were many more firstborn sons in the 11 tribes than the male Levites population. God then asked Moses to redeem the number not accounted for by substitution. We read the following:

"Then the Lord said to Moses: 'Number all the firstborn males of the children of Israel from a month old and above, and take the number of their names. And you shall take the Levites for Me—I am the Lord—instead of all the firstborn among the children of Israel, and the livestock of the Levites instead of all the firstborn among the livestock of the children of Israel.' ... Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: 'Take the Levites instead of all the firstborn among the children of Israel, and the livestock of the Levites instead of their livestock. The Levites shall be Mine: I am the Lord. And for the redemption of the two hundred and seventy-three of the firstborn of the children of Israel, who are more than the number of the Levites, you shall take five shekels for each one individually; you shall take them in the currency of the shekel of the sanctuary,

the shekel of twenty gerahs. And you shall give the money, with which the excess number of them is redeemed, to Aaron and his sons'." (Num. 3:40, 41, 44-48)

4. PURIFICATION of the MOTHER (Lev. 12:2-8; Luke 2:22-24). For 40 days after the birth of a son and 80 days after the birth of a daughter, the mother was considered ceremonially unclean and could not enter the temple. At the end of her separation, the parents were to bring a lamb for a burnt offering and a dove for a sin offering. The priest would sacrifice these animals and would declare her clean. If a lamb was too expensive—as was the case with Jesus' poor parents—the parents could bring a second dove instead. Being poor, this was what Joseph and Mary presented—*"A pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons"* (Luke 2:24b). Jesus was God's Son, and His earthly family carried out these ceremonies according to God's law. Jesus was not above the Law; instead, He fulfilled it perfectly. The rabbi explained that these practices still go on today. No lamb or pigeon would be presented but there's a place and provision where you "cleanse yourself" after 40/80 days, as the case may be. A woman may, however, attend the synagogue but she could not resume sexual activities until after her purification.

One question I have for those preachers who peddle this is: Why take only the redemption of the firstborn? What happens to purification of mothers 40 days after the birth of a boy and 80 days after the birth of a daughter, as was and is still being practiced in Jewish communities then and now? Why don't you preach this as well? Why not be Jewish all the way?

TITHE AND FIRST FRUIT

Trust me, I also talked about tithing and first fruits with Rabbi Gulack, as they were practiced back then in the Old Testament and now in Jewish communities. Not because I didn't have my biblical understanding and practice but to gain an understanding of its practice, content and context in the Judaic setting. **To me, tithe and first fruits are not money issues. First and foremost, they are heart and stewardship matters.** Rabbi Gulack explained they had different types of tithes for different purposes designed to cater for specific needs of the community, something like the modern system of taxation to meet certain budgetary needs in society. In fact, she used the taxation system to illustrate her point.

Regarding the "**first fruits**", she specifically explained that it means what it says, "*fruit*," as in farm produce, and nothing more, specifically fruit from a garden or farm, not salary. It served its purpose in Old Testament agrarian culture to provide for the poor, the priesthood, and temple workers. I know I am stepping on some toes here. No Jew, back then and through their history, or presently in Israel or Jerusalem or New York, ever understood it to mean earned income. No Jew today sends portions of, or entire salary, in January to the temple/synagogue. To start

with, nothing grows, and nothing is harvested in January in Israel and many other parts of the globe. Any Jew with an orchard, vegetable garden, farm, or farm produce, cheerfully gives the first fruit to the poor, synagogue, or priest—a member of the Cohen family. He does that not in January (or Nissan, the first month of the year in the Jewish calendar) but at any time he harvests the first fruit. Practically, the Jews had four major New Years¹² in a calendar/almanac year – that is, beginning or commemoration/celebration of this or that (Exo. 12:2; Leviticus chapter 23; Num. 10:10; 28:11; Ruth 1:22) – when the temple was standing. The “first fruit” at each season or beginning of the year was a form of taxation paid to support the community. The way I’ve practiced my “first fruit” from my rudimentary understanding from 1972 before the advent of new, strange teachings on it, is to give the first ten percent of my gross income, not the bottom ten percent and not of the take-home. Tithing is not simply ten percent of an income. The faith and trust come into play by giving the top ten percent, that is, before any other expenditure—“as much as possible”. I put that caveat “as much as possible” because even before I get my paycheck, Uncle Sam, collaborating with my employer and the pay-as-you-earn (PAYE) system have taken about a third as taxes, medical insurance and other deductions for other civic purposes.

I don’t want to rock the boat any more than I have done, so I won’t say much more here on tithing and first fruits. Please see Didactic 004 for more on tithing.

PENTECOSTALISM SUFFERS FROM A HODGEPODGE SYNDROME AND SELF-INFLICTED WOUNDS

A Boundless, All Comers Enterprise: Not that Pentecostalism is suspect or questionable, or in any way should be. It is not an error in any form or shape. It is a hodgepodge, a heterogeneous mixture, a place where different people, styles, theories, etc. are mixed together without any possibility of cohesion. I had explained this to some extent in **Thinking Aloud—2**. When you think about it, (let’s do some playing on words here), what is inadvertently turned around and bent in bad light is the very

dynamism (Greek: *dunamis*, as in Acts 1:8, meaning strength, power, inwardly-generated or resident energizer or ability) and enthusiasm (Greek: *en theos, enthous*, meaning possessed by a god, God-inspired, zest, zeal, passion, jubilation, intense excitement)—the very virtues for which Pentecostals are known. These are the visible evidences or manifestations of God’s Spirit and presence in a person.

¹² The 4 Jewish New Year observances to celebrate, commemorate, mark their growth through the year, to acknowledge their deep relationship with animals, and celebrate all aspects of life and the Earth, are: (1) Rosh Hashanah—“head of the year” begins the High Holy Days, a time of introspection and repentance through Yom Kippur (the holiest day of the year); (2) Passover and the Exodus—“head of months”, connects to the Exodus story which is retold every Passover; (3) Tu B’Shevat, marks the birthday of trees, now celebrated as an ecological holiday or a “Jewish Earth Day”; (4) Elul, the last month before Rosh Hashanah and sets up for reflection and renewal. Traditionally, the shofar is blown every morning during Elul to awaken people’s spirits.

These very virtues of the Spirit that are susceptible to be turned into vices, or abused and exploited are boldness, risk taking, adventurism, empowered creativity, which are the demonstration of God’s presence in an individual’s life, and for which Pentecostals are not lacking. It is for the same reason of visible manifestation of God’s power and presence which Simon, the sorcerer, had witnessed in Peter and John, in Acts 8, that prompted him to offer money to the apostles so he could buy these dynamic virtues or Source of power from them. Any Christian leader who does not have the kind of boldness and daring faith to believe God for His Word—which Pentecostals are known for, should have a second thought before criticizing or passing judgment on Pentecostals.

Some have charged that Pentecostalism is heavy on the Spirit and light on the intellect; high on emotions, low on reasoning, deep in fore-telling shallow in forth-telling. Some others claim that dreams, visions, signs and wonders abound in its pulpits as substitutes for Biblical expositions and exegesis for theological discourses. I don’t go those routes or think in those terms. If you say it is highly subjective, we are on the same page. It is the subjectivity, which many have taken advantage of that I question

and is worrisome to me. That’s one reason I’m happy that I wasn’t born into and raised in Pentecostalism and having it as my point of reference and default, spiritual or religious reasoning, and worldview.

That way, no one can sweep me off my feet by saying, “Thus says the Lord…” or, “The Lord told me…” My first reaction to such is “Which Lord?” If you said to me, “I had a dream or revelation from the Lord,” my immediate response would be to ask you, “What greasy Mexican food did you eat for dinner? (Pardon the reference to Mexicans; no offense to Mexicans, please). What movie/YouTube video did you watch last night? How many days have you been sleep deprived before you had the dream or revelation? What (hallucinating) medications are you on? Are you sure you weren’t suffering from dehydration?”☺ Sadly, I never had the courage to ask those questions on my checklist. I just had them rolling and roving in my head while I listened passively to the account. The exception, of course, is when you’ve earned my trust as a person of unparalleled integrity, with or without titles. In that case, I’M ALL EARS listening to the dream or revelation the Lord has given you.

HERETICAL PRACTICES RESULTING FROM PNEUMATOLOGY WITHOUT SOUND CHRISTOLOGY

In the rituals for the cleansing and atonement for healed lepers in the Old Testament, Leviticus 14:10-18, the priest was to first apply the blood from the slain lamb (representing Jesus and His atoning blood) on the person to be cleansed and afterwards apply the oil (representing the Holy Spirit and His power) on the individual. The order was blood before the oil. In like manner, you receive Christ first, and then the Holy Spirit comes to empower you. You pursue Christ and the Holy Spirit anoints you to do Christ's mission. It has to be that order ALWAYS. Jesus Christ then the Holy Spirit for power—a different order devalues Christ and makes whatever “spirit” that fills and empowers you open to question.

In my opinion, by far the worst error in Pentecostalism stems from pneumatology without deep and intense Christology, that is, involvement and engagement with the Spirit without prior involvement and engagement with Jesus. The Holy Spirit is the source of our Christian strength and power. Jesus Christ is our Savior who grafted us into God and also our model for character. Jesus is the Harbinger of the Holy Spirit, if I may use that word. You cannot covet God's power without the character of Jesus. If you do, that's similar to what resulted in the fall of Lucifer. Lucifer, in his exalted pride, had sought to usurp God's position, saying, *“I will be like the Most High”* (Isa. 28:12-17, esp. v.14b, also Ezek. 28:13-19) without desiring the nature and character of God, such as, love, mercy, goodness, kindness. Power without love is tyranny; absolute power without sacrificial love is Satanic hell.

It's not a bad ambition to want to be like the Most High if it is seeking to be more in the nature and character of God, Who is described as, *“God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation,”* (2 Cor. 1:3, 4). Without doubt, Lucifer wanted none of God's attributes of love and compassion, just the position of power. Correct me if I am wrong, today, seeking God's power at all costs without first seeking the nature and character of Christ, such as, humility, genuine love, compassion, “not My will but Yours” kind of surrender to God's will in any situation, etc. is the ultimate source of weakness and downfall of many Pentecostal ministers. They want power and positions of power. Power corrupts in politics as well as in religion.

It is the quest for supernatural manifestations by fiat or willy-nilly that often leads many to resort to all kinds of manipulations to sustain people's demand for miracles.

The Holy Spirit came or was sent by the Father and the Son, to enlighten us about Christ, and to talk about Christ, not the Holy Spirit. The more a person is filled with the Holy Spirit, the more revelation of Jesus the person has, and the more the person talks about Jesus, not the Holy Spirit. In the Nicene Creed, we have this portion on the Holy Spirit:

“I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets...”

Our early fathers had it in their legacy for us. I will let this abundance of scriptures speak about the error of pneumatology without a sound Christology, which to

me, is seeking power without the character of God. The result of this is heretical behavior in the name of God.

- Jesus said of the Holy Spirit’s ministry and mission, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear *them* now. However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own *authority*, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. **HE WILL GLORIFY ME, FOR HE WILL TAKE OF WHAT IS MINE AND DECLARE IT TO YOU. All things that the Father has are Mine. Therefore I said that HE WILL TAKE OF MINE AND DECLARE IT TO YOU**” (John 16:12-15, emphasis mine).
- “Behold, I send the Promise of My Father upon you; but tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high” (Luke 24:49).
- And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever (John 14:16).
- But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you (John 14:26).
- When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father—he will testify about me (John 15:26).
- But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).
- Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38).
- We are witnesses of these things [that is, the resurrection of Jesus], and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him (Acts 5:32, insert mine).

The Holy Spirit is the Christian’s Source of Power but Much More than Power—He is a Person Possessing all the Attributes of God and Godhead (Matt. 28:19), such as Eternal (Heb. 9:14), Omniscience (1 Cor. 2:11).

There are many symbols of the Holy Spirit that are used to describe the Holy Spirit and His work, but these are just representations. Chief among them are water, wind, fire, dove, seal, breath, etc. It does not mean or suggest that the Holy Spirit is those symbols but are descriptive of His influence. For example, dove, symbolizing peace and gentleness (Matt. 3:16), fire (Matt. 3:11, Acts 2:3), symbolizing power, as in volcanic eruption, dynamism (as in “he’s on fire”), passion/enthusiasm, (as in “he’s full of energy”). Fire also symbolizes purification, as in purification or purifying of gold/silver by a smith at his work. *“He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver; He will purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, That they may offer to the Lord An offering in righteousness”* (Malachi 3:3). Wind is another common symbol, (John 3:8; Acts 2:2), symbolizing power and motion, and water (John 3:5; 7:37-39). Water signifies birth, washing, renewal, refreshing, etc. We read, *“On the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, ‘If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’ But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified”* (John 7:37-39).

The Holy Spirit is not fire, wind, water, seal, dove, etc., but these symbols that Bible writers used are to describe Him or His ministry. The significant theme in all of these—water, wind, fire, is power, force, motion, or strength. While these are some of the symbols of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit is NOT these inanimate and lifeless phenomena. The Holy Spirit is a Being, a Person, and the Third Person of the Trinity. Fire, wind and water do not have a will or emotion, but the Holy Spirit does have will (1 Cor. 12:11), has life (Rom. 8:2) and emotion (Eph. 4:30). As “a Person,” the “personality” of the Holy Spirit is portrayed by His activities, such as speech (1Tim. 4: 1; Acts 8:29; 10:19, 20; 13:1-4), teaching (John 14:26), guidance (John 16:12, 13), bearing witness (John 15:26, 27), intercession (Rom 8:26), forbidding (Acts 16-7), and permitting (Acts 16:10). Therefore, to seek the Holy Spirit for His power alone without continually falling in love with Him as a Person is like seeking and embracing a gift while ignoring and despising the Giver of the gift.

THE SLIPPERY SLOPE OF TWEAKING THE TRUTH *“A Little Leaven Leavens the Whole Lump,” (Galatians 5:9)*

1 in 60 Rule or The Power of 1 Degree

Have you heard of “1 in 60 rule” or “The Power of One-degree”? To illustrate a moral lesson from math about remaining focused without deviating from the good path of parental guidance, I once told my middle school students to draw a straight-line A-B. Thereafter, using a protractor from their geometry math set, they were to draw another line from point A to C with a deviation of one degree from the first line. The two lines at point A are one degree apart and barely noticeable. They then extended the two lines to 6 inches. At six inches, the two lines, AB and AC, were still like one line, side by side. At two feet, however, it was becoming a little pronounced, though not seriously obvious, that the two lines were going their separate ways. I told them if we had the space to draw the two lines, AB and AC, to five or ten miles they might both end up in different zip codes. I said that’s how it was with a little distraction or deviation from a moral path. You don’t notice anything at the beginning, but give it time, and you’d be surprised what a little compromise could do.

Experts in air navigation have a rule of thumb known as the 1 in 60 rule. It states that for every 1 degree a plane veers off its course, it misses its target destination by 1 mile for every 60 miles it flies. This means that the further the plane travels, the further it is from its destination. Mathematically, if you’re off course by just one degree, after one foot, you’ll miss your target by 0.2 inches. After 100 yards, you’ll be off by 5.2 feet—not huge, but noticeable. After a mile, you’ll be off by 92.2 feet. One degree is starting to make a difference. If you veer off course by 1 degree flying around the equator, you’ll land almost 500 miles off target!

The point here is that small actions, accumulated over a very long time make a huge difference. If a child veers off the course his parents have taught him, you might not notice anything in two weeks. Give it time, three or five years, and then you’ll notice the child is not the same person anymore. In like manner, if a church leader veers off the mainline road in doctrines and practices, it might not be noticeable in six months with twenty members. At the fifth year with a membership of two thousand, the difference will be staggering.

How Innocuous Falsehood Often Poisons the Whole Batch

Back in the day as a new Christian in my early twenties, during a Bible study on “sound doctrines” (1 Tim. 1:10; 2 Tim. 4:3; Tit. 1:9; 2:1), this question was part of the study/discussion questions: **What quantity or amount of a poisonous substance do you have to add to a pot of soup to make it deathly and dangerous for consumption?** Is it an amount equal to the soup or just a pinch or

even a trace of the deadly material? It was obvious to us, as young adults, and scary too, that it wasn't the quantity but the potency that mattered, that a little could be extremely deadly, for, "*a little leaven leavens the whole lump*," as the Scriptures say. When it comes to doctrines, we are all imperfect students of the Eternal; we are all prone to err, in some points (see Thinking Aloud—2). "*For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known*" (1 Cor. 13:12). One of the pillars of the Jerusalem church declared, "For we all stumble in many things," (Jam. 3:2a). James warned, "*Dear brothers and sisters, not many of you should become teachers in the church, for we who teach will be judged more strictly. INDEED, WE ALL MAKE MANY MISTAKES.*" (Jam. 3:1, 2a; NLT, uppercase mine). However, there are some poisons that don't have to touch your tongue, because even a sniff or whiff can send you to an early grave. An initial little deviation snowballs into something else. Yes, there are deviations from mainline truth that are plainly satanic, "Aaronic" or "Jeroboamish". I'll explain.

"Aaronic" and "Jeroboamish" Poisons

Aaron didn't break ALL the Ten Commandments, he broke #2: "*You shall not make for yourself a carved image—any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth*" (Exo. 20:4). Aaron had the nerve to tell the people that his actions were fulfilling Commandment 1. This was how Aaron made the connection between his carved image of a calf and the God who had delivered Israel. We read, "*And he [Aaron] received the gold from their hand, and he fashioned it with an engraving tool, and made a molded calf. Then they [the leaders] said, 'This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!'*" (Exo. 32:4). When the leaders declared, "**This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!**" they connected their actions to obeying Commandment 1, which categorically stated, "*I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. 'You shall have no other gods before Me'*" (Exo. 20:2, 3).

As for Jeroboam, the first king of the divided Israel, he replicated sacred rituals, offices, duties, practices and persons in the religious and political center in Jerusalem. Jeroboam committed the evils out of self-preservation and fear of losing his membership, sorry, I meant to say, the Northern Israelites, "*And Jeroboam said in his heart, 'Now the kingdom may return to the house of David: If these people go up to offer sacrifices in the house of the Lord at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will turn back to their lord, Rehoboam king of Judah, and they will kill me and go back to Rehoboam king of Judah'*" (1 Kings 12:26, 27). In an eerie manner, it sounds like, "If these people go to other churches, I will lose my membership", doesn't it?

We read again, 1 Kings 12:28-33,

Therefore the king asked advice, made two calves of gold, and said to the people, "It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, O Israel, which brought you up from the land of Egypt!" And he set up one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan. Now this thing became a sin, for the people went to worship before the one as far as Dan. He made shrines on the high places, and made priests from every class of people, who were not of the sons of Levi. Jeroboam ordained a feast on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, like the feast that was in Judah, and offered sacrifices on the altar. So he did at Bethel, sacrificing to the calves that he had made. And at Bethel he installed the priests of the high places which he had made. So he made offerings on the altar which he had made at Bethel on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, in the month which he had devised in his own heart. And he ordained a feast for the children of Israel, and offered sacrifices on the altar and burned incense.

Jeroboam made his idolatrous proposal appear like he was doing the people a favor for their convenience. His speech and action sounded more like what a concerned shepherd of God's people would say and do. He sold the idea by saying to the people, "*It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem.*" Let me relieve you of that burden.

In context, neither Aaron nor Jeroboam used a large amount of poisonous material in "the pot of soup" they served the people. It was not wholesale heresy, just tweaking and reformatting things here and there while keeping the appearance of remaining true to "the same old practices." Like Aaron had declared, Jeroboam also said to the people, hundreds of years later, "*Here are your gods, O Israel, which brought you up from the land of Egypt!*" (v. 28). This was reminiscent indeed of Exodus 32. They didn't lure the people from the God who had brought them up from Egyptian slavery; they just MISREPRESENTED this God with molded images they had copied from Egypt. They used the same nomenclature and historical events of Yahweh for a different god. They moved just "one degree" away from the normal course, but the move eventually led to a downward spiral.

It's been said that you need 1000 lies to cover up one single lie. The same can be said of the Ten Commandments. To their dismay, Aaron, Jeroboam, and King David regretfully discovered that if you broke one commandment and didn't come clean in repentance you would end up breaking all ten in your attempt to justify, rationalize or escape the web of the one law you'd broken. Apostle James would later say, "*For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all*" (James 2:10).

Today, at the altar of "miracles, signs and wonders," materialism, the spirit of the age, falsehood, power broking, a sex goddess, etc. many preachers have recast

Aaron's and king Jeroboam's speeches this way: "Here is your Christ, O Christians, who saved you from your sins." Thereafter, they then offer the people a false Christ and false religion.

Through the mouth of prophet Hosea, God had said of the people of old,
"My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge" (Hos. 4:6a).

Casting the same thought in the affirmative, Jesus said,
"And you shall know the Truth, and the Truth shall make you free... I AM the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 8:32; 14:6).

The apostle Paul said in the last or latter days, people, that is, deceivers, would call good evil and evil good.

But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away! For of this sort are those who creep into households and make captives of gullible women loaded down with sins, led away by various lusts, always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth...
But evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived (2 Timothy 3:1-7, 13; emphasis mine).

IN SUMMARY

All I am trying to say in this rigmarole on Pentecostalism is this: **don't throw away the baby with the bath water**. A skeptic may ask, "Is there a baby in the bathwater?" My answer is an emphatic "Yes!" Charlatans will not have the last word. Getting personal: **Something happens in my spirit and perspectives when I pray in an unknown language that does not happen when I don't. Yet, we may sleep in the same bed for years and you might not even notice this phenomenon, because it's between me and God**. The Pentecostal churches and many Pentecostal ministers and ministries have done great exploits and many good works for the Kingdom of God. However, many charlatans have given Pentecostalism a bad press with their unbridled excesses, moral laxity, ulterior motives, and manipulating people for personal gains. No one is to blame for this but the Pentecostals themselves. I applaud the social and secular media when they expose many dubious practices and questionable lifestyles of many leaders in the church. Like the new prophets of this age, the secular press and social media are

simply doing for the church what the people of God shamefully have chosen to tolerate or cover up.

EXHORTATION AND WARNING FROM THE APOSTLE PETER; 2 Peter 1:16-2:3

¹⁶ For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty. ¹⁷ For He received from God the Father honor and glory when such a voice came to Him from the Excellent Glory: “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” ¹⁸ And we heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain.

¹⁹ And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; ²⁰ knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, ²¹ for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke *as they were* moved by the Holy Spirit.

2 But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, *and* bring on themselves swift destruction. ² And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed. ³ By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words; for a long time their judgment has not been idle, and their destruction does not slumber.

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Complete with Critical Thinking Questions for Small Group Discussions

A NATION FULLY RIPE FOR SPIRITUAL INTROSPECTION:

**NIGERIA*, YOU ARE BRIMMING WITH
CHURCHES (of All Sizes and Shapes)—
HOW MANY ARE YOUR (Born Again)
CHRISTIANS WHO TRULY EMBODY &
REPRESENT CHRIST?**

**How Authentic Christian Faith Is Subtly and
Rapidly Becoming Endangered Because of the
Beliefs and Practices of Some Religious
and/or Church Founders in Nigeria Today**

Chaplain (Dr.) Michael O. Ojewale

(Ph.D. Biblical Counseling; Board Certified Clinical Chaplain; Storyteller)

THINKING ALOUD—2

**(For Campuses and the Community; Thinking Aloud—1, attached)
Examining Our Religious Beliefs & Preferences
through the Lens of “The Parable of the Circus
Elephant and the Three Blind Men”**

(If you have never read or heard “the parable of the circus elephant and the three blind men,” please, do a Google search and read it.)

***This could be true of other NATIONS as well; decide for yourself**

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Open Letter to Christian Students in Universities and Colleges in Nigeria—Thinking Aloud—1

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Dedicated to all outsiders who found enigmatic Jesus both enchanting and enthralling and would have hobnobbed with Him but had been put off by the religious professionals who claimed to represent Jesus but shared none of Jesus’ warm, non-discriminating, straightforward, and loving personality. I feel your frustrations. May you find Jesus, the Christ, without religious wrappings and entanglements. Please read John 3:16, 17 and 17:3 and Romans 5:8 and 6:23.

Preamble

Back in the 1990s, as a university chaplain, I published a book and asked a member of the congregation to write a comment for the back cover. He did not belong to the university community as a staffer. He had studied abroad, had a PhD and a well-paid position in the banking sector. He and his family could worship anywhere else in Lagos but they chose the chapel, for which I was happy and became their pastor and a friend of the family. All I wanted was for him to say how my ministry had been a blessing to his family. In addition to

It would be leave without pay; thankfully, God is our Source. **Thinking Aloud—2** became a bigger assignment than the one I had prayed for, for many years and had come to Nigeria to initiate. I rarely bleed for so long when I write but I began to, with every punch as I was typing. I wish I could stop, but I couldn't. My calling had taken over and I was powerless. It hurts even more, because I'm part and parcel of the system about which I speak so forcefully.

other comments, he wrote, "Reverend Ojewale preaches sound doctrines." Although his gesture was well-intended, I felt insulted and did not use that part of his endorsement. I asked myself: What qualifies him or gives him the right (a PhD in economics/banking?) to affirm or disaffirm my doctrines? I may be wrong or even self-deluded, but in my world it's comparable to a high school graduate telling a professor of nuclear physics that the professor was on point in his inaugural lecture.

Very often, I've heard something similar to that when fans talked about their pastors or favorite preachers. They said with excitement, "He preaches the Word!" [At the back of my head, I'm thinking: What is "the Word" he preaches when your favorite preacher in a TV telecast of his sermon, during his eloquent delivery and biblical exposition of a passage in Luke, had kept referring to the Gospel writer, Luke, as one of Jesus's Twelve Disciples? (true story.)] In most cases, this was the fan's way of saying the preacher/pastor was a skillful storyteller, at home with the microphone and a crowd, who had a way with words that are tantalizing, not boring, even entertaining, that had kept them mesmerized, regardless of substance, or lack thereof. (PS: For those who may not know: Luke was not one of the Twelve Disciples of Jesus. He was a physician, a historian-researcher, a companion of Apostle Paul on many of his missionary trips. He wrote a two-volume series—the Acts of the Apostles and the Gospel that bears his name, Luke.)

On another occasion, I once heard a renowned pastor, a leader of a flourishing Pentecostal assembly, gave an exhortation in a wedding ceremony. He read from Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians, chapter 5:21-33. At least 5 times he

read/quoted portions and declared that Jesus said “So-and-so” or Jesus was saying “So-and-so to us,” from the Ephesians’ epistle he had read. The first and second times I heard him; I had thought it was a slip of the tongue. However, when he kept driving home his point by invoking again and again that this was Jesus speaking, I blocked my ears to everything else and prayed he would just keep it short and sit down. I later spoke with the member who had invited me to the wedding that I couldn’t believe the pastor had continued to refer to Paul’s letter as the sayings of Jesus. That member told me she wasn’t aware of anything amiss in the sermon. (A clever way of avoiding any discussion on who had spoken/penned the words: Paul or Jesus.) She said she just knew that their pastor had preached the word of God from the Bible. Say what? Whatever happened to “*Study to shew thyself approved unto God*” and “*rightly dividing the word of truth*” (2 Tim. 2:15; KJV). I mused within myself if these pastors and their devotees had any idea how the New Testament, not to mention the whole Bible, was structured. If the pastor had prefaced his message with “God said,” or “the Word of God said” it wouldn’t have alarmed me; but to keep saying, “Jesus said” again and again was worrisome, to say the least. Even to a casual reader, the opening statement of the Epistle is the greeting, “*Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, To the saints who are in Ephesus, and faithful in Christ Jesus*” (Eph. 1:1).

Even if a seminary professor had written that comment, “Reverend Ojewale preaches sound doctrines,” I would question what right he had to assume that he (or we) had a monopoly right to sound body of doctrines? The question that provokes asking is: “Sound doctrines” according to who? Is it according to our brand, that is, according to the part of the elephant we touched, or a generic, middle-of-the-road version, if there’s one? Who among us, except the pseudo-intellectuals, could argue strongly that our knowledge and body of truth have not been tainted and filtered through the lens of our culture, formal and informal education or their lack thereof, personal story, and life experience?

WHO ARE THE CUSTODIANS OF “SOUND DOCTRINES”?

Epistemic humility is an intellectual virtue. It is grounded in the realization that our knowledge is always provisional and incomplete—and that it might require revision in the light of new evidence. Socratic wisdom, as well, is a sort of humility: it simply means being aware of how little one really knows, how uncertain one’s beliefs are, and how likely it is that many of them may turn out to be mistaken.

In the end, as epistemic humility (or, its counterpart, Socratic Wisdom) suggests, we are all like the proverbial three blind men who touched different parts of an elephant and came away with different descriptions of the same elephant. They were partially (and experientially) correct but totally misrepresented the elephant. Makes me wonder: What if God is infinitely bigger, larger, and greater than all our doctrines and theologies? What if (like the three blind men) we've also overblown the part of the Eternal Reality we touched and, therefore, inadvertently and unbeknownst to us, have been proclaiming a caricature and misrepresentation of the Eternal Reality based on our limited, human experience of the Eternal? What if such a possibility remotely exists? Can you handle that?

Without a doubt, each one of the three blind men had an authentic encounter with the elephant, but was any of the three correct in his report of the encounter of what an elephant truly was like? No! They presented a caricature of the elephant because they neither saw nor touched the whole animal. None of us ever sees the full picture of the Eternal Reality. Yet, each one of these blind men extrapolated his little experience to construct a bizarre story of the elephant. Could we also be guilty of doing the same? In science, you would be a fraudulent researcher if you collected a sample (or survey) of ten in a population of a million and based your conclusions and profile of the population on how the ten samples (or survey responders) had performed. (For clarification, in large populations, a minimum of ten percent is acceptable as credible, which, in this example is 100,000. 10 is in no way representative of a million.) On the other extreme, playing the devil's advocate: What if we've sincerely believed a lie, or an exaggerated teeny-weeny half-truth?

For me, if it all turned out that I'd believed a lie, that there's no hell, no heaven, no Judgment Day, no immortality and no God. Looking back at this "lie" I had believed if eventually it turned out to be a lie, it'd be a lie that had transformed my life. It would've been the "lie" that had motivated and empowered me to soar, to live a life of significance and meaning that added value to other lives and improved conditions around me. The "lie" would be the reason why I had been delivered from a life of addiction to destructive habits and endowed with serenity. Believing that my life was more than a mere product of human reproduction, that I was created in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26-28; 2:7), that God knew and chose me in my unborn phase (Jer. 1:5; Eph. 1:4) had brought meaning and purpose to my life. Living with the conviction that God loved me unconditionally and Jesus died for my salvation (John 3:16; Rom. 5:6-8) had been my greatest self-esteem booster. For all these, I'd believe the "lie" again and again, if I had the benefit of a million lifetimes.

1st DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Discuss epistemic (or epistemological) humility. How is it manifested or lacking, especially in the Nigerian Christian culture? How about “in you”?
2. How is it similar to, or different from Socratic Wisdom? (To Socrates, wisdom is a sort of recognition of your own ignorance, captured by the well-known statement: “I know only one thing—that I know nothing.”) Socrates never claimed to be wise as he was conscious of his own ignorance about higher matters; thus, he had a type of wisdom.
3. Discuss the helpfulness and limitation of such attitude in religious postulates. (I do sing the old-time religion chorus: “You cannot tell me God is dead... I talked with Him today.” Yet, I wonder: Is the Almighty God our breakfast buddy with whom we share newspaper pages that we “know with a knowing” as some TV preachers insinuate, or is God much more?)
4. Agree or disagree, discuss: “One major problem in the Nigerian church is that every born again or not born again Sunday school teacher, or anyone who owns a pocket-sized Bible concordance or commentary, believes he or she is an EXPERT in theology and the Bible, and knows how best to effectively run a church, and is convinced that any conversations with the established churches or church leaders is a waste of time, and disobedience to God, because of God’s calling and anointing on his/her life; therefore, the best thing is to start another church.” Discuss, buttress with stories.
5. Suggest possible solutions to (a) this know-it-all, “biblical expertise” syndrome, (b) prevalent “anointed and called by God” mentality, (c) inability or unwillingness to cooperate and work with others, and (d) perceiving “doing church” as a lucrative business venture.

The parable of the elephant and three blind men is also applicable and extremely helpful to our understanding of Biblical writings and their human authorship. For example, we know from Scriptures that Jesus is the essence of the Eternal Reality (please read John 1:1-18; 3:31; Col. 1:15-19), the Self-Existent-Creator with no beginnings, “the Image of the Invisible God”. Therefore, the Elephant in the parable is representative of Jesus, the Eternal Reality. The three blind men represent the patriarchs, prophets, priests, and anointed rulers of the Old Testament.

MOSES AND ELIJAH, AND OTHER GREAT STUDENTS OF THE ETERNAL WHO TOUCHED SOME PARTS OF THE ELEPHANT

Moses and Elijah were the two representatives of Old Testament heroes who appeared to Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt. 17). In Jewish tradition, since the Passover offering is reserved for the circumcised, Elijah visits each Passover Seder as well. Hence, the custom of Elijah's chair at a circumcision and Elijah's cup at a Seder. An empty chair is reserved for Elijah in every Jewish home during the yearly Jewish Passover Seder, because the Jews are still expecting him to show up and make the long-awaited announcement about the coming of the Messiah, reported by the last biblical prophet, Malachi (Mal. 4:5, 6; see also Matt. 17:10-13). Whilst Moses is read in the synagogues on Sabbaths, every Jewish family is on the lookout for Elijah as a guest in their homes during the yearly Passover celebration.

Discussing how Moses towered above all Old Testament characters, my colleague at work, Rabbi (Dr.) Susan Gulack, had compared Moses to that one exceptionally diligent student in college who took the most extensive class notes, sometimes, so ridiculous as to include the professor's jokes, coughs and laughter points in his notebook. This is the one student whose class notes you'd like to borrow to copy from, if you had missed one of your professor's classes.

Without any doubt, Moses was the best student, the Teacher's pet, and confidant of the Eternal One. God communicated His will to other prophets through dreams and visions, but God spoke face to face with Moses, (Exo. 33:11; Deut. 34:10; Num. 12:1-8). Yet, even this beloved student and favorite, when he made the

bold and audacious request, "*show me Your glory*" (v. 18) he was hidden "*in the cleft of the rock*" (v. 22) and shown only a passing glimpse of the back view of the Eternal (Exo. 33:12-23) because the finite could not comprehend the Infinite and no mortal could encircle the Immortal. While discussing the superiority of Jesus over Moses, in Hebrew 3:1-6, Moses was credited as "*faithful in all His [God's] house as a servant*" (vv. 2, 5) but Moses was neither the owner nor the builder of the house, JESUS CHRIST is (vv. 3, 6).

Moses, this foremost of Old Testament characters, -- like one of the three blind men -- had touched the miracle working, moral and religious law giving part of the Eternal Reality. But, when overblown out of proportion, law became a tool that enslaved, inadvertently making Moses the new slave master. Jesus, the Eternal Reality, spent a good deal of time, especially in the Sermon on the Mount, editing, reinterpreting, and dismantling unnecessary burdens that had paralyzed the Commandments so as to restore the law to its original intent. The apostle Paul wrote in Romans 7:12, "*Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good.*" The Law or Commandment was never the problem, the problem was over-blowing it, thus making the Law all there was, there is, and there ever to be, relating to the Eternal One.

While Moses could rightly say okay to stoning a woman caught in adultery, because Moses had touched the holiness aspect of God's wrath regarding sin, punishment and judgment, Moses's

partial knowledge made him present a caricature of the Eternal Reality. So, what did the Eternal Reality do? Without contradicting His faithful servant (because “*the wages of sin is death*”), Jesus found a way to spare and save the woman. For, “*The Son of Man did not come to kill but to save*” (Matt. 5-7; John 8:1-12; Luke. 19:10).

In like manner, in a patriarchal community, Moses could capitulate and excuse divorce for expediency’s sake. What happened centuries later? Jesus, the Eternal Reality, redirected attention back to God’s original blueprint for marriage (Matt. 19:3-10; Gen. 2:23-25) as the all-time norm.

Elijah the prophet was another giant in the line of “blind men” who had touched the Eternal Reality’s miracle working power and righteous anger over the sins of the nations and their rulers. Elijah, a prophet in a class of his own, understood God as “*a consuming fire,*” and he demonstrated it at the slightest opportunity. Therefore, Elijah could rightly call down fire from heaven to destroy his enemies (2 Kings 1), but when the disciples cited Elijah’s action as precedent and elevated him as a model, Jesus, the Eternal Reality, reprimanded and reminded them that that kind of spirit was an overblown description of His Eternal Nature and thereby a caricature of Truth (Luke 9:52-56; Deut. 4:24; Heb.

12:29). Throughout the scripture, fire was a recurring physical manifestation of God’s presence, but the Eternal One is much more than fire. Sadly, for Elijah and those who have touched and embraced the “*Consuming fire*” and “*God that answereth by fire*” nature of the Almighty, when overstretched and overblown out of proportion, it caricatures and devalues the Eternal into someone not more than a promoter of pyrotechnics and fireworks in general.

The One who could ask His Father for a legion of warring angels, if He had wanted to, in self-defense, to destroy His “enemies” (Matt. 27:53), did not. Rather, Jesus gladly took the insults and pain of rejection for which His followers had wanted to invoke the pyrotechnic spirit of Elijah. This same Elijah could pray down fire to consume his sacrifice on Mount Carmel, only for him to sink into the depths of depression and became a runaway fugitive the next moment (1 Kings 18 and 19).

The same thing could be said of Elisha, King David, Prophet Isaiah or Jeremiah, et al. who were among the best students who took good notes whenever they had an audience with the Eternal Reality. However, they all had partial understanding, and, in times of great trials, they often showed that they had the feet of clay, like the rest of us (Jam. 5:17).

2nd DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: Everything you've read above is based on one premise: **Jesus is the essence of the Eternal-Reality (John 1:1-18; 3:31; Col. 1:15-19), the Self-Existent Creator with no beginnings.**

- (1) Discuss why this piece makes sense and deserves attention if the author's postulate is correct about Jesus in relation to creation, Old Testament, and human history. Hint: recall C. S. Lewis's trilemma of 1 of 3 alternatives, "Lunatic, Liar, or Lord" or "Mad, Bad, or God," arguments for Jesus' bold claims to divinity.
- (2) Discuss how everything falls flat if Jesus is not the absolute truth that the author believes that the scripture makes Him to be (again, Lewis' trilemma).
- (3) What's your gut feeling as you tried to filter or examine your faith in the light of the parable and my "what if" questions? What if you've believed a lie?
- (4) Not many people have the ability to be a part of, or belong in, a system, and yet are able to step out of the system and take a critical, nonpartisan, unbiased examination of the system. If you could do that, would you describe the practices in your church as Christ-centered, Moses-centered, or laser-focused on Elijah (no offence to Moses or Elijah, please)? [Hint: If it is authoritative, gracious, and restorative, it's Christ-like; if it is authoritarian, ungracious -- meaning that it thrives on absolutes, and condemning, it's Moses-centered.]
- (5) Out of curiosity, compare any 365 daily devotional material imported into Nigeria from other parts of the world (including West African countries such as Ghana), to any yearly devotional material indigenous to a Nigerian church/denomination. You might notice a difference in brand of doctrines and theological inclinations that will make you ponder and wonder, "Who's on track? Who's getting off track?" **The devotionals are indicators of what God's flocks feed on daily.** "You are what you eat," is as true in spiritual realm as it is in the physical. French proverb, "Tell me what you eat and I'll tell you what you are."

GOD HAS ALWAYS USED IMPERFECT MESSENGERS (AND SYSTEMS, SUCH AS, FAMILY, CHURCH OR GOVERNMENT) TO ACHIEVE GOD'S PLANS

To be certain, we do not serve a two-faced God, who, on one hand, is a mean, angry, one-strike-you-are-out, rule-based, Old Testament Deity, and on the

other hand, a loving, forgiving, baby-kissing, party-going, friendly New Testament Deity. It is the face of the same Eternal Godhead that we see in both Old

and New Testaments, only that the characters of the interpreters of the Eternal Reality, that is, those blind men feeling the Elephant and reporting their findings, reported the One Story from their different angles, as they authentically perceived the Eternal.

Unfortunately, when some pastors study and sincerely pray, seeking answers, “What does the Bible say on this issue,” the journey they really embark on is a quest for, “What does Moses or Elijah say?” or, “How would Moses or Elijah understand and handle this?” or, “What did prophet Ezekiel say about that?” They go straight to these students and interpreters of the Eternal Reality, because it is easier, personally more gratifying, and authoritarian for church leaders to set up Moses, Elijah, or King Solomon as their role model than making Jesus Christ and Christ’s life of simplicity, humility, and sacrificial spirit, their Model for life and ministry.

Due to the bent of their hearts, what these pastors eventually unearth from their diligent study of the Bible is usually what

Moses had penned. They fail to consult, first and foremost, the Mind and Spirit of the Eternal Reality Himself, and to have the boldness to filter any suggestions from the best students through the eyes, heart, hand and mind of the Master. This posture often leads to findings of a supposed Biblical answer (or position on an issue) but a gross misrepresentation of the Eternal-Reality.

Rather, the initial and ultimate questions should have been: How would Jesus, the Eternal Reality, handle this? What line of action would portray the Spirit and intent of Jesus, the Eternal Reality who is the true representation of the Eternal Godhead? Who is the model, and in whose spirit is this line of action we are about to take best portrayed in scriptures -- Moses, Elijah, or Jesus -- and whose follower (or disciple) will that kind of direction make us out to be -- Moses, Elijah, or Jesus? (Col. 1:15-20; Philipp. 2:5-11; Acts 2:36; Heb. 7:22; 12:24). For me, without any controversy, I cast my vote for Jesus, anytime, any day, and He remains my Model for life and ministry.

MUTUAL RESPECT VERSUS BITTER COMPETITION

Back to Moses and Elijah, these two prominent characters of the OT. They lived in different eras, hundreds of years between. They both appeared to Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration, representing the culmination and fulfillment of the Law and Prophets in Jesus. Imagine with me, for a moment, a conversation between these two, trying to tear each other apart, rather than working together as partners and co-laborers.

Moses to Elijah: Elijah, you got it wrong. All you need is a rod. See; look at

my rod. Where is your rod? I stretched my rod over the mighty Red Sea and it parted. I struck the Rock with it and it brought forth water for the people of God. Again, you should know that God’s “pillar of fire” (Exo. 13:21) was for the Israelites’ protection and guidance by night as we traveled through the wilderness after we had left Egypt. Sometimes, God’s fire was to show that our offering had been accepted by God (Lev. 9:24), or for God’s judgment (Lev. 10:1-3; Num. 11:1-3), but you kept calling down fire on innocent soldiers

who were simply carrying out their king's command. I fell on my face and cried out to God for mercy when God's fire fell on people in judgment. You wouldn't do that. Calling down fire willy-nilly is not all there is to being a servant of God.

Elijah to Moses: Moses, I hate to tell you this, but this thing is not about a rod. All I needed to do was to speak the word. You never got that part right. You didn't know there was more power in your mouth than your rod. May I remind you that in the beginning, God spoke, "*Let there be...*" and there was: the created world came into being (Gen. 1:3-25; John 1:1-3; Heb. 11:3). Even a Gentile, the Roman centurion knew the power of the spoken word when he told Jesus, "*Only speak a word, and my servant will be healed,*" (Matt. 8:8, 9). I stood before the raging king Ahab and declared, "*As the Lord God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, EXCEPT AT MY WORD,*" (1

Kgs. 17:1; emphasis mine). You see, that's all I needed to do: speak the word. By the way, Moses, have you forgotten that the reason you were forbidden from entering the Promised Land was because you "*raised your hand and struck the rock twice*" (Num. 20:11) when you had been clearly instructed to "*speak to the rock before their eyes, that it may yield its water*"? (v.8). You didn't follow the instruction. You were earlier told to "*strike the rock, and water will come out of it*" (Exo. 17:6). You thought everything was about a rod. You imagined the Almighty was a one-way track, who worked only one way. If only you had realized that there was more power in the spoken word than your rod.

Ridiculous, wouldn't you say? If you could imagine that scenario in a million ways, that's how we are, today. Pathetic, like two preteens showing off their toys and trying to outdo each other rather than sharing and playing together with each other's toys.

HOW ABOUT SOUND DOCTRINES?

Back to my opening story about endorsement for my book, I hear a question that may be on the floor loud and clear. The question is, "Hellooo, are you saying there's nothing like sound doctrines, or there's no body of sound doctrines that the Body of Christ signs on and agrees to?" No, I am not saying or implying anything like that.

To begin with, the apostles taught and emphasized sound doctrines. They warned against the errors and shipwreck of faith for departing from sound doctrines, and they advocated the need to stand up and defend it (Acts 2:42; Rom. 6:17; 16:17; 1 Tim. 1:10; 2 Tim. 4:3; Tit.

1:9; 2:1; Jude 1:3). We read that "*All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for DOCTRINE, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work,*" (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

The problem is not about what constitute doctrines or sound doctrines -- the scripture is clear and replete with that. The problem resides with the students and interpreters of the scripture -- aka, the distant cousins of the three blind men -- who cannot but bring their biases and preferences, denominational traditions and age-old practices, cultural filters and

personal stories to endorse or otherwise reject any particular doctrine or scriptural postulate.

At different eras and periods of history, church leaders from different parts of the world had convened meetings to formulate a statement of orthodox faith, Creed and confession that's agreeable to all. Such historic church councils, as in Acts 15, and others have given birth to collective pillars of faith statements. Ecumenical and historic Christian creeds include the Apostles' Creed, the Creed of Nicaea, the Nicene Creed, the Constantinopolitan Creed, the Chalcedonian Creed, Greek and Roman creeds, Old Catholic Union creeds, Evangelical creeds and Modern Protestant creeds.

A denomination's or church's body of doctrines gives the group its unique identity or code of conduct. We often talk about the doctrines of, or what Baptists, Anglicans, Reformed Churches, Christ Apostolic Churches or Foursquare Gospel Churches, etc. in a particular region believe. For these groups, their set of beliefs or doctrines becomes their shared identity.

The apostle Paul urged unity of faith. *"There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all,"* (Eph. 4:4-6). Both the power of unity and the devastating effects of disunity were displayed in the rise and fall of the Tower of Babel. The ambitious human project of the Tower of Babel was discontinued because of disunity after God had confused their language with consequent inability to further communicate with one another (Gen. 11:1-9). United, they built together; divided, they abandoned the project and dispersed.

If the Body of Christ, His Church, ever needed a miracle, it would be the miraculous answer to Jesus' repeated request to His Father in His High Priestly prayer, *"That they may be one as We are"* (John 17:11, 21, 23). In other words, that we may be able to pray together, act together, and speak with one voice on issues spiritual and political, locally and globally.

MORE IMPACTFUL SAINTS, LESS OF OUTWARD SHOWS. COULD LESS INDEED BE MORE?

In my other leaflet, Thinking Aloud—1, (Open Letter to Christian Students), I advocated asking questions and especially, asking the RIGHT (and hard) questions. The problem in the parable, as I see it, was that the three blind men did not ask the right question. They asked each other: "What was the elephant like?" So, the one who had touched and fondled with the ear of the elephant and even wrapped the elephant's ear around

his head said, and vigorously argued, that the elephant was flat and flexible like the mat he slept on. The one who had felt the body of the elephant then insisted vehemently that his colleague was out of his mind because the elephant was just like a wall, only hairy. What if they had asked each other: "What part of the elephant did you touch? I didn't feel or sense your presence near me while we fondled with the elephant, so, you must

have touched a different part. Please tell me your story with the elephant and I will also share my experience with the elephant as well.” If that had been their approach and line of question, each would have benefited from the other man’s experience and their world and friendship would have been richer.

In the past two months, (Dec. 2021-Jan. 2022), I traveled back and forth in the western parts of Nigeria. Everywhere I turned I saw different churches and denominations of all sizes at every street corner. On the first Sunday of 2022, at about a few minutes after 10am, we stood in a street looking for a church address. I kid you not, I could hear church music and prayers from about six different places, possibly more, but that was all my ears could filter out. Needless to say that we peeped into the church address that had brought us to the street, but eventually worshipped in a different church on the same street, in an adjacent house that shared a wall with the other church (God is my witness, I lie not), because that one had a better cooling system. The best part was that once we were inside the church auditorium, prompted by the skill of the instrumentalists and the blessing of well-positioned speaker systems, we made enough *“joyful noise unto the Lord”* (Psa. 100:1) that made us oblivious to everything else. A power outage, which happened, was not a problem. Standby generators came to the rescue. Furthermore, the noise from the church’s generator and the humming sounds from other generators in the vicinity, drowned out any distracting prayers and songs from other churches, making it as if those holy hours that first Sunday were exclusively designed for just us and God.

Monday morning came and I found myself in malls, offices, and stores to transact business. I could not but ask myself: Where do all the good Christian people who filled the churches and cathedrals, sang and danced, work? If they do work in those offices and stores, yours truly could not see or feel any Christian impact. This made me begin to wonder that, maybe, just maybe, if we’d been asking the RIGHT QUESTIONS, we might have less denominations and churches but end up with greater number of impactful Christians in the community.

How do we measure success, that is, the indicators of true success? Is a large crowd, followership or membership size the sign of true success? Twitter and Facebook didn’t think so. If a large crowd and followership defined true success, then Twitter and Facebook committed a great disservice to society for ending and suspending the accounts of a one-term president of the US, who shall remain nameless in my book.

I wish we had such effective machinery in the church today to achieve what Twitter and Facebook did, to silence some mouths today. This might indeed facilitate what the apostle Paul wrote under the qualifications for elders in Titus 1:10, 11. From his tone and language, we would charge Paul for name-calling today. Paul wrote: *“For there are many insubordinate, both idle talkers and deceivers [that’s name-calling], especially those of the circumcision [referring to the legalists], WHOSE MOUTHS MUST BE STOPPED, who subvert households, TEACHING THINGS WHICH THEY OUGHT NOT, FOR THE SAKE OF DISHONEST GAIN,”* (insert and uppercase, mine). Unfortunately, this is

hard to enforce in our culture. As long as there are gullible souls, there will be ample supply of wolves in sheep's clothing preying on them.

I got a partial answer to my bewilderment two or three days after. It was not really a multitude of saints who had gathered in churches that first Sunday of the year. It was a mixed multitude. Some were there to worship, others to pilfer. A brother-in-law, a deacon in The Lord's Chosen Charismatic Revival Movement or, the Chosen, for short (no playing on words – that's the name of the church/denomination) had traveled with a group of the Chosen from the East to attend the annual convention of the Chosen in a camp in Lagos. He reported that his new mobile phone, which he had bought on December 31st, was stolen by someone in the camp of the Chosen who had gathered to worship and rededicate themselves to the Lord for the New Year. The Chosen church was started in 2002. Currently, barely 20 years after its inception, a fundraising is going on among the membership to buy a private jet for "the convenience of" the general overseer of the Chosen church. In a million lifetimes, I may still not understand how a church leader could own a private jet when the majority of the membership (the sheep fleeced to starvation and death) is living below poverty level, in rented ramshackle dilapidated buildings.

It reminds me of the favorite verse of an ex-con who had spent a greater part of his youth in prisons. He is doing well in society today and regularly volunteers in prisons. It is the verse that had led him to Christ, and it is the shortest verse in the Bible. The verse is, John 11:35, "*Jesus wept.*" His only way of admonishing the inmates in attendance during his visits through the verse is by asking: "Jesus is still weeping today, my question to you is: Is Jesus weeping over you today tears of joy because you have repented, or tears of sorrow because you have continued in your sinful ways? It's one or the other: Jesus is still weeping." Great question and maybe, great theology, too! If I understand a little grammar, *chosen* suggests exclusivity or inner circle, among other things. This then provokes the question: "Chosen by who, and chosen for what, and chosen to belong in whose inner circle?" Please find my brother-in-law's missing phone first, then I'd be happy to hear your answer.

(Ezekiel 34, God's indictment of Israel's unfaithful leaders, is a must-read for all shepherds of God's people).

In the end, it may be true that "less is more". To me, an unexamined faith or a blind religious belief system that's shielded from (or not subjected to) ongoing examination and questioning, is worse than Socrates' "unexamined life" statement.

SOCRATES AND "THE UNEXAMINED LIFE"

"The unexamined life is not worth living" is a famous dictum supposedly uttered by Socrates at his trial for impiety and corrupting youth, for which he was subsequently sentenced to death, as described in Plato's Apology. While I am not a student of Socrates, I sincerely believe that an unexamined faith --

the kind that's prevalent in today's culture, or faith that depends only on emotions than reasons, one that cannot survive scrutiny, is useless and not worth calling a faith. It's just a new form of enslavement clothed with religious activities and social engagements on Sundays, midweek, and other days of the week.

Socrates believed that living a life where you live under the rules of others, in a continuous routine without examining what you actually want out of it is not worth living. Hence Socrates' renowned statement "The unexamined life is not worth living". He knew that questioning life would lead to a stronger conception of life and reality. When he stated that "the unexamined life is not worth living", he truly meant that without questioning life, one would not be truly living. Ultimately, by living an examined life, we are giving ourselves an amazing gift. We receive a sense of freedom, clarity and thus, peace. Again, Socrates reiterates: "We must examine and understand the universe that dwells within [our] own soul."

I APPRECIATE ALL TRUE SHEPHERDS OF GOD'S PEOPLE

By the way, and this is one hundred and ten percent true, even if it is hard to believe: **I RESPECT PASTORS AND CHURCH LEADERS MORE THAN YOU COULD BELIEVE TO BE SO.** The real me, I'm scared to step into your shoes, or be asked to fill your role; I'll fail miserably. It won't be a mistake or failure of the head or heart – I've got those two checked right. It will be mistakes and/or failures of the legs, hands, feet, eyes, ears, [you got the message]. I'm thankful to God, who called me, knew my constitution, and has given me an assignment tailored for me. I'm a chaplain, a pastor and pastoral caregiver to all, chained to none, and subservient to none except to Jesus Christ. I am a storyteller, and a Christian educator. Like Gideon used the cover of the night to carry out the Lord's instruction (Jdg. 6:25-27), I also often hide behind the pen to do my sacred assignments. I pray God's abundant grace on all true shepherds who serve the Great Shepherd of our souls. Like many of you have, I have also touched a part of the Elephant. I hope I have not overblown my experience, thereby making a part the Whole. I have used this medium to share with you the part of the Elephant I touched. I will be all ears when you share your story with the Elephant. Hopefully, the sharing of our various experiences with the Eternal-Reality will together enrich each of our lives.

[PS: to fully understand who a chaplain is, what he does, and how a chaplain functions, please read chapters one and two of my book, **TEACH THEM, BOOK 2**].

PURE RELIGION AND TRUE CHRISTIANITY

On January 21, 2022, we paid the initial deposit for the printing of our books; *Teach Them*, 1 & 2. The printer who got the contract told me he was fasting. He belonged to an indigenous church/denomination in Nigeria that had their members fasting for the first 50 days of the New Year. I asked him if that was Christianity or Religion. He closed one eye, after a deep contemplative pause, he replied, “It is religion.” I asked why he thought so. He said, “We do it every year.” I didn’t want to burst his bubble; otherwise, I would have asked why he kept up with the practice if he knew enough to consider it a religious practice. I guessed he didn’t get the memo on Socrates’ questioning life.

The apostle Paul had something to say about such in chapter 2 of his epistle to the Colossians, because the Colossian Christians were deep in religious and self-denying practices that had “*an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh,*” (2:23).

If the printer had given me a different reply, my next question would have been for him to help me filter that practice through lens of the practices in the New Testament, or show me any New Testament precedent. In New Testament era, individual Christians fasted for several days, but the church or elders of the church rarely fasted, collectively, past a week. They fasted for specific needs, or missionary endeavors. Jesus fasted for 40 days to initiate His ministry. We never heard or read any such prolonged record of His fasting again. On the contrary, the

Pharisees and the disciples of John fasted religiously.

(By the way, an extra-biblical practice does not necessarily equate falsehood or unscriptural. It however prompts the question: Does it add to, or does it reduce, people’s burdens? Is it absolutely a New Testament essential?)

It is worth noting that it was in the context of religious fasting, Mark 2:18-22; Luke 5:33-39, that Jesus gave the double parable about incompatibility of mixing, or attempting to mix, the old and new dispensations. To make His point, Jesus used the common examples of His day. Patching an old garment with a new piece of cloth, or putting new wine in an old wine skin made things worse, not better. By this, Jesus had hinted that, although Christianity had its roots in Judaism and was an offshoot of it, it was nonetheless the New Covenant.

Prophet Jeremiah and the writer of Hebrews were so bold as to say that God set aside the Old Covenant before God established the New Covenant. Furthermore, that a new covenant became necessary, because God found fault with the Old Covenant (Heb. 8:7, 8) and God had to make it “obsolete” (v. 13). (Read Heb. 8:7-13; Jer. 31:31-34). Some would recognize Jesus’ double parable as warning against the dangers of any form of syncretism. Jesus said it wouldn’t work. New wine—Jesus’ wine—must be put in a new mindset. (Mark 2:18-22; Luke 5:33-39; 18:12. See

also pages 310-311 of *Teach Them*, Book 2).

I'm afraid Jesus' conclusion of the parable might be true of my people. Jesus concluded, "*And no one, having drunk old wine, immediately desires new; for he says, 'The old is better,'*" (Luke 5:39). That is, he's so used to the old that he has

no desire for any new experience, because the familiar is good enough. To all of you out there engrossed in religion saying, "*The old is better,*" I have one question for you: From what exactly did Jesus' death and resurrection achieve to set you free, and into what kind of life does His sacrifice and Spirit liberate you? Believe me, the old is not better.

BIBLICAL FASTING

To begin with, biblical fasting accompanied by increased prayers and spirit of generosity, serves and achieves many tremendous purposes. All the great leaders of the Bible fasted. Moses, Elijah, King David, Daniel, Ezra, Jesus, the apostles and elders of the early church, et al. fasted. They fasted not as an end in itself, but as a means of focusing mind and body on God and spiritual reasons, such as, (1) seeking God's guidance and help when they found themselves in a tight corner in spiritual warfare (2 Chron. 20:3, 4), (2) to humble themselves, to express contrition and repentance (1 Sam. 7:6; 1 Kgs. 21:27-29; Jonah 3:5-10), (3) to earnestly seek God's strength and God's will and to dedicate themselves to, and submit to God's purpose (Matt. 4:1-11; Acts 9:9, 13:1-3), (4) in humility and concern, to intercede for the work and glory of God, and the people of God (Neh. 1:3-7; Dan. 9 & 10), (5) to gain mastery over the appetites of the flesh and gain victory in temptations (1 Cor. 9:27), (6) like prophetess Anna, to express love and devotion to God (Luke 2:36, 37), and many more.

I believe in fasting. I had personally fasted for many weeks, especially when I was praying desperately for the healing of my late wife. I knew I wasn't trying to

bribe God, or twist God's hand by fasting. We wanted God's best. We knew God was for us, in our corner, and not against us. Every day I reminded myself that God loved us both unconditionally—fasting or not fasting, and "Jesus paid it all" to make us God's children, "*heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ,*" (Rom. 8:17). She eventually passed on to glory. Fasting was a spiritual discipline for us to grab hold of God and hear God clearer; it was not an add-on to obtain additional favor. In Christ, God's unconditional favor, grace, and mercy have been lavished on us.

I stand to be corrected. In my opinion—I should actually say, from my understanding of the spirit, intent and content of the New Testament, the practice of religious fasting in Nigerian churches today SUBTLY MINIMIZES "tetelestai," "It is finished" (Jn. 19:30), which Jesus uttered with His last breath on the cross; it TAKES AWAY from the deep theological insight of the old church hymn, "Jesus paid it all"; and it's a NEGATION of "For by grace you have been saved... not of

works” (Eph. 2:8, 9), which was the core of the revelation of the gospel to the apostle Paul.

To begin with, we must keep in mind that GRACE, unmerited favor from an inherently good and loving Father-God, is the singular distinctive feature that differentiates Christianity from myriads of other world religions. Take away grace from the church’s consciousness and we are back at the mercy of Moses.

To me, long religious fasting to curry God’s favor—please tell me what it is for, if it is not for that—signals an insufficient or

inadequate Jesus, which necessitates a “Jesus Plus XYZ” theological construct. Inadvertently, spiritual victories are directly attributed to the season of fasting and peripherally credited to an all-season Jesus. Some may argue that this kind of fasting is not a form of “work” and does not hurt or erode the concept of “grace” or “free gift of God” (Rom. 6:23b), but serves as a necessary complement (or supplement—*help me Jesus!*) to “the finished work of Christ”. Again, yours truly stands to be corrected. Read Zech. 4:6b; Lam. 3:22, 23; Eph. 2:8, 9; Rom. 4:5; Heb. 9:12, 26.

I AM A SOUL IN DESPERATE SEARCH FOR RELEVANCE

I’m afraid one of my greatest fears might be happening. I don’t want to lose relevance, or be out of touch, but I don’t see where I fit in today. I’m old school. In the good old days, if you saw a picture or photograph at the entrance of the church, it was the picture or photograph of Jesus. It is a different story today, which makes me want to ask: Whose church is it? I felt lost when on social media platforms they asked me to write apostolic, prophetic, declarative prayers. All I could post were scripturally infused prayers and prayer items, ending in the name of Jesus. I couldn’t even say those prophetic, apostolic prayers on the social media platforms.

Bless my Sunday school teachers in Baptist churches in those days. Back then, they taught us the priesthood of every believer, that we all had equal

access to the Throne of Grace, that we didn’t need another mediator, go-between, in-between, or intermediary other than Jesus. I have spent my entire life teaching the same, “*Christ in you, the hope of glory... [you are] complete in Him,*” (Col. 1:27; 2:10). I couldn’t say those prophetic prayers, because I didn’t need any other savior or deliverer, or another Jesus in my life. I also couldn’t, with clear conscience, write such prayers, or pose to be in any way above anyone else. My office or assignment in the Kingdom may elevate me, but it gives me no special privilege. We have equal access to Jesus’ name, redemption privileges, and the Holy Spirit.

For certain, God has favorites. In Christ, WE ARE ALL GOD’S FAVORITES. If I have stepped on some toes, please forgive me. It is just that Jesus is enough

for me. I don't intend to be Jesus to anyone, and I don't accept anyone posing as Jesus to me. An old Baptist preacher said the floor is flat at the foot of the cross; no sinner stands on an elevated platform. Regarding our spiritual leaders, we have two extremes for which we need a middle position. On one extreme is to deify our spiritual leaders; the other extreme is to defy them. The middle ground is respect, honor, not worship, and mutual submission (Eph. 5:21). Unfortunately, while defiance isn't appropriate, the Nigerian church has moved to the extreme of deification of the leaders. Our spiritual leaders were always regarded as "men of God," but now some ultra-spiritual men pose as "gods of men."

Nigerians are generally very respectful of the elderly and leaders, but much more so, of religious leaders. Unfortunately, many spiritual leaders take undue advantage of this. I remember back then as a university chaplain, University of Lagos, Akoka, if some professors—I mean academic professors—shook my hand after service, they felt so honored and blessed some might not want to wash the hands, if not for reasons of hygiene. Some would send me a note afterwards, to show how "heavenly" or "transformative" that was for them. Not to mention bowing, kneeling, and curtsying—simply because I was their pastor. I tried my best to make them know we were all the same, flesh and blood, saved by grace, redeemed and called, infused by the Holy Spirit to be who God wanted us to be (Gal. 2:20; 2 Cor. 4:7). When I had Bell's palsy—a paralysis of the face, from damage to the seventh cranial nerve—I counted it a gift because it helped to buttress my point, that the members and spiritual leaders were

mortals, flesh and blood. (The Bell's palsy probably happened in late 1995 or early 1996). I didn't know how many physical therapists we had in the congregation until that happened. This is again, one more "Thank you" note to all of you, physicians, professors and nurses that worked on me in clinics, in my house, and your offices. You lavished your time, skill, and equipment on me for my quick recovery. THANK YOU. I appreciate you all.

Back in the day, the Gospel message was a simple story: "[Once upon a time,] *God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life,*" (John 3:16). Now it is one-liner prayer, almost formulaic. The Man of God [uppercase intentional], the Man of God bellows, "My apostolic, prophetic declaration over your life in the year 2022 is that all your enemies, and your destiny blockers, will perish in the River Nile." Should I say, "Amen"? Wait a minute, you lost me there! Which enemy or enemies? My number one enemy and destiny blocker was defeated 2000 years ago when Jesus died on the cross and declared, "*It is finished,*" (John 19:30). Since I gained an understanding of that, in Easter 1972, my story has been, I'M FREE INDEED. "*Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed,*" (Jn. 8:36). As for other enemies, the Master commands, "*Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you... that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good,*" (Matt. 5:44, 45). It's been said that what you see in your mind, think about, or focus on is what expands and becomes your reality. I'm afraid, my people focus on enemies; therefore, enemies multiply for them.

THE RISE AND INFLUENCE OF PENTECOSTALISM IN NIGERIA

Pentecostalism grew rapidly in Nigeria in the seventies, eighties, and the nineties (by the way, I am not a church historian; I am a deep thinker—more reflective than spontaneous, and storyteller) partly in response to the so-called dead orthodox churches. By that, they were referring to the mainline denominations, notably, Roman Catholic, Anglican (or Episcopal), Methodist, Baptist, etc. The result, as many Christian observers of my age group can testify to, was the enlivening of those dead orthodox churches. The so-called “dead” churches became more receptive to charismatic ideas, especially openness in worship styles, increased awareness of the ministry of the Holy Spirit in every believer. The “dead” churches embraced contemporary and cultural songs/music styles in their services, members became more generous in their giving, the order of worship featured spontaneous and extemporaneous prayers, and evangelistic and church planting programs received a boost.

I clearly remember—because I was part of the so-called rebellious and un-Baptistic youths—that the General Secretary, the topmost clergy/office holder of the Nigerian Baptist Convention, was posted to a prominent flag bearer Baptist church in Ibadan in the 1970s for the purpose of quelling and suppressing the influence and upsurge of “tongue speaking youth” in the congregation. The mission was to expel anyone associated with such an un-Baptistic idea. What did he find in the church? He found that the ushers, active members, faithful tithe-payers, choir leader and talented choir members, those performing major functions that had

given the church its prominence in the denomination and the opinion leaders and professionals in the community were the very core of the people he had been assigned to get rid of in the congregation. The success or failure of the mission is in the history book of the Oritamefa Baptist Church, Ibadan.

Unfortunately, the downside was that Pentecostalism became a free-for-all, boundless enterprise of anything goes, no-holds-barred playing field, branching into all shapes and formless expressions. Many new converts who had touched the “elephant” came away believing they had received the anointing and calling of a prophet, deliverer, and church planter. Again, I may be wrong, because I am not a church historian; just a keen observer, a deep thinker, a saved soul, and one with a Spirit-sanctified mind.

On January 16, third Sunday of 2022, we worshiped in another church close to where we were staying. The church/denomination was yet to start their 21 days of fasting in the New Year. They would begin that week. To encourage attendance for congregate prayers after daily fasting, the bishop didn't disappoint me. He offered one of the in-things in Pentecostal circles: “impartation.” As an incentive, he said, “There will be impartation; get ready to go to another level”. I am not trying to debunk impartation, because it is scriptural (Num. 11:24, 25; Rom. 1:11, 12; 2 Tim. 1:6, 7), only that it's become one of the overblown parts of the “elephant,” resulting thereby in a caricature of the Eternal.

If I could become a successful surgeon overnight by having the most reputable surgeon in the world lay his hands on me and thereby transferring [imparting] into me all the knowledge he had acquired from the years he spent in medical school and the skills he perfected from his years of practice, then 80 percent of those impartations in Pentecostal church events would make sense. To me, it is one of the cheapest ways to maintain and perpetuate a lazy, fix-me, do-it-for-me crowd of churchgoers. One of my callings in the

Kingdom is that of Body building, or disciple making. To build, train, develop, empower, endorse, and affirm other Christians, teaching, mentoring and (role) modeling are my all-time approach (1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1; 1 Thess. 1:6; Heb. 13:7; Philipp. 4:8-13, esp. v. 9); impartation is reserved for only a few, on special occasions. The surest way to “impart” (or impact) another is through relationship, tender supervision, and honest feedback.

WHY IS RELIGION MORE APPEALING THAN THE LIBERATING LIFE OF JESUS?

Before I share my thoughts, let me remind you of who I am, or, more appropriately, what I self-profess to be. I am a Christian educator, storyteller, and academic; I hold what some call a terminal degree. (I wish adding that I am an ordained clergyman would lend more credibility, but you and I know better, in the Nigerian context). However, putting those three together—educator, storyteller, and academic—should introduce you to someone who is impartial, stands for truth or facts, plays no favorites, and is answerable to his conscience and the Highest Authority only.

I said all that for this—no offense to Pastor W. F. Kumuyi or the Deeper Life Ministry—no offense, please. I cite the group only to make my point about religion. The case in point is **RELIGION** and its unexplainable grip on people, not Deeper Life or Pastor W.F. Kumuyi.¹³

From the rapid growth of the ministry from the mid-70s, and how it captivated the youths and college educated young persons, I have asked myself one question, again and again, why? I attended a few retreats and Bible studies of the Deeper Life in the late 70s. I kept my friendship with my colleagues and coworkers who dove in all the way, even if they considered me “lesser than” in holiness. This was a movement that had rules against everything a young man or woman craved for. No earrings or jewelries, no makeup, even on your wedding day, your trousers must be of certain length, acceptable ladies’ dresses were gowns touching ankles, turtle necks, long sleeves, no T-shirts, music was restricted to certain hymns accompanied by organ alone, radios only, no watching the TV (TV was tagged “the devil’s box”), no fancy house, car, shoes, belts, or coat jackets; no, no, no to any kind of

¹³ I’ve heard from many sources that Pastor Kumuyi had made an about-turn and publicly declared that he was wrong in his early rule-based righteousness and other off course

doctrines in his zeal for the Lord. We are all a work in progress. My emphasis and understanding are different today than they were a decade or two decades ago.

worldly or social enjoyment. Yet, the crowds of young people and hordes of holiness seeking, heaven-minded adults flocked to the group.

After a deep reflection, this was what I came up with, and I felt sorry for Jesus—yes, I did. I might be wrong, but I came up with the idea that if you could make the rules of religion, or of belongingness, more stringent, more limiting, if you could make rules that enslave than liberate, even rules bordering on cultic traits, you would get the crowds. Many would sign up to belong in that movement. That’s why I felt sorry for Jesus. Jesus came on the scene and what did He say? Jesus said,

“Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy

RELIGION 101

Jesus missed a great opportunity to give Nigerians what they want. Yes, I said it; He missed a great chance to endear Himself to Nigerians when His Disciples implored Him, *“Teach us to pray as John also taught his disciples,”* (Luke 11:1). Jesus could have seized that opportunity to instruct them to pray 3, 5, or 7 times a day, and fast the first two weeks of every new month. That would have been perfect for us. What did Jesus do? Jesus reduced prayer—believe it or not—Jesus reduced prayer to the level of a family conversation between a beloved child and his loving heavenly, ever-present Father. As for Jesus, you can pray any time,

and My burden is light.” (Matt. 11:28-30).

“I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly,” (John 10:10b).

Say what, Master Jesus? What planet are You from, Rabbi Jesus? I get it; You are not from this, or any other planet. You are from above (John 3:31; 8:23). Little wonder then that You would think and speak that way. Well, my dear Jesus, I hate to tell You this, on this corner of the planet called Nigeria, we don’t want to be free; we want bondage to religion, to rules, to dos and don’ts, period!

In every other arena of life people choose the easy way out except religion. Contrary to logic, it is when the terms of belonging are harder that the religion (or, even a cult) becomes more appealing. Not to mention the additional bonus of a self-gratifying pride of achieving a state of religiosity that many either fail to attain, or shy away from ever attempting.

morn, noon and night, any place, land, sea, or space. No rules are necessary, just family talk. By that, to the chagrin of Nigerian Christians, Jesus had downgraded prayer from the lofty religious pedestal to mere Father-child conversation. Who wants that? Jesus said, *“When you pray, say: Our Father in heaven,”* (v.2). Can you believe that? Hear me, dear Jesus: WE WANT RULES (or Pillars of Faith), AS IN JUDAISM AND ISLAM.

Religion gives you a checklist, like the Pharisee (or Jew) in Jesus’ parable. He turned his head towards heaven and read

his own report card to God, “*I fast twice a week (✓); I give tithes of all that I possess (✓)*” (Luke 18:12). Typical checklist: Quiet time (✓), choir rehearsal (✓), mid-week service (✓)... Check, check, check, that’s Religion 101—predictable and countable.

Unfortunately, checklist religion offers you the choice between one of two evils – pride or condemnation. Evil #1 is pride. That is, pride in your achievement if you think you’ve worked hard enough to earn sufficiently good points for God to brag about you, like God bragged about Job to Satan (Job 1 and 2). Along with pride, checklist religion also entices you to play the comparison game, like this Pharisee did. “*The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this [he pointed a finger] tax collector,*” (Luke 18:11). Jesus said that he “*prayed... with himself,*” not prayed to God. He compared himself to the other man. Just for a moment, consider the names of many of our indigenous church denominations in Nigeria (I don’t want to go into mentioning specific names). The etiology of the names are traceable to I-have-this-they-don’t, or I’m-special-you-are-not comparison mentality.

(For clarity, let me give you two hypothetical examples of the comparison game in religion. In Nigeria, you could find a church or denomination named, “The Church of the Elects of God,” or “The Greater People of God.” If they are the church of the elects of God, who are we—the un-elect of God? If they are the greater people of God, what are we, the lesser people of God? Their names set them up against the rest of us. Sounds to me like a ringtone to the Pharisee’s prayer, “*God, I thank You that I am not*

like other men—[un-elect, lesser]...” that’s a sneaky comparison game).

Evil #2 is condemnation. If pride does not have you in its hold, checklist religion makes you suffer from perpetual guilt and tormenting spirit of condemnation if, for all your efforts you still aren’t sure you’ve done enough to hit God’s high standards of perfection. Hypocrisy is a by-product of checklist religion. It often leads to self-deception. An example of such is seen in women taking off their makeup before going in for worship service (the checklist) and putting them back on after service.

Contrary to religion, Jesus offers life and forgiveness. “*Jesus said to [a woman who had been condemned to death for adultery], ‘Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more.’*” (John 18:11). To Zacchaeus, the hated, fraudulent tax collector, “*Jesus said to him, ‘Today salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham; for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost,’*” (Luke 19:9, 10). Why would anyone trade that for subservience to some man-made rules?

If my late wife were here—may her gentle soul rest in peace—she would have asked me, like she did many times after I had preached one of my hard-to-understand sermons in the chapel. “Tell me, am I a Christian or am I religious?” Looking sheepish and hoping to find the exit sign, because the room would soon be warmer, I would have answered, “I am not the one who decides or declares that; you tell me what you are: a Christian or a religious person.” Thereafter, I would be praying earnestly in my heart for a divine distraction; for a knock on the door from a special friend or family member coming for an unexpected visit to take the

pressure off me. She was my best critic. To anyone out there muttering the same: “Am I a Christian or a religious person?” I say, “To thine own self be true,” (Polonius).

By the way, for those who may be thinking that this is foreign influence on

me; you are wrong. No, it’s not. This work is who I’ve been. America didn’t change me; America empowered me to own my voice, embrace my authentic self, and be ready to stand alone, if need be. For that, I’m proud to be an American. Virgin Atlantic, please don’t cancel my flight.

OF CROWDS AND RESULTS

If the crowds are not good indicators of true success, as Facebook and Twitter seem to agree on, what then is? Is it RESULT? Maybe not! Jesus had warned, “For, false Christ and false prophets shall arise, and shall show signs and wonders [that is RESULT, OR UNDENIABLE EVIDENCE] to seduce if it were possible, even the elect” (Mark 13:22; insert mine).

Simon, the sorcerer, and Old Testament false prophets always had the crowd and a measure of success in their community (Jeremiah 27-29). For example, about Simon, we read:

“But there was a certain man called Simon, who previously practiced sorcery in the city and astonished the people of Samaria, claiming that he was someone great, to whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, ‘This man is the great power of God’ [that is, a MESMERIZED CROWD]. And they heeded him because he had astonished them with his sorceries for a long time [that is, CONVINCING RESULTS OR EVIDENCE]. But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized. Then Simon himself also believed [later events, vv. 18-24, proved that was a fake or

halfhearted conversion]; and when he was baptized he continued with Philip, and was amazed, seeing the miracles and signs which were done” (Acts 8:9-13; insert mine). Simon had had the crowd in the palm of his hand, and apparent results to captivate and sustain their interest until the city experienced the true power and presence of God in and through Phillip, the evangelist.

In Numbers 20:7-13, Moses was told to speak to the rock and water would flow for the multitude to drink. However, in anger and disobedience, Moses struck the rock, twice, and water gushed out for the people—a hard text for me. Why? Moses disobeyed, he did the wrong thing—for which he was disqualified from entering the Promised Land—yet, Moses got results before the people: water still came out to satisfy the thirst of God’s people. It signals something I don’t want to believe, because it is scary if it’s true. That is, can a leader be out of God’s will and heading for disqualification (I didn’t say destruction), yet, be pulling the crowds and GETTING RESULTS before the multitude? In spite of his act of disobedience and consequent punishment for it, Moses still performed [in the same way that we have a lot of performances in the church today], as if heaven was all the way pleased with him. Scary thought! Moses got results despite the

circumstances, not because of himself, but because God’s name and reputation were at stake.

DIFFERENT, NOT BETTER

At my age – I am a senior citizen – I’m trying to train my mind to be less judgmental, to see many things and people (myself inclusive) as DIFFERENT, not BETTER. I think of this as the secret to unconditional acceptance of others and self. However, I don’t always succeed, as this treatise may also have borne out. Maybe, when political correctness is out the window, some things/people are not just different, they are simply WRONG. Who knows?

My goal is to operate with an attitude of mind that grants permission and grace to

others to be simply different, without passing judgment or putting out my opinion on them. We are all unique, eternal souls, emanated from God, the Father of the spirits of all flesh (Num. 16:22; 27:16; Heb. 12:9). Sometimes, if there’s a keen interest and emotional investment in the relationship, this difference is easily explainable or even justifiable by the fact that the thing or person (not excluding myself) has been formed by different sets of stories and realities. If that’s the case, what then gives anyone the right to pass judgment?

I DIDN’T SEE THIS COMING; IT COULD BE JOHN 3:8 AND/OR PHILIPPIANS 2:13 IN ACTION

We didn’t know we would spend these many months in Nigeria. Our project, the main reason why we came, demanded it. I didn’t plan on writing **Thinking Aloud 1 and 2**, or any other writing for that matter. I didn’t even bring my laptop for the journey. However, as I walked around the city, I needed to process my thoughts. For yours truly, the way I process my thoughts is by running my fingers over the keys of a word processor. Happily, I downloaded a note-taking app on my Nigerian phone. The Psalmist said, “*My tongue is the pen of a ready writer,*” (Psa. 45:1c). I could not say that, but I could say, “My mobile phone app is the pen of

a ready writer. I emailed my brother my first thoughts typed on the mobile phone for his comments. Out of nowhere, without my asking for it—it must be by the prompting of the Spirit—my brother asked if he should lend his laptop to me to keep me from boredom. Soon, Thinking Aloud—2 took a life of its own, taking me to places I never planned or dreamed I’d go. Yet, I’d made the commitment to stay true, as a storyteller. If I’ve stepped where no one ever dared to, it’s because of my commitment to be a true academic who plays no favorites. The rest is history.

“REV., THIS IS ALL WE KNOW”: MY MOST COMPELLING REASON

“Rev., this is all we know.” Those were the words of a deacon to me as I was teaching them different types of prayers. For more than forty years the deacon had served the local Baptist church in Brooklyn, New York, under two distinguished pastors. However, the prayer pattern and habits had been the same for the church. I thought I could help to broaden their understanding. After a session of the School of Prayer, the deacon walked up to me, almost apologetically, said, “Rev., we didn’t know all that. We didn’t know any better. What we’ve been doing is all we know.” Posterity is the number one compelling reason why I have been able to make sense of this difficult assignment. This is for posterity, for my six-month old baby girl, **IbukunOluwa Precious OLU-MICHAEL**. If the trend continues as it is, a generation of Nigerian Christians may grow up, more steeped in church activities than authentic liberating Christianity, knowing only the misrepresentations of Jesus, the Eternal Reality, and the caricatures of the elephant, yet, sincerely believing it is all there is. In the words of the faithful Baptist deacon, they will say, “This is all we know.” I hope not.

To be fair and impartial, as a shepherd and clinical chaplain, I must also admit

that some of today’s “misguided” shepherds and leaders may likewise honestly say, “This is all we know. This is what was taught and modeled for us.” It’s sad, but true. Thankfully, God judges the heart. I am also aware that some faithful members are unhappy with the goings-on in their church, but they feel stuck and gagged by a system that frowns on asking questions.

Without a doubt, there’s an explosion of churches in Nigeria but one cannot talk of a corresponding growth in discipleship. Many leaders are busy replicating themselves and their methods in their followers. It takes one who has been disciplined in the old-time, old-fashion religion to disciple another the same way; otherwise, it is the blind leading the blind (Matt. 15:14).

Benjamin Franklin said, “Critics are our friends; they show us our faults.” Elizabeth Sullivan said, “My best friend is my biggest critic.” How I wish these words were true today. However, if they aren’t, if I lose some friends and make more enemies after this, so be it. Whenever I picked my storyteller’s pen, which Jesus gave me, I always walked alone—alone with Jesus. If I can gain one new friend, that will be heavenly. Could you be my new friend?

Postscript—added in February 2023

Looking back, now at 70, I considered it foolishness and arrogance on my part teaching “school of prayer” in order to change the prayer practices of that Baptist church in Brooklyn, New York. They say, “If it aren’t broke, don’t fix it.” Mostly, middle aged and seniors in their 70s, 80s, and 90s frequented the midweek prayer meetings. You never could tell if it was a prayer meeting, praise and testimony time, or a gathering to reminisce and sing (first or all stanzas of) favorite old hymns.

Against the backdrop of the practice of prayer and prayer meeting formats in Nigeria, I often wondered, “Is this a group meeting, group therapy session or prayer/intercessory gathering”? In my opinion, you could skip visiting your therapist after that Wednesday evening “sweet hour of prayer” because your mental and emotional tensions would have been relieved and released. No sermons; just reading of scripture, with or without a brief comment on it. No “praise and worship” songs for the first 15 minutes to “usher in the presence of God”; just good old-fashioned inspirational singing, and “pray ’n share” session.

For the one hour of the mid-week prayer meeting, one after another, as many as could be accommodated within the timeframe, stood up to give a brief prayer request or praise item, read his/her favorite scripture or one that spoke to the request/testimony, suggested, and requested the singing of the first or all the verses of his/her hymn. After this, he/she prayed, or someone burdened over the request/testimony prayed. In most cases, no prayer followed because the soulful and emotional singing of the hymn was the prayer. For this congregation, both eventful days that ended in a visit to the hospital emergency room, and uneventful, ordinary routine days of home, work, family, and three meals were sources of testimony and praise. At the end of one hour, the leader—usually a deacon or the pastor—closed or asked a volunteer to close with a prayer summarizing all voiced and unspoken prayers before the Lord.

Why was I trying to teach a “School of Prayer” in that context and attempting to change something that had worked for many decades? It didn’t bother me then, but it bothers me now. Could it be because the prayers were not “declare and decree”, “hell bombarding”, “fire and brimstone”, dramatic, “apostolic” and “prophetic” like back home in some Nigerian churches? I hope not. Mostly, I went home to my Brooklyn apartment after the prayer meeting with tears of joy in my eyes because we had each encountered the Divine in our own ways.

I remember two deaconesses in their 80s in particular. If they were present, you could count on it that they’d raise their hands to give prayers and their hymns. As I recalled, their commonest weekly request/praise was predictable. It usually was, “He woke me up this morning, and started me on my way. He didn’t have to do it, but He did. I’m thankful to God and my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for giving me one more day to praise Him.” That was it: week after week. I also recalled their favorite hymns, the singing of which always got those in attendance, including myself, into a holy frenzy, teary eyes, unbridled shouts of Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, “Thank You Lord”, and plenty of glory hallelujah dances. For one deaconess, her regular hymn from one Wednesday to another was “It pays to serve Jesus” (first stanza below), for the other, the one and only hymn she always lifted for congregational singing was “Great is Thy Faithfulness” (first verse below). In all my journeys—and I have traveled far and wide and visited all kinds of congregations and denominations: White, Black, Brown, Multiracial, Mixed, In-Between, etc.—I can testify to it that no one and no congregation, in all of God’s Kingdom, sings these two hymns with fervor, enthusiasm, “holy roller”, passionate, fervency and unpretentious teary eyes like the people of the *Concord Baptist*

Church of Christ in Brooklyn, New York. You could tell that each one in the congregation found himself/herself in the shoes and story of these saintly hymn writers, and could identify with their pain or joy, doubts or faith, loss or victory.

It Pays to Serve Jesus — first verse

The service of Jesus true pleasure affords,
In Him there is joy without an alloy;
'Tis Heaven to trust Him and rest on His words;
It pays to serve Jesus each day.

Refrain:

It pays to serve Jesus, it pays every day,
It pays every step of the way,
Though the pathway to glory may sometimes be drear,
You'll be happy each step of the way.

Great is Thy faithfulness—first verse

Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father
There is no shadow of turning with Thee
Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not
As Thou hast been, Thou forever will be

Refrain:

Great is Thy faithfulness; Great is Thy faithfulness
Morning by morning new mercies I see
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me

You should have been there when we sang the refrains of these hymns. Talk of Black church and emotionalism, or worshipping God with and through one's emotions. It's all there! In an African-American congregation and theological milieu, even God was emotional, such as God's display of love, anger or jealousy. Therefore, the worship of God could not be dispassionate and devoid of raw emotions. That's why I'm questioning my sanity today why I had wanted to change or modify something that was so simple, nurturing and honoring to God. "If it aren't broke', why fix it?" It aren't broke'. Amen!

It sure it's okay to worship God with our emotions. For, Godself is emotional, a feeling God who displays emotions of love, anger, regret, heartbreak, etc.

"For God so loved the world"/"God is love"—the word "love" that describes Who God is and what motivates God into sacrificial action is an emotion. *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul"*—love, heart and soul are expressions and synonyms of passion and emotion in the context of the first and greatest commandment. Love, heart and soul in worship—the Black church displays them all.

Now that I just turned 70, I'd walk ten times faster into that kind of prayer meetings than I would to typical Nigerian church kind of prayer meetings, which are more often than not laser-focused on real and imaginary enemies. It's simply because I don't have enemies—apart from Satan. If I do have enemies or haters, it's in my best interest to not know them. I've been singing the hymn, "*Lord, I want to be a Christian in my heart, in my heart,*" for a very long time. Therefore, knowing my enemies would compel me to act countercultural by going out of my way, going the extra mile demanded of Christians and endeavoring to "*love [my] enemies and pray for those who persecute [me]*". That's why I'm praying and begging; please, any enemy or hater out there, kindly remain anonymous and spare me the unnecessary burden of "*If your enemy is hungry, feed him... for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head*". That latter part of heaping "burning coals on his head" is another reason why I don't want to know my enemies and haters. Another amen!

3rd DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: The author believes he says more in-between the lines than the printed words.

- (1) If that's the case, what are some of the hard questions, especially relating to religion, education, politics, and social order, that he would like his Nigerian readers to consider seriously, confront, and ask at every level, with information, passion, and appropriate actions?
- (2) To you, what is an unexamined life like? How honestly, even brutally honest, are you willing to probe into your life and soul, and ask: why or why not?
- (3) What is an unexamined faith like? What would it be like if you could respectfully **QUESTION EVERYTHING** in your church/denomination?
- (4) What would happen if you took a critical look at yourself, your church, and your community and asked: (a) What are we doing right, and how can we do even better? (b) What issues have we not confronted, and why is that so? (c) What can we do differently today to arrive at a desired (and better) tomorrow, knowing that the classical definition of insanity is doing the same thing again, and again, and expecting a different result each time?
- (5) Discuss the unholy possibility that indigenous church planting might be the new and latest "oil boom" industry in the Nigerian economy.
- (6) What if the ex-con was right, that Jesus is still weeping today, what would Jesus be weeping over in ---- (fill the blank)? Is Jesus' tear of sadness or joy?
- (7) From all you've read; jot down 3 items you will include in your prayers for Nigeria or your own nation.

CLOSING THOUGHT AND THE WEIRD THEOLOGY OF AN EX-CON

Someone wrote, “It’s better to regret what you have done than what you haven’t”. I made my choice: My regret will not be on the side of, “What if I had...” I also know that every action and inaction has consequences. For me, **Thinking Aloud—2** may be the one thing that tips the scale for blessings or curses from some Nigerian pastors.

People are like sheep; they follow the leader, mostly in politics and religion. The sheep TRUST and FOLLOW the shepherd. It is the shepherd who has a point of view about which way they should go. If the shepherd is facing the wrong way, and the trustful and unsuspecting sheep are unquestioningly following, then....

- *“A lion has roared! Who will not fear? The Lord GOD has spoken! Who can but prophesy?”* (Amos 3:8).
- *“For if I do this willingly, I have a reward; but if against my will, I have been entrusted with a stewardship.”* (1 Cor. 9:17).
- *“Open rebuke is better than love carefully concealed. Faithful are the wounds of a friend, But the kisses of an enemy are deceitful,”* (Prov. 27:5, 6).

We have to wonder and ponder if the ex-con, not schooled in theology, was right when he had insinuated that Jesus, the Great Shepherd, the Eternal-Reality, was still weeping. Could this ex-con be right that Jesus is still weeping today? And, if so, are they tears of joy or tears of sorrow over the sheep and their shepherds? *“Thou sayest,”* (John 18:37; KJV).

Lastly, NIGERIA, it’s not a choice between Christ and the Church; it is both Christ and the Church, for Christ is the HEAD of His Church. However, it is EITHER Christ OR religion; it cannot be both. “Choose you this day,” (Jos. 24:15; Gal. chs.1-4). This treatise is my humble response to the clarion call of Nigeria’s national anthem, *“Arise, O Compatriots, Nigeria’s call obey. To serve our Fatherland...”*

To conclude, let me take you back to my earlier “what if” questions: What if God is infinitely bigger, larger, and greater than all our doctrines and

theologies? What if (like the three blind men) we've also overblown the part of the Eternal Reality we touched and, therefore, inadvertently, and unbeknownst to us, have been proclaiming a caricature and misrepresentation of the Eternal Reality based on our limited, human experience of The-Eternal? What if such a possibility remotely exists?

- “The secret things [the eternal counsels], belong to the Lord our God [Jesus, the Eternal Reality], but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law” (Deut. 29:29).
- “And truly Jesus [the Eternal Reality], did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus [the Eternal Reality], is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name,” (John 20:30-31).
- “These things have I written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God [the Eternal Reality], **that you may know that you have eternal life**, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God”, (1 John 5:13).

It could be out of modesty that Socrates, who lived before Christ, had uttered the statement: “I know only one thing—that I know nothing.” Without taking away anything from the import of Socrates’ statement, for me, out of gratitude to a living Savior, I can say, “One thing I know: ‘I know that I have eternal life,’ for ‘the Spirit Himself bears witness with my spirit’” (1 John 5:13; Rom. 8:16).

- If/when available, to request additional free copies of **Whither Bound, Churchianized Nation?** or to **Donate**, our team can be reached on our website, www.BackToBasicsMinistry.org
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Your Friend, (or Uncle Mike),

The Reverend M.O. Ojewale, Ph.D.

For: Back to Basics Ministry; www.BackToBasicsMinistry.org;

February 2022

Publications of *Back to Basics Ministry*: **TEACH THEM**, Book 1, 371pp; and book 2, 452pp, by yours truly. For free distribution in universities, colleges, seminaries and Bible schools in Nigeria as the Lord provides.

Both *Teach Them 1 and 2* are available as free e-books, PDF format, on our website, along with other Christian spirituality and educational resources. However, many university and college students in Nigeria do not own a personal computer (PC) or laptop computer. Their only access to online services and Internet is on their smartphones. These books, the *Teach Them* series, are too cumbersome for reading on the phone screen, hence the free distribution of the hard copies.

Back to Basics Ministry is a literature ministry to, and in partnership with the local church/chapel, for equipping the youth of today, leaders of tomorrow, through free distribution of **TEACH THEM** publications by Dr. Michael O. Ojewale in higher education institutions.

1. **TEACH THEM (Book 1 of 2): Biblical Counsels on Thorny Questions For Youth & Truth Seekers (371pp)** and
2. **TEACH THEM (Book 2 of 2): Pathway to True Freedom & Echoes of Hope from a Prison Chaplain’s Ministry (452pp).**

Teach Them is more than a set of companion books; it is a tool for campus evangelism, one-on-one discipleship and mentoring. Among the many themes covered are:

**Book 1:
Biblical Counsels on Thorny Questions
for Youth and Truth Seekers**

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|---|--|
| 1. Salvation/Authentic Christian Experience or How to be Born Again | 7. Effective Prayer/Praising God's Will |
| 2. Faith/Overcoming Faith | 8. Apologetics—A Defense of the Bible |
| 3. Assurance of Salvation | 9. Apologetics—A Defense of Jesus' Resurrection |
| 4. Peace With God/Peace With Self | 10. Theology—Wrestling with the Problem of Coexistence of Evil, Pain, Suffering, and a Perfectly Loving Almighty God |
| 5. Christian Doctrine of Trinity/Trinitarian God | |
| 6. Knowing God's Will/Experiencing Divine Guidance | |

**Book 2:
Pathway to True Freedom & Echoes of Hope
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| 1. A Prison Chaplain's Prison Ministry | 7. Biblical Pathway to Overcoming Addictions/Recovery of Soul |
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| 3. Christian Duty of Forging Others & Pursuing Peace | 9. Sample Takeaways from Protestant Community/Family Day Events |
| 4. Proving the Genuineness of Your Faith Before the World | 10. Down the Memory Lane: Musing and Mulling—"This is my story..." |
| 5. Spiritual Warfare, Demonology & Delegated Authority of the Believer | |
| 6. The Three Enemies of the Christian | |



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TEACH THEM

Michael O. Ojewale

1

Biblical Counsels
on Thorny Issues
for Youth
and Truth Seekers

TEACH THEM

(Book 1 of 2)

Complete with Critical
Thinking Questions for
Campus Ministry, Youth
Study Group Discussions
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TEACH THEM

Michael O. Ojewale

2

Pathway to
True Freedom
& Echoes of Hope
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Prison Chaplain's
Ministry

TEACH THEM

(Book 2 of 2)

Complete with Critical
Thinking Questions for
Prison Ministry, Addiction
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Group Discussions and
One-On-One Discipleship

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(PS: A copy of this booklet -- Thinking Aloud—2, MUST be inserted into every copy of Book 2 distributed on campuses).

Open Letter to Christian Students in Universities and Colleges in Nigeria

(And other stakeholders of our future)

THINKING ALOUD—1

Chaplain Michael O. Ojewale, Ph.D.

Dear Christian student,

Greetings in our Lord's name.

First, let me introduce myself. My name is Michael Ojewale. I was once in your shoes in the 70s as a Christian student leader, both in high school and university. At different seasons, I had chanted Great Ife! Great UI! and Great Unilag! Somehow, I kept hanging around the campuses till I later became a University chaplain in the 90s. Many will agree that Nigeria (or the world) then was a lot different, even incomparably different, from Nigeria (or the world) today. Happily, this is not about nostalgia; it is about responsibility and giving back. For, *“to whom much is given, much is also expected”* (Luke 12:48).

I am a man of many hats for which I have ample credentials, expertise and experience. I am an ordained clergyman, a pastor, a New York State certified public school science teacher (grades 7-12), PhD holder in Biblical counseling, board certified clinical chaplain, seminary professor, storyteller, author of dozens of books on Christian living and character education curriculum, to mention a few.

Educator & Senior Citizen

Today, through this “Teach Them” project, I come to you as an educator and a senior citizen. Yes, a Christian educator and Papa. I am inviting you to have a dialogue with me in those two roles: Papa and educator.

When I do my best job as an educator, I don't spoon-feed or supply answers to my students. I force them to think, especially, to think “outside the box,” as the saying goes. Correct answers are the last things on my mind. I award full grades for supposed “failures”, trials and errors that are the results of rigorous brain exercises. My primary concern is to engage the minds of my students in critical thinking and problem-solving mode, in asking the right questions,

discarding outdated answers, to be vulnerable to doubt themselves and admit their doubts, to reexamine and vacillate, to question everything with respect and dignity, and eventually arrive at a personally researched and experientially verified position on any issue.

One of my goals, as a senior citizen, is to promote and empower a generation of critical thinking youths who are not afraid to ask the right questions (in school, business, politics, and especially in church) and whose imagination is without borders. Those kinds of thinkers are the stakeholders and the future of our race and civilization. Are you ready and willing to sign on for that?

Respectfully Question Everything

When we stop asking (open-ended, why, what, when, how, and where?) questions, we stop growing. That's when we capitulate, we accept the status quo, and we resign ourselves to fate. When we draw back from asking the right (and sometimes hard) questions, we numb our conscience. This results in a loss of our human dignity and surrender of our sanity. We then become boxed (or caged) in, we lose sight of alternative routes and options, and we eventually transform ourselves into our own worst enemies. When we can be easily pacified by any incoherent answer, rationale, or logic, we've lost the sacred fire of holy discontent (which is the precursor for change), we've thereby mortgaged our senses for a piece of bread and solidified our posterity for penury. Believe me, that's not a position to be in.

As an educator, it will be a disservice for me to expect you to believe me, hook, line, and sinker, on every aspect. No, I expect you to disagree with me in some areas but do so with credible, concrete, logical reasoning befitting a student in a tertiary institution than mere baseless, passionate emotions, because it is the easy, childish way of doing things. Ponder, reflect, and ask questions.

Teach Them Mandate

I have two books (Teach Them Book 1 --371pp, and Book 2 -- 452pp) that I want to distribute freely on your campus through the institution's chapel/chaplain, until supplies run out. Priority will be given to the leaders and officers of the various Christian groups on your campus. The means, methods, and ways of creating awareness are entirely up to the institution's chaplain. He or she is free to make copies of this leaflet and circulate, as he/she deems best.

I will be happy if you can find a friend or colleague to study these books together in a peer-to-peer mentoring relationship. The meat of this two-volume series lies in the critical thinking and life application questions at end of each chapter. Please don't gloss over them. The questions provide the personal applications that make your study worthwhile. ***Teach Them 1 and 2*** are available as free e-books, PDF format, on our website. You will find other free resources on our website, www.BackToBasicsMinistry.org.

Though the books are free they are actually priceless. They are tools for empowerment, paradigm shift, and cultural reorientation. Just as salvation is free but it's not cheap because it cost Jesus His life. In this series, I am inviting you to THINK, and RETHINK, and THINK again. If you will not, or cannot do that, that is, if you will not engage your mind and THINK, then, the joke is on you. My books will be meaningless riddles to you.

I have already said a lot in the two volumes that there's nothing more for me to say here, than introduce myself and my philosophy to you, and challenge you to delve in and find out. Just as the beauty of great music is in the silences, not the notes, as a veteran author, I say more in-between the lines than through the printed words. Also, I don't deliver hard, knockout punches. Rather, I deliver well aimed, indirect soft punches to rouse and awaken. The kind of conversation I intend for us to have is not a contest of wits; it's a dance. I sincerely hope you find it so.

The Naked Truth and the Dressed-Up Lie

Long time ago, Truth and Lie were companions. They traveled together and walked hand in hand (by the way, Truth and Lie still do today). One hot afternoon, as Truth and Lie walked together, they came by a cool body of water. They decided to swim and cool down. They both took off their garments and jumped in. Lie told Truth, "Let's race and see who gets to the other side of the pond first." Truth took the challenge and began swimming as fast as he could. In the meantime, Lie got out of the water and picked up Truth's garment on the shore. When Truth turned and looked, he was surprised to see Lie out of water and dressing up in Truth's garment. Truth yelled, "Hey! Lie, why aren't you swimming and racing as we decided, and, if you aren't, why are you putting on my garment? Please, leave my garment and put on yours." Lie paid no attention. Dressed in Truth's garment, Lie started for the village.

Truth quickly rushed out of water. Truth's garment was gone. Lie's garment was laid on the shore. Truth had a hard decision to make. Should he put on Lie's garment, or should he chase Lie butt-naked? It would be out of character

for Truth to put on Lie's garment. So, completely naked, Truth decided to run after Lie who was dressed in Truth's garment. Unfortunately, Lie ran faster than Truth. This was true then, even as it is true today. Lie was already at the town's square giving a lecture and deceiving people who took him to be the Truth. Hiding behind the trunk of a tree because he was naked, Truth cried out to the crowd, "That isn't me! That's Lie dressed in my garment, pretending to be the Truth. He's lying to you, please stop listening to him." Nobody paid attention to Truth's plea.

Desperate that the truth be known, and frustrated that no one was listening to him, Truth stepped out from behind the trunk of a tree, in his birthday suit, and started pleading with the people, "I am the Truth; that's Lie in my garment. Lie's garment is on the shore." The crowd was disgusted seeing Naked Truth. They started pelting Naked Truth with stones until they drove Naked Truth to the wilderness. Then, they returned to the Civic Center to continue listening to Dressed-Up Lie. Back then, nobody could stand Naked Truth; they preferred Dressed-Up Lie. Unfortunately, as it was then, so it is today, Dressed-Up Lie is welcome in the open market, on social media or TV, in schools, in the corporate world and in the church.

Truth has been driven out. Naked Truth is not available in the open market, social media or TV. If you want the Truth, you have to go away from the crowd and public arena and retreat into the wilderness to find the Truth. It is not only that you have to go to the wilderness, but because Truth is naked, you also have to become naked like him to have communion with the Truth. That is, you become naked yourself. Yes, you heard me, naked as in butt-naked! Okay, I take it back; you know I am not promoting nudity. I mean, you have to be transparent, vulnerable, no pretenses, no cover up, no masking up. Are you up for that?

Let My People Go

I saw a dog on a leash wagging its tail and jumping with excitement at seeing the owner when he arrived. A crazy thought flashed through my mind. It said, "The happy dog on a leash represents the people. The dog has little or no consciousness that there's a chain around its neck. The magnanimous owner basking in the affection of the dog represents the charlatan shepherds." What a crazy thought that was! If you connect the dots, you'll bleed. To a religious system that's choking and strangulating God's people, God says, "*Let My people go, that they may serve Me.*"

Discussion Questions:

- (1) What questions am I afraid of asking, a) of myself, b) of my leaders/mentors, c) of my school, d) of my peers, e) of my church? Why am I so scared of asking?
- (2) If indeed Truth is not in the open market, but Lie is, how do I know or filter out the Lies from the information with which the media bombard us?
- (3) In order for you to fully embrace Naked Truth, what defenses/masks would you have to put off?
- (4) Complete the sentence: “When you are transparent, you are...” What would total transparency or complete openness be like for you?

Back to Basics Ministry

Publications of *Back to Basics Ministry*: **TEACH THEM**, Book 1, 371pp; and book 2, 452pp, by yours truly. For free distribution in universities, colleges, seminaries and Bible schools in Nigeria as the Lord provides. **Both Teach Them 1 and 2 are available as free e-books, PDF format, on our website, along with other Christian spirituality and educational resources. However, many university and college students in Nigeria do not own a personal computer (PC) or laptop computer. Their only access to online services and Internet is on their Smartphones. These books, the Teach Them series, are too cumbersome for reading on the phone screen, hence the free distribution of the hard copies.**

Back to Basics Ministry is a literature ministry to, and in partnership with the local church/chapel, for equipping the youth of today, leaders of tomorrow, through free distribution of TEACH THEM publications by Dr. Michael O. Ojewale in higher education institutions.

1. **TEACH THEM (Book 1 of 2): Biblical Counsels on Thorny Questions For Youth & Truth Seekers (371pp)** and
2. **TEACH THEM (Book 2 of 2): Pathway to True Freedom & Echoes of Hope from a Prison Chaplain’s Ministry (452pp).**

TIDBITS

Life After Easter, 2022

It rained in the morning of the Sunday following Easter, Sunday, April 24. However, you wouldn't dare cancel a medical appointment or call in sick to your employer for that amount of rainfall. We, however, had a good reason (or excuse) to stay at home. Needless to say, that the Sunday routine of going to church wasn't all that thrilling. The double doors of a local church were the last things we were eager to see or walk through. We didn't go to any church. My wife virtually joined church "worship" here and there on YouTube, while I kept going to my laptop back and forth.

Less than two weeks after Easter, on a Thursday, four of us, my wife, the baby, her nanny and myself were in another Uber/Bolt taking us to visit and spend some time with Mrs. Feyi Ogunbanjo, the widow of a recently departed saint, Chief Francis Ogunbanjo—a humble man of unparalleled integrity. Mr. Francis Ogunbanjo was a family man to the core, loving and caring for his immediate, extended and even church family members. He had a God-given knack for a range of moneymaking ventures that had improved individual and community life beyond description. He was a savvy businessman, blessed with rare insight, foresight, and creativity for genuine business enterprises. He was a generous financial blessing to evangelistic and church projects, a great lover of good music and a diligent student of the Scriptures. I longed to have seen him one more time to say, "Thank you for who you are and for all you do for Christ and humanity." By his generosity and selflessness, he enriched and added value to my life, to the university chapel, to many other local churches, to society and to all who were privileged to know him. Rest on, dear brother.

I saw an adult teacher Sunday school book (January to June), on the dashboard of the Uber/Bolt car. I picked the book and said with a tone of sarcasm, "Church!" The Uber/Bolt driver then concurred, "Religion has destroyed humanity." Taken aback, I asked him to explain. He shook his head and said, "I've seen many strange things and heard strange teachings in the church." Say what? Did he just say, "Strange things" and "strange teachings" in the church? My mind went back to Easter. My wife was quiet. He then added in a resigned voice, as if to appease us, "But we still go to church." I struggled with handling that coming from another uber/bolt driver. I kept pondering on his first comment, "*Religion has destroyed humanity,*" and what would have made him say so that I forgot to ask him what "church" he was referring to because his Sunday school adult material was produced by a different Pentecostal denomination from my Easter story.

Double Negatives Helped my Venting and Emotional Release

I had prayed before attending the Easter service that I might see nothing but Christ and hear nothing but Christ. However, many things going on in the Easter sermon in the church had so much choked Christ and relegated Him to the background. Consequently, it was difficult for me to find Christ in all that was happening in Christ's name and in His church. My wife, however, is very forgiving; more so, it was her "church" (both in Nigeria and the US). She had been recommended to be ordained as a deaconess, which was usually the steppingstone to being ordained as a pastor, by the leadership of one assembly of the denomination that she had served faithfully as worship leader, prayer coordinator and head of protocols but she turned down the offer. She was willing to serve the Lord from her heart without any titles. From her background, she had grown up believing that the office of a deaconess was for the married and she wasn't married then. As should be expected, my wife was willing to regard that Easter sermon as a miscue. That would be my consideration too, in another life, not this one. For me, "I aren't no more stepping into that assembly." If not for my wife, I would also have added, "I aren't never stepping into any assembly belonging to the denomination." (Do you now see how our English teachers demonstrated their insensitivity to our emotions when they corrected our double negatives? 😊).

I did a Google search for "nearest Baptist church to me" and found one 700 meters from my house. I never knew one was close by. This Baptist church was not part of the 16-18 churches I had tallied in my list of churches nearest to my house. I hadn't walked that far when I was taking the census of churches within easy walking radius to my house. Unfortunately, it's not always easy to find an Uber/Bolt. I would walk to the Baptist church while my wife and baby still would continue in "the church."

After my first service with them (on Sunday, May 1), I walked the 700 meters from the NEW LIFE BAPTIST CHURCH, OKE-AFA, ISOLO, to my house ruminating on my Baptist roots. The church was a direct daughter church of the NEW ESTATE BAPTIST CHURCH, SURULERE, where I had been a young adult Sunday school teacher from the mid-1980s until the end of June 1990 when I became the chaplain of the University of Lagos chapel.

Sadly, this Church is Becoming "The Great Divide"

My wife urged me to forgive—pleading that God Himself forgives us—and return to that church. She said it was a guest minister who had preached; that other Sundays were okay. I said they knew what he had been teaching in other assemblies, endorsed it and invited him to specifically preach the same on Easter. They were not embarrassed; rather, they glorified it. I said, for me, a

great harm and disservice had been done to the purpose of the gospel message of Christ's death and resurrection.

Easter Sunday records the highest yearly attendance record in churches, for good reasons. How dare anyone take advantage of that and commercialize the day. At this juncture, this local assembly was in a frantic fund-raising drive and admonishing members to redeem their pledged funds for the purchase and building of a sanctuary on a new site. If you wish, say I am taking it too far, but this is where I stand: Only if "the end justifies the means" would I agree that a place of worship built with such fundraising tactics—tactics I am 99.9% certain that the heavens were not smiling over—was a building dedicated to worship the crucified and risen Jesus, the Christ. We might as well rob banks and loot national treasuries to build cathedrals; why not, if the end justifies the means. (See the subtitle: "The Parable of two Temple Builders" in Didactic 001). I dare say that if presented with a choice between having a "little flock" (Lk. 12:32) of true Christians who embody Christ worshiping in a ramshackle building and a crowd of churchians filling to capacity a beautiful, talk-of-the-town cathedral, most of today's egocentric, crowd-crazy pastors would opt for the latter. Maybe, they are themselves churchians, not Christians, only heaven knows.

As far as I am concerned, there's no sin to forgive and, if it's a question of sin, it's been forgiven. In love, you correct unintentional errors. However, intentional errors calculated to defraud people of money and in the process also adulterate the core of the Christian message deserve sharp rebuke, distancing oneself and, in Facebook terminology, unfriending. My wife was not satisfied with my response because, more than anything else, she wanted us to be able to worship together as family.

This was the question I couldn't bring myself to ask my wife, because I didn't want to further dampen her enthusiasm for us to worship together. I sincerely wish I could say to her, "Praise, if, right in your presence, I mix a pinch of cyanide which I obtained from a passerby, into your favorite meal, would you still go ahead and enjoy the meal, because your husband didn't intentionally go shopping for the lethal substance? Should you survive that poisoning episode, would you, thereafter, readily accept another bowl of your favorite meal from me?" For me, I don't want to attend a church service with some trepidation for not knowing what to expect on any particular Sunday, whether it's going to be a good "manna" to feed and nourish my soul or a poisoned "manna" that may ruin the rest of the Sunday for me. I told her I would maintain my relationship with the Albany, New York assembly of the denomination, because the pastors and members are our good friends, the church offers her the privilege of ministry and using her gifts, and the pastors truly fulfill shepherding roles in her life. Dear Lord, if I am wrong on this, I throw myself on the mercy of Your court.

Christians and Churchians

The two gentle giants I mentioned earlier that I had visited on Thursday after Easter were Venerable Olusegun Kuti (a Baptist deacon turned Episcopal priest) and Chief Michael Olorunfemi (a Catholic turned Protestant). You ask: Is this another instance of your name-dropping? My answer: Yes, it is. I drop the names of friends, especially more elderly friends, who inspire and motivate me. *Show me your friends, and I will tell you who you are.* These men are aging gracefully and still doing ministries where it matters most. It was Venerable Kuti who had reminded me not to confuse Christians with *Churchians*. I'm grateful for that distinction which eventually became part of my title for this book. These two have had their ears and eyes full, yet they believed things would turn around; that the pendulum would swing again to some normalcy. I need some of their faith and optimism to keep going.

What if “It is Time for Judgment to Begin with God’s Household”? (NIV)

God is my witness; when I was chaplain of the University of Lagos Protestant Chapel and met with members, visitors or regular worshippers who had traveled from a distant part of the metropolis and commuted for almost an hour to get to the chapel, I had asked myself this question, again and again, “Why are these people driving past all these great and good churches and places of worship in Lagos, only to worship in UNILAG chapel? What’s special here?” It was a question that always humbled me to ponder on and one that also encouraged me to take my assignment more seriously. Back then, I had concluded that it was because of the neutrality and nondenominational nature of a university chapel. It could still be the reason, but right now, with my recent disappointing experiences in good churches for which I had great respect, I began to rethink about “all these great and good churches.” Maybe, God forbid; just maybe, like the Uber/Bolt driver suggested, we continue going to church, because we had to, regardless of the “strange things” and “strange teachings” to which we might be exposed. I never prayed for God to have mercy on us, like I am doing these days because, if I could be so infuriated, how do we handle 1 Peter 4:17, 18: “*For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God? Now if the righteous one is scarcely saved, Where will the ungodly and the sinner appear?*” GOD HAVE MERCY!

Sorry, It Happened In the Reverse Order

Whether it is true or not, I cannot tell, but I’ve heard that the last or concluding scenes were usually the first to be shot in most films and movies with well written scripts; kind of like walking from the ending scene back to the first scene. For some reasons, most of my writings follow that pattern. My first thought on paper, the very idea that sparked the piece and set everything in

motion, often got edited to the last part or somewhere in between. Although it wasn't intentional, you are reading this book, which is a compilation of one pamphlet and two booklets, in reverse order. I wrote Thinking Aloud 1, first, then Thinking Aloud 2 and finally Didactic 001, which was meant to build up on Thinking Aloud—2. The publications were dated for a reason. I kept the dates in the hopes that, in not-so-distant future, some of these gory events would have become the past that we had moved so far away from that we wouldn't even believe that they were at one time a part of our story and history.

Talking About Story, Storytelling or Storyteller

Coming from a pure science background, my first set of nonfiction Christian publications from 1984 were straightforward, less wordy, to the point, and full of supporting quotations to buttress my points. My books then were laced with quotations like a scientist would refer to, or quote from, other publications and data to back up his idea. I then reflected on how we did things in *Every Home for Christ*. We gave reports, supported with statistics and data, but we also focused on one of the stories from the letters, or the visit of an enquirer to our office, or an evangelistic outing with faces in the narrative. We call them “human interest stories.” These were the portions that spiced up our reports. Those stories put human faces and emotional feelings on dry and cold statistics and facts.

Later, in 1997/1998 while studying clinical pastoral education (CPE) and working closely with hospital patients and staff, I came to realize that we, that is, humanity, are all a bundle of stories. The sick come to the hospitals with stories. They have tangible and factual stories of what's going on in their bodies to tell their physicians and a different set of intangible and indefinable stories of the things happening in their hearts, souls, minds, and emotions for the visiting chaplain. What separates one from another are our different stories. The stories we tell ourselves in our self-talk and inner conversations and the stories that we are told or have been told from our childhood to our present stages are the fuels for, as well as the undercurrents of, our emotional health and ailments. Our stories also provide areas where we connect with other souls as co-travelers who share common stories. This, thereby, often facilitate a bond between the hospital patient and the visiting chaplain.

It is our stories that reinforce our commonality, shared values and connectedness as humans. They inform us that humanity is more the same than different because, white, black, or green, Caucasian, Asian, or Jamaican, we cry and laugh in the same dialect. At the core of our beings, in spite of our fears and suspicions of one another, we desire and want the same things for our children, our communities and ourselves. Our stories define us. They explain who we are, who we have become, and why we do some of the things we do that others might consider “stupid” or even self-destructive. When family and friends judge

us for our unreasonable actions, it is our stories that provide “the why.” Sometimes, our stories engender some empathy for why we are “unreasonable” and do “unreasonable” things, hence, the colloquialism, “Don’t judge me until you know my story.”

It was at that time of my CPE that I read again John 3:16 and realized it was a complete story. The only missing part was the cultural phrase, *Once Upon a Time*, that we often used to preface our storytelling. From that time, when I made reference to John 3:16, I inserted the introductory storytelling line. For example, I would write, “[*Once upon a time*] for God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). It dawned on me that as a pastor, the Good News is actually a story; a story of God’s love, how that love prompted God to sacrifice God’s only Son. Therefore, all I had to do was tell stories.

Storytelling for me is not the same as reporting. A reporter is supposed to ignore his/her own opinion and simply report. A storyteller is part of the story with his head and heart, reasoning, and emotions. He cannot be a dispassionate reporter. In the context of these writings, storytelling enabled me to avoid being confrontational or combative. All I was doing was recounting my different encounters with people and filtering their stories through my theological point of view. My conclusions and inferences could be critical of others or of their views but that was secondary. **Please, no offence to any pastor or church: I was simply doing my assignment by telling stories.** Storytelling is my understanding of my present assignment from the Master. Hopefully, the stories flesh out with the Scriptures.

There’s Always Provision for God’s Vision

Everything about our trip to Nigeria was in God’s perfect timing. If it had been three years or even one year earlier, it could have been a different story. What Covid-19 pandemic global lockdown had meant for evil, God turned it into a blessing for us. (Sorry, the preacher in me couldn’t resist making that inference). Our normal yearly or biyearly vacation to Nigeria couldn’t exceed two weeks but, this time, we both came because of Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) which enabled us to take unpaid, job-protected leave for family reasons. My wife and I had been 6 months on leave without paychecks. With bills accumulating in the US and Nigeria, it wouldn’t have been anywhere possible. Yet, from our pockets, we were able to print thousands of copies of publications we freely distributed, including TEACH THEM Books 1 and 2, and the Thinking Aloud series as well. It was all in God’s perfect fore-planning and timing. (In case you glossed over it, I wrote that we printed the books and supporting booklets in their thousands with funds, “*from our pockets.*” It had to be God.)

Many who had read the **Thinking Aloud** series and the first edition of **Didactic 001** said they were an eye opener for them. Didactic 002 became necessary as an appendix to Didactic 001. As you would likely concur, the Didactic 002 detailed the lowest point a local church or denomination could sink into when “the blind leads the blind.” What could be more disappointing than a pastor or a local church offering redemption for sale to the highest bidder on a day the historical churches were singing JESUS PAID IT ALL the loudest? I hope nothing ever tops that. Nonetheless, I’ve been hinted about unbelievable worst cases, which, for the sake of having a good night rest, I always blocked my ears from hearing them, and never bothered to search for them on You-Tube. (Whether right or wrong, they say, “What you don’t know won’t hurt you.”)

Remember my main point in **Thinking Aloud—2**, that when any genuine touch of any part of the Elephant is extrapolated to construct the Elephant, the result is a caricature of the Eternal Reality. As I mentioned in **Thinking Aloud—2**, without any doubt many church leaders have touched the Elephant. However, the Elephant is too big, too large, and too massive for anyone to fathom, encompass or wrap hands around. We should be happy for this, because an Immortal Deity that we perfectly understand, and we can put in our pockets is no God at all.

It is a pity I had to “apologize” and defend myself by repeating again and again that I am an academic. I shouldn’t have to do that. But it was the only way I could explain myself that I was not necessarily being critical or senselessly biased but factual and objective. I have no allegiance to any interest group or denomination, except trying my best to be true to the Bible. I hadn’t intended to say so much about myself, but my pen couldn’t keep secrets; it revealed so much. Now you know me: where I’d been, where I came from, and where my heart and my head are.

The Pressure to Be and Behave Like the Crowd-pulling, Fast-Growing Churches with Questionable Doctrines and Practices

A man was introduced to us that could help facilitate procuring electric meters for the apartments in our house. He also happened to be a pastor in the *Foursquare Gospel Church*. He invited me to a three-day service, Friday to Sunday (March 11-13), to mark the sixth anniversary of the church. The flier indicated that a prophet had been invited to minister on the three-day event. I told him I could make only the Sunday service. Trust me; I looked at my wristwatch to note the time when the pastor gave his guest the microphone. I had made up my mind that I had only one hour for him, unless he was a comedian; I then could stay and be entertained until I nearly cracked a rib. First, all the worship songs and congregational singing which had been led by the choir before the guest minister was given the microphone were not enough to put him in the mood for preaching. He, therefore, started with another round of

“praise worship” songs. Thankfully, this prophet could sing. He said he had started as a choir/worship leader before God promoted him to be a prophet.

After exactly one hour of this guest-preacher-prophet doing his thing in the pulpit with no end in sight, I walked out of the church to call an uber/bolt to take me home. Did I mention that the prophet had kept promising and assuring us that he would get to his text and preach, but he never did for one hour, because the “Spirit” was downloading messages from heaven into his spirit for this person and that person? The pastor ran out to meet me. He wanted to apologize for the length of the service/sermon and for the performance of the guest speaker, but I cut him short. I said, “I was never a Foursquare member, and not a Foursquare pastor, but I know the Foursquare church. I know all the senior ministers of the church; especially the first set of Nigerian pastors who took over the leadership after the Foursquare had been introduced to Nigeria. My question is: ‘Was that Foursquare? Was that the Foursquare of Rev. Dr. Odunaike, Rev. Dr. Boyejo, Rev. Dr. Orebayo, all of blessed memories, and Rev. Dr. Farombi, to mention a few? Was that the kind of teaching and ministration your people came for on Friday and Saturday for your church anniversary?’” He said, “Daddy,” every man older than you is “Daddy” in my culture. He continued, “I’ve been trying to teach them the Word, but this is what *the people* want. They want to hear it from the mouth of the prophet, not from a pastor.”

When I heard him say those words, *the people*, my mind flashed back to King Saul, (1 Sam. 15:10-22). Saul had blamed his incomplete obedience on “the people.” Saul said he only had given into the people’s demand. But Prophet Samuel did not buy that as a tenable excuse. I told him, “You are the pastor; you feed your people. As the pastor, you are also like a parent. Sometimes, you have to think and act like a parent. If your child wants to eat only fast food and you know it’s not healthy for him, will you continue to give him fast food, because he craves for it?” He said, “Daddy, they will leave the church; that’s what they want to hear. If I didn’t bring the prophet, they would go to places where they could hear a prophet. This is what we are contending with here. They are seeking miracles and prophecies about their lives. They want to hear prophetic declarations, not the preaching of the word anymore. They will leave the church, if I don’t give them what they want.”

Wait a minute; I had heard something like that not many days ago. It was from an Anglican priest. I had read his prayer items and prayer pattern for his church service. Everything was religious prayer that minimally reflected “the Mind of Christ,” and with little prospects of deepening your roots in Christ. They were a bunch of panic prayers against imaginary problems and spiritual attacks; they were full of imprecations against their enemies amongst their neighbors and co-workers. I had asked him the same question that I asked this Foursquare pastor: “Is this Anglican?” His reply was almost verbatim with the Foursquare pastor’s

reply. He had told me, “That’s what they want; those are the prayers they want to pray. If you don’t pray like that and don’t suggest prayer points like those and do things that way, they will leave the church and go somewhere else where they can find those things.”

Sadly, the Anglican priest then told me that I would do the same, if I were still a pastor in a Nigerian church. Otherwise, I would lose my members. I told him he didn’t know me; that I would be happy with few disciples of Christ than a mindless crowd of churchgoers. He remained adamant that I also would have conformed and bowed to the pressure. His insistence that I would have joined the bandwagon was scary for me to chew. Consequently, and very unfortunately, I started second-guessing myself: maybe I also would acquiesce and blend in. Who knows? They say, “If you can’t beat them, join them.” Would I? It made me sick to my stomach thinking that I might. COME, LORD JESUS. Please take me home to be with You before I find myself repeating those sad words King Saul said to prophet Samuel, “*The people...*” Saul had said,

“For THE PEOPLE spared the best of the sheep and the oxen, to sacrifice to the Lord your God; and the rest we have utterly destroyed.... But THE PEOPLE took of the plunder, sheep and oxen, **the best of the things which should have been utterly destroyed**, to sacrifice to the Lord your God in Gilgal,” (1 Sam. 15:15c, 21; emphasis mine).

“Preach the word! Be ready in season *and* out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. **For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn *their* ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables,**” (2 Tim. 4:2-4; emphasis mine).

PASSING IT ON: The 3 Most Important Things I Stand On as a Christian

The Three Things I Learned In 1972 as a New Christian that I Have Not Outgrown (and May Never Outgrow)

These three (3) things I clearly remember were impressed on me as a new Christian:

- 1) That Christ is in me by His Holy Spirit; meaning that I am “a new creation”, born again into God’s Family
- 2) That I am also in Christ, even as Christ is in me; and that the mystery of these two simultaneous possibilities of Christ in me and I in Christ is the bedrock of living the Christian life, and

- 3) That no matter what, where, or when, I'll never be alone, never walk alone, that Christ is always with me, always walking with me, *“even to the end of the age”*.

Were you taught these basic truths as well? What do they really mean? I suggest they mean exactly what they say. At least that was how literally we understood them. I can say that I have been kept in my “right mind,” (borrowing a phrase from African Americans) because of these simple truths.

From these I have **3 “if you knew...” propositions:**

1. **If you knew who lives in you...** (Read Gal. 2:20; Col. 1:27, 28; and 1 John 4:4; Philipp. 2:13; Eph. 3:20)
2. **If you knew who's got you, and whose you are...** (Read 2 Cor. 5:17; John 10:28-30; and Col. 3:1-3)
3. **If you knew who walks by your side...** (Read Matt. 28:18-20; Heb. 13:4-5; Rev. 3:20; and Mark 13:11; 16:20; Luke 21:14, 15; Isa. 41:10, 13)

If You Knew These Three With Absolute Certainty, I Guarantee You That

- 90% of your prayers will be prayers of thanksgiving, for *“in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you”* (1 Thess.5:18).
- 90% of the items on your prayer list will be without anxiety but requests made to God with thanksgiving, because you know that God *“cares for you”* (Philippians 4:6; 1 Pet. 5:7).
- You could dare anything without fear because *“He who is in you is greater he who is in the world”, “it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me”, “Christ in you, the hope of glory”, “He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it”, and “to live is Christ, and to die is gain”* (1 John 4:4; Gal. 2:20; Col. 1:27; 1 Thess. 5:24; Philipp. 1:21).

My brothers and sisters in Christ, life takes on a new meaning, renewed power and priceless incentive if you knew and live with the consciousness of

- (a) **Who Lives In You,**
- (b) **Who's Got You And To Whom You Belong,** and
- (c) **Who Is With You And Walks With You, Holding Your Hand Even In Your Darkest Hour.**

This is the mystery of the union of 3 intertwined entities: I-Jesus-God. Jesus said, At that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you... Jesus answered and said to him, “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him” (John 14:20, 23).

In that day you will ask in My name, and I do not say to you that I shall pray the Father for you; for the Father Himself loves you, because you have loved Me, and have believed that I came forth from God (John 16:26, 27).

I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me” (John 17:23).

I pass this on to you.

A SINCERE APOLOGY TO MOSES, THE LAW GIVER

I need to tender this apology before I meet this towering, giant figure in Old Testament Scripture on the other side. It’s unfortunate that virtually all the references I made to Moses, the faithful Servant of the Lord, with whom God spoke face to face as to a friend, were negative, (especially didactic 003—Whose Disciples are we: Jesus/Moses?). I wish I could say “the people” pushed me that far, but that would mean my not accepting responsibility for my action. You would observe that all and any negative or “lesser than” portrait of Moses was in comparison to the supreme excellence of Jesus. Moses was a created being; Jesus was and is the Self-existent One who had existed from eternity past, through Whom all things were created (John 1:1-3). The scripture says, “*Moses was certainly faithful in God’s house as a servant. His work was an illustration of the truths God would reveal later*” (Heb. 3:5; NLT).

This is what the Lord said to Moses’ critics, “*If there were prophets among you, I, the Lord, would reveal myself in visions. I would speak to them in dreams. But not with my servant Moses. Of all my house, he is the one I trust. I speak to him face to face, clearly, and not in riddles! He sees the Lord as he is. So why were you not afraid to criticize my servant Moses?*” (Num. 12:6-8; NLT). Surely, “From Moses to Moses, **none arose like Moses.**” Although that statement was made in reference to Moses Maimonides (1138—1204), a medieval Jewish philosopher with considerable influence on Jewish thought, and on philosophy in general, it nonetheless highlighted the eternal prominence of Moses, the Law Giver, whose laws Maimonides codified. Yes, no human has arisen like Moses.

EPILOGUE

SAVED TO SERVE THE CHURCH

“God-Moments” and Significant Milestones in My Spiritual Journey

Many of us have our “God-moments;” a time or an experience when we know or become aware that God has spoken to us about our lives. It could be through dreams, visions, impressions, or some inexplicable divine visitations that we came to the conclusion that it had to be God who communicated with us. I’ve got some and I’m going to share two of those moments in my life. I cannot pinpoint how they came to me, but their messages have stayed with me.

As you might have read or deduced, I gave my life to Christ under the umbrella of SCM/SU. I could date that specifically to Easter 1972. These were Christian organizations outside the control of local churches that were helping young people like me find salvation and meaning in life. I was almost 20 then. Prior to that time, I had been involved in church activities such as, a choir member and Sunday school superintendent. I knew Bible stories, but no one had strung the stories together for me to make the Gospel of salvation clear to me. For this, I was disappointed in the church. **What if I had died with head full of Bible stories but heart empty of Christ and His Spirit and had gone to eternity without knowing Christ as my Savior?**

I therefore reasoned or concluded that the churches were not places with the salvation message. Everything meaningful for me spiritually came by way of my association with the SCM/SU. I attended more SU camps and was determined to abandon the church and serve those organizations that had helped me. In December 1972, I had a “God-moment” that changed that. Please don’t ask me how that happened. This much I know: that in December 1972, in another SU camp, the Spirit impressed it on me that **if everyone who had found salvation abandoned the church, because they did not hear God’s salvation message in the church, what would be the fate of those who Sunday after Sunday dutifully and religiously attend church?** For me, that was a message that I should be involved in the church. That was what I meant when you read earlier where I said that I was “a church person through and thorough.”

Let’s fast-forward 50 years later, 2022. I had come with a project for campuses because I was determined to focus on our future leaders, when I encountered many ugly scenarios in the church. That’s when **Thinking Aloud—2** and **Didactic 001** came to view as projects for the community. Working with and within the local church was in line with my first God-moment, dating back to December 1972. No matter what and how much I do in and through the Christian organizations my ultimate concern is what’s happening in the church

to thousands and millions who go to church regularly but do not belong in, and will not participate in, Christian organizations such as SCM/SU.

PRIVILEGED EDUCATION AND TRAINING FOR COMMUNITY SERVICE

The second “God-moment” I want to share is not clearly dated. It probably dawned on me over the time. If I tagged the first as getting saved to help point the Christless church going masses to find the Savior, the second would be the privilege of having a rare and special secular and theological education and training for the benefit of the community. To develop and advance their towns, in the once-upon-a-time era, or some seventy or more years ago, community polled resources to train a member of the community in tertiary studies either abroad or within the nation. The individual so selected and collectively sponsored would return to the community to head a community project such as be the principal of a school, or manage a dispensary, for the education or health of their posterity. If my memory serves me right, I faintly remember that my high school principal was in that category.

You will recall that I said many Christian leaders who are deep in syncretic beliefs and shallow in Christology were in that condition due to ignorance. **I Really Meant It.** If you knew their stories and journey of faith, you wouldn’t be too surprised. Many such leaders have been able to build on, expand, and perpetuate the system they inherited. Sadly, they have not been able to transcend the system, or think outside the (denominational) box in which they found themselves. I am in no way better. I probably would have believed and acted the same way were it not for the benefit of education, training and exposure I’ve had which many did not. I mentioned in *Thinking Aloud—2* that some could truly say, “This is all we know; it’s what’s been taught and modeled for us.” It was also during this trip to Nigeria that I began to realize that in Christendom there are church leaders, denominational leaders, religious leaders and Christian leaders, and that the four do not mean the same thing. Christian leaders, though they may have been deeply indoctrinated and well versed in the doctrines of their tradition or denomination, yet they understand and are committed to the barebones of the faith and are comfortable paying lip service to the peripheral. May we have more Christian leaders and less of the others in the land.

It’s not a question of empty boasting; it is as things are. That today, very few of my colleagues and peers in the ministry—white, black and in-between—can match my qualifications, diplomas, certifications, and on-the-job-experience, both in secular and theological arenas. Here’s that second “God-moment” I said gradually dawned on me: that **I’ve had such benefits of education and training so I can serve the community. Like those individuals that communities had sponsored and invested in decades ago so they could**

return to improve the lots of others. This, in part, explains why I've always been freely distributing educational and spiritual materials, and why many things are free on our website. I hear you; I am not putting unnecessary burdens or guilt on myself. Believe me I know when, and how to apply the brakes. Do you remember one of the lessons I had learned in my university days, from my so-called disappearing leadership style? It is that, "No one is Indispensable."

Why These Stories?

In Isaiah 37:3, King Hezekiah, in a strait condition sent his emissaries with an SOS message to the prophet Isaiah, "*Thus says Hezekiah: 'This day is a day of trouble and rebuke and blasphemy; for the children have come to birth, but there is no strength to bring them forth.'*"

This book is an SOS message. Hezekiah's words painted a picture of hopelessness. Thankfully, the prophet had a word from the Lord. It will take you and me working in sync for Christ's mission in Nigeria/Africa not to be in such an unpleasant situation as Hezekiah's words gloomily painted. It will take all of us working together to move from the present cloudy situation to a brighter one.



IbukunOluwa at 9 months, in Mom's arm

Why these stories? I'm glad you asked. It's for this: WE ARE IN IT TOGETHER. That's the way it should be. God helping me and with your support, I intend to circulate as freely as possible, this COMBO of Thinking Aloud—1 and 2 and Didactic series on campuses and the community. I don't believe in criticizing or finding fault without first providing a viable alternative. That's why the TEACH THEM series was the first in my consideration. We can do it together. Help this churchman achieve his God-given assignment. Let's do it. Thank you.

To **Donate**, our team can be reached by email at our website, www.BackToBasicsMinistry.org to donate.

We really invite you to visit our website for free spiritual and educational resources.

Appendix

FONDLY REMEMBERING DAD AND MOM¹⁴

“Sweet Mother (And Great Father), I No Go Forget You; For The Suffer Wey You Suffer For Me” (Rocafil Jazz)

My mother, Mrs. Omoboade Asande Ojewale, born in Otu-Oyo, did not have letters to her name; she never saw the inside of a classroom. My Mama was a hardworking and resourceful woman, as strong as a horse. She could turn sawdust or beach sand into a moneymaking venture. She worked and traded with anything you could bring to market to sell. When it came to doing a day’s job and earning a living Mama didn’t see gender lines. She dabbled into businesses and trades typically reserved for men and put the men to shame. My mother’s culminating vocation that gave her prominence and a measure of affluence was being a cattle owner, cow/bull butcher and fresh beef seller. In my opinion, few decorated surgeons with their scalpels could match her skill at dissecting a flayed and sheared cow/bull. Talking about anatomy, she would dazzle any professor of mammalian anatomy by her knowledge of the various organs, muscles, tissues and tendons in the mammalian body. She touched the organs I read in books.

My father, Mr. Moses Atilola Ojewale, born in Fiditi-Oyo, was an elementary school teacher. He taught for over 40 years. Sadly, after all those years of teaching, with many of his past pupils in highly paying government positions, corporations, and private businesses, my first salary was multiples of my father’s terminal salary. I didn’t realize this until I had access to his personal records after his decease. No wonder he always preferred teaching in village schools and living amongst the villagers so he could be offered a piece of farming land for him to supplement his salary with farming arable crops and annuals. I had a greater respect for him and a deeper sense of appreciation for all he sacrificed to raise his children. I couldn’t believe how he survived on the paltry salary.

Dad and Mom were not into hugging, kissing, and verbalizing “I love you” to demonstrate their love and affection to their weaned children. Dad and Mom spelt parental love with provision, presence and sacrifice, their children understood family love as respect, performance, and obedience. For example, my family couldn’t (didn’t is probably the right word) attend my graduation in June 1979 when I received my Bachelor of Science degree in agriculture from the University of Ife, now Obafemi Awolowo University. For my Dad, the question was, “What’s next?” However, urged by his peers, my father made it to my graduation ceremonies in 1982 when I got my

¹⁴ The Prophet Isaiah enjoined Israel of old, “...Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the hole of the pit of which you were dug. Look to Abraham your father, and to Sarah who bore you...” (Is. 51:1, 2). Here is retracing my journey to the “rock from which I was hewn” and “the hole of the pit” out of which Christ dug me, to my “Abraham” and “Sarah”.

For you, IbukunOluwa, (aka, IBK, Ibukun, Blessing), this is filling you in on “The Grandparents You Never Met”, as a sense of duty and token of love from your Daddy.

master's degree in animal nutrition and husbandry from the premier university of Ibadan. The graduation photographs we took together told the story better than words could. In the photos my Dad and I took on my graduation, technically standing side by side as dad and son, you could easily sandwich a plump person in the space between dad and son on the happy occasion. The spatial gap must have looked like the family norm to the photographer because he did not bother to suggest to my father to wrap his arm around my shoulders as a memento on this august occasion. As a family, we were not the touching, feeling, emotional type; we were more of the cerebral or rational type.

Gbajigbo—You Never Heard of It. Believe Me, It's on the Map, Somewhere

It did not matter how remote the village school was; Dad would accept the posting. There was a village primary school—please promise me you wouldn't laugh—where my father was the headmaster and the only steady teacher for almost the two years, 1964 to 1965, that he taught there and he and his family lived there, because no other teacher would stay. The road to the village was not motor-able for most parts. Especially after it rained, which was expected being a rain forest zone, it was not uncommon for the vehicle to be stuck in the mud in the un-tarred road. When that happened, all able-bodied passengers would be mobilized to push it out, otherwise, the journey ended there. For the most part, one rickety lorry, which often had to be parked on a slope to ease push starting, designed essentially for transporting farm produce, made one in-and-out trip per day to ferry goods and humans. The lorry could be transporting as many goods and passengers inside the vehicle as it had on its roof, swaying from left to right, for the entire trip. I might be wrong on this, but I think the lorry was always puffing, "I think I can... I think I can... I think I can..." to psych up itself uphill.

From the relics of dilapidated and abandoned buildings in the village and the aged infrastructure of walled and roofed classrooms, one could surmise that the village and school once thrived as a booming economic center. It was a terminal village, looking much like a ghost town and deserted settlement. I had been promoted to be in class/primary 6 from my last school, in Iseyin-Oyo, where my father had taught for a year, when my father was posted to head the school in Gbajigbo. Unfortunately, there were no other students for the class and I would have been the only student in class 6, so I repeated primary 5. I completed my Primary School education in 1965 and graduated from that village school at Gbajigbo-Oyo.

A young lady, a supervising educator from the School Board in the city once made an unscheduled and unannounced visit to Gbajigbo primary school. She was probably the only visitor from the city the school ever had in two years. She asked for my father's note of lessons or lesson plan. Apparently, my father's note of lessons was incomplete or not up to par. The lady was visibly upset. It was an adult conversation, but we knew she wasn't happy with our teacher. She then collected the class notes of pupils from four different classes. She couldn't believe her eyes. She glowed and beamed with excitement. We were delighted to see her demeanor changed and improved tremendously towards our teacher. The volume of work in the pupils' notebooks impressed her. She checked every subject: Arithmetic, English, Science, Civics, History and all the subjects my father, the only teacher in the school, had

taught in each class. She turned to the pupils—well, we weren't that many—and said we were lucky to have my father. She said many teachers who had one class to teach never put in so much for their class. She promised to send two additional teachers immediately. She kept her word. The two teachers came. They were more like tourists on sightseeing. They disappeared as quickly as they could.

Dad—the “Ever First” in Class

Dad had been orphaned at an early age. He had no uncle or relative of means to support him. He was exceptionally smart and intelligent. His nickname in school was “Ever First” because he always came on top in every class. Name it: reading, math, science, art, craft, penmanship, and other educational activity, he was on top of his peers. Apart from occasional goodhearted remarks on his school career coming from his buddies and co-teachers when they socialized around kegs of palm wine, I once stumbled on some of his faded school report cards that proved the stories. With resources and the right environment, Dad could branch into any field of his choice. He had no means of continuing his education after the Standard School Leaving Certificate (now known as Primary School Leaving Certificate, or Elementary School Leaving Certificate). Dad started his teaching career after that, and later became a family man. Just for the record: a holder of the Standard School Leaving Certificate in Western Region of Nigeria (of the British Commonwealth era) in the 1940s—my father's generation—had a better command of the (Queen's) English, not to mention penmanship, than many high school or university graduates of succeeding generations.

Dad loved children and, for that, he was tagged, “Baba Ewe”, meaning, “father of little kids.” Children in the villages we lived flocked to him, not so much to receive candies—which he didn't have—but to listen to another moonlight story or receive one of his art creations. He was a good storyteller. He would design and create things to make the story or folktale come alive to the listening kids. After he had been able to save some money for further studies, I was placed with an aunt in Lagos and my mother and sister, Omotoyosi, of blessed memory, went to stay with Grandma in Otu so my father could attend a two-year Teacher Training College to obtain the Grade III Teaching Certificate. I was four years old at the time. The family was reunited after his graduation. At 6, at the beginning of the school year, in January 1959, I started my primary school education in Local Authority Primary School, Alawusa, Ilora-Oyo, where my father was a schoolteacher. He couldn't afford pursuing his education any further due to the demands and expenses of raising a family. He was inventive, imaginative and resourceful as a teacher. However, after many years in the system as a classroom teacher, he, again went back to school with in-service training, to obtain the Grade II Teaching Certificate which had become the minimum standard required for teaching, because he would be redundant if he didn't.

Romance in the Air—Here Comes “the Bride”

My father had met my mother when he lived in one of the big villages and towns that were served by the primary school where he was a schoolteacher. My father was the

only educator my mother ever had to show her symbols on a slate or the letters of the alphabet or the numerals. Her classroom was their one-bedroom apartment as newlywed. The arrangement didn't last long enough for her to become a good reader or be able to scribble some words besides her name. I had shared their strange story of love and elopement in **"Out of the Miry Clay"**, a testimonial-like 128-page book I had published in 1993. A brief version will suffice here.

As the practice was in rural cultures in those days, the oracle was consulted regarding the right suitor for Mama. The oracle foresaw a stranger, not an indigenous person, in her future. This was anathema. The family would see to it that no stranger ever had any chance to come near her. Grandma then offered the prescribed sacrifices to the gods and performed the necessary rituals to keep this stranger away and at bay. As part of the ritual, a large broom had been used to sweep away every trace of this unwelcome stranger from their vicinity. Though they were both from the same tribe and spoke the same language, my father was not one of the locals. He was the stranger. Back then, marriage was more of an agreement between the two consenting families than the individual partners in the wedlock. Grandma, Mama's nuclear and extended family wouldn't welcome any outsiders into their homes, not to talk of agreeing to such a union.

To forestall and further prevent the possibility of a stranger whisking her away in marriage, the family hurriedly made arrangements for another man, an indigene in the community, to marry my mother. However, the marriage didn't last. Due to a misunderstanding, Grandma, a "no-nonsense" woman, forcefully took Mama from her matrimonial home. This infuriated the husband, a noted *juju* man (enchanter), who was said to have placed a curse on her that she would never have any children. Not long after she had been yanked from the husband, the stranger, Mr. Moses Atilola Ojewale, a native of Fiditi, an elementary schoolteacher, was transferred to Otu. The teacher's eyes caught Omoboade and Omoboade's eyes caught his, and love ensued. However, everything about her love affairs with my father had to be a secret.

Mama's widowed mother was a strict and stern disciplinarian. She had lost all her children to childhood/infantile mortality, or in young adulthood due to lack of proper healthcare system, except my mother. You would think Grandma would pamper her only surviving child, but she didn't. In spite of her loss, Grandma was harsh on Mama as if she didn't care if she lived or died. Mama had unending chores from dawn to dusk and was always multitasking. With no father in the picture, because her father had died at an early age, Mama said she doubted her parentage and wondered if she was actually "this woman's" biological child. She said she often asked and pleaded with the older men and women in the neighborhood to tell her the truth if she was actually her Guardian's or Mama's child or an adopted child to deserve such treatment. However, with the benefit of hindsight, it was the "cruel" treatment that toughened Mama, separated her from the pack, and made her a disciplined, independent, resourceful, and self-reliant woman.

As fate would have it, at the time that Cupid was in action—so to speak, my father had been transferred to another village primary school and had rented a room in that new village, miles away from the village where Mama lived. On the early hours of

the pre-arranged day, my mother ran away from her mother's home with a handful of all she could carry with her to meet my father, the schoolteacher, who was waiting for her with his bike on the outskirts of the town. The "solemnization" took place on my father's bicycle as the couple rode stealthily on the footpaths to my father's new station. With no clues to go by, the oracle was again consulted as to the disappearance and whereabouts of my Mama. The oracle indicated that she had run away with the stranger and that they should leave her alone. The couple resurfaced at Grandma's doorsteps after the birth of their second child, my baby sister named Omotoyosi, of blessed memory.

Unfortunately, and very disappointing for the young couple, Mama did not become pregnant as soon as the newlywed started living together. At the back of their minds, as a possible deterrent to pregnancy and source of their problem, was the supposed curse of infertility the first husband was reported to have placed on Mama. They kept trying and seeking medical and spiritual help, wherever possible. How long was the delay? I didn't know. It could have been a few to many months, a year, or a few years. Back then copulation, even one time, was synonymous with pregnancy. The math was simple: A maiden or young woman had sexual intercourse = pregnancy. If she didn't get pregnant, then there was a problem of infertility (or abortion). I was simply told that the first pregnancy was not as soon as anticipated and that they had waited and sought medical and spiritual help before Mama was pregnant with their first child. Available record located Dad's teaching career in those towns and villages around 1949.

Black is God-Made, God's Masterpiece

One bright and lovely Sunday morning in October 1952, Dad rode his bike to Iwo Baptist Hospital where Mama had been admitted to have a baby. Dad found Mama sobbing, a newborn boy-child sleeping restfully on her breast. She was gently rubbing the baby's body, as if that would wipe off some skin color. Confused at this, Dad asked why Mama was weeping while holding their long-anticipated bundle of joy. Between sobs, Mama replied, "They, they, they said, of all the children born in this hospital, mine, my baby is the dark, dark, darkest baby they've ever seen." "Darkest!" Dad retorted, "Imagine all the while we've been waiting, trying and desiring to have a baby and start a family. Now we have our first child, and you are crying that he's the darkest. What if we had had an albino? Aren't we going to be happy and love him? You aren't crying; those are tears of joy." Mama wiped off her tears. A smile, a deep sigh, Dad wiped his own tear of joy. Dad held his boy and asked Mama, "What name do we give our boy?" "Any name you suggest," Mama replied submissively. "We will name him

Earliest picture found: Yours truly by the right of dad, baby sister between dad and mom



Oluwafemi.” Oluwafemi¹⁵ means or literally translates, “The Lord loves me.” That name was prophetic: THE LORD LOVES ME, even me.

Having been born on a Sunday, a holy day of worship and rest, Sunday became one of my names. Therefore, my birth certificate issued at Iwo Maternity and Baptist hospital, read: Sunday Oluwafemi Ojewale, Mother: Omoboade Asande Ojewale, Father: Moses Atilola Ojewale. Growing up, in schools and in the neighborhood, everybody called me by my first name, Sunday. Only my parents—Dad and Mom—called me Oluwafemi. They always did so with intentionality, as if to keep the story alive and fresh. Years later and married, friends, colleagues, peers in school and workplace, called me Michael—the baptismal name that replaced my initial first name. However, my *wives* (I remarried after the passing of my first wife) also preferred calling me Oluwafemi, in particular, my second wife, when it’s just the two of us, alone. It’s an endearing name. Sometimes I wonder if they are calling my name to get my attention or mentioning my name to remind and encourage themselves that God loves them, or both. Yes, the Lord loves me, me, profusely melanin-endowed me! The African sun did not tan my skin; God made me BLACK! Ask my mother. I was pitch BOA (that is, Black On Arrival) even my mother needed help grasping reality. She was able to decode her bundle of heavenly gift and fully embrace her deep chocolate baby, because it had been written:

For You [God] formed my inward parts;
You covered me in my mother’s womb.
I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
Marvelous are Your works,
And that my soul knows very well.
My frame was not hidden from You,
When I was made in secret,
And skillfully wrought in the lowest parts of the earth.
Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed.
And in Your book they all were written,
The days fashioned for me,
When as yet there were none of them. (Ps. 139:13-16, emphasis mine).

Mummy Goes Back to Her Roots

Many years later, in the late 1970s, on my advice, to avoid the constant drama, suspicions, mistrust and infighting typical in most polygamous homes, Mama moved back to her roots, to the native community where she had been born and raised. She was among *her* people. She had built a house with four bedrooms. There she lived and raised her two youngest children—Funke and Seyi¹⁶. During a visit, I had the

¹⁵ /O/lu/wa/fe/mi—5 syllables name/word (and musical too), as in 5-syllable words like *accommodating* (/a/cco/mmo/da/ting) and *accumulation* (/a/ccu/mu/la/tion).

¹⁶ Seyi (Oluwaseyi Ojewale), was the baby of the family. He was the leader of the Christian group on the campus of Obafemi Awolowo University. He died in July 1999, in his final year in an auto accident as he drove some members of the group to an evangelistic outreach. The circle is unbroken. The circle of kinship and belonging continues in this world and the next. Seyi, you are fondly remembered today as always, because you are alive in our hearts.

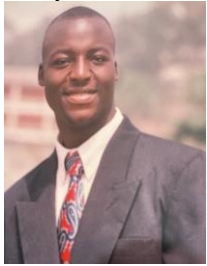
pleasure of seeing the man who was Mama’s first husband, as the man was returning home from his farm. This was the man to whom she had been hurriedly married, to forestall the intrusion of the stranger, the man who was reported to have placed a curse of infertility on her. Truly, the elephant never forgets. Mama said that on her return, the man came to confess to her that it was not true that he had placed a curse on her; that he had done no such thing that was rumored. Mama said she helped him often as she could. All I can say, borrowing a phrase from Daniel chapter 1, verse 20, is this: Mama was “*found ten times better than*” him. What else can I say? Truth is stranger than fiction on many levels.

Yours truly during a visit to Mom



From time immemorial Mama cooked for her family “plus one extra plate”, and 99.9 percent of the time somebody would stray in that needed that extra plate dearly. When you asked her why she did this, she would tell you that she believed that her children, wherever they were in the world, would never be hungry, because God would send someone to feed them, the same way she’d fed other people’s children. If, after the extra plate was gone, another set of hungry men, women, kin, younglings came by, no panic. Mama was blessed with a booming voice. There and then, standing at her doorway, she would call by name, beckoning in off-the-chart decibels, on one, two or three women in the adjacent houses who quickly responded to her call. She would then begin to direct them and give them orders where to find this and that in her house and what to cook. With three- or four-women running helter-skelter in and out of the kitchen, pounding, grinding, grilling, bumping into each other in their hurry, soon wafts of sweet-smelling aroma of stew would fill the rooms. Out of nowhere in a couple of minutes would surface delicious, fresh home cooked meals. Those three or four women who came to assist her were happy she called on them because after having their own plate of food they would have extra plates to take home to share with their family members. That’s what Mama regarded as a good day when she retired to bed at night.

Seyi, the baby of the family, RIP.



Now that she was back home, and back to her roots, my mother, “*Iya Oosa oko*”, as she was often called to reflect her rank in the ancestral worship system, could have been the high priestess of the family deity; a spiritual sect that had sworn to use its power to be protective and do good, and do no harm. She had been expected to carry on the torch, especially, being a born charismatic leader that she was. She was as well offered a chieftaincy title position by the leadership of the town. The title and position happened to be the type that could hardly be devoid of fetishisms. When she turned her back on all these and professed faith in Christ, it was like throwing down the gauntlet. It is unfortunate that, in many quarters, Pentecostalism has been reduced to, and defined by, speaking in tongues, brashness, spiritual gyration, hysteria and strange dramatics. As far as we could tell, my mother didn’t pray in an unknown language, yet her stand showcased Acts 1:8 and summoned the hosts of heaven on her

side. In my book, she was filled with the Holy Spirit, and her faith testified to “Holy Ghost Power,” (quotation intentional).

If only out of curiosity, my Mama almost got the whole town to fill the pews of the First Baptist Church, Otu, to attend the special church service organized for her for the public to listen to her testimony. It was such a momentous occasion and talk of the town that the pastor ensured it was taped and recorded on a videocassette; it was at an era when the Video Home System (VHS) was in vogue. The service had been dedicated for her to share her story of faith with the public. Her public testimony preceded her water baptism, which was furthermore witnessed by the public. Needless to say, Mama got other women who had looked up to her as their leader to also confess Christ, because “if Mama Otu would dare take a stand against the ancestral gods, then there had to be more to Jesus and Christianity than having one’s name on the church’s register.” Amen.

Mom at her baptism



A True Shepherd of God’s People is a Rare Jewel

May God richly bless Pastor F. O. A. Alade, of First Baptist Church, Otu, Mama’s pastor, wherever he is. He became like a son to my Mama, and like a sibling to Mama’s children, and what a true son and “sibling” brother he was! It was an arrangement made in the heavens. Only Christians would understand the bond of that relationship. I still tear up when I remember how the Pastor was there for us and for our Mother when we could not be present with her. He was the one Mama called when she needed help, he was the family and son she had, and the one she confided in. He also called her “My Mummy” with endearment. In the waning years of our Mama’s life until her departure from this world on August 28, 2008, when all Mama’s children were in the big cities or outside the country, the pastor took care of her as if he was one of her biological children. That’s the fruit of a faith worth believing and worth dying for, and an evidence of God’s faithfulness to our Mama and to us. We have no regrets.

Our Mama’s conversion and story were unconventional or the “other way around.” We normally hear of and applaud parents who passed their faith to their children, and rarely the other way around of children who passed their faith to their parents. My Mama’s children did not inherit her faith; she came to faith on the account of her children. All her children, including the two who had preceded her in death, had been Christian ministers, pastors, and lay leaders in the local churches before she came to faith in Christ. Mama came to faith through the ministry of the local Baptist church in Otu and was dramatically transformed. Thereafter, she lived, learned and served faithfully until she took her last breath. She wouldn’t miss Sunday school, mid-week prayer meeting, or evangelism for anything. This, to us, was the culminating answer to the prayers of her children. What a joy to see her act, behave and exhibit the same

dynamism, abandonment and craziness for Christ which she once regarded as excesses and fanaticism and which she once charged her children with. By His grace, Mama was finally able to discard her imaginary fears of all the negative things that could happen to her and believed the all-sufficiency of Christ to protect and carry her safely through whatsoever. Until we meet again, not soon, Mom. ☺

Dad: A Theologian Per Excellence – “Plus Jesus, Minus Satan, Amen.”

Sadly, to my shame, it took me 70 years and many degrees from seminary, professional and theological diplomas to realize what a great theologian my dad was. My father had been the choirmaster in several village churches where he was a schoolteacher. He also had filled in as one of the regular preachers when a church didn't have an ordained pastor. Unlike some of my father's contemporaries, my father believed in, and practiced reflective and contemplative praise. Many of my Father's contemporaries, with their impressive long prayers, were into what you'd call manipulative praise, or praise with ulterior motives. I'll explain.

In my (Yoruba) culture you approach the chieftain or monarch singing his praise, cajoling him and massaging his ego, so he can be kindly disposed to you. The local kings fed and thrived on such flattery that inflated their ego, so much so, that there were paid palace praise singers. Somehow, my father's contemporaries had reduced the eternal God to the level of local monarch who had to be buttered up, cajoled and manipulated by saying the right words of praise that were designed to press the right buttons in the Deity. As far as Dad was concerned only a puny God would not see through such manipulative tactics. My Dad

understood the thin line between a theocentric (God as central focus) and anthropocentric (humankind as central focus) “praise and worship.”

My father believed in a gracious and compassionate Jesus, the Jesus that was always willing to help, the Jesus the leper approached with the request, “If you are willing, you can make me whole.” Without a second thought, Jesus responded spontaneously, “I will, be clean,” and he was cleansed (Matt. 8). That's the Jesus of my father's theology. You don't have to bribe or twist the hand of my father's Jesus with manipulative praise words or long fast to curry His favor because He is intrinsically gracious and compassionate.

My father's concept of praise was spontaneous and reflective on the visible wonders of God's creation as well as pondering the invisible wonders of His grace in a person's life. It was praise for who God was to him, what God had done, and was doing for him. His concept is best captured by these four old-time religion hymns, which were some of his favorites he often hummed or whistled. I will print the first stanzas of the hymns (you may check out other verses):

1. Praise my soul the King of heaven

To His feet your tribute bring
Ransomed healed restored forgiven evermore His praises sing
Praise Him Praise Him

Praise the everlasting King

2. **Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father**

There is no shadow of turning with Thee
Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not
As Thou hast been, Thou forever will be

Great is Thy faithfulness; Great is Thy faithfulness
Morning by morning new mercies I see
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me

3. **O Lord my God, When I in awesome wonder,**

Consider all the worlds Thy Hands have made;

I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder,

Thy power throughout the universe displayed.

Then sings my soul, My Saviour God, to Thee,

How great Thou art, How great Thou art.

Then sings my soul, My Saviour God, to Thee,

How great Thou art, How great Thou art!

4. **Immortal, invisible, God only wise,**

In light inaccessible hid from our eyes,

Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,

Almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.

Those songs and hymn writers were praising God for who God is, not to manipulate God, or for any ulterior motives. Those were praising God for the grandeur and beauty of creation, praising God for His love and mercy and forgiveness, praising God for the gift of new life and the Holy Spirit, praising God for God's faithfulness and unconditional love in spite of us.

Today, however, some pastors, worship leaders, and gospel musicians admonish us to praise God so God could be predisposed to bless us; that the more we praise God the more and faster God would bless us. They tell us that praise is the open sesame, the remote control, and the right button to press to get the Almighty's attention. Unfortunately, that concept leaves us with a God with such low self-esteem that He needed buttering up, a God that could not be expected to be gracious unless He's been induced with the right words that pressed the right buttons in Him. That puzzled me. If praise is the remote control that activates

the Almighty, isn't the one who holds the remote control the superior in that relationship? This is because their concept of God is on the same level as their relationship with the chieftains and monarchs. This whole concept, to me, borders heavily on spirituality than Christianity.

That was not true of my father. Especially in his senior years, if dad would say grace over a meal, pray before going to bed, or pray before going to work; his prayer was simple: **"Plus Jesus, minus Satan, amen."** (Back then, in my overzealous, born-again "SU-mentality", I had thought that was irreverent.) For Dad, that covered all the bases. What else to desire in a 24-hour-day? My father's Jesus was sovereign and gracious and needed no buttering up. To my father, Jesus was enough, kind, approachable, compassionate, and friendly. When you run to Him you are safe, and Satan is immediately out of the equation because of Jesus. For Dad, prayer was not

about the right words but the right NAME and Mediator: Jesus. For Dad, prayer was more about the right relationship, about belonging in God's Family, and the privilege of being able to breathe out those endearing words, "*Our Father...*" with a knowing that He's there for you as your heavenly Father. Our chieftains were magnanimous but not necessarily compassionate, benevolent but not essentially gracious; that's why you need to "seed in" something to approach them or win their favor.

I hear your protest loud and clear. You say, "How about king Jehoshaphat in 2 Chronicles chapter 20? Didn't he win his battle by praising God? Contrary to logic and warfare tactics, the king sent a choir to the warfront singing the praise of God, not armed and experienced soldiers and artillery." I say to you, "That's what *they*

told you. Did you read the chapter? If you did, you would have noticed that the praise was not the weapon of warfare *per se* but a response to God's answer to their prayer and God's assurance of victory." King Jehoshaphat, confronted with a coalition of enemy armies encamped around Jerusalem, had mobilized his people to fast and pray (vv. 3, 4). The king then led his people in a humble prayer, verses 6 to 12, beseeching God. In answer to their prayers God assured them of victory through a prophet/Levite, gave them strategy for the war, culminating in God's message through the prophet saying, "*You will not need to fight in this battle. Position yourselves, stand still and see the salvation of the Lord, who is with you, O Judah and Jerusalem!*" (v. 17). Afterward, the choir marched forth in praise, v. 21. It was the only reasonable thing to do when God had handed them the victory.

Lesson from Sunday School Class 101: When, like king Jehoshaphat, you have the assurance of God's Word, His voice, synchronicities or His confirmatory circumstances, or inner peace, that God has answered your prayer (John 10:14, 27; Rom. 8:14-17; Heb. 11:11; John 5:14, 15), you can begin to sing and praise God and do victory laps, even before the physical manifestation of the answer. Until then, continue to ask, seek and knock—Matt. 7:7; Luke 11:1-13; 18:1-8.

Wherever the Shepherd Goes, the Sheep Follow

You can't really blame my father's peers because they were simply following the teachings of their spiritual leaders. In addition to putting the Almighty God on the same pedestal as our monarchs and chiefs, their spiritual leaders could also be categorized in two ways: One, rule-based righteousness preachers, and two, the proverbial ostrich pastors. I'll explain.

Rule-Based Righteousness Preachers

For example, this is how the rule-based holiness spiritual leaders had (mis)read Ephesians 2:8. I will put the actual text in italics and parentheses.

"For by prayer (*by grace*) you have been saved through regular fasting and unfailing church attendance (*through faith*), and that because Heaven helps those who help themselves (*and that not of yourselves*); don't be fooled, there's no free lunch anywhere (*it is the gift of God*)" (Misreading of Ephesians 2:8 by work-based salvation preachers).

If the rendering sounds appealing or familiar it is because it comes straight from the first chapter of Religion 101 recommended textbook, compiled by the Nicolaitans and edited by Balaam (see Revelation chapter 2).

Of course, you and I know that prayer, fasting, church attendance and other spiritual disciplines are appropriate and necessary; it is just that these spiritual leaders have placed the cart before the horse. We do those things—prayer, fasting, and church attendance—in response to God’s unmerited, free gift of salvation. It’s the same principle in the Old Covenant. Abram “*believed in the Lord, and He [God] accounted it to him for righteousness*” (Gen. 15:6; see also Rom. 4:22; Gal. 3:6), meaning that Abram’s righteousness was by grace, not by works, was credited to him by a generous God, and had nothing to do with his obedience to the Law that wasn’t yet given and didn’t even exist then. Also, God had already saved, delivered, and claimed Israel as His own (Exo. 6:1-8; 19:4-6; 20:2). God had said to Pharaoh, “*Israel is My son, My firstborn*” (Exo. 4:22c) and to the Israelites, “*I will take you as My people, and I will be your God... You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation*” (Exo. 6:7; 19:6). Thereafter, God gave the Israelites the Ten Commandments (Exo. 20:3-17). The Ten Commandments weren’t designed to save them and didn’t save them; they served as code of conduct in the Kingdom of God.

Today, God freely covers the believer in Christ with His righteousness, gives him a new name and the status of a heavenly prince, and then endows him with the Holy Spirit to empower the believer to live into the calling that grace has conferred and bestowed on him. The question that remains for the rule-based righteousness preachers to answer is this: How would any mortal do enough righteous deeds, or how would any mortal know that he’d done enough righteous deeds, for him to confidently come to table and cross legs dining with the “Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty”?

The Proverbial Ostrich Pastors (or Pastors who Bury their Heads in the Sand)

For example, God forbid, let’s say there’s a mass shooting at the airport on Saturday, leaving 10 innocent passengers/tourists dead and 20 others injured and hospitalized. The story is in all news outlets—TV, radio, social media platforms and your mobile phone news feed. Everyone who comes to church the following Sunday has the unfortunate incident of the airport mass shooting heavily on his mind. That’s a pink elephant in the sanctuary during the Sunday service. Here’s where the pastors of my father’s contemporaries enter the discussion. I am 99.9% certain that in more than half if not in all of the great Evangelical and Pentecostal pulpits of my father’s peers the preacher would not acknowledge the pink elephant in the room. He would go ahead with his PowerPoint slides and preach his pre-prepared “5 Steps to Get Your Miracle” or “3 Principles for Answered Prayers” as if nothing worrisome was agitating the minds of his listeners.

Why is that so? I cannot answer that question. I suspect that, to him, life, society, and humanity were a disruption, intrusion or distraction from church ministry of pie in the sky, singing and preaching, and not an integral part of holistic ministry of the church. Who knows? Probably, he could not engage reality and the ministry had become for him a

happy escape for him to live in his happily ever after fantasy world. Sadly, he had lulled his congregation into the same illusion. According to Jesus, *“They are blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind leads the blind, both will fall into a ditch”* (Matt. 15:14).

The Eternal Versus the Temporal

Dad had a loftier concept of God than put God on the same pedestal as our chiefs, emirs and monarchs. Many things are wrong with viewing God through the lens of our chieftains, though that defective lens is the closest parallel to us in terms of understanding the power and authority of a sovereign. (Due to the US democratic, presidential electioneering system of governance, paying homage and subservience to, or veneration and autocracy of a sovereign ruler are foreign concepts to Americans. See Proverbs 20:2). I’ll mention two errors. One, the praise or worship of the temporal lords is out of fear, not love. Most of our chieftains are despotic tyrants. We have a saying in Yoruba that goes like this: *“The chief sends for you and you are consulting the oracle (that is, to determine the outcome of your visit to the palace); if the oracle predicts peace, but the king says otherwise, what chances do you have?”* Meaning: the oracle does not have the final say about your fate, because the king has the power of life and death. They are therefore feared. (See Prov. 16:14, 15; 20:2 for remarks on the king’s wrath or favor.) The king wields absolute power over the physical existence of his subjects. However, he has no control over the souls of his subjects. God does.

Therefore, God is much more to be feared. Jesus said, *“And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell”* (Matt. 10:28). Yet, the Bible assures us of a loving God, saying, *“God is love. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love. We love Him because He first loved us... Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need”* (1 John 4:8b, 18, 19; Heb. 4:16).

“The Lord Your God is a Consuming Fire, a Jealous God,” (Deut. 4:24).

To be blunt, the eternal God, unshielded and unclothed by His other attributes, is fearsome and TERRIBLE (uppercase intentional). Hebrews 10:31 says, *“It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”* *“For our God is a consuming fire”* (Deut. 4:24; Heb. 12:29). God is certainly to be feared with a reverential awe. For lack of a better way to describe God, please allow me to compare the Eternal Creator and Holy God Almighty to a currency with two faces: a frontal and reverse face. The reverse face of God is Terrifying, Fiery and Consuming Fire; the frontal side of His face is Mercy, Love and

Grace. Decidedly, out of God’s own volition, much like a default setting, God has chosen to constantly and permanently turn His frontal face typified by Mercy, Love and Grace face towards us (2 Cor. 5:17-21; Tit. 2:11-14). The Psalms, especially Psalm 103, speaks powerfully to this.

The second thing that’s wrong with the perception of the eternal God through the lens of our monarchs is that the worship and praise of these mortals are to induce and curry the chieftains’ favor and blessings, not essentially out of genuine love and

admiration. In essence, it is a kind of “quid pro quo” which is defined as a favor or advantage granted in return for something; as in, “the pardon was a quid pro quo for their help in releasing hostages.” Some suggest that our relationship with God is on this basis, “quid pro quo” aka “what’s in it for me?” I know one of their favorite Scriptures for this, “*I said not unto the seed of Jacob, Seek ye me in vain*” (Isaiah 45:19b; KJV). I may also add my own favorite verse where Jesus said, “*But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you*” (Matt. 6:33).

Who am I to argue against such robust theological concepts, except to say that the patriarch Job was probably out of his mind when, with his body wracked in pain and sitting on piles of the rubble of his lost ventures, he declared, “*Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him*” (Job 13:15). Earlier, when Job heard in quick succession, recurring tragic reports, he had been reported to have worshipped God saying, “*Naked came I out of my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD*” (Job 1:21). Habakkuk must be running high fever temperatures, because when confronted with the possibilities of the worst case scenarios of devastations, he nonetheless proclaimed, “*Though the fig tree may not blossom, Nor fruit be on the vines; Though the labor of the olive may fail, And the fields yield no food; Though the flock may be cut off from the fold, And there be no herd in the stalls— Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation*” (Hab. 3:17, 18).

We eagerly quote, Philippians 4:13—“*I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me,*” to motivate ourselves to attempt a worthy goal, which is okay, except that it is without regard for its context. The context is in the preceding verses where the apostle Paul wrote about his contentment in whatever state of living he was in the two ends of the spectrum of life: between hunger and full belly, being abased and abounding. “*Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need*” (Philipp. 4:11-12). For balance, we should equally and readily quote and apply the verse, Philippians 4:13, when we encounter the worst-case scenarios of life—just as the apostle had done.

This much I know: **Those who genuinely love God do not serve or worship God for rewards but are thankful for them,** “*For he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a Rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.*” (Heb. 11:6b). “*Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap*” (Gal. 6:7). I may also add Luke 6:38—“*Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you.*” However, some divine rewards are not material or temporal; they are intangible and eternal, and some others are not in life terrestrial.

(I know I have stepped on some toes here but it’s okay. I am deliberately writing with tongue in cheek and some sarcasm because the truth speaks for itself and is pervasive to a keen looker. Intentionally, my jokes often camouflage my truth).

Our chieftains wouldn’t bless you unless you first blessed them but not Jesus. Our monarchs would respond to us in kind; Jesus responds to us regardless, in spite of, and without conditions. Dad knew best: Jesus is willing and able and gracious. In the

last decade of his life, my dad went about his daily businesses with: “Plus Jesus, minus Satan; amen.” That was his favorite, on-the-go prayer. I still cannot believe why it took me so many years to figure out the profoundness and simplicity of that.

The Third Eye Insights

This is for those for whom this discussion on ulterior motives in praising God is still not clear. Let’s break it down this way. Use your third (or inner) eye. As seen through the third eye or inner eye, in true praise the worshipper’s head is lowered in penitence, heart is bowed in worship and hands are raised in surrender, singing, “How great Thou art!” In manipulative praise the worshipper’s head is raised, eyes looking up and hands stretched out and cupped to receive, screaming, “How great Thou art!” As seen through the third eye, true praise is the posture of a devotee on bended knees massaging the Deity’s feet, singing “My God is Awesome!” Manipulative praise is the posture of an entitled petitioner on bended knees grabbing the Deity’s feet out of desperation, shrieking, “My God is Awesome!”

One more illustration that every Nigerian should understand: As seen through the third eye, true praise embodies a statesman with an attitude that says, “Elected to power or not, I’m here to serve you and to do all I can to elevate this community, even if doing so means losing my life in the process.” Manipulative praise embodies a politician with an attitude that says, “I’m all you’ve got; I will tar your roads, build bridges and hospitals IF you give me your votes.” (By the way, you know too well what always happens to those campaign promises after you’ve given him/her your votes. Believe it or not, I’m tempted to think that there are church leaders with the mindset and attitude that the heavens must be jubilant for having them in God’s corner because even God

should feel indebted to them for all they do for God’s Kingdom).

In one sense, manipulative praise and true praise are traceable to one Old Testament character, at different stages of his life. Manipulative praisers and worshippers are descendants of Jacob (meaning supplanter, which is often interpreted as someone who seizes, circumvents, or usurps). Jacob believed he had to fight and work hard for everything, including bargaining and wrestling with God—“*If God will be with me, and keep me... then the Lord shall be my God... and of all that You [Lord] give me I will surely give a tenth to You ...I will not let you go until you bless me*” (Gen. 28:20-22; 32:22-31). Jacob was in the driver’s seat and was dictating the term. “If God will be with me and keep me... then the Lord shall be my God.” It was conditional: “*If... then*”. Wow! That’s baffling to me!

True praisers and worshippers are descendants of Israel (meaning prince of God, “one who prevails with God” or “let God prevail”). Israel came to the realization that, though undeserving and without merit, he had been chosen, beloved and adopted into Eternal Royalty (Mal. 1:2, 3; Rom. 9:11-13—“*for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil... As it is written, ‘Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated’*”). From then on, Israel could hear the Father saying, “*Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours*” (Luke 15:31). As Israel, he didn’t have to fight anymore because he was the beloved of the Father. He didn’t have to bargain with God, he was God’s heir.

You decide for yourself which group you might—happily or unhappily—have fallen into.

Is there a fine line between manipulative and true praise? Maybe, maybe not.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this long discussion on true/manipulative praise may be my personal struggle, and not my (Nigerian) readers' issue. I've heard pastors and worship leaders in some Nigerian churches say something like, "God does not need anything from us, for the *'cattle on a thousand hills are God's,'* (Psa. 50:10). The only thing God requires of us is praise. Praise is God's food. When you praise God, you are giving God His food. God will respond to you right away for, *'God inhabits (or dwells in/is enthroned in) the praises of His people,'* (Psa. 22:3). When you give God His food, God will give you your food, or whatever you need, as well." I struggle with that theological mindset.

If saying the right words is food for the Eternal Almighty that moves the Eternal Almighty to act in response to the "food" I serve Him, I struggle how I might consider that Deity as God rather than a puppet. I refuse to bow to a puppet god. I refuse to worship a deity on the same pedestal as our Chiefs, Emirs and Obas. I refuse to address as God a deity I may so easily cajole and manipulate with words of "praise". That's what I struggle with. I don't want a God I may control (conjure or summon) at whim since I know what words press His right

buttons. I'll vote for a God bigger than I-we-you-and-us put together so much so that "*In Him we live and move and have our being*" (Acts 17:28). I need the God of my early Sunday school classes, that is, the God who's so big, mighty and sovereign, we sang, "He's got the whole world in His hand... He's got you and me in His hand."

Surprisingly, I'm okay with the quote, "**Prayer is the slender nerve that moves the muscle of omnipotence,**" (which is a testimony to the power of prayer; a statement often attributed to Martin Farquhar Tupper or Charles H. Spurgeon). In that (Tupper/Spurgeon's) quote, the petitioner is not the Omnipotent, God is. You wonder and ask: "Michael, how is, 'Prayer is the slender nerve that moves the muscle of omnipotence' different from, 'Praise is God's food. When you praise God, you are giving God His food. God will respond to you right away'? Aren't they expressing the same sentiment?" In my mind, in one case, the mortal is appealing the Immortal through prayer; in the other case, the mortal is waving an open sesame magic wand called praise at the Immortal. *Potato-potahito?* Who knows? Again, I admit, it's my issue, my struggle. Hopefully, someday, it will be clearer to me.

Food for thought: Jesus said to the Samaritan woman, "*You worship what you do not know...*" (John 4:22). Could this same indictment be applicable to us today in a church culture where "praise and worship" is the in-thing; that we "praise and worship" what we do not know? (Have mercy, Lord.) "*And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.*" (John 17:3).

REMEMBER ("Do not forget..." Deut. 8:2, 11; Psa. 103:2)

This is what works for me, "remembering" or "not forgetting." Someone should do an exhaustive word count for the number of times and places that the word, remember

(or the phrase, "do not forget"), are used in the bible. I lost count. The word and phrase are everywhere, in the Pentateuch, Psalms and Prophets, (Deut. 15:15; Psa. 78:40-43;

106:19-22; Isa. 1:2-3). God wants us to remember, to recount, to keep afresh in our minds His past blessings, to thank and praise Him for them. The three notable yearly festivals of Old Testament were designed to force, if I may use that word, force, the Israelites to pause, recall, reflect, remember, and rehearse their history of God's redemptive acts. In like manner, Jesus, on the eve of His crucifixion, instituted the Lord's Supper (Holy Communion), saying, "Do this in remembrance of Me" (Luke 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24, 25). The Apostle Paul then reiterated, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till he comes" (1 Cor. 11: 26). When we fail to remember the cross, when the imminent return of Christ has receded from our thoughts and considerations, when we forget God's blessings, we lose our focus on God. The nation of Israel in Bible times always went astray after other gods because the nation forgot God and His acts in their history, because they failed to remember who they were and their covenant with God.

When we remember God's past blessings, and do not forget His present mercies, they draw us closer to God—Psalm 42 (please check the two places that the word, remember, is used in that psalm). Remembering and thanking God and praising God for His mercies renew our faith, revive our spirit, and connect us back into fellowship with God. Unfortunately, we often forget the things we should remember, and remember those things we should forget. The shepherd boy, David, gained courage and confidence to fight the giant, Goliath, because David remembered and recounted the past victories God had granted him when he had encountered the lion and the bear that had come into his sheepfold (1 Sam. 17). Somehow, focusing on God magnifies God, and minimizes the enemy. Somehow, in our perception, God becomes bigger and our problem smaller when we remember "what the Lord has done" for us in the past.

(See prayers of remembering and recounting of God's acts in Israel's history in Ezra 9, Neh. 9, Dan. 9, Psa. 78 and 136.

Also note their effects on the covenant people.)

However, it isn't God who comes to us, for God never shifts His position; it is the "panting" and "thirsting" of our souls (Ps. 42:1, 2) that bring us to find meaning, fulfillment, and satisfaction for our thirsty souls. For, as the scriptures say, "*You will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart... He who seeks finds... Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled*" (Jer. 29:13; Matt. 7:8; 5:6). As chaplain of the University of Lagos Protestant chapel in the first half of the 1990s, I once preached a sermon, titled, "Pause, Ponder and Pray." It could be a prayer for help or of thanksgiving. In my message, I emphasized that if we THINK, we will give THANKS, and the more we will appreciate GRACE. It's all about not forgetting, about pondering, and remembering. Old saints sang, "When I think of the goodness of Jesus, and all He has done for me, my very soul shall shout 'hallelujah', praise God, for saving me." A hymn writer recommends, "When upon life's billows you are tempest tossed; when you are discouraged thinking all is lost, count your many blessings name them one by one, and it will surprise you what the Lord has done." It's a call to "Remember." Even God remembers. God delivered Israel time and again because God REMEMBERED His covenant with their father, Abraham. What's the point?

Here's the point. I am not pressing the right button that feeds God's ego when I praise God, which then makes God draw near to me. On the contrary, when I remember His goodness and pour out my praise regardless of what the present situation is—again, Psalm 42—the remembrance stimulates my faith, renews my spirit, and restores me back into fellowship with God. Old preacher said, "If God seems far from you, guess who moved?" (Not God, definitely. You did!) Spiritually, geographically, and relationally, God is where He's always been from

eternity. He never moved. We move and shift. “Remembering” and praising Him draw our souls to God who’s been waiting for us to return (Isa. 55:6, 7; Matt. 11:28). It is interesting to note that Jesus prescribed this very word, remember, to backsliding churches in Revelation 2:5; 3:3.

Radio waves do not magically appear in the room when you turn on a portable transistor radio and adjust its antenna to receive and play music (already) in transmission from your favorite FM station. No! The radio waves were in the room before you arrived and even before you switched on the transistor. In like manner, God has occupied and filled your environment before you think about praying or praising God, “*for in Him we live, and move, and have our being*” (Acts 17:28). However, if I may say so, you are able to

pick God’s signals when you turn on the receiver of your spirit and adjust the antenna of your mind to the right frequency, to God’s frequency. If, to you, praise is God’s frequency, so be it.

Back in the day, as a seriously committed young Christian, I remember that after a diligent study of the Bible and with the help of a Bible concordance, I had compiled a long list of names, titles and attributes of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. These names, titles, and attributes of the Triune God I would employ in my prayers in my efforts to induce the Divine I AM THAT I AM. It was fun. However, I don’t try that anymore. I don’t need to. I know the One Name that’s “above every name” (Philip. 2:9-11), and I have absolute confidence that that name is enough for me.

Like Father, Like Son

As I grew older, specifically after I had turned 65, I realized that my prayer time had shrunk considerably. Even my get-up-and-go prayer was shorter than my Dad’s. This was a little bit embarrassing and guilt-prone for me. I didn’t see it coming. Apparently, it had been building up. I remember that in the hustle and bustle of life in the city, Brooklyn, New York, as a schoolteacher, on many days if not daily, I had to be intentional and deliberate by setting a 15- or 30-minute timer, for me to be able to squeeze in any uninterrupted chunk of time for private devotion. I hate saying, “squeeze in” but that was the reality. Otherwise, the day might end without a “pause to pray” slot, or retreat to my personal sanctuary where my soul could be renewed.

In the fast-paced city-life everything screamed at you as URGENT! Daily, you were confronted and bombarded with too many distractions, too many side attractions, too many time competing and consuming demands for your limited 24-hour day, too many attention-grabbing events playing out or being displayed on

your handheld or mounted screens, too much on your to-do list at home and at work that were almost impossible to juggle, too much of *too much* you were swamped, choked and breathless at bedtime, only to repeat the same the following day. Life, especially devotional life, wasn’t always like that for me.

For example, at 20, back in 1972 when I gave my life to Christ, I would challenge myself to pray all night, once a week, alone, because Jesus did so, periodically—Luke 6:12, and I wanted to be like Jesus. Then I had an exercise book for a prayer diary that contained the names of family members, civic and political leaders and prominent individuals in society in Nigeria and elsewhere, special evangelistic/church revival events, countries, missionaries, etc. that I spent 4 to 5 hours interceding for—mostly prayer-walking back and forth in my room, alone. (Walking back and forth so I might stay awake and alert). Especially if I had to minister on any particular day, I often challenged myself to spend an equal amount

of time speaking to God about the program the night before the day of the event, as I would spend preaching to the audience about God during the program. If I had an advance notification, I might spend the three nights prior to the event doing this. As a university chaplain in Nigeria during the first half of the 1990s, Thursday was my count down prayer vigil to entreat the Heavens and also prepare myself mentally and spiritually for Sunday service. (I thought I told you that I was “old school”.)

Now, a senior citizen, though spending less time on my knees or prayer walking, I don’t consider myself praying *less*, or prayer-*less*. The last time I checked, God, in Jesus Christ, does not love us more, and neither are we commended to God for fulfilling some obligations, such as praying for longer hours or fasting for half of the year. To believe otherwise would be “Checklist Christianity” of I-do-this, and I-don’t-do-that, more of the don’ts than the dos; all self-imposed, rules-based righteousness, which is an aberration, akin to walking away from sonship and freedom into the embrace of Mt. Sinai and the slave masters. Of course, I am the first to admit that, spiritually, there’s always room to do better, and be better. However, I refuse to use the word lazy or sloppy to describe my devotional or prayer life, because one, Romans 8:1 is true—*“There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus”*, and two, because like Brother Lawrence, I also engage in **“The Practice of the Presence of God.”** Another way of saying that The Lord and I are in constant heart-to-heart conversation and

two-way communication all the time. I *“pray without ceasing”* (1 Thess. 5:17), which is a good scripture that soothes my conscience in this regard.

Albeit, it’s unbelievable that after 5 decades of devotional routine, it’s still a constant struggle for me to find and maintain a consistent “same time, same place”, uninterrupted block of time for my daily devotion. Now and again, I heave a sigh, “Thank You, Lord”. I still long for those 2, 3, 4 or more weekly consecutive hours spent on my knees or prayer walking in my room in the 1970s, but I couldn’t recapture them—no matter how hard I tried. Maybe they would never come back. Prayer-walk back then was to enable me stay alert while praying. Not so, now. Presently, my incentive for prayer-walking, stationary biking or using an exercise stepper is to multitask, that is, engage in physical exercise and intercession. It’s a routine primarily necessitated for the benefit of body exercise along with prayer.

These days, I walk around mostly breathing one phrase of prayer, “Thank You, Lord,” which is one word less than my Dad’s “Plus Jesus, minus Satan.” I’m not complaining of less time groaning on my knees. I believe in seasons of life: childhood, adolescence, adulthood, middle age, and senior years. I’m just thankful for every step of my journey, and for every bump and stop on the way. And I’m equally thankful for every redeemed foolish misstep, recalibration and rerouting after unforeseen and humanly unforeseeable roadblocks and unavoidable stops. Talk about Divine GPS and grace so amazing.

Again and again, for every remembrance, recall, flashback or throwback, I say, “THANK YOU, LORD.” For my hopes, desires, goals, dreams and visions for future, I offer them up to Him, Who is Faithful (1 Cor. 1:9; 10:13), and breathe again, “Thank You, Lord”, because He’s been too faithful to leave me now, too faithful to not see me through—as He’s done time and time again. I thought I always had seasoned my prayers with thanksgiving in accordance with Philippians 4:6, *“...in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God”*, however, presently, the clause, “with thanksgiving”, overshadows all requests. In terms of prayer life, I believe those undergirding “everlasting arms” of the “Eternal God” Who is my “Refuge” (Deut. 33:27) have graced and raised me from groaning

to gratitude, contrition to celebration. It reminds me of the first verse of (late) Andrea Crouch’s Tribute—“To God be the Glory,” which goes:

“How can I say thanks
For all the things
You’ve done for me?
Things so undeserved
Yet You gave to prove
Your love to me
The voices of a million angels
Could not express my gratitude
All that I am
And ever hope to be
I owe it all to Thee.

Three surviving of the family: Side by side with Venerable Steve, Assistant pastor Funke sitting on my laps (Photos taken in Feb. 22)



To God be the glory/3x
For the things He has done.” (Andrea Crouch).

Psalm 71—Aging Gracefully with an Ageless Grace-filled/Grace-full God

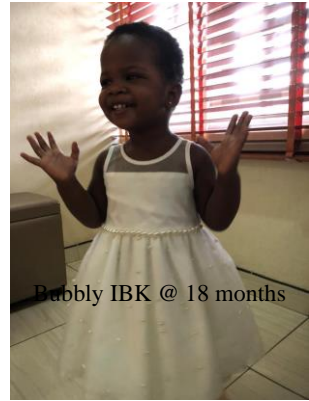
Now I can say that I understand, to a great extent, the sentiments behind the Psalmist’s prayer in Psalm 71 (bold fonts and left borders, mine). As a senior citizen, this Psalm speaks to my heart so much that I tear up anytime I read it.

- 5 For You are my hope, O Lord God; You are my trust from my youth.**
- 6 By You I have been upheld from birth; You are He who took me out of my mother’s womb. My praise shall be continually of You.**
- 7 I have become as a wonder to many, But You are my strong refuge.
- 8 Let my mouth be filled with Your praise And with Your glory all the day.
- 9 Do not cast me off in the time of old age; Do not forsake me when my strength fails.**
- 10 For my enemies speak against me; And those who lie in wait for my life take counsel together,
- 11 Saying, “God has forsaken him; Pursue and take him, for there is none to deliver him.”
- 12 O God, do not be far from me; O my God, make haste to help me!**
- 13 Let them be confounded and consumed Who are adversaries of my life; Let them be covered with reproach and dishonor Who seek my hurt.
- 14 But I will hope continually, And will praise You yet more and more.**
- 15 My mouth shall tell of Your righteousness And Your salvation all the day, For I do not know their limits.**
- 16 I will go in the strength of the Lord God; I will make mention of Your righteousness, of Yours only.**
- 17 O God, You have taught me from my youth; And to this day I declare Your wondrous works.**
- 18 Now also when I am old and gray-headed, O God, do not forsake me, Until I declare Your strength to this generation, Your power to everyone who is to come.**
- 19 Also Your righteousness, O God, is very high, You who have done great things; O God, who is like You?**
- 20 You, who have shown me great and severe troubles, Shall revive me again, And bring me up again from the depths of the earth.**
- 21 You shall increase my greatness, And comfort me on every side.**

The righteous shall flourish like a palm tree, He shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon. Those who are planted in the house of the Lord Shall flourish in the courts of our God. They shall still bear fruit in old age; They shall be fresh and flourishing, To declare that the Lord is upright; He is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in Him. (Psa. 92:12-15; emphasis mine).

PS: IbukunOluwa, this appendix, “Fondly Remembering Dad and Mom”, is especially for you. I know you are a very smart girl. The reason you were not given Ojewale as a last name will be clear to you, because you’ll figure it out sooner than can be imagined. It’s a long story I hope to tell someday. I know as well that you’ll be proud of your hyphenated last name, Olu-Michael (4-syllables, /O/lu/Mi/chael, as in /A/la/ba/ma). You are unique. There could be a thousand Michaels in North America; you’ll scarcely come across another Olu-Michael. In biology, to discover the innate potential and possibilities of an organism, we study its four grandparents. I hope “Fondly Remembering Dad and Mom” gives you a window to our ancestry, our roots, our genealogy, our family tree, our story, and ultimately, into the person you are. This is who we WERE, and who we ARE: **We Are the Beloved of God.** “*We love Him because He first loved us*” (1 John 4:19). Our skin color is dark, because God made us “*fearfully and wonderfully*” so (Ps. 139:14).

Like Grandma, work hard, pray harder and feed the hungry soul God sends your way. Don’t rest on your oars. In the words of a basketball coach, “Hard work beats talent when talent doesn’t work hard.” Like Grandpa, learn, study, excel, nurture, and exercise your creative spirit, and teach others. Love people, serve them, and enlist others to be on your team, because you cannot do it—your God-given assignment—alone; you need other people in your corner. Keep faith simple and real, like Grandpa, do everything, “Plus Jesus, Minus Satan.” Above all, pursue peace. It’s been said that peace begins with a smile. I’m glad you are playful and smile a lot, naturally. Keep it up. I love you, IBK. You know I really do. Bless you. “*May the Lord of peace Himself give you peace always in every way. The Lord be with you*” (2 Thess. 3:16).



Lastly, IbukunOluwa, this is OUR STORY AS I REMEMBER IT. I have to put that caveat, “as I remember it” because I have often been accused of having lapse memory or that I have a selective memory, because I don’t always remember the bad things that happened to me or that people did to me. I remember only the good vibes. I think of it as a special gift from God. Though, technically, no one is trauma-free, I can say that 1 Corinthians 10:13 has been woven into my storyline, even before I learned to read the Bible: “*No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.*” I’m thankful to God for His faithfulness and for His grace that overshadows or numbs any horrible past experiences I might have had, so I may live and enjoy the present. I’m the firstborn child of our parents. It will not be out of place to say that I have a special place in their hearts, as they do in mine. I’m certain that it is possible that my other siblings might remember and experience our parents differently. However, “This is MY STORY.”

IbukunOluwa, “*Therefore know that the Lord your God, He is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and mercy for a thousand generations with those who love Him and keep His commandments*” (Deut. 7:9).

POSTSCRIPT

Reading over this work, **WHITHER BOUND, CHURCHIANIZED NATION?** (100,000+ words), I was mightily and embarrassingly surprised at the high levels and numerous numbers of first-person pronouns—I, me, we, etc. in the work. I never intended it that way. Somehow it read like an autobiography and valedictorian memoir at the same time. Even if I had set out to write an autobiography I might not have fared better, except for more intentional table of contents and sequencing of the narrative. Regarding reading like a farewell note, I know it will happen when the time comes and it will be a happy moment of my final salvation, but I am in no hurry to see Jesus—or to see Mom and Dad and departed siblings. What's the sense of hurrying to a place where you are going to live eternally FOREVER!!!

However, I LOVED THE SCRIPT! I loved its overall tone. Why? It put a smile on my face for two reasons; One, it is common knowledge that as far as science and technology are concerned future generations always build on and greatly improve on the achievements of generations before them. I'm not sure that the same could be said of religion—especially Christianity—morality and godliness in general. Moral decline, religious apostasy, postmodernism, relativism, decadence and devolution of erstwhile institutions and systems that once guaranteed safety and peace are what we are witnessing. With that in mind, as I again read every page of the script it was with a smile on my face, because it dawned on me that this work is my way of joining my voice to other voices out there and declaring: **THIS IS THE FAITH THAT WAS HANDED OVER TO US WHICH WE NOW GLADLY BEQUEATH TO YOU.** It is a TRUST to which you are now also ENTRUSTED, same

way as we had been. Run with it and be faithful to the end. God's blessings on you as you do this.

Two, the Yorubas have a saying that the elders would not be in the market with a newborn baby's head not properly placed or comfortably nestled on her mother's back (because the elders would step in to correct the situation). Back then mothers backed their babies, secured with a wrapper tied around their chest, atop their breasts; the market was an open public square. Meaning: the elders are responsible for spotting and correcting anomalies and abnormalities in the society.

Unequivocally, anyhow you consider it, by whatever criteria you choose to measure, Yours truly—even in Diaspora—is one of the Christian Elders or Statesmen in the land. I'm not a church founder, denominational leader or high-ranking ecclesiastical title holder, *"But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain"* (1 Cor. 15:10a). I hope this work may rise in some measure to the level of what my saintly 6-month-old baby did in church on Easter Sunday, 2022. She was yelling hysterically and rebelliously, something out of character, during the preaching in church when the guest preacher had disregarded the old-religion refrain, "Jesus paid it all" and was offering redemption to whosoever for the paltry sum of N2000.00 (<\$4.00) on an Easter Sunday (see Didactic 002). Didn't the prophet Isaiah say, *"And a little child shall lead them"*? (Isa. 11:6d). To which I say: Lead on, IbukunOluwa. This work is my way of heeding Jude the Apostle's injunction to *"contend [contend earnestly, NKJV] for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God's holy people"* (Jude v.3; NIV).

Our Lord Jesus Christ had promised, "I will build My church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18).

The hopeful words of Gilbert K. Chesterton come to mind. Chesterton had said, "At least five times the Faith has to all appearance gone

to the dogs. In each of these five cases it was the dog that died... Christianity has died many times and risen again; for it had a God who

knew the way out of the grave.” Assuredly, the history of the Faith bears testimony that our God is greater than the dogs (of despotic leaders, demonic ideologies, ungodly philosophies, religious falsehoods, ferocious persecutions, antisemitic regimes, etc. who had attempted to bury the Faith) and is larger than all the graveyards combined. It’d been the attackers—from within and without—that had gotten buried.

“Quo Vadis?” (Whither Goest Thou?)

At the Last Supper, Jesus told His disciples: “*Little children, yet a little while I am with you.*” Peter asked, “*Lord, whither goest thou?*” The Lord replied: “*Whither I go, thou canst not follow me now; but thou shalt follow me afterwards,*” (John 13:33, 36; KJV.) According to tradition, while the Apostle Peter was fleeing Rome on the Appian Way, Jesus accosted Peter and asked, “Quo Vadis?” (Whither goest thou?), the same question Peter had asked the Lord. Humbled by this encounter, Peter returned to Rome where, we are told, he died a martyr for the cause of Christ.

In one form or another, that question comes to each one of us, “Whither goest thou?” especially regarding our spiritual destination. In the context of this book, “Quo Vadis?” (Whither goest thou?) might be asked of the Nigerian church. Where is your spiritual destination, Nigerian Evangelical/Pentecostal Churches? Specifically, please allow me to ask: Whither Bound, Churchianized Nigeria?

As an educator, especially one with a science background, I bask in asking questions, the right and sometimes hard questions. If this work has provoked questioning, raised a new set of hitherto unasked bold questions, then I would have done my best job. If, however I have provided some answers without further provoking questionings, then I sincerely ask for your forgiveness because, in that context, I haven’t lived up to my calling as an educator. I didn’t really set out to give answers or quell the search and end the discussion. On the contrary, to open the door for more discussions, to push you to question, doubt and reinvestigate those things you once firmly believed as they were passed down to you.

What Do You Want Your Readers to Take Away from This Book?

I’m glad you asked.

In brief, **the problem the book, *Whither Bound*, addresses can be termed the “lookalike syndrome”,** in Nigeria and elsewhere, for “All that glitters is not gold.”

The present religious landscape of the world is filled with JESUS LOOKALIKES—in the negative ways. The disciples of Jesus asked Him, “*What will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?*” (Matt. 24:3e). The first sign and warning Jesus gave them was this: “*Many will come in My name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ [that impersonation is the lookalike syndrome] and will deceive many... Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many*” (Matt. 24:5, 11; insert mine). Today, we are dealing with a plethora of Jesus lookalikes. Evidently, “the end of the age” is upon us. These Jesus lookalikes are unlike the disciples of Jesus in Antioch who so much embodied and manifested the Spirit of Christ that the unbelieving onlookers,

with evil and negative intentions, coined a derogative word, “Christians,” (meaning: Christlike ones) to deride them (Acts 11:26). Lookalike is the profit-making business of impersonation.

I began my discussion in Didactic 001 by drawing attention to two dangers in the church, 1) the preaching of an incomplete gospel, and 2) the preaching of a corrupted version of the gospel. I advanced my thesis in Didactic 001 by using, as an illustration, the damaging effects of fake drugs. A fake drug is the lookalike or fake imitation of its genuine brand. In fake drugs, you think you are taking the medication that will cure your disease but the pill you are swallowing does not have the potency to do so. This may hurt you in more ways than you think. One, because the pill is not treating the cause of the disease, the disease progresses, and your condition deteriorates. Two, the chemical substances in the fake pill may do further harm to your body, and also overload your metabolic systems. Lastly, you have wasted money and resources buying fake drugs, poisoning yourself, and you may eventually die of the disease. How sad and pathetic! Therefore, we cannot begin to imagine the damages that “a fake Jesus” (as in fake drugs) or fake spiritual leader in the church can do to sincere seekers.

Believe it or not, we also have political-leader-lookalikes or occult-leader-lookalikes in many Nigerian churches. As it is practiced in cults and occult circles, it was a known secret that a certain political leader, a one-term ex-President of the US in this century (who shall remain nameless), always demanded sworn loyalty from his staff and close associates. Many church leaders in Nigeria, by the administrative setup of their denomination, demand loyalty and implicit obedience from staff, associates and members to whoever is above you in the administrative echelon. If you get out of line, you immediately place yourself under a curse and those curses and imprecatory prayers are already enshrined in the unwritten rulebook of the church. Though unpublished and undistributed, the code of conduct is taught and understood by all members. Patterned after Old Testament Moses, it is top-down management style where you unquestionably obey the instruction of the leader. It is not uncommon to find some self-styled, self-ordained 30-year-old leader—addressed as Daddy by the members—ordering around members twice as old as he is. The military rule is “obey first before you complain”. In these churches, it is “obey first [your leader at any stratum—pastor, deacon, group or sector leader, etc.] and never complain.” If you complain, that’s likened to the rebellion of Korah, Dathan and Abiram in Numbers chapter 16, and you know what happened to them, don’t you? (If you don’t know, please read Num. 16).

In this era of postmodernism, everything has a lookalike. Even Satan, the adversary, has his lookalikes. If you doubt me, please look into the eyes of many world rulers and political leaders from around the globe—if eyeball-to-eyeball isn’t possible, then consider the outcomes of their hidden plots, schemes, selfish, narcissistic, and egotistical propaganda—and tell me how on earth you couldn’t find Satan lookalikes.

Kindly allow me to further explain the concept of lookalike in the following parables of Jesus.

In Jesus’ parable of the wise and foolish house builders (Matt. 7:24-27), the two houses—one built on rocky foundation and the other built on sandy foundation—

appeared the same to any observer until the rains fell, winds blew, and deluge and floods descended on them. Although the two houses were subjected to the same weather conditions, the difference in their foundations resulted in different outcomes. The end result was regrettable and devastating for the foolish builder. Also, in Jesus' parable of the 5 wise and 5 foolish virgins (Matt. 25:1-13), the 10 virgins were asleep in the waiting room with their lamps by their side. To any observer, the two groups were comfortable, relaxed, looking forward to meeting the groom, and probably snoring under the same cozy ambience of the waiting room. It was the late arrival of the bridegroom that proved the unpreparedness of the 5 foolish virgins. The end result was regrettable and devastating for the 5 foolish virgins.

On two different occasions Jesus gave two parables of two sons and their fathers (Matt. 21:28-32 and Luke 15:11-32). He told of two sets of siblings with the same last names, both working in the family business, eating dinner from the same family table but these two were heading in different directions spiritually, one pair discordant with the Father. Lastly, in Jesus' parable of "Wheat and Tares" (Matt. 13:24-30), the owner of the field forbade his servants from prematurely uprooting the tares, which had been planted by "an enemy", because the two were intertwined. He cautioned and restrained his servant with these words, "*Lest while you gather up the tares you also uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest*" (Matt. 13:29, 30). The wheat and tares both grew and completed their life cycles in the same soil environment, same habitat, and same ecosystem. The separation and burning up of the tares happened at the time of harvest. **These were parables of two lookalike houses, two sets of lookalike virgins, two siblings under the same roof, who'd had everything in common, and two lookalike plants growing in the same field, but all with different eternal destinies.** The same hot water that hardens an egg softens a potato. The difference is what's inside, what they are made of.

In line with Jesus' dualism in those lookalike parables—not that I am attempting to put myself on the same pedestal with Jesus—I had mentioned and cautioned toward the end of Didactic 001 that we have two parallel streams of the Faith. First, **Authentic Christianity** and second, the practice of the **Religion of Christianity**, and that these two are identical in that they both mention and claim to serve Jesus Christ and His Church. However, authentic Christianity is a relationship with a living Savior, and it is liberating, for Jesus has "*come that [we] may have life, and that [we] may have it more abundantly*" (John 10:10b). Authentic Christianity is Jesus only, and it is laser-focused on the New Testament, or, more appropriately, the New Covenant. It is rooted in "*having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ*" (Rom. 5:1) and "*the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all*" (Tit. 2:11).

On the other hand, the practice of the Religion of Christianity is a religion, a practice. It is fluffy, appealing, and enslaving. It fosters spiritual bondage to a Church Lookalike, which is an aberrant mirror image of that sacred institution called the Church—the Body of Christ. The church lookalike is an enterprise, mostly a family business. As it's ultimate goal, the religion of Christianity furthermore engenders bondage to the superstar charlatans who own and run those church lookalike institutions. The practitioners, who propagate the religion of Christianity, either

intentionally or inadvertently, are working to maintain and keep alive “*the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And [which] He [Jesus] has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross*” and “*wiped [it] out*” (Col. 2:14).

Without any doubt, bad theology or false biblical teaching can produce a deeply religious and moral person. Even some cults, sororities, and fraternities, by the tenets and practices they have sworn to uphold and live by, can and do achieve this end as well. However, it is highly doubtful if bad theology can lead to authentic Christianity, or genuine Christian faith where the believer is living in active fellowship with the Spirit of the risen Savior, Jesus Christ. Jesus said, “*You will know them by their fruits*” (Matt. 7:16). What fruits? Christlikeness—the same fruits the cynics in Antioch noticed that made them coin the word, Christians, which at the time was a sneer word. The practice of the Religion of Christianity is the lookalike of the Authentic Christian Faith. As in Jesus’ parable, the end result could be regrettable and devastating for those engaged in the practice of the Religion of Christianity. Hear this charge from the Apostle Paul,

Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you are disqualified. (2 Cor. 13:5).

Authentic Christian Faithful Versus the “Playing Church” Devotee

This is not to suggest that “Authentic Christianity” as described in the book, *Whither Bound*, is homogenous, monolithic, uniform or one-size-fits-all. This is far from being the case. Authentic Faith is comparable to water. Like water, it takes the shape (and color) of its container while retaining the essence of its substance. Authentic Christianity is superbly diverse and positively pluralistic, comprising “*a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language*” (Rev. 7:9). In different geographic zones and people groups, it branches out into many forms, shapes, spiritualities, cultural patterns, and it embraces and embodies contrasting and divergent denominational practices. Yet, with all these diversities and transformations, they all espouse, are united and rooted in one truth: **JESUS ONLY** as the All-Sufficient Lord, Savior, Deliverer, Healer, Sanctifier, Perfecter, Baptizer in the Holy Spirit, and the soon coming King.

In the authentic Christian practices, the Word and the Holy Spirit (through the prayerful ministry of the local church) are the midwives of spiritual births, national revivals, church growth and renewals. No human agency or denominational practice is endorsed as intermediary or mediator because this will only serve as a hindrance, eventually blocking the people’s view from seeing the real Jesus and may lead to substituting human agencies for the work of the Holy Spirit.

CHRISTIANITY IS EITHER THIS OR THAT; IT CANNOT BE BOTH

Christianity is either a *spiritual* life, that is, a life lived by the Spirit, humanly impossible and unattainable except by the indwelling Christ (Rom. 8:9; Gal. 2:20; Eph. 3:17) resulting in a Kingdom-minded people who strive to do God’s will “on Earth as it is in Heaven” (Matt. 6:10), or Christianity is a *religious* life, that is, a noble, morally inclined humanistic movement doing good works, because it is the right thing to do for the health of society, not dissimilar to the Boys/Girls Scouts of the world. We seriously have to consider the

fact that we are either a *Holy Spirit led* movement founded by a publicly crucified and gloriously resurrected living Leader doing good works by His Spirit, in His name, as the “salt of the earth” and “light of the world” (Matt. 5:13-16), or we are a *humanitarian* religious movement with an absent once-upon-a-time miracle-working-leader who’s now on furlough, doing the best we can in our own power to promote morality, welfare, justice and reforms in society. It is either/or, we cannot be both, and we cannot have it both ways.

When a person joins a local church, he/she becomes a member of that church, which is a social and sacred institution. However, when the person experiences a second birth, he/she is “born of God” according to John 1:12 and 13 and becomes an heir of God and joint heir (or co-heir, NIV) with Christ (Rom. 8:17). There’s a big difference between the two. To conclude as succinctly as possible, “Authentic Christianity” is the outworking of the new birth or birth from above (John 3:3; 14:23; 1 Pet. 1:3) both in an individual’s life as well as in the corporate life of the collective of individuals we call “the church”. Anything else outside this is “playing church”, “doing church” or “going through the [church] motions”; phrases I learned in the US. Unfortunately, many gullible souls are riding in a church bus which isn’t traveling on “*the Way, the Truth, and the Life*”, hence does not have Jesus’s “Father’s House” as its ultimate destination for the passengers (John 14:1-6).

Who, Specifically, is This Work For?

You know by now that I will answer that question with storytelling, don’t you?

In my undergraduate days the lecturers and professors poured into me. I was like a sponge, and I soaked up their wisdom. During exams, I regurgitated back to them, most times verbatim, the things they had deposited in me. That was the relationship; the exam was “return to sender”. Today, we call that passive learning, because it was not as transformative as it should have been. During my first master’s degree I tiptoed around the subjects and the professors, because the possibility of moving up the scale and earning higher wages was at stake.

However, in my subsequent graduate (or post-graduate) studies, especially in the US, when acquisition of skills and knowledge, and not earning daily bread, was the issue, I engaged the subjects and my professors. I was an adult, new immigrant, black male student, and I behaved that way. If being black and an immigrant with an accent did not make me visible enough, I increased my visibility in every class by raising my hands and asking questions and instigating debates, because I wasn’t in class to soak up knowledge but to actively reflect and process my thoughts. I wasn’t anti-American though I came across to some that way. I challenged the professors and took them to task. From hindsight, I would say that I was unnecessarily self-conscious of my race, as well as being a new immigrant, and for these reasons—my skin color and accent—I had determined, been stubbornly determined, not to play or accept any inferiority role at any level, in any shade, shape, or form. (I was a *Great Ife!* and a *Great UI!* rolled together)¹⁷. In the process, I earned the respect of my professors and

¹⁷ These were the rallying slogans of the alumni of the universities of Ife and Ibadan, respectively; two world-class academic and research institutions in Nigeria.

supervisors. We became friends and collegial (not necessarily peers). There was hardly a class that the professor, especially in education courses, did not single out my paper and read portions as example of what he/she was looking for in a graduate level class. I was surprised when a colleague mentioned to me that our supervisor and boss in a CPE unit had said to him that I intimidated him. Maybe, I could believe that coming from one of my colleagues, but from the boss? I yelled, “Who?” “Me?” “No way!” “Impossible!” “He’s the boss!”

I bring the same uninhibited, graduate school level, adult mentality to church. I don’t come to church for the preacher, pastor or bishop to pour into me. Rather, I come to church to engage life and the scriptures with the preacher and, from the engagement, collusion, intersection and interaction of life and scriptures, to hear an authentic word from the Lord. I’m not a tabula rasa, a blank slate—I have feelings and strong ideas that I need the pulpit to recognize, address and challenge, not ignore. It is unquestionable that uncountable times, there exists a chasm—a big gap—between what a worshipper believes from his Bible studies and prayerful devotion to God and what he’s experiencing in his day-to-day life. Meaning that, even though the believer is not consciously and willfully living in unconfessed, known sins, there’s yet a clash or misalignment between life (or reality) and the indomitable promises of the scriptures. That’s when a fresh Word of hope, encouragement, assurance, and inspiration from the Great Shepherd through the ministry of His pulpit is especially needed and desirable. Therefore, if the service/sermon was refreshing and I was blessed, as much as possible, if he/she was available with no aggressive security personnel around him/her, I always edged my way to meet and shake the preacher’s hand and give him/her my compliments and unsolicited comments. That’s the kind of engagement and adult relationship I expect for this work and me.

For that reason, this book, **WHITHER BOUND, CHURCHIANIZED NATION?** is not for every Nigerian. It is for Nigerians with their **SPIRITUAL EYESIGHT** wide open, who **THINK DEEPLY** and **RESPECTFULLY QUESTION EVERYTHING**, including questioning this book and its author. Are you up for that challenge? Let me close with 1 Corinthians 14:20 where the Apostle Paul admonishes, “*Brethren, DO NOT BE CHILDREN IN UNDERSTANDING; however, in malice be babes, but IN UNDERSTANDING BE MATURE*” (uppercase mine). Are you a child or an adult? Prove it.

Closing Prayer for the Pulpit

May God save us from pastors who teach the scriptures detached, disconnected, and disjointed from life here and now on Monday mornings. May God deliver His pulpit from life coach preachers who confuse abundant life (John 10:10b) with human achievements and who would be more productive teaching and motivating the Boys/Girls Scouts of the world. May God rid His pulpits of demigods who charm the pews into stupor and oblivion. May the day come when character and content, motivation and inspiration, zeal for and knowledge of the Holy Scriptures, Biblical exegesis and Christian discipleship, modeling and mentoring for leadership, are the happy duos that sparkle from every pulpit Sunday after Sunday, in Nigeria, the USA, and all over the world. Amen.

Before I Sign Off—FYI

Presently, I am a chaplain in a New York State medium security correctional facility that may house about 1500 incarcerated individuals. I'm a chaplain to both staff and incarcerated individuals of all religions and no religious faith. I consider myself a good team player with the admin executive team. I minister and preach to a Protestant congregation behind bars, with 65 as the highest Sunday service attendance record. Yet, I prepare for the service and minister with intentionality and intensity in no way different than I would with a congregation of one precious soul sitting on a bench in a park, or a crowd of 65,000 souls in a cathedral bedecked with stained-glass windows. In about a decade as a prison chaplain, hundreds or probably thousands of men from different races, ethnic backgrounds, languages, with formal or no formal educational qualifications, different economy status, varying types of criminal records, first time or recurrent incarcerations, etc. have been under my ministry as chaplain and pastoral care giver in the six months, one year, two years or four years of their incarceration. On some Sundays, I preach in what an inmate once termed my "seminar voice", other times in my evangelistic voice, or a switch from one to the other in the same message. The goal always is pastoral. Some call me "my pastor" with a glow in their eyes; some see me as a role model or mentor. (I never made much of this.)

For many years in the classrooms of inner-city schools (especially in Brooklyn, New York) I had dealt with teenagers controlled by hormones leading them to display a flurry of fleeting mood changes. Such as, one minute she was cheerful, the next minute she was morose. I knew, from experience, that any hostility or semblance of it displayed toward me wasn't about me and had nothing to do with me. For most times, the teenager's behavior to the teacher was a misplaced hostility or euphoria. The teenager was reacting according to the stress or bliss emanating from his/her conflicting internal and external environments. Therefore, whether true or false, I had chosen to operate with a mindset that nobody—teenager, teacher, inmate, coworker, supervisor, or subordinate—had any valid, legitimate, or concrete reason to hate or dislike me, except from bad judgment or prejudice (which was their problem, not mine).

In my Nigerian Yoruba culture, we give civility, pleasantries, and neighborliness their pristine meanings. A Yoruba person cannot come in contact or be in proximity with you without extending a pleasantries or well wish that's unique to that moment. For example, we have a word of greeting or well-wishing for every season, occasion, event, or hour of the day, such as, a greeting or good wish for you when you are sitting, walking, tripping over or falling, eating, traveling, returning from a trip, teaching, learning, working, relaxing, standing, getting out of bed, going to bed, you name it, we have a greeting or salutation for it. That's why it's hard for me to be in the same space with someone, walk by anyone at his/her desk, in the walkway, or lobby and not voice a greeting or send a good wish. Since the English language is paltry in this regard, I'm left with a hearty "How're you doing?", "Good Morning Sir", and "Good Afternoon Ma". That's disappointing for someone who loves clowning around. (Clowning is a positive energy which helps to lighten the atmosphere).

When I said "Good morning" to an individual at work, I deliberately put so much energy and enthusiasm into it you would think I was saying "Good morning" to the universe that had just handed me a free cup of coffee. Though it had never been voiced, I was always conscious that this elation might validate the stereotype that

Black people are loud, but that has never bothered me. I'm alive and well! God's air fills my lungs. If I walked into a space and sensed hostility, tension, or resistance, I took no responsibility for it because it had nothing to do with me. On my part, I would find ways to diffuse the circumstance and lighten the mood. If that didn't happen, their unhappiness wouldn't deter or dent my happy mood.

When I turned 60, I made a quality decision to have fun and find humor in everything I did and whatever came my way. Henceforward, I was at my best when I was clowning and having a bellyful of laughter. "*A cheerful heart is good medicine*" (Prov. 17:22a; NIV). Occasionally, I got mail from an incarcerated individual about to reenter society thanking me for making them laugh during the Sunday services. I might act like one, but I never considered myself a comedian. It's just that I didn't know how to preach THE GOOD NEWS OF A LOVING GOD WHO SENT HIS SON TO DIE FOR OUR SINS, with a frown or scowl. (By the way, comedy is my TV staple. I'm stuck on the reruns. Comedians are so crafty, devious, and hilarious when they tell the bitter truth about your foolishness that you laugh so hard you forget you are the butt of their joke and end up liking them though the real you want to hit them.) I count it a privilege to be offered the chance of being part of their life's journey as their chaplain, a religious authority figure, father-figure, mentor, and, above all, God's agent of change.

My Philosophy as a Prison Chaplain

I don't think of an incarcerated individual as an island. Rather, I consider each one as a member of a (dysfunctional) family system, tribe, or village that's in dire need of healing and restoration. I am therefore always conscious of the ghosts of aunts, uncles, sons and daughters, dads, and mums present in every case, as well as unvoiced stories of the broken dreams and unfulfilled aspirations of the family, tribe, or village. With that frame of mind, I understand whatever I do, and however I do it, in three ways.

First, whatever I do or say, and however I do or say it, is a reflection of who God—whom I profess to represent—is. Is He God of love and compassion, who forgives, restores and always willing to grant yet another chance? I want them to come away believing such a God. For the same reason, while I don't make promises, I try hard to keep my word. Not because I am good at it, but because I represent a God Who keeps His Word. I am also aware that many of the incarcerated individuals came from a background of distrust and were well familiar with disappointments and broken promises from authority figures in their lives. I strive to be the exception, the authority figure that keeps his word.

Secondly, I consider every encounter as an indirect opportunity to reach out to the family, tribe, or village that the incarcerated individual represents, because, whatever happens to the incarcerated individual has a corresponding effect on the morale, emotions, and worldview of his village.

Lastly, whatever his crime or race, I imagine every incarcerated individual wearing a badge that reads, "*Imago Dei* (Image of God); Handle with Care." For, "*inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me*" (Jesus in Matthew 25:40).

The decade I spent in the classrooms as a science teacher in inner-city schools in Brooklyn had proved to be of tremendous advantage to my work in the prison system. As a teacher (once a teacher, always a teacher), I conducted my business in the prison with four eyes,

two in my eye sockets and two at the back of my head. As a pastor, I walked into every situation with four ears, two on the left and right sides of my head and two on the left and right atriums of my inner heart. Intentionally, and to everyone's advantage and benefit—if I may say so, I wore these two caps simultaneously: inner-city schoolteacher and clinical chaplain (or pastor/pastoral caregiver)—see *TEACH THEM*, Book 2, chapter 1. At any given point, I relied on the skills and charisma of whichever was appropriate for the situation. At the end of a day's work, when I dropped off my keys to go home, I forgot and left behind everything behind the prison walls. The slogan and advertising campaign for the city of Las Vegas put it well: "What Happens Here [in jail], Stays Here." From my discussions with other chaplains and correctional facility employees I believe the ability to drop the keys and put the prison out of my mind is a gift, a real blessing.

Being a New York State paid chaplain/employee in a medium security prison facility frees me from worrying about the color of the carpet in the sanctuary, building extension or renovation projects, staffing and budgetary needs, or the outgoing and incoming diaconate or board of elders. Nor do I have to bootlick or curry favor of some donors. It also enables me to be able to think outside the box. (Happily, I'm encased in none.) The only thing I worry about is being my authentic self, comparing and measuring myself and ministry with no one else but myself and my calling, seeking to be and do better today than (I was or did) yesterday, and praying for grace to faithfully deliver to the world the message I was sent here to deliver. I come alive, play my music, dance my dance, craft and deliver my message especially when I run my fingers over the keys of a word processor. I print and distribute my sermons to the incarcerated men in attendance every Sunday service because the sermons were birthed on a word processor. (This is also part of my bending over backwards to compensate for my accent). It always warms my heart when incarcerated individuals tell me that they have a folder where they file my printed sermons, and that they study and share them.

I am not the miracle worker—Jesus is. In my book, every day with Jesus is purposeful, even in a jail cell. I know and preach a miracle-working Jesus, not merely in the third persons by recounting and retelling biblical miracle accounts or verifiable miracles from other people's testimonies but in the first-person singular as a beneficiary of daily miracles and divine interventions. My utmost goal is to introduce and connect the incarcerated individuals to this life-transforming, never-failing, miracle-working JESUS.

I usually have my wife winking at me or gently kicking my feet under the table to caution me when, characteristically, I crack my expensive jokes and display my dry sense of humor. Unfortunately, I don't have that privilege when I am by my laptop. Please forgive my painful sarcasms, uncurbed dry sense of humor and bear with me if/when the messenger's style blurs (or appears to make blurry) his message. I thank you in anticipation of your forgiving spirit. This work, **Whither Bound, Churchianized Nation?** which I've chosen to tag *A PROJECT FOR THE MOTHERLAND*, was clearly out of my radar. It literally gave birth to itself because it had to be written. It was the product of a 6-months FMLA (unpaid) vacation in Nigeria, Dec. 2021 to May 2022.

In closing, I have a confession. Reading over, I was reminded that some Christians might charge me with immodesty. Have I been modest or immodest? I was able to resolve this when I asked myself: "Which of these two reports will gladden the heart of a parent: 'Mom, it got broken,' or 'Mom, I broke it'?" I had a choice to speak of God in the passive voice (e.g., "God is able; God can do it.") or in the active voice (e.g., "God is making me

able; God did it for me.”) I guess you know my choice by now. We don’t serve a passive God. We serve a God who is active in His people, God who is creating mini stories here and there through the experiences of His people. I’m thankful to be counted as one of His. AMEN. Lest I forget, I’ve never been prouder than I am now that I am an AMERICAN.

Questions for Reflection/Group Discussion

1. Relate your story of faith. How has God been made real to you or your family? (See a more detailed account of the author’s story of God in Part 3 of Didactic 001, pages 56 to 81 of *Whither Bound*).
2. What practice or practices in your parents and/or grandparents would you like to be perpetuated in your children and future generations?
3. The question: “Quo Vadis?”, “Whither goest thou?” comes to each one of us. Ask yourself: Where am I going... spiritually, mentally, emotionally, physically, and my commitments to myself, my community, and to God?
4. If we could (a) be mindful that each person we meet is not an island and that he represents a village, (b) that each individual is “Imago Dei” bearer of God’s image, and (c) that we are accountable to God how we treat our fellow human beings, especially the least, lost, last, and forgotten of society (see Matt. 25:31-46 and Luke 10:25-37), how will that awareness condition our human interactions in society?
5. As you go about your daily duties, do you ever imagine that you might embody and represent the hopes, aspirations and stories of your village or extended family, such that if you fail, they wither, and if you succeed, they thrive? That you are blessed to be a blessing; raised for such a time as this, (Est. 4:14)? (In other words, are you the Moses—the deliverer—of your village/extended family, and as you carry the burden and play the part, do you consider it as your God-assigned role?) If so, explain.
6. If (5) is remotely true of you, do you think that the different persons that you encounter daily might feel the same (that is, that they are “the Moses” of their village), and if so, is there something you can do (or not do) to make it easier for them as they carry the weight? Discuss. (Is it: “Don’t judge me until you know me”?)
7. The world is not in short supply of people who will offend you for no reasons whatsoever. I am naturally not a fussy person—those who know me can testify that I am not. However, when I turned 60, I made a quality decision not to be offended by whatever anybody did, not to give anyone the power to control my mood or happiness. Without making excuses or finding some justification for their bad behavior I chose to see past their actions, inhale-exhale and “let it go”, “let go and let God” and not let them determine my happiness. I attributed this to growing up.
 - a. How is that attitude a good or not so good philosophy in a society that’s prone to hostility, selfishness, and out to devour you and take advantage of your good intentions?
 - b. Why is it that we sometimes find out too late in life—and some never find out—that many of our battles are not worth fighting, and countless things we’ve fussed over never truly deserve the time and attention we gave them? Explain if you can, how is it that we often learn this lesson late in life?
8. I read again the piece on true/manipulative praise and chided myself. I said, “Michael, what a waste of words and illustrations. Just say, ‘In my opinion, manipulative praise is selfish and self-centered; true praise is selfless and God-centered. One is, ‘I’m praising God to receive XYZ from God’, the other is, ‘I’m praising God because God is worthy of my praise, with or without XYZ.’” Nothing more.” Do you agree with that succinct explanation? Explain.
9. In the “Third Eye Insights” the author uses three or four illustrations to describe true/manipulative praise/worshippers. Where do you find yourself, and why?
10. Describe or explain, Christianity and Churchianity, similarities and differences.
11. 3-2-1 exercise: (a) 3 questions that this booklet answered for me; (b) 2 questions that this booklet further raised for me; and (c) 1 reason why this booklet was meant for me.
12. Life Application: What action or decision will make this booklet worth your while?

DAD, THIS IS ESPECIALLY FOR YOU

(“Shaped by my story” (pg. 1), Dad would be proud of me for my authentic reflection below:)

Although my father had passed 10 years before I relocated to the US in the Fall of 1996, he would nonetheless have given me his blessing for the migration. Moreover, Dad would have encouraged me not to live as an alien but like a “son of the soil” in America. For, *“Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given you”* (Jos. 1:3). As an American citizen, and a reflective Christian, I humbly submit this thought, because my father would be proud of me for doing so, even though *Whither Bound: Churchianized Nation?* was my reflection on Christianity in Nigeria.

AMERICA, WE HAIL THEE¹⁹

It is common knowledge that whatever is “off-color” or “deviant” in the Nigerian church, especially, in the free-for-all Pentecostal churches, is copied, and learned from America. Many Nigerian Christian leaders—especially the entrepreneurial, highly motivated, self-starters and church founders—look up to America as standard of perfection in everything, including preaching, teaching, leadership styles, fundraising, building projects, etc. They learn the good, the bad and the ugly. Nigerians are generally good students, and in most cases, they perfect whatever they learn from American preachers, “as seen on television”, beyond the practice of their remote teachers, mentors, and role models. Their highest aspiration is to one-day visit the American churches and ministries they watch on television. Some Nigerian pastors are so enamored with America they’d argue with you until thy kingdom come to prove to you that America is “God’s Own Country.” To which I ask: “Which God? The god of the almighty \$\$\$, or the deity of ANTI-XYZ?” (Where XYZ is science, climate change, assault gun control reform, etc.) You could put a billboard, **“As Seen on US TV”** in front of many indigenous founder-led Pentecostal churches in Nigeria, because they are copycats of their TV models.

This is not a sweeping generalization or painting all American churches or church leaders on TV with a broad brush of bad influence on Nigerian churches, and African churches in general. I know, and I have great respect for many American churches and church leaders of high integrity that are passionate and committed to foreign missions and are sending short- and long-term missionaries, and seminary teachers to Africa and other Third World countries. Their approach is respectful

¹⁸ A term popularly known on the Internet for when someone includes extra information that is off-topic to advance his or her own selfish interests. A promotion usually completely unrelated to the conversation.

¹⁹ “Nigeria, we hail thee,” was the first line of the first Nigerian national anthem at attaining Independence on October 1, 1960. Six decades later, those of us who were old enough to have waved the complimentary miniature Green, White, Green Nigerian flag that day now struggle to hold back tears from saying, “Nigeria, we *wail* thee.” Nigeria is endowed in every area except good leadership with foresight, skill and passion to harness resources for nation building. May God, again, remember us, turn to us in His favor and send us our Moses.

and affirming. They form partnerships with African nationals, not “big brother, little brother,” or “big I, little you” mentality. They come alongside the African leaders as partners in the Kingdom. Sometime, the support is in form of building Bible or theological schools in the community, training local pastors and church leaders in their communities by the visiting or short-term bible teachers, rather than granting scholarship to a few Christian leaders to study abroad. The local leaders they train in turn take over the leadership of the schools and train their own people. They also support indigenous missionaries financially, with needed equipment, vehicles, and other resources. This group of American Christians has been real blessings to Nigeria and their continued influence in teaching sound doctrines and modeling ethical Christian leadership are most needed at this time.

AMERICA, WE HAIL THEE NOT (Or “America, We *Wail* Thee”)

Every survey indicates that Christianity and church attendance are on the decline in the United States. A recent study (2022) from the Pew Research Center shows that America’s Christian majority has been shrinking for years, and if recent trends continue, Christians could make up less than half the U.S. population within a few decades. That America’s Christian majority is facing steep declines is worrisome.

As one with background in the sciences, I approach life and issues by turning them into questions, preferably pint-sized questions that I can easily solve, or that will lead me to asking more questions. When my middle school students tell me they have some ideas for their science projects I ask them: “What is the question? Frame your idea in a question form for me, please.” Science is about asking (the right) questions and finding ways to answer them by formulating a hypothesis and designing experiments to test the hypothesis.

There was a conversation between the *researcher* and the *Christian* in me. So, the researcher in me asked, “*Why is Christianity declining in the US?*” *Could it be because...*

- 1) The Bible is not available in American language or not accessible to whosoever? The Christian in me answered: **An emphatic, NO.**
- 2) There are no preachers, and no one is preaching the gospel? The Christian in me answered: **Another emphatic, No! Preachers abound in the US, preaching is going on 24/7 on TV, radio, church buildings, social platforms, etc.**
- 3) *The researcher asserted:* The unbelieving world couldn’t see and haven’t seen any difference between themselves and professing Christians and therefore they feel pity for Christians and have no desire for what Christians claim they have to offer. *The rejoinder:* **Probably so! Most likely so! Unfortunately, this is true. You have a point here. For example, in the US, the rate of divorce, incarceration, drug addiction, domestic violence, etc. is about 50:50 among the worldly and Christianly people. Christians are as guilty of bigotry as the non-Christians. If Christianity works, why isn’t it making the difference? Why isn’t it working in the lives of many professing Christians and Christian leaders?**

This leads me to another question. *Researcher: Why is there no difference between those who claim to be Christians and those who have no interest in religion? Could it be that...*

- 1) Contrary to erstwhile proclamations and claims that the Bible, Jesus Christ, and the New Testament gospel change and transform lives, that this isn't true anymore or has been overstated. *The rejoinder: I doubt this. I sincerely don't believe it. The true preaching of God's word and Jesus as Savior still transforms lives and changes situations. God has not changed, and Jesus has not.*
- 2) *Researcher:* Though preaching and church attendance are going on, and mega churches are springing up here and there, there has been a departure from Biblical and New Testament truths. Now, watered-down gospel or half-true salvation messages are being preached, name-it-and-claim-it is the vogue, psychology has replaced theology in the pulpit, and the people are offered a spineless and fake Jesus (who himself needs rescuing). *The rejoinder: Sadly, I concur with you.*
- 3) Leadership! Numerous spiritual leaders, televangelists and mega church pastors in the land have been (a) known with the feet of clay, (b) are tainted with sexual scandals and money embezzlement, (c) conduct church/ministry like a family money-making business, (d) without regard for conscience and righteousness, under the guise of preserving conservative values and a theological framework of "The end justifies the means", have dabbled into politics, promoted, crowned, and proclaimed modern-day "Hitlers", racists, narcissists, bigots, chauvinists as saviors in order to appease their tribe and constituencies, (e) are known to exchange wedding vows and change spouses like ladies change shoes, (f) have been known for many unfulfilled and false prophecies they openly on national TV had prefaced with "Thus saith the Spirit of the Lord," yet—hit or miss—they keep on prophesying at every election cycle, (g) from their self-righteous Pharisaic reading and understanding of the Bible, they neglect grace and mercy typified by Jesus in favor of Mosaic "thou shalt" and "thou shalt not," etc. The list is inexhaustible, and I have not mentioned their fundraising gimmicks, telethons, and reformatted versions of the old "sale of indulgences" to vulnerable souls seeking divine help. The truth is that their gullible constituency may be fooled, and has been fooled, again and again, but the world is not. These leaders are a bad press for Jesus of Nazareth. Most of their practices negate true religion, which provokes the question: Why would anyone, in his right mind, for his soul's salvation, desire their "Made in America", opulent, partisan Jesus, who'd been reeling under systemic racism? Can't you see that the Jesus of Nazareth, the true Jesus of the Bible, has been missing from many American pulpits a long time ago? *The rejoinder: Okay! Enough! I get it! I'm ashamed I have to admit that we've missed the mark.*

This leads me to another question: *What is the way forward? How do we stem the tide?*

First, let's talk. Let's not shy away from having honest conversation on these. In the meantime, please read,

1. WHITHER BOUND: CHURCHIANIZED NATION? and
2. PULPITS, PEWS & POLITICAL PARTIES IN THE US: WHO IS USING WHO? both by Yours Truly, available on our website, **www.BackToBasicsMinistry.org** as free e-books. They are downloadable and printable for noncommercial purposes.

#shamelessplug. My name is Michael Ojewale and I approve this message. ☺

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Family Photo shoot in Nigeria to mark my 70th birthday: In the picture are my evergreen, endearing Sweetheart, Queen Praise, our charming then 15-month-old cute baby, Princess IbukunOluwa, and me, the king of the castle, Michael, the storyteller. IbukunOluwa was every bit a part of the mission.



than you can imagine. In the end, half-truths may be as damaging as absolute deception.

What is WHITHER BOUND, CHURCHIANIZED NATION? It is:

- Essentially, a collection of 3 related, dated, author-designed, color printed materials, preserved and presented here in their original booklet format, as they were earlier circulated (from February to May 2022) in some parts of Lagos, Nigeria
- A compounded medication, in the spirit of 2 Timothy 3:16b (NIV) and Revelation 3:19, concocted and served with love, for the purpose of (a) teaching, (b) rebuking, (c) correcting and (d) training
- A 100,000+-word book that literally gave birth to itself because it had to be written
- For some, a hard pill to swallow. For others, it is “*a word spoken in due season... a word fitly spoken,*” and “*open rebuke... the faithful wounds of a friend,*” (Proverbs 15:23; 25:11; 27:5, 6). For the author, simply storytelling.

In local churches and chapels, we offer copies to interested persons based on: **“Take a copy for any donation you can afford.”** All donations and gifts will be thankfully received to sustain this readership-sponsored literature ministry. To the public, we use mail order sale by DHL, FedEx, etc. for those who request for copies in response to our national newspaper ads.

Our three-pronged approach: 1) To circulate this book, “Whither Bound, Churchianized Nation?”, in millions to enlighten the masses, equip and empower future church and denominational leaders; 2) to create awareness for free online resources on our website; 3) to raise funds for the distribution of “*Teach Them*” publications on campuses in Nigeria.

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From the Postscript: “This book, *Whither Bound, Churchianized Nation?*, is not for every Nigerian. It is for Nigerians with their SPIRITUAL EYESIGHT wide open, who THINK DEEPLY and RESPECTFULLY QUESTION EVERYTHING, including questioning this book and its author. Are you up for that challenge?”