

## **ACTS 4:32-37: THE COMMUNAL LIFE OF THE EARLY CHURCH AS A PANACEAN MEASURE FOR REDUCING POVERTY AMONG CHRISTIANS IN NIGERIA**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

This paper attempts to contribute to the on-going search for solutions to the problems posed by poverty among Christians in Nigeria by using exegetical methodology to study Acts 4:32-37. It notes that poverty is not a new problem among Christians as the first century church also encountered it. The absence of the apostles from their home town, Galilee, contributed to their experience of poverty in Jerusalem. None of them was a native or a resident of Jerusalem. Hence, the instruction of Jesus that they should stay in Jerusalem without any means of livelihood most likely affected the early church economically. However, the church was able to manage the situation so that nobody was in need as it is presented by Luke in the text. Likewise, the paper notes that poverty is more rampant among Christians and non-Christians in rural areas than urban areas in Nigeria. This is due to the fact that in Nigeria most rural areas in the country lack social amenities. The paper is of the view that the Christian church in the country is doing little or nothing to combat poverty among its members unlike the early church which took certain steps to fight it.

One of the banes of many countries in the world today is poverty. This is manifested in the fact that about twenty-five thousand people die every day of hunger or related causes. In Nigeria the presence and severity of the problem has been confirmed by the establishment of many agencies that target it. Starting from 1979, Nigeria has set up different institutions and agencies such as the Green Revolution (GR), the National Directorate of Employment (NDE), and the Directorate for Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI). Poverty Alleviation Programme (PAP) which was established in 1999 to create 200,000 jobs annually failed to achieve its mandate and was scrapped to give room to National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) which was set up in 2003.<sup>1</sup> In spite of all these institutions, many Nigerians are still living in abject poverty. In fact, it has been stated that “as at 2004, the World Bank postulated that about 70% of Nigerians lived below poverty line – poverty line is US\$1 per day.”<sup>2</sup>

Nigeria is a multi-religious nation with three major religions: Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion. No doubt, there are poor people among the adherents of these

religions. What are these religious groups doing to assuage the effect of poverty on their adherents? How can the church in Nigeria help alleviate poverty among its members? This paper suggests answers to these questions by comparing the situation in Nigeria with that of the early church in Jerusalem. The paper notes that the church was able to overcome poverty because it neither appeal to, nor early rely on the government of the day but looked inward to solve the problem

### EXEGETICAL NOTES ON ACTS 4:32-37

Acts 4: 32-37 is about socio-economic and religious situation of the early believers in Jerusalem. In this text, the writer leaves his narrative of the persecution of the followers of Jesus in order to intimate his readers with activities in the community of believers. According to Smith, 'it is characteristic of Luke to sum up occasionally the situation of the community at various stages of development.'<sup>3</sup> The passage is the second summary of the socio-economic life of the community of believers; the first summary is Acts 2:44-45. Smith notices that there are nine such summary accounts. The other seven summaries can be found in Acts 5: 12-16; Acts 6:7; 9:31; 12: 20-25; 16: 5; 19:20; 28: and 30-31.

The disciples were commanded to stay in Jerusalem for 'the promise of the Father' (Acts 1:4). The promise came on the Day of Pentecost when the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2) and the number of believers increased to about three thousand after the sermon of Peter. Persecution arose against the church because of a miracle performed by Peter and John at the Beautiful Gate using the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 3). The phrase *plethous* (a great number or multitude) *ton pisteusanton* (of believers, that is, Christians)<sup>4</sup> signifies the numerical strength of the church which was less than two hundred before the Day of Pentecost. The warning given to the apostles by the Sanhedrin could not deter the missionary zeal of the believers who were of one heart and soul (*en kardia kai psuche mia*). This underscores the kind of unity that was in the church. It was unity of heart and soul. The members were perfectly united as one body and with one life. They experienced a common bond of fellowship. With this kind of unity, no problem would be unsolvable. No enemy could break into their camp easily. Commenting this, Constable notes that:

... the unity of the believers extended beyond spiritual matters to physical, material matters (cf. Mt 22:37-39). They owned personal possessions but they did not consider them private possessions. Rather they viewed their belongings as common (Gr. *Koina*, cf. *koinonia* –“fellowship”) property.<sup>5</sup>

The consequence of this is that 'no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own' (Acts 4:32). This does not imply that members of the church lost their rights to possess property; but that whatever one had could be shared with others. There was no room for claim of ownership when other members were suffering. This has been wrongly regarded as 'a primitive type of communism.'<sup>6</sup>

Luke also emphasized here that there was no needy person (*endees*) among them. Does it mean that there were no poor people among them? No, but the poor were catered for by the rich who sold their properties and laid the proceeds at the feet of the apostles. Thus, poverty was

conquered with the proceeds of what were sold. One cannot determine the duration of this act of charity but it seems it continued to the time of Paul who took it up as his ministry to collect offerings for the “saints” in Jerusalem. This development gave the apostles the opportunity to face their preaching assignment. Had it been that the problem of poverty still persisted they would not have had time for preaching. They would have abandoned it to look for greener pasture. But now that there was no needy person they were able to give their testimony to resurrection of Christ with great power (Acts 4:33). A point to note here is that poverty can hinder Christians’ evangelistic mission if nothing is done to curb it.

Another important point to note in the text is the name of Joseph (Barnabas) which was mentioned as a good example contrary to the examples of Ananiah and Saphira (Acts 5). Constable gives a succinct comment on it, thus:

Luke now gave a specific instance of what he had just described in verses 34 and 35. This reference to Barnabas is significant because it introduces him to the reader. Barnabas becomes a major character in Acts later. Furthermore Barnabas provides a vivid contrast to Ananias in chapter 5. ...His given Jewish name was Joseph, but people called him by his Jewish nickname (cognomen), Barnabas, which means "Son of Encouragement" (*uios parakleseos*)....Barnabas evidently sold some of his land—where it was we do not know—to provide cash for the needs of the church members. He humbly presented the proceeds of the sale to the apostles for their distribution.<sup>7</sup>

There were many people like Barnabas in the church but he was mentioned, probably, as a way of introducing him to the readers.

### **THE SOCIAL STATUS OF THE EARLY CHURCH MEMBERS**

The passage, Acts 4: 32-37, raises some issues that border on the social status of the early believers. Were they all poor people? Why would some people sell all their property and lay down the proceeds at the feet of the apostles? No doubt, most of the members of the church were living in Jerusalem which was a commercial city. It should also be noted that none of the apostles was a native or a resident of Jerusalem. They were far away from their relations as well as their businesses (Mark 10: 28). The economic situation in Jerusalem was bad because the economy of the city at that time partly depended on the businesses connected with religious services in the Temple. Tidball describes the situation, thus:

At the time of Jesus, Palestine was undergoing a period of rapid social transition. A number of natural phenomena, e.g. the famine of 25 AD when even Herod was moved to melt the palace plate for the poor and the epidemic of 29 AD combined with the probable over population of Palestine and problems in the distribution of goods to produce social upheaval....<sup>8</sup>

This was the situation in Jerusalem when Jesus asked the disciples to stay there until they would receive the Holy Spirit. This probably made some members of the church to be poor.

Paul's assertion in I Cor. 1:26 is also an indication that some early Christians were poor, especially the first converts in Jerusalem. Tidball's appraisal of Paul's status shows that Paul was not to be regarded as a poor person.<sup>9</sup> The spread of the Gospel to the Gentile world attracted some middle class people to the church so that they could send some contributions to the saints in Jerusalem occasionally.

This is reiterated by Paul's references to the church in Jerusalem about collection of offering in his epistles. Paul and Barnabas were sent to the church in Jerusalem when there was famine in the days of Claudius as prophesied by Agabus. They went with the contributions from the church in Antioch to Jerusalem (Acts 11:27). Paul also mentioned in his letter to the Galatians that the church in Jerusalem asked him to "remember the poor, which very thing I was eager to do" (Gal. 2:10). In the churches at Achaia and Macedonia, collections were also made for the 'saints' but it is not clear whether they were the saints in Jerusalem or elsewhere or even for Paul's ministry, although impression given in Phil 4:10-18 is that the offerings were to help Paul in his ministry.

As noted earlier, Paul's assertion in I Cor. 1:26 seems to imply that some of the early believers were not only poor but people of low status (proletarians). However, the phrase 'not many of you' does not mean all the believers; it only implies that there was a mixture of poor and rich men – poor men like the apostles, the slaves or ordinary people and rich men like Barnabas, Ananias and Saphira who had plots of land in Judea or elsewhere. The former were many while the latter were few. Tidball affirms this position, thus:

Even before Paul's ministry there are indications of wealthy and middle class people in the church. Barnabas clearly had some wealth (Acts 4:37) and Cornelius was hardly a member of the proletariat (Acts 10:1). Judea may not have been the most attractive part of the Empire in which a soldier could be stationed, but even so as a Roman Centurion based in prosperous Caesarea, Cornelius must have been a member of the middle class. With Paul's conversion and ministry, the class basis of the Early Church became even wider.<sup>10</sup>

One of the important lessons from the experience of the early church is that poverty was not encouraged neither was affluence discouraged. Most Christians tend to think that the Christian faith is synonymous to poverty just because the early church experienced it. As noted above, poverty was not palatable for the early church. Hence, the apostles sought for help from other Christians (Gal. 2:10).

## **THE SOCIAL STATUS OF THE CHRISTIANS IN NIGERIA**

The social status of the Christians in Nigeria cannot be easily and accurately determined because of lack of statistics and poor record keeping. Notwithstanding, the social stratification of Nigeria according to Smithy can be used to determine it. The stratification goes, thus:

- a) High public offices which consists of top political office holders;
- b) The professions which consists of Nigerians who hold senior posts in the Civil Service bureaucracy;

- c) Businessmen and women;
- d) Minor white collar workers; and
- e) The labouring class which constitute the largest percentage.<sup>11</sup>

This stratification reflects the status of Christians in Nigeria. Most of the rich people reside and have their businesses in the urban cities all around the country. Thus, it is not inaccurate to state categorically that members of the churches in the urban areas are richer than the ones in the rural areas where there are no good roads, electricity, pipe-borne water, good schools and other social amenities.

There are other factors that can help one to determine the social status of Christians in Nigeria. One of such is whether the church is a Pentecostal, Mainline or African Independent Church. It has been noted that at the initial stage of the Pentecostal churches, most of the members were university graduates and elites or well educated people who were senior civil servants or working in big industries like communication and oil companies.<sup>12</sup> This is not peculiar to the Pentecostal churches; in fact, the Mainline churches have a large number of political office holders. For example, the present governors of Oyo, Osun and Ogun States are all members of the Mainline churches. The reason for this can be linked to the fact that Mainline churches probably encourage their members to participate in politics more than other denominations. Besides, the location of a church can determine whether the Church members are rich or poor. For example, a church located in the rural area cannot be as rich as the one located in urban cities like Lagos and Warri. This probably explains the reason behind moving The Living Faith Chapel (also known as Winners Chapel) headquarters from Kaduna to Lagos. The movement of the church's headquarters in early 1990s brought it into the limelight.<sup>13</sup> Another factor in determining the social status of church members is the number of the poor in the nation's population. It has been noted that about seventy percent of Nigerians are living below poverty line.<sup>14</sup> This suggests that, at least, more than fifty percent of Christians in Nigeria are poor.

However, it may be difficult sometimes to believe that Christians are poor if one considers the physiognomy of church buildings in the country. This is common to all the churches – Mainline, Pentecostal and African Independent Church (AIC). Those churches buildings were erected with contributions of church members. Hence, it is difficult for one to say that there are poor people among Christians in Nigeria. Structures, on the other hand, can deceive and may not be a true representation of worshippers. It is an indisputable fact that poverty is real in the church. It is pertinent to state here that the church in Nigeria reflects the Nigerian society. In the society, those who are rich are very rich while those who are poor are extremely poor.

Comparatively, the social status of the members of the contemporary church is different in some ways from that of the early church. Firstly, the economic situation in Nigeria is better than that of Jerusalem, the headquarters of the early church. The country is endowed with many mineral resources unlike Jerusalem which was just a religious centre and all its businesses connected with the Temple worship. Secondly, being a Christian is not a crime as it was in the first century when many Christians had to leave their homes in order to escape persecution. The first century believers were scattered and the church was decentralized.<sup>15</sup> Also, many rich men and women find solace in the church today while many of those who constituted the first century

church were slaves and labourers as noted earlier. The early church did not have many high public or political office holders. Nevertheless, an area of similarity is that both the early church and the contemporary church have a mixture of both the rich and the poor in their membership.

### **IMPLICATIONS OF ACTS 4: 31-37 FOR CHRISTIANS IN NIGERIA**

It can be implied from this passage that if any attempts to alleviate poverty will succeed there must be a concerted effort against the problem. All Christian organizations in Nigeria will have to unite together to find solution to the problem. Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN) and Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) which comprise all Christian denominations in the country can set up programmes which will be aimed at eradicating poverty in Nigeria especially among Christians. Individual church members should be made to understand the danger and havoc posed by poverty among Christians.

In addition, as implied from the text, communalism as a way of life can also be an antidote against poverty. This should not be seen as a basis for modern day Socialism or Marxists' Communism which 'sprang from coercive legislation...' It came rather from a 'true union of hearts and made possible by regeneration.'<sup>16</sup> The New Testament does not promote communism but communalism or communal life which was practiced by the early Christians. In communalism, what one person owns belongs to all the community. This has nothing to do with different classes of people as it is emphasized in Communism. The communal life helped the early church to alleviate poverty to the extent that there was no needy person (*endees*) among the members.

It is important to note the generosity of Barnabas. His magnanimous act is contrary to what obtains in Nigerian society where the rich continue to be rich at the expense of the poor. He, like other believers who had possessions, sold them in order to assuage the suffering of their Christian fellows. They laid the proceeds at the feet of the apostles – a sign of total surrender of ownership, to show that they had confidence in the apostles. The apostles were trustworthy. The number of the poor would have reduced by now if people saddled with alleviation of poverty are trustworthy.

Lastly, the collection of offerings/contributions of fellow believers outside Jerusalem helped them to face and conquer poverty. Macedonians as well as the people of Achaia contributed to salvage the situation in Jerusalem. The church in Antioch of Syria also contributed towards relieving the church during the time of famine. The underlined point in this is the fact that the church saw poverty as a common enemy and united against it. The church in Nigeria can also borrow a leaf from the early church. The church can do this by coming together to contribute financially and materially to fight poverty to zero level.

The following suggestions will also help the church on how to reduce poverty level among Christians in Nigeria. Firstly, Christians should stop depending on only what government can do to reduce poverty. The early church did not wait nor appeal to the government to help her. There are more churches than government agencies in Nigeria. Those churches can serve as an avenue to enlighten Nigerians and empowering them to be financially independent. What NAPEP cannot achieve in the society can be achieved by the church. Religious leaders are closer

to the people than the government. They can work together with the government to make sure that poverty is reduced in the country. Second, church leaders need to understand poverty in all its ramifications. There are four areas of life through which one can manifest poverty, namely: mental, spiritual, social and physical areas.<sup>17</sup> The church can help members to attain physical sustainability, which includes basic daily needs like food, water, health, economics and a sustainable environment. It can also help members to attain mental sustainability which will make the poor to believe in themselves and be free from fear. Other areas are social sustainability and spiritual sustainability. Myers further suggests that the church must be interested not only in soul care but also in the social care of her members.<sup>18</sup> In order to achieve this, local churches can organize seminars on economic empowerment and poverty eradication. This will help members to change their attitudes towards work because in many African societies, hardworking is not equal to getting wealth. People believe that the amount of work one does will not bring riches but one's destiny. Hence the saying *ise ko lowo* (work is not money).

## Conclusion

This article has examined Acts 4:32-37 and related it to the economic status of Christians in Nigeria. It is the submission of this paper that the church in Nigeria is not doing well in terms of economic empowerment of its members. To be candid, many church leaders have enriched themselves at the expense of their members. Part of the offerings collected from the members which are supposed to be spent on the poor are directed towards building projects and buying luxury vehicles. Since most members of the church are poor, the church should take a radical step at eradicating poverty notwithstanding the futile efforts of the government which have resulted in making the rich to be richer and the poor to be poorer. The success of this also depends on the leadership of the church. It is not an exaggeration to say that the church in Nigeria fails because the leaders of the church fail in their responsibilities. Writing on the failure of the leaders of Pentecostal churches in Nigeria, Ojo calls on the leaders to:

... stop the descent into corruption and develop new emphases and values that will transcend self and materialism, but will cultivate discipline, accountability, and justice for the collective, and which will sustain long lasting legacies. It is then that a renewed religion will stand in a better position of offering hope and new direction against the failures and hopelessness that the contemporary Nigerian society presently finds itself.<sup>19</sup>

Ojo, nevertheless, concludes by reminding the church leaders who have enriched themselves at the expense of the poor and encouraging the impoverished congregation that "...if Pentecostal pastors are unwilling, I hope we, the foot soldiers and the sinners, can collectively provide some answers to resolving this paradox of religion and the Nigerian society".<sup>20</sup> Who knows how the "foot soldiers" will resolve "the paradox of religion" he is talking about? One can only hope that it will not be in a violent manner.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> M. Oluba, 2008, September 18, “Reducing Poverty in Nigeria” in Daily Triumph, retrieved from <http://www.triumphnewspapers.com/red1892008.html> on 05/04/09.

<sup>2</sup> U. Chigbu, “Why We are Struggling Below the Poverty Line” curled from [www.nigeriaworld.com/articles/2008/feb/263.html](http://www.nigeriaworld.com/articles/2008/feb/263.html) on 05/04/09.

<sup>3</sup> T.C. Smith, “Acts” in C.J. Alen (eds.) *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, vol. 10, Nashville: Broadman Press, 1970.

<sup>4</sup> D. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*. London: T&T Clark, 1999, 361.

<sup>5</sup> T.L. Constable, *Notes on Acts*, 2007 edition, curled from <http://www.soniclight.com> on 24/03/09

<sup>6</sup> D. Tidball, *An Introduction to the Sociology of the New Testament*. Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1983.

<sup>7</sup> Constable, *Notes on Acts*.

<sup>8</sup> Tidball, *An Introduction to the Sociology*, 46-47.

<sup>9</sup> Tidball, *An Introduction to the Sociology*, 93.

<sup>10</sup> Tidball, *An Introduction to the Sociology*, 92.

<sup>11</sup> H.H. Smythe, “Social Stratification in Nigeria” in *Social Forces*, vol. 37, No. 2, University of North Carolina Press, Dec., 1958.

<sup>12</sup> M.A. Ojo, M.A. *The End-Time Army: Charismatic Movements in Modern Nigeria*, (Trendy, NJ: Africa World Press, 2006, 165.

<sup>13</sup> Ojo, *The End-Time Army*, 165.

<sup>14</sup> Chigbu, “Why we are Struggling below Poverty Line

<sup>15</sup> Reichke, B. *The New Testament Era*, translated by D.E. Green, (London: Adam &Clarles Black, 1968, 110.

<sup>16</sup> Constable, *Notes on Acts*.

<sup>17</sup> Myers, B.L. *Walking with the Poor* (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 81-86.

<sup>18</sup> Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, 86.

<sup>19</sup> M.A. Ojo, *Of Saints and Sinners: Pentecostalism an the Paradox of Social Transformation in Modern Nigeria*, Inaugural Lecture Series 227, (Ile-Ife: Obafemi Awolowo University Press, 2010, 51.

<sup>20</sup> Ojo, *Of Saints and Sinners*, 51.

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