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Ethical Investigation of Material Possession Among Contemporary Christians in Nigeria

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Abstract

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Purpose: God created material possession for sustenance of man on earth. Material possessions are indispensable in life and living a purposeful life requires having basic material possessions. The paper investigated Material Possession, Challenges of Material Possession and ethical response to the challenges of material possession among contemporary Christians in Nigeria.

Methodology: The work is descriptive in nature and author employs a qualitative research approach that involves a combination of literature review and biblical analysis to address the subject of discussion. Material possession that some Christians at this contemporary time desire to acquire include latest vehicles, glamorous attire, attractive and solid houses, estates, clothes, electronic equipment and gadgets, plots of land, billions of dollars in their foreign accounts, productive firms at home and abroad and many of such. The greed of humans makes them pursue material possessions of the world at the expense of moral and spiritual values. Undue quest for material acquisition through bribery and corruption is detrimental to the moral and spiritual standard of Christian life.

Findings: The paper identified compromise of some Christians, abuse of prosperity gospel, increase of social vices in the society, abandoned and inhabitable houses as challenges attached to material possessions among some Christians. The paper argues that acquiring material possession is not sinful, but undue means of material acquisition is against the will of God. Appropriation of Christian ethical response discussed in this paper is believed to promote biblical understanding of material possessions and godly ways of utilizing them to the glory of God and blessing of humanity.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Policy and Practice : The study recommends that all Christians and responsible citizens should avoid every unethical way of acquiring material possession and learn to be contented in God. The true Church of Jesus Christ must uphold proactive teachings of the Bible on what constitutes true material possession. The article makes a notable contribution to the existing body of knowledge within Christian ethics, particularly in the context of expected biblical moral standard that should guide disposition of Christians to material possession.

Keywords: *Christian Ethical Response, Material Possession, Contemporary Christians, Nigeria*

Introduction

Material possession is part of God's creation for sustenance of man on earth. God provides physical and material blessings for humans to enjoy. God makes provision for the man he created in His image and His provision for man includes gold, aromatic resin, precious stones, and many other resources. In fact, in Nigeria, the land is rich in minerals and fertile indeed with flowing waters. He puts all of them at humans' disposal. The Bible clearly reveals that every part of the material world comes from the loving hand of the Creator, who calls it into being out of nothing and declares it very good. They are for humans' sustenance and blessings (Genesis 1:9-31 and 2:9-19).

However, the greed of humans makes them to pursue material blessings of the world at the expense of moral and spiritual values. There are contemporary leaders who amass wealth for themselves to the point of making the whole nation to experience poverty and economic meltdown. There are government and private sectors that have been invaded with bribery and corruption in the name of undue desire for material possession. Worst still, there are people who have built mansions and after their demise, the place becomes inhabitable due to many reasons. The wrong philosophy of "money answers everything" in society has distorted social, moral and religious values in Nigeria. It wastes the lives of many promising youth, increases social vices in society and affects the quality of living in contemporary society (Apase and Yawe, 2019:11-13). The paper argues that acquiring material possession is not sinful but undue means of material acquisition is against the will of God. The work is descriptive in nature and author employs a qualitative research approach that involves a combination of literature review and biblical analysis to address the subject of discussion. Thus, this paper examines material possession, biblical perspectives of material possession, challenges of material possession and presents Christian ethical response to address the challenges of material possession.

Concept of Material Possession

The concept of material possession in the contemporary time has its root from materialism. The popular idea, that it is money, not God that makes the world go round, is derived from the more basic meaning of materialism. It implies that money is the basic factor of human action and it should be used to acquire material possession. On this view, money is supposed to supply human values, when actually it represents them. Money cannot buy joy, life and other things that are paramount to life (Storkey, 1995, 575). Material possession that people at this contemporary time desire to acquire are: the latest vehicles, glamorous attire, attractive and solid houses, estates, clothes, electronic equipment and gadgets, plots of land, billions of dollars in their foreign accounts, productive firms at home and abroad and many of such. The acquisition of the above material possessions is paramount to contemporary Christians. This paper argues that the necessity for life is over and above material possessions.

There are different positions on material possessions from different scholars. For instance, Sirgy, Lee, Larsen and Wright (1998:103) affirm that material possessions have influence on life satisfaction for materialistic and non-materialistic individuals. Pelham (2016:3) asserts that material possessions play a role in the identity formation of individuals. Satisfaction with material possessions influences overall life satisfaction. Chan (2019:115) states that material possessions are used among young people for self-expression. Thus, the paper agrees with the above assertion that material possessions are indispensable in life and living a purposeful life requires having basic material possessions.

Similarly, Richins (1994:523) affirms that values have great influence on what people acquire. The significance of material possessions depends on the meaning that people ascribe to materials. Accordingly, two types of meaning are given to material possessions -public and private.

Public Meanings: These are the subjective meanings of material that are shared by the people in the society at large. These meanings are attached to socio-cultural experiences and exposure to social media. Possessions are parts of social communication system and people use their material possessions to express themselves to the public.

Private (or personal) meaning: This is “the sum of the subjective meanings that materials hold for a particular individual” (523). It has to do with the special meaning of the owners, consequent upon their experience and values for the material acquisitions. The development of a material private meaning involves active processes from which the meaning has grown as a result of intimate interactions with those material possessions (524). Reflection from the above position shows that individual affection and disposition to material possessions is a factor in the personal or private denotation to material possession.

Biblical Perspective of Material Possession

True wealth, according to biblical injunction, is more of a spiritual undertaking than anything material. From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible’s view of heavenly wealth remains constant (Collins, 1992:354). Christ, in several analogies, spoke about the vanity and banality of material possessions, about the stupidity in putting one’s faith in such perishable items that cannot stand the test of time; about the foolishness in chasing after transient things that will not guarantee Christians a future of limitless enjoyment (Luke 12:15; 16:19-31;18:22).

The Eden debacle is one of the most graphic expositions on the emptiness of material wealth in juxtaposition with its spiritual equivalent. God created man in His image and likeness, equipping him with all that was required to make his life on this earthly plain successful and fulfilling (Gen 1:26-27; 29,30; 2:8,9). Man was spiritually empowered by the Almighty to the extent that nothing was impossible for him to achieve. He was free from all the challenges associated with earthly pursuits (Genesis 1:28-30). That was before he fell from his exalted heights (354).

When man disobeyed his maker by siding with the rebellious “sun of the morning,” Lucifer, in his insurgency against the Most-High God, instantly became poverty-stricken. He fell from the pinnacle of his first estate into the depths of penury, pain, fear, anxiety, hopelessness, helplessness, and death. In his former station, he had all he needed at his fingertips, while in his decadent state, he had to struggle to make a living; now had to scratch a living out of an earth that had been created for his enjoyment; now had to work hard to bring out those things that were initially meant for his enjoyment (Meyer, 2006:32).

From the biblical account, there is a difference between possession of wealth and love of wealth (I Tim. 6:9-10). The love of wealth is attached with temptation and other evils, which is inimical to Christian life. Possession of wealth is not sinful but the mode of possession and wrong attitudes to possession is a sin against God. The Bible condemns greed and undue attitude of the wealthy toward the poor (Amos 4:1-4 and James 2:1-7). The Bible affirms the right to private property, which is not absolute. The Bible considers the wealthy as stewards of God’s resources which should be used to serve God and care for the poor (Rick, 2013:39).

In the ancient world, debtors are poor and they were at the mercy of rich and Bible condemns the exploitation of the poor for any reason whatsoever. This is what makes the rich to become richer and the poor to be poorer. Bible condemns immoral act of acquiring wealth (Scott, 2014:14). In an ideal situation, the rich can become wealthy and the poor can be better off. Furthermore, God expects the rich to demonstrate generosity with their wealth and regardless of one’s level of wealth, the wealthy should trust in God not in wealth.

Challenges of Material Possession

This paper identifies four major challenges attached to material possession among Christians in the Nigerian context.

Compromise of Some Christians: In the selfish cravings after material possessions, some Christians have sold their souls to the devil (1 Timothy 6:10). Some Christians today due to financial hardship in the nation and lack of deep-rooted faith compromise their faith by engaging in unethical means of giving and collecting bribe in their desperate quest for material acquisition. Worst still, this paper argues that there are some individuals who identified themselves as ministers of the gospel who sacrificed gospel message on the altar of materialism. This is evident in their approaches to the ministry and the ways they deceive some miracle seekers. The paper submits that there is no moral justification for any Christian to compromise the faith because of material possession that will not last.

Abuse of Prosperity Gospel: Prosperity gospel is part of the holistic gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the will of God for all His children to prosper in life. Barron (2022:3), affirms that prosperity gospel emphasizes God’s provision for human beings in the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. Christians are to benefit from Jesus’ victory over sin, death, sickness and poverty. Prosperity in this sense

means health, wealth and wholeness. The blessedness of Christian life starts on earth and reaches its fulness in heaven. Thus, the abuse of prosperity messages among some gospel ministers promotes materialistic lifestyle among some contemporary Christians. Similarly, wrongful interpretation of the Bible on material possession is making some to be desperate in acquiring material possession. Obuseh (2014:3) is in agreement with the position above and states that the seductive doctrines of some contemporary prosperity preachers have influenced the biblical position of true wealth. This is evident in Nigeria where the harsh economic realities have influenced some people to accept false religious tenets. Material possessions have a lot of moral and spiritual challenges on man's quality of living.

Today, some churches are relenting on gospel messages that prepare people for the heavenly kingdom because they are concentrating on what one can grab and enjoy on this earthly plain. There are fake pastors who focus more on earthly prosperity, in their congregations and make more money from their ignorant, miracle-seeking disciples (3). This is quite unfortunate, because false prophets use the name of Jesus Christ and church to defraud people and soil the integrity of the Christian faith. Abuse of prosperity gospel has created a very materialistic generation which believes in momentary pleasure of materialism. This calls for more serious concern of the Church in Nigeria.

Increase of Social Vices in the Society: Undue quest for material acquisition among some people who claim to be Christians without due fruits in their lives is a factor responsible for social vices in the society. This is evident through corruption and bribery, falsification of age, gossips, backbiting and muds lingering among unregenerate church members (Awoniyi 2017:185 and Obuseh 2014:3). The paper argues that some church members who indulge in collection of bribe either in kind or cash in different sectors of the nation are making some people to consider bribery as a normal thing. Thus, undue desire for material acquisition through social vices is daily increasing and this is inimical for church and society.

Abandoned and Inhabitable Houses: Abandoned and inhabitable houses is another attached challenge to material possessions. The writer observed that there are abandoned and inhabitable houses in the town and cities today which are not of value for the owners and the residents in the society. This could be as a result of death of the owners or children's absence in the country which makes it uneasy to claim their late parents' properties. Also, some children lack interest in the properties left by their parents. Sometimes, some people have properties without telling the children, siblings and relatives which makes the property unprofitable after their death. The writer recalled an incident of a man who was involved in an accident and he almost lost his life. The wife and children borrowed money to take care of him in the hospital not knowing that the husband has undisclosed millions of naira in his private account. The survival of the man brought change of heart to him. If the man does not survive the accident, the money might likely be a waste in the bank. This is in agreement with Pelham (2016:3) who affirms that some people have material

possessions that cannot benefit them, but threatens their emotional and environmental health. Thus, any material that will not be profitable for the owner and posterity should be jettisoned.

Christian Ethical Response to the Challenges of Material Possession

This section provides Christian ethical response to the challenges of material possession among Christians in Nigeria.

The Authority of the Bible: The authority of the Bible should be maintained on all matters pertaining to the acquiring of material possession. God is transcendent and personal; man is sinful but can be saved through personal faith. This is the theological expression with which Christians are most familiar and most comfortable. Maston (1982:14) and Awoniyi (2017:186) assert that the entire Bible should be related to the whole man and society. Since God is both love and justice, evangelicals can be no less. Based on the above assertion, the writer submits that the biblical principles of love, faith, justice and hope of eternity should be applied in responding to the challenges of material possession among the contemporary Christians. Therefore, the authority of the Bible should be maintained on all matters of acquiring material possessions. Christians must not worship Mammon in the quest for material acquisition. Christians are to critically appropriate the biblical principles on the material acquisition. Christians are to demonstrate radical obedience to the authority of the Bible in all matters pertaining to material acquisition.

Practice of Genuine Faith in Jesus Christ produces Lasting Material Possession: Practice of genuine faith in Jesus Christ will produce lasting material possession; and this is the kind of material possession that produces the fruits of love, patience, charity, tolerance, forgiveness, obedience, meekness and many of such as found in Galatians 5:22-24. Any material possessions that does not express or identify with these fruits of spirit are abominable before God. Genuine Christians should desist from empty pursuits of material possession that will give momentary pleasure that will end up in eternal damnation. The Bible affirms that “man must not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4). When Christians listen to the commandments of God pertaining to moral conduct, they shall accordingly reap abundant material possession both here on earth and in heaven. The paper argues that genuine faith in Jesus Christ is measured in the manifestation of fruits of the spirit and not in the measure of material possession.

Proactive Teaching on True Material Possession: In these end times, the true church of Jesus Christ must uphold proactive teachings of the Bible on what constitutes true material possession. The pursuit of material possession must be in accordance with the biblical standard and any other teachings against the moral standard of God should be discouraged because material possession is not an assurance of eternal life. Mark 8:36 states that “what shall it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and losses his own soul?” It is of no benefit for any Christian to enjoy material blessings on earth and end up in eternal damnation. Mbewe (2020:148), affirms that teaching ministry of every church must lead to transformation of life that will lead into eternal kingdom of

God. The writer submits that Church leaders at this contemporary time should be proactive in the teaching ministry that will translate to the transformation of life and society. Church teaching ministry should be proactive in this generation which should be evident in the spiritual growth of church members that will manifest in their faithfulness to God in private and public life.

Condemnation of Accumulation of Possession: The church of God should condemn accumulation of material possessions at the expense of care for other people in the society. The Bible provides basis for this position. There is the need to understand biblical moral standard to accumulate material possession. For instance, Luke 18:25 affirms that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to inherit the kingdom of heaven. and Luke 6:20 says blessed are the poor. The material possession that are not centred on God's will is evil and leads to destruction. However, these texts should be balanced by a few Old Testament texts which consider possession as God's blessing to be enjoyed (Eccl. 5:18-20) and a result of one's diligence (Prov. 10:4-5). Similarly, in the New Testament, Paul counsels Timothy to keep material possession in proper perspective (1 Tim. 6:6-19), Paul acknowledges that God gives liberally to his people for their enjoyment (1 Tim. 6:17). This position is balanced by admonitions not to trust in one's wealth because of the temptation of pride and of the uncertainty involved in retaining wealth (Eccl. 5:8-6:12) (Philips, 2001:32). Hence, there is need for every Christian to be conscious of God and eternity as they acquire material possession. Similarly, the church should condemn any material possession that will be gathered at the expense of care of others and posterity. This should be done through media and relationship with God's people in the church and outside the church.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has examined material possession and attached challenges among contemporary Christians in Nigeria. It also delved into the Christian ethical response to the attached challenges. God created material possession for sustenance of man on earth. Material possessions are indispensable in life and living a purposeful life requires having basic material possessions. Material possession that some Christians at this contemporary time desire to acquire include latest vehicles, exotic attire, attractive and solid houses, estates, clothes, electronic equipment and gadgets, plots of land, billions of dollars in their foreign accounts, productive firms at home and abroad and many of such.

The greed of humans makes them to pursue material possessions of the world at the expense of moral and spiritual values. Undue quest for material acquisition through bribery and corruption is detrimental to the moral and spiritual standard of Christian life. The paper identified compromise of some Christians, abuse of prosperity gospel, increase of social vices in the society, and abandoned and inhabitable houses as challenges attached to material possessions among some Christians. The paper argues that acquiring material possession is not sinful but undue means of material acquisition is against the will of God. Appropriation of Christian ethical response discussed in this paper is believed to promote biblical understanding of material possessions and

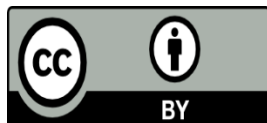
godly ways of utilizing it to the glory of God and blessing of humanity. The study recommends that:

1. Christians and responsible citizens should avoid every unethical way of acquiring material possession and learn to be contented in God.
2. The true Church of Jesus Christ must uphold proactive teachings of the Bible on what constitutes true material possession. The pursuit of material possession must be in accordance with the biblical standard and any other teachings against the moral standard of God should be discouraged because material possession is not assurance to eternal life.
3. Acquisition of material possessions is indispensable for the contemporary Christians. This paper recommends that the necessity for life is over and above material possessions, therefore every Christian should be conscious of eternity with God and learn to store up their material possessions in heaven.
4. The church of God should not relent on correct interpretation and application of prosperity gospel among her members. This will strengthen the immunity the church members against false teachings from fake gospel ministers.

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