

CAUSES FOR THE UPSURGE OF IMPRECATORY PRAYER
IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN CHRISTIAN CHURCHES

By

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Introduction

Prayer is a conversation with God; the intercourse of the soul with God, not in contemplation or meditation, but in direct address to him. It is 'beseeching the Lord' (Ex 32:11); 'pouring out the soul before the Lord' (1Sa 1:15); 'praying and crying to heaven' (2Ch 32:20); 'seeking unto God and making supplication' (Job 8:5); 'drawing near to God' (Ps 73:28). Prayer presupposes a belief in the personality of God, his ability and willingness to hold intercourse with us, his personal control of all things and of all his creatures and all their actions.

As part of forms of prayer, came imprecatory prayer. Imprecatory prayer has become one of the forms of prayer in African Christian Churches. Though this type of prayers is found in the Bible especially the Old Testament, the practice is not in consonant with Jesus' statement, "You have heard that it was said, Love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:43-44). This paper in this regard, seeks to bring to light the meaning of imprecatory prayer, the theological foundation for imprecatory prayer, state some of the factors that have led to the upsurge of imprecatory prayer in Africa and finally, examine the named factors in the light of the New Testament. For the sake of my knowledge in some Akan culture and traditions especially that of the Ashanti region of Ghana, I will use some of them to elaborate some of the points.

What is imprecatory prayer?

Carl Laney defines the imprecatory psalms as 'an invocation of judgment, calamity, or curse uttered against one's enemies, or the enemies of God'¹. C. Hassell Bullock in his view sees the

¹ J. Carl Laney, *A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms*, in *Vital Biblical Issues*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel Resources, 1994), p.30.

imprecatory psalms as ‘Psalms of anger’ or ‘Psalms of wrath’². According to Rogers, imprecatory prayer is essentially praying the Psalms of the Bible and specifically naming the enemies of God who refuse to repent³. In the light of the Old Testament, imprecatory prayer is directed primarily at God’s covenant people, not the unconverted or those who are not part of the covenant. The imprecatory prayer asks the blessings of God on His people if they obey the Law and curses of God if they disobey. Throughout the Bible the blessings and curses of God are delineated as part of God’s covenant. Deuteronomy 28 and 29 contain lists of blessings and curses for God’s people. Many of the Psalms of David also contain imprecations. In the imprecatory Psalms, the author calls for God to bring misfortune and disaster upon the enemies (Ps. 5; 11; 17; 35; 55; 59; 69; 109; 137; 140).⁴

Whiles commenting on imprecatory prayer, Brandford Yeboah, stated that imprecatory prayer springs from the Old Testament curse theology that reflects the holiness of God and His faithfulness to His covenant promises. It is a pattern of divine judgment through curses upon those who violate God’s word. This is evident in the Old Testament. For example, Adam and Eve (Gen 3:17), Cain (Gen 4:11), Noah cursing Canaan (Gen 9:23). He further said, ‘God’s unconditional promise to Abraham and his descendants to curse those who curse them, permanently established this principle of God’s dealing with His covenant people’⁵. Gen12:3; 27:29 and Deuteronomy 27:15 - 26; 28:15 – 66, however provides the backbone for this Old Testament curse theology.

² C. Hassell Bullock, *Encountering the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), p.22

³ Jay Rogers, *What is Imprecatory Prayer?* September 08, 2008. www.forerunner.com/blog/what-is-imprecatory-prayer [Accessed 3 July, 2011]

⁴ Roy L. Honeycutt, *Curse and blessing*, Holman Bible Dictionary for Window 1.0g, (Parsons Technology, 1994)

⁵ Dr. Brandford Yeboah, *Themes of the Old Testament, Exegetical Analysis of selected Psalms towards a theological development of the theme of Imprecatory Prayers*, (Lecture for Master of Arts in the study of Religions, June – July, 2011)

Factors which may account for the upsurge of imprecatory prayers in African Christian churches

There are a lot of factors that have accounted to the increase of the teachings and application of the doctrine of imprecatory prayer in many churches in Africa. Some of these factors are as follow:

African's worldview

According to Craig Rusbult, 'A world view is a mental model of reality, a framework of ideas and attitudes about the world, ourselves and life. It is a comprehensive system of beliefs'⁶. People's worldview is affected by factors such as their inherited characteristics, background, experiences, life situations, their values, attitudes, and habits they have developed, and more.

The African's worldview about spirits is so amazing. In Africa, there is no division and differentiation between the animate and inanimate, between the spirit and matter, between living and non-living, dead and living, physical and metaphysical, secular and sacred, the body and the spirit, etc. Most Africans generally believe that everything (human beings included) is in constant relationship with one another and with the invisible world, and that people are in a state of complete dependence upon those invisible powers and beings⁷. In addressing the issue on the worldview of African people, Peter Paris made reference to Genovese's statement, 'When Africans took over the Christian God, they simultaneously extended, rather than transcended their own practice'⁸. That is to say African conversion to Christianity did not mean a wholesale

⁶ Craig Rusbult, *Worldview*, <http://www.asa3.org/ASA/education/views/index.html> [Accessed 15 July 2011]

⁷ Cilliersp, Johan, *Formations and movements of Christian spirituality in Urban African contexts*, p.10, http://academic.sun.ac.za/tsv/Profiles/Profile_documents/Johan_Cilliers_AFRICAN_SPIRITUALITY.pdf [Accessed 20 July 2011]

⁸ Peter J. Paris, *The spirituality of African Peoples: The search for a Common Moral Discourse*, (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1995), p.37

exchange of their indigenous religion for a new one⁹. Most Africans Christians still believe in the existence of ghost, witches, evil spirits, idols etc which can cause havoc, misery, diseases, death, poverty and so on.¹⁰ Because of this embedded worldview, African Christians still have the fear that these invisible spirits can still have influence on one's life negatively in spite of the fact that one has become a Christian¹¹. In the quest for African Churches to find solution to this matter and also help their members to stay secured from the influence of these evil spirits, some African churches have resulted to imprecatory prayers as a means to make these evil forces powerless.

Superstition

Superstition is also one of the things that is causing the upsurge in imprecatory prayer in African Churches. Superstition is a belief or practice generally regarded as irrational and as resulting from ignorance or from fear of the unknown. It implies a belief in unseen and unknown forces that can be influenced by objects and rituals. Magic or sorcery, witchcraft, and the occult in general are often referred to as superstitions¹². For example, one common thing that is going on in many organizations and institutions is that, there are certain people others have tagged to be wicked and evil and can do anything evil to anyone when they fall into their trap or threat them (the suspected wicked person) for any reason. For this reason, they do not want to have anything to do with the suspected wicked person. One common Akan proverb that has also increased this

⁹ Peter J. Paris, *The spirituality of African Peoples: The search for a Common Moral Discourse*, p.36

¹⁰ Peter K. Sarpong, *People differ: An Approach to inculturation in evangelism*, (Ghana, Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2002), pp. 94-103

¹¹ John D. Kwamena Ekem, *Priesthood in Context: A case study of Priesthood in some Christian Community and Primal Communities of Ghana and Its Relevance for Mother- Tongue Biblical interpretation*, (Ghana, Sonlife Press, April 2009), p.39

¹² Saliba, John A, *Superstition*, Microsoft® Student 2009 [DVD]. (Redmond, WA: Microsoft Corporation, 2008)

idea of superstition is the statement, '*Aboa bi beka woa, na efiri wo ntoma mu*' which literally means, before you can be bitten by any insect, it might be in your cloths. This proverb technically means before anything evil can happen to you, it might be from people around you. Therefore, with this idea in mind, should it be that anything evil happens to any African Christian who believes in superstition, the next thing the person does is to result to imprecatory prayer and return the evil back to the sender. The term 'return to sender' is also another name for imprecatory prayer.

Language of libation

Libation is the act of pouring liquid, e.g. wine or oil, as a sacrifice to a god or in honor of a dead person (Ancestors)¹³. It is not surprising to see that Africans love to pray imprecatory prayers. The reason is because it is part of our understanding as well. This understanding is picked from the language of libation. In pouring libation, you will hear the linguist conclude by saying, '*Obi nko nhyira enko hyira ne busuefo*' meaning in the process of prayer it would be unwise to seek the welfare of one's enemies. The linguist will usually add, '*nipa bone foa onpe yen yie die no, ne nkonko enbo ne so*' meaning those who wish evil for us should fall and die. In the view of this, it is therefore not surprising that cursing has now become common in African communities and has now crept into the church as well. This has now become the African Christian's understanding of how to deal with their enemies. That is to pay them back in their own coin. In view of this, some Africa churches do not see anything wrong with promoting imprecatory

¹³ Encarta Dictionaries, Microsoft Encarta 2009© 1993-2008 Microsoft Corporation.

prayer in order to deal with one's enemy. They see it as a form of Christianization of the libation language¹⁴.

Hermeneutical problem

Hermeneutics is the technical word for interpretation. It is the science and art of interpreting what an author has written¹⁵. In the Biblical records, there are a lot of phrases and prayers that have imprecatory connotations. In the Law, Moses is always talking about paying people back in their own coin. For example, 'Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot' (Exodus 21:24). This is what the law seems to be teaching. When one come to the Prophets, specifically king David, some of his prayers in the Psalms are referred to as imprecatory Psalm or cursing prayers. For example, 'Arise, O Lord, in your anger; rise up against the rage of my enemies. Awake, my God; decree justice'. (Psalm 7:6). In the New Testament, people refer to some Pauline statements such as, 'Alexander the coppersmith did me much evil: The Lord will repay him according to his works. Of whom be thou ware also; for he has greatly withstood our words'. (2 Tim 4: 14 – 15)

Due to the fact that theology must respond to the needs of people¹⁶, out of people's experiences, they form their own theologies based on what is already in the Bible in order to deal with their life situations¹⁷ without considering the contextual study of the text. Once this form of interpretation is accepted and promoted, it is therefore generally accepted as facts and in some

¹⁴ Asempa Dedwuro (A publication of the Methodist Church Ghana) , Vol. 2, No. 006, April – June, 2011

¹⁵ W.W Klein, C.L Blomberg, R.L Hubbard (eds), *Introduction to Biblical interpretation*, (Dallas, World Publishing, 1993), pp. 3 - 4

¹⁶ Howard W. Stone and James O. Duke, *How to Think Theologically*, (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1996), pp.51 - 53

¹⁷ Howard W. Stone and James O. Duke, pp.18-19

churches they become part of their doctrines. This is what happens when imprecatory verses in the Bible are interpreted literally in churches.

Apart from the literal interpretation of scripture by some ministers of the gospel that has led to the rise of imprecatory prayer in African Christian Churches, this hermeneutical problem has also affected people's understanding of spiritual warfare. The interpretation of spiritual warfare seems to portray a picture of physical battle with one's enemy. The importation of canes, stones and etc into some churches to beat one's enemy is a clear picture to this fact. People who get involved in this kind of practice do it with anger, bitterness and vigor. Their mentality is to deal with their enemies once and for all with physical objects. A critical analysis of this approach in the light of 1Cor 10: 3 – 4 which says, 'For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh: For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds.....' shows how unbiblical this approach is.

Current trend of Prophetic ministry

The current trend of prophetic ministry which is a follow up of liberation theology is also one of the factors that has led to the upsurge of imprecatory prayer in African Christian Churches. Unlike the Old Testament Prophets who offered critique and advice for the kings, priest and individuals, predict the future and called Israel to honor God, the current trend of prophetic ministries relegate every problem to the influence of either demonic forces or to close associates of people that have come to them with their problems. In order to redeem such complainants from their problems, they therefore pray imprecatory prayers against the people they perceived to be the cause of the said problem. This in turn encourages their clients to do same anytime they

pray. In such cases, these prophets are not sincere to their clients if even their clients are the cause of their problems. They over spiritualise everything that comes to them.

The crossroad

The word crossroad used in this context is the African Churches dilemma on imprecatory prayer. As can be clearly deduced by the discussions above, the psalms of imprecation have caused much debate in Christian scholarship and for that matter African Churches. The primary challenge which seems to plague African Churches is how the psalms of imprecation can be reconciled with Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus, in Matthew 5:43-44, says, 'You have heard that it was said, Love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you'. How can Christians be commanded to pray for their enemies on one hand and yet curse their enemies on the other? The imprecatory psalms present to Christians the problem of reconciling the apparent spirit of vengeance with the precepts of the New Testament and the teachings of Jesus.

According to Hicks, the ground of these psalms is not personal vengeance, but God's righteousness, holiness and faithfulness. These psalms function as the liturgy of Israel and they give voice to theologically legitimate imprecations. In fact most of them were written to the choir director. The New Testament establishes their legitimacy by quoting them and applying them in their own context (e.g., Paul applies Psalm 69 to hard-hearted Jews in Romans 11:7-10)¹⁸. This means that Paul regarded the very words of imprecations as inspired and not sinful personal word of vengeance. Paul based his prohibition against seeking revenge in Romans 12: 19 upon the statement of God in Deuteronomy 32:35, 'Vengeance is mine'. This therefore means that

¹⁸ John Mark Hicks, *Preaching Imprecatory Psalms*, <http://johnmarkhicks.faithsite.com/content.asp?CID=11789> [Access 5 July 2011]

there is an unbroken continuity of ethical requirement that progress from the Old and New Testament.

The conservative scholars, along with the vast majority of interpreters in Christian history, have understood these prayers as petitions for God's justice. They formed part of the worship of Israel in which God's people petitioned God to curse their enemies. There are several different ways in which this general approach has been understood, although none of them are mutually exclusive¹⁹.

Conclusion

Looking at the factors discussed so far, it is very clear that the imprecatory psalms should never provide a Christian the license to harbor bitterness or rage. In fact, these prayers must be prayed from a heart that has been shaped by the heart of God, a heart which despises wickedness, and yet desires mercy and not judgment (Ex 34:6-7). The imprecatory psalms lay forth a model of how to let go of bitterness and rage not by acting like those feelings do not exist, but by recognizing them, voicing them, and then laying them at the feet of Jesus, pleading with him to establish justice by acting according to his perfect character. When a believer does such a thing, he frees himself up from the bondage of thinking that exacting justice is his duty. It frees him up to love as Jesus loved.

¹⁹ John Mark Hicks, *Preaching Imprecatory Psalms*.

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