John the Baptist's Discourse in Luke 3:12-14: A Quintessence of Christian Response to Corruption in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

One of the banes of the Nigerian society today is corruption; there is stigmatization on Nigerians both locally and in the international community. The vice however presents itself in every race, nation and culture and it is therefore not to be blamed on a particular country or race alone. The paper locates the prevalence of some corrupt practices in the Bible times which are still noticeable or even prevalent in a precarious level in the society today. The message or injunction of John the Baptist in Luke 4:12-14, if put into practice, is seen as an appropriate response to be emulated by the Church today in order to confront the vice and bring about the desired change in the society. The paper therefore recommended among other things that the pulpits in our churches and other spheres should be adequately and appropriately engaged to condemn corrupt practices in the society.

Key Words: Corruption, Injustice, Quintessence

INTRODUCTION

Corruption is one of the greatest threats to the existence and welfare of the nation called Nigeria. Both the present and the future of the nation are doomed because of the level of the effect of this cancer that has eaten deep into the fabrics of the

economy, judiciary and polity of the country. It has become so prevalent that in the international community, Nigeria is listed among the most corrupt nations in the world; in fact, she was listed the 3rd most corrupt nation in the world at a time by the Annual Corruption Perception index of the Transparency International.[254]

The current leadership of the nation also considers it a menace that should be tackled with every form of seriousness and tenacity; that makes the fight against corruption to be listed among the cardinal programs to be pursued by her; while other areas of interest are security, food production and employment. The atmosphere in the country today is saturated with fighting against corruption and its allied societal ills. The Church of God in Nigeria is also witnessing the incursion of several corrupt practices which makes the fight against it by her inevitable if she would showcase her 'salt' and 'light' of the world claim.

In the quest for the way out to fight this menace, the church is sometimes faced with the modus operandi that will be scripturally acceptable to her; this quest is one of the factors that prompted this paper. The paper sees in the interaction between John the Baptist and several groups of people by the Jordan river, an acceptable response to some corrupt practices in our society and the church today. The paper affirms the prevalence of corruption in the times of old and thus it is not a 21st century or postmodern invention. The fact that issues related to it were dealt with in the Bible confirms the logicality of the assumption that such were part of the experiences of the people at in the period covered by the biblical accounts. The way it was dealt with then also

[254] Emiola Nihinlola (2006). "The Problem of Corruption in Modern Nigeria: An Ethical Analysis and the Role of the Church" in S. P. Ango and J. D. Adewale (eds). *Corruption and Theological Education: The Nigerian Experience. WAATI (Nigeria Zone) 2006 – 2007 Papers*. Ilorin: Modern Impression, 16.

provides for the church and society today the leeway for addressing the menace.

WHAT IS CORRUPTION?

To begin with, a discussion of the meaning of corruption, especially as used in this paper, is necessary. The word corruption is the noun form of the word 'corrupt.' It is defined as "dishonest or illegal behaviour by officials or people in positions of power especially, when they accept money in exchange for doing things for someone."[255] There are few things from this common definition, namely that dishonesty or illegality is involved in the act. Any act of dishonesty or illegality can be termed as corruption, once it is aimed at personal gains and taking undue advantage over the victim. Another thing is that it is indulged in by people in power or authority; people who occupy some vantage position and make illegal or undue demands (in cash and kind) from helpless or unsuspecting members of the public. One more issue to be noted is that the demand for cash or kind is for some duties to be performed by the recipient. The services are supposed to be delivered normally, legitimately and statutorily; but unless the demands for bribe or gratification are met by the one seeking the services, such services would be denied.

Corruption as seen in this light in this paper is viewed as an illegal or dishonest practice wherein the one demanding for something does so without recourse to the statutory nature of the service to be rendered. It is also seen in the direction of taking what belongs to the commonwealth of a family, community, state, region or nation and denying the majority of the populace the opportunity of having access to the basics of life. It is an act of "embezzlement" which is stealing money and properties entrusted unto one by the virtue of one's work or

[255] Rundell, Michael (ed.) (2007). "Corruption" in *Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners*. Oxford: Macmillan, p. 332.

office.[256] Unfortunately, this dimension which was somehow exiguous and abhorred in times past had become almost a normal and expected phenomenon in every facet of life.

There are cases of bribery, embezzlement, extortion, gratification, etc. everywhere including the church. All seem to be involved; for example, the law enforcement agents (Police, Custom, Military, Immigration services) are reported to have made demands for money 'tips' before their statutory services are rendered. Such illegal demands have been given several names like 'kick back' 'hand washing' 'pen or biro for writing' 'padding' 'fuel for the tank' 'public relations' 'brown envelope' 'share of the boys' 'returns' 'file pushing' etc. Contractors inflate contract sums to include the amount payable to staff (as gratification), thereby doubling oven tripling the actual cost of the project or service. This reminds me of an experience (one out of several) that I had while supervising one of the projects in my office about a decade ago; I was heading a team of negotiators with a contractor (an artisan). As I was pressing on him to reduce the price of the service, he asked me a shocking question "I hope you will not expect any 'return' with this pricing sir." I asked him naively what he meant by 'return' and he told me, that ours was not the first place he would bid for contracts, and he was surprised that I did not request for a percentage of the contract sum to be added as my own share. I then retorted that as a Pastor, I can never condescend to such a practice, but I was much more disturbed as he said "He was meeting a different pastor for the first time as I was not the first pastor he would work for and others had requested for what he was raising question about.[257]

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[256] Rundell, Michael (ed.) (2007). "Embezzlement." *Macmillan Dictionary for Advanced Learners*, p. 481.

[257] Dele Oluwole. An Encounter with One of the Contractors during the initial construction Work on the Agbowa Campus of Baptist College of Theology, Lagos in January, 2012.

With the case study above and several others, the presence and prevalence of corrupt, and dishonest practices even in the church is undoubted. Sometimes, not towing the path is what looks strange, obdurate and completely out of the norm, it seems that it is even expected by all and sundry. Imagine buying a product from a store or vendor at an agreed price and while you demand for a purchase receipt you were asked how much you would want to be written on the receipt; usually, a higher figure would be expected. This shows that an average seller of some wares has also come to 'understand the game of corruption' in the country.

Moses Adebayo also observes in support of this submission:

> Evil practices are all over the land. Manipulation and falsification of the process of truth and justice could it be right to say that believers are also involved in lying, deceit, falsification of financial documents, all forms of negative marketing tactics, alteration and adjustment of goods offered for sale, fake drugs, purchase of justice, all manners of bribery and corruption, smuggling, tax evasion, etc?[258]

The evil practices, most of which are derivatives of corruption have made the contemporary society and perhaps the church to be comparable to "a maddeningly volatile century characterized by moral corruption and spiritual degradation…."[259] In the words of Lawal also "Corruption has many faces and there is no one sector of the Nigerian society that can be said to be free of corruption in one form or the other. Corruption is noticed in our economy, politics, and even

[258] Moses B. Adebayo (2014). *Fraud Issues: A Christian Response*. Ibadan: Publications Department, Nigerian Baptist Convention, 96-97.

[259] Simeon F. Kehinde. "Sheep Among Wolves: A Quest for the Right Christian Response to Societal Ills". *Ogbomoso Journal of Theology (OJOT), Volume XI*, 2006, 14.

our schools, and universities that are supposed to be the watchdogs of the society."[260]

The church is therefore living with this menace in the same way the society does. The challenge thus makes a consideration of the way out imperative for us in this paper. The message of John the Baptist in the wilderness around river Jordan (Luke 3:12-14) presents an example that can be followed by the church especially the preachers of the word of God today.

THE PASSAGE IN CONTEXT

> Tax collectors also came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?" "Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them. Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?" He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely — be content with your pay" Luke 3:12-14 NIV.

The entire chapter presents the interaction between John the Baptist and his audience which was made up of different categories of people. The author of the Gospel according to St. Luke first located the call and ministry of John the 'baptizer' in both political and religious contexts in history (Luke 3:1-6).[261] He was then "pictured as a peripatetic preacher who toured the region about the Jordan"[9][262] with a simple message of repentance and call to baptism. His own baptism was clearly unlike those before him whose baptism was merely for

[260] Julius B. Lawal (2006). "Corruption and Theological Education: The Nigerian Experience" in S. P. Ango and J. D. Adewale (eds) *Corruption and Theological Education: The Nigerian Experience, WAATI (Nigeria Zone) 2006 and 2007 Papers.* Ilorin: Modern Impressions, 3.

[261] Malcolm O. Tolbert (1970). "Luke" in Cliffon J. Allen (ed) *The Broadman Bible Commentary, Volume 9 Luke-John.* Nashville: Broadman Press, 34-35.

[262] Tolbert, 35.

the outward washing without emphasis on repentance and forgiveness of sins.

His preaching is presented in verses 7 – 14 in which he dealt with sundry matters relating to the life of people and which depicted the spiritual and social state of affairs of the people at the time.

> John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire." "What should we do then?" the crowd asked. John answered, "The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same." Tax collectors also came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?" "Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them. Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?" He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely — be content with your pay." (Luke 3:7-14 NIV)

His style of preaching or proclamation of the message depicted in the passage above was somehow crude, repelling and unexpected (of a preacher seeking the conversion of souls); especially in verse 7; “John said to the crowds coming to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers; who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?” (Luke 3:7, NIV). Was John overwhelmed by the turnout or was that just his approach to preaching? Never the less, the audience kept coming and

listening to him. 'The coming wrath' that he warned them against was most probably "a reference to both the destruction of Jerusalem (Luke 21:20-23), which occurred in A.D. 70, and the final judgment (John 3:36).[263] He warned tenaciously against the impending doom and judgment to befall all who failed to repent.

The text for our consideration was then located within this discourse, he had specific instructions for two sets of Inquirers, namely Tax Collectors (***teloonai*** from the root word ***telones*** which refers to "a renter or farmer of taxes (Latin *Publicanus*); among the Romans usually a man of equestrian rank; a tax gatherer, a collector of taxes or tolls… one employed by a publican or a farmer-general in collecting the taxes." He is a collector of public revenue" or simply *a Publican* as presented in the Authorized Version.[264] The second set were Soldiers ***strateuomenoi*** from the root ***strateuoma***i [1st aorist subjunctive, second person singular] used severally in the New Testament to mean " an encampment, an army; to make military expedition, to lead soldiers to war or to battle… to do military duty, be on active service… to fight" or even contend with canal inclinations.[265] Both groups inquired about what they could do to evade the impending doom and judgment. Both were prone to corrupt and dishonest practices by virtue of their jobs and the nature of practicing such at the time. The Tax Collectors were open to corruption because:

> The Romans taxed people by farming out the taxing rights to the highest bidder. The successful man would pay Rome the amount he bid, but he would collect more than that to pay the expenses and to give him his legitimate profit. But it was a strong temptation to levy

[263] Kenneth, Barker (1985). *The NIV Study Bible, New International Version.* Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1541.

[264] Joseph H. Thayer (1977)*Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the NewTestament.* Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 620

[265] Thayer, 590.

> more than was strictly necessary and to pocket the extra…. So the tax collectors were hated. And the more they were hated, the more they tended to overtax. It was a vicious circle.[266]

They were obviously Jewish agents of the Roman Tax Moguls who needed to make profits for their masters and make extra for themselves. They were obviously "detested for helping the pagan conqueror and for frequently defrauding their own people."[267]

The message of John to them was pointed and clear; if they would evade the impending doom and judgment they should heed the simple counsel "collect no more than is appointed you."[268] To John, the way out of this act of corruption was to be honest and sincere in the apportionment of taxes. Though payment and collection of taxes were legitimate rights and duties on both sides, that which made for sin i.e. overtaxing the citizens in order to enrich their personal purses, should be completely avoided. Being a tax collector was not evil and sinful, but the manner of discharging the duty should be watched and done in a Godly and acceptable way.

The Soldiers were the second group of public servants and they were told "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely – be content with your pay" (Luke. 3:14b). The identity of the soldiers has been greeted with two propositions namely that they were either Jews or Romans. However, the most common position is that - they were probably Jews who may have partnered with the tax collectors in providing the necessary backing which enabled the tax collectors to do their work. They were to work with the tax collectors to ensure compliance, but they had been accused of two major flaws – they extorted money from people and brought false charges

[266] Leon Morris (1977). "Luke" in R.V.G. Tasker (ed) *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 96.

[267] Barker, 1541.

[268] Morris, 96.

against the citizens.[269] these were common issues that put them also against the citizens as they carried out their duties. It was not being soldiers that was the problem because "limited military forces were allowed for certain Jewish leaders and institutions (such as those of Herod Antipas, the police guard of the temple tax collectors). The profession of tax collector and soldier as such were not condemned, but the common unethical practices associated with them were."[270] To demand more tax than required or to extort money from the innocent citizens were acts tantamount to corruption today and to bring false accusation against those who failed to play along with them was an act of injustice as well.

The pointed response of John to their quest showed that while their profession was not condemned, every unethical practice associated with their own conducts and comportment in the profession should be changed in order to make them profitable to the society. The two public servants were thus enjoined to be God-fearing in their dealings with the demands of their legitimate duties.

> Tax Collector (Publicans) and soldiers were to act honestly and justly in their profession. There is here no radical upheaval of the existing social order, but an insistence on those moral principles which will lead to a transformation of society from within rather than by the path of violent revolution.[271]

The two public officers were to eschew corruption and injustice and embrace honesty and justice; the two virtues which could make them acceptable to the kingdom of God of their quest and also keep peaceful relationship in the society.

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[269] Morris, 96-97.

[270] Barker, 1541.

[271] I. H. Marshal (1990). 'Luke' in D. Guthrie and J. A. Motyer (ed). *New Bible Commentary Third Edition*. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 894.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF JOHN THE BAPTIST'S MESSAGE FOR THE FIGHT AGAINST CORRUPTION IN NIGERIA TODAY

Having studied the main crux of the message of John the Baptist, this section is devoted to drawing out the parallels and implications by juxtaposition with the experience in the contemporary church and society in Nigeria.

The personalities involved in the discourse have replica in the society and the church today. There are tax collectors epitomized by public servants who are dishonest and manifest illegality in their actions or inactions. Their deeds or deals conform to the World Bank's description of corruption as quoted by Celestina Isiramen as:

> The abuse of public office through the instrumentality of private agents who actively offer bribes to circumvent public polices and processes for competitive advantages and profit. Beyond bribery, public office can also be abused for personal benefit through patronage and nepotism. For example, the theft of state assets or diversion of state revenues.[272]

Most public servants (some of whom are church members), have failed to uphold the Christian ethical values and virtues of honesty and justice. The common practice is for personal purses to be enriched at the expense of the commonwealth and welfare of the common man among the citizenry.

The other public servants (solders) relate to all those involved in military and para-military outfits in the country. There is a gross abuse and unnecessary use of power that had led to

[272] Celestina O. Isiramen (2010). "Corruption in the Nigerian Society: Suggestions for Moral Rearmament" in C. O. Isiramen (ed.). *Religion and the Nigerian Nation: Some Topical Issues*. Ibadan: En-Joy Press Books 69-70.

general lawlessness. Many of them pervert the course of justice and use double standards. "For instance, the policemen who are supposed to help in maintaining law and order in this country and who are called friends of the citizens have proved themselves to be breakers of the law, enemies of the public and people who are trigger happy."[273]

The activities of some law enforcement agencies and their allies constitute a menace in the country today and this calls for the church to rise up to the task to support efforts of the government in addressing the menace. The Nigeria governments, especially the regime of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo (1999-2007) took the bull by the horn by instituting bodies like the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices and other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) to deal with the issues of corruption and allied vices in the polity.[274]

The unfortunate thing is that the church seems to have reneged in her duty of confronting this menace especially since some of those who engage in corrupt practices are members of churches; instead of condemning the sharp practices, the church often celebrate them and bring them to undue limelight because of the monetary/material gains. That are derivable from such corrupt public servants and indeed politicians.

The implication of the discourse of John the Baptist is far reaching on the church today. The following are some of the lessons and recommendations.

First, the preachers of the word must be sure of the message they preach and they should be in the right location. If the preacher is sure of his location as being divinely appointed and the message as divinely instructed, then the message

[273] Celestina Isiramen, 76.

[274] E. Dada Adelowo (2006). *Issues in Public Affairs*. Lagos: Atlantic Associated Publishers, 27.

would be delivered without fear. John the Baptist was divinely located in the wilderness as "The voice of one calling in the desert prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The cracked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all mankind will see God's salvation."[275] John was obviously sure of his mandate to preach the message of righteousness and prepare the way for the coming of the Lord.

Secondly, it also implies that the word of God must be preached with absolute courage and faith in God who has called the preacher. The message of John was pointed and direct, the instructions and response to the inquiry of the tax collectors and soldiers were straight to the point, he was not beating around the bush. Preachers should be straightforward and direct in their condemnation of evil practices, no matter who is involved. The nation needs fearless and uncompromising preachers today, the Church and her pulpits cannot afford to be slack in exposing and condemning the antics of corruption within her and the society. Since the Church is a product of the society both in location and composition, those who bear the word of God in the Church must know that they are to minister towards the transformation of the society through the listeners who are essentially drawn from the society and are therefore to be sent back to the society. Preachers and teachers of the word of God should be prepared to respond to this poser that if persons serving in the public places (like the Tax Collectors and Soldiers) examined in this paper listen to messages preached in today(which often is the case, because many of them attend church services), what impacts or imprints would such have on them?

Also, the church should be aware of what constitute corruption in the society and in the church with a view of

[275] Luke 3:4b – 6 quoting Isa. 40:3-5 (NIV).

dealing with them holistically. There should be no double standard in condemning all forms of dishonest and illegal practices and activities. The issue of corruption should not just be focused on a particular group of people; the whole society and family lines are either corrupt or prone to corruption in one form or another; thus the preaching/teaching of the church against it should be broad and all embracing.

Furthermore, the Church should create a culture of honesty and justice around her; in her mission and vision statements, on the weekly bulletin and even the newsletters, her position on the fight against corruption and injustice should be clearly spelt out for anyone coming to be aware of. The church in any locality, like John the Baptist in the wilderness, should be known with zero tolerance for these vices, though they may be the common practice in the immediate society. In the same vein, the Church should stand by and openly commend acts of honesty and incorruptibleness demonstrated by any of her members in public service as an example to be emulated by all. In this direction, this writer remembers vividly a Christian, a deacon in the church, who was vindicated and given a clean bill by an anti-graft tribunal under the Buhari/Idiagbon military regime of 1984/1985 in Nigeria while many of his colleagues in the National Youths Service Corps (NYSC) headquarters were sentenced to several jail terms. His local church celebrated him as a victorious Christian in the midst of corruption ridden system and as an ambassador of Christ. Till date, his example is still an example and encouragement for Christian public servants. The Church has a major duty be the light to dispel the darkness of corruption and sharp practices, and this must begin with the church environment. For example, entering the premises of the Theological College of Northern Nigeria (TCNN), Bukuru, Jos, Plateau State, one will be greeted and captivated by this caption “TAKE NO SHORT CUT, IT PAYS NOT”. It is written in every office, classroom and possibly, the hostel rooms. This creates awareness that in the College, due process must be followed in

everything and no place for injustice and corruption. This is a conscientious fight against these vices in a branded way; the Church should also try to create such environment in her location and send the right signal out for every one coming into the premises about her stand against corruption and injustice.

Moreover, the preaching and teaching of the word today should be focused on the promotion of righteousness, holiness, honesty and justice; there should be a deviation from the emphasis on money and wealth issues that are called health and wealth messages. There is a perceived dearth of messages that prepare and remind people of righteous and holy living be helpful to the society and thus make them heaven bound. There should be a move back to the 'old time religion' messages that eschew evil and unrighteousness but lead people to fear God. In the words of the President, Evangelical Church Winning All (ECWA) in Nigeria, Rev Dr Jeremiah Gado in an interview published in the Church's magazine "Nigeria is the most religious nation on earth, but why is corruption eating this country as religious as we are? We are just pretending. Let us fear God and not just talk about our faith, let us practice what we preach"[276]

The Church also has a duty to prepare persons gunning for, or appointed into public offices in relation to the conduct expected of them in the various assignments. The Church should not wait until the name of the Lord is dragged in the mud before joining the band wagon of complainants and critics. She should not sit down and watch "as political entrepreneur, especially those with Christian names use their money and church platforms to advance their personal agenda"[277] and later go on to misbehave. The Church is often

[276] Jeremiah Gado. "I Pray Buhari will do to Christians what Goodluck did to Muslims" *Today's Challenge* (A Publication of the Evangelical Church Winning All, Nigeria),Vol. 1, No. 4, July, 2015.p 9.

[277] Bulus S. Dabit (2018) "Moving Forward: Building A Great Nation Through Christian Participation: The Pastor's Role". Paper presented to

guilty of abandoning public officers without periodic checks and sometimes encouragement. The Church is also guilty of calling on them with demands / requests for financial or material assistance which are far beyond what their statutory income could provide for. This is a subtle way of encouraging and abetting corruption. Thus, the church should be on ground to always encourage the public office holders in her midst towards uprightness and righteousness.

Finally, the messages and teachings today should also address the seemingly eroded traditional value system, for according to Nihinlola "the destruction of the traditional human value system can be said to be one of the curses of modern civilization."[278] This has made the citizens in Nigeria today (even in the church) to "become a people who worship money and rich people even if their wealth is ill-gotten."[279] The Church should keep an eye on this derailment which has become inimical to her message and impact in the society. Those who are known to have gotten their wealth through dishonest and corrupt means should not be celebrated by the church. The church should be at the vanguard of redeeming the bad image of the nation and not contribute to its further denigrating and obliteration.

CONCLUSION

This paper has presented the prevalence of corrupt and dishonest practices in the Nigerian society. The paper also presented the two issues or officers involved in corrupt practices that had an encounter with John the Baptist. It was further established that the two types are also prevalent in Nigeria and thus the response of John the Baptist to them is

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the Central Baptist Pastors' Fellowship, during the Central Baptist Conference in Session on 08-02-2018 at Nasarawa Baptist Church, Jos. (Mr Dabit is the Plateau State Director for the National Orientation Agency).

278 Emiola Nihinlola (2006)."The Problem of Corruption in Modern Nigeria: An Ethical Analysis and the Role of the Church"18.

279 Nihinlola, 19.

applicable to such cases in the church and the society today. It is therefore recommended that the church should learn from the way and manner of John the Baptist's response as a quintessence or ideal to embrace. By this the church would have confronted the menace and would have contributed a great deal to the fight against corruption in Nigeria.

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