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Article

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THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN COMBATING FALSE PROPHECY IN THE 21st CENTURY

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Abstract

The prophetic ministry of the church in the twenty first century Nigeria has come under serious criticism due to the introduction of a number of ritual practices and symbolisms. Many Pentecostal churches that seek to promote prosperity preaching would stop at nothing promoting prophecies that have no theological relevance or balance. In such instances, the church fails to equip the congregants with deep biblical literacy that fosters active spiritual discernment. Given this background, this study seeks to assess the role of the church in combating false prophecy in the twenty first century Nigeria. This research attracts a historical and survey methods to access the roles of the church towards the axioms of false prophecy and its attendant effects in the church and the society. Data are gathered through various ways including interview, participant observation, books and online publications. The findings revealed the characteristics of the twenty first century church prophecy to include extortion, commercialization, falsehood, and lack of sound theological support. This results in tears and sorrows rather than comfort, edification and exhortation for which prophecy was meant. This paper therefore suggest proper hermeneutical engagement, sound doctrinal teachings, and sociological concern, that can end the activities of the prophetic mercenaries. The paper contributes to the restoration of the mission of prophecy: revelation of God's will, declaration of His redemptive plans on earth and the communication of divine truth.

Keywords: Pentecostalism, Prophecy, Prophetism, Church, False, Nigeria.

Introduction

Prophecy is an integral belief in Nigerian Pentecostalism owing to its hydra headed functions of soothing the mind, mending the broken hearted, giving hope to the hopeless, giving revelation to the blind, direction to the confused, and warnings to others. This is

particularly true because Africans are incurably religious and would like to seek meaning, cause, and solution to everything that befalls them in a religious means. It is essential to note that Africans had already experienced a stringent relationship with the supernatural of whom they sought divination of the future concerning farming, naming, famine, infertility, birth, gender, fate, destiny and star of an unborn baby, and other sorts of obscurity that entangled them before the advent of Christianity and Islam (Mbiti 1996; Quarcoopome 1987; Rotimi 1999; Folarin 2015; Gehman 2013). With the premise of prophecy, the prophets claim to be solution providers, offering promises to the unsuspected clients, even when they themselves have little or no knowledge of the case at hand, making it possible for the introduction of fake prophecies, a situation refers to as sick religiosity by Essien, (2017; 2023). The truth remains, however, that there are some prophecies that are truly genuine: preaching of the undiluted word of God, the scripture to comfort, edify and exhort the church, as traditionally upheld by some churches. Yet the practice of fake prophecy has religiously found its ways into the church system (Kunhiyop 2012), with a view to defrauding the innocent and help seeking members of the church instead of giving “comfort, edification and exaltation to the church” (George 2017; Edet 2021). Unfortunately, the ‘strands have become so interconnected and interwoven that it sometimes become difficult to decipher the authentic ones without proper discernment. It is like a cobweb that is very complicated, and so, not possible to know except on the matter of commercialization, because commercialized prophecy is usually fake’ (Essien 2017, 2023). This is what this work seeks to address.

Conceptual Clarification and Literature

Prophecy: Prophecy is traditionally understood as the act of receiving and communicating messages believed to be divinely inspired. It implies a divinely inspired utterance, revelation or interpretation of a prophet; a prediction of something to come. It is a "miracle of knowledge" that describes something in the future beyond human sagacity to foresee; the function or vocation of a prophet, specifically the inspired declaration of divine will and purpose (Ahlstrom, 2024). Prophecy, in a wider context, is communication between the divine and the human, which usually takes the form of dialogue. The messages in both directions are channeled through individuals (prophets) who are recognized by others as qualified to perform the function (Ugwueye and Umeanolue, 2015). It involves God (the giver), the prophet (the human mediator) and the human audience (the receiver). Since the prophet is not called to minister to himself, the central interest of the prophet is the human audience, who should understand, interpret and accept the message as coming from God.

Prophecy in the Bible: According to Palmer (2014), God raised up the prophets as fire brigade to put out fires in times of spiritual emergency, to salvage His people. The prophets were strictly on God’s calling, not hereditary. Subsequently, to show submissiveness and reliance upon the directive of God, the initiator of prophecy, the Old Testament prophets often related their messages by proclaiming the annunciation formula, thus says YAHWEH – the Lord (Isaiah 37: 21; 50:1; 56:1; Palmer 2014). In this regards, the Old Testament prophetic figures, such as Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, were not only referred to as prophets (1 Kings 18:36; 2 Kings 9:1; Isaiah 37:2; Jeremiah 1:5; Ezekiel 2:5), but their whole life spans were characterized by the exercise of prophecy as a vocation. According to McCain (1996), Prophets of the Old Testament were divided into two categories: the speaking prophets, and the writing prophets. The speaking prophets were those prophets who were prominent in their prophetic vocation, but did not write down any of their

prophecy in a book for future references. Among such prophets are, Nathan, Elijah, Elisha, Deborah, Gad, Ahijah, Jehu, Micaiah, Huldah, Shemaiah, Oded, and Hananiah. The writing prophets include all those prophets whose prophecies were written in books, of the bible: both the Major and the Minor Prophets. As McCain further explains, the term “major” and “minor” are not used because the Minor Prophets are less important than the Major Prophets, rather, the classifications designate the length of their writings. The inference here is that Old Testament prophecy was divinely initiated in its entirety, not from human will or reasoning (2 Peter 1:20- 21). The New Testament prophecy is seen in two ways also: a temporal and authoritative apostolic-canonical mode, which agrees with the Old Testament canonical prophecy, and a less authoritative but enduring form of congregational prophetic manifestations (Feldman 1990). For instance, the Apocalypse of John is portrayed as canonical prophecy in line with Old Testament canonical prophecy (Revelation 1:3; 22:18) as well as the other New Testament writings which are equated with Old Testament scriptures (2 Peter 3:15-16). Congregational prophetic manifestations, such as were witnessed in the Corinthian church (1 Corinthians 12-14), were viewed as a less authoritative form of prophecy which needed to be evaluated to determine whether the prophetic utterances were acceptable to the church or not (1 Corinthians 14:29; 1 Thessalonians 5:19- 21).

Functions of Prophecy: The three major functions of prophecy according Pauline epistle to the Corinthians are, edification, exhortation, and comfort, (1 Corinthians 14:3). Anything outside these three is fraudulent and misleading. In a nutshell, both edification and exhortation are synonymous, that is why they are used in a composite sense in 1 Corinthians 14:3 *...edification and exhortation*, they mean to teach, educate, instruct, illumine amongst others. According to McCain (1996), the prophecies in the Old Testament were written from the ninth century BC to the fifth century BC. This period was the period of the divided kingdom. Israel occupying the northern part of Palestine with ten tribes while Judah was occupying the south with two tribes. As McCain further explained, this was a period of great apostasy for both nations. Judah had some good kings who always called the people back to God, but Israel had no single good king among them. All the kings were corrupt. Consequently, God raised the prophets to *teach, educate, instruct, and illumine* them about his judgments. God was warning them through prophecy that He will punish the evil doers. Not to sing praises to them even in their sinfulness, as it is now in the 21st century Church. However, concerning comfort, because the period of the Old Testament reportage was a dark period, God through prophecy also provided glimpses of hope for His children. In most prophecies, there is a message of hope, deliverance and expectations. However, the Neo Pentecostal understanding of prophecy centres heavily on prophecy as a functional socio-religious activity. It is a personalized revelations, deliverance ministries that popularize the yearnings for it sequel to its functionality. The overreliance on prophecy has virtually given no room for discernment again in the church. This has introduced falsehood which merely renders prophecy useless in the 21st century Church.

Findings of False Prophecy in the Church

To have reliable pieces of information about false prophecy in the 21st century church, a study was conducted in some of the Assemblies of The Apostolic Church Nigeria, in Ikot Ekpene Field, Akwa Ibom State, as the first classical Pentecostal church in Nigeria (Paul 2014, Ukaoha 2013, Matthew 2025). On the course of this study, respondents who offered the information, pleaded for anonymity, claiming that most of the individuals involved in the act

were still alive. Therefore, for security reasons, the findings are reported on the note of anonymity. The synopsis of the findings is reported here.

Synopsis of Prophecies in the Study Area

- i. A prophetess, mentioned items needed for the healing of a partial stroke patient, to include palm kernel oil, crude oil, *isana* leaves, and new palm frond locally known as *ajei* and other items (Itoro 2019 *eye witness*).
- ii. A prophet prophesied to a woman, who was sick of hydrolysis, that the only cure for her infirmity was an infusion of the holy (olive oil) into her vagina (Fransisca Matthew 20/5/2023, *personal interview*).
- iii. A pregnant woman was suffering from severe convulsion, instead of taking her to the hospital, she was subjected to prophetic declarations. But to the glory of God, the woman delivered of a bouncing baby boy at the hospital through the intervention of the pastor (*eye witness account*).
- iv. A prophetess was suspended for prophesying to a woman she jointly gossiped the previous day on their way from the local market. It was reported that she prophesied exactly the matter they gossiped about the same woman. The prophecy became a case when members of the gossip crew made a standing ovation against it, as according to them was *what we discussed yesterday evening while returning back from the market* (*anonymous 15/3/2024, personal interview*).
- v. A prophet was apprehended at a member's compound, at midnight, on the expedition of burying a charm in the compound, so that he will come the following day to exhume it through prophecy and the *Utom mantra* exhibition (*eye witness*).
- vi. During the labour, for child birth, of a particular woman, there was a prophecy that they should bring a young palm fruit leave, *ajei*, and some other leaves to the Pastor, who would give it out to the spirits as injunction against their (spiritual) advances on the pregnant woman. But the Pastor refuted the prophecy, prayed for the woman and the baby was delivered of safely, without the observation of the prophetic directives (Anonymous 20/7/2024, *personal interview*).
- vii. A married woman confided with a pastor that she was advised through prophecy to look for a genuine man of God and let him (the man of God) undress, bath and redress her with new pairs of cloth, for that would translate into the end of her sufferings. But the Pastor refuted the prophecy, warned, and counseled the woman on the right way of tapping God's blessings (Anonymous 19/9/2024 *personal interview*).
- viii. A woman was directed through prophecy to buy items like snuff, local gin (*kaikai*), tobacco, cola nut and the likes, for the appeasement and propitiation to the spirits of their family. That the assignment should be done at their former (abandoned) compound known in Annang as *ndon*, for they are suspected to be witched hunting members of the family. This is, however, not different from the prescriptions of an African Traditional Religious *prophet* (Anonymous 11/9/ 2024 *personal interview*).
- ix. A pregnant woman who had a prolonged labour at the church was advised through prophecy to mention her supposed concubines without which she will not survive the labour. The innocent woman out of anger named her father as her first perceived concubine and her husband as the second. The delay nearly caused stillbirth, due to infidelity by prophecy. The woman who was blessed with a set of twin lost one and delivered of the other safely at the hospital. She got irritated by the obnoxious abuse of spiritual sensibility, and left the church for good (Anonymous 2/2/2024, *exclusive interview*).

- x. A pregnant woman was advised by prophecy not to try going to the hospital, keeping to this instruction, the woman became unconscious after a severe bleeding and died at the verge of considering going to the hospital (Anonymous 2//2/2024, *personal interview*).
- xi. A prophet told one Mr. A, that he should hand over his car key to him (the prophet) to use for six month without which he will die on an auto crash. As panic as Mr. A, could be, he handed over the car key to the prophet. But unfortunately, the prophet while using the car for some time involved in a fatal auto crash that nearly ended his live, (Anonymous 4/2/2024, *personal interview*).
- xii. A man was unconscious when he was brought to the church, and the prophet prophesied that he will not die, advised that they should go to his family compound and build a hut for the ancestors, adding that the moment that is done, the man will return to life, but the poor man died even before the hut was completed, (Anonymous 5/5/2025, *personal interview*).
- xiii. In another church programme a prophet told one sister B, to suspend her foundation laying and hand over the plot of land to the prophet for the land was poisoned, but the lady went and told her family members who advised her to ignore such prophecy; today she is happily living in the house she built on the land, against the prophecy, (Anonymous 4/4/2025, *personal interview*).
- xiv. In another church session, a prophet told a lady that the prophet himself was her right husband, adding that if she refuses to marry him, she will never be married in her life, but to the glory of God, the sister is happily married with three kids to another man (Anonymous 3/3/2025, *personal interview*).
- xv. A prophet prophesied to a man to reject his bride, adding that she was not his rightful wife, but today the man is happily married to his wife, that same woman (Anonymous 2024, *personal interview*).
- xvi. A prophet told a lady that her womb was lock with padlock, that the only way to unlock the padlock and open her womb was for him to have divine penetration into her through the genital organ, (Anonymous 3/3/2024, *personal interview*).
- xvii. A prophet told one Mr. B to empty his account to the prophet's account to be free from spiritual attack, the man did, yet his financial conditions remain poorer then ever, (Anonymous 5/5/2024, *personal interview*).
- xviii. A prophet prophesied to sister C that her mother in-law was a witch, but when the mother-in-law was brought to the same church, that same prophet said oh that her husband was about to kill her (Anonymous 5/7/2024, *personal interview*).
- xix. A lady was prophesied to by a prophet that her husband is impotent, adding that he was with divine anointing to get her pregnant. The lady refused such offer, to the glory of God, the lady is blessed with four children today, against the prediction of the prophet (Anonymous 10/5/2024, *Personal interview*).
- xx. A prophet told a lady at menopause to buy seven bottles of olive oil and fasted for seven days, for the angel of the lord will visit her on the seventh day, then she will conceive. Little did she know that the prophet was also the angel; as desirous as the lady was, the prophet at the seventh day had a canal knowledge with her, even when she discovered the tricks, she still could not do anything than to keeping for the fulfilment of the prophecy till date (Anonymous 3/6/2024, *personal interview*).
- xxi. A prophet told a six month pregnant woman that she will put to birth in few days, and that what the doctor told her ,Cesarean Section (CS) will not happen, when she has not

- yet gone to any hospital to meet with any doctor (Anonymous 3/4/2024, *personal interview*).
- xxii. A prophet prophesied to a sister that she should donate her car to someone for an exchange of another car in a short time. But for so long a time now, Sister Grace has not been given the car (Anonymous 2/2/2024, *personal interview*).
- xxiii. A man lost his wife, after the burial, he visited a prophet, who told him that his wife was not dead even after the burial. The man stop going to the church (Anonymous 4/5/2025, *personal interview*).
- xxiv. A lady testify that she was asked to make sacrifice with item like goat, hen, before she could have a child and she did as was directed yet, for a long time she has not yet gotten any issue (Anonymous, 3/5/2025 *personal interview*).
- xxv. Someone testify that he was told that he would travel out of the country and was given a specific time but today the condition of the person became worse than before (Anonymous, 2/2/2025 *personal interview*).
- xxvi. A prophet who had been well fed with some information about a man, was always visiting a man, prophesied to him, and demanded some ransom before the fulfilment of the prophecy. After the prophet might have sapped the man to penury, and the tricks revealed, the prophet took to his heel, (*eye witness*).
- xxvii. A prophet who severed from The Apostolic church, to open his own private solution centre, was said to have been having canal knowledge of young girls, married women inclusive through prophetic enterprise. He prophesied to twin sisters at the same venue, the same day, but in different fora, and advised them to revisit him individually. Also advised that each of the twin should not relate the information to the other, for doing so will distort the efficacy of the prophecy. But he got it wrong by the mother of the twin who reacted feverishly upon hearing and distinguishing the tenor of the prophecy (The victims, 3/7/2024, *personal interview*).
- xxviii. A prophet negotiated with a certain family to use a man as example of his prophetic prowess. He brought a coffin for the man to enter, paid them fifty thousand naira only, asked them to bring the man to the church so that he can command him to rise, assumed he was dead. Unfortunately, the man could not rise upon the prophetic enterprise. Consequently, the wife could not hold her peace again, but reveal the cause of her husband's death, through uncontrollable wailing and screaming (Focus Group Discussion, FGD).
- xxix. A sister was directed by a prophetess to bring some items of propitiation to include among other things a bag of rice and some spices. According to the prophetess, the rice was for the angels. Adding that failure to bring those items would result in the futility of the prophetic ministration. Regrettably, the sister could not afford a bag of rice, but half. The husband of the prophetess rejected the offer and pursued the poor sister, saying, that half bag of rice is not enough for the angels, for they were many in number. (Anonymous, 2/4/2025 *personal interview*).
- xxx. In a similar milieu, Mr.B, contracted the prophetic services of another mercenary. The prophetess ordered him to buy a brand of wrapper called Hollandaise Wax for her. But for lack of money, Mr. B, could only buy an High Target Wax. The reaction of the prophetess was disappointing, as she rejected out rightly the offer, adding that High Target Wax was too inferior to be used in the prophetic administration (Anonymous, 7/3/2025 *personal interview*).

The Effects of False Prophecy in the Church

Prophecy has shaped the lives of many members of the church, by providing frameworks to many destinies, giving hopes to the hopeless. However, Prophecy that was meant for edification, comfort and exaltation of the church, has been reduced to means of sapping people's economy. Some prophecies are now commodity for commercialization, rendering the unsuspected clients bankrupt. Some have to pay through their nose to secure a particular prophetic administration, owing to the exorbitant demands of some prophets. In some instances, marriages are initiated through prophecy without giving the couples a chance to access their social, academic, religious, and medical compatibility before entering into marriage. The effect of this is usually broken marriages, poor parenting and the reproduction of medically malfunctioned children like sicklers (SS) and HIV/AIDS carriers, which inversely may constitute a burden to the society. Some under the guise of prophecy take an undue advantage of people's wives and husbands. Citing a particular instance of sexual exploitation of a female church members by a 'Prophets' in Nigeria, Agazue (2016) quotes, 'he told me that my waist and private parts have been ravaged by demons', thereby having sexual affair with the lady, notwithstanding the marital status of the woman. More so, not minding the medical status of the two. In the process one can be infected with HIV/AIDS, which leads to untimely death and separation of marriages. Most parents-inlaw are considered to be witches and wizards by prophecy, to the detriment of their families and the church. Some people have been lynched having been accused by prophets and prophetesses to be witches and wizards (Ekwunife 2011, Essien (2009).

Contemporary findings on prophecy reveal health and medical consequences, shows orthodox medication is regarded sacrilegious. Pathological diseases like HIV/AIDS, Lassa fever, diarrhea, malaria, typhoid fever, tuberculosis, that could be handled effectively in the hospital have been subjected to the whims and caprices of prophecy, thereby causing many cases of untimely death, leading to greater number of orphans, widows and widowers prevalent in the Church, which inversely brings about an alarming rate of poverty in the society. Values like hard work and creativity have been relegated to the background. Most people now wait for prophecy before they begin to engage themselves in any given venture in order to succeed in life. Some even go round seeking prophecy, synonymous to the divination of African Traditional Religion. This also brings about poverty in the church that results in the increase in social vices. There is an interesting and fascinating belief that nothings happen accidentally or naturally because all events have supernatural causes and effects including poverty and divorce. These supernatural wicked forces include: Principalities and powers, witches and wizards, demonic spirits, water spirits, charmers and sorcerers. It is strongly believed that these are responsible for failures, sicknesses, road accidents, childlessness, and untimely death.

The Roles of the Church in Combating False Prophecy in the Church

- i. **Theological Education:** According to Mulholland (1975), theological education is seen as the systematic biblical and doctrinal teaching. Both theoretical and practical teachings are complimentary for that has as its purpose the preparation of the believer especially, the leader for the role of a special ministry in the church of Jesus Christ." It is the education or teaching giving consciously to someone who is understudying to know more about God and his will to human kind, and the "process by which a person learns to know God personally, to love Him with all his mind, and heart, and to glorify Him with his whole being. This is subjecting the whole faculties of human personality in attempt to know more about God through rigorous learning, practices and disciplines (Matthew

- 2016, Gerber 1984). The importance of theological education should not be mitigated, as it holds the foundational doctrines and the sustenance of the future of the church. A robust foundation in theological education is essential for fostering authentic prophetic practice. Religious institutions and communities, according to Fee (2003), should prioritize teaching about the nature, purpose, and history of prophecy within their traditions.
- ii. **Biblical Literacy and Studies:** Closely related to theological education is Bible studies. A teaching base church cannot easily be misled by the unscrupulous elements of the society. This is why Jesus Christ, the founder of the church, devoted tremendous effort in teaching his audience (Matthew 4: 23; 9:39; 15:9; 21:23; 26:55; 28:20; Mark 14:49; Luke 13:10,22; 21:37; 23:5). The early church also saw the importance of teaching in the church and they made it a priority (Acts 5:25; 15:35; 18:11). Apostle Paul in his ministration toed to Christ's steps and the result was mind boggling (Acts 28:31; Colossians 1:28). The responsibly of the church should include studying the context and purpose of prophetic messages in the Bible (Grudem, 2000). Providing comprehensive studies for leaders and laypersons on biblical principles related to prophecy will help restore the prime role of prophecy in the church. This includes understanding the role of prophecy in the Christian tradition and recognizing the characteristics of true prophetic messages (Yong, 2006).
 - iii. **Establishing Accountability Structures and Prophetic Oversight Teams:** Creating accountability structures within religious communities is crucial to prevent the abuse of prophecy. These structures can help ensure that prophetic messages are tested and evaluated before being accepted. Forming teams within churches or denominations responsible for evaluating and overseeing the administration of prophetic messages, and sermons delivery at every meeting, will effectively combat the activities of false prophets. These teams should consist of mature and theologically trained individuals, who can provide guidance and correction when necessary (Cartledge, 2018). And any defaulter should be called upon openly to apologize publicly and correct the error theologically in the open. The church should be able to encourage prophets to submit their messages to peer review by other leaders within the church before delivery. This process will help ensure that prophecies are weighed and tested in accordance with the scripture before being disseminated widely.
 - iv. **Promoting Ethical Standards Such as Transparency and Honesty:** Promoting ethical standards in the church is essential for maintaining the integrity and credibility of prophetic ministry. The church should be able to encourage the prophets in all ramifications including financial supports, pastoral welfare and upkeep, so that they can show transparency in the delivery of their prophetic messages without selfish bias. When the leaders are transparent, the followers are equally transparent. But when the leaders are living in a sumptuous affluence like the biblical Diarus (the rich man) and expect others to be transparent in this twenty first century, of high cost of living, the introduction of false prophecy in the church is inevitable.
 - v. **Humility and Servanthood Priority:** The church should emphasize that prophetic ministry be carried out with humility and servants' heart, rather than for personal gains, influence and affluence. The teachings of Jesus, the owner of the church should be re-emphasized. For instance, according to John, Jesus says "this is my commandment, that ye love one another, as I have loved you" (John 15:12). Everybody in the church, from head to the pew, should be encouraged to demonstrate the brotherhood, humility and

servanthood of the early church, as exemplified in Acts of the Apostles, that what belonged to one person was for every other member of the church according to his need (Acts 4:32-37). Truly, if this is adhered to, the multiplication of false prophecy in the church will be combated.

- vi. **Educational Campaigns and Engagement in Ecumenical Interfaith Dialogue:** Launching educational campaigns on social media to inform believers about potential falsehood and how to discern trustworthy prophetic voices. These campaigns can provide tools and resources for critical engagement with online prophetic content (Campbell, 2010). Engaging in interfaith and ecumenical dialogue can provide broader perspectives on the practice of prophecy and foster mutual learning and accountability. Also, participating in conferences, workshops, and study groups with members of other faith traditions to learn about their approaches to prophecy and discernment, can miraculously reduce the influx and acceptance of false prophecy in the church.

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