

*Article*

## A Letter to the Church in Port Harcourt

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**Abstract:** The Church, which is considered the body of believers in God through the affirmation of the sacrifice and death of Christ on the Cross of Calvary, ought ethically and logically to live by the supposed tenets of Christianity. But in recent years, the church, especially in Port Harcourt, has become more worldly than the world itself. This paper critically examines issues relating to whether the church, in truth and essence, is expected to stay quiet when the moral fabric of society, is being destroyed by politicians. It also probes into how the church in Port Harcourt treats such themes as marriage, culture, gender and politics. Questions regarding the ideal theological teachings of the church were further examined since changes in homilies suggest the practice of process theology, and the emphasis on materialism and wealth suggests prosperity theology. Where, then, is the place of salvation and the great commission which ab initio were the essence of the church? Adopting the qualitative method, the paper calls on the church in Port Harcourt to re-examine its homilies on the above themes, arguing that the church which purports to save humanity must first purify itself of all self-contradictions, as such internal purification is needed for the external purification and manifestation of society. The pulpit should not be used to spread political homilies of hate and partisanship. Since culture and traditions were instituted by God, the Church must not destroy African cultures through its homilies on marriage and gender, nor see Africans as second-rate creatures.

**Keywords:** God, Church, Port Harcourt, Culture, Christianity.



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### 1. Introduction

Several letters have been written to draw attention to certain anomalies or to push through some ideologies across societies, either within the micro (particular) units of society such as church, family, or school, or within the macro (universal) level, such as state, nation or country. Some were directed at the civil government such as John Locke's *Letter on Civil Government*. Some others, such as St. Paul's letters to the Churches in Corinth, Ephesus and his individual letters to Timothy, were geared towards the development of the Church. But Sam Harris's *Letter to a Christian Nation* is somewhat mixed in approach and scope. On one hand, it addresses the Christian community in America, on the other hand, it addresses the American Nation for attempting to go against secularist tendencies and enforcing the Christian ethos. Harris, in his *Letter to a Christian Nation*, was astute with raising some philosophical questions around the Christian belief system. Some of these philosophical questions will be expatiated upon in this paper. These letters we have mentioned and

many more resonate with our concern in this paper, even though, from different contexts. This paper is primarily concerned with the phenomenological manifestation of the Church in Port Harcourt. Although, in scope, it is limited to Port Harcourt, most of the themes of the paper have universal application. The paper will examine the problem of process theology as manifestly observed in the Port Harcourt church. After a deep and proper apprehension of the actual occasion of the Port Harcourt church, the paper shall then examine such other themes as prosperity theology within the Port Harcourt church, internal politics and external political quietism of the church, demonization of African cultures by the church, the homily on one-man, one-wife among other themes. The paper is, therefore, a gadfly on the church in Port Harcourt. It aims at redirecting the attention of the church to its ideal essence or exposing the self-contradiction the church.

## 2. Materials and Methods

Using qualitative philosophic and critical analytical methodology, this study examined the manifestations of the church in Port Harcourt in the contemporary setting and how far these extent to the demands of the classical theological identity of Christianity. This work was largely based on vernacular interpretation and theological reflection of theories, biblical writings, philosophical argument, and sociological considerations of the church and its practice. Using this method, the article offered critical reflections on topics like process theology, prosperity theology, gender, politics, and Christianity and African culture. By closely reviewing relevant Scriptures and philosophical arguments, the research investigated if contemporary church practices in Port Harcourt reflect the original Christian calling popularly known as the Great Commission. The study also engaged with existing related literature on Christianity, African religion, theology and sociology of religion, so that the developments observed could be contextualized within wider academic discourse. This qualitative method allowed the researcher to view the church not just as an institution with a doctrine, but as a social and cultural phenomenon whose teachings and practices change alongside history and society. In Port Harcourt, the experiences provided context for examining the discrepancies between the above stated Christian ideals and actual church activities, preaching, and institutional behaviour. Through philosophical critique and hermeneutic interpretation, the project intended to reveal where contemporary homilies and practices in the church seem to diverge from their original theological aims. A qualitative philosophical inquiry constitutes a good overarching methodological framework, since the questions examined are ultimately normative, ethical and interpretive, not variable-oriented, and the nature of the research problem (the church's role, influence and changing doctrinal expressions) pertains to the specific context of Port Harcourt.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### On the Nature, History and Essence of the Universal Church

The Church, from the perspective of Christians is conceived almost similarly, but differing slightly based on the passage of the *Bible* in question and its context. In Matthew 18:20 and Matthew 16:18, it is interpreted as the assembly of believers in Christ and by extension, believers in the Christian doctrine. In Ephesians 2:19-21, it is conceived as the spiritual house built on Christ while in Corinthians 12:13 it is seen as the body of Christ united by the spirit. The Christian Church is said to have its origin in the Pentecost encounter of Jesus Christ and his disciples, which also marked the advent of the Holy Spirit. However, in a sense, the word church is synonymous with the word "temple". In 1 Corinthians 6:19, for instance, St. Paul admonishes believers to know that the body of a child of God is the temple of the holy spirit, since according to him, Christ paid a price for them. Philosophically, this can approximate a humanistic hermeneutics of the God-thesis since it calls for the sanctity, respect and dignification of the human person. Still in the line of religious issues, is the question of the essence of the church. That is, why the church? Does it exist only for the glorification

of the unseen and unknowable supernatural figure? Does it exist for the sociological and psychological integration and edification of man? According to the Christian *Bible* again, the essence of the Church is in the great commission. It is not just for the evangelization of the world, but also for the adoration of the God-figure. By the word "God" the church understands an uncreated, creationist, supernatural, omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, omnibenevolent and almighty being. From this established nature of the universal essence of the church and God-figure as admitted by the church itself, we shall attempt to examine whether the church in Port Harcourt is a church of candor. Without dabbling into the facticity of the existence of God, the question would be, does the church in Port Harcourt admit and practice this great commission? Has the church not shifted its attention to the commission of the pockets and bank accounts of individual ministers/churches rather than the salvation of mankind? As we were told that Christ died for the truth and the salvation (liberation) of mankind; the question would be, how many Christ-like members of the Port Harcourt church are ready to die for mankind today? What exactly is the response of the church to the Government's reckless economic and political decisions that have left many residents of Port Harcourt unemployed? This is important because the ideal church is an institution concerned with both the spiritual and material well-being of citizens. A peep into the history and origin of the church shows that the church started as an alternate leadership platform to remedy the misrule of the leadership of Rome about the time of the Pentecost encounter (AD 30 - AD 33).

The church built schools, roads, markets and so many structures geared towards the betterment of citizens. How can that same church suddenly turn to a worship center for the glorification of wicked and evil politicians as we see in the present-day Port Harcourt church? We now find politicians desecrate the pulpit by openly uttering vulgar curses such as "thunder fire them," aimed at their political opponents while inside the church, and the church does not rebuke them. Rather, they roll out the drums and celebrate them as if to reenact the triumphant entry of Christ. Of course, we know that it was this kind of attitude or temperament of the church during the Middle Ages that led to the decline of the early church. We know of the glorification of the papacy and the execution and killing of the men of science. Such figures as Galileo Galilee who was executed for failing to reject Nicholas Copernicus's heliocentric thesis which ran contrary to Claudius Ptolemy's geocentric belief of the early church. Below are some great personalities who were executed by the Church, an act against the Biblical command "thou shall not kill" :

Jan Hus (1415): He was a Czech religious reformer and philosopher who was executed and burned at the stake for preaching against the sale of indulgences of the Catholic church.

Joan of Arc (1431): She was a French national, who led the French Army to several wars and gained victories. However, she was captured and put on trial by the ecclesiastical court and later burned for heresy and cross-dressing. In her own case, she was later canonized as a Catholic saint.

Girolamo Savonarola (1498): An Italian, who was excommunicated from the church by Florentine and papal authorities and later hanged and burned in Piazza della Signoria for his critical posture against the corruption in the church and particularly, during the reign of Pope Alexander VI.

William Tyndale (1536): An English scholar, who translated the Bible into the English language, a project which was not fashionable at the time. He was tried for heresy, strangled to death and his remains burned.

Michael Servetus (1553): He was a Spanish theologian as well as physician whose rejection of the doctrine of the trinity was considered heretical by the church. He was arrested in Geneva, tried for heresy, convicted and burned at the stake. Indeed, John Calvin was highly instrumental to his prosecution.

Giordano Bruno (1600): He was an Italian philosopher and cosmologist, who argued that the universe was infinite and contained countless worlds. He was tried for heresy by the Roman Inquisition over several years. He was burned at the stake after he refused to retract and withdraw

his Anti-Christian theological views.

The above examples show clearly that the church made some serious mistakes and killed many innocent men and women of truth and science. Some of these mistakes are still being made by the church, especially, the Church in Port Harcourt, even though, it may not be on the magnitude of open execution and burning of humans as carried out by the early church. We must continue to raise those doctrinal, ecclesiastical and social issues which do not seat well with the church's ideal mission of great commission.

### **Of Process Theology**

Christianity came into Port Harcourt around the 1920's through the colonial and commercial missionary activities of the British and Portuguese. The first churches were the Anglican (Church Missionary Society) and the Roman Catholic Mission (The Holy Ghost Fathers). For the Anglican, it started from the CMS bookshop which later metamorphosed into the building and establishment of the St. Cyprian's Church, Hospital Road, Port Harcourt, while for the Catholics, Sacred Heart Church (now Cathedral) was established. As is often said when the stories of Mary Slessor and many early missionaries are told, Port Harcourt was an uncivilized primitive setting. Inhabitants of the city lived primitive lives and their means of livelihood were predominantly farming and fishing. The issue here, which borders on process philosophy as historically traceable to Heraclitus, but actually domesticated as a philosophy in the Contemporary Period by Alfred North Whitehead and Henri Bergson, is the fact that things are ever changing. Whitehead in one of his groundbreaking works, *Process and Reality: An Essay on Cosmology*, responded to the Heraclitus-Parmenides debate on change and permanence [1]. In his words, "...attention has already been drawn to the sense of permanence dominating the invocation 'Abide with Me, and a sense of flux dominating the sequel 'Fast Falls the Eventide'" (p. 338). This extract shows the dialectical or changing nature of the Lutheran hymnal Number 552. The same hymn that prays for God to abide with believers, is the same hymn that prays for the eventide to fall fast. According to him, Ideals fashion themselves round these two notions – permanence and flux – in the inescapable flux, there is something that abides; in the overwhelming permanence, there is an element that escapes into flux [1]. He further argues that "the art of progress is to preserve order amid change, and to preserve change amid order" (p. 339). Fundamentally, what Whitehead is arguing is that reality is constantly in a process of becoming, rather than a fixated entity. Creativity is the wheel that drives actual entities through the recurring circle of experience.

The Christian Bible also accommodates this debate between change and permanence. We find in 2 Corinthians 5:17, the superlative ability of God to make all things new. Yet, in Malachi 3:6, we are told that God does not change, and in Hebrew 13:8, we see that Jesus Christ remains the same yesterday, today and forever. The question then is, if God does not change why vary our homilies from time to time? Process theology as it applies to this paper, therefore, is the constant variation of homilies based on the changes and challenges of actual entities in society. The point, therefore, is that before the advent of Christianity in Port Harcourt, indigenes and residents of Port Harcourt lived based on their traditional belief systems. The Okrika residents worshiped Fenibieso, the Kalabaris worshiped Akaso, the Ikwerrers worshiped Amadioha, etc. Upon the advent of Christianity, the church did not immediately abolish these traditional worship systems, rather, Christianity became an alternative platform of worship. The church did not condemn most of the traditional practices it rejects today, even though the Christian Bible condemns some and accommodates others. For instance, during harvest, members of the church were requested to bring jars of locally brewed hot drinks known as *kaikai* (*nmaya gbeke*) and palm wine (*nmaya nkwo*) which were used for merriment. Many of them presented same as items for thanksgiving to the Lord. Passages of the Christian Bible such as Deuteronomy 14:26, Ecclesiastes 9:7 and Proverbs 31:6 which seem to encourage drinking of strong drinks either for stomach sake or for merriment were made meaningful. That is to say, by then, it was not considered a sin to drink strong drinks. But in present-day Christianity, you can be sure how a pastor or elder of a church who openly brings strong drinks (hot drinks) into the church will be treated. Also, then, people prayed to God kneeling, but now, with the changes in society, people pray standing. The questions now are: has God changed his

commands? Or will the prayers still be answered? If yes, does it mean that those prayers said while kneeling were not answered? Or does it not matter if people kneel or stand when saying prayers?

We discover that some passages of the Christian *Bible* lost their semantic value with time, while others gained traction or meaningfulness. In the olden days, when Christianity came into Port Harcourt, it was easier for the leaders of church to visit a traditional ruler with items such as jars of palm wine, locally brewed hot drinks (*kaikai*) than it is now. As a matter of fact, we doubt that any church can buy hot drinks and offer them as presents to any traditional ruler today. This raises the question, does the Bible permit the dynamism in content, intent and practice with which the church in Port Harcourt has carried on, including the variation in the content of homilies? Before now, it was considered an abomination for a woman to put on a pair of trousers to church. This drew from the people's culture where women were not allowed to put on trousers or men put on skirts. This was also backed by the Biblical passage which says that a woman should not put on what belongs to a man and vice versa (Deutronomy 22:5). But today, especially, with the advent of Pentecostalism in Port Harcourt, some churches started permitting people to dress as they please to church; claiming that God looks only at the heart and not the dressing. This kind of homily which ultimately is geared towards populating the church and increasing its financial muscles has also negatively impacted the dressing culture of the people. People now freely dress almost naked to church. Again, upon the advent of the church in Port Harcourt, traditional gospel songs were encouraged in the church and most traditional/cultural songs adapted to suit the worship of the new God, but in modern-day Port Harcourt, secular songs and music are being sung in churches. Disco lights which were hitherto condemned by the Church are now being used in churches and crusade grounds.

We also recall the story which one of our early employers told us. The respected man was a devout Christian and a member of the Deeper Life Bible Church. He had so much respect for the General Superintendent, Pastor William Kumuyi. Kumuyi had preached against the viewing of television by Christians. According to our storyteller, he had just bought a brand new television set, but had to break it after he listened to the preaching against the use of television sets by the General Superintendent of his church. According to him, the television set was one of the instruments that the devil had brought into the world to destroy humanity. The storyteller was, however, shocked to watch/view the same Kumuyi preaching on television. About the same time, Christian women were not allowed to put on earrings and use hair extensions, as they were considered products from marine spirits. Alas, the churches that condemned these things in the past then, now consider them fashionable; even though it has not been accepted by all.

### **Of Prosperity Theology**

The church is gradually losing its salt today, the ideal homily (Great Commission) is no longer preached as a Kantian "duty sake". As we saw in the section on the "Nature, History and Essence of the Universal Church", the whole essence of the church is the salvation of mankind, at least, from the Pauline Epistles and Gospels of Christ as recorded in Matthew 28: 18-20, Mark 16:15, Luke 24:46-47 and Acts 1:8. We may, at least, give it to the church that this is the true command of the supposed resurrected one, without raising issues of selfishness that often accompany any discussion of the subject. However, we must ask whether the church is living up to this command. Most priests and ministers are no longer interested in the homily of salvation, redemption and grace. Even when they purport to preach this ideal sermon, it is seriously diluted with prosperity theology or what may be referred to as prosperity gospel. A teaching that emphasizes the material essence of God, and its attendant benefit/manifestation on believers over and above the spiritual salvation of mankind. Although, it is a strand of theology often credited to the Americans, it is not an entirely new theology. In *The Confessions* for instance, we see St. Augustine, reacting to this theological tendency when he wrote:

Those whose god is their belly find no delight in them. For it is not what is given that bears the fruit, but the spirit in which it is given. Therefore, I see clearly why he (Paul) rejoiced over one who served God and not his belly. I see it and I rejoice with him. For he had received from the Philippians

what they had sent by Epaphroditus to him. I understand why he rejoiced. He rejoiced at what he fed on (p. 301).

In a paper presented at the 2018 GAFCON Jerusalem Conference, Bishop Mwita Akiri wrote: “wealth is regarded as a blessing from God the Provider (Jehova Jireh). The prosperity gospel teaches that the invisible faith should lead to tangible financial rewards. The prosperity gospel would go further and claim that the size of your wallet tells the size of your faith. Most prosperity gospel preachers would argue that prosperity is governed by a spiritual law of positive confession” (p.3)

Proponents of prosperity theology advocate that the devil is responsible for poverty and it is incompatible with human productivity. A genuine christian cannot be poor because, wealth, health and victory are their legitimate right endowed on them by God from the creation. Christ’s redemptive work broke the barrier placed on humanity by sin and restored them to their lost right to success, health and wealth. Most churches that that embraced prosperity theology have their theology, liturgical practices, and proclamation characterized by this view. Globally, preachers of prosperity share similar thoughts and hermeneutics [2].

Paul Freston, who wrote as a sociologist of religion, presents the following scholars’ views on the subject matter to show that prosperity theology is an affirmation of the global capitalist order [3]. In his words:

Robert Hefner, American anthropologist: the message is, don’t feel sorry for yourself and don’t get distracted with dreams of social justice, get right with God and expect miracles. Andrew Chesnut, American sociologist: prosperity theology in both practice and theory reinforces and even promotes the existing global capitalist order. Douglas Hicks, American professor of religion and economics: it represents a complete acceptance of the free market’s solution to the distribution question. Jonathan Walton, professor of African-American religion: prosperity theology and the housing and stock market bubbles were all fueled in part by super-sized conceptions of life, based on easy credit and unmanageable debt

These emphases on materialism have impacted significantly on the membership of the church to the extent that the church has become more worldly. We now regularly witness the triumphant entry of politicians into the church, rather than the triumphant entry of Jesus, the supposed crowned Christ (redeemer and savior) into the lives of members of the church and the church itself. Preachers of this prosperity homily also find their base in the Christian Bible. Proverbs 10:22 says the Lord’s blessing makes rich and adds no sorrow, Deuteronomy 8:18, says “God gives the powers to make wealth”, Psalm 34:10, says “God takes delight in the prosperity of his servant”, and 3 John 2, says “I pray that you may prosper in good health even as your soul prospers”. But if prosperity is a gateway to salvation why did the Bible argue that it will be easier for the camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to inherit the kingdom of God (Matthew 19: 24), (Matthew 19:23-26), (Mark 10:25), (Luke 18:25). Also, Luke 16:19 -31, is a Biblical chronicle of the poor beggar, Lazarus, and the rich man where the rich man could not make it to Abraham’s bosom after death but the poor Lazarus did. But most merchants of theology still refuse to see the strict warnings of the Bible against wealth. They focus more on how to exploit gullible members of the public. In his essay titled “The problem of exploitation in prosperity theology: A Kantian perspective” Victor Chidi Wolemonwu notes [4]:

The Prosperity theological ideology seems to appeal to the appetite and the craving or material satisfactions. ... it exploits the evangelical inclination toward an attractational model of ministry, which builds on common ground with culture; and it enters Church buildings and sermon manuscripts wearing Christian Camouflage. It sneaks in softly, gently ...with nodding and sympathy (p. 104).

Religious exploitation has taken such a dangerous dimension, especially, in Africa that the statement that religion started in Rome as a family affair, moved into other parts of Europe as politics and finally, into Africa, as business has become a manifest truism. The Port Harcourt church which teaches that Jesus is coming soon at the moment appears to have focused on material acquisition,

most churches concentrate on business investments. This is worrisome since the church purports to predicate its homilies on the second coming of Christ which the church expects to happen soon. The same church which preaches that God is coming soon is investing in a fifty-year project. Perhaps, their concept of soon is different from the ordinary language use of the word 'soon'. It may have drawn from the Biblical passage that "a day in the sight of God is equivalent to one thousand years in the sight of men" (2 Peter: 8-9). In present-day Port Harcourt, Christianity in general and the church in particular have become an instrument of survival against the economic woes of the people. People often say they are Christians not necessarily because they like Christ or want to be like him, but because saying so, and associating with Christians have the tendency to bake bread. Even in the political arena, the question is often asked, which church does he belong to instead of what are his leadership qualities? This has contributed significantly to the derailment of the church from the great commission. The church must therefore, ask itself some salient questions such as, if God placed so much value on material wealth, why did he say that it will be easier for the camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for the rich man to go to heaven? (Luke 18:25) (Matthew 19:24). Or why did Jesus tell the rich man to sell all he had and give to the poor in order to inherit the kingdom of God? (Matthew 19: 22), (Luke 18: 18-30) (Mark 10: 17-27). The point is that from the ideal (essence) of Christianity, wealth is considered a hindrance to the inheritance of heaven. We know, as Marx stated several years ago, that religion in general and Christianity in particular, are an instrument of oppression by the Bourgeoisie against the proletariat. This is exactly what the church in Port Harcourt is presently manifesting.

#### **Internal Politics and External Political Quietism/Complicity**

Historically, the church, is not just a religious institution, but also a political institution. As we may know, the city of Rome is about the only city in the world administered by the church. Rome is a theocratic city. In fact, the political credentials of the church may be appreciated more when we consider the role of the church in the emergence or sustenance in power of most political leaderships across the world. Some good examples of such leaders are:

Emperor Constantine whose consolidation of power was greatly attributed to the support of the church and his legalization of the religion with the Edict of Milan in 313 AD.

William Wilberforce (British politician) whose campaign against British slave trade was said to have succeeded because of the support of the Clapham Sect., which is a body of evangelical Anglicans.

Martin Luther (a German reformer): Although he later became critical of the church and as a result led the reformation of the church, he was said to have enjoyed serious support from the church.

Joachim Gauck, the president of Germany between 2012 and 2017. He was a Lutheran minister and an anti-communist civil rights activist. This was said to have contributed immensely to his election as the President of Germany.

Others are: Kjell Magne Bondevik who was prime minister of Norway between 1997-2000 and 2001-2005; Raphael Warnock, the United State Senator from Georgia; Mike Huckabee, a former Governor of Arkansas; Tenzin Gyatso (the Dalai Lama) who served as both the spiritual and political head of Tibetan Government in exile; and, finally, Tommy Douglas, the former Premier of Saskatchewan in Canada.

From Biblical records, prophets and priest are supposed to speak truth to power irrespective of whose ox is gored. As followers of Christ, they are supposed to speak truth to power, as they aver that Christ did, and be willing to face the consequences of speaking the truth; as Christ and many martyrs did. Recall that St. Paul, Barnabas, Stephen and many others were killed for standing by what they considered as truth. Jesus Christ himself as recorded in Matthew 16: 25 and Mark 8:35 philosophically proclaims that he who saves his life shall lose it but he who loses his life for his (that is, for the sake of speaking the truth) sake shall save it. The church in Port Harcourt is observing quietism in political matters. Even when individual members speak or the clergy speaks up against

bad politics and governance, supposing it to be based on the *Bible*, we often discover (although not in all cases) that it is merely an emotional decision geared towards satisfying personal, ethnic or religious agenda and not an altruistic decision geared towards the salvation of humanity or fulfilling their calling. We recall that as Assistant State Secretary-Organizer, and a member of the Executive Council of the Rivers State Council of the Boys' Brigade, Nigeria, we organized a campaign against electoral violence. This was to quell the growing toxic political climate prior to the 2015 general elections in Nigeria, and in Rivers State in particular. The official flag-off ceremony was held at the Methodist Cathedral, D-Line, Port Harcourt. During the said flag-off ceremony, after we had openly told the congregants of the need to preach against electoral violence and electoral malpractice, the presiding Bishop quickly collected the microphone from us and openly told the church that this election is strictly between Christians and Muslims on one hand, and Northerners and Southerners on the other. He openly told the congregants to vote for the incumbent president, Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan who, according to him, was a Christian and also comes from the Southern part of Nigeria, claiming that he (the said Bishop) had read a book which showed the supremacist ideologies of the Northern Fulani as proclaimed by their late leader, Usman Dan Fodio. The consequence of the Bishop's statement was that the Cathedral church simply divided into two. While some supposed members of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), the party of the then incumbent president, were jubilating, the supposed members of the All Progressives Congress (APC), major opposition party as at then, were angry. It became clear to us that the essence of our campaign was almost eroded. The point here is that the church which claims to be apolitical on sensitive political matters, on which it should speak up, pretends to be silent when the government itself is or government's decision are in its favour, but speaks up when government's decisions turn against it or some strong members of the church. The church, like the judiciary, in Nigeria has become part of the complex corrupt Nigerian system.

The church was entirely silent during the controversial (now declared lawful by the Supreme Court of Nigeria) declaration of the six months of State of Emergency in Rivers State by the President and Commander-in-Chief of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, President Armed Bola Tinubu. An imposition of a State of Emergency which was ill-conceived, primarily to cow the serving Governor of Rivers State, Sir Siminalayi Joseph Fubara. This goal was eventually achieved through the suspension of the Governor, the Deputy Governor and elected members of the Rivers State House of Assembly, an action which was generally thought to be at odds with the tenets of both democracy and federalism, both of which Nigeria purports to practice. Though the action was later legitimized by the Supreme Court, this does not invalidate the question, what was the position of the church on the declaration of this State of Emergency? The church did not make any serious public statement in condemnation of such action, apart from few individual clerics who spoke in their individual capacities. Of course, it may be argued that since most of the alleged "infractions" levelled against the church are not often "committed" by the church as a corporate entity but by individual clerics, in their personal capacities, it would then be unfair to count as insufficient remedy when other individual clerics speak up, in their private capacities, against perceived societal injustice.

As valid as the preceding argument may seem, it is crucial to bear in mind that most of the alleged "infractions" committed by the erring individual clerics are doctrinal in origin and, therefore, the church, as a corporate entity, bears, at the very least, vicarious responsibility for them. The church which always claims to be an apolitical institution also plays internal politics in matters like posting of clergy, election of church leaders, promotion of clergy, etc. For instance, some Bishops post their loyal servants (boys) to the big parishes in the urban cities and post those who are considered disloyal to the small parishes in the rural communities. They often consider loyalty in the context of the typical Nigerian politician who considers loyalty as the unquestioning submissiveness to the will of the leader, which manifests in the form of praise-singing and boot-licking. Rather than post ministers to parishes based on seniority, leadership skills, calling and spiritual gifts, or simply through balloting, they are posted based on their 'returns' to the Bishop, praise-singing and boot-licking skills and their ability to snitch on other clergy who are considered to be opposing the Bishop

or General Overseer, depending on the denomination, of the church. The Church must, therefore, by this call reconsider its external political quietism/complicity and internal political maneuverings. The church, as a body of followers of Christ, should ask the question, if Christ were to be in Port Harcourt when the State of Emergency was declared, what would He have done? Would Christ have worshiped in a church where a politician will invoke thunder to strike his political opponents and not say anything?

### **Gender Issues within the Church**

The church must examine and possibly, revisit its stance on some gender issues, such as marriage, women ordination and some other social issues such as divorce. The Christian *Bible* in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-12 instructs that women should remain silent in church and submit to men. In fact, if they must ask questions, they should go back home and ask their husbands. Perhaps, it is for this reason that the Johane Masowe Chishanu Church (JMCC) in South Africa refuses women and girls from occupying major leadership offices in the church. Phillip Musoni, in an article entitled "Gender Inequality in the Church: Addressing Patriarchy within the Liturgical Spaces in Johane Masowe Chishanu Church in South Africa" found that "although the majority of the congregations were overwhelmingly composed of women and girls, only men and boys were given the privilege of leading JMCC services" [5]. In another paragraph, Musoni argues that women were prohibited from performing rituals of opening and closing prayers probably because of the church's understanding that God is a male (Mwari-Baba) Mukonyora (2000), hence, only a male congregant can invite a male God and ask a male God to guide and protect the congregants on his behalf (p.8). But in the Port Harcourt church of today, women are pastors, lay readers and deaconesses. They occupy many sensitive offices whose functions include preaching at the pulpit. The Biblical instruction that women should not speak in church shows that the church should not jettison the culture of the people. In this context, it shows that the church is a patriarchal institution. It further shows that the *Bible* is a cultural document. Carl P. Cosaert, echoes this point when he asserts that "to many, the prohibition barring a woman from teaching and exercising authority over a man in 1 Timothy 2:12 is nothing more than an historical example of the oppressive nature of ancient patriarchy" [6]. Nanlir Kartir Napbut and Rose Bulus Boyi corroborates the foregoing when they wrote [7]:

The second challenge is cultural patriarchy, patriarchy within African contexts. Many societies uphold male dominance in public and religious life, which influences church structures and leadership. Oduyoye stresses that African women face "triple oppression"- as women, as Africans and as members of churches shaped by male authority (Daughters of Anowa 78). This cultural entrenchment of patriarchy often results in resistance to women's ordination, leadership and theological authority (p.74).

Furthermore, Onyenze lamented the nonrecognition of women in the development and evangelical works of the church. According to her, "Christianity is often criticized for being chauvinistic towards women. However, the *Bible* portrays a special position for females in the church and society" [8]. It is this special place that we are calling on women to develop and be proud of, rather than seeing themselves as a gender in competition with their male counterparts. Unfortunately, Onyenze is still guilty of this charge which in contemporary times is becoming worrisome and a major source of all forms of social unrest and instability.

Prior to the advent of Christianity in Port Harcourt, the people practiced a polygamous system of marriage as may be akin to the practice in 1 Kings 11:3 which says "that King Solomon had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines". Also, 2 Samuel 5:13 tells us that "After the men of David had arrived from Hebron, David took more wives in Jerusalem". Women had special place, with important roles, in marriage and they played their roles with dignity, pride, commitment and submission to their husbands. Bienose-Osagiede rightly stated that "the traditional marriage institution was a vital link and bond that sustained and strengthened kingship ties within African communities. In the African cultural setting, the marriage between two individuals was

understood as a means of initiation or cementing the union of the households and clan from which the couple belonged" (p.362). In fact, from the revelation of Okeke, Ibenwa, and Okeke, in Africa, and particularly Igbo land, marriage is also a spiritual activity [9]. At the preliminary stage, it requires a diviner to tell the particular clan that the man is supposed to marry his fortune wife from (p.7).

Divorce was almost considered an abomination by men and women within the African religio-cultural milieu. But with the advent of the church and its doctrine on one-man, one-wife, things began to turn around for the worse. Women began to flex muscles with their husbands. Feminist rights and justice began to curtail women from exhibiting their natural virtues that sustained marriages. Okeke, Ibenwa, and Okeke, were right when they stated that traditional worshipers, especially, in Igbo culture were critical of Christian marriages [9]. According to them, Christians claim that their own marriage is the ideal standard as revealed by God but forget that the Christian marriages and many Christian families are failures going by the prevalence of Christian divorces (p. 7). Women, after listening to feminist homilies on the pulpit, start to push for equality and equity as feminist themes that can guarantee their survival. The church gradually shifted away from the African patriarchal and polygamous system to introduce a monogamous system of marriage. Within the African religio-cultural system, men's spirituality was considered in marriage such that a man was not allowed to have sexual intercourse with a woman in her monthly menstrual flow. For this reason and for some others such as having enough people to help in their farming activities, men married more than one wife. Please note that it was not considered a crime for a man to marry only one wife, though, many men preferred to marry more than one wife because of the attendant benefits. This introduction of strange marriage culture called "white wedding" or "Christian wedding" where a man is only entitled to marry one wife thus encouraged divorce. Many women were emboldened to start disrespecting their husbands. This attitude was further influenced by the European age of romanticism when romance became the essence of marriage. Paradoxically, the same church that upholds and enforces the doctrine on one-man-one-wife forbids priests from getting married, as is the practice within Catholicism. Within the Anglican and most other orthodox churches, however, the priest is allowed to marry. This shows clearly that such practices do not depend on the instructions of God as contained in the *Bible*. Perhaps, it was to stem these doctrinal contradictions that St. Paul stressed the unity of the Church in some of his epistles.

The other point is, does the *Bible* permit the ordination of women? From the passage earlier cited (1 Timothy 2: 12-15), we can deduce that women are not supposed to be ordained ministers in the church of God, as they are not meant to exercise authority over men. But some churches, like Presbyterian, still go ahead to ordain them as ministers or as lay readers, thus, making them to exercise authority over men. The question then is, why would a church which purports to work for God, using the instrumentality of the *Bible*, disobey the same Bible? The Presbyterian church ordains women as ministers; the Anglicans and some other denominations ordain them as lay readers which is strictly against the instruction of the *Bible*. This position somewhat shows that the leaders of the church are allowing their human idiosyncrasies influence their decisions. First, we must realize that God himself is a patriarch and any attempt by the church to take a feminist or matriarchal stance will be challenging the wisdom of God. If human beings did not question God when he asked them to dominate the earth, why would they question God when he says that women should remain silent in church? Beyond this issue of what the *Bible* says about women participation in church, we should also ask God, (if the *Bible* is truly His words) why he decided to subjugate women.

There are different practices according to the different Christian denominations. The Catholic church prohibits the priests and Reverend Sisters from getting married. The Anglican Church and some protestant churches permit their priest to marry. Even within these different churches, some have legalized gay marriage and others refused to legalize it. For instance, the Church of England decided to legalize gay marriage, purporting to be respecting the individual freedom of choices. The church in Port Harcourt, like many churches in Nigeria, refused to legalize it. The Port Harcourt church considers the culture of the people as well as the *Biblical* institution of marriage as an affair between opposite sexes. It further considers the unnaturalness of same-sex marriage in terms of

procreation and sexual intercourse. But with the observed process theology which we discussed above, we can predict that a time will come when the church in Nigeria will allow same-sex marriage. This prediction follows the observation that the doctrines of the church have over the years been influenced by the changes in society. The church in pursuit of more members to increase its financial muscle, has resorted to accepting all kinds of changes in society, thereby neglecting the great commission.

### **Demonization and Destruction of African Religions and Cultures**

Almost all the first set of church buildings in Port Harcourt were erected in ancient spiritual forests in Africa. With the advent of Christianity in Africa and Port Harcourt in particular, many places which had been designated as evil forests were either offered to or bought by churches, which proceeded to destroy them and build places of worship on the land. Of a truth, we may not consider many of these evil forests as free gifts to the church, but as Greek gift. Of course, the people held so much belief in their gods to destroy those (Christians) who claim to have a superior God should they attempt to inhabit the evil forests. But this did not eventually turn out to be the case, as most of the evil forest were not only destroyed but the shrines which hither stood on the land as well gods/oracles in those shrines were often plundered, including art works and artifacts.

Suffice it to say that so many churches bought forests which is seen to be “evil forest for church buildings. In some communities, most of the dreaded areas known to be the abode of malignant spirit were donated to churches for them to contend with the gods. Churches took over these areas and built massive structures for the development of those communities” [10].

Initially, the people revolted against the church, but with time and as the church grew in number and wealth, many accepted the church. This is also because the church became more pragmatic in their engagements with their host communities. Churches reserved special seats for community chiefs. The homilies by church leaders and workers during those early days accommodated the traditional leaders as not only part of the leadership of the church, but also as part of the leadership enthroned by God. They often used the kings in the *Bible* as examples to demonstrate that traditional institutions and leadership were instituted by God. Almost all the kings mentioned in the *Bible* were traditional kings, custodians of culture(s), and polygamous kings, yet, many of them were reported to have found favour in the sight of God. Unfortunately, with the advent of Pentecostalism and what many now refer to as charismatic evangelical churches, most churches started treating traditional rulers as enemies of God. The doctrines of the church gradually changed according to the dynamics of society. Again, lending credence to the truism of process theology to which again, we ask, why change our liturgies and doctrines when we are told that God himself does not change? Are traditional African rulers and leaders truly part of God’s overall leadership structure? Or are they merely frolicking on their own? The church must learn to be consistent in their doctrines concerning leadership and the role of traditional institutions in the church. It must go beyond ego-messaging to coherent truth-telling. It has to realize that God could be described as a transcendent entity who may be conceived in different ways by the five men of indolence.

Today, Bishop Chinasa Nwosu of the Royal Church and Chinasa Nwosu Ministries International is going around Port Harcourt and some parts of Eastern Nigeria clearing evil forests and destroying cultural artifacts without realizing that he is destroying his own spiritual heritage and God’s own spiritual deposits in the land. Thus, Bishop Chinasa Nwosu and his like must heed the advice of Odey when he argued that rather than constantly asking the question what is wrong with the white people that they could exploit us so much? We should rather ask “what is wrong with the mentality of the black people that we keep on exploiting and destroying many years after our common enemy has been told to quit?” [11]. According to Odey, “an authentic theology for Africa must be self-reflective and self-critical”.

## Hypocrisy in the Church

Hypocrisy thrives in the church like in many other institutions to the point that it is gradually becoming a virtue. Beginning from the chancel, to the choir and down to the congregation. We recall our discussion in 2013 with one of our clergy friends during the funeral service/burial of Late Chief Onu Joseph Echeonwu (father of one of our colleagues) at St. George's Anglican Church Rumuekini/Rumuosi, in the Diocese of the Niger Delta North, in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria. The preacher for the day, Rt. Reverend Solomon Sornageloo Gberegbara, Bishop, Diocese of Ogoni, (Anglican Communion) centered his sermon on the resurrection power. We listened to the sermon from outside the church auditorium since the church auditorium was filled. While we listened to the sermon, a friend whose name we wish to withhold asked if we believed in resurrection? Without waiting for an answer to the question, he told us that he did not believe in resurrection. When asked why, then, he preach it in church to others since he did not believe it, his answer was that as a clergyman, he was expected to preach based on the beliefs and doctrine of the church, hence, it did not necessarily follow that he should believe what the church believes. We hasten to juxtapose the fact that this friend did not believe in resurrection, yet, he preached it to members of his congregation with another story which one of our former priests, whose name we shall again withhold, told in church. The short story had to do with how he got admission to study in one of the universities in America, but refused to accept the admission because he was given a condition that he must believe in what "they" believed. Though we are not certain what he meant by "they," we suppose he meant Americans. Moreover, we do not even think that such a thing happened. We rather think that there is a display of ignorance since issues of belief are exclusively within the jurisdiction of the self/individual. However, if it did happen, then he did not act like a hypocrite because he stayed true to his calling compared to the friend in the first case.

The level of hypocrisy in the church is unprecedented and alarming that about the same people who worship in church at the Sunday service end up in a night club on the same Sunday night. In fact, Harris captures this hypocrisy aptly when he wrote that "religion is the one area of our discourse where it is considered noble to pretend to be certain about things no human being could possibly be certain about" [12]. There are two types of wedding ceremonies within the church. The first is solemnization of holy matrimony and the second is blessing of marriage. By solemnization of holy matrimony, it is believed that the couple have not had sex before the wedding while in blessing of marriage, the couple are sexually entangled [13][14][15]. But many of the couples that present themselves for solemnization of holy matrimony today in the Port Harcourt church have had sex several times with their fiancés, but they pretend not to have had sex all because there are no proof or evidence such as pregnancy or child(ren) between them. As a matter of reality, members of the church, whether at the level of the youth, choir or adult, cohabit. Yet, they present themselves as saints to the rest of the world. The church must therefore, fashion a way of eradicating or at least reducing the level of hypocrisy and deceit within the its ranks if intends to be taken seriously.

## Of Truth and Salvation

The church must also ask itself, what is the nature of the salvation that it seeks for mankind? Does it seek mankind to be saved from this wicked and corrupt existential earth and inherit an imaginary illusive heaven? Who exactly is the church trying to save mankind from? Is it from the human forces that have always made things very difficult for man to survive or is it from God who supposedly programmed all things the way they are? Going back to the Bible, St. Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:8-9, "by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works". The implication of this Biblical passage is that it is by the mercies and grace of God that anyone can be saved. No wonder why St. Paul also wrote "It is not of him that willeth nor of him that runneth but of God that showeth mercy" (Romans 9:16). These passages, again, portray the Judeo-Christian God as a partial God. A God who treats the same sins committed by different persons differently.

The church should clearly define what it means by truth when it makes truth claims. It should be able to clarify whether it believes in the divine command theory of truth, correspondence theory, coherence theory, pragmatic theory, consensus theory, etc. There are certain actions that are considered by the church as bad and there are others which are considered as good. Stealing, for instance, is considered as a bad act while kindness and humility are considered as good acts. The church often tends to assume that an action is good because the Christian *Bible* says it is good and bad, because the *Bible* says it is bad. But we strongly think that God or the writers of the *Bible* actually examined the nature and consequences of such actions before they considered them good or bad actions. Could we in good conscience say that an action is good because God commanded it? We should rather think that God commands us to carry out an action because such action is inherently good by its nature. The writers of the *Bible* may have also considered these actions within the context of one or more cultures before considering them to be good or bad. A study of the levirate marriage tradition of the Jews as captured in Deuteronomy 25:5-10, Genesis 38:8, and later in Matthew 22:24 and Mark 12:19 will show clearly that the people's culture matters in the consideration of the morality of actions. We strongly believe that the present-day Port Harcourt will consider the Biblical instruction that if brothers dwell together and the one dies, the other should take in the wife of the late brother for the purpose of continuing his lineage as evil and bad. But, that is the culture of the Jewish people, hence, it was not considered as sin. The point here is that the church in Port Harcourt must begin to realize that Christianity and African cultures are not two parallels. That Christianity stands for some form of truth and African cultures for another does not mean that all that African culture stands for must be condemned by the church.

#### 4. Conclusion

The paper has critically reflected on the church in Port Harcourt, raising some philosophical issues. It is believed that some of the issues raised in this paper may apply to the universal church. However, the scope of the paper is the church in Port Harcourt. This is to avoid overgeneralizations. The paper considers the church in Port Harcourt as the body of Christ in Port Harcourt. By this characterization, no individual denomination or doctrine is considered in isolation, but all those who profess to be part of the body of Christ. It follows the proverbial saying that if one finger touches oil, it spreads to the rest of the other fingers. This implies that the individual churches or denominations should not preoccupy themselves with whether any issues raised is being practiced by them or not, but whether any part of the church practices it.

The paper emphasizes the need for the church to stay true to its essence which is considered as the great commission. It also raised the question of process theology by which we understand the constant variation of homilies and church doctrines based on the sociological changes in society. The church in Port Harcourt has continued to vary their homilies such that it has become necessary to ask whether those early Christians who died as devoted Christians at a time when it was fashionable in the church to drink hot drinks went (or will go) to heaven?

The problem of prosperity theology which has overwhelmed the Port Harcourt church was also examined and the church urged to realize that Jesus Christ himself whom the church is modeled after is not a materialist. His teachings as recorded in Luke 18:25 and Matthew 19:24 where he said that it will be easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to go to heaven clearly demonstrates how salvation and material wealth are diametrically opposed to each other. Prosperity theology is, therefore, inimical to spiritual salvation.

The place of women in the church was also philosophically explored. The paper took cognizance of the Biblical statement that a woman should not speak in church, and on its bases questioned the practice of women ordination by the Presbyterian church and such other closely related practices by many other churches. The church must also work hard to reduce hypocrisy within its fold.

The paper also interrogated the role and place of traditional rulers in the Port Harcourt church, highlighting that they are equally servants in the temple of God and, hence, should be respected by the church in Port Harcourt and not considered as idol worshippers. The paper underscored the point that almost all the kings reckoned with in the Bible were traditional rulers, yet God used many of them. In conclusion, the paper argues that the church must stay true to its essence, having defined its mission, nature, and essence through the great commission. It must keep to Biblical instructions without modifications and doctrinal changes.

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