

RE-ASSESSING THE NEW TESTAMENT DOCTRINE OF ETERNAL SECURITY IN RELATION TO PROSPERITY GOSPEL IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN SOCIETY

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Abstract

The doctrine of Salvation is one of the several doctrines in Christianity which finds its deepest meaning in the spiritual aspect of life and fulfilment in Jesus' death. The highpoint of Christian commitment is to achieve salvation and be sure it is secured. God is holy and has zero tolerance for sin, therefore, no one who relish in sin would be saved by God. Within this context, two schools of thought emerged, namely: Calvinism and Arminianism. In Calvinism, God offered irresistible grace to those whom He elected to save in his sovereignty. While in Arminianism, Redemption was gotten through God's grace, but could be resisted by people through free choice. Prosperity gospel is a current phenomenon in Christianity in Nigeria being peddled by some preachers. It has become so popular that it is seen as a point of spiritual salvation. The problem of study in this study examined the import of sin and how eternal security can remain intact where sin does not abound. Replacing call to repentance and faith with too much emphasis on donation of money, especially gotten through illegal sources is a sin and unChrist-like. Therefore, the relationship between preacher's attitude to eternal salvation and prosperity gospel is critically examined. The methods employed are historical and sociological. The study concludes that once a Christian is saved, he cannot lose it because the Holy Spirit dwells in him. Also, prosperity gospel is a deceit to lay the foundation of greed. Therefore, preachers should make their callings and election sure by adding to their salvation God's virtue and godliness.

Keywords: Eternal Security, Salvation, Prosperity gospel, Preachers and Christianity

Introduction

The concept of "eternal security" teaches that Christians once saved remained eternally saved. This doctrine is controversial in discourse because, it is often assumed that it is one way of discrediting the relevance of sin to salvation. In this work, this assumed irrelevance will be meaningful to help us see the point those churches that do not teach it do not necessarily neglect sin as much as the church that teaches it as part of their doctrine. Indeed, what eternal security means is that those who truly believe in Jesus Christ can never be lost as long as they do not remain in sin, once they are saved, it is forever. According to Ryrie "eternal security is the work of God which guarantees that the gift of salvation once received is forever and cannot be lost."¹ This implies that all true

believers in Jesus Christ are free from the danger of losing their salvation; they are permanently secured in Him, because even if they sin they will always repent and go back to Christ. This doctrine has strong footings in predestination and adoption. Dutynoted that Augustine a fifth century Catholic monk and theologian, originated the doctrine of predestination in the history of the church. He lived between 354 and 430 AD. His teaching on predestination is that: "God from all eternity predestined some to be saved and passed the rest of the race by, with no offer or possibility of salvation, and that those elected for salvation would finally persevere and can never be lost".²

John Calvin, also a Christian theologian who lived between 1509 and 1564 AD got his inspiration on predestination from Augustine. He developed Augustine's doctrine to a conclusion that he coined his own doctrinal position which he called "Calvinism." The concept of Calvinism on predestination is generally called "eternal security,"³ Calvin, like Augustine taught predestination as God's eternal decree by which God's absolute sovereignty will decide the eternal destiny of every individual."⁴The rigidity that characterizes Calvin's position is total in the absoluteness of God. This cannot be denied. However, God has not made man sufficiently irrational for him to decide on what he want God to do for him. Jacobus Arminius' position is stronger than Calvin's when he said; "if a person truly regenerates and neglects grace and grieves the Holy Spirit with sin, he falls away totally and at length finally falls from grace into eternal probation".⁵Arminius believed that Christians become the elect of God and remain so, as long as they meet the conditions of salvation. He believed and taught that it was possible to fall away from Jesus Christ and be lost forever. Since then, there has been a great dichotomy among Christians in this area of theology. Today, some denominations remain sharply divided over the doctrinal teaching of eternal security which teaches that Christians once saved, remained eternally saved.

But the question is, "Is eternal security a problem of biblical interpretation or not?" The role of 'grace' in salvation seems not to approximate the tendency of once saved. Ordinarily, grace is unmerited favour attached to human activities governed by principles and duties inseparable from the end- results. Grace cannot abound when people relish in sin. Therefore, in this paper, we shall show how important the teaching on eternal security is in Christian living of today where prosperity gospel has dominated the church; instead of the message of salvation all on the basis of once saved, is saved forever.

The Doctrine of Eternal Security

The Biblical doctrine that a person who has received Jesus Christ, been born into the family of God, and justified by faith can never again be lost is sometimes called eternal security. Others speak of it as the perseverance of the saints. The eternal security of believers rests on the Father's purpose in choosing the Christian to salvation in eternity past and predestinating to sonship in Jesus Christ.(Eph.1:4-5).Salvation is the centre of Christian experience and theology. Believers in Jesus believed it was the reason that prompted Jesus to leave His throne in heaven for this world to fulfil God's plan for the salvation of man. It is in the light of this that Chafersaid that, "salvation represents the whole work of God by which He rescues man from the eternal ruin and doom of sin and

bestows on him the riches of His grace, even eternal life now and eternal glory in heaven.”⁶The message of salvation may appear simple but its biblical teachings are sometimes complicated because of all that it takes to sustain it. Teaching such as the eternal security of a saved Christian is a controversial issue for biblical scholars. Orr said that: It is not news to tell you that there are opposing schools of thought on the question of the security of the believers in Christ. One which holds that it is impossible to a duly saved person to ever be lost. While the other school holds that under certain conditions a saved person may lose his salvation.⁷These two schools of thought can be acknowledged as having certain conditions. It is only that the person who has been duly saved has overcome these conditions while there is no denial of the conditions, whoever falls away has not overcome them; i.e has not overcome sins.

The doctrine of eternal security has caused a stormy debate since the beginning of the Church. According to Orr “It has divided the Christian world of theology since the days of Church Fathers.”⁸ Jesus mentioned the issue briefly in the gospels, He said, “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish. No one can snatch them out of my hand. My father who has given them to me is greater than all, no one can snatch them out of my father’s hand” (John 10:27–29). Jesus took cognizance of His sheep, they heard and listened to his voice and Jesus distinguished them from others and provided happiness for them by giving them eternal life. They shall be saved from everlasting perdition and by no means perish forever. In the 21st century, some denominations have remained sharply divided over the question of whether a man once saved can subsequently forfeit his salvation or not. It is important to say at this point that ‘certain conditions’ which illustrates relishing in sin are also tenable for the school of thought that says some are duly saved. The point here is that those who have not been duly saved still claim to be saved when they have not overcome ‘certain conditions’. The problem between Arminianism and Calvinism is the factor of permanence in salvation experience. This will be clearer as we proceed in this work.

The Arminians teaching on eternal security

Duty notes that, “The Arminians are the followers of a Dutch theologian named Jacobus Arminius who lived between (1560 - 1609)”. Arminius engaged in bitter arguments about Calvinism, rejecting the Augustinian – Calvinistic doctrine of predestination. This position is stronger than Calvin’s for Arminius said, “if a person is truly regenerated and neglects grace and grieves the Holy Spirit with sin, he falls away totally and, finally falls from grace into eternal probation.”⁹ Arminius believed that Christians become the elect of God and remain so as long as they meet the conditions of salvation, he believed and taught that it was possible to fall away from Christ and be lost forever, because the Christian’s security is dependent upon his state of grace. Here are some of the biblical passages Arminius used to support his views. “We must pay more careful attention therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord was confirmed by those who heard him” (Hebrews 2:1–3).

This passage teaches that diligent attention must be given to the scriptures read so that the truth does not slip away from the Christians. It is the great concern of every true Christian to give the most earnest heed to all biblical directions, and to prize them highly in his or her judgment as matters of the greatest importance, to hearken to them diligently, read them frequently, meditate on them closely and mix faith with them; either one believes the concept of eternal security or not. No person can neglect something that he does not have. Paul warns saints that every sin will be judged by God and that it is possible to let the truth and salvation slip away. In Hebrews 10:38-39: Paul said, "But my righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back I will not be pleased with him." "The just shall live by faith", if they continuously move with Jesus and do not "shrink or draw back." James teaches that anyone who is a hearer of the word but not a doer is self deceived and his religion is vain, but if he continues to do it he will be blessed.

The Calvinists Teaching on Eternal Security

The Calvinists are the followers of John Calvin, a Christian French theologian who lived in Geneva between 1509 – 1564 A.D. He was a follower of Augustine, the originator of the doctrine of predestination. Calvin developed Augustine's doctrine of predestination to a conclusion that he coined his own doctrinal position which he called "Calvinism." The concept of Calvinism on predestination is generally referred to as "eternal security" today.¹⁰ The view of the Calvinists contend that once an individual is a recipient of the saving Grace of God he cannot fall from that state, but that he shall be kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation. In other words, those who hold this view believe that no Christian can ever lose his salvation even if he falls into sin for it is by grace you have been saved it is the gift of God not by works (Eph. 2:8). They hold that Christians persevere because God preserves and that the doctrine of eternal security is based on God's promise and not by works. It also holds that if the elect could at some point lose their salvation, God's elect of them to eternal life, would not be truly effectual.

In support of Calvin, Berkhof wrote; "If one has gotten salvation, he never lose it and if he is said to have lost it, he has never gotten it."¹¹ This implies that those who are Christians cannot be lost. Though, they may fall into sin temporarily, they will eventually return and be saved and if they refuse to return, then they were never Christians in the first place. Anyone living consistently in sin is not a true follower of Jesus. He further maintained that, "The believer in Jesus will continue to the very end because God never forsakes His work. The continuous operation of the Holy spirit in the believer's life will be brought to completion at eternity."¹² The Calvinists maintain that the Christian kept by grace of God, will successfully endure all trials and temptations of this life and remain true to the Lord until death. To buttress this, Pink opined, "if there is no guarantee that salvation is permanent, believers may experience a great deal of anxiety and insecurity that will distract them from the major task of the Christian life."¹³

The Calvinists support their views with many biblical passages. A few of them are John 10:28-29. "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, no one will snatch them out of my hand," (1 Cor. 10:13). "And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear" (1 Cor. 10:13). "God will make a way of escape that you will be able to bear all temptation," (1 Pet. 1: 4) "and into an inheritance that can never perish,

spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you.” (Hebrews. 10:14) “For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.”

Pink observed that, “insisting that one must follow rules and laws and be objectively good in order to obtain or to keep one’s salvation is actually an indirect opposition to the true gospel.”¹⁴ The New Testament does not teach that after coming to Jesus we become new creatures, and that the man or woman will not sin again. One of the main premises in the gospel is that man is not good nor can he be good. Paul the apostle did that, he sometimes did things he did not want to do and that he still sometimes sinned (Romans 7:15-24), hence the need for the leading of the Holy Spirit and for God to chastise the Christians when they misbehave. The scripture says that, “sinning Christians are to be disciplined, “because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens every one he accepts as son” (Heb. 12:6). It says nothing about being cut off from God for all eternity, this is according to the teachings of the Calvinists. One may not be comfortable with this teaching because so many vices are committed everyday by so called Christians. We hear cases of corruption, embezzlement, rape and a lot of unholy acts being practiced by both pastors and lay men, right in the house of God. We cannot say that because these people have professed to be Christians they are therefore saved forever. If they continue in sin they will definitely lose their salvation. This is based on what the scripture says in Romans 6:1 that one cannot continue in sin and expect grace to abound, therefore, one must remain permanently in the salvation experience in order to be eternally saved.

A Brief History of Prosperity Gospel in Nigeria

Prosperity gospel originated from the United States of America since the middle of 1960. Prominent among the teachers of the gospel include Kenneth Copeland, Kenneth Hagin, John Osteen, Robert Tilton among others. According to Gilford, “These people have in turn been influenced by the teachings of W. Kenyon, Norman Vincent and others. Gilford goes further that the teaching also leans heavily on an outlook and hermeneutic of affluent and materialist middle America.”¹⁵ The teaching has been introduced to Africa through Reinhard Bonke’s Christ for all Nations crusade which has been active in various centers throughout Africa. The ‘crusade’ has been appraised by Gilford in 1987, demonstrating the campaigns advocacy of prosperity teaching and its American influence in this aspect of teaching. This teaching has been taken up by many indigenous preachers, including Archbishop Benson Idahosa, Bishop Oyedepo, W.F Kumuyi and host of other Nigerian preachers. Prosperity gospel is now a prominent feature of many of the neo – Pentecostal churches and large evangelistic rallies in Nigeria.

Theological teaching on prosperity gospel

Giving a theological summary of the prosperity gospel, there are difficulties partly because it does not present itself as a written theology, but rather a rhetorical and experimental teaching in which appeal is as much led to the language used and the personality of the proponent as to the theological content. Another factor that makes it

difficult is the considerable variation between the proponents of prosperity gospel on some of its details. There are however certain common elements found in it.

The main element of the prosperity gospel is that all Christians have the right, to financial prosperity and prosperity in the realm of physical health and well – being. Idahosa describes this in the following way. “No one in God’s family was ever destined to exist in sickness, fear, poverty, loneliness or mediocrity...”¹⁶ He also states “It is God’s perfect will that a believer should enjoy perfect health, spiritual and material blessings, victory, promotion, peace, joy and satisfaction throughout his sojourn on earth...”¹⁷

The implication of this is that for a Christian to be in poverty or to be ill is to be outside of God’s will for his or her life. Whether that be because of sin, ignorance or lack of enough faith. This teaching obviously could lead to serious theological and pastoral problems if it does not work and provide the prosperity it claims for the believer, because the fault is always on that believer and not with the theology.

Scriptural basis for prosperity gospel

The authority for the teaching of prosperity gospel sought from many proof texts, interpreted with the assumption that they can stand alone as prescriptive statements without the need to refer to context or original intent. One of the common texts of the teachers of prosperity gospel is 3 John 2 which says “I pray that all may go well with you and I wish above all that you may be in health; I know that it is well with your soul”. (RSV translation). They claim that this passage clarifies that it is the wish of God that all believers should prosper in every way, so that the argument is inconclusively proven. Matthews also argues that “prosperity gospel is an aspect of the atonement by referring to Galatians 3:13 and stating that the curse of the law is poverty, whether it be emotional, financial, physical or spiritual”.¹⁸ He goes further that: prosperity gospel also espouses a form of covenant theology. The covenant of God with Abraham, which includes a promise of material prosperity is seen as a conditional one, dependent on obedience.¹⁹ Galatians 3:14 is then cited to show that God must also bestow this prosperity on the Christian.

This conditionality was made explicit through Moses and this element of the covenant was a prominent one (Deut. 28-30). These covenantal promises of prosperity are a part of the believer’s benefits on the basis of Hebrews 8:6-12 and the fact that Christ has fulfilled the old covenant (Matt 5:17). Logic then leads to the statement “...and you know that you are in Christ, stand before God as someone able to keep the covenant. The blessings of covenant keeping are therefore yours to claim”.²⁰

Prosperity gospel teachers stress that it is faith in God that brings about a response from God to deliver prosperity in all areas of life. Not only will God in response to his faith, but He is actually obliged to do so. Such considerations lead to prescriptive formulae on to how God will work. Since then human faith has the power to effect change and bring

about this prosperity. This according to Matthews can be regarded as a force in itself without reference to its object. This force is welded not by God but by the human believer.²¹ This view of faith means that it is measurable by the material results it achieves and so easily leads to the possibility of grading Christians according to their material success. This in turn, introduces the concept of a superior class of Christians who can effect this prosperity in their lives.

Another feature of teaching of faith by the teachers of prosperity gospel is their advocacy of what is termed "positive confession". This is a principle based on Mark 11:22-24; that is "what you say in faith is certain to come about". To maintain this positive confession, it is enjoined on the Christian to act as though he has received the benefit claimed, even though the evidence may be entirely the contrary. To do anything less, is a show of weakness of faith. The implication of this is potential disaster which obvious in cases of serious illness.

In the case of poverty and sickness, these two are viewed as evil and Christians who find themselves in such situations are regarded as sinners. Matthews argued that "the church has been misled in affirming the value and dignity of poverty and suffering in the past, whereas it can lead to sin and tragedy".²²

Similarly, there is no truth in the assertion that prosperity gospel promotes sinfulness and sinful attitudes (Idahosa cites the example of Abraham, David and rich Christians to illustrate his points).

In reaction to this teaching on prosperity gospel, it is crucial to acknowledge that not all of their teachings is to be denied. The gospel does apply to every area of Christian's lives, and should also affect every area and not just be restricted to the spiritual realm. God's material and physical care and provision for his people are very real aspects of his love towards his people but this is always in the context of his sovereignty. God does love the affluent as well as the poor, and even relative affluence does bring responsibilities to share the affluence. Having said this, it is clear that there are many aspects of the teaching to which a response is needed.

The general approach to prosperity gospel to scripture and its interpretation has been to quote isolated proof texts and to treat them almost exclusively as propositional truths or promises. This, it is claimed, is in the interest of elucidating the plain meaning of the text. Responding to this methodology, Fee makes this crucial point: "let it be understood that the plain meaning of the text is always the first rule, as well as the ultimate goal of all valid interpretation. But plain meaning has first of all to do with the author's original intent. It has to do with what would have been plain to those whom the words were originally addressed"²³

This is seen in the interpretation of 3 John 2. This verse is a part of the conventional letter writing formula of the day and part of a personal note of good wishes from the author to

Gaius. It cannot be seen as a propositional promise of God to all Christians either in its original intention or the way it is to be applied today. Idahosa refers to Mark 10:29-30 and he says "Any man or woman who reads these verses without prejudice will establish in plain language that the Lord promised temporal wealth".²⁴ Simply reading the verse in isolation from this context does not tell the whole story. Idahosa conveniently forgets that this sayings is set in the context of a discussion on the difficulty of the wealthy entering the kingdom of God and neglects to comment on the promise of persecution that is part of these verses.

Implication of Prosperity Gospel in Contemporary Nigerian Churches

Although, prosperity preachers sincerely seek to use the Bible in explaining and promoting their preaching, it is disappointing how much use of the Bible is seriously distorted, selective, and manipulative. Many churches where Prosperity preaching is dominant, the Bible is rarely preached in any careful or explanatory way, and the way of salvation, including repentance from sin and saving faith in Christ for forgiveness of sin, and the hope of eternal life, is misrepresented and substituted with material wellbeing for instance Idahosa opines that "No one in God's family was ever destined to exist in sickness, fear, poverty, loneliness or mediocrity..."²⁵ Idahosa's stand is difficult to reconcile with some people who were sick in the Bible. For instance Namaan the commander of Syrian army was a leper until he met the young slave girl who led him to his healing (2 Kings 5:14). So also Bartimaeus who was blind until Jesus met and healed him (Lk 18:35).

While re-assessing the doctrine of eternal security and prosperity gospel, the concern of present researcher about this unbalanced practising is in two dimensions. The first is that this preaching may set in confusion the mind of the Christians who are living according to Biblical standard and are struggling to make ends meet. They may begin to wonder if they are guilty of some sins or how would they explain their inability to stumble at wealth. They may become discouraged from doing good. The implication of the teaching that all Christians should be wealthy is that Christians who are still struggling to make ends meets are not genuine Christians. The second implication is that those who purposely attend the church in order to be wealthy, if they fail in the purpose, they may eventually resort to unholy practices in pursuance of their aim which is a sin.

Commercialization of the gospel is another implication of prosperity preaching in Nigeria. Obiora describes commercial tendencies as "Holy Deceit", the art of trading in God's name, willing to commercialize religion for their own benefits and interest".²⁶ Today, some preachers of the word of God obviously in their preaching lay emphasis on monetary issues and they have not been able to resist the reality that they had made religion a source of merchandize, using it as a lucrative business avenue to maximize profits. There is a clear evidence that many of prosperity gospel preachers have in practice moved away from key and fundamental tenets of evangelical faith, including the authority and priority of the Bible as the Word of God, and the centrality of the cross of Christ.

Recommendation/Conclusion

Prosperity preaching has made significant impact in Nigeria. The cynic might suggest that it is plain greed that motivates the adherents of this teaching and the appeal of a quick and easy way to riches may be the attraction to some. The situation is somewhat more complex than this.

A factor that is worthy of mention is the highly emotional nature of the presentation of the prosperity message. Meetings and rallies are very lively and emotionally engaging. Even the books on prosperity teaching use highly emotive language. The preachers of this teaching tend to be very attractive and charismatic figures as well. The appeal of the message then is intimately tied to the appeal of the medium in which it is presented.

Some of the Bible passages cited in this paper makes it clear that Christians are saved by grace, and eternal life is forever, but to say that it makes no difference how a Christian lives after he is saved, or what he does after he has been converted is as far from the truth as anything can be. It does make a difference because God does not judge His people. It is important to point out that there is a difference between condemnation and judgment. There is no condemnation for the believer, but there is certainly judgment. Every Christian will have to give an account of all his/her deeds, words, and even thought at the judgment seat of Christ. (See II Cor.5:10).

Jesus brought the gospel of love, peace and redemption, but Nigerian Christians are being short-changed as what they get most of these preachers is plainly the gospel of materialism. While some Christians in Nigeria cannot afford three square meals, some preachers are 'swimming' in money and flying in private jets. The Nigerian Christians have been starved of divine knowledge and yet Nigeria boasts of thousands of churches with extremely rich ministers deception is being actively pursued under the guise of Christianity.

The beginning of Jesus's ministry was highlighted by his experience in the wilderness where the devil tries to tempt him with materialistic seduction. Consideration of the temptation of Christ sheds light on how our surrounding culture operates in much the same way as the devil did in the desert. When Jesus began his ministry, He was led into the wilderness by the spirit to experience deprivation and temptation (Matt. 4:1) this should be a warning for Christians in our highly materialistic culture. Satan still uses this technique today to test the faithfulness of the body of Christ. Matthew tells us that the first temptation was used by the Satan to fulfill a perfectly normal bodily need. Jesus is hungry; he had fasted for forty days and nights. Satan suggests that He turn stone into bread, something well within Jesus' capabilities. Christians wrestle with the same suggestion from Satan today, however, it is expected of Nigerian Christians to carry their cross and follow Christ's lifestyle. But what is wrong with fulfilling normal bodily functions? The body needs food, clothing and shelter to survive, but it must be to the glory of God rather than yielding to more bodily desires. It is essential at this period of

Nigerian socio-economic difficulties and its attendant quest for material security for preachers to contribute positively to the social and economic problems of Nigeria.

In conclusion, there is a need for the church to preach a biblical message that does touch all areas of life, making the scripture relevant to the real needs of everyday life in Nigeria showing that God does act in the world today. In particular, there must be practical and relevant teaching on the topics of wealth and poverty, pain and illness. Above all, there is a need for a sound grounding in biblical theology and the reading and teaching of scripture in a way that brings out the whole of its message and rejects the proof – text approach to interpretation and theology.

Endnotes

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