

**COMMODIFICATION OF THE GOSPEL BY SOME CHURCH LEADERS IN NIGERIA: LESSONS FROM MATTHEW 10:8b****Amadi-Nche Church-Hill PhD**

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**Abstract**

*The print and electronic media are ablaze daily on the vulnerable state of the Nigeria religious domain. Most pressing is the concern for the commodification of the gospel by some church leaders for financial and material gain through well-orchestrated means which have led to the exploitation of gullible worshippers consequently necessitating ill feeling about the church of Christ and dragging the name of God to the mud. What is commodification of the gospel? How can the Nigerian religious sphere regain her respect, value and dignity amidst commodification of the gospel? What are the various ways through which some religious leaders exploit their worshippers in the modern time? What proactive steps should be taken to salvage the deplorable state of the Nigerian religious spheres? It is within this context that this paper examines Jesus' instruction to his disciples in Matthew 10:8b, "Freely you have received, freely give". Premised on the Marxist theory and using the phenomenological and historical-critical methods, the paper reveals ways in which some church leaders in the 21st century perpetuate commodification of the gospel through exploitation, false scriptural interpretations, sales of religious artefacts, symbols and other objects all for financial and material gains which is in contrast to the ideal biblical principle of selfless sacrifice as reflected in the biblical text of Matthew 10:8b. The paper maintains that by commodifying the gospel, church leaders have not shown a high level of spiritual and moral responsibility as required of them as purveyors of the good news of Christ. The paper recommends that church leaders should keep to religious ethos, adhere to moral and spiritual etiquette, value and respect the dignity of every human being in the discharge of their ministerial functions.*

**Keywords**

*Commodification,  
Church Leaders,  
Marxist Theory,  
Matthew 10:8b,  
Salvation.*

**1. Introduction**

According to Amadi-Nche (2021) there is no society or religion which operates in a vacuum. Every organized religion have their ethical codes, creeds and theology which is believed to be the guiding principle of such society or religion in matters of morality, spirituality and liturgy. The Nigerian nation as a pluralistic society comprising of people from different socio-cultural, religious and political affiliations constitutionally recognizes three religions which are namely Christianity, Islam and African traditional religion. Each of these religions teaches love, peace, forgiveness among others and promotes values and dignity for human existence. However,

in recent times the Nigerian socio-religious space is threatened on the electronic and print media on some activities which are contrary to the norm of the society and established religion. Some of the disturbing deeds which describes the Nigerian religious sphere are commercialization of the gospel, human trafficking and killing for ritual purposes, injustice, fraud and economic exploitation through sales of religious artefacts, symbols and other objects all for financial and material gains among others. While these unholy activities benefits some church leaders (especially those at the ecclesiastical apex) in the Nigerian polity, the unguarded congregants are disfranchised of their hard earned resources and the name of God is oftentimes dragged to the mud.

Sequel to the above line of thought, this paper centres on commodification of the gospel by some church leaders in Nigeria, drawing lessons from Matthew 10:8b. The paper inquires on what commodification of the gospel is all about and the various ways through which some religious leaders in Nigeria exploit their worshippers in the modern time. It further provides insights into commodification of the gospel in the New Testament time and how Nigerian religious leaders can regain their respect, value and dignity amidst commodification of the gospel. Using the phenomenological and historical-critical methods, the paper reveals the full import of the statement "Freely you have received, freely give" as scribed in Matthew 10:8b and maintains that commodification of the gospel is against Christian ethics and should not be encouraged in the Christian tradition. It sustains that the act of commodification of the gospel by some Nigerian church leaders imply that they do not show a high level of spiritual and moral responsibility as required of them as purveyors of the good news of the cross. The paper recommends that Nigerian church leaders should keep to religious ethos, adhere to moral and spiritual etiquette, value and respect the dignity of every human being in the discharge of their ministerial functions.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

This paper is premised on Karl Marx theory of religion. Karl Marx was one of the foremost and greatest influential thinkers in the history of social thought, an economist, philosopher and revolutionist whose writing metamorphosed into what is today termed Marxism (Okon 2010). He was born on 5th May, 1818 to a renowned Jewish lawyer Heinrich Marx. He secured admission at the University of Bonn, in 1835 to study Law, after a year he abandoned the course and transferred to the University of Berlin to study philosophy. Karl Marx viewed religion from the capitalist background. Religion for Marx could be explained as the economic exploitation of the masses in the capitalist system (Elom 2008). Marx criticized awfully the social and political structure of his time especially the oppression of the poor. He saw the society as made up of two classes of individual, the controllers (bourgeoisie) and the poor workers (proletarian) and also viewed religion as an opiate of the masses; a dangerous tool in the hand of the wealthy and employer of labour which is used to maintain a deep gorge between the rich and poor. He saw religion as a drug substance which has a benumbing effect on the masses making them docile and weak in the face of oppression. Marx described religion as the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of the soulless conditions. It is the opium of the masses (Anyacho 2004).

Marx summed up his idea of religion as an opiate to dull the pains produced by oppression and make the oppressed obedient. Religion for Marx hinders genuine rebellion as it preaches a heavenly bliss which is prepared and kept for the faithful. He allude that religion prevents genuine rebellion by carefully and systematically enacting laws against the wish of the masses and thereafter tells the masses not to bother about the negative effects of the laws on them promising them a better reward in heaven after their sufferings in life (Elom 2008). In the assertion of Marx, religion does not really solve the problems of human but tells them that the condition is good, a misguided attempt to make life more bearable. Marx therefore advocated for a forceful abolition of religion as a way to free the society from bondage. It is in these context that this paper is situated as revealing the activities of some church leaders in Nigeria in commodifying the gospel through exploitation, false scriptural interpretations, sales of religious objects, symbols and other items all for financial and material gains which is in contrast to the ideal biblical principle of "Freely you have received, freely give" as scribed in the biblical text of Matthew 10:8b. On the other hand, the paper draws lessons from Matthew 10:8b providing what should be the appropriate conduct and manner of church leaders in the Nigerian pluralistic society for sustainable development of the Nigerian nation.

### What is Commodification of the Gospel?

The term commodification of the gospel is a sociological and theological appraisal of how the Christian message traditionally viewed as a free gift of grace is transformed into a marketable product or service within a commercial context. In this process, the gospel of Christ is packaged, branded, and sold, often prioritizing market appeal and profit over spiritual transformation or social critique. In its most literal usage, commodification of the gospel appears in the prosperity gospel, where spiritual favor is linked to financial contribution. Scholars argue that this creates a transactional relationship with the divine. Instead of a covenant, the faith becomes a contract where blessings are the product purchased through seed faith and other offerings (Bowler, 2013). When the gospel is branded, the believer is often repositioned as a customer whose needs must

be met, rather than a disciple who is challenged to sacrifice. The digital and televised age has accelerated this trend. When the gospel is broadcast, it must compete with secular entertainment for attention. This often leads to a watered-down theology that avoids costly discipleship in favor of cheap grace content that is easy to consume and highly shareable but lacks depth (Bonhoeffer, 1995).

### **Mediums of Commodification of the Gospel by Nigerian Church Leaders**

One of the most viable strategies of exploitation by some twenty first century church leaders in Nigeria is through prosperity messages. Prosperity message preachers promise their adherent an el dorado when they the preachers are not willing and ready to be there. They do this using scriptural passages based on giving and nothing more than giving. For instance, “Give, and it will be given unto you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom” (Luke 6:38); “And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:19), “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you” (Matthew 7:7) among others. A Prosperity gospel preacher cited by Onuoha (1999) once delivered this message “It is more blessed to give than to receive...the next thing is to give. You’ve got to give, don’t let anyone tell you that you are too poor to give. It is a good thing to give what you are in need of. If you need clothes, well give away some clothes. God is able to stretch your income, give first, generously and in faith”.

The proponent of prosperity theology claim that God is affluent, having everything at his disposal and as such his followers are not meant to be poor (Anyasodo 2005). Prosperity gospel preachers create an atmosphere of bliss to their dying followers while tactically relieving them of their hard earned resources. The scriptural passages are misplaced, misconceived and re-interpreted to suit their motives of extortion. Prosperity gospel preachers are among those who live in the best houses, drive the best cars/air craft and have the fattest bank account today. Interestingly, amidst the personal enrichment and deceit perpetuated by most prosperity gospel preachers they still admonish their followers by encouraging them to continue to confess positively by claiming that they are rich even when they remain impoverished, they further assert that they are poor because they do not have faith even when their living conditions continue to deteriorate (Celestina 2010). The gospels of prosperity preachers are humanly calculated mechanism to exploit their adherent and enrich themselves. Prosperity gospel preacher emphasize less on the transformation of the human being rather there major emphasis is on the transformation and possession of the human pockets.

There is hardly any religious institution at present that have not an established viable school(s) as the early Christian missionaries did. The early Christian missionaries in a bid to convert pagans and communicate the gospel of Jesus Christ to them established schools in every community that they visited and planted churches. Through the establishment of schools in the community visited, everyone including the poor masses within the community benefited was enlightened in reading and writing and more so reading of the scriptures. Interestingly the early Christian missionaries never intended to enrich themselves through the establishment of educational institutions but to bring light to the world, giving concrete hope to the hopeless which is in line with the biblical text “freely you have received, freely give” (Matt. 10:8b). It is pertinent to note that in the twenty first century church, schools are now established by some churches and church leaders to the detriment of the poor even when the poor contributed to its establishment through the myriads of offerings collected in the weekly/daily church services. Most of the twenty first century church schools are established by the rich for the rich to the detriment of the poor. This assertion is made because in most church schools, the tuition fees and other fees are so exorbitant in such a manner that the poor affording it is just a mirage. Most of the primary and secondary institutions operated by some churches is for those that can afford the fees as an average Nigerian cannot afford its requirements.

The establishment of Educational institutions by some of the twenty first century churches and church leaders is a skillful measure to enrich themselves. A recent post in the social media detailing the tuition fees of some selected recognized religious organization universities has the total sum of four hundred and fifty thousand naira (#450,000) as the least tuition fees per session and seven hundred thousand naira as the highest tuition fees per session (#700,000) depending on the courses applied. With these kind of inflation in tuition fees, the dreams of the poor actualizing formal education is unrealistic as the rich and their progenies are the only ones fortunate to be schooled. Moreover, it shows that the twenty first century church has turned into a business enterprise as the schools established by it have more financial than spiritual concern (Anyacho 2011).

Another well devised strategy of exploitation by some church leaders is through employment. It is pertinent to note that most churches in the present dispensation are into establishment of micro and macro companies such as bakeries, bottled water processing plants, petrol stations, guest houses, printing press, super markets, Micro finance banks among others. While applauding the church for the giant strides of creating employment for the populace especially for their congregations thereby improving livelihood, it is quite disheartening to note that

some of the establishments operated by churches in the twenty first century have Marxist undertone. This assertion is made owing to the fact that in some establishments, the efforts and labour of the employees cannot be equated to their monthly salary; this means that the output (salary) of the workers is not equal to their input. The employees are subjected to work for long hours while at the end the salary may not be commensurate to the time spent. Moreover, the employees are obligated to pay their tithes from their insufficient salaries to the church treasury without complaint or questioning (Nnodim-Onyebuagu 2007).

Furthermore, the salaries of the congregations are always requested by the church authority to know the equivalent tithes such a member is required to pay. Apparently, the Job opportunities granted by the church make the members unable to react or revolt even when their salaries are being touched because if they react the effect could be termination of their appointment or suspension without hope of re-employment. It is on this note that Okon (2010) asserts that we can find the most fertile field for infiltration of Marxism within the field of religion. He adds that religious people are the most gullible. Gullibility is a condition of social unconsciousness in which one is easily taken in or tricked.

Amadi-Nche (2021) remarks that some church leaders and workers in Nigeria are not there because of what they will do to enhance the propagation of the gospel of salvation but what they will gain using the gospel. While some religious leaders charge consultation fees before prayers are offered to their congregation others compel their workers preparing for sacerdotal offices to pay heavily in order to be ordained in the same denomination and oftentimes the huge sum of money goes into the treasury of the general overseer or bishop who has the prerogative to ordain other church workers. Similarly, some religious leaders sell holy waters, holy oil, stickers, handkerchief, wrist bang, aprons, creams and writing materials for examination and interviews, rings and so many other items which are unbiblical to their adherents just to make money from their congregations at exorbitant prices negating the biblical injunction "Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons. Freely you have received, freely give" (Matt. 10:8 NKJV).

It is not an exaggeration to opine that there are churches built by business mogul as commercial ventures whereby the owners employ pastors or contract the churches to pastors to make returns. In such an atmosphere, the emphasis will be nothing more than money in order to meet the demands of the business owner. In some denominations in Nigeria, particularly from the orthodox traditions, investiture into knighthood is now traded for money whereby the highest bidder is invested with knight by the episcopate and recognized in the organogram of the church as against the original intention for knighthood investiture. Some church leaders even carry out this knighthood investiture in hotels rather than churches just to justify the money collected from the gullible congregants, an act which negates the original intention of the office of knighthood. Similarly, ordination of priests, installation of canons and collation of archdeacons are now carried out by some bishops in some Anglican dioceses after the candidates have successfully complied with the payment of huge sum of money which range from two hundred to five hundred thousand naira or as the case may be. Why would a Bishop demand such amount of money knowing that many of those to be presented for ordination single handedly trained themselves in the various theological institutions that they all attended and the persons to be ordained, collated or installed as the case may be have decided to surrender himself for the service of the LORD? Where is the place of "freely you have received, freely give" as enshrined in the Christian scriptural text, Matt. 10:8? (Amadi-Nche, 2021).

Jonah (2021) sustaining the above views adds that in some churches in the Nigerian clime, burials, weddings and birthday celebrations are heavily commercialized by church leaders. The bereaved family and celebrants are oftentimes charged huge sums of money before the services commence. In some quarters, the celebrants are asked to make suits for the pastors and his wife, list of items for feeding of the church members, choristers, youth, band, fuelling among others are provided for the bereaved family and celebrants, and this is in addition to the monetary attachment, failure to comply with the list provided imply that the service or services will not hold. On the other hand, it is a common knowledge to hear some church leaders in Nigeria say that to be wealthy or healthy, one has to pay tithe, sow seed and buy artifacts like portraits of their General Overseers, stickers, key holders, aprons, holy water anointed oil, love their pastors and consider them as angelic beings sent by God to liberate them. All these are ploys to grab the pockets of their members. By turning these services which should have been provided free of charge into commercial ventures of making wealth for personal enrichment, these church leaders have failed in their calling and services to the kingdom of God which is premised on benevolence, charity and Grace. Alana (2012) supporting the views above opines that today some places of worship have become a beehive of commercial activities, with the milieu suggesting that salvation is probably for sale. He adds that ephemeral such as building projects, tithes, offerings to religious leaders, and leadership contest for offices and positions are now celebrated relegating the sincere yearn for the true gospel and kingdom. To this end, what is the import of "Freely you have received, freely give" as documented in the Christian scripture, Matthew 10:8b. This is the focus of the next section.

### **Analysis and Contextualized Reading of Matthew 10:8b**

The Gospel of Matthew is one of the most important single documents in the New Testament because it reveals in full the account of the birth, life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Though, there is no indication in the gospel of Matthew or any other New Testament book on who wrote the book called Matthew however by traditional attribution the gospel of Matthew is ascribed to Matthew, a tax collector among the twelve disciples of Jesus Christ. Scholars who uphold this view believe that the gospel was written in Aramaic. The date of writing the gospel of Matthew is uncertain, but biblical scholars agree that the gospel could have been written as early as A.D 50 but not later than A.D. 70 (Brown, 1996).

The gospel of Matthew chapter 10 reveals where Jesus commissioned the Twelve Apostles for their first major solo mission of teaching and preaching the gospel of salvation for the purposes of winning souls for the kingdom of God. In order to accomplish this assignment, Jesus granted them supernatural authority to heal the sick, cleanse lepers, and cast out demons. The instruction in verse 8b “freely you have received, freely give” serves as a moral guardrail. Jesus here reminds them that since they did not pay for the divine power to carry out such assignment or earn it through merit, they have no right to monetize the miracles they are about to perform rather they are warned that all the services should be rendered free of charge.

Barnes (1978) in providing a hermeneutical interpretation to Matthew 10:8b avers that the text centres on Jesus directives to His disciples in their mission work to the nation of Israel. He notes that the text emphasizes the need not to preach or teach the gospel for the purposes of making money. This is because the Grace to minister and administer healing to the suffering or sick was received freely. He maintains that the idea of some church leaders to conduct crusades, revival, family deliverance and ministrations of the gospel with the sole intention of making money out from such activities is uncalled for. Additionally, organizing such programmes or services with the aim of making money negate the biblical position of Matthew 10:8b which reads “freely you have received, freely shall ye give”. Nixon (1979) adds that church leaders have received Grace to heal, preach, teach, cast out demons and forgiveness without pay thus they are required to proclaim forgiveness, preach, teach and cast out demons through the Grace of God without pay. He reveals that the fact that the gospel is free means that its proclamation is not on a business basis but free of charge.

Powell (2000) in examining Matthew 10:8b remarks that in order for church leaders to actualize Jesus’ mandate of preaching the gospel of salvation and conduct a ministry of healing similar to that of Jesus, they must adopt ideal of an austere lifestyle, requiring no more of their host than the basic hospitality (food and shelter) due any traveler. He maintains that in preaching and teaching the kingdom good news, their messages were to be the same with that of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ (Mtt. 3:2; 4:17). He insists that ministers of the gospel of salvation at all levels must not accept payment for their preaching, teaching and healing. He avers that the experiences in some churches where church leaders will inquire from their host to know and possibly see the current financial status of the church inviting them for ministration must be condemned. He opines that the gospel of salvation and the Grace to declare such messages was freely received and should be disseminated without charges or request of any kind.

Kapolyo (2006) in examining Matthew 10:8b asserts that Jesus in sending his disciples out for mission (to the lost sheep of Israel) gave them specific instructions for how they were to conduct themselves on the mission field. He remarks that the mission of Christ disciples in healing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing those who were leprous and driving away demons was an extension of Jesus’ own ministry. Consequently, the disciples of Jesus were to be careful not to charge for their services just as their master did not, noting that they had not paid for the ability to perform them. This implies that both the message and the authority to heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the leprous and cast out demons had been freely received and they were to be distributed for the kingdom assignment without charges. Jesus further instructed that they were not to carry money along with them as part of marking up for the charges which they were reframed from collecting. The essence of these instructions was to enable them concentrate on the ministry and mission without worrying about material possessions or provisions.

Barclay (2006) in his examination of Matthew 10:8b remarks that every sentence and phrase in the text rings an answering bell in the mind of the Jew. He reveals that Jesus in the text was giving His disciples the instructions which the Rabbis at their best gave to their students and followers. He asserts that a Rabbi was bound by law to teach freely the Law which Moses had freely received from God without accepting any monetary reward. However, he avers that a Rabbi may accept payment for teaching a child, since that was the fundamental duty of the parents. Barclay remarks that when Jesus instructed His disciples that they had freely received and should freely give, he was telling them what the teachers of his own people had been telling their students for many a day. He notes that if a man possesses a precious secret it is indisputably his duty, not to hide it to himself until he is paid for it, but willingly to pass it on. He asserts that it is a privilege to share with others the riches God has

endowed us without requiring money especially in the advancement of God's kingdom project. Jesus from Matthew 10:8b was not heaping burdens on His disciples or trying to negate or reframe them from making wealth from their talents, gifts and resources however He was trying to ensure that carriers of His word, in this case church leaders do not carry out ministry with the mind of doing business. Jesus' instruction means that church leaders must show by their attitude to material things that their first interest is God and not money. Similarly, they must never be over-concerned with material things, but must prove to the world that they are interested with the affairs of God without being money conscious in ministry.

Gill's exposition of the Bible reveals that "freely ye have received, freely give" refers both to the working of miracles, and preaching of the Gospel. It infers that as Jesus' disciples had these miraculous gifts freely imparted to them by Christ, having them not of themselves, nor did they procure them at any charge, or expense of theirs, or purchase them with their money, as Simon Magus impiously proposed to the apostles; so they were freely to make use of these wonderful powers, they were possessed of, for the relief of the distressed, without insisting upon, or receiving any thing for the same; a practice which was formerly disapproved and condemned in Gehazi, the servant of Elisha: and with respect to the Gospel, as the knowledge of it was freely communicated to them by Christ, and gifts qualifying them for the preaching of it, were of his mere grace and goodness bestowed upon them, so they were to dispense it without making a gain of godliness, or discovering in the least an avaricious disposition. Jesus seems to have respect to a rule frequently inculcated by the Jews concerning teaching their oral law which is this; "in the place where they teach the written law for a reward, it is lawful to teach it for a reward; but it is forbidden to teach the oral law for a reward, as it is said, "behold, I have taught you statutes and judgments, even as the Lord my God commanded me", As I have "freely" learned, and ye have also "freely" learnt of me; so when ye learn posterity, , "teach them freely, as ye have learnt of me". Interestingly, what the Jews say of their traditions, Christ applies to the Gospel: in dispensing of which he would not have his disciples come behind them; but as they had freely received the Gospel from his lips; so they would as freely, as well as faithfully, make it known to others; and which no ways contradicts the maintenance of the Gospel ministers by the people; only forbids amassing wealth and riches by it, or preaching for sordid gain, or filthy lucre's sake: for otherwise it is Christ's own ordinance, that the preachers of the Gospel should live by it; and which is confirmed in the following verses.

Adam (2006) in interpreting Matthew 10:8 "Freely ye have received, freely give" remarks that it is a rule very necessary, and of great extent. He emphasizes that ministers or laborer in the Gospel vineyard, though worthy of their comfortable support while in the work, should never preach for hire, or make a secular traffic of a spiritual work. He calls it a scandal for a man to traffic with gifts which he pretends, at least, to have received from the Holy Ghost, of which he is not the master, but the dispenser. He maintains that he who preaches to get a living, or to make a fortune, is guilty of the most infamous sacrilege.

In like manner, church leaders in the 21st century irrespective of their locale and stratification should not be like contemporary lawyers who charge for every services or for hours spent in preparation for such works. Similarly, church leaders must offer prayers, baptism, sermons, ordinations and other sacerdotal functions free of charge without demanding any form of gratis or monetary inducement before such services are rendered. Preachers of the gospel of Christ must know that they are not called to make money for themselves but to present the true word of God undiluted and without charges. This does not imply that when preachers are appreciated they should decline but the emphasis been put forth is that the gospel is a matter of Grace and not a commercial transaction.

### 3. Conclusion

It is clear that the motives of some church leaders in Nigeria in the twenty first century church are not far from the Marxist ascription on religion. This motive which centres on economic exploitation of the masses to ensure self-aggrandizement has caused more harm than good to the present church in Nigeria. Thus, for the twenty first century church leaders to make recognizable impact on the lives of the led, she must emphasize more on the pragmatic apostolic teachings, principles and doctrine of the early church and de-emphasize on current economic crusading of the masses pockets. The twenty first century church leaders must be vocal in order to actualize the said objective noting that the grace for ministry was received freely and the propagation of the gospel must be done without monetary attachment. The paper recommends that Nigerian church leaders should revisit the contents of their messages and also emphasize more on salvation rather than prosperity and the likes. Moreover, Nigerian church leaders should keep to religious ethos, adhere to moral and spiritual etiquette, value and respect the dignity of every human being in the discharge of their ministerial functions for the acceptance and advancement of the gospel.

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