

**A Communication and Plea from the
Catholic Biblical Association of Nigeria (CABAN)
On the Wrong Use of the Bible for Material Wealth in the Church**

Introduction

The Catholic Biblical Association of Nigeria (CABAN) held its fifth annual convention, 24-27 October 2012 at Issele Uku, Delta State on the theme “Material Wealth and Divine Blessing in the Bible”. The convention was graciously hosted by his Lordship Most Rev Michael Elue (himself a biblical scholar) at the Diocesan Pastoral Centre. A total of 34 members attended the convention from different parts of Nigeria, from the seminaries, theological institutions and universities. This was one of the highest attended conventions by ordinary or associate members since the association held its inaugural convention in 2008. The interest in the theme of this convention was great as a total of 18 papers were presented by members comprising of the clergy, religious and lay faithful.

The papers covered a variety of topics rooted in selected biblical texts that address issues in the general theme: These papers searched the Bible with a view to finding solid solutions to the multifaceted usages made of the Bible in service of material wealth in our time. In selecting the general theme, CABAN was deeply concerned that the current ever growing practice whereby the Bible is liberally used (or abused) in the service of wealth both within and outside the Church requires responsible action to confront this practice with the true meaning of the word of God; and to do this from the perspective of our Catholic faith, in keeping with the Church’s principles for the study of the Bible enunciated especially in *Dei Verbum: The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* (DV 10; 24) of the Second Vatican Council and more recently reiterated in the Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation of Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini: The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church* (VD, 3, 31, 35; 47, etc.).

What We Discovered

During the presentations, the convention heard story after story of the abuses of the Bible by some Catholic pastors who, borrowing from some non-Catholic pastors, terrorize and traumatize the lay faithful into believing that all their woes and troubles in life are caused by their failure either to pay God “his due” in terms of tithes, levies, redemption of pledges, redemption of their firstborns “as the Bible prescribes”, or failure to be adequately generous to God at harvest and thanksgiving bazaars. The higher the blessing one desires from God, the bigger the amount one must pay for God to release the desired blessings. Prayers of blessing are designed commensurate with the amount paid (blessings for millions, thousands and so forth). Even the administration of the sacraments, the sacramentals, the blessing of holy objects (Holy Water, olive oil) of homes, cars and so forth, are administered with exorbitant fees. People are refused baptism, marriage, even burial if they have not paid to the satisfaction of the pastor; if payment is in arrears, they must pay double the amount owed.

The tragic net result of these practices is that God is projected as the greatest profit-making businessman of our times; one who makes profit at all costs from the impoverished people and who will not offer them a blessing unless they first give to him. It also emerged in the sharing that this problem has lasted long in the Church unchecked and unaddressed; as a result it has grown by leaps and bounds and every day it discovers new incredible ways of expanding its territory, like the wide and spacious road that leads to destruction which many follow (Matt 7:13-14).

In view of this, though it is not the practice of CABAN to issue communiqué at its meetings, the convention felt at its very last session that it would be irresponsible on our part to just leave the matter there and not raise alarm about it. The body strongly felt that we had a sacred duty to God, to the people and the Church in Nigeria (the Church being the faithful custodian of God's word [DV 47, VD 10]), to alert attention to the danger of this practice and call for concerted action to put an end to it or at least to drastically curb it. The practice of equating material wealth with divine blessings, in a tit for tat manner, cuts at the very roots of the gospel of Jesus Christ and God's gratuitous gift of salvation.

Scripture tells us cumulatively that when God saved us, it was not because of anything we ourselves had done; but out of God's own infinite love and mercy (Titus 3:4-8). In Christ, through whom came "grace and truth" (John 1:17), God has given us the greatest blessing possible based on God's incredible love for humanity; a love that made the divine Word to become flesh, one of us (John 1:14), to live, spend and be spent for us ("He went about doing good"; Acts 10:38) and in addition and climactically to suffer, die and rise for us and give us his very self as food and drink for unending life, all free of charge. God cancelled our debts of sin (deviations from God), because we had no means of paying back (Luke 7:42). As Paul our God-given Apostle says, since God did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all; having loved us that much will God now deny us any blessing in heaven or on earth that we ask of him (Rom 8:31-39) or ask for payment before blessing us? These few scripture passages reveal that it is grave injustice to God and even insult, exploitation of the ignorant laity and a profound betrayal of the Gospel to allow these aberrations to go on unchecked in the name of God and of Christ.

Call to Action

The members of CABAN therefore call upon the church leadership and all God's people (clergy, religious and laity) to concertedly take urgent actions to arrest this protracted evil. We suggest the following lines of action that we consider key, but not exhaustive.

1. That all become aware of the seriousness and danger of this practice that is growing and engulfing both pastors and God's people, and which thrives on the poverty and ignorance of the people; ignorance of the people in this matter is the energy of pastors who in their selfishness use God, Christ and the Bible to meet their personal greed.
2. That while it may be true that "The Church cannot be built on Hail Marys", we keep ever in view that the Church is essentially God's building (1 Cor 3:9; Matt 16:18), the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:12-14) and the Family of God (Eph 4:9-16). We note that no true member of a family exploits, extorts from or terrorizes other members to build family projects. In fact, it was reported that, at times, those encouraging this practice demand levies that the people cannot realistically afford, for all kinds of prestigious projects and structures to the ruin of God's own building: the people (1 Cor 3:9; Eph 2:19-21). On projects in general, we need to recognize and reject as dangerous the great temptation to focus on grandiose projects, money-making institutions instead of on building up and rooting the people in their Catholic faith.
3. Since the root cause of these practices can be attributed to a basic misunderstanding of the gospel on the part of those involved together with the attraction of the prevailing prosperity gospel, we suggest that in this era of new evangelisation and Year of Faith, a massive campaign be undertaken through rallies, workshops and seminars at the parish, diocesan, regional and national levels to ensure that both clergy and people get the sound scriptural knowledge that will in turn lead to right action.

4. That a disinterested competent body be set up to undertake serious fieldwork and documentation of these practices on the ground throughout the nation and unearth the real and complex reasons why these practices continue to strive.
5. That the CBCN commission a competent body to draw up scripture-based directives to address in depths and to the roots the onslaught of Pentecostalism in the Catholic Church, similar to what they did in the case of the healing ministry. And that appropriate implementation steps with sanctions be put in place to ensure compliance and address those who may want to deviate from or ignore the approved directives.
6. That in addressing this matter, we focus on the issue rather than on persons. Since we are members of one and the same Family of God, what affects one person affects all of us. The concern here is that together we wake up to the great, subtle and pervasive danger, temptation and grip of money (the root of all evil) in the Church and join forces to reject and fight against its multifaceted lures.
7. As members of CABAN we place ourselves at the service of the Church to help in whatever way possible according to our expertise, which the Church holds in great esteem (VD 31) as individuals and as an association to provide the scripture-based knowledge needed to help the Church-Family of God address the complex pastoral problems involved so as to put an end to this subtle betrayal of the gospel in our land.

Our Prayer

We pray that God may give us all, as individuals, as leadership and as Church-Family of God in Nigeria the much needed grace to reject with all our soul and all our might and all our strength the take over and enthronement of material wealth in the Church. May God give us the grace to follow Jesus who is our way, our truth and our life in this as in all other matters! Amen.

Signed

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