

IS THE SOCIAL GOSPEL, ANOTHER GOSPEL? REIMAGINING THE SOCIOECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL SITUATION OF AFRICA

Mark Omorovie Ikeke*¹

Toma Brume**²

Abstract: *The Christian gospel has brought hope and succour to many, particularly African society. Apart from engaging in spiritual works of evangelization to win the souls of men and women to God, there are equally Christians who have engaged in social activism in promoting social-based projects to foster justice, peace, development, and environmental wellbeing. But some see Christians engaging in social projects for human promotion and corporal works in society, which has come to be called social gospel, as abandoning the true gospel. For such people, the social gospel is a heresy. This paper through a critical hermeneutic and analytic method argues that the social gospel is an essential aspect of the gospel. It is not heretical and it should be encouraged. The Christian gospel should attend to the spirits, souls, and bodies of people. There are biblical foundations for this. The Christian gospel should not attend to the souls of people and ignore the social conditions that damn their bodies. The paper shows that there are many socio-economic and environmental problems in Africa. The paper concludes that the social gospel can help in fostering a better Africa.*

Keywords: *Social, gospel, social gospel, socioeconomic, environment, Africa.*

¹ * Dept of Religious Studies & Philosophy, Delta State University, Abraka
drikeke@delsu.edu.ng

² ** Intl't Assoc of I'cultural Values & Indg Ecoethics. Effurun
tomabrume@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

Part of the title of this paper is drawn from the Letter of St Paul to the Galatians chapter one, from verses six to nine. In that passage, the apostle accuses the Galatians of departing from the gospel that he preached to another gospel. The gospel that the apostle preached is the gospel of God's grace (Eneji, et al., 2024). Some have understood this to mean simply salvation by grace. The purpose of this paper is not to do a linguistic and exegetical analysis of the above text. The purpose is rather to argue that contrary to people who lay so much emphasis on grace and repentance and privatize the gospel to only be concerned with a person's salvation and focus on taking people to heaven; engaging in social projects to help the temporal situations of people is part of the gospel (Ndifon, et al.,

2008). A privatized gospel that simply waters the souls of people and cares little or nothing about the social situations that drain their blood and bring them death and misery is not what Jesus intended. When the gospel is concerned about social conditions and engages in actions to ameliorate physical human suffering this is as essential aspect of the gospel. It is not another gospel (Owa, et al., 2024).

The World Synod of Catholic Bishops (1971) assertively states that: “Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation” (p.1). Olayiwola (2014), Anagwo (2013), Obaje (2018), Hill, Knitter and Madges (2002), Obijiaku (2017), and Koester (2002) all indicate that the religion/church has a social mission in society. Mejia (2002) rightly and carefully notes that there can be no complete evangelization in Africa without the promotion of social justice and peace. Ewherido (2013) writes that the church has a mission to promote social justice and engage public policy; and also engage the Zacchaeuses

of today not just for their salvation and not for what she can get from the Zacchaeus but for the benefit of the poor. Social engagement is not an extra option, it is an intrinsic part of the gospel's essence. For Gustavo (1988) the church should be involved in a theology of liberation and engage in social protest against poverty, slavery, and all that dehumanizes the human person.

There is no human society without social problems and ills. But the African continent remains one of the most adversely affected continents with social problems (Osim, 2014; Osim, 2016). Social problems that inundate the continent include ethnicism, violence, wars, child labour, human trafficking, poverty, terrorism, maritime piracy, discrimination, embezzlement of public funds, hunger, starvation, etc. From the theory of functionalism it should be clear that every social agent has a role to play in eradicating social problems. And also from the theory of social capital, the Christian institutions whether in its churches, educational ventures, entrepreneurial engagement, inter-religious and ecumenical dialogues, and engagement in politics, is a social capital that should not be despised in the resolution of the social crisis. It is in

this light that this paper proposes that the Christian church through the spreading of the social gospel can make a vital contribution in promoting human welfare and social justice in Africa. A strong argument of this paper is that the social gospel is not another gospel different from the one that Christ or the early Christians preached. It is not an anathema gospel. It is an essential aspect of the gospel

In pursuing the purpose of this paper, a conceptual clarification of terms will be made. This will be followed examining other dimensions of the social gospel; and the situation of human welfare and social justice in Africa. An application will then be made of what the Christian social gospel can be made in promoting human welfare and social justice in Africa. It is to the conceptual clarifications that the paper now turns.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

The following terms inform this paper. They are social, gospel, social gospel, another gospel, socioeconomic, environmental situation, Africa. The word, “social” means what is more than one or an individual. When more than one person or group interacts with others the social comes into being. The Encyclopedia

Britannica (2024) states that social means: “relating to or involving activities in which people spend time talking to each other or doing enjoyable things with each other” (p.1). Jary and Jary (2005) write that social relates to human society and human interactions in groups or organizations.

The next word that requires clarification is gospel. Hahn (2009) says the term gospel comes from the Anglo-Saxon, *god-spell* (good tidings or good news) and it is used to refer to the four canonical gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John that narrate the birth, infancy, life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Hahn continues that in its origin it is also seen as *euangelion* (a Greek word meaning good tidings) such as bringing good tidings to the poor, afflicted, and captives, and breaking yokes of oppression (Is 61:1). The gospel is the good news of the kingdom of God as inaugurated by Jesus Christ, who went through all of Galilee and the entire land of Israel preaching the good news of the kingdom. Boisclair (2007) writes that *euangellion* (good news) originally speaks of heralding military victory or significant events in the emperors' life and it is likely that drawing from Isaiah 40:9; 52:7; 60:6, 61:1 the early Christians used it to designate the

message that Jesus proclaimed of the reign of God and to describe the literature that speaks of the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Christ.

The term social gospel is used to refer to the fact that proclaiming the good news (gospel) should not be restricted to repentance from a person's sins and going to heaven. The good news or gospel has a social dimension and it should affect the bodily conditions of people not just their spirits. And so those who preach the gospel should be concerned about the socioeconomic and political structures that affect people. The reign of God that Jesus taught and inaugurated by his teaching, life, and ministry is not simply transformations of hearts but works of justice, end to social oppression, respect for human dignity, human promotion, etc. This dimension of the gospel is not another gospel.

For the term another gospel, it is used in this paper to describe any form of teaching that deviates from the spirit and essence of the gospel. It refers to doctrinal errors that are contrary to the gospel that Jesus and the early church taught in line with the teaching of Jesus. There are many brands of Christianity and all Christians do not agree on how to take and

interpret the teachings of the message of Jesus or how to understand his life in the same way. The tendency is that those who disagree with others tend to call those persons heretical and tag them as teaching another gospel. Kelley (2016) states that the gospel as enunciated in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 is the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus and people trusting in him for salvation. Those who see the gospel as strictly concerned about personal salvation from sin and taking people to heaven see those who emphasize social activism for human progress and good as deviating from the original gospel. This paper challenges that notion and states categorically that social actions for justice and peacebuilding are an essential aspect of the gospel and not another gospel.

A central thesis of this research is that the social gospel should address the socioeconomic and environmental situation in Africa. It should not shield itself from this situation. The gospel cannot be deeply rooted in Africa if it is concerned only with salvation from personal sin and ignores the problems of bad leadership, debts, wars and conflicts, forced migration, poverty, etc affecting the continent. The term socioeconomic is used here to describe all the variables

of different social processes embedded in society that affect economic issues and by implication the wellbeing and welfare of people. The social is linked to the economic. Social issues cannot be separated from economic issues for what informs people's living in society together inform their economic behaviours, and management of the resources of society.

Environment refers to the totality of all the surroundings in which any organism is embedded. The environment is plants, animals, landscapes, trees, etc. All that surrounds human beings is their environment. All that surrounds other entities is their environment. Biology Online (2023) states that environment refers to all external conditions and elements with which an organism interacts; this includes all abiotic and biotic factors.

The socioeconomic and environmental situation of Africa refers to the complex processes and factors of people's interaction in struggling, acquiring, and managing both human and natural resources of the continent and the consequent impacts of these human behaviours and activities on the natural environment. The way that people live and the economic activities of buying and selling, agriculture, industrialization, etc all

affect the natural world. There is no human activity that takes place outside nature. When the environment is negatively affected it equally impacts gravely on the quality of lives that human beings can live and affects also the ecosystems. The socioeconomic and environmental situations in which Africans live should not escape the message of the gospel.

BRIEF HISTORY AND OTHER DIMENSIONS OF THE SOCIAL GOSPEL

According to the Editors of the Britannica Encyclopedia (2022), the social gospel refers to a reform religious movement coming from the United States between the years 1870 and 1920 that emphasizes that salvation requires improvement of industrial society and betterment of the human condition rooted in the bible; and justice and charity are quintessential components of the kingdom of God. The Social Gospel movement asserts that individual salvation is not enough. For this same Editors just mentioned this Social Gospel was prominent among liberal protestants with persons like Lyman Abbot, Washington Gladden, Charles Monroe Sheldon, and Walter Rauschenbusch; and *In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do?* Written in 1895 and *Christianity and the Social Crisis* written in

1907 are key books that influenced and informed the Social Gospel. For Oshatz (2024) the Social Gospel is in response to the challenges posed by immigration, rapidurbanization, and industrialization and it focuses attention on the idea of the immanence of God, the incarnation while critiquing capitalist sole reliance on supply and demand laws and advocates for an interventionist welfare state and labour movements. The Social Gospel, Oshatz (2004) indicates further, promoted a Christianized society in which compassion, mutual respect, and cooperation win over conflicts, competition, and greed. For Compelling Truth (2024) the Social Gospel which arose in the late 19th to early 20th century de-emphasized sin, heaven, hell, and salvation and rather paid attention to the welfare of people and their corporal wellbeing here on earth.

There were some key persons involved in the Social Gospel. They are Richard T Ely, Walter Rauschenbusch, and Josiah Strong. Kirkley (2007) shows that Rauschenbusch who was a Professor at Rochester Baptist Theological Seminary and who believed that poverty is not the fault of the poor people in his book, *A Theology of the Social Gospel* written in 1917 argued that Jesus is the social redeemer of

society; and through equality and social justice, the kingdom of God can be realized on earth. Kirkley (2007) shows that another prominent figure in the Social Gospel is Washington Gladden who was a Congregationalist minister at Springfield, Massachusetts, and Columbus, Ohio; and he was in support of labour activism, appealed for cooperation among management and labour and argued for humane working conditions while also encouraging interfaith, ecumenical and interracial dialogue. Among other achievements of the Social Gospel, as Kirkley (2007) has enumerated are: the birth of the new field of social ethics, the establishment of soup kitchens, operations of shelters for the homeless, the creation of clothing closets, the creation of day care centers by some, job training, community mobilization, etc. According to Got Questions Ministries (2024) most people who followed the Social Gospel were postmillennialists who affirmed that the kingdom of Christ has to be established through good works before Christ will come. Got Questions Ministries (2024) states further that the social gospel had many different strands with programmes and projects to end poverty, economic inequality, alcoholism, crime, slums, unclean

environment, inadequate labour unions, child labour, and inadequate housing.

It will be wrong to restrict the Social Gospel to the above. There are other varieties of the Social Gospel. It can be argued that wherever there is a preaching of the Christian gospel or biblical stories and there is a strong application of them directed to social conditions of people and call for justice, welfare, social transformation, socio-political development, etc it amounts to a form of Social Gospel. Applying the message of the 8th century BC prophets of social justice such as Amos, Micah, and Hosea to destabilize injustice, and corruption and for a just and egalitarian society are all forms of Social Gospel, the gospel understood here as good news. In this sense then the Social Gospel in its generic understanding predates the 19th and 20th centuries. The civil rights movement was informed by the Christian gospel as advocated by Martin Luther King, Jnr, and the message of the theologian James Cone, are all forms of Social Gospel. The Pluralism Project of Harvard University (2024) writes that expressions of the Social Gospel can be found in the catholic community in the works of Dorothy Day, Peter and Daniel Berrigan, Cesar Chavez, and in formal

catholic social teaching that began with Pope Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum* that critiqued rugged capitalism, socialism and called for just wages, the right of workers to unionize.

Still, on other dimensions of what can be called a Social Gospel, the Pluralism Project of Harvard University (2020) states that Christian social movements that arose in the turbulent 1960s took different forms such as the Civil Rights Movement, denominational movements for economic and racial justice, liberation theologies from Latin American Catholic communities, feminist theologies, womanist theologies, *mujerista*, publication like Sojourner, etc. Indeed, the great liberation theology from Latin American Catholic communities is a form of Social Gospel. Editors of the New World Encyclopedia rightly (2023) note that much of the language of liberation theology is like that of the Social Gospel. The social gospel like every form of human teaching or movement is not without criticism. Oshatz (2024) writes that Barthian theology from the Swiss Theologian Karl Barth emphasized God's transcendence with the message of the apostles and was critical of liberal theology that tries to fit the gospel to the needs of middle-class people

and social reform; while also stating that Richard H Niebuhr and Paul Tillich critiqued it for inattentiveness to sin, political conflict avoidance, and its optimism.

BIBLICAL AND ECCLESIAL FOUNDATIONS FOR THE SOCIAL GOSPEL

A biblical foundation for the Social Gospel should be traced back to the stories of creation in Genesis. The creation story in itself is the story of a once transcendent God taking interest and concern with the human situation. God refuses to be a spirit up there above the skies. God touches and walks in the garden. He took soil from which he created the human body. God has earthly concerns. The God that Genesis reveals is not a God who is afraid of getting self-soiled by the soil or ground. Human welfare and wellbeing are God's concern. He is concerned that human beings will need food and water to eat and drink. God entrusts the garden to human beings but human beings are also to till and cultivate to ensure sustainability in supply.

Another strong foundation for the social gospel is the Exodus event. The God of the Exodus, Ela (1988) writes is interested in human history and God's desire to end impoverishment, hunger, marginalization,

alienation, and exploitation that are rampant in African villages and cities. The people of Israel and people from other nationalities were suffering from socioeconomic and political bondage and oppression in Egypt. The people cry to God and their fathers and mothers. God hears their prayers and comes down to help them by ending the oppression and suffering. God takes the side, the side of the oppressed. The words that God uses in Exodus 3 are highly remarkable: “7 Then the Lord said, ‘I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings, 8 and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey (Exodus 3:7-8, Revised Standard Version)

This God sees suffering and human pain and responds in liberation actions. God does not keep silent amid human suffering. God promises to bring them into a land that is prosperous and a place of plenty. God’s interest is not simply in the people serving him, but also in their social conditions. Eventually, God will through the prophetic instrumentality of Moses free the people from Egyptian bondage.

Okere (2005) writes that social prophecy is part of the mission of the church drawing insights from biblical figures such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Nathan, Elijah, John the Baptist, and others. He writes that they intervened in the politics of kings and called for a just social order in line with God's demands. Though prophecy is not enough there must be action. John the Baptist demanded that people's repentance require that they share what they have with others. "And he answered them, "He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise."(Luke 3: 11, Revised Standard Version). Repentance is incomplete if it is simply a private and personal conversion to live individualized private lives free from social engagement. The story of the Good Samaritan, and the parable of the rich man, and Lazarus, and the parable of the last judgement all testify to radical actions for justice and human welfare. Both individual Christians and the Christian church as a body should engage in social activism for the betterment of the human conditions of people in Africa.

The incarnation is fundamental in understanding the need for involvement in social action. God's incarnate word took human flesh in the womb of a

woman, the virgin Mary. God did not disdain human flesh and conditions. Mejia (2002b) writes that the incarnation is God's commitment to human dignity and human rights as Jesus identifies with all human beings, especially with the poor and rejected and because of this "Christianity is not a private religion between God and the individual person but is about the love of others practised in the same way as Jesus loves us"(p.108). Jesus proclaims his radical and revolutionary manifesto in Luke 4 as follows: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, 19 to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:18-19, Revised Standard Version). In the Lord's Prayer, he taught his followers to pray for the kingdom to come and for God's will to be done on earth. The kingdom is not postponed but is to be prayed to come to reality now through works of justice and peace. Kingdom building begins now. All these biblical foundations show the need why Christians and human beings should be engaged in social gospel movements and groups.

This paper considers that from a catholic perspective, the social teachings of the Catholic Church are a vibrant form of the Social Gospel. Aniagwu (2011) writes that the first of the social teaching, *Rerum Novarum* spoke of the exploitation of workers in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, and the encyclical spoke of treating workers humanely, asserting their right to protest and embark on strikes. Since that first encyclical written in 1891 by Pope Leo XIII, many other teachings have been produced by the church dealing with socioeconomic and political issues in society. The titles of the church's encyclicals give away the issues they deal with. Look at the following: *Peace on Earth*(written in 1963 by Pope John XXIII); *On the Development of Peoples* (written in 1967 by Pope Paul VI); *Justice in the World* (written in 1971 by Synod of World Catholic Bishops); *On Human Labour* (written in 1981 by Pope John Pual II); *On Social Concerns* (written in 1987 by Pope John Pual II); *Economic Justice for All* (written in 1986 by US Catholic Bishops); *The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response* (written in 1983 by US Catholic Bishops); *Care for Our Common Home* (written in 2015 by Pope Francis).

The same fundamental motives for engaging on socioeconomic issues to foster human welfare also inform engaging in environmental protection. While the environment should be protected for its intrinsic worth, it should also be protected to foster sustainability. Without a good and healthy environment, human beings cannot live meaningful and fruitful lives. An environment that is polluted, degraded, and unsafe impedes human activities and labour. Environmental care is one of the principles of Catholic social teaching. With regard to Jesus, Bauchkham (2010) affirmed that he affirmed the creation theology of the Hebrew people and spoke of God's care and concern for creation. Horrell (2010) cites the preface of the 2008 Green Bible saying that with over a thousand references to the earth, it is clear that God's earth and the creatures in it matter.

It would be a flaw to promote a Social Gospel that cares only for socioeconomic affairs to the detriment of environmental concerns when there can be no socioeconomic without the natural world. Johnson (2014) cites both Pope John Paul II and Brian Patrick to show that from the implication of the story of the Good Samaritan, the neighbour must include other

species- the dolphin, whale, the rain forest. Johnson (2014) underlines Catholic social teaching to assert that social structures that create misery must be transformed, and the new poor which is nature as Sallie Mc Fague opines must equally enjoy justice and freedom from oppression as all that threatens the ecosystem should be eliminated. Johnson (2014) in furtherance of that point writes that:

This may well entail action on behalf of justice that goes up against powerful vested interests. There are tough political and economic issues at stake, decisions about allowable business practices, budget expenditures, energy production, pollution controls, trade patterns, and the like where the wellbeing of the Earth is at stake. In the tradition of the biblical prophets, and the spirit of Jesus, people band together and take critical public stances for the care, protection, restoration, and healing of Earth and its community of species, fully aware that they may elicit the classical reaction to the prophet and be despised (p.283).

Peter Harris and Barbara Mearns (2007) cite John Stort when they write that:

Ecological involvement must be included under the heading of 'mission,' for mission embraces everything Christ sends his people into the world to do, service as well as evangelism. And we cannot truly love and serve our neighbours if at the same time we are destroying their environment, or acquiescing in its destruction, or even ignoring the environmentally-depleted circumstances in which so many people are condemned to live.

The fact is that the Social Gospel Movement is part of the larger Christian worldview that sees that Christianity should not be separated from society. Catholic social teaching also emphasized the need for gospel values to permeate human society. Other factors that form a background to Social Gospel are Marxist and Socialist Christians and conservative Christian books such as *Young Men and Young Women Association* and *Salvation Army*, as Kirkley (2007) shows. Some

critiques of Social Gospel are that some social gossellers were friendly with racial justice, some were ethnocentrists and paternalistic, imprecise in their solutions to social problems, and ran away from addressing the root causes of economic injustice. As Kirkley (2007) and others show, despite all these, they brought the notion of human suffering to the heart of mainstream Protestantism and raised the consciousness of middle-class Americans on the oppression and thus created a fundamental basis of support for the New Deal and Progressive Era in America. According to Got Questions Ministries (2024) one radical criticism that it did not account for the root causes of why there is sin in society and the need for people's hearts to be transformed. It simply focused on social reform and social actions.

It can be seen that there is a strong biblical and ecclesial foundation for promoting the Social Gospel. It is an essential aspect of the Christian faith. The socioeconomic and environmental situation that the gospel should engage in is what the paper pays attention to now.

THE SOCIOECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL SITUATION IN AFRICA

The socioeconomic conditions of life in Africa are dire. Africa right from colonial times remains a land of pain, misery, and suffering. The daily news coming from newspapers, television, and other social media shows that people are in pain. Thousands are dying daily of hunger, starvation, malnutrition, violence, wars, terrorism, climate change, police brutality, and so forth. War and violence continue to remain a constant in Africa. If it is not war in West Africa, it is in Central Africa; if not there it is in North Africa, and if not there it is in eastern or southern Africa. Since the independence of most African countries in the 1960s wars have been fought in Nigeria, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Namibia, Ethiopia, etc. Some African countries only got independence through liberation struggles using instruments of war. At present war is raging on in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Sudan, Cameroon, etc. The situations in places like Somalia, Eritrea, South Sudan, etc are tenuous. These countries are bordering on the verges of war. The consequences of war are not far-fetched. Wars and violence have destroyed millions of lives and

properties. They have delayed the development of social and public infrastructures. Educational and social progresses are retarded as schools are closed and social activities are fractured. The toll of war on the natural environment is also another issue. The environment becomes degraded and the ecosystems are damaged by the movement of war equipment, vehicles, bombs, and explosives usage. It difficult to adequately build factories and industries at a time of war as attention is focused on winning the war. Many factories have turned to develop more weapons of war. Insecurities from war drive people from creative industries and agricultural productivity as the farms are insecure.

Poor and inept leadership grounded in corruption and bribery is a bane in Africa. Of the situation in Nigeria, Okere (2005) writes: “Here in our midst, there are scandals in high places, money scandals. Non-payments of pensions and salaries, with blatant lies claiming the contrary, conflated contracts, withholding of contract payments to exhort fraudulent percentages, house members receiving hush money or demanding money to pass bills into law” (p.89). This previous statement was written in 2005, one would think the

situation would have improved. It has even grown worse. The table of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission in Nigeria is filled with cases of corruption that are being prosecuted. Nigerian government workers are often on strike for the lay of payment of just salaries. Pensioners have died in line waiting for pension money. Issues of workers going on strike are not limited to Nigeria. Of recent workers in various sectors in Ghana have gone on strike. Recent coups in countries like Niger, Mali, and Guinea have been attributed to bad governance and misrule in those countries.

The Arab Spring which did not fully come to fruition in North Africa was a result of economic hardships and bad leadership. The Editors of the Encyclopedia Britannica (2024) the term Arab Spring refers to a series of pro-democracy uprisings and protests that happened in North America and the Middle East in the years 2010 and also 2011 protesting authoritarian governments and economic hardships in the region. There were some little gains in the Arab Spring but the Spring did not fully materialize as anticipated. There are still many authoritarian regimes in the region. After the toppling of Muammar Gadhafi,

Libya has continued to suffer from failed governments and a devastated economy.

Poverty is also a serious problem in Africa. In Africa, the words of Thomas Hobbes are applicable. Life is short, brutish, and nasty. Thousands of Africans are dying daily from illegal migration, wars, violence, terrorism, hunger, starvation, and the effects of climate change. Poverty is endemic in the land. On the number of people living in extreme poverty, Galal (2024) states that: “In 2022, around 431 million people in Africa were living in extreme poverty, with the poverty threshold at

1.90 U.S. dollars a day. The number of poor people on the continent increased compared to the previous years.” Poverty in Africa is not divine. Many factors have led to poverty. Many African countries suffer from broken governments. Many politicians steal public money and hide it away in foreign banks. While this is going on many contractors are corrupt and fail to adequately use the money given to them to execute public projects. Money that should have made life better for the people is drained away. There is massive unemployment in many African countries thus many have no source of income to enable them to meet

the necessities of life.

The environmental situation in Africa is a dire one. There is much to still be desired in terms of a good and healthy environment. The World Meteorological Organization (2023) states that though Africa emits fewer greenhouse gases than many other regions of the world yet it is suffering gravely from the effects of climate change and this is affecting ecosystems, food security, precipitating migration, causing displacement of people and exacerbating conflicts. Ikeke (2020) writes that “All over Africa there are a lot of environmental problems such as resource conflicts, climate change, desertification, deforestation, gas flaring, etc” (p.67). Ikeke (2020) states further concerning the environmental challenges in Africa thus: there is a pillage of natural resources, and resource wars are fought to see who will control the resources in places like the Democratic Republic of Congo, etc.

In the socioeconomic and environmental challenges in Africa, it sounds inhumane that because somebody is a Christian or believes in the gospel all that should matter to him from his religion should be spiritual salvation and going to heaven. That his Christian gospel should not pertain to mundane

affairs. The questions that arise then are did Jesus, the early church, and the prophetic traditions of the Judeo- Christian religion not speak and take action about secular and mundane affairs. The answer is, it did. Some of the applications hereby follow.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE SOCIAL GOSPEL FOR SOCIO-ECONOMIC SITUATIONS IN AFRICA

Though the Social Gospel was essentially a movement that arose in the United States, some of the ideas in the Social Gospel apply to societies everywhere for they are gospel values and shares commonalities with the Sermon on the Mount, the kingdom values that Jesus preached, and the compassion and human promotion of the early church. It would not be right then to think that there is nothing to learn from the Social Gospel simply because it originated in the United States. Kirkley (2007) avers that the Social Gospellers (those engaged in the Social Gospel Movement) rightly noted that the gospel has social implications and should be applied to the problems of society.

There is a biblical basis for arguing that the Christian gospel should be applied and made relevant to the social contexts and situations in which African

people live their lives. This foundation has been examined above. But it is imperative to reiterate as King opined that a religion that is not socially relevant is moribund. Ela (1986) states that the “social and temporal reality is the locus of God’s interventions and revelation alike”(p. 34). Dedji (2003) writes that the deplorable socio-economic conditions of peasants in Cameroon were a concern to Ela. The social gospel is not another gospel. The Fathers of Vatican II enunciated that: “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts” (p.1). It is a partial understanding of the biblical tradition to say that Christians should only concern themselves with preaching repentance from sin and focus on getting people to heaven, and only if necessary tangentially engage in social ventures. Human beings in Africa are made up of body and soul. The apostle James teaches that “faith without works is dead.” The church in Africa even from missionary times has not only engaged in preaching repentance and getting people to heaven. The missionaries did

engage in educational projects and charitable works to better the lives of people. The church was a major instrument in ending slavery and apartheid in South Africa. In South Africa, Desmond Tutu of blessed memory was a strong voice in advocating for the end of apartheid and a just and peaceful society in South Africa. The Catholic Church in Africa has many departments of justice, development and peace, family and human life, education, etc that help in advocating for the transformation of social structures and engaging in projects to better the lives of workers and citizens in different countries in Africa.

The gospel cannot be good news if it is cut away from the social and economic lives of people. African peoples both Christians and non-Christians are suffering gravely from corrupt and inept leadership. Billions of African public money are siphoned yearly from African countries and stashed away in European capitals while Africans are suffering. In Nigeria, the millions that the late Sani Abacha took away are still being returned. You would wonder what African leaders will do with these monies in their graves. For what they cart away they cannot finish in their lifetime. Even if they can it remains corruption. Corruption and bribery

are so ingrained in Nigerian politics and society that the Catholic Bishops of Nigeria have to compose a prayer against bribery and corruption. As part of the prayers, the bishops prayed for an end to bribery, corruption, and injustice and the emergence of good leaders who would end hunger and oppression in the land.

The Christian church in Africa cannot but be a prophetic voice for the voiceless. Some areas in which the church has been seriously engaged are in health care, education, and chaplaincy services as noted by Abe (2014). The succour and blessings that the church has brought to people through these services are inestimable. Think of the number of people who have been saved through these services. American missionaries and others from European countries have brought water, food, and other facilities to African villages. Abe (2014b) has also highlighted the need for the church to be engaged in economic entrepreneurial activities. Unemployment, financial difficulties, and lack of jobs all affect church members and the ability of the church to reach the gospel, as Abe notes. The church should be actively engaged in helping people find work and providing employment opportunities.

Today some churches run hotels, retreat and lodging centers, accommodations, restaurants, recreational facilities, etc. These should be done not simply to make the church wealthy but also to improve the lives of people.

This paper opines that all these are also aspects of a social gospel as far as they contribute to human welfare and promotion. Writing of the liberation theological challenge facing the African church, Rwiza (2006) cites Laurenti Magesa who writes that any spirituality that glorifies poverty instead of confronting it, thus turning an evil to a virtue is unacceptable for “poverty is born of human greed which causes imbalance in the distribution of world resources where some have too much while others have nothing” (p. 246). The church should preach against poverty, but preaching is not enough. It should have tangible programs targeted at eradicating poverty and breaking the structures of poverty. Aniagwu (2011) writes that: “The church should engage in concrete action to bring about the needed transformation of the African continent. Part of that action will be to encourage competent and morally upright members of the laity to

go into active politics, and seek election or appointment into public offices” (p.291). Transformation of African society can also be through engagement in entrepreneurial activities, philanthropic and humanitarian projects, and campaigns against injustice, and human rights violations. This paper agrees with Bamikole (2007) who writes that:

Religious institutions have contributed a lot in terms of development in the past. They should come out forcefully again and do more. In this present economic recession, when unemployment is the order of the day, churches and mosques in rural areas should embark upon agricultural ventures so as to make more food available to the populace. They can also help in vocational training and setting up of small-scale industries that can help the unemployed thereby stemming the rate of social vices in our society. Religion should help to

complement government efforts in combating the plaguing social ills, like indiscipline, corruption, drug trafficking, human trafficking, 419, etc. (p.301).

Umoren (2015) writes that motivated by Luke 4:18-19 the church should continue her social services of offering access to legal, health, educational, and other social services through her JDPC, St Vincent de Paul Society, Caritas, the works of priests, religious, and parishes and congregations. The environmental context is an important one also that should not be sidelined. There is a danger that even those who advocate for a social gospel may sideline environmental issues. But the environment is an important aspect of the gospel that Jesus proclaimed. Jesus spoke of God's benevolence and protection of the birds, flowers, and plants. During his forty days in the desert, he lived in harmony with the wild beasts. He shunned any form of waste after the feeding of the 4,000 persons. He lived a simple, humble non-luxurious, and extravagant life. He spoke of the need for wise management of resources and the need for people to share. You see this in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus and the parable of the last

judgement. In light of all these, it would be wrong to exclude the environmental question from the social question. Here in Africa then, in teaching and preaching the social gospels Christian churches and institutions should embark on not just socio-economic projects but also environmental projects or activism. Only then will the social gospel be complete.

CONCLUSION

The fact is that the Christian gospel is not only a spiritual gospel; it is also a Social Gospel. It has been shown clearly that the Christian gospel should be brought into the various problems that Africa faces to encourage the promotion of social justice, environmental protection, economic wellbeing, and an end to all forms of oppression and social evils. The paper above has examined the socioeconomic and environmental situation in Africa. It showed that Africa is ravaged by poverty, war, violence, forced migration, and environmental degradation. The paper also showed that the prophetic tradition of the bible, the ministry of Jesus, and the outreach of the early church all show that there should be engagement in the social, economic, and environmental affairs of the

society. When Christians do this, they are not engaging in another gospel, but they are involved in the one and same gospel that Jesus preached and that the early church participated in. A promotion of the social gospel will help to build a better, peaceful, and environmentally secured Africa.

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