

**THE UPSURGE OF PROSTITUTION IN NIGERIA AND ITS EFFECT ON
BENUE YOUTHS: THE CHURCH OPINION**

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Abstract

This research paper entitled, "The Upsurge of Prostitution in Nigeria and its Effect on Benue Youths: The Church Opinion" undertakes a critical examination of the prevalence of prostitution in Nigeria with specific emphasis on how this affects the youths in Benue State and how the church might intervene to stop the ugly trend. To achieve this objective, the research adopts the qualitative research method since the aim is not merely to describe and explain the practice of prostitution but also to actively engage victims of prostitution in order to get first hand information that will aid informed decisions. Consequently, the paper obtains data from interviews and observations, in addition to official documents, personal records, and records of eyewitnesses. The paper finds that prostitution is not only prevalent in Benue state but is also endemic as it is found in all the towns within the State and is practiced by men and women of all ages. The paper also finds that most prostitutes in the state get involve in the practice due to a plethora of problems and will not want to be prostitutes otherwise. Based on the strength of these findings, the paper concludes that the Church, in accord with its mandate of saving the miserable and lost souls and bringing all to God's eternal kingdom, is uniquely qualified to combat the scourge, not by coercive means but through love and care. The paper recommends that, rather than seeing prostitutes as offenders of the law and sinners, all Christians should see prostitutes the same way our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ saw them: as slaves and victims of injustice and inequality in the society who need help.

Keywords: Prostitution, Church, Nigeria, Benue Youth, Government

Introduction

Prostitution is seen as “the world’s oldest profession” (Ditmore 275) and is believed to have been in practice right from the early stages of human existence. Given its ancient origin, prostitution has a long history with divergent modes of operation in different societies across the world. Sanger and Doufor express the unanimous view that in pre-modern times, prostitution was institutionalized in certain societies and was connected with temple or secret rites in the temples of goddess of love where priestesses, in exchange for donations for the goddesses, offer up their bodies to men (qtd Dylewski and Prokop 2).

In the Chaldean Venus temple of Mylitta in ancient Babylon, each woman had to give herself to a foreigner who would pay, in order to fulfil their sacred duty; while in ancient Rome, a special office was established to coordinate the affairs of brothels and maintain the peace, in addition to controlling the tax income in the same manner. Mention is further made of the Roman Baths where special cabins were created in which erotic massages and oral and classic sex were performed by both female and male prostitutes and professional prostitutes wore red bows on their arms as a sign of pride of guild membership, with the income from their activities feeding the municipal treasury (Sanger 25).

In the same vein, Biblical evidence indicates that prostitution was also practiced among the Jews. The earliest record of this is in the story of Judah and Tamar in the book of Genesis (38: 14-26). Also, the story of the Jericho prostitute, Rehab, who hid the spies sent by Joshua to spy on the land of Canaan (Joshua 2:1-24), and Samson who had relations with a prostitute (Judges 16:1-20) are notable evidence of the practice among the Jews. Similarly, the story of the two prostitutes who brought a dispute before King Solomon for adjudication (1 Kings 3:16) and the experience of prophet Hosea that was ordered by God to marry a prostitute (1 Kings 22:38) are undeniable evidence of prostitution among the Jews. In all these accounts, it is clear that the ancient Hebrew law did not particularly forbid prostitution but rather, confined the practice to foreign women as is stated in the Book of Deuteronomy, “none of the daughters of Israel shall be a cult prostitute, and none of the sons of Israel shall be a cult prostitute” (23:17).

In Africa, although the modern trend in prostitution was unknown to the traditional African society, Luise, Ekpootu Mfon intimates that, “there existed

several sexual activities that fell outside conjugal relations” which are akin to modern prostitution such as “the engagement of women in extra-marital sexual liaisons...conducted within culturally sanctioned parameters.” (3) Among the Akan of Ghana, there existed the “abrakree” (public women) who rendered unpaid sexual favours to bachelors; which is similar to the “karuwanci” (divorcees) of Hausa in Northern Nigeria (qtd in Aderinto 470), to mention just a few. Scholars have consequently, expressed the view that the open practice of prostitution was inaugurated in Africa along side slavery, and colonization (Luise 11).

A review of researches on the emergence of prostitution on the African continent reveals that with the rise of industrial capitalism in the hay days of colonialism, there emerged full fledged prostitution on the continent which was predominant in the densely populated urban centers. The prevalence of the vice in urban centers was largely due to the anonymity that was a feature of the emerging townships. Aderinto, citing Akyeampong, opines that “The facelessness of the city facilitated by its large population enhanced anonymity and the freedom to express sexual desire...it was amenable to such activities as public flirting and solicitation, which facilitated sex work” (472). Thus, individuals who could have been ashamed of engaging in commercial sex among their kin left their immediate environments to urban centers where they engaged in prostitution.

Consequently, in Nigeria, like every other colonial African country, there was mass exodus of people to urban centers in search of better lives in the hay days of colonialism. Most of the men and women who drifted to the cities however, were unskilled and therefore, resorted to odd jobs for survival, with a large percentage of the women and even men engaging in prostitution. Beginning from this era to the contemporary times, prostitution has grown exponentially and has become an endemic in modern day Nigeria.

Known by different names such Ashawo, Akunakuna, to mention but a few, prostitution has defiled all attempts to halt its existence in the country to the extent that in recent times, Nigerian prostitutes formed an association known as National Association of Nigerian Prostitutes (NANP) to protect their rights (Dele, Auwal and Oluwafunmilayo 2). As a non-governmental organization, the main objectives of NANP is to see a Nigeria where sex work is recognized as work, violence and discrimination against sex workers eliminated and the health, social and human rights of sex workers respected. Their agitations have not yielded the desired

results of the association since Nigeria, although a circular state, has strong constitutional and religious laws against prostitution.

In addition to the Christian and Islamic laws forbidding prostitution, the Nigeria criminal code of 1944, section 249 provides penalties for prostitution and states that, "every common prostitute behaving in a disorderly or indecent manner in any public place loitering and persistently importuning or soliciting persons for the purpose of prostitution shall be deemed idle and disorderly persons, and shall be liable to imprisonment for one month (qtd in Kangiwa 71). These have, regrettably, achieved very little in stemming the rising vicious tide of prostitution in the country as the practice is common in every state, city, village and particularly rampant in the all educational institutions in the country. On account of its devastating consequences on individual participants and the society at large, Sanger concludes that "the evil is so notorious that none can possibly gainsay it" (17). The ever growing risks occasioned by prostitution on the society's harmony and healthy existence therefore, underscore the need for a critical examination of this ancient vice on the Benue youth currently in this research paper.

Understanding the Concept of Prostitution

The word "prostitution is derived from the Latin "*pro*" meaning "up front" or "forward" and "*stituere*", defined as "to offer up for sale" (Perking and Lovejoy 2-3). Prostitution as a concept has attracted considerable scholarly attention given its insidious nature to society's moral and socio-psychological well being. Researchers and scholars have proffered several definitions in an attempt to explain its nature. Edward Armstrong in the research paper entitled, "The sociology of prostitution; defines prostitution as an occupation in which an individual sells sex in a promiscuous and emotionally indifferent manner." (102) His definition has sociological bearings and highlights the occupational, commercial, sexual, and emotionally connotations involved in the practice and how these impact the participants and the society at large.

Clinard in a succinct assessment offers a view similar to Armstrong when he states that, "prostitution is a sexual intercourse on a promiscuous and mercenary or on monetary basis with accompanying emotional indifference" (371). The implication of Clinard's and Armstrong's definitions is that within the context of prostitution, sex occurs between persons who are not emotional attached and the act is based mainly on pecuniary reasons. Loy and Paul's view of prostitution converges with

the foregoing in the comment that, "prostitution is an act of offering oneself for hire to engage in sexual action for money". (qtd in Tyoanande and Audu 31)

Although there appears a consensus view in the opinions offered thus far that prostitution is anchored on monetary reward, it is important to note that a prostitute may also offer sexual pleasures for other benefits other than money as well. Martin Monto expresses this poignantly when he defines prostitution as "the exchange of sexual access to one's body for something of value, most frequently money or drugs" (161). It is also crucial to stress that one may be coerced into prostitution especially in cases of under-aged persons or dependents. This explains why Bindman (qtd in Janeiro 8) associates prostitution with "slavery" and "violence against women."

The foregoing also indicates that the term prostitute is traditionally associated with the female but a survey of existing contemporary studies reveal that males too are actively involved in commercial sex work. Bray and Norton report that, "as early as the eighteenth century commercial sexual contact between men frequently occurred in European metropolitan centres such as London" (qtd in Scott 181), although the activities of these male prostitutes were associated with homosexuality and the male in question considered as perverts or psycho-social outcasts. Even as empirical data suggests that the percentage of male prostitutes is relatively small when compared to the females (Kaye 2007; Atkins 2012; Scott 2003), this does detract from the fact of their involvement in commercial sex work.

While female prostitutes flourish in Nigeria and appear impossible to eradicate, male prostitution is strongly abhorrent to the generality of Nigerians, which explains why their activities are closely guarded secrets. The first instance where gay and homosexual Nigerian men asserted themselves publicly, according to Samson Olanisebe, "was when a man by the name Rev. Rowland Jide Macaulay established a church known as Rainbow Church in Lagos...[which] soon became a haven for Nigerian homosexuals and lesbians..."(201) Due to the harsh treatment they receive on daily basis however, Olanisebe concludes that "many Nigerian gays and lesbians have left the country for UK or USA" (203) and the remnants operate clandestinely to avoid public notice.

As can be inferred from the above, prostitutes (male or female) operate mostly in secluded or obscure locations due to the public stigma attached to the practice. Such locations as bars, nightclubs, movie theatres, private apartments and homes, brothels, hotels and even street corners are ideal havens for prostitutes. Voloshin, Derevitskiy, Mukhina, Karbovskii aver that, "with the advent of web technologies

commercial sex work in its various forms have found new possibilities for both arranging and providing sexual service to the clients via Internet, as well as finding new targets for human trafficking." The internet has thus minimized the physical presence of commercial sex workers in their traditional locations, making them scarce to the general public and law enforcement agencies.

Types of Prostitution

As it has become clear from the foregoing, the first form or type of prostitution is the sacred or cult prostitution which was practiced in ancient times where women and men gave sexual pleasures to patrons in order to generate income in the shrines of goddesses, or engaged in elaborate erotic activities in veneration of such goddesses. In his book entitled, *Prostitutes and Courtesans in the Ancient World*, Christopher Faraone notes that "sacred prostitution was primarily an economic activity, by which a deity would receive the money paid to buy or rent the prostitute's body." (79) Usually, such temples offered sacred spaces for guests, especially travellers in which they satisfied their sexual desires in exchange for holy donations to the temple.

In Benue state, there is no record of cult or temple prostitution however; other modern forms of prostitution as categorized by scholars and sociologists are obtainable within the state. Contemporary classification of prostitution is largely based on the location and operational modalities of the sex workers. Clinard in his classification divides prostitution into four main types. These include the street workers, brothel prostitutes, call girls, and the high class or professional prostitutes (377). Among these categories, the street walkers are the lowest in status as they are found on street corners, beer parlours and other public places soliciting patronage, usually dressed suggestively, and revealing most private parts of their bodies to attract customers. Street prostitution accounts for a small percentage of the general population of prostitutes and based on various factors such as "the market size, the community's tolerance levels, the degree to which prostitutes are organized, and the relationship of prostitution to drug use and trafficking." (Scott and Dedel 3)

The brothel form of prostitution describes prostitutes who reside in brothels which could be low class hotels or houses located in slum area. According to Ladipo, et al "a brothel is a residential 'quarters' for sex work habitation, where sex services are obtained or sold." (qtd in Ajibuah) Brothels are located mainly in highly

populated areas for easy access by customers. Weitzer explains that the prices they charge are “moderate” and brothel workers endure “moderate exploitation” since they have to give part of their earnings to the brothel owners. The owners of brothels are scarcely seen within the premises but function through employees called managers. Ajibuah explains that the managers are usually men or women that ensure effective day-to-day operations of the brothels and are typically assisted by other staff, such as bar men who are in charge of drinks and the chairlady who is the leader of the sex workers: “the chairlady ensures that peace and harmonies are kept and also facilitate the admission and orientation of new ladies into the service.” (5)

In call girl prostitution, prostitutes are known to rent and reside in personal apartments, mostly in decent neighbourhoods and are generally known in many of the high class hotels in town especially by the waiters and receptionists that put visitors and lodgers in touch with such girls. The sexual act takes place either in the hotel room of the visitor or lodger or in the girl’s apartment. Most call girls are known to arrange meetings with their customers on the phone or through social media networks such Facebook twitter, snap-chat and WhatsApp. They usually charge higher fees compared to the brothel and street walker prostitutes. The upper class independent/professional prostitute on the other hand usually resides in a well furnished apartment in one of the most respectable residential areas with highly placed members of the society as customers who pay her very high fees for her sexual services.

Other categories of prostitutes include university students and students of tertiary institutions who engage in what is popularly known as campus prostitution and sell their bodies to their lecturers, mates and other willing patrons in addition to soliciting marks from their lectures in exchange for sex (Abdullahi, qtd in Kangiwa 73). Other sub-categorizations of prostitution as put forward by Weitzer include: Escort/ out-call Prostitution, Sex tourism, Window or doorway prostitution, among others.

Causes and Consequences of Prostitution

A plethora of factors have been advanced by scholars to explain the prevalence and continued existence and the attendant effects of prostitution in the human society. These range from socio-economic/environmental, psycho-moral, and religious factors. A survey carried out by this research paper reveals that the

universal reasons why people involve in prostitution as profiled by these scholars are not remarkably different from what is obtainable in Benue State, except in cases where the socio-economic dynamics of the environment are considered.

Notable of the above mentioned causes are the socio-economic and environmental factors. In relation to the endemic prostitution in Nigeria, the pervasive poverty and squalor that is a lot over seventy percent of Nigerians is often cited as a key predisposing factor. In spite of the country's immense wealth in mineral resources and abundant fertile arable lands for food production, over sixty percent of Nigerians live in extreme poverty (Sadiq, qtd in Omoniyi 1) and can barely afford the basic necessities of life. Citing reports by The World Bank and Addae-Korankye, Omoniyi highlights some of the effects of poverty which includes the individual's inability to access basic resources for a wholesome living, "including low income and the inability to possess basic goods and services required for survival with self-esteem... lack of adequate education, poor state of health, ...loss of physical security, lack of voice, insufficient capacity and lack of opportunity to better one's own life." (3) Faced with these stupefying and dehumanizing conditions of living, many Nigerians, especially the vulnerable women, have reluctantly embraced prostitution, a business that requires no capital for survival.

Within this context, harsh socio-economic conditions of the environment as a result of the ineptitude to leadership and crass corruption, denies the prostitutes viable opportunities for self improvement and sustenance and leaves them little options for survival; one of which is prostitution. It is plausible to argue that poverty limits the peoples chance of acquiring education and literacy, apart from limiting one's choices, exposes one to exploitation of all kinds. Against this backdrop, it becomes easier to understand Ewah's assertion that with the high rate of illiteracy in Nigeria, the youths are deceived into believing that in big cities, milk and honey flows, only to be forced into sex work when in those cities. (qtd in Chukwu and Okoronkwo 17) This resonates strongly with Maria opinion that young girls and gullible women are lured by the promise of a better life, but they are used in the cities for prostitution. (qtd in Chukwu and Okoronkwo 15)

Also, prostitution is believed to be caused by abuse which may be emotional and psychological, especially in children. The Merriam-Webster's Dictionary defines abuse as improper usage or treatment of a thing, often to unfairly or improperly gain benefit. Emotional abuse, to Umobong, "is any attitude, behavior or failure to act" on the part of a caregiver - a situation that interferes with "a child's mental health, social development or sense of self-worth." (qtd in Chukwu and

Okoronkwo 18) Specifically, Sexual abuse has been defined by Clark *et al.* as “the involvement of the child in sexual activity to provide sexual benefit to the perpetrator, including contacts for sexual purposes, molestation, statutory rape, prostitution, pornography, exposure, incest or other sexually exploitative activities”.(qtd in Chukwu and Okoronkwo 17)

A person who is abused usually feels “an intense feeling of worthlessness, being unloved, unwanted, and perhaps only of value in meeting others’ needs.” (Chukwu and Okoronkwo 18) Abuse is generally characterized by denigrating, threats, discrimination, ridicule, which unfortunately, are least understood but are never the less, very devastating to a person’s physical and emotional welfare. This emotional and psychological imbalance, it has been argued, predisposed teenagers and young adults to wayward behaviors such as alcoholism, drug use and prostitution. Consequently, majority of Nigerian prostitutes are children who at certain points in their lives suffered abuse and negligence from the hands of adults.

Further more, parental irresponsibility and negligence is a strong causative factor of prostitution in Nigeria. This is usually characterized by failure of parents or care givers to provide the basic needs of their wards which forces them to start fending for themselves at a very early age. Aloba and Rita express the point that, most parents do not give children proper guidance and counselling and allow them to mingle with wrong peers - which leads them to deviant acts, criminal behaviour as well as prostitution. In Benue state like in most Nigerian states, it is common to see teenagers of school age hawking wares during school hours. This exposes such children to many physical and psychological hazards. To Ebigbo, street hawking by female children exposes them to sexual exploitation/abuse and consequently, prostitution. He explains that such children “will either be raped or enticed into sexually compromising situations and virtually all of them will be sexually molested through touching and/or visual and verbal enticements to sex.” (Chukwu and Okoronkwo 18) From a spiritual perspective, it is undeniable true that youths who lack knowledge of God and His words due to their lack of involvement or interest in the things of God are likely to fall victims of the vice of prostitution. Under the influences of negative forces, they may indulge in prostitution just for the fun of it and “not for economic benefit or frustration.

Whatever is the cause of prostitution within Nigeria and the Benue as a society in particular, there is no gain saying the enormous consequences prostitution tends to bring in the society at large. Prostitution is generally associated with the spread of transmitted diseases (STDs) such as HIV/AIDS. According to Aminu Hussaini

in the paper entitled, "Causes, Types and Consequences of Prostitution on Women in Sokoto State, Nigeria: Implications for Small Scale Enterprises Counselling", "One of the main reasons for the rapid spread of HIV in Nigeria is the massive transmission among sex workers/ clients and other sexually transmitted diseases like gonorrhoea, pelvic inflammatory diseases and syphilis."(7)

Alobo and Rita in their submission aver that "prostitutes are usually at risk of becoming victims of ritual killers. Since they operate under cover and less likely to be looked for by the police if they disappear."(qtd in Hussaini 7) Also, prostitutes are most likely to sell and use hard drugs and consequently, most likely to be involved in criminal activities thereby, causing harm, not only to themselves, but the society at large. Furthermore, the risks of unwanted pregnancies, abortions, abandoned children and single motherhood which are direct consequences of prostitution. Given the enormity of its consequences on the society, prostitution and other related vices have been condemned seriously by the body of Christ and concerted effort by the church are dedicated to eradicating it in the society.

A survey of the Prevalence of Prostitution in Benue State

Benue state is a highly religious state with almost the entire population subscribing to one faith or the other. I.T Sampson in a study asserted that the state "is entirely composed of Christians and followers of traditional religion." (qtd in Tsebee 102) However, this conclusion has been proven to be incorrect by survey carried by this paper which reveals that, although Christians are clearly the majority in the state and are followed by the believers of the African Traditional Religion; there exist a significant percentage of Muslims (mostly non indigenes) and a number of free thinkers who subscribe to no specific religion in the state.

In spite of this predominantly large percentage of God fearing population, the state has significantly large percentage of prostitutes. During a field survey conducted by the researcher in the major towns of the state, namely: Makurdi, Gboko, Otukpo, Katsina-Ala, Adikpo, Vandeikya, zaki-Biam, and Aliade, it was discovered that in each of these places, there were designated homes for prostitutes who conduct their sex business unmolested. Ayem, Shimawaan, Chiagi, and Alechenu who are residents of Makurdi, during an interview for the research offered very lucid insights into prostitution racket in the town.

Ayem in a succinct statement explains that; in Makurdi due its status as the State's headquarters for prostitution attracts a lot of idle and unskilled females from all over the state who survive in the city through prostitution. According to him, "new prostitutes on arrival, stay with friends who are already in the business until they save enough money to rent a room of their own." Collaborating Ayem's view, Shimawaan points out that "some of the prostitutes entertain customers in their rented rooms while others hang around drinking joints and bars in search of customers." Chiagi on his part intimated that a significant percentage of the prostitutes in Makurdi "are students of the Benue State University who sell their bodies to support the exotic lifestyles'." When asked how much an average prostitute charge for her services, Alechenu informs that the rate depends on the duration of the encounter: "if the customer wants to stay all night, he is charged 2500-3000 naira while a round of sex typically referred to as short-time attracts 500 to 1000 naira, depending on the youthfulness and beauty of the prostitute."

Information gathered by the researcher in Gboko, Otukpo, Adikpo, Katsina-Ala, Zaki-Biam and Aliade reflects the same pattern obtainable in the State's headquarter except slight variations in the prices depending on the economic strengths of the towns. Tyotom, a resident of Gboko, states that "while most prostitutes in the town reside in designated prostitute homes where they are visited by customers, some stay in their independent apartments and visit bars in the evenings to solicit for customers." In Otukpo, a resident of the town, Ochefu informs that "a good number of the prostitutes in the town are young girls who have fled their villages to seek greener pastures." He adds that "although young girls make up the majority of prostitutes in the town, older women too are in the trade and they usually charge lower fees to attract patrons."

In Adikpo, a resident of the town, Agbatse, expressed great dissatisfaction with the rising wave of prostitution sweeping through the town. In his words: "the world is coming to an end, I see young girls every evening who are not old enough to be mothers swimming the town in the night in search of men old enough to be their fathers because they need money." Similarly, Shighfan, Nongo, and Tivlumun who are residents of Katsina- Ala, Zaki-Biam and Aliade respectively confirmed the prevalence of prostitution in the towns and blame the ugly situation on parental irresponsibility, broken marriages, poverty, moral degeneration and crass lack of the fear of God, and the inordinate ambitions of some youths to acquire the good things of life without making efforts to engage in gainful employment. Efforts by the researcher to speak with some of the prostitutes within

this town did not yield positive results as some were out rightly abusive and would not tolerate the presence of the researcher. However, few who reluctantly agreed to be interviewed after prolonged appeals but insisted to be anonymous mentioned the lack of government interest and support for the youths, the destitute, the widows; in addition to personal tragedies as factors that pushed them into prostitution and insisted that under different conditions, they would not choose prostitution.

Church's Position on Prostitution

The position of the Church concerning prostitution is contained in the social teachings of the Church which are guided by the Biblical orientation. From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible adopts a clear position of intolerance to prostitution, especially when it concerns the chosen people of God. The Hebrew law is "extremely severe on Jewish maidens who gave themselves to prostitution but tolerated the offence in strange women." (Clarkson 299) The Hebrew word "Zonah" for prostitution does not only mean outright commercial sex but also imply other inappropriate sexual activities outside the marriage institution. Consequently, evidences abound in the Old and New Testament in condemnation of prostitution and other illicit sexual activities.

In the book of Leviticus, priests are forbidden from marrying someone who had been defiled by prostitution, and if the daughter of a priest had engaged in prostitution, she should be burned: "As for the daughter of any priest, if she is defiled by prostituting, she is disgracing her father; she shall be burned in the fire." (Leviticus 21:9) Temple, sacred or cult prostitution which was practiced across nations in the ancient times is condemn and forbidden in strong terms in the Old Testament. Moses, in Deuteronomy (23:17) says that "There shall be no ritual harlot of the daughters of Israel, or a perverted one of the sons of Israel." In the Book of Exodus (34:16), he advises against the marriage to foreigners who may contaminate the people of God through their practice of same: "and when you choose some of their daughters as wives for your sons and those daughters prostitute themselves to their gods, they will lead your sons to do the same."

Throughout the Bible, prostitution is used as a symbol of filthiness and unfaithfulness, and God likens his people to prostitutes whenever they turn from him to false gods and to evil ways (Ezekiel 23; Exodus 34:15; Leviticus 20; Deuteronomy 31; Judges 8; Chronicles 21) and the prophets frequently condemned

the Israelites for engaging in this practice (Jeremiah 2-3; Ezekiel 16). What flows throughout these Biblical citations is a strong warning to the children of God to keep away from prostitution, either through involvement with women who sale sexual pleasures or through idolatry. These warnings also resonate in the Book of Proverbs where Solomon cautions against involvement with the prostitutes: “do not lust in your heart after her beauty or let her captivate you with her eyes, for the prostitute reduces you to a loaf of bread, and the adulteress preys upon your very life. Can a man scoop fire into his lap without his clothes being burned? Can a man walk on hot coals without his feet being scorched?” (Proverbs 6:24-28).

It is instructive to note that while the Old Testament is completely intolerant of prostitution and pronounces the ultimate penalty of death for prostitutes, the New Testament in the teachings of Jesus Christ, while condemning prostitution, offers a window for the redemption of repentant prostitutes. In spite of their filthiness, Jesus in several bible texts is seen to welcomes them which ultimately marks a turning point in Church’s teaching on sin and retribution. In the Gospel of (Luke 5:32), Jesus said, “I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.” This consequently sets the standard for the position of the Church on the treatment of prostitutes.

The New Testament thus, makes benign comments on specific women engaged in prostitution, which is a departure from the punitive stance of Mosaic laws on prostitutes. A number of instances drawn from the New Testament illustrate and substantiate this assertion: in the Gospel of Luke (7:36-50), Jesus welcomes and forgives the sins of a woman who is a known sinner when she washes his feet with her tears, dries it with her hair and anoints his feet from her alabaster oil; in the Gospel of John (8:1-11), Jesus forgives a prostitute who is brought before him, accused of adultery; in John (4:7-26), Jesus interacted closely with a woman who married and divorced several husbands. In each of these cases, Jesus was graceful to the women who, based on the Law of Moses, would have been against the law to mingle with.

In the gospel of Mathew (21:31-32), Jesus says that, “assuredly, I say to you that tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him; but tax collectors and harlots believed him.” This clearly shows that prostitutes should be given the opportunity to repent of their sins like any other sinner. He set them free, allowed them to worship Him, and gave them a new status in the community, advising

them not to sin again. Instructively therefore, any effort by the contemporary Church in controlling prostitution must be anchored on Biblical standards laid down by Christ, the founder of the Church.

Addressing the Incidence of Prostitution in Benue State: The Church Perspective

The fact that prostitution is still prevalent and growing by the day in the human society, in spite of the effort made so far to prevent it. It is a difficult problem that requires a complete different approach to stop it. While governments have enacted laws that aim to punish offenders in cruel ways to deter individuals from getting involved in this vice, the very government that make these laws create conditions consciously or unconsciously that serve as fertile breeding grounds for prostitution such as neglect of the poor and downtrodden, the less privileged who are daily faced with hunger and deprivation, victims of rape and abuse who get no justice in the law courts, lack of care for widowed women who have no one to turn, to mention only a few. The inability of the authorities to surmount this challenge calls for a moral and humanitarian approach to the problem and the Church is strategically placed to fill this vacuum.

The fact that majority of the people who get involved in prostitution do so out of a dire need to survive in the face of hopelessness cannot be overemphasized. Many studies on prostitution attest to this truth. Thomas in a study points that “women enter prostitution because of pathological problems at their backgrounds – a broken home, parental death or neglect, separation of parents, maladjustment or emotional disturbance...” (qtd in Kangiwa 70) This conclusion is echoed in by Stephen who points out that “women’s involvement in prostitution though can be linked to poverty, it is not limited to it... Most women and children are not freely choosing to work as prostitutes.” (qtd in Baguda and Yusuf 4) It is therefore, not out of place to state that prostitutes are impoverished and helpless slaves who need sympathy and liberation and nobody is better positioned to do this than the Holy Church of God.

In the foregoing discussion, we see that Christ, the founder of the Church even though holy and blameless, welcomed and cared for prostitutes who were considered sinful and highly despicable by the people. His salvation is for the lost sheep of the house of Israel and all gentiles who are abducted sons and daughters by faith through Christ Jesus; not for the righteous (Luke 5:32). It therefore behoves all Christians to live up to their responsibility as disciples of Christ by caring for prostitutes who are society’s outcasts by showing them love and providing for

their basic needs in addition to praying consistently for them. There is no doubt that when these prostitutes are loved, cared for and accepted unconditionally into the mainstream society as Christ did, they will have no reason to go back to prostitution.

This posture of compassionate concern for prostitutes as means of winning them over to Godliness and dignified lives was demonstrated by Pope Francis, the head of the Catholic Church, when he visited the John XXIII community (an organization that helps young people rebuild their lives after being rescued from prostitution) in north-East Rome during the Jubilee Year of Mercy where he met with twenty women liberated from the slavery of the prostitution. According to the Pope, "any form of prostitution is a reduction to slavery, a criminal act, a disgusting vice that confuses making love with venting out one's instincts by torturing a defenceless woman... a sickness of humanity, a false way of thinking in society." (N.p) Based on this conviction, instead of the usual discriminatory attitude against prostitutes that is the norm in the general society, the Pope asked the women for forgiveness, especially on behalf of Christians who had used and abused them: "today, I ask you all for forgiveness. For all the Christians, for all the Catholics, who have abused you... I also [ask] for forgiveness on my part, for not having sufficiently prayed for you and for this slavery." (N.p)

The attitude of the Pope in the above resonates with the response of our Lord Jesus when a woman caught in the act of adultery was brought to him by the people. While her accusers were hoping that they might find something against him, or he might ask them to stone her to death as was the Law of Moses (Leviticus 20: 10), Christ disappointed them. This account is recorded in the book of John (8:3-11). This example set by Jesus Christ, the author of our Christian faith shows that we cannot claim to be Christian and followers of Christ if we fail to show compassionate love to prostitutes around us in trying to save their lives from eternal damnation. As Kosuke Koyama puts it: "the greatness of theological works is to be judged by the quality and extent of service they render to the people to whom [we are] sent." (15) The Christian Gospel will therefore be in vein if it fails to produce practical fruits of saving people in need of salvation such as prostitutes.

It is sensible to conclude, based on the foregoing that, as Christians, our attitude to prostitutes and other marginalized and enslaved members of our society should be that of unreserved compassion, unconditional love, care and support as it is only through these that we may win them back to the family of God and they will

willingly abandon their sinful ways. Rather than see them as offenders, we should see them as victims and slaves of human insensitivity, greed and debauchery.

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