

PARADIGM FOR EXPRESSION OF GRATITUDE IN PENTECOSTAL CHURCHES IN IKALAND

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ABSTRACT

The significance of gratitude is widely perceived as a vital social bond that promotes connection among people, functioning as a backbone for the church and society at large. However, sparks of ingratitude within Pentecostal churches have continued to result in the breakup of congregations, conflicts, misunderstanding, and poor social relationships. This study examines a paradigm for the expression of gratitude in Pentecostal Churches in Ikaland, addressing a significant lacuna in the existing literature regarding local expressions of this virtue. Adopting historical and phenomenological methods of religious research, the paper identifies a lack of structured gratitude expression in these churches. It proposes a paradigm for the practice of gratitude deduced from Luke 17:11–19, as demonstrated by the grateful Samaritan leper. This paradigm focuses on the pillars of celebration, humility, and faith. This paradigm will help stem the tide of ingratitude and enhance peaceful co-existence. The paper recommends that the Bible, as the constitution of the Christian faith, should serve as the primary guide for the expression of gratitude among believers.

Keywords: Paradigm, Expression, Gratitude, Pentecostal and Churches

Introduction

Gratitude is one of the qualities of a civilized person and a distinctive label of an enlightened mind. This view is buttressed by Anele (2016), who asserts that a decline in values has led to a failure in inculcating social etiquette, such as respect for elders and showing gratitude for favors received. There is no gainsaying that appreciating good deeds is a critical attribute of a civilized person. It boosts the morale of people to do more good to others, and as a result, it promotes the culture of harmony and goodwill. Fulfilment in life and destiny comes from a deep sense of gratitude, not merely from achievement. In fact, the biggest achievement in life is diminished if there is no expression of gratitude to God and mankind. Frequently, there is a tendency to play down the good things received in life and concentrate on what has not been received. Contemporary culture is often obsessed with ingratitude. The church as the body of Christ is not spared in this regard. Questions arise: How many appreciate God for the work of creation? How often do we tell God “thank you” for the breath of life? How many of us gratefully praise Him for His answers to our prayers? The positive impacts of gratitude depend on verbal expression, for instance, by saying “thank you”.

This has led popular science periodicals to state that, according to positive psychologists, the words “thank you” are no longer just good manners; they are also useful to the self (Floyd et al., 2018). Gratitude is the most important aspect of fulfilment of life and critical to real success. Apart from expressing gratitude verbally, one can also express gratitude through non-verbal communication. For instance, for the Nguni tribe from Southern Africa, non-verbal gratitude is an intrinsic part of their daily interactions. According to Oshin (2018), one of the most effective ways the Nguni people practise gratitude is through gestures, such as holding out hands in a cupped position when receiving an offer, signifying that the gift is too significant to be held by one hand.

According to Allen (2018), throughout history and around the world, religious leaders and philosophers have esteemed the virtue of gratitude. He further argued that over the past twenty years, scientists have made great progress toward understanding the biological basis of gratitude and the ways people can develop it in their daily lives. Abhishek (2021) adds that gratitude is a delightful feeling that strengthens human psychology and society. However, despite this general understanding, there remains a significant lacuna in the literature regarding the structured expression of gratitude within the specific context of Pentecostal Churches in Ikaland. This study seeks to fill this gap by proposing a paradigm for the expression of gratitude in these churches. The study adopted the historical and phenomenological methods of religious research.

Methodology

This study adopts the historical and phenomenological methods of religious research. The historical method was employed to trace the origins of Ikaland and the trajectory of Christianity within the region. The phenomenological approach was utilized to explore the lived experience of gratitude among believers. Primary data was gathered through oral interviews with four purposively selected subjects, comprising two clergy members and two lay members from Pentecostal assemblies in Agbor, Ute-Eruru, Owa, and Ewuru. These participants were selected based on their leadership roles and long-standing membership to ensure authentic contextual insights.

The Origin of Ikaland

Ika is one of the prominent ethnic groups in Delta State. According to Onyekpeze (2003), the dearth of written records and archaeological works has deprived the clans in Ika, like most other clans and ethnic groups in the nation, of an authentic history. Consequently, the fluid and loosely documented history of the clans that make up Ikaland is reminiscent of the different schools of thought regarding their origin, derived primarily from oral sources and colonial writings.

The majority of the various clans of Ikaland claim to have migrated from the ancient Benin kingdom between the 12th and 14th centuries A.D. in different waves. There are three primary schools of thought regarding this origin. The first suggests that a man named Eka came to settle in the land, which was subsequently named Eka after him. The second posits that the people of Ika migrated from the Igbo hinterlands east of the River Niger and settled at Agbor. The third and perhaps most widely accepted view is that the Ika and Benin people share a common origin (Nwanne, 2004).

The Ika people, who occupy thirteen separate clans, possess a rich cultural heritage influenced by both the Igbo and Edo cultures (Echenim, 2009). The Igbo influence is particularly obvious in commercial roles and missionary activities, while the Edo influence is dominant in language, festivals (such as Igwen), and titles like Iyase and Adolor.

The Advent of Christianity in Ikaland

The arrival of Christianity in Ikaland occurred in three phases: the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in 1903, the Roman Catholic Mission in 1906, and the emergence of Pentecostal churches in the 1970s. Onekpe (2009)

posit that in 1903, a white missionary named Fanny Dennis of the CMS came to Igbodo and Umunede from Idumuje-Ugboko. She preached the gospel, converting locals such as Mary Ofuani, Sussana Odede, and the renowned traditional priest Paul Onai to Christianity, despite facing persecution. The mission extended its activities to Ekwuoma and Umunede in 1904, and Onyeidu (2002) observes that the Obi of Owa encouraged the settlement of Christian agents in Owa-Oyibu.

Similarly, Catholic missionary activities entered Ikaland through Fr. Zappa. In 1903, Fr. Zappa and a group of priests, while en route to Sapele, stopped at Agbor-Obi and requested permission from the Dein to establish a mission. The request was granted, and land was allocated near the palace for a worship center (Banwune, 2016). Nevertheless, it must be borne in mind that the spread of Christianity in Ikaland was closely linked to the colonial factor, as colonial interests often paved the way for missionary enterprises.

The Origin and Growth of Pentecostalism in Ikaland

Pentecostalism was established in the region following the activities of the Scripture Union in 1970. According to Okobia (2024), a Scripture Union group from Ibadan organized a crusade that heralded a great revival in Ikaland. Converts from this crusade began a Bible study group at the Anglican Primary School (now Orogodo Primary School) in Agbor, engaging in intense prayer and study.

This revival eventually broke off from the Scripture Union, giving birth to numerous Pentecostal churches in Ikaland. These contemporary Pentecostal assemblies draw significant inspiration from American Pentecostalism. Since the 1940s, the Christian religion has progressively become a remarkable part of the daily lives of the Ika people (Gbenoba, 2015). Given this deep religious permeation, the expression of gratitude becomes a vital virtue for church and societal health (Bono et al., 2004).

Paradigm for the Expression of Gratitude

This study proposes a paradigm for the practice of gratitude in Pentecostal churches, deduced from Luke 17:11–19. The grateful Samaritan serves as a prototype for this expression. The researcher posits that this paradigm, built on the pillars of Celebration, Humility, and Faith, will serve as a normative and logical model for the contemporary Nigerian church.

Act of Celebration

In this perspective, 'Celebration' depicts doing something spectacular to mark a significant event. It provides avenues that can help to reduce elements that may adversely affect morale. The healed Samaritan leper, having experienced God's power and thankful for His mercies, returned with celebration to express his gratitude. Steindl-Rast (2004) notes that gratitude is principally a celebration; by concentrating on the way we experience gratitude, we become conscious that it is more than a feeling. It involves intellectual recognition and emotional appreciation.

While all ten lepers were willing to perform the religious ceremony of showing themselves to the priests, only one was filled with the spirit of celebration. Abigail Ofume (personal communication, June 26, 2023) emphasized that gratitude breeds happiness and joy, which are manifestations of celebration. Celebration is advantageous to mental and physical well-being as it fosters a sense of belonging and connection.

Biblically, celebration is rooted in the Hebrew concept of *hagag*, which refers to preparing, keeping, or

observing a feast. The Israelites celebrated feasts like Passover to remember God's deliverance, fostering religious dedication across generations. It is therefore necessary for church leadership to create avenues for celebration among members to curb the growing trend of ingratitude. Celebration leads to gratitude, peace, and joy, fostering a mindset of gratitude.

The Attitude of Humility

The grateful leper recognized the need to appreciate Jesus in humility. He stepped into immediate action by falling on his face at the feet of Jesus, displaying the correct attitude of humility. The Greek word doxazo (to glorify) implies giving a correct opinion or proper assessment of God. The physical act of falling on one's face signifies complete prostration and total surrender to Jesus' authority.

Humility and gratitude are deeply connected. Arrien (2011) states that humility allows individuals to reach beyond themselves and appreciate the gifts others bring to the world. Accepting a gift implies a reliance on the benefactor, which requires humility. Blackman (2022) argues that gratitude thrives in an atmosphere of humility. A seed of humility paves the way for an attitude of gratitude.

Humility facilitates deeper and more enduring gratitude by allowing individuals to acknowledge their strengths and weaknesses without arrogance. Williams (2023) notes that this balanced mindset paves the way for personal growth. Jesus taught that "everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 14:11).

In the Pentecostal context, self-seeking behavior and pride often hinder gratitude. Rev. Lucky Agbatia (personal communication, June 15, 2023) noted that seeking personal interest among members hinders the expression of gratitude. Church leadership must therefore model selflessness and manage the imperfections of the congregation with humility, fostering an environment where transparency and trust can be restored.

Model of Faith

The grateful Samaritan also serves as a model of faith. Despite being a "foreigner" and a Samaritan, whom Jews regarded as unspiritual, he was the one who returned. Luke highlights this ethnicity to make a theological point. While the nine Jews likely felt entitled to the healing as God's chosen people, the Samaritan recognized the healing as an act of undeserved mercy.

When the Samaritan returned, Jesus commended him, saying, "Your faith has made you well" (Luke 17:19). Hamilton (2019) suggests this faith was rooted in gratitude. Faith is the recognition that God's mercy is unmerited; thus, gratitude is a natural concomitant of faith. The Samaritan did not just thank the Rabbi for a miracle; he glorified God, recognizing Jesus' divine authority.

He felt obliged to show his gratitude toward the one who made it so. Gratitude is proof of faith in God, helping to exterminate disbelief. As Lowe (2013) posits, gratitude and faith are two spheres of the same disposition. For the modern Pentecostal church, this link is vital: faith in God leads to gratitude, and expressed gratitude, in turn, strengthens faith.

Awareness of Gratitude as a Cardinal Moral Virtue in the Teaching of Jesus Christ.

Gratitude is a cardinal moral virtue in the teachings of Jesus Christ. The gospels reveal Jesus consistently thanking God, at the feeding of the multitude, at the raising of Lazarus, and at the Last Supper. Pauley (2013) elucidates this by asserting that a beautiful aspect of Jesus' life was his constant attitude of gratitude.

The Greek word eucharistos (thanksgiving) is derived from eu meaning "good" and charis meaning "grace".

Voskamp (2013) describes gratitude as a virtue most worthy of cultivation; it is to be planted, watered, dressed, and harvested in the life of a Christian. Jesus publicly expressed his gratitude to God for the benefit of other people, teaching them to also be grateful.

Although the disciples were initially slow to cultivate this attitude, their later writings in the Epistles overflow with generous expressions of gratitude. Consequently, church leadership must properly create awareness among members that gratitude is a moral imperative. Pastor Enoch Isah (personal communication, May 24, 2023) remarked that leaders must teach gratitude as a Christian lifestyle to counter the inception of nominal Christianity. Patrick Akemu (personal communication, June 16, 2023) added that living a life of gratitude is a way of obeying God's instructions and serving as a witness to the public.

The Technique of Worship

Worship is a primary tool for expressing gratitude. Rohrer (2019) describes gratitude as the "stem cell" of worship. True worship, as Jesus taught the Samaritan woman in John 4:7–26, is not about outward rituals but a truthful expression uniting the human spirit with the Divine. It must be a combination of intellectual understanding and emotional feeling.

In worship, the church expresses its reverence and submission to God. This creates social concord and binds the community together. In the context of Pentecostal liturgy, which is often characterized by expressive and affective spirituality, worship becomes the primary vehicle for this gratitude. Pentecostal leaders should utilize worship as a technique to level social status and entrench peaceful co-existence. When Christians practice spirituality through worship, they display more gratitude.

Conclusion

Humanity often struggles to show gratitude, preferring to dwell on negatives. However, the biblical narrative of the ten lepers in Luke 17:11–19 reveals that God expects and values gratitude. This study has proposed a paradigm for the expression of gratitude in Pentecostal churches in Ikaland, anchored on three pillars: the Act of Celebration, the Attitude of Humility, and the Model of Faith.

The findings indicate that the current lack of structured gratitude expression contributes to church conflicts and social disintegration. Ingratitude is not merely a social faux pas but a spiritual deficiency that affects the cohesion of the body of Christ. Therefore, church leadership cannot be isolated from the practice of gratitude; it is their responsibility to model and teach it. By adopting this paradigm, churches can address the vices of pride and entitlement. This will foster a community where transparency, trust, and loyalty are restored, ensuring that gratitude to God and one another becomes the norm for the contemporary church in Ikaland.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommends the following:

Biblical Constitution: The Bible should serve as the primary guide for the expression of gratitude. Systematic discipleship training, seminars, and conferences should be organized to teach these principles thoroughly.

Leadership Training: Church leaders and government officials should be trained on the importance of gratitude. This includes practical applications such as the timely payment of gratuities to workers, which

reflects societal gratitude.

Cultural Integration: The church should explore ways to integrate local cultural expressions of gratitude, such as the respectful gestures found in Ikaland culture, into liturgical practices to make the concept more relatable and culturally authentic.

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