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The Theological Significance of the Concept of Anointing in Contemporary Churches in Nigeria

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Abstract

Anointing is a popular concept in most Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria today. It is common to hear sayings such as “falling under anointing”, “transfer of anointing”, “anointing service”, “anointing for favour”, “anointing for sickness”, “anointing for breakthrough”, and many more. There is a wide spread confusion within the Pentecostal movements regarding anointing. There is no common accepted meaning. There is no uniformity in understanding how one may obtain whatever the anointing is, there is even a great disagreement about who really is anointed. The main reason for this misunderstanding in most cases is because everyone is holding to a different interpretation of the Bible. The study examines the concept of anointing from the Biblical perspective in the context of the practice of anointing in contemporary Pentecostal churches in Nigeria. The study adopted the contextual and narrative analytical method to investigate the historical and contemporary contexts of the use of anointing and its practice in the church today. The study shows that spiritual anointing with the Holy Spirit was conferred on Christians by God (2Cor1:21) and they were described as having an unction from God by which they know all things (1 John 2:20, 27) but there was no indication in the Scriptures that anyone can transmit the anointing by any means as it is being practised in the church today.

Keywords:

Anointing, Anointing Oil, Pentecostal Churches, Spiritual Anointing, Transmitting Anointing, Nigeria

Introduction

Anointing has been an aged old practice among the ancients, particularly the Israelites. The anointing of priests (Ex. 40:15; Number 3:3), prophets (1Kings19:16), the Israelites kings (1Sam9:16; 1Kings 1:34, 39) and sacred vessels was a common practice among the Hebrews. The practice of anointing was not only common among the Hebrews but among other nations and religions as well. In modern Hinduism and Jainism, anointing is common, but unlike the Hebrews who used oil, Antoine¹ (2005) observed that the Hindus and Jainists typically employ water or yogurt, milk or butter from the holy cow, rather than oil. Many devotees of these religions were anointed as an act of consecration or blessing at every stage of life. During special occasions such as birth, educational enrolments, religious initiations and death, the ritual of anointing is observed. Nwaomah (2009)² personal property like houses, cars, and even electronics are anointed with oil. Many times such an anointing takes place when a new house or car or expensive item is purchased. People were anointed from head to foot downward.

Unlike Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism which uses water and butter as the case may be, Judaism uses only oil in carrying out this ritual. This practice was significant among the Jewish people. For example, the anointing oil was used in the consecration of priest (Exodus 29:7), prophets as well as kings (2 Samuel 16) the kings were anointed with oil by the prophets as a sign which was considered to impart the Spirit of the Lord upon them. However, Robert³ (1999) points out that, the practice was not always observed and seems to have been essential only at the consecration of a new line or dynasty.

The practice spread to Christianity from Judaism but in a different form and, today, the practice has become contentious among Christians, especially with regards to what anointing could mean. Christianity developed from following 'Christ' whose name

¹J. Antoine (2005). "Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies: The Classical First Hand". <http://www.books.google.com.ng/books.isbn> Accessed on 30/10/2017.

²S.M. Nwaomah. (2009). Anointing with Oil in African Christianity: An Evaluation of Contemporary practices. *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies*. Digital Commons: Andrews University.

³Robert (1999).

simply means 'the anointed one.' Christ was not anointed by the high priest in accordance with the ritual practice of using the anointing oil, as described in the Old Testament, rather, he was considered to have been anointed by the Holy Spirit during His baptism (Matthew 3:16), and before the coming of the Holy Spirit upon Him, had the prophet Isaiah prophesy (Isa 61:1) that he would be anointed with the Spirit of God rather than in a formal ceremony at the temple. Similarly, Fleming⁴ observed that a literal anointing of Jesus also occurred when He was lavishly oiled by an anonymous woman often assumed to have been Mary Magdalene. Jesus in his response to the act of this woman said it was an anointing in preparation for his burial.

The practice of anointing with oil appears to have developed in the early church during the late 2nd century, as a symbol of Christ, rebirth and inspiration. The earliest surviving of such account according to Ferguson⁵ seems to be the letter written to Autolycus by Theophilus, bishop of Antioch. In it, he calls the act 'sweet and useful' punning on *Khristōs* ('anointed') and *Khrēstos* ('useful'). He seems to be saying believers are called Christians on the account that they are anointed with the oil of God. The practice according to Smith⁶ is also defended by Hippolytus in his commentary on the Song of Songs and by Origen in his commentary on Romans. Origen opines that "all of us may be baptized in those visible waters and in a visible anointing, in accordance with the form handed down to the churches."

Some Protestant commentators, according to Piepkorn⁷, understand the efficacy of anointing the sick to arise from the prayer of faith while Roman Catholics associate it with Markan account of Jesus commissioning His disciples (Mark 6:7-11) and so speak of a sacrament of anointing the sick. However, Elwell⁸ (1997), argued that the ancient Christian rite of anointing for healing received little positive attention from leading Protestant thinkers, they rejected the Catholic sacrament of the extreme unction as unbiblical and for the most part consigned supernatural gifts of healing to the apostolic

⁴D. Fleming. (1998). "The Biblical Tradition of Anointing Priests". *Journal of Biblical Literature*: [JSTOR](#) Accessed on 30/10/2017.

<http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anointing>, p. 117

⁵E. Ferguson, (2009). *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries*. Kindle Locations 5142-5149: Wm. B. Eerdmans, p 269

⁶Y. Smith. (2013). "The Mystery of Anointing". *Gorgias*: Accessed on 30/10/2017
<http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anointing>, p. 30.

⁷C Piepkorn. (1990). "Profiles in Belief" *Dictionary of Christianity in America*. Ed. Daniel G.

⁸W. Elwell . (1997). "Entry for 'Anoint'." *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*"
Access date: October 30, 2017. <https://www.christiancourier.com/articles/118-anointing-with-oil->

age. With this divergent view in respect to the practice of anointing in the contemporary church, this paper therefore seeks to discuss some of the contemporary practices of anointing and equally establish the fact that the modern churches have greatly departed from the traditional practice of anointing among ancients.

The Concept of Anointing

The act of anointing appears to have been viewed as emblematical of a particular sanctification, of a designation to the service of God, or to a holy and sacred use. The high-priests were anointed (Ex 29:29; Lev 4:3), and even the sacred vessels of the tabernacle were anointed (Ex 30:26); Thus the high-priest is called the anointed (Lev 4:3) and also the king (I Sam.26:9) (McClintock and James:1982)⁹. Anointing was also used as an act of hospitality in the Bible. The anointing of Jesus' feet by "the woman who was a sinner" (Luke 7:38) led to the remark that the host himself had neglected to anoint his head (verse 46). The Orientals according to McClintock and James¹⁰ are indeed strongly persuaded of the sanative properties of oil; and it was under this impression that the Jews anoint the sick, and applied oil to wounds (Ps 109:18; Isa 1:6; Luke 10:34; Rev 3:18). Anointing was used in various ways to promote the general health of the body. It was, hence, as a salutary and approved medicament, that the disciples were directed to "anoint the sick" (Mark 6:13) and the sick man directed to send for the elders of the Church, who were "to pray for him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord" (James 5:14). Spiritual anointing with the Holy Spirit is conferred also upon Christians by God (2 Cor 1:21), and they are described as having an unction from the Holy One, by which they know all things (1 John 2:20, 27). The word 'anointed' in the contemporary church has become arguably the most overused term in the Pentecostal and Charismatic arenas. At various times charismatic preachers, who often describe the anointing as feeling heat or something like electricity, claim to be 'under' the anointing, can 'feel' the anointing come over them, or in the room. (Thus) Hinn in his *Good morning Holy Spirit*¹¹ (1997, p, 21) describes his anointing experience thus:

⁹J. McClintock and S. James,. (1982). *The Cyclopedia of Biblical Theological and Ecclesiastical literature*. Vol.12. Baker Academic: New York.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹B. Hinn (1997). "Good Morning Holy Spirit". Accessed on 30/10/2017. <http://www.letusreason.org/pent28.htm>, p. 21.

Suddenly my little body was caught up in an incredible sensation that can only be described as "electric." It felt as if someone had plugged me into a wired socket. There was a numbness that felt like needles-a million of them- rushing through my body.

Anointing is generally associated with smearing, or pouring, oil on something, or someone. The main Hebrew term use for "to anoint" is "*masah*" and it has secular connotations such as to 'rub' as rubbing a shield with oil (Isaiah 21:5), 'smear' as in smearing/daubing a wall or a house with paint (Jer 22:14), or 'anoint' as anointing the body with oil (Amos 6:6). The theological meaning of *masah* according to Ellison¹² (1996) is fourfold:

First, an individual or object set apart for divine use is said to be "anointed." Solomon was anointed ruler over Israel (1 Chronicles 29:22); this anointing made him both responsible for and accountable to the people. Anointed kings sometimes failed in their tasks, and were reminded of their accountability (1 Sam 15:17; 2 Sam 12:7). Second, when people were anointed, God empowered them to accomplish his tasks (1 Sam 10:6; 16:13). Third, no one was allowed to harm God's anointed (1 Sam 24:10; 26:9). Finally, the term *mashiyach* derived from *masah*, refers to Israel's Messiah who was to come from the house of David (Psalm 84:9; Psalms 89:38; Psalms 89:51).

Contemporary Practices of Anointing by Selected Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria

One New Testament practice that seems to have appealed to many contemporary African Christians in their quest to appropriate the providences of God in their lives, endeavours, and in order to protect their possessions is the practice of anointing with oil.

The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) is a Pentecostal megachurch and denomination founded in Lagos, Nigeria with branches in over 196 countries. The General Overseer of the church, Pastor E.A. Adeboye, describes anointing as heaven's

¹²H. Ellison, (1996). *The Centrality of the Messianic Idea for the Old Testament*. V. P. Hamilton, TWOT Baker Books: Grand Rapids, Michigan.

electricity working through a material channel capable of regulating the anointing¹³. Ukah¹⁴ writes that, church members desirous of appropriating the power in an anointing as delivered through Adeboye are required to submit containers of olive oil labelled with the owner's identity to the office of the Pastor, who it is believed, has the exclusive spiritual mandate to pray over the oil. The olive oil containers are then handed back to the owners. Sometimes, the congregation may be requested to lift up their olive oil containers during the monthly Holy Ghost service for blessing by Pastor Adeboye. According to Ukah:

In a dramatic demonstration of the nature and uses of anointing, Adeboye recently declared that God instructed him to wear three shirts at the same time for an undisclosed number of days and nights so that some of his own anointing would be transferred onto the shirts. God further directed him that on the first night of wearing these shirts, he should remove one of them, fold it in a particular way, place it in a basin, and fill the basin with oil. The oil will be the transmitting medium of the anointing in the shirt to everyone in the congregation who comes in contact with it. Upon completing this ritual, Adeboye admonished his congregation that when they touch the oil, they are to rub it on their head, mouth and then rub the remainder on the palm of their hand. The one on their head is going to take care of every yoke in their body. And the one in their mouth is going to ensure that the prayers they offer will all be answered, while the one on their hand is going to ensure the beginning of their prosperity¹⁵.

The anointing oil therefore serves several purposes in the Redeemed Christian Church of God and some of its purposes as pointed out by Ukah (2003) includes:

¹³E. Adeboye. (2000). *Deep Calleth Unto Deep*. Lagos, Nigeria: CRM Book Ministry.

¹⁴A. Ukah (2003). *The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), Nigeria. Local Identities and Global Processes*. In *African Pentecostalism*. Fakultät der Universität Bayreuth.

¹⁵A. Ukah. (2003), p. 213.

1. Healing for physical ailments.
2. Protection of assets such as bags, cars, electronics, and other household items from theft or manipulative forces.
3. Protection from evil spirits and powers.
4. Power to attract good fortune.

Living Faith Church Worldwide is another Christian denomination in Nigeria, founded by Bishop David Oyedepo. The anointing oil according to Oyedepo¹⁶ was the prescription which Christ gave to the twelve disciples when he called them and commissioned them in Mark 6:7. Oyedepo teaches that the olive oil transforms from “a chemical” to “mystery” in the hand of the prophet and the Holy Spirit dwells in it and the oil serves as a fan and a fire to do the work of healing on the anointed person. The anointing oil is capable of healing “AIDS, diabetes, cancer, diseases and sickness of all kinds! It is also effective for healing of businesses, homes, etc.” The anointing oil could be applied externally or ingested to perform the function intended after it has been prayed over it by the Pastor¹⁷.

The Mountain of Fire And Miracle Ministries (MFM) is another Pentecostal denomination founded by Dr. Daniel Kolawole Olukoya in Lagos in 1989. In Mountain of Fire, there is anointing for divine favour and this anointing according to Olukoya¹⁸ can turn around any unfavourable or terrible situation and there is no amount of limitation that divine favour cannot remove. Members of Mountain of Fire are admonished to anoint their head, feet, hand and other parts of the body in order to break any curse upon that part of the body. Olukoya¹⁹ again claimed that anointing is used for other things apart from bodily sickness. There is anointing for finding a job, for business success, for help with examinations, for finding a life partner, and for other “forms of success or breakthroughs.” There are also cases of people anointing fruit before they eat the fruit, which will in turn give them their desired miracle, like being able to become pregnant or other forms of miracles and cures.

¹⁶Oyedepo, D. (1996). *The healing balm*. Ota-Lagos, Nigeria: Dominion Publishing House.

¹⁷Ibid p.17.

¹⁸D. Olukoya. (2012). *Receiving the Oil of Divine Favour*. Retrieved on the 12 of April, 2018 from <https://www.amazon.com-receiving-oil-divine-favour>.

¹⁹D. Olukoya. (2001). *Dealing with local satanic technology*. Lagos, Nigeria: The Battle Cry Christian Ministries.

Nwaomah²⁰ noted that sometimes, people are required to attend anointing services with bottles of oil, which the presiding priest prays over to give them power. There are instances where beneficiaries of such anointing services have been encouraged to drink the anointing oil with the belief that internal ailments or certain spirits could be expelled. Also, people are encouraged to smear the blessed oil around their surroundings to avert danger or scare demonic spirits away. Those seeking traveling visas and employment and other undisclosed favours are also to apply olive oil on their application papers.

Conclusion

The New Testament indicates that all believers are anointed because all believers are set apart or consecrated to God and this is why Christians are referred to as saints (1 Cor. 1:1) This effectively eliminates the idea that a few special persons who claimed to have the anointing are more gifted than other believers, or have special 'powers' that other believers do not have. Although charismatic teachers have made the anointing a separate power that God bestows on special people, the Holy Spirit empowers all Christians who ask for anointing and as such every Christian ought to have enough anointing needed for all situations. The different applications of anointing do not have sufficient theological basis to guarantee its credibility. To a large extent, transmitting or transferring anointing either through laying of hands, blowing air into the face of recipients, or praying into olive oils are means developed by church leaders to amaze their followers and convince them that they have all it takes to meet their needs. Many anointed men of God use the different anointing services as means of attracting crowd, making money and manipulating the vulnerable ones who are desperately in need of healing. Jesus is the promised deliverer (John 1:41 ; 4:25), anointed with the Holy Spirit and with power (Acts 10:38) and the nature of his anointing is described as spiritual, with the Holy Spirit (Isa. 61:1 cf Luke 4:18).

²⁰S. M. Nwaomah (2009). Anointing with Oil in African Christianity: An Evaluation of Contemporary practices. *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies*. Digital Commons: Andrews University..