

# **The Miracle Theology Factor in Pentecostal Churches in Owerri**

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## **Abstract**

Miracles, miracles, miracles in the churches. The Pentecostals are echoing it all the more. The Nigerian populace is clapping, jumping, and dancing to the rhythm of the beat of this theology, mostly orchestrated in the Pentecostal churches. It is catching the congregations across the board. The theology seems to be the reason for increased mobility of Christian faithfuls from one church to another. Owerri is not left out in this experience. It appears that the promise of miracles to church members by the Pentecostal churches in Owerri is attracting worshipers, and the churches have made the theology of miracles their main focus more than ever before. This article uses documented interviews and observation methods of data gathering while deploying the sociological/functionalist approach in its data analysis.

**Key Words:** miracles, Owerri, Pentecostal, theology

## **Introduction**

In recent times, there appears to be a wind blowing across Christian churches worldwide. Going around the city of Owerri (henceforth Owerri) of Imo State of Nigeria, a casual observer will be astonished at the presence of numerous Pentecostal churches with different names, captions, and insignia displayed conspicuously on their signposts, boards, and posters, including their handbills distributed to people in Owerri. A closer look at these ubiquitous materials reveals claims and counter claims of miracles of different types taking place in special gatherings and locations. Obilor (2003, 160) observes that there are claims and counter claims of miracles everywhere. The new churches and their founders seem to hinge their proselytization on claims of miracles. Religion is ceasing to be a worship of God and fast becoming a place where miracles happen.

Such miraculous claims include those of healing from sickness and diseases; deliverance from the power of demon and occultism, armed robbery attacks, premature death, accidents, imprisonment, barrenness, and all forms of problems and challenges; success in business, marriage, political appointments, prosperity, and examinations. In fact the list is endless. Issues are being raised daily by both Christians and non-Christians regarding such claims and the rush to experience them. Some of people's concerns should be on the realities of the claims: are the claims confirmable? why the upsurge? has the church derailed from the message and purport of the gospel of Christ and the study and knowledge of God through Christ? Most importantly, what could be the powers behind such a quantum leap of miracle claims by this sect of Christian faithfuls?

In global times like these, it is imperative and expedient to draw the attention of the Christian populace and of all people to this recent and trending facet of Christian theology. In particular, what is the justification for the current dance to this bizarre tune being orchestrated by the Pentecostal churches in Owerri in particular?

## **Theoretical Framework**

This article adopts the theory of structural functionalism. In any given society, there exist institutions which correlate in carrying out their functions for the sustenance of that particular

society. Levy's (1952) term "institution" will be used here as a particular type of normative pattern (miracles) that affects human action (Christians) in terms of social system (religious beliefs and teachings). In this sense, the claims of miracles are part of the theology of Christianity/church institutions which refer to those particular normative patterns, conformity with which is generally to be expected and failure to conform is generally met with the moral and biblical indignation of those individuals who are involved in the same general social/belief system and who are aware of the consequences of any failure in this regard (Parson, 1940).

The theory of structural functionalism is anchored on its sociological origins in the works of its founder, Auguste Comte. According to Comte (Poloma, 1979), society is like a living organism. However, it was the British sociologist of the mid-nineteenth century, Herbert Spencer, who discussed specific differences and similarities. For Spencer, the parts that develop in living bodies and in social bodies each serve a function or purpose. They grow into different organs having unlike duties; in the social system as in human bodies, any change in the part affects the family, informal education, religion, and so on, which includes Christianity and by extension the theology of miracles. Perry & Perry (1931) argue further that Durkheim observes that modern society is like an organic whole having a reality of its own. This whole has needs or functions that must be met by the member parts in order for it to exist in its normal state.

### **Research Area**

The area known as and referred to as Owerri consists of many communities in the old provincial "Owerri nchi ise" (Owerri with five alms). The area is bounded on the north by Owerri North and Mbaitoli Local Government Areas, on the east by Owerri West, Aboh Mbaise, and on the south partly by Owerri West and Ngor Okpala Local Government Areas respectively. According to oral tradition, Owerri (Owerri "nchi ise") people migrated to their present location as a result of a family feud very many years ago in a place called "Uratta." One of the brothers of the progenitor family felt offended during a conflict. He decided to take the life of his elder brother, who got wind of the plan to assassinate him and fled with his family at night to the present day Owerri. When they arrived at "ugwu ekwema" they rested and had their first meal of roasted yam with (red) palm oil. The runaway family became the ancestors of the indigenous inhabitants of Owerri today, while their first meal of roasted yam and palm oil became the origin of their festival called "oru Owerri" (the annual remembrance of their survival and escape from death).

Owerri houses the seat of the government of Nigeria's Imo State. Owerri's population grew from 125,337 in 2006 to 172,600 in 2016 (Owerri City Population, n.d.). Its area is 62.40km<sup>2</sup> with a population density of 2,766/km<sup>2</sup> (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2009).

### **The Concept of Miracle**

Cross (1981, 905) defines miracle as a sensible fact (*opus sensible*) produced by the special intervention of God for a religious end, transcending the normal order of things usually termed the law of nature. Iwe (1986, 157) opines that a miracle implies a special and extraordinary presence of God's power in a given human event. Hence, when God's presence is observed or seen by men extraordinarily, a miracle has taken place. Sumrall (1999, 6) posits that, in the simplest sense, a miracle is God acting in a way which is beyond human understanding. It is the suspension of what mankind considers to be natural laws. Along this line of argument, a miracle can be seen as the removal of human or natural barriers so that divine energy flows unhindered.

Papyri (1980, 621-622) defines a miracle as a supernatural event, a marvel, a wonder. It is a divine, supernatural intervention in a hopeless situation bringing about a positive turn around. The individual who receives a miracle recognizes it for what it is even if he does not know how to define it. Arguing that the word “miracle” is a vague and ambiguous one, Guy (1960, 27) adds that the word literally means anything at which people tend to marvel. For Guy, therefore, what is a miracle to one age or nation might not be considered miraculous to people of another time or culture. Going by this view, what is a miracle today may not be one tomorrow. David Hume, as cited by the aforementioned Guy, argues that a miracle is a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the deity or by the interposition of some invisible agents. Thus a miracle by its very nature is a violation of the law of nature, contrary to the natural course of things—like the dead coming back to life.

Ekarika (1986, 47) posits that, for Christians, miracles are not therefore extraordinary because they are rare, but because they take place beyond the natural order. Hence even if, for example, blind men were to receive their sight everyday, what has happened in every case would still be regarded as a miracle. But a generation of offspring everyday and everywhere through conception would not be termed a miracle since it does not transcend the effective operations of nature, i.e., the nature of man to reproduce its kind.

### **The Bible and Miracles**

Emerole (1995, 35) argues that many Christians believe that miracles began on the creation day. Genesis 1:3, 6, 9, 14, and 24 agree that God created the earth and all that there are in it by his spoken word. It was not mere words, but words of spirit and life (John 6:63). Demaray (in Emereole, 36) estimates that 61 miracles were wrought in the Old Testament alone, excluding creation day miracles. Sixteen (16) of these miracles were recorded in Exodus, one in Leviticus, five in Numbers, and three in Joshua. Others were in 1 Kings (five), 2 Kings (16), Daniel (two), 2 Chronicles (one), and Jonah (one). The Old Testament writers described anything which made people wonder as being the direct result of God's activity in the world—hence the word “miracle” seldom appears in the Old Testament. The writers without considering the possibility of natural explanation saw all in the unexpected apparently unnatural events and experiences as a lively sense of God's presence and power. Such events which made people wonder (miraculous) included a pillar of cloud by the day and a pillar of fire by night deployed by God to guide Israel's journey from Egypt to the promised land.

In Old Testament, the two Hebrew words most commonly used for miracle occur in Deuteronomy 13:1, as translated by the RSV: “If a prophet arises among you, or a dreamer of dreams, and gives you a sign (תִּשְׁמֹר) or wonder (מוֹפֵת)...” (Buttrick, 1962, 393). There is another Hebrew word for miracle (מִלְאָכָה) which means something beyond one's power to do or to understand. It appears in Exodus 15:11 referring to the wonders of the Exodus; but in Psalms 89:5-6, it means wonders of the natural world. This term also refers to the wonderful acts of God. In Exodus 3:20; Judges 6:13, it refers to events of the Exodus. But in Job 5:9 the reference includes rainfall, which God sends upon the earth and fields (Buttrick, 1962, 394). Miraculous healing in the Old Testament is generally attributed to the intervention of God. An example is the recovery of Moses (Ex.4:24-26) from the illness associated with his disobedience over his son's circumcision: that recovery is given an entirely spiritual significance. The healing of Miriam's leprosy (Num. 12:1-5) and of Naaman, through Elisha (2 Kings 13:3-6); the healing of Jeroboam's suddenly paralyzed hand (1 Kings 13:4-6), the raising from dead of the son of the widow of Zarephath by Elijah (1 Kings

17:17-24), and the raising from the dead of the son of the Shunammite woman by Elisha (2 Kings 4:1-37): these events are clearly miraculous. The recovery of Hezekiah (2 Kings: 20:1-11) was attributed directly to God (v. 8) and was accompanied by a nature miracle (vv. 9-11).

Sawyer (1987, 14) notes the enigmatic Old Testament story of how Isaiah made “the shadow cast by the declining sun on the dial of Ahaz turn back ten steps” (Isaiah 38:8; cf. 2 Kings 20:8-11). Moses also performed miracles: turning his staff into a snake and covering his hand with leprosy “that they may believe” (Ex. 4:1-9); the stretching out of hand towards heaven that brought about thunder and hail and fire darted to the ground (Ex. 9:23-26). Hannah was a woman who had been denied by nature the right to have children, but through the supernatural intervention of God (miracle) she conceived and brought forth a son. Jericho was a city with strong walls which collapsed miraculously when the people of Israel led by Joshua marched and shouted around it seven times (Josh. 6).

In the New Testament, what in English might be termed a “miracle” is variously designated as “sign,” “wonder,” and “mighty work” (Onwu, 1991, 179-180). The Greeks refer to miracle as “*semeion*” (σημείον) and “*teras*” (τέρας) but the Greek New Testament also uses the word “*dunamis*” (“power” - δύναμις) for miracle. All four gospel writers recorded that Jesus performed “mighty works” (ἐκεῖ δυνάμεις), a phrase much used for miracles in the Synoptic Gospels. Such miracles include the healing miracles (Matth. 4:23-24; Luk. 22:50-51). In fact, in the combined narratives of the four gospels, there were over 20 stories of the healing of individuals or small groups (Papyri, 1980, 622). Jesus’s recorded miracles include the turning of water into wine at the marriage in Cana (John 2:8-10); casting out demons (Mk. 1:32-34); healing the paralytic (Mk. 2:3-11), the woman with the flow of blood (Mk. 5:27-34), and the deaf and dumb; feeding the multitude; the raising of Jairus’s daughter (Lk. 8:54-56); the healing of the two blind men (Matt. 20:30-35); the calming of the sea (Matt. 8:24-26); and many more.

A careful observation of the biblical miracles reveals that they satisfied and answered the needs of the people. Jesus never went to those places to perform miracles. His Apostles or disciples never called out the people to observe or to experience the miraculous. Rather, the miracles were wrought because of the needs of the people which arose in the course of the preaching or ministry of Jesus. The performance of miracles by the Apostles took place in the course of their evangelism. As is obvious, Peter and John were just going to the temple at the ninth hour to pray when they saw a man lame from birth who was kept at the temple gate called Beautiful. The two prayed for him, and he was healed. They didn’t invite people to come and witness the miraculous at the gate. Similarly, signs and wonders followed the activities of Philip in the Acts of the Apostles. Paul was able to command Elymas the sorcerer to become blind, and it came to pass. The miracles were proofs that the Apostles were truly men of God; they had God’s backing and support; they were not speaking their own words but God’s words. The Apostles didn’t go to such places with the aim of performing miracles. Rather, such miracles were results of situations which presented themselves. They never advertised miracles to attract a crowd nor asked for any pecuniary gain after performing them. Miracles were not the focus of the biblical prophets, Apostles, or priests. They were a result of a direct encounter with God unannounced, on the spot, freely, and to the need of the time and moment. They were never for show nor for the glory of the human instruments.

### **Origin of Pentecostal Movements/Churches**

The word “Pentecost” derives from the Greek for “the fiftieth day.” It was the Jewish Feast of Weeks (Ex. 34:22), variously called the Feast of Harvest (Ex. 23:16) or the Day of the First Fruits (Num. 28:26), which fell on the fiftieth day after the feast of the Passover (Tenney, 1963, 635). Pentecost was the second of the three annual festivals at which every male Israelite was required to appear before the Lord at the sanctuary, and the first of the second agricultural festival (Ex. 22, 23, 34; 2 Chron. 8:12-13; cf. 1 Kings 9:25). It was so called because its date was set seven complete weeks after ripe barley (Lev. 23:15, 16; cf. Deut. 16:9, 10) (Gehman, 1898, np). Uterman (1981, 198) argues that the word “pentecost,” or “Shavuot” as Jews more commonly know it, is a one-day festival (two days in the diaspora) for which no fixed date is given in the Bible. It falls on the fiftieth day after the Omer offering is brought, and with the advent of a calendar based on calculation rather than the sighting of the moon, it was assigned to the sixth of the Hebrew month Sivan. In the Bible it is described as a harvest festival (Ex.23:16), but its main significance for later Jewish consciousness, as well as in the early Christian centuries, was its association with the revelation of Torah at Mount Sinai.

The most notable Pentecost was the first which occurred after the Resurrection of Christ (Acts 2). At the institution of the Risen Jesus, the Holy Spirit descended on all believers, without distinction of age, sex, or social status. The consideration for the claim to such a supernatural manifestation became, in the early decades of the twentieth century, the most characteristic mark of the religious groups which may be generally termed “Pentecostal” (Tenney, 1963, 636).

The Pentecostal movement began in the first years of the twentieth century among believers who sought a baptism in the Holy Spirit, accompanied by speaking in tongues similar to instances recorded in the book of Acts of the Apostles. Cross (1981, 1043) observes that the manifestations of this nature, occurring in some special meetings in Los Angeles in April 1906, were the first to attract worldwide attention. The movement spread rapidly. Offiong (1996, 103) argues that the origin of modern Pentecostalism is debatable. He insists that some scholars date the origin of the phenomenon to the nineteenth-century Holiness and Higher Life Movement in England and America which emphasized a “second blessing,” sanctification, and baptism in the Holy Spirit as endowment of power for service (Burgers, 1988, 220-221).

For Turner (1979, 122), the Pentecostal movements in Nigeria appeared as spontaneous and independent “prophetic” or “spiritual” movements in areas where non-Pentecostal movements had developed. He refers to this phenomenon as “Nigerian Pentecostalism,” pointing out that it does not share certain features found in Western Pentecostalism. For example, Turner notes that Nigerian Pentecostalism may not be congregational, show interest in millennial Adventism, or stress personal holiness, while it may share with Western Pentecostalism such traits as practicing baptism by immersion and emphasizing the importance of prayer and most importantly the working of the Holy Spirit evident in charismatic gifts and visible signs and results. These characteristics are also observable in Pentecostal churches in Owerri, as we shall soon observe.

### **Pentecostal Churches and Miracles in Owerri**

In Owerri, there was no single Pentecostal church until 1968, when Rev. Ezeugo with the assistance of Evangelist Alalibo opened the Bible Missionary Church (BMC) branch in Avu-Owerri. Although this initiative was met with stiff resistance from Owerri residents and from several previously established churches, the BMC in Avu-Owerrie nevertheless thrived until Nigerian troops occupied Owerri and its environs during the Nigeria civil war of 1967-1970. Later the Scripture Union (SU) was founded while the BMC gained more converts and acceptance by

the local people (Emereole, 1995, 20). According to Rev. Ezeugo, other Pentecostal churches which sprang up after the Bible Missionary Church were Jesus the Way Mission, Riches of Christ, The Church of God Mission, Assemblies of God and others. Moreover, the presence and planting of Pentecostal churches in the area were energized by the evangelistic crusades/campaigns of charismatic preachers like Rev. Don Stewart from America in the mid 70's (Ezeugo, 2016).

Walking round Owerri reveals a large number of Pentecostal churches. The researcher countered over sixty (60) of them in the course of this work. While some of the churches visited own their worship centers, others (the majority) are operating from rented apartments, uncompleted buildings, and school premises. Some of the Pentecostal churches are: Will of God Church; Redeemed Christian Church of God; Arise Chapel; Abundant Life Gospel Church; Jubilee Chapel; Vote for Jesus Church; Church of God Mission; Assemblies of God; Overcomers Christian Mission. There are many more.

A major determinant of the mobility and population of these churches is the search for miracles and ability of the churches, founders, or pastors to wrought miracles for their congregation. The researcher observed that the churches that claim to wrought miracles are daily increasing in membership and branches, while other churches which do not have such claims are not growing. In one of the church services at Overcomers Christian Mission, the Archbishop while preaching stated that “a church where God does not perform miracles is a dead church and not a living church.” This statement aptly summaries the general belief and theology of the Pentecostal churches. The researcher observed that miracles and claims about them were always on the lips of their pastors and members alike. It may not therefore be an overstatement to conclude that Pentecostal churches in Owerri dance miracle, announce miracle, expect miracle, pray miracle, preach miracle, walk miracle, sleep miracle, wake miracle, and teach miracle.

### **Testimonies as Evidence of Miracles in Owerri Pentecostal Churches**

Testimonies abound in all the Pentecostal churches visited in the course of this research. While some were made during Sunday services and during the churches' weekly programmes, others were published in the churches' books, magazines, and newsletters. The testimonies reported here are simply representative and were chosen randomly. Emerole (1995, 42-45) presents the testimony of a little boy (Obinna) whose leg was miraculously healed to save him from amputation. The parents were introduced to the church and the pastor prayed for the boy and his leg was healed. In another church, Mrs. Stella Nwokenna testified how God wrought a miracle of pregnancy in her life without passing through the normal menstrual circle. During April's Holy Ghost night, a 51-year-old medical doctor practitioner received a miraculous healing on January 13, 1999. After the general overseer laid hands in him, he was able to get off his wheelchair and walk back to his seat some 20 metres from the altar. Mrs. Aishat Odigie, a former research officer with Nigerian Tobacco Company (NTC) was childless for 14 years, conceived and had a baby girl after the prayer of the General Overseer (Dirionyemma, 1999, 10).

Edward Nakasala (2004, 7) gave testimony that God miraculously rescued him from an armed robbery attack. He thanked God for saving him from the trigger of the gunmen. Mrs. N. Edeodum (Uwem, 1998, 2-3) testified that her husband, whose promotion was delayed for many years, was promoted after the man of God prayed for her husband. Shortly after the death of a relation, according to Mrs. Christie Ekwuba, the spirit of fear came into her life. She later got her complete deliverance after prayers (Ekwuba, 2000, 9).

This research observes many ways of receiving these claims of miracles by the congregation. One such way is through direct and personal prayers by the acclaimed men of God. The pastors pray directly for the person with such pronouncements as “receive your healing now.” In other cases, the people who need a miracle are called out in what is known as an “altar call” and prayed for individually or collectively.

There is also what the churches call intercessory prayer. This may involve a wife, father, brother, or sister representing the person facing challenges and who is not in the church because of distance or other challenges. Sometimes people are asked to write down the names of the persons who need prayers on a piece of paper and either lift it up or throw it into a basket in the church. Prayers are then offered on their behalf as they are told to expect answers henceforth.

Congregational prayer is another form of receiving miracles. In this method, the pastors ask the sick or people with problems needing miracles to place their hands on the affected areas or raise the hands towards heaven. Prayers are then offered for them as they are invited afterward to confirm their miraculous healing. There is also the laying of hands. This the commonest form observed by the researcher among the pastors of these churches. Apart from re-enacting the ministry of Jesus by touching or laying on of hands on the sick, these churches seem to follow the biblical injunction in James 5:14-16: “Is there anyone of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray for him and anoint him oil in the name of the Lord...” It is observed, too, that in these churches people can receive their miracles through the media (television and radio) for those churches that can afford such broadcasts. Some of their media programmes are “Spiritual Cafeteria” of the Praise Centre Church; “Regeneration Hour” by the Life Line Chapel; “Restoration Hour” of Revival Peoples Church; “Overcomers Half Hour” by Overcomers Christian Mission; and “Power in the Word” by the Redeemed Evangelical Mission. Television viewers or radio listeners are told to touch any part of the TV or radio set as the prayers are going on to receive their miracles.

### **The Roles and Significance of Miracles in the Pentecostal Churches**

Miracles in these churches are there for a function or purpose either for the pastors/ founders of the churches, the congregation, or the wider society. Firstly, the miracles serve as a means of reassuring and convincing members of the congregation that all hope is not lost in whatever circumstances they may have found themselves. The sick are reassured that through miracles their hitherto helpless situation will be turned around by God for the better. Those who are having marital challenges are told to expect a miraculous solution from God. The poor and physically challenged in the churches, who have no one to help them eke out a living, have their hopes of a better tomorrow renewed and strengthened. They look forward hopefully for a miraculous turn around, thereby redirecting their minds from engaging in anti-social activities, crimes, and criminality. This redirection in the long run enhances social order and stability.

Like the lame man at the Beautiful gate (Acts 3:1-10), those with similar challenges are convinced not to lose hope or to be frustrated--as it could be their turn next. To fully appreciate the role of miracles in this circumstance, we must acknowledge that, like the first-century Jewish worldview (Onwu 1999, 181), the Owerri (Igbo) society is a precarious one, full of sickness, misfortunes, and demons. The churches further teach that there is a relationship between sickness, the devil, and sin. This teaching is in line with African Igbo cosmology (Metuh, 1986, 94). Onwu (189) points out that a logical counterpart of the Pentecostal churches’ miracle theology to such a concept of ill-health is the belief amongst the Igbo that total recourse to the services of a physician demonstrates a lack of faith, since healing is a monopoly of God. This understanding is all the

more so as the cost of medication is unarguably beyond the reach of the common man. Since men of God like Elijah and Elisha could mediate God's healing power, Pentecostal pastors could also replicate it. Offiong (1996, 195) observes in further support that "the Pentecostal churches have become an important attraction because of the socio-economic situation in the country."

Another important significance of the miracles is that they remain a source of the confirmation that their pastors, founders, or bishops are men of God or that God is truly with them. Like miracles of the apostolic times as opined by Iwe (1982, 157-158), miracles in the Pentecostal churches are signs of God's presence with the preachers. Congar (Iwe, 158) speaks of the joint action of God and his ministers of the gospel, remarking that "God accompanies them, too, bearing them witness by signs and wonders and diverse miracles and distribution of Holy Ghost according to His will" (cf. Heb. 2:3-4). God himself "witnesses to" (cf. 1 Thess. 1:5). Thus, the miracles in the Pentecostal churches as the sensible presence of God co-jointly witness with his human agents as they proclaim him. The miracles serve to confirm the message of the pastors, demonstrating the vital force and power of the word of God.

Miracles in the Bible were dramatized signs intended to teach a double lesson. They were to authenticate the word of the person who performed them (Ex. 7:9; Lk. 5:20-24; Jn. 7:19-22, 10:37-38; Acts 2:22) and to illustrate the Word. Hence, what happened to the body of the paralytic in Luke 5:18-26 was a proof and picture of what happened in his soul. The purpose was theological and not medical. This significance is true of the Pentecostal churches in Owerri. In *Overcomers Christian Mission*, the Presiding Bishop (Alexander Ezeugo) posits, "these miracles you see happening in this church are proof that I am a man of God, and that God is here. If what I say does not happen, then know that I am not a true man of God. In short do not call me a man of God" (Ezeugo, 2016).

Sawyer (1987, 3), points out that miracle working is an integral part of the prophet phenomenon. Miracle working constitutes one of the main ways by which society recognizes the prophet and acknowledges his power, in particular the truth and divine authority of his word, since people hailed Jesus as "a great prophet" after a healing miracle in the city of Nain (Lk. 7:11-17).

Ekarika (1987, 50) writes that miracles could be worked indirectly in favour of a doctrine if a man who claims to be a messenger from God in turn appeals openly to the miracles as a guarantee of his divine mission. He cites an example of St. Paul who established his apostolic identity by appealing to the miracles that accompanied his labours (2 Corinthians 12:12). So the miracle, by directly proving the divine mission of the legate, indirectly proves the divine origin of the doctrine or religion he is preaching. Ekarika therefore concludes that it should be definitely clear that the miracle was wrought either directly or indirectly for the purpose of guaranteeing that doctrine. Christ definitely worked miracles to prove the divine origin and authority of his doctrine. He asserted in clear terms and by his manner of acting that a miracle he was about to perform was for the expressed purpose of vindicating his doctrine. Thus, before healing the paralytic at Capernaum, Jesus stated clearly, "but that you know that the son of man has power on earth to forgive sins..." (Matt. 9:6). In support of this position concerning the Pentecostal churches in Owerri, Emerole (1995, 41) postulates that "it is not mere sweet talk to say that the fire of miracles, signs, and wonders has been kindled at the *Overcomers Christian Mission* and as many as it pleases God to use are catching up with this fire." It is as though God in his wisdom has elected to use the ministry to reach out to people at this point in time. He simply, as the Apostle Peter prayed in Acts 4:29-30, stretches forth his hands to heal and wrought signs and wonders.



Onwu (1999, 187-189) argues that, like Jesus's miracles in the Bible, the Pentecostal churches' miracles are part of the proclamation of the kingdom of God. They are designed not for divine authority alone, not for amazement, and not for personal popularity, but to awaken repentance (cf. Matt. 11:20-21 and Luke 10:13).

It appears that the Pentecostal churches use the claims of the miraculous to show that through the power of the Holy Ghost new grounds are being broken. The cures and healings as claimed by the beneficiaries in these churches were unique not because they were merely unprecedented but because they were characteristics of the new age as could be found in the book of Isaiah 35:5-6. Stanton (1989, 219) states that the miracles of Jesus were signs but not proof of the kingdom of God. The outsiders could see and hear but not perceive and understand (Mk. 4:10, 8:18). They were intended to convey the reality of God's kingly rule. In the Pentecostal churches in Owerri, the miracles are not only signs but also demonstrations that they carry not just an individual, local, and contemporary physical significance but carry a general, eternal, and spiritual meaning. Pastor Ngaodi of Grace Tabernacle Church states that the point made in the case of the man born blind was that individual sicknesses, sufferings, and difficulties in human life are not necessarily attributed to individual sin but are a result of ancestral curses and the activities of wicked people.

The claims of miracles are to further manifest the knowledge of God. Pastor Henry Ngamdi of Overflowing Church of Christ agrees, arguing that the knowledge of God receives a bigger boost when miracles happen (Ngamdi, 2016). This view for Ekarika (1986, 26) aligns with that of Thomas Aquinas that there is no better way of making it obvious that the whole gamut of nature is subject to the divine will than for God from time to time to do something over and beyond the order of nature. By so doing, God makes it clear that the order of creation flows from himself: not from any necessity of nature, but by his own free will. We should not deem it frivolous that God should perform something in corporal creatures directed towards an intelligent being, whose nature is to know God.

There is nothing strange, then, in having an occurrence in corporal nature serve as a means of bringing knowledge about God to intelligent beings. It becomes impossible to therefore deny that miracles in Pentecostal churches in Owerri like those performed by Jesus Christ, were meant more or less than to teach great spiritual truths (the existence and knowledge of God (Ryle, 1976, 494). Christopher Nwanna of Christian Evangelical Liberation Mission stresses that, as a believer in miracles, he prays for miracles because they are means of fulfilling the biblical injunction of setting the captives free and of liberating the people from poverty, joblessness, hunger, and other vicissitudes of life which obstruct people from making progress in life. He sees miracles in his church as performing the role of liberation theology (Nwanna, 2020).

The problems which miracles have come to ameliorate are well captured by Okoro (1994, 84), who opines that Africa is far from being in tranquility and order. It is in turmoil because of ethnic rivalries, racial strife, coups, counter-coups, refugee problems, and violations of basic human rights. Foreign and domestic tyranny, exploitation (ever since the colonial days), and protracted hunger, disease, and death seem present from time immemorial. No doubt the call by Africans to develop their own liberation theology geared towards the evil structures peculiar to the continent seems to have been answered by the deployment of miracles as strong tools.

## **Conclusion**

The central or major theology of the Pentecostal churches in Owerri from this research is miracle theology. It is the cornerstone of their theology and the reason for giving offerings, tithes, praises, testimonies, prayers, and the entire church service. Miracles top all discussions, programmes, activities, and concerns of the churches. It is therefore safe to argue that the theology of miracle drives the sustenance of the churches from the clergy to the congregation. It is the major determinant of the mobility of Christian congregants within the area of study. Pentecostal faithfuls in Owerri are always on the move in search of the miraculous to satisfy their needs. There is nothing to show that they are genuine seekers of true repentance or to be edified by the gospel. Most of them are simply on the move to locate miracles. The seekers are not new converts of Christian religion but are already converts of other churches, including Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Baptist churches. Women are more affected than men by this movement. If they are not searching for babies through pregnancy, they are battling one form of ill health or the other, especially the challenges of spiritual husbands and “mamiwota” (mermaid) spirit.

To satisfy the population of these seekers of miracles, there has been a rise in the number of Pentecostal churches in Owerri. As noted earlier, the researcher saw over 60 of such churches. No doubt this rise in the number of churches has produced fake pastors and ministers of miracles who are leveraging the quest for miracles to dupe gullible and unsuspecting seekers of miracles. The accumulating pressures from those in demand of miracles may also have forced some Pentecostal churches to misplace their priorities from the onset by placing and laying as much or more emphasis on miracles than the salvation of human souls. This imbalance accounts for these churches' inability to hold on for very long. While some Pentecostal churches are growing, many others are shrinking. There are now Christians who are simply in search of miracles without *metanoia* (change of heart). In the process, many such seekers may have been duped of their valuables and money. Many may have been forced to abandon their faith, especially when the miraculous has failed to happen. In all, the evangelization of the people has taken a back seat, allowing the theology of miracles to flourish. This imbalance ought to be checked by every Christian, the Church, and the society at large.

### **Recommendations**

The observations just discussed are not in any way to suggest that there are no genuine seekers of the gospel in the Pentecostal churches in Owerri. Nor are they suggestive that some Pentecostal ministers are not actually or truly empowered by God to perform miracles. No doubt some people have encountered genuine miracles. But over-emphasizing and hyping miracles out of proportion will not serve any useful purpose. As Christians, miracle seekers should first be seekers of true repentance and followers of Christ. The clergy should be seekers of genuine biblical truths. It is only through a robust application of the sincerity of purpose across the board that the propagation of the gospel of Christianity in Jesus can effectively be achieved.

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