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Christians as Salt of the Earth in Matthew 5:13 Among the Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria

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Abstract

One of the most difficult challenges Christians face in the home, in the church, on the job, at the school or in the society is living as the salt of the earth. In this paper, attention is drawn to the church in the pluralistic Nigerian society: Challenges and the way forward focusing on Matthew 5:13 where Jesus speaks metaphorically to his audience, reminding them of their identity in the world. Nigeria is a pluralistic society with many religions, tribes, ethnics, languages and cultures. Jesus reminds Christians that as salt of the earth, they are expected to demonstrate the qualities of salt. This study shows that Christians in Nigeria have fundamental roles to play in order to save the society from the present ills. Using Bible to source primary data and published works and internet to gather secondary data on Christians as salt of the earth, the need for Christians in Nigeria to live as salt of the earth in the society that is battling with the challenges of corruption, immorality, religious fundamentalism, political instability and ethnic differences is hereby examined in the context of Matthew 5:13. The findings of the paper show that although Nigeria may be having so many challenges, it is believed, the trends leading to this situation are not without solutions, if the sermon of Jesus could be adopted by Christians. The implication of this is that Christians in Nigeria have the obligation to live out the qualities of salt as they live in this plurality.

Key words: Salt, Plurality, Nigerian Society, Social, Vices, Matthew 5:13

Introduction

In Matthew 5:13, Jesus compares his disciples to salt and refers to the uselessness of salt that has lost its salinity. The text emphasizes that Jesus' disciples must be a role player. Salt is a symbol of good character and it is an integral part of Christian life. Its relevance in human's life cannot be over emphasized. Obviously, as remarked by an anonymous author on Patheos.com:

No human life is possible without sodium chloride or salt and salt is the only trace mineral that is found in every cell in the human body. Without it, the organism would cease to function, therefore, salt is a biological necessity. For example, salt contains iodine that prevents hypothyroidism but it also helps bodies retain and balance fluids and without salt, human life could not exist. Salt was once deemed so valuable that it was used as a currency and probably why the saying "He's not worth his salt" made sense. In fact, the word "salary" comes from salt.¹

The text under study has received diverse interpretations and applications from Biblical perspective regarding the distinct functions of Christians in the society. Salt is an essential commodity in every household. It is a commodity that human beings can hardly do without. Therefore, it is metaphorically used in Matthew 5:13 by Jesus as a symbol to describe the roles and the relevance of church as a community of believers in the society. The role of the Nigerian Christians has often been challenged due to perceived inconsistencies of the Christian living with biblical principles. Thus, the need to

¹ Jack Wellman, "What Does It Mean to Be the Salt of the Earth?" <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/christiancrier/2015/07/25/what-does-it-mean-to-be-the-salt-of-the-earth>. Retrieved on 14-11-2019.

conceptualise the substance of salt from the Biblical perspective for a balanced Christian life particularly in Nigeria.

The direct relevance and application of salt to the general behavior of Christians has been established as links to good moral behaviour in the society. Scholars have considered the concept of salt as an indispensable commodity in every home and as the expected moral conduct of Christians in the society. Scholars have conducted study on salt of the earth in relation to Christians, especially in other contexts apart from Nigeria. On the other hand, some scholars have studied Christian life from theoretical, developmental, moral and socio-economic perspectives without relating it to the Biblical template. Hence, the need to interrogate the Christians in relation to their conduct and duties, especially in the context of the Nigerian Christians as salt of the earth.

As a concept, "salt of the earth" is commonly used within symbolic and metaphoric discussions of Christians responsibilities in the society without its clear definition and understanding. Therefore, this paper aims at conceptualizing salt as distinct from a narrow-minded conception. Furthermore, the paper also seeks to highlight the expectations of Jesus for Christians who are truly the salt of the earth with particular reference to Matthew 5:13. The church as part of the large community, remains irrelevant if it doesn't make any positive impact on the society where it exists. It is not more than a mere group of people with no definite purpose in life. This is because, the religion is not concern only about spiritual things, but also about physical and social life of the people in the world by encouraging ethical decisions and actions according to the moral qualities of salt and other moral codes as contained in Matthew 5-7. Which emphasizes the concept of social relevance, human dignity and human rights, necessary

for social development, peaceful coexistence and egalitarian society.

Conceptualising Salt

The Bible contains numerous references to salt. In various contexts, it is used metaphorically to signify permanence, loyalty, durability, fidelity, usefulness, value, and purification. The Hebrew word מֶלַח (*melach*) and its Greek equivalent ἅλας (*halas*) mean common salt and it is considered by most authorities as an essential ingredient of human food). Thus in biblical times and in many cultures, salt was recognized as a necessity of life. It was, even as now, a necessary part of daily diet. Abimelech sowed the ruins of Shechem with salt to prevent a new city from arising in its place (Judg 9:45). Lot's wife turned to a pillar of salt (Gen 19:26). Salt could also be a symbol of desolation and barrenness (Deut 29:23; Ps 107:34; Jer 17:6; Zeph 2:9), due to the custom of sowing the earth of a conquered city with salt (Judg 9:45). Such a practice was not limited to the Old Testament world; the Romans also did it when they destroyed Carthage.²

A chemical, normally sodium chloride, used in its crystalline form for seasoning and preserving food. In the hot, dry, and windy climate of the Near East, body salts (electrolytes) are quickly lost with perspiration and need to be maintained orally lest dehydration occur.³The chloride of sodium of modern chemistry. Indispensable as salt is to ourselves, it was even more so to the Hebrews, being to them not only an appetizing condiment in the food both of man (Job 6:6) and beast (Isa 30:24), and a most valuable antidote to the effects of the heat of the climate on animal food, but also entering largely into

² Geoffrey W. Bromiley (ed.), *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Revised Edition. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1979), Biblesoft, Retrieved on 14-11-2019.

³ Geoffrey W. Bromiley (ed.), *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*.

their religious services as an accompaniment to the various offerings presented on the altar (Lev 2:13). They possessed an inexhaustible and ready supply of it on the southern shores of the Dead Sea. In the same manner the Arabs of the present day procure their supply of salt from the deposits of the Dead Sea, and carry on a considerable trade in that article throughout Syria. Although sodium chloride is a stable compound that does not disintegrate, it should be noted that the salt from the Dead Sea region was generally contaminated with other minerals; thus the salt could be dissolved out of this mixture, leaving a tasteless substance. It was important to take rock salt from the inner layers of mines, since the outer layers could lose their salinity with exposure. Although its impurity made the salt from the Dead Sea inferior to most sea salts, its accessibility (it could simply be picked up along the shore) made it the main source of salt for Palestine. Salt is also a very common white substance with many uses, especially for flavoring and preserving foods. Salt in a technical sense is a chemical compound formed by the combination of an acid and a base or metal.⁴ "Salt of the earth" are the people who have a wholesome influence on society.

According to Bromiley, salt is emblematic of loyalty and friendship. A person who has once joined in a "salt covenant" with God and then breaks it is fit only to be cast out.⁵ Also among the Arabic-speaking people, the custom of pledging friendship or confirming a compact by eating food containing salt is still retained. Scholars have different theories about the meaning of "salt" in the text under consideration. Some think that its whiteness represents the purity of the justified believer. Others say that salt's flavoring properties imply that Christians

⁴ Geoffrey W. Bromiley (ed.), *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*.

⁵ Geoffrey W. Bromiley (ed.), *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*.

are to add divine flavor to the world. Still others believe that Christians are to sting the world with rebuke and judgment the way salt stings an open wound. Another group asserts that, as salt, Christians are to create a thirst for Christ.⁶ The Arabic word for "salt" and for a "compact" or "treaty" is the same. Once an Arab has received in his tent even his worst enemy and has eaten salt (food) with him, he is bound to protect his guest as long as he remains. According to Leviticus 2:13, Israelites were enjoined to use salt in their offerings to God; for in the first instance it was specifically ordered for the meat offering, which consisted mainly of flour, and therefore was not liable to corruption. This incorruptibility of salt was, however argued based on scientific grounds, that under the generic name of "salt," in certain passages, we are to understand petroleum or its residue asphalt.⁷ Thus in Genesis 19:26 he would read "pillar of asphalt;" and in Matthew 5:13, instead of "salt," "petroleum," which loses its essence by exposure, as salt does not, and becomes asphalt, with which pavements were made. The local name for salt among the Yoruba of south west Nigeria is 'iyo'. According to Mrs Idowu Jayeoba,⁸ 'iyo' was and still remains an important condiment used in households, marriages, treatment of the sick, initiation and other cultural ceremonies not only among the Yoruba, but also elsewhere in Nigeria. It was a priceless and rare commodity in the past and explains the high value that was attached to it by all and sundry. Furthermore, while commenting on the importance of 'iyo', Elder David Fasiba noted that, in the olden days some notable traditional rulers in

⁶ Morris G. Watkins and Lois I. Watkins (eds.), "Salt" in *The Complete Christian Dictionary for Home and School*. (Colorado Springs: International Bible Society, 1992), 606.

⁷ Geoffrey W. Bromiley (ed.), *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*.

⁸ Idowu Jayeoba (Mrs), Interview Respondent, 76 years old, Obasa Street, Coca Cola Area, Ibadan, Interviewed on 27th April, 2019, 2.30 pm.

Yoruba land stored salt in locally made containers and made it available when this was needed.⁹

Qualities of Salt

Considering the characteristic nature of salt, the following are some of the qualities that are inherent in this substance and which also have practical applications for Christians particularly in Nigeria. These are perhaps, the reason why Jesus uses it in this context.

Symbol of Hospitality:

Because salt was a necessary ingredient in any meal, it could symbolize the hospitality that cemented friendships. Hence, the Arab expression, "there is salt between us." To eat salt with one is to partake of his hospitality, to derive subsistence from him; and hence he who did so was bound to look after his host's interests.¹⁰

Therapeutic Agent:

In ancient times, salt was used as a cleansing agent for wounds and today, many medicines still contain salt compounds in them and the old home remedy of gargling with warm salt water can get rid of sore throats and can also help tooth aches by cleansing and killing the germs and bacterial when a tooth becomes infected. Apart from this, Elisha is said to have healed the waters of Jericho by casting a cruse of salt into the spring (2 Kings 2:20, 21). He threw salt in the water and healed it of

9 David Fasiba (Elder), Interview Respondent , 81 years old, ECWA Church, Ode Oolo, Inalende, Ibadan, Oyo State. Interviewed on 30th April, 2019, 11.00am

10 M. G. Easton, "Salt" in *Easton's Bible Dictionary, Third edition*, Pc Study Bible Formatted Electronic Database, Bible soft Inc., 2006.

death and miscarriage. The purifying property of salt, as opposed to corruption, led to its selection as the outward sign in Elisha's miracle (2 Kings 2:20,21), and is also developed in the New Testament (Matt 5:13; Col 4:6).¹¹

Preservative Means:

Salt was and still is used as a preserving agent for foods and inhibits and prevents spoilage. Because of the lack of refrigeration, in the Middle East of the first century, salt was used to preserve food, especially meat, which would quickly spoil in the desert environment.¹² The disciples of Jesus too would have been intimately familiar with this function of salt. Without refrigeration, the fish that they caught would quickly spoil and rot unless they were packed in salt. Once salted, the fish could be safely stored and then used when needed.¹³

Antiseptic Quality:

The Arabs of the desert consider it so necessary, that in the absence of salt they bathed their infants in camels' urine.¹⁴ The normal procedures for childbirth in biblical times apparently included rubbing the newborn with salt as well as cutting the umbilical cord, washing with water, and wrapping in blankets (Ezek 16:4). In this way, salt was used as an antiseptic in

11 Michael Youssef, "Christian: You Are Salt and Light" in *My Journal*, available: <https://www.christianity.com/bible/christian-you-are-salt-and-light-11596480.html>. Retrieved on 14-11-2019

12 M.G. Easton *Easton Illustrated Bible Dictionary, third edition*, (_____: Thomas Nelson, 1897). <https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary/salt/>. Retrieved on 10-11-2019.

13 McClintock and Strong Encyclopedia, Electronic Database, BibleSoft, 2006.

14 N/a. "What Does It Mean That Believers Are to be Salt and Light (Matthew 5:13-16)?" Available: <https://www.gotquestions.org/salt-and-light.html>. Retrieved on 14-11-2019.

Yoruba people, mostly in the south west Nigeria, first had contact with the Christian gospel and early western education. The first church ever in Nigeria is located in Ake area of Abeokuta, Ogun state. Ever since the establishment of Christianity in Nigeria and particularly in the south west Nigeria, the religion has continued to grow at quite alarming rate. Although, it is difficult to determine the exact number of Christians in Nigeria, the religion is well embraced in the region and the entire southern Nigeria. Early western education and general social development are some of the impacts of Christianity in this region. This has given the people of the region an edge over their counterparts in other regions of the nation particularly in the area of human development.

However, the present security challenges in the northern part of the country (Nigeria) has escalated and become a national problem. The entire nation is currently facing many distinct security threats, mainly from the rise of radical religious and increased political extremists. Much of this is deep-rooted, rather than due to deficiencies that could readily be addressed. Radical Islam is a global phenomenon, generated by the uncontrolled dissemination of extremist ideology. It poses a distinctive threat to Nigeria partly because many cities in the region have substantial Muslim populations.

It seems, Nigerian security forces are ill-equipped to meet these threats. As such, the governors in all the six states in the south west geopolitical zone of Nigeria recently met in Ibadan, the Oyo State capital on January 9, 2020 and launched the western Nigeria security network called "Operation Amotekun" which they said the rising insecurity in the region is the major reason for the birth of the security outfit. However,

the Federal government described it as illegal.²² Therefore, the situation can hardly be described as peace- friendly despite the advantage of early western education in the south west and all the efforts put in place by successive Nigerian governments to arrest the insecurity situation in the land.

Moral instruction among the Yoruba which serves as the foundation of education itself became unpopular.²³ Perhaps, the prevalence of corruption, insecurity and many other social vices in the society can be traced back to moral training which has drastically gone low and the failure of Christians to live as “salt of the earth.” This situation has reached alarming state in Nigeria and some other parts of the world. Cases of killings, kidnapping, corruption, dishonesty, insurgence, disobedience to parents and constituted authority, truancy, examination malpractices, cheating, nudity and other antisocial behaviours are common in the Nigerian society particularly among the youths. Christians therefore, more than ever before, are expected to become increasingly involved in moral development by living as salt of the earth. What perhaps exists in homes and the society today is high moral decadence as a result of the collapse of moral standard. Unless, these moral values are built, life in the society will only be a mirage. To do these, Christians must live and influence the society where they live.

The Roles of Christians as Salt of the Earth among the Yoruba of South West Nigeria

While the universal importance of salt is not as readily apparent in our modern world. The mandate that Jesus gave to

²² Abdulaziz Abdulaziz of premium times January 16, 2020 in https://www.premiumtimesng.com/new_headlines/372).

²³ O.O. Olowo and J. S. Ojewumi. *International Journal of Gender and Child Education in Africa*. 2 (2): 110-119.

medicine. This custom of rubbing infants with salt originated in sanitary considerations, but received also a symbolical meaning.¹⁵

Food Seasoning

According to Patch, salt was used as a flavor enhancer in the Middle East of the first century and most people intentionally season their cooking with more or less salt for the sake of palatability.¹⁶ Others depend upon the small quantities which naturally exist in water and many foods to furnish the necessary amount of salt for the body. Either too much salt or the lack of it creates undesirable disturbance in the animal system. Human beings and animals alike instinctively seek for this substance to supplement or improve their regular diet.

Furthermore, Melissa Tumino¹⁷ identifies other incredible abilities of natural salt. These are highlighted as follow. It can stop and inhibit the growth of harmful mold and bacteria by absorbing moisture. It has been used for centuries as a means to preserve cure and save food. Another incredible fact about salt is that it is an element that human beings cannot live without. Salt keeps our electrolytes in balance and helps regulate insulin and blood pressure. Apart from all these, Chief Mrs Elizabeth Oluwajana observed that, in Yoruba land, the importance of salt in dowry payment, seasoning, trade currency, wedding rituals, gift to nursing mothers, appeasement of a discontented

¹⁵ N/a., "What Does It Mean That Believers Are to be Salt and Light (Matthew 5:13-16)?" Available: <https://www.gotquestions.org/salt-and-light.html>. Retrieved on 14-11-2019.

¹⁶ James A. Patch in International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia, Electronic Database, (2006) by BibleSoft. Retrieved on 14-11-2019.

¹⁷ Melissa Tumino, "Salt of the Earth: Bible's Meaning to Being A Salty Christian". Available: <https://thinkaboutsuchthings.com/salt-of-the-earth/>.

party, royal privileges among others cannot be over emphasized.¹⁸

Yoruba and their Location

Oduduwa who is generally believed to be the great ancestor of the Yoruba race. According to Yoruba mythology, he settled in Ile Ife in the present day Osun state, Nigeria. Ile Ife, as the cradle of the human life, is credited to be the original homestead of the Yoruba people.¹⁹ The Yoruba people primarily occupy the south-western part of Nigeria, that is Oyo, Osun, Ogun, Ekiti. Lagos and Ondo states. This is apart from those found in parts of Kogi and Kwara states of Nigeria. Their language is called Yoruba, a Niger-Congo language. As distinct people, Yoruba people of the south west are predominantly town dwellers who practice hoe agriculture and are well known as traders and for their crafts. Yoruba people are an ethnic group with rich culture and tradition. Like their counterparts in Kwara, Kogi states they can be identified by the manner of their greetings such as *e ku*. They are therefore referred to as the *Ekus*. According to Oke, “the early missionaries and traders refer to Yoruba generally as the *Akus*.”²⁰ For instance, most greetings in Yoruba begin with *E ku*. Thus, *E k'aaro* means good morning; *E k'asan* means good afternoon; and *E k'ale* means good evening *etc.*²¹

¹⁸ Elizabeth Oluwajana (Mrs). Interview Respondent, 81 years old, Obasa Street, Coca Cola Area, Ibadan, Interviewed on 27th April, 2019, 4.30 pm.

¹⁹ Ruth O. Oke, “Women as Care Givers: A Comparison of Yoruba Women and the Virtuous Woman in Proverbs 31:10-31. *Orisun: Journal of Religion and Human Valuess*. 6 & 7, 2008:48.

²⁰ Ruth O. Oke, “Women as Care Givers: A Comparison of Yoruba Women and the Virtuous Woman in Proverbs 31:10-31. 2008:48.

²¹ Ruth O. Oke, “Women as Care Givers: A Comparison of Yoruba Women and the Virtuous Woman in Proverbs 31:10-31. 2008: 10-31.”

his first disciples is still relevant and applicable to His followers today in a number of ways.

Seasoning Agent: Nigerian Christians, as salt, can bring flavor and meaning to the society just as salt brings out the taste in food. In this pleasure-crazed Nigerian culture, people are finding life dull and boring. No worldly pleasure can satisfy. Christians reveal to the society that life without salt is tasteless and unsatisfying.

Cleaning Agent: Salt in Old Testament times was used as a cleansing agent. Apparently newborn infants were washed in brine. Therefore, Christians have a cleansing effect on the society as they wash the society of the rots through their lifestyle.

Healing Agent: As salt has the potency to heal wounds and, when applied, Christians, by their attitudes, can bring healing to the society that is battling with social, economic and political sickness.

Preservative Agent: The Nigerian society, because of social vices that have bewildered it, can be best described as decaying. It seems, the only antidote is for Christians to act and preserve it from getting out of hand. The presence of Christians in the Nigerian society should hold back the natural decay process of corruption and other vices. Christians are preservatives to the environment, preserving it from corruption, decadence and other social vices inherent in the society. This agrees with the Biblical injunction in 2 Chronicles 7:14 which says:

If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from

heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land,
(2 Chronicles 7:14, RSV).

Christians in Nigeria are to serve as preservatives, stopping the moral decay that are rampart in the society. They are to be a moral disinfectant in the society where moral standards are low, constantly changing, or non-existent.

Neutralizer: It is interesting to also note that salt was employed in Biblical times as a neutralizer in the soil. Farmers cast salt on the ground to stimulate growth. This is perhaps, in context, what our Lord is referring to. Therefore, Christians are neutralizers against evils in the society by being salt of the earth.

Salty Christians Bring Flavor

Just as salt has the ability to enhance flavor, this translates to Humanity that when the society has nothing to offer and the bitterness of insecurity, corruption, killings, and insurgents will take its toll in the society. Christians are expected to bring something flavorful to the plate.

Salty Christians Preserve

Christians as salt, has an ability to preserve. It stops the growth of harmful bacteria and mold. It is used for food and if anyone has a wound it will prevent infection from taking place. Therefore, Christians are called to preserve and stop the growth of corruption, examination malpractices, killings, kidnapping and evil perpetration in the society.

Salty Christians Help Build a Healthy Society

Salt can keep the human body healthy. If a man or a woman has no more salt, he or she will not be healthy.²⁴ Therefore, for the society to remain healthy, Christians fulfill their roles as salt of the earth. Just like salt keeps the body healthy. Christians are helping the world become *healthy* and *whole* by being the salt of the earth. When Jesus told his disciples that they were "the salt of the earth", as recorded in Matthew 5:13, they understood the metaphor. Christians have been given a wonderful privilege to be the salt of the earth. However, the second part of the verse is a warning to them. The second half of Matthew 5:13 states: "But if salt loses its taste, how would its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trodden underfoot by men". When salt is contaminated it becomes corrosive and poisonous. Contaminated salt cannot even be used for fertilizer on the field, so it has to be thrown on the road.²⁵ In the same way that salt enhances the flavor of the food it seasons, the followers of Christ stand out as those who "enhance" the flavor of life in the society.

Christians will inevitably influence the world for good, as salt has a positive influence on the flavor of the food it seasons. Where there is strife and riot, they are to be peacemakers; where there is sorrow, they are to be encouragers, binding up wounds, and where there is hatred, they are to exemplify the love of God, returning good for evil. Christians in Nigeria should realize they are called to be people who inhibit the growth of immorality and other social vices in the society. The

²⁴ Michael Youssef, "Christian: You Are Salt and Light" in *My Journal*, available: <https://www.christianity.com/bible/christian-you-are-salt-and-light-11596480.html>. Retrieved on 14-11-2019.

²⁵ Michael Youssef, "Christian: You Are Salt and Light".

integrity, otherwise called moral health and strength of the Christians in Nigeria, is to counteract the corruption that is in the society.

Recommendations:

The following recommendations are put forward based on biblical teaching on Christians as the salt of the earth as encapsulated in Matthew 5:13. Christians should not live a double standard life. Their lives in the church must be the same as in their homes and offices. Second, they should actively participate in governance in the society, from ward level up to the federal level. Third, Christians must learn and live by the message of Jesus daily. Four, Christian parents must be role models for their children because they are the future leaders in the society.

Conclusion

The charge of Jesus in Matthew 5:13 is part of his general and popular Sermon on the Mount which is contained in chapters 5-7. The summary of his sermon is life style gospel. The world of the apostles then was decaying and so the only antidote given by Jesus is for the disciples to live up to their calling, that is, salt of the earth. In the same manner, the Nigerian society has gone and it is still going through many challenges ranging from insecurity, corruption, dishonesty, and so forth. Christians are called to salt the earth. It is believed that these problems that seem unsurmountable will be brought under control if this sermon of Jesus is given the needed attention and followed.