

The Theology of Generational Curses and its Challenges for Contemporary Christians in Nigeria

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Abstract

The focus of the paper is on the increasing belief and teaching on generational curses by Christian faithful and preachers. This has become necessary in order to present an unbiased position of the Christian scriptures on the subject matter. The paper adopted a combination of biblical theology and historical-critical approach. Belief in generational curses is partly influenced by pre-Christian beliefs, practices, and an innate propensity in man to find alibi for failure and underperformance in life undertakings. Although the books of Exodus and Numbers instituted generational curses, these passages have been set aside by later writings such as Ezekiel and Jeremiah. Again, such beliefs have no place in the New Testament scripture. The Bible must be understood as a progressive revelation of God. Emphasis on generational curses diminishes the strength and efficacy of the sacrificial death of Christ which guarantees the believers' total freedom from all forms of baggage.

Keywords: Ancestors, Deliverance, Generational Curse, New Testament.

1.0 Introduction

Perhaps one of the greatest threats to the Christian faith today is wrong doctrines and theologies which leave the believer doubting his/her salvific status. One of such theologies currently being propagated by Christian preachers in Nigeria is the theology of ancestral or generational curse. This theology is fast gaining ground not only in Charismatic and Pentecostal churches but has crept into mainline churches as well. It is a teaching that seems to affect the

emotional state of believers, induces fear and makes them vulnerable to exploitation in the guise of deliverance to avoid misfortunes associated with curses and ancestral obligations.

Makashiniyi (2019) defines generational curse as the “cumulative effect on a person or things that their ancestors did, believed or beliefs and sins being passed down”. In other words, it is systematic inheritance of a guilty judgement from one’s ancestors. That is, an innocent person is meant to suffer for the sins he or she knows nothing about. This implies that the same punishment meant for the offender will also be passed on to posterity. Besides the inheritance of punishment, generational curse is often adjudged to be responsible for certain familiar misfortunes or diseases that are prevalent in a family line. Watkins (2015) opines that ancestral curse is a specific sin or disease that is prevalent in a family. According to the above assertion, it seems that illness can be passed down to children from their progenitors if they are under any ancestral curse.

It is pertinent to state here that promoters of this theology base their teachings on Exodus 34:7 which states that “... I will not fail to punish children and grandchildren to the third and fourth generation for the sins of their parents”. Christian preachers anchor their messages on ancestral curses on this Old Testament passage and somehow make their adherents conform to the belief that the misfortunes they suffer are as a result of ancestral sins. Misfortunes such as delay in marriage, poverty, failed businesses, failed marriages, and so on, are often linked to the ancestral sins rather than any other rational factors. However, this trending doctrine poses some theological challenges to contemporary Christians, especially those in Nigeria. Therefore, this paper investigates the theological development of this belief and the challenges it poses to contemporary Christians.

2.0 Concept of Generational Curse

The term generational curse is not directly used in the Bible, but implied and understood by literary usage. It refers to an idea expressed in the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20:5. According to the Webster Dictionary, the term “generation” is “a single step in the line of descent from an ancestor; the average span of time between the birth of parents and the birth of their children”. Generation gives an idea of time relationship between parents and their offspring; a relationship formed along bloodline in successive connection or lineage. Therefore, generational tree of four steps pictures the successive link between a father/parent, children, grandchildren and great-grand-children.

In the same vein, the term “curse” is “a prayer or invocation for harm or injury to come upon one; the evil that comes as if in response to imprecation or retribution; to call on the divine or supernatural power to send injury upon someone (Webster Dictionary, 1999). The implication of the definition is that curses occur as a result of the invocation of higher powers either good power or evil power; the involvement of God or Satan in visiting harm or misfortune on a particular victim. This suggests that those under generational curses are dominated by forces beyond human control and in a realm beyond their own control. Situations like this require the intervention of a power equivalent or greater than the force of the curse. It is on this premise or scenario that the doctrine of generational curses and the ministry of breaking curses emanate.

Belief in generational curses appeal to many Christians for so many reasons. In the first place, it provides them with the opportunity to pass the bulk of their failures or wrongdoing on extraneous forces. According to Reddin (1999) one obvious reason why belief in generational curses is so popular is the reluctance of most humans to take blame for their wrongdoings. He added that “psychological theories have convinced many people that they are not really sinners, but victims of society in general and parents in particular”. Again, the doctrine is popular because

of the material, financial and psychological gains that accrue to the preachers. Victims of this fear-inducing doctrine are made to part with their hard earned money for sacrifices as part of the rituals for deliverance while the supposedly delivered often come back to handsomely reward the preacher/deliverer.

2.1 Origin of Generational Curses

The origin of generational curses can be traced to few passages in the Pentateuchal books. These passages introduce the concept of generational curses which has now metamorphosed into a full blown theology that most charismatic churches anchor their teachings on. Believers in generational curses rely on the following biblical passages for justification.

(i) Exodus 20:5-6

In admonishing the Israelites on the observance of the Ten Commandments, God gave them a specific consequence of treading the path of idolatry:

Do not bow down to any idol or worship it, because I am the Lord your God I tolerate no rivals. I bring punishment on those who hate me and on their descendants down to the third and fourth generation. But I show my love to thousands of generations of those who love me and obey my laws.

This is the first place in the Bible where generational curse is implied. Here, God promised to punish those who hate Him and extend the punishment to successive generations up to the fourth line.

(ii) Exodus 34: 6-7

This is the second passage where generational curse is mentioned. After the first tablet of commandment was broken, God made a replacement. In it, God reiterated His commitment to generational curse which he had instituted in Exodus 20:5:

The Lord then passed in front of him and called out, “I the Lord, am a God who is full of compassion and pity, who is not easily angered and who shows great love and faithfulness. I keep my promise for thousands of generations and forgive evil and sin, but I will not fail to punish children and grandchildren to the third and fourth generation for the sins of their parents.

Here, some words stand out. The first being “promise”. God made it clear that He honours His words and will always keep them. He has initiated generational curse and has reiterated His commitment to it. The warning in Exodus 20:5 had just been reinforced in Exodus 34:7.

Secondly, God emphasized the seriousness of His warning by employing the phrase; I will not fail to punish children and grandchildren for the sins of their parents. The phrase “I will not fail” gives the idea of a covenant been established. It is not in God’s nature to break any covenant. The negative emphasis “will not” employed here shows that generational curse is a tradition that God will always honour. Other passages where this concept was implied are Numbers 14:18 and Deuteronomy 7:9-10

In summary, the four passages highlighted above constitute the biblical roots of the belief in generational curses. In fact, there is no other passage in the Old Testament books where this idea was reinforced except in the prophetic books which will be discussed later. It suffices to note for now, that the doctrine of generational curses which is the bedrock of most Pentecostal theologies today is based on the aforementioned four passages.

3.0 Generational Curses in Contemporary Theological Discourse

In recent times, the doctrine of generational curses has become very popular among contemporary Christians; providing alibi for misfortunes and failures in life’s-undertakings. However, it is important to state here that generational curse is a brand of theology which is

predominantly common among the Pentecostals, Charismatics and African Indigenous Churches in Nigeria. The following sermons, for instance, illustrate the issue in question.

Edward Hardee's (2007) sermon on "*Generational Curses in the Family*" suggested that "Generational curses are judgements that are passed on to individuals because of sins perpetuated in a family in a number of generations". This sermon by a seasoned Pentecostal preacher based in the United States confirms that the doctrine is not alien to the western world. Furthermore, according to Hardee (2007), "generational curses bring judgement or bondage during an individual's life, reducing the quality of life, until that individual addresses the sin issues that put the curses into place". For, Hallock (2002) a renowned American Pentecostal preacher, in some families, there are some reoccurring negative traits that run from one generation to another. These include: domestic violence, drunkenness, divorce, unemployment and so forth and all these are a result of being chained to generational curse". These misfortunes, though behavioural, economic and marital in form, were however linked to generational curse by Hallock.

In Nigeria, the doctrine of generational curses is steadily gaining momentum especially among the well-known preachers of the gospel. On the 23rd of February, 2018, in one of his sermons '*Breaking Generational Curses*' Oyedepo (2018) averred that generational curses are real. In a sermon delivered to members of Living Faith Church a.k.a Winners Chapel, he also declared that generational curses can hold one captive and can mess up one's destiny but he added that they can be reversed or broken. In addition, coming under God's blessing, living a life of commitment and good stewardship are some of the ways it can be broken or reversed (Oyedepo 2018).

Another renowned man of God, J.K. Olukoya is also an ardent believer and promoter of this doctrine. Olukoya (2015) opines that “children continue with the suffering which their fathers started and that no matter where they go, they are bound to reap the iniquity of their parents”. Therefore, children will continue to bear the brunt of their ancestral sins until they are set free through a series of coordinated deliverance sessions led by some powerful “men of God” or pastors. According to Him, the consequences of ancestral curses can take different forms such as difficulties in finding a good job, familiar disgrace pattern, manifestations of demonic family names, ugly family trends like fighting each other, delayed marriages, acidic poverty, untimely death, marital cruelty against women, prostitution, bewitched hands or hands that cannot prosper, depression, sadness and so on (Olukoya 2019).

Olukoya’s (2015) conclusion is that the cup of iniquities of parents can be shared among the children and when the cup is full, succeeding generations will continue to suffer the consequences. The way out according to Olukoya (2015) is to do the following: “Deeply and sincerely confess your sins; destroy all ancestral collections that are evil in nature; then break and destroy all generational curses through prayer”. Furthermore, Olukoya in one of his sermons on the 4th of March 2017, titled *Breaking Chains of Curses -I*, opined that when your great grandfather was poor, then your grandfather, and fathers follow suit and you also become very poor, then there is a curse of poverty that needs to be broken”. He described this as a satanic mandate for evil powers to wreck a person’s life with poverty.

In another development, Chika Ossai-Ugbah, one of the foremost Baptist preachers in Nigeria and the pastor of Covenant Life Baptist Church, Ugbowo, Benin City laid credence to the reality and danger of ancestral curses amongst contemporary Christians. It is believed that

generational curses can be passed down through ancient ancestral codes to successive family members even in this present day. According to Ossai-Ugbah (2008), these codes:

Might be the explanations for the continuing ills you find in your generation with marital struggles and separations, social rejection, stubborn problems, hardships that are seasonal, losses that come during particular times of the year, specific diseases in the family such as mental illness, cancer, diabetes and other incurable diseases that lead to untimely death, near success syndromes, seizures, obesity and other hardships you face

The way out as suggested by him is that the blood of Jesus is able to wipe away every evil code from one's life no matter how long it has stood in one's generation.

4.0 Challenges of the Doctrine of Generational Curses to Contemporary Christians

The following are some of the thought-provoking areas and challenges that promoters and believers of this doctrine of generational curses have to address.

(i) Who is the Man that can break a Curse that God has placed?

From the biblical passage quoted earlier, it is obvious that God is the one who places generational curses on would-be violators of his commandments. However, the question arises; who is the man that is able to remove the curse which God Himself placed on man? One of the major emphases of the promoters of this doctrine is the need for one to undergo series of deliverance in order for the yoke of ancestral curses to be broken (Olukoya 2015). What Olukoya seems to suggest with his statement is that generational curses can be reversed through deliverance sessions organized by some powerful "men of God".

However, scripture tells us that no one can shut the door God has opened and no one can open the door God has shut. Therefore, if a man's life is under the influence of generational curse as claimed by those promoting the doctrine, it is believed that God has made him so and therefore no man except God has the right and ability to reverse such cases.

(ii) The Position of the Prophetic Books:

All the prophetic books of the Old Testament (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and so on) echoed futuristic messages concerning God's plan especially under the expected new covenant. God actually spoke through His prophets intimating them with details of how he intends to change plans and His working relationship with his people under the new covenant. One of such prophecies actually poses a serious challenge to the doctrine of generational curses. It was explicitly stated that in the book of Jeremiah that the era of generational curse would be terminated under the new covenant. The passage reads: "In those days, people will no longer say, the fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth set on edge. Instead, everyone will die for his own sin; whoever eats sour grapes – his own teeth will be set on edge" (Jeremiah 31:29-30).

The proverb stated above is an allusion to the collective responsibility of guilt which was established in Exodus 20:5-7. That is, the proverb is a reference to the concept of ancestral curses which prescribed that a child must suffer for his father's and grandfather's sins. However, this seems to have taken a different form considering Jeremiah's position. Without mincing words, God's new position on the subject matter is very clear under the new covenant that generational curse will no longer be operational. The phrase "In those days..." refers to a futuristic period depicted by the coming of Jesus under the new covenant. Therefore, it was God's deliberate plan to abolish the practice of generational curse under the forth coming covenant.

It seems most promoters of the doctrine of ancestral curses fail to comprehensively look into this area of the scriptures which definitely raises a lot of challenges for contemporary Christians who have been made to accept and believe that their misfortunes are defined by the tenets of generational curse.

(iii) God Abolished Generational Curse in Ezekiel 18:1-4

The pronouncement of God on generational curses seemed to have been reversed by God Himself in Ezekiel 18:1-4. The Jews had complained that they were being made to suffer for the sins of their ancestors rather than for their own sins. Likewise, Job lamented that God stores up a man's punishment for his sons and further argued that God should repay the man himself so that he will personally experience the consequences of his sins (Job 21:19). In response to these complains, God unequivocally asserted that "As surely as I live, you will no longer quote this proverb in Israel, rather the soul who sins is the one who will die (Ezekiel 18:3-4). The question arises; if God has explicitly abolished the law of generational curses why then does it still remain the foundation upon which most deliverance messages are based?

4.1 Some Misconceptions on the Teaching of Generational Curses.

(i) Socio-Economic Factor

Most of the acclaimed manifestations of generational curses such as delayed marriages, business failures, unemployment, poverty, cannot be unrelated to the niggling socio-economic state of Nigeria. Presently, Nigeria as a nation has for some decades has been passing through a phase of socio-economic upheaval. Therefore, it can only be a natural consequence for majority of Nigerians to suffer such misfortunes. It will be suicidal for an unemployed man in his forties to consider taking a wife when he has no means of financial sustenance. In essence, marriages are

delayed, poverty abound, businesses collapse partly due to the socio-economic state of Nigeria and elsewhere in some developing countries.

(ii) Genetic or Biological Factor

The place of genetic or biological factor cannot be ruled out in the manifestations of certain misfortunes in some people's life. Albinism is a defect of the skin pigment that is common among Africans. It is not unnatural or a genetic curse for albino parents to have albino offspring. It is simply a genetic or biological factor and not a result of generational curse. Furthermore, Ossai-Ugbah (2008) described the following misfortunes as ancient ancestral codes or curses that are passed down to successive families through evil codes: "specific diseases in the family line, inability to conceive, mental illness, cancer, diabetes, obesity, illness that lead to premature death"

These aforementioned misfortunes could be genetically or biologically related. It is a well-known fact that diabetes, obesities, mental illness and so on has been medically proved to be partly dependent on genetic factor (Dorman and Bunker, 2000; Balhara, 2011). Unfortunately, these misfortunes are often been labelled as consequences of generational curses. This is another misleading teaching and a great challenge to contemporary Christians in Nigeria.

(iii) Some Old Testament Laws are no longer Functional on 'Christians'

So many Old Testament laws were fulfilled under the new covenant, some others were redefined. In some cases, some were completely discarded or abolished by Jesus Christ Himself. In a situation where a law is completely or directly abolished by God there should be no contemplation about it; it should remain abolished. There are so many examples of abolished Old Testament laws. The following examples will suffice for this study: Exodus chapter twenty-one clearly gave a narrative of the institution of the law of an eye for an eye, tooth for tooth, life for life, hand for hand, wound

for wound, bruise for bruise, burn for burn. Furthermore, Israelites were commanded to put to death any man who curses his father or anyone who kidnaps another. In the same vein, an Old Testament law requires that if a person does evil, show no pity on him take his life for a taken life, eye for a taken eye, foot for foot (Deuteronomy 19:21). These were laws that defined the Jewish life under the old covenant.

However, under the new covenant, some of these laws were abolished and reversed. The abrogation of the eye for an eye law is expressed thus: you have heard that it was said, “eye for eye and tooth for tooth’ but I tell you do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also...” (Matthew 5:38). The question arises, if God had instituted a law under the old covenant and abolished same under the new covenant, why then are preachers of the gospel selective in their application?

(iv) A New Creation in Christ

Second Corinthians states that “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has gone the new has come (II Corinthians 5:17). The spiritual rebirth of a believer makes him a new creation totally different in the spirit, laws and realm of the old Adamic self or nature. In essence, generational curse was a principle tied to the old self; the Adamic nature and which according to the New Testament has no bearing on the new creation through Christ. In essence, we should never diminish the power of the Cross. As a new creation in Christ, we have no spiritual connection with our ancestors.

5.0 Conclusion

Belief in generational curses remain popular not only in the Pentecostal and Charismatic groups, but also amongst some mainline churches. Many Christian faithfuls have been conditioned

to accept it as the cause of misfortunes in their lives. It was also revealed that promoters of this doctrine base their teachings on the covenant established by God in Exodus 34:7 (challenges arise from a more holistic understanding of the Bible especially as seen in the prophetic books (Jeremiah and Ezekiel) and the demands of the new covenant. Which generational curses abrogate monetary concerns and African world view provide fertile ground for the doctrine of generational curses to thrive

Recommendations

(i) Christian believers are admonished to be more objective in their application of biblical teachings. They are advised to resist heretical teachings that are based on shallow and erroneous theological interpretations such as the teaching on generational curses.

(ii) Believers must not shy away from the fact that some ailments are genetically acquired. Attributing misfortune or medical condition to generational curse may be misplaced.

(iii) Holistic understanding of the scriptures is recommended as against the prevalent practice of selective interpretation.

(iv) People should understand that generational curses have since been abrogated by God Himself who also initiated same.