
Ethical Response to Godfatherism in Pastoral Leadership: Implications for the Contemporary Nigerian Church

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ABSTRACT

Pastoral leadership in Nigerian contemporary Christianity is challenged by a troubling phenomenon known as godfatherism, which distorts the process of electing leaders to leadership positions. This practice undermines the integrity of spiritual leadership and hinders the advancement of a truly Christ-centred community. The study employs literary research to explore the effects and ethical implications of godfatherism in pastoral leadership. The study utilised existing literature as the primary source of information. The study revealed ethical issues associated with godfatherism in pastoral ministry, including the compromise of ministerial autonomy, the distortion of leadership selection, silencing of prophetic voices in Christian institutions, conflict of interest and moral compromise, and spiritual abuse and institutional decay, among others. In response to the identified challenges to effective pastoral leadership, the paper advocates balancing ministerial autonomy and accountability. The selection of leaders should reflect fairness, respect for the prophetic voice, unity of purpose among church leaders, and, finally, the practice of servant leadership. The paper argues that, for the Church to remain faithful to its calling and mission, the leadership must resist the infiltration of worldly power structures and recommit itself to a Christ-centred model of leadership. Therefore, the paper recommends that the church should reaffirm the divine calling of pastors, promote transparency and fairness in leadership selection, strengthen ministerial autonomy with accountable structures, restore the church's prophetic voice, cultivate the practice of servant leadership, implement ethical training in theological education, and foster a culture of unity and shared mission.

Keywords: *Godfatherism, Pastoral Leadership, Contemporary Church, Nigeria*

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Pastoral leadership in contemporary Christian ministry plays a vital role in guiding congregations' spiritual, emotional, and moral development. However, in many Christian organisational settings, a troubling phenomenon known as godfatherism distorts the smooth election of leaders. Godfatherism, the exercise of undue influence or control by certain individuals over church leaders or members, appears to be interfering with the leadership processes or procedures for selecting leaders in pastoral ministry. Most often, this undue influence is driven by personal or political motives. This practice can undermine the integrity of spiritual leadership and hinder the advancement of a truly Christ-centred community from functioning as the Church of Christ.

As religious leaders, pastors are called to model ethical conduct, promote justice, and lead by example while serving the flock with humility and transparency. In this context, godfatherism presents a moral dilemma that challenges the values of integrity, accountability, and genuine servitude inherent in biblical leadership. An ethical response to godfatherism in pastoral leadership requires an understanding of its detrimental effects on pastoral ministry and a proactive stance to restore the principles of Fairness, respect, and godliness within church leadership.

This paper examines the nature and consequences of godfatherism in pastoral leadership and proposes an ethical framework grounded in Scripture, Christian tradition, and sound theological reasoning. By examining both the spiritual and organisational implications of godfatherism, this study aims to offer practical and theological responses that uphold the integrity of pastoral ministry and restore the church's prophetic voice in a compromised world.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

The study employs a descriptive research design to elicit relevant information. Information from existing literature was utilised as the primary source in the study. A descriptive research design is appropriate for this study because it describes the phenomenon of godfatherism and its implications for pastoral leadership. This method provides room for evaluation and addresses the questions posed by the challenge under investigation. Furthermore, it is a design that describes what has been or what is current, from which judgment and conclusions are drawn.

3.0 CONCEPTUAL OVERVIEW OF GOD-FATHERISM

The concept of godfatherism has been presented differently across literature, depending on individual perspectives, and as a result, it becomes difficult to arrive at a specific definition.¹ However, in an attempt to define the concept, J.C. Scot viewed godfatherism as a relationship involving two or more individuals with different socio-economic statuses and levels of influence. In the relationship, a person of higher socio-economic status, known as the godfather, utilises his influence and resources to provide support, protection, or benefits to another person of lower socio-economic status, known as the godson, in pursuit of a desired outcome. The godson reciprocates this gesture by offering general support, assistance, and loyalty.²

It is a phenomenon that could be described as a political surrogacy arrangement in which the godfather serves as the chief donor, providing financial and moral support to the godson, the primary recipient.³ In most cases, the godfathers appeared to be influential individuals who were usually in the corridors of power, determining who, what, when, and how things operated in a given system. The godfather served as kingmaker, mentor, boss, and principal, building an unimaginable level of

¹ Ifeanyi Ositadinma Onuigbo, Sunday Nonso Okoye and Ekene Assumpta Anemje, "Political Godfatherism and its Effect on Nigeria's Democratic Process," *International Journal of Innovative Legal & Political Studies*, Vol.11, No.3 (2023):53.

² James Charles Scott. "Patron-client politics and political change in Southeast Asia." *American Political Science Review*. 66, (1972):92.

³ Ougbo, Okoye and Anemie, *Political Godfatherism*, 54.

respect and influence that secured victories for candidates of his choosing.⁴ Godfatherism is likened to a symbiotic relationship between the godfather and godson, in which each depends on the other to survive and achieve their aims. The godfather is responsible for bankrolling the godson's campaign.

In contrast, the godson pays high interest and awards juicy contracts to the godfather.⁵ The relationship provides leverage for individuals who desire to reach certain heights or achieve their goals but lack the required influence and support on their own. However, they can utilise the influence and support of another to actualise their desire.

3.1 Political Godfatherism

The godfatherism factor is not limited to the political space but also appears in many spheres of power and influence, including the church. However, godfatherism appears more pronounced in the political sphere. Kehinde Ohiolo Osakede and Samuel Ojo Ijimakinwa described godfatherism as a political king-making institution that enables certain political officeholders with shaky political influence to come to power.⁶ Political godfatherism involves the endorsement or anointing of a chosen candidate, with the expectation of winning an election, by utilising the godfather's influence, wealth, political structure, and experience.⁷ Providing the political platform for winning an election may require the endorsed political candidate to comply with the political godfather's terms and conditions of operation. I. A. Olawale observed that in some instances, the relationships between political godfathers and their adopted sons (godsons) are sometimes transactional.⁸ Olawale likens the relationship to a business transaction in which political

godfathers invest in their political godson and expect returns after the godson wins the election.

In several cases, the expected returns and privileges from the godson are strategic, including lucrative political positions, juicy contracts, land grants, political control, and power-sharing with incumbents.⁹ In some instances, many godfathers seek full control and influence over the situation, dictating to the political godson what operations should be carried out and how in the governance process. They remote-control the sponsored political candidates to their bidding, to the extent that the interests of the governed no longer matter, but those of the political godfather do. Political godfathers position themselves as merchants who make more money from the political process than anybody else, even political candidates.¹⁰ Citing Chimaroke Nnamani, the former governor of Enugu State, Nigeria, Lambert Uyi Edigin submits that the position of godfather in any system is comparable to a virus, with the intention to create ill will, especially to subdue the godson he sponsored and to do his will at all costs. The godson is placed in a subordinate position by his godfather. According to Edigin, the godfather appears as a merchant who sets out to acquire or engage the godson as a client. The godfather is viewed as a self-serving individual who exploits the government for his own personal gain.¹¹

The sponsored political godson has often been deprived of the political will to govern the people effectively due to the constraints imposed by their political godfather and therefore performs below expectations. In most instances, the political godfather sponsored a candidate out of selfishness and greed, seizing every possible opportunity to short-circuit any

⁴ Lambert Uyi Edigin, "Political Conflicts and Godfatherism in Nigeria: A Focus on the Fourth Republic", *An International Multi-Disciplinary Journal, Ethiopia Vol. 4 (4), Serial No. 17* (2010):177

⁵ Edigin, *Political Godfatherism*, 179.

⁶ Kehinde Ohiolo Osakede and Samuel Ojo Ijimakinwa. "Political Godfatherism and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria: Empirical Evidence from Oyo State and Kwara State." *Arabian Journal of Business and Management Review*, Vol. 5 (2016): 3.

⁷ Osakede and Ijimakinwa, *Political Godfatherism and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria*, 177.

⁸ I. A. Olawale, "Explaining Godfatherism' in Nigeria politics," *African Sociological Review*. 9(2), (2005):80.

⁹ Olawale, *Explaining godfatherism in Nigeria Politics*, 80.

¹⁰ Ougbo, Okoye and Anemie, *Political Godfatherism*, 58.

¹¹ Edigin, *Political Godfatherism*, 177

leadership process that would not be in their interest, even when their actions are detrimental to the general public's common good.

3.2 Biblical Perspectives of Godfatherism

The biblical view of godfatherism is that of mentorship.¹² Mentorship, as presented in the Bible, is a divine strategy for spiritual formation, leadership development, and generational continuity of faith. It entails a relationship where a mature believer offers guidance, wisdom, and encouragement to a less experienced individual, aiming to nurture godly character, service, and purpose.¹³ The mentorship relationship emphasises the importance of spiritual guidance and growth through biblical principles regarding leadership, authority, and ethical conduct. This view contradicts the concept of godfatherism, a system in which powerful individuals exert influence or control over others for their personal benefit. The concept of mentorship in the Bible is often implicit rather than formally structured. It is grounded in principles such as discipleship, stewardship, accountability, and spiritual fatherhood. The Apostle Paul's exhortation to Timothy, "And the things you have heard from me... entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others" (2 Tim. 2:2 NIV), encapsulates the essence of biblical mentorship across generations. This pattern of reproducible mentorship emphasises the transmission of faith and ministry skills from one generation to the next.¹⁴

Mentorship in scripture is also relational. In Proverbs 27:17 (NIV) states, "As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another." This sharpening is both character-forming and mission-defining. According to Paul David Stanley and J. Robert Clinton, mentorship in the Bible is about more than teaching; it is about

imparting life, vision, and purpose within the context of a godly relationship.¹⁵ The Bible provides numerous examples that highlight the importance of mentorship in fostering spiritual growth, transmitting values, and equipping individuals for divine assignments.

In the Old Testament, the relationship between Moses and Joshua is one of the earliest and clearest examples of mentorship. Joshua, who served Moses faithfully (Exod. 24:13), was mentored through observation, experience, and direct guidance. When Moses passed on, Joshua was fully prepared to lead Israel into the Promised Land (Deut. 34:9). This mentorship ensured continuity in leadership and fidelity to God's covenant.¹⁶ Similarly, Elijah and Elisha demonstrate the power of spiritual mentorship. Elisha served Elijah closely, requesting a double portion of Elijah's spirit (2 Kgs. 2:9). Elijah's mentorship of Elisha was not merely about transferring power, but about preparing a servant to carry on a prophetic legacy. According to Gene A. Getz, the relationship was marked by intimacy, trust, and spiritual empowerment.¹⁷ Jethro's guidance to Moses (Exod. 18) is also instructive. Jethro, though not a prophet, offered practical leadership advice, helping Moses establish a decentralised judicial system. This highlights that mentorship can also address administrative and leadership challenges, not just spiritual ones.¹⁸

From a New Testament perspective, scripture provides an even richer understanding of mentorship, particularly through the ministry of Jesus and the Apostle Paul. Jesus' relationship with his disciples was mentorship at its highest level. He called them not only to follow him but also to learn his ways (Mk. 3:14). He modelled servant-leadership (Jn. 13:14-15), taught them kingdom values (Matt. 5-7), and gradually delegated responsibility (Lk. 10:1-20). His

¹² Paul David Stanley and John Robert Clinton, *connecting: The Mentoring Relationships You Need to Succeed in Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1992), 33.

¹³ Stanley and Clinton, *Connecting: The Mentoring Relationships*, 33.

¹⁴ Robert Emerson Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 2011), 37.

¹⁵ Stanley and Clinton, *connecting: The Mentoring Relationships*, 33.

¹⁶ Michael James Wilkins, *Following the Master: Discipleship in the Steps of Jesus*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 59.

¹⁷ Gene Allen Getz, *Men of Character: Elijah*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2007), 58.

¹⁸ John Calvin Maxwell, *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 148.

mentorship was incarnational. He lived with them, walked with them, and eventually commissioned them (Matt. 28:19–20).¹⁹ The Apostle Paul also mentored individuals like Timothy, Titus, and Onesimus. His letters to Timothy are filled with personal encouragement, doctrinal instruction, and leadership advice (1 Tim. 4:12–16). Paul refers to Timothy as "my true son in the faith" (1 Tim. 1:2 NIV), underscoring the familial dimension of biblical mentorship.²⁰ Mentorship, in Paul's view, was about shaping both theology and character for effective ministry. In the opinion of Christopher John Henry Wright, mentorship is one way God raises faithful leaders to preserve His covenant community and advance His mission on earth.²¹

Mentorship is also tied to spiritual gifts. Ephesians 4:11–13 highlights that apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers are given "to equip the saints for the work of ministry." This equipping role is inherently mentoring, designed to mature the body of Christ.²² Throughout scripture, mentorship is seen not as an institutional framework but as a relational process driven by love, trust, and a shared commitment to God's will.

4.0 CONCEPT OF PASTORAL LEADERSHIP

Leadership is the process by which someone exercises influence over others to accomplish an objective and direct the organisation in ways that make it more cohesive and coherent. Guy Northouse defined leadership as a process whereby an individual influences a group of

individuals to achieve a common goal.²³ Moreover, according to Oluwaponle Adetunji, leadership is the development and articulation of a shared vision, the motivation of key people without whom that vision cannot become a reality, and the gaining of the cooperation of most people involved. It requires administration and management.²⁴ Leaders carry out these responsibilities by applying their leadership knowledge and skills. The skills and knowledge of leaders are influenced by their attributes, such as beliefs, values, character, and ethics.²⁵

The word "Pastoral" relates to the care of souls, the duties of a pastor, or the functions and ministry of a pastor in a local church.²⁶ Pastoral refers to the work of those who are called by God, not just a job.²⁷ A pastor is a shepherd God calls to provide spiritual leadership to the church of Jesus Christ. The mandate to nurture the church and provide a focus for membership is vested in the pastor, who serves as the undershepherd of the flock. The shepherd is responsible for being with the sheep. Pastoral work refers to a pastor's duties, including caring for individuals' spiritual needs. The pastor's work is a unique form of ministry, not a human job that is always comfortable; it is sometimes horrible or full of persecution.²⁸

Pastoral leadership could refer to influencing the followers' activities to accomplish the church's goals as set by Jesus Christ. It is a divinely ordained form of leadership within the Christian community that integrates spiritual oversight, administrative responsibility, moral example, and compassionate care, grounded in biblical

¹⁹ Stanley and Clinton, *Connecting: The Mentoring Relationships*, 45.

²⁰ Grant R. Osborne, *1 and 2 Timothy and Titus: Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 189.

²¹ Wright, Christopher John Henry. *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 123.

²² Gordon Donald Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 85.

²³ Guy Northouse, *Leadership theory and practice*. (3rd ed.) (New Delhe: Sage Publications, Inc., 2007), 3.

²⁴ Oluwaponmile Gideon Adetunji, *Leadership in Action: A Sourcebook in Church Administration for*

Students and Ministers. (Ibadan: Baptist Press 2010), 23.

²⁵ Manoj Kumar Sharma and Shilpa Jain, "Leadership Management: Principles, Models and Theories," *Global Journal of Management and Business Studies*, Vol.3, No. 3 (2013):309-318

²⁶ T. C. Oden, *Pastoral Theology Essentials of Ministry* (Dallas, Texas: Harper Saan Franscisco, 1982), 10.

²⁷ Prime Derek & Begg Alistair, *On Being a Pastor* (Chicago, USA: Moody Publishers, 2004), 18.

²⁸ Larson Bruce, Anderson & Self Doug, *Mastering Pastoral Care* (USA: Library of Congress, 1991), 17.

principles and modelled after the servant Leadership of Jesus Christ.²⁹

Pastoral leadership involves integrating theology and practice, in which the leader not only teaches sound biblical doctrine to the congregation but also lives a lifestyle that exemplifies his teachings and beliefs.³⁰ The pastoral leader is expected to be a spiritual guide, a moral compass, and a visionary who discerns God's direction for the church. Moreover, pastoral leadership is relational and participatory, emphasising collaboration with church members and lay leaders in fulfilling the church's mission.³¹

One unique aspect of pastoral leadership is its emphasis on servant leadership. This concept is rooted in Jesus' ministry and is echoed throughout Scripture (John 13:12-17). To further explain the uniqueness of pastoral leadership, Robert Keith Greenleaf observes that a pastoral leader is called to serve rather than dominate, to nurture rather than control, and to build others up rather than seek personal gain.³² Effective pastoral leadership also requires emotional intelligence, cultural sensitivity, and the ability to manage conflict, all while maintaining spiritual integrity and doctrinal fidelity.³³

The role of the pastoral leader in contemporary times faces new challenges, including secularism, technological change, and ethical dilemmas. As such, the pastor must be both spiritually mature and professionally competent, embodying resilience, adaptability, and a deep dependence on the Holy Spirit.³⁴

4.1 Godfatherism in Pastoral Leadership

As mentioned already, godfatherism traditionally associated with political structures, is a system in which influential individuals

(godfathers) use their power and resources to control or manipulate others (godsons) placed in positions of leadership. While originally a political concept, this phenomenon has increasingly infiltrated ecclesiastical institutions, especially within pastoral leadership. In this context, Godfatherism compromises the spiritual independence of church leaders, replaces divine calling with human endorsement, and ultimately undermines the church's prophetic role.

In pastoral leadership, godfatherism manifests through the imposition of leaders by influential church elders, founding pastors, or wealthy benefactors. These godfathers often expect loyalty, favours, or influence in return, thereby distorting the biblical understanding of ministry as a divine vocation rather than a political appointment.³⁵ This influence may extend to church finances, appointments, doctrinal decisions, and even moral judgments, leading to a church culture governed more by patronage than by principles.

Ethically, this practice contradicts key Christian values such as servant leadership, accountability to God, and the autonomy of the spirit in guiding the church. Jesus explicitly warned against hierarchical power dynamics within his followers: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them... Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant" (Matt. 20:25–26 NIV). This servant model is fundamentally incompatible with godfatherism, which thrives on dominance, manipulation, and patronage.

Moreover, godfatherism erodes meritocracy and spiritual discernment in the leadership selection process. Pastoral positions, instead of being prayerfully discerned and based on character and calling, become rewards for

²⁹ Lyle Anderson, *Leadership That Works: Hope and Direction for Church and Parachurch Leaders*. (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2001), 45.

³⁰ Anderson, *Leadership That Works*, 45.

³¹ Aubrey Malphurs, *Being Leaders: The Nature of Authentic Christian Leadership* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003), 92.

³² Robert Keith Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (New York: Paulist Press, 2002), 27.

³³ Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership*, 27.

³⁴ Bob Burns, Tony Chapman, and David Guthrie, *Resilient Ministry: What Pastors Told Us About Surviving and Thriving* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 118.

³⁵ Tokunboh Adeyemo, *The Crisis of Leadership in the African Church* (Ibadan: Kingdom Press, 2020), 45.

loyalty to power brokers. This not only breeds mediocrity but also compromises congregational spiritual growth.³⁶ Churches led by godsons may lack vision, authenticity, or the courage to speak truth to controlling power brokers due to the influence exerted on them.

Theologically, the issue also raises concerns about ecclesiology and pneumatology. The church is the body of Christ and should be led by those chosen by the Holy Spirit (Acts 13:2), not by human political considerations. Godfatherism supplants the work of the spirit, leading to a human-centred church structure that prioritises control over calling.³⁷ Furthermore, this system can breed corruption and spiritual abuse. When godfathers install and support leaders to protect their interests, accountability is lost. Pastors may fear opposing their sponsors, even when the sponsors are clearly in the wrong, leading to moral compromise and institutional decay.³⁸ Godfatherism in pastoral leadership is not just a structural problem but also a spiritual crisis. Therefore, this phenomenon demands urgent ethical reflection and a return to the biblical model of leadership based on calling, character, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

5.0 ISSUES OF GODFATHERISM IN PASTORAL LEADERSHIP

Godfatherism in pastoral leadership presents myriad ethical issues that challenge the church's moral integrity. At its core, Godfatherism subverts the divine calling of pastoral leaders by replacing spiritual discernment with political favouritism. The ethical implications of this practice are profound, affecting not only individual pastors but also the church's overall health and witness.

5.1 Compromise of Ministerial Autonomy

One of the foremost ethical concerns is the erosion of ministerial autonomy. When godfathers, often wealthy church members, founding leaders, or influential elders, exert

undue influence over pastors, the result is a form of spiritual manipulation. Pastors, rather than responding to divine directives and the needs of their congregations, often feel compelled to meet the expectations of their sponsors.³⁹ This compromises the independence and prophetic boldness required in pastoral ministry. The interference of godfatherism often negates God's choice of a leader for His people. Since godfathers often do everything possible to protect their interests by presenting their chosen candidates. Even though the godfathers lead the people to pray about the process and the will of God in choosing a leader after his, they often manipulate the process to produce a leader in line with their own hearts and desires.

5.2 Distortion of Leadership Selection

Another ethical issue is the distortion of leadership selection processes. In a godfather system, pastoral appointments are frequently based on loyalty to powerful figures rather than on spiritual maturity, theological competence, or pastoral calling. This undermines the biblical model of leadership grounded in divine calling and communal discernment (Acts 6:3). The result is an unethical favouritism that leads to mediocrity and the marginalisation of truly called leaders.⁴⁰ The interference of (political) godfathers has remained an issue because credible and competent individuals unaffiliated with a godfather find it challenging to participate in and win electoral processes. Moreover, at such times, many pastors who desire to serve in one capacity or another in pastoral leadership but would not yield to or submit to the lordship of a godfather would find it challenging to make headway. Moreover, at the end of the electoral or selection processes, the electoral offices and the political officeholders would be likened to having a round peg in a square hole or vice versa.

³⁶ Michael Okafor, *Power and Influence in the Church: A Nigerian Perspective* (Onitsha: HolyWord Publishers, 2018) 78.

³⁷ Joseph Iroegbu, *The Spirit and the Church: A Pneumatological Ecclesiology* (Enugu: Renewal Publishers, 2021), 101.

³⁸ Chinedu Ndukwe, *Church Leadership and Corruption in Contemporary Nigeria* (Lagos: Beacon Press, 2019) 64.

³⁹ Adeyemo, *The Crisis of Leadership in the African Church*, 52.

⁴⁰ Okafor, *Power and Influence in the Church*, 81.

5.3 Silencing of Prophetic Voice

Godfatherism in pastoral leadership significantly undermines the church's prophetic role in society. Pastors who emerge through the influence of political or ecclesiastical godfathers often become indebted to their sponsors, making them reluctant to address sensitive moral, social, or political issues. This fear of offending their powerful backers positions them at a disadvantage, making them prone to compromise their integrity, messages, and missions.

Consequently, such leaders may avoid confronting corruption, injustice, and societal decay, thereby betraying the church's calling to serve as the nation's conscience. This silence is ethically problematic, as it contradicts the prophetic tradition of speaking the truth of God's word, regardless of who is involved.⁴¹ This ethical silence stands in stark contrast to the biblical prophetic tradition, in which God's messengers consistently spoke the truth even at great personal risk. Prophet Jeremiah was instructed not to fear anyone but to proclaim God's message faithfully (Jer. 1:7-8). Similarly, John the Baptist fearlessly confronted King Herod's immorality, despite the consequences (Mark 6:17-18). When leaders prioritise loyalty to human sponsors over obedience to God, they erode the church's credibility and betray its witness in the public domain.

5.4 Conflict of Interest and Moral Compromise

Godfatherism in church leadership creates an ethical dilemma that often results in a serious conflict of interest. Pastors under the influence of godfathers frequently face conflicts of interest, in which their allegiance to a sponsor conflicts with their ethical obligation to serve God and His people. This dual loyalty often

leads to moral compromise, such as covering up a godfather's wrongdoing, mismanaging church resources to favour certain interests, or refusing to discipline erring leaders within the power structure.⁴² This dual loyalty compromises their spiritual integrity and decision-making, often leading to moral failures. Instead of serving as impartial shepherds, such pastors may cover up the sins of their sponsors, divert church resources to appease them, or avoid confronting corruption within the leadership structure.⁴³ This pattern directly contradicts the biblical call for church leaders to be above reproach, trustworthy stewards of God's household, and guardians of truth (Tit. 1:7; 1 Tim. 3:2). When pastors neglect their ethical responsibilities to please human sponsors, they betray their prophetic mandate and diminish the church's credibility.⁴⁴ Furthermore, moral compromise resulting from such divided loyalty can lead to disillusionment among church members and weaken the church's influence in society.⁴⁵ Therefore, the church must reject all forms of leadership manipulation and reaffirm its commitment to integrity and accountability, lest it lose its moral authority and witness in the public sphere.⁴⁶

5.5 Spiritual Abuse and Institutional Decay

Godfatherism promotes an environment ripe for spiritual abuse. The undue control that godfathers wield over pastoral leaders can result in manipulation, emotional coercion, and psychological control. Over time, such practices create a toxic church culture where power dynamics supersede servant leadership, leading to institutional decay.⁴⁷

The contemporary church is challenged by godfathers who interfere in the emergence of its leaders. The involvement of godfathers in the selection process for leaders has become an

⁴¹ Ndukwe, *Church Leadership and Corruption in Contemporary Nigeria*, 67.

⁴² Iroegbu, *The Spirit and the Church*, 105.

⁴³ Tokumbo Adeyemo, "Leadership" *Africa Bible Commentary*. (Nairobi: WordAlive Publishers, 2006), 546.

⁴⁴ Christopher John Henry Wright, *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 225-230.

⁴⁵ John Chukwudi Okoye, *Prophecy and Power: The Role of the Church in African Societies*. (Enugu: Snaap Press, 2015), 78-82.

⁴⁶ Godfrey Onah, *Ethics and Leadership in the African Church* (Ibadan: Claretian Institute, 2018), 110-115.

⁴⁷ Adeyemo, *The Crisis of Leadership in the African Church*, 59.

ethical concern, as it hinders the emergence of credible, competent individuals into pastoral leadership. The interference godfathers often interrupt electoral/nomination procedures that should have reflected the populace's decision, but instead impose candidates who reflect the godfather's decision and interests. Godfatherism as an institution has become an evil building block for corruption, retrogression, underdevelopment, mediocrity and backwardness in various platforms of leadership including the Church.⁴⁸ It allows the sponsorship of a chosen candidate through illegal means into the corridors of power, rather than relying on the Leadership of the Holy Spirit, integrity, and candidate's ability to govern and provide solutions to issues. The godfather's factors may involve using money to buy votes from the poor and vulnerable electorates, the use of thugs to promote violence that would pave the way for their manipulations, rigging of elections, and other unethical practices to protect their interests not only in the political terrain but even in the church settings.⁴⁹

6.0 RESPONSE TO ISSUES OF GODFATHERISM IN PASTORAL LEADERSHIP

6.1 Balancing Ministerial Autonomy and Accountability

Ministerial autonomy is grounded in the biblical understanding that God calls pastors and ministers and ultimately holds them accountable (Heb. 13:17). When this divine calling is subverted by secular, political, or institutional interests, the integrity of the pastoral office is compromised. Christian ethics emphasises the virtue of faithfulness to God, to scripture, and to the church community. A minister who becomes beholden to outside interests risks violating this faithfulness, thus becoming a people-pleaser rather than a servant of Christ (Gal. 1:10). Christian leaders should navigate the tension between autonomy and accountability, recognising that their authority is not absolute,

but rather stewarded under God and accountable to their community and Church leadership.

Furthermore, the autonomy in ministry is essential to the pastor's moral responsibility. Christian leaders are morally accountable for their actions. In resisting the compromise of autonomy, ministers must draw upon the example of Christ, who remained obedient to the will of the Father, even when that obedience led to suffering and rejection (Phil. 2:5–8). Ministers are thus called to uphold truth and justice courageously, even if doing so results in conflict with powerful institutions. Therefore, they must be vigilant to guard their calling and remain faithful to the gospel above all other interests.

6.2 Leadership Selection should reflect Fairness

In instances where favouritism, political manoeuvring, or unethical influence override discernment of God's will, they violate core biblical and ethical principles. Christian Leadership is not merely a position of power but a divine calling marked by servanthood, character, and spiritual maturity. Scripture clearly teaches that church leaders must be selected for godly character and a sense of calling, not for social status, wealth, or personal connections. The Apostle Paul instructed Timothy to appoint leaders who are "above reproach," faithful, sober-minded, and not lovers of money (1 Tim. 3:1–7). When this process is distorted, the community risks appointing unfit leaders, resulting in spiritual harm and a loss of trust in the church's moral witness. Therefore, the distortion of leadership selection represents a failure of justice and integrity. The virtue of justice requires that every person be treated fairly and that leadership appointments reflect God's standards, not human preferences (Prov. 28:5).

6.3 Respect for Prophetic Voice

The suppression of voices that speak truth to power, challenge injustice, or call the church

⁴⁸ Edijin, *Political Godfatherism*, 178.

⁴⁹ Isaac Olawale Albert, "Explaining 'godfatherism' in Nigerian Politics" *Africa Sociological Review* 9, (2), (2005):93

and society to repentance is a serious ethical failure from a Christian ethical perspective. The prophetic voice in scripture is not merely a prediction of the future; it is a courageous proclamation of God's truth in the face of moral decay, often confronting religious complacency and societal corruption. Throughout the Bible, prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, and John the Baptist boldly addressed injustice, idolatry, and unrighteousness. Their messages were often unpopular and dangerous, yet they remained faithful to their divine calling (Jer. 1:7–8). To silence prophetic voices today, whether through political pressure, institutional censorship, or fear of controversy, is to reject the church's key role as a moral and spiritual conscience.

Christian leaders should insist on virtues such as truth-telling, justice, and courage as embodied in prophetic ministry. As Walter Brueggemann asserts, the task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception that are alternatives to the dominant culture.⁵⁰ When the church silences these voices, it risks complicity with systems of oppression and forfeits its credibility and witness.

6.4 Unity of Purpose

Conflicts of interest in ministry occur when personal, financial, or relational priorities clash with the ethical and spiritual obligations of church leaders. Such conflicts often result in moral compromise, eroding personal integrity and undermining the church's public witness. To mitigate this risk, fostering unity of purpose among the leadership and the congregation is essential. Stanley and Clinton argue that when leaders and members are united around a shared mission rooted in biblical truth and accountability, personal agendas are subordinated to collective spiritual goals.⁵¹ The New Testament emphasises integrity and blamelessness in leadership, as seen in Paul's

charges to Titus and Timothy (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:7), underscoring that unity in values and purpose guards against moral drift. Moreover, a cohesive spiritual community encourages mutual accountability, reducing the opportunities for ethical lapses.⁵² In the opinion of Henry Blackaby and Richard Blackaby, leaders who remain aligned with God's purposes are less likely to make self-serving decisions.⁵³ Therefore, unity of purpose not only strengthens the moral fibre of leaders but also ensures the church remains a credible and effective witness to the world.

6.5 Practice of Servant Leadership

The misuse of religious authority to manipulate, control, or harm others is a profound violation of Christian ethics. When such abuse becomes systemic, it often leads to institutional decay, eroding trust, distorting the gospel, and damaging the moral and spiritual fabric of the church. Scripture consistently condemns leaders who exploit their positions for personal gain or domination (Ezek. 34:2-4), God rebukes the shepherds of Israel who "eat the fat" and "clothe yourselves with the wool" but fail to care for the flock. Jesus also harshly criticised religious leaders who placed heavy burdens on others while refusing to lift them themselves (Matt. 23:4). These passages demonstrate that spiritual leadership carries an ethical mandate: to serve humbly, protect the vulnerable, and reflect God's justice. From a Christian ethical standpoint, spiritual abuse constitutes a breach of justice, love, and truth, the three core values grounded in God. As Miroslav Volf argues, "abuse of power in religious institutions is not simply a moral failure; it is a theological betrayal" because it misrepresents God's character and undermines the church's mission.⁵⁴

In response to spiritual abuse, the church must cultivate servant Leadership (Mark 10:42–45), empower the laity, and implement

⁵⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*. 2nd ed. (Fortress Press, 2001), 3.

⁵¹ Stanley and Clinton, *Connecting: The Mentoring Relationships*, 45.

⁵² Wright, *The Mission of God's People*, 158

⁵³ Henry Blackaby and Richard Blackaby, *Spiritual Leadership: Moving People on to God's Agenda*. B&H Publishing Group, 2001), 20.

⁵⁴ Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*. (Eerdmans, 2006), 199.

structures of accountability. Theological education should include training on trauma-informed care and ethical leadership. Most importantly, victims must be heard, supported, and given space to heal and be restored. The church must reclaim its prophetic and pastoral role by confronting sin within its ranks, restoring integrity, and embodying the love and justice of Christ.

7.0. RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the study's findings, the following recommendations are offered to enhance the effectiveness of pastoral Leadership in Christian institutions.

7.1 Reaffirm the Divine Calling of Pastors

In preserving the sacredness and integrity of pastoral ministry, the Nigerian Church must reaffirm that pastoral leadership is a divine calling and not a political appointment. In the face of increasing politicisation and worldly influence in church leadership appointments, churches must reaffirm the divine nature of pastoral calling. Leaders in pastoral ministries should be selected based on spiritual maturity, doctrinal soundness, and evidence of God's calling, and not influence from godfathers. Pastoral ministry should not be considered a career path attained through influence, lobbying, or allegiance to powerful godfathers, but rather a sacred responsibility that originates from God. Therefore, upholding integrity in pastoral leadership appointments will help preserve the sacredness of ministry and, consequently, resist the infiltration of political godfatherism and worldly manipulation into spiritual leadership.

7.2 Promote Transparency and Fairness in Leadership Selection

To safeguard the integrity of church leadership and resist the negative influence of godfatherism, church institutions in Nigeria must promote transparency and fairness in the selection of pastors and other leaders. Leadership in the body of Christ must not be left to personal biases, tribal affiliations, or behind-the-scenes lobbying. Instead, the process must reflect the character of Christ and the principles

of justice, equity, and accountability. Transparency also demands that the congregation be informed and, where appropriate, prayerfully engaged in the process. When leadership selection is conducted with openness, accountability, and integrity, it fosters trust, strengthens unity, and guards the church against manipulation and division. Ultimately, promoting fairness and transparency is not only a matter of good governance but also an act of worship and obedience to God, who calls His people into leadership according to His will rather than human preference (Jer. 3:15).

7.3 Strengthen Ministerial Autonomy with Accountable Structures

To preserve integrity in ministry, pastoral leaders in Nigeria must maintain spiritual autonomy while being accountable to both their congregations and denominational authorities. This balance allows them to preach and lead under divine conviction without undue external influence. Establishing transparent accountability frameworks, such as oversight boards, peer reviews, and ethical guidelines, ensures that autonomy does not lead to isolation or the abuse of power. These structures foster responsible leadership, protect pastors from manipulation, and uphold the biblical standard of stewardship and integrity in ministry (1 Tim. 3:1–7; Titus 1:7).

7.4 Restore the Church's Prophetic Voice

Further, the Nigerian Church must empower pastors to boldly speak truth to power without fear of backlash from sponsors or influential figures. The Church should intentionally protect and support leaders who address injustices and uphold righteousness in society. This involves creating a supportive environment where leaders are encouraged to confront injustice and promote righteousness. By defending pastors who uphold truth, the church reclaims its prophetic mandate and strengthens its moral authority in society.

7.5 Cultivate Servant Leadership Ethos:

To address the ethical and leadership challenges facing the church today, cultivating a servant leadership ethos is essential. The training for

pastors and leaders should be rooted in the model of Christ and emphasise servant leadership, exemplified by Christ, who prioritises service, humility, and the well-being of others over personal gain or influence. Unlike leadership driven by personal ambition or loyalty to human sponsors, servant leadership focuses on uplifting others and advancing God's purpose. Churches should discourage leadership driven by ambition or loyalty to human patrons, and instead develop spiritually mature, Christ-centred leaders. Furthermore, churches should establish formation programs that instil servant-leadership values, thereby promoting spiritual maturity and Christ-centred influence. Leaders must be evaluated not by their networks or control, but by their faithfulness, character, and service to the body of Christ. This shift will foster integrity, unity, and resilience in pastoral ministry.

7.6 Implement Ethical Training in Theological Education

There is a need for Seminaries and Bible colleges to incorporate robust curricula on Christian ethics, leadership integrity, and prevention of spiritual abuse. As the church navigates increasingly complex sociopolitical environments, ministers must be equipped not only with theological knowledge but also with the moral discernment to identify and resist unethical pressures and manipulative power structures. Theological training should focus on developing ethical reasoning, accountability systems, and Christ-centred leadership models that prioritise service over ambition. By equipping theological students with practical ethical frameworks, the church ensures the development of leaders who will reflect righteousness, transparency, accountability, and the character of Christ in all aspects of their calling.

7.7 Foster a Culture of Unity and Shared Mission

Churches must intentionally cultivate a culture of unity among leaders and members by emphasising their shared mission rooted in scripture. When the church is united around God's purpose, such as evangelism,

discipleship, and justice, it minimises factionalism and resists the rise of godfather-style influence. As Blackaby and Blackaby rightly noted, leaders who remain aligned with God's agenda are less likely to fall prey to manipulation, self-interest, or moral compromise, ensuring healthier spiritual leadership. Such alignment fosters healthier leadership, spiritual maturity, and a Christ-honouring community in which every member contributes to God's redemptive work.

8.0 CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of godfatherism in pastoral leadership represents a profound ethical and spiritual crisis that undermines the integrity, credibility, and prophetic mission of the contemporary Christian Church. This study has revealed that godfatherism compromises ministerial autonomy, distorts leadership selection, silences prophetic voices, fosters conflicts of interest, and facilitates spiritual abuse and institutional decay. These issues contradict the biblical model of servant leadership and threaten the church's witness in society. Addressing these challenges requires a deliberate return to Christian ethical principles rooted in scripture, such as justice, integrity, accountability, humility, and divine calling. Restoring transparency in leadership processes, reaffirming pastoral vocation as a spiritual, not political mandate, and cultivating a culture of servant leadership are essential steps toward ethical reform. Furthermore, the church must re-empower its prophetic voice and uphold the work of the Holy Spirit in guiding the selection of leadership and governance. Ultimately, for the church to remain faithful to its calling and mission, it must resist the infiltration of worldly power structures and recommit itself to a Christ-centred model of leadership. By doing so, it will foster a spiritually vibrant, ethically sound, and socially relevant ministry that reflects the kingdom values of truth, righteousness, and love.

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