

# Christian sufferings in Nigeria: A critical examination of church leadership responses to national challenges

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**ABSTRACT:** Suffering is a universal human reality that often occurs against an individual's will. It produces pain, discomfort, disharmony, sorrow, despair, and anxiety across material, physical, psychological, spiritual, and social dimensions of life. This paper critically examines the concept of suffering and its implications for Christians in Nigeria, with particular focus on church leaders and their responses to national challenges. The study adopts a documentary research design, relying on historical and theological analysis of published and unpublished works, including books, journal articles, denominational documents, and archival materials. The perspectives of the Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Pentecostal traditions were examined to highlight their distinctive understandings of suffering and the frameworks through which they respond to it. The findings reveal that suffering remains an integral aspect of the Christian experience, and when properly understood, can serve as a divine instrument for strengthening faith, deepening commitment, and enhancing spirituality. The study therefore recommends that Christian leaders should address suffering within its biblical context and develop practical strategies to alleviate the plight of suffering members of society. Initiatives such as the establishment of charity organisations, welfare programs, and pastoral counselling will not only reduce human misery but also reflect the biblical perspective of suffering as exemplified in 1 Peter 4:12-13, thereby leading to enduring blessings and profound spiritual growth.

**Keywords:** Christian, Christian leaders, churches, developing nations, suffering.

## INTRODUCTION

Suffering as a concept in contemporary times has generated a lot of controversy among Christians and church leaders. Scholars are not left out on this issue. Questions are being raised on the necessity of suffering, what constitutes suffering, and its purpose, while appropriate Christian responses are being proffered. However, the issue keeps generating discourse among scholars. For instance, Kaftanski and Hanson (2022) see suffering as a human experience which an individual undergoes, an experience which might cause pain, despair, physical, psychological and spiritual trauma to one in life. Suffering is a universal phenomenon, but it means different things to different people of diverse faiths. This diversification is agreed as a theological problem, particularly in relation to religions that have a "Supreme

Being" as the ultimate object of worship, like the Judeo-Christian faith. They feel that suffering is both logical and evidential. A disaster brings perplexity intrinsically related to the existence of God and His attributes of omnipotence and love (Jordan 2004).

Equally, Andre (1985) submits that the problem of suffering has been linked to theodicy, that is, an attempt to justify and reconcile the omnipotence, goodness and justice of God with the observable facts of evil and suffering in the world. Thus, finally, they affirm three propositions: (i) God is Almighty, (ii) perfect, and (iii) God exists. But if evil exists, it seems either that God wants to obliterate evil and is not able to, and thus His almightiness is denied or that God is able to obliterate evil but does not want to, and thus His goodness is denied. Scholars and

philosophers such as William James, as well as religious traditions like Vedanta Hinduism, Christian Science, and Stoicism, have attempted to address the problem of explaining or denying the perceptual analysis of suffering (particularly the existence of evil, pain, and hardship) as discussed by Cavert (2003).

The argument on suffering is aggravated because many views that were advanced by scholars, theologians and preaching from pulpits make it appear confusing and contradictory. Different theological perspectives exist regarding the place of suffering in the Christian life. While certain voices argue for a life void of suffering and pain, others maintain that suffering is an inescapable experience for any true Christian. An example of the former is the teaching of Chris Oyakhilome, in a television broadcast tagged Atmosphere for Miracles of Christ Embassy (a church with branches across Nigeria, other parts of Africa, and Europe, with its headquarters in Lagos). He asserted that a Christian should not suffer, and if suffering occurs, it is a consequence of sinful living or lack of complete faith in God. From this background, it becomes pertinent to examine suffering from the perspectives of the Roman Catholic Church, Protestant Churches, and Pentecostal Churches. From the foregoing, it is pertinent to understand suffering from the viewpoints of the Roman Catholic Church, Protestant Churches and Pentecostal Churches. Therefore, the aim of this study is to critically examine how these Christian traditions in Nigeria conceptualise suffering and to evaluate the responses of church leadership to the national challenges it generates.

### **Christianity and its implications for suffering**

The historical account of Christianity's origins is deeply relevant to the subject of suffering because suffering is woven into the very fabric of the Christian story. Jesus, the founder of Christianity, did not merely teach moral imperatives; his life culminated in rejection, crucifixion, and death on a Roman cross, a form of execution reserved for criminals and rebels. This central event, which appeared to mark the failure of his mission, is in fact understood by Christians as the ultimate redemptive act through which salvation was secured (Ferguson, 2005). In this sense, suffering is not peripheral but foundational to the Christian faith.

Furthermore, the resurrection of Jesus transformed the perception of suffering among his followers. What had seemed like defeat became the demonstration of divine power and vindication. Early Christian communities, empowered by the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:36), interpreted their own trials and persecutions as a participation in the sufferings of Christ (cf. 1 Peter 4:12-13). This gave suffering a new theological meaning: rather than being merely punitive or meaningless, it was understood as a means of sharing in Christ's glory and strengthening the

believer's faith.

The communal practices of the early church also reflected this theology of suffering. The breaking of bread (later formalised as the Eucharist) served not only as a memorial of Christ's death but also as a reminder of the redemptive power of his suffering. As the church spread across the Roman Empire, it faced repeated hostility and persecution, yet these hardships often reinforced the resilience and unity of the Christian movement. Thus, the historical roots of Christianity demonstrate that suffering is not an aberration but an expected dimension of Christian discipleship, shaping both the identity and mission of the church from its earliest days.

## **CHRISTIAN VIEW ON SUFFERING**

### **The Roman Catholic view on suffering**

Pelikan and Frassetto (2025) submit that the Roman Catholic Church is said to be the first and largest single Christian body all over the world. Harrison (2017) opines that the Roman Catholic Church comprises Christians who acknowledge the supreme authority of the Bishop of Rome, the Pope, in matters of faith. The word 'catholic' means 'universal' and has been used to designate the whole church since its earliest period. This church tradition regards itself as the only legitimate inheritor by unbroken succession descending from Apostle Peter to the present time, of the commission and powers conferred by Jesus Christ on the twelve apostles. The church has had a profound influence on the development of the culture of Europe and on the introduction of European values to other cultures (Harrison, 2017).

The Pelikan and Frassetto (2025) inform that some doctrines distinguish the Roman Catholic Church from all other denominations. Irrespective of their locations and continents. These include her ecclesiology, sacramentology, affirmation of communal dimension of salvation and of every religious relationship with God, her liturgy, baptism and teachings about the authority of the Bible with saints, Mariology and her stress on divine mediation through the humanity of Jesus, the Church and the sacraments. In any discussion about the beliefs in the Roman Catholic Church, appeal must be made to her hierarchically-structured ecclesiology.

McTavish (2016), a Catholic, opines that suffering, adversity and death are all inseparable from the human way of life. The two concepts are intertwined and are very difficult to separate. He adds that suffering is inseparable from the Christian life because the Christian is called to a life of voluntary self-denial and mortification. Along the same line of thought, Krathong (1998) says that suffering is real, universal and common to lots of mankind irrespective of status (socio-economic, political or religious). He adds that Catholic Christians find the meaning and the relevance of suffering in the Judeo-

Christian Holy Scriptures, the teachings and traditions of the Church and in the lives of instructions of the saints. He adds that the Catholic view is that suffering is inseparable from the mystery of salvation. However, suffering is not caused by God, who is believed to be the Author of all good; rather, evil is inherent in the universe, natural processes, in the uniqueness of freedom and in the misuse of freewill.

Pope John Paul II (2015), in his book *Salvific Doloris* (The Christian Meaning of Suffering), opined that suffering does not have only a salvific implication; it is particularly essential to man for purification and maturity. He maintains that suffering is a mystery and belongs to the realm of transcendence. It is one of those points in which man, in a certain sense, is conditioned to go beyond himself. His view infers that suffering is a part of the redemptive process. He explained further that the Redeemer suffered in place of man for man. Everyone undergoing the redemptive process is thus called to share in that suffering through which redemption was accomplished. When the faithful suffer, it is seen as a response to the divine call to participate in the redemptive process. Through his redemptive activities, Christ has raised human suffering to the level of redemption. It is then no longer a punitive measure. Thus, it could be surmised that suffering serves a redemptive purpose in Roman Catholic theology.

Cavert (2003) contributes to this subject matter, saying that suffering, according to the Roman Catholics, is not only a reality but also a necessity. It is even a vocation into which all Christians are called; hence, the Roman Catholic tradition encourages voluntary submission to affliction and suffering. The belief is that this vocation is, in a sense, a prolongation of the presence of Christ in space, time, and as such, through such commitments, the Christian continues Christ's actions in His own life (Hick, 2010). Since Christ suffered and died for all men because He loves them, Christians must continue this love and mortification for those who are either potential or, in fact, their brothers in Christ (Riga, 2019). However, it must be stated that though the views herein represent the Catholic teachings about suffering, the younger generations within the tradition generally see it as 'old-fashioned in the light of modernism. It becomes pertinent to look at the Protestant view of suffering.

### **The protestant view of suffering**

Cavert (2003) advanced that in the broadest sense, Protestantism denotes the whole movement within Christendom in the sixteenth-century Reformation and later focused on the main tradition of reformed church life. This movement led to the severance of the Reformed Churches from the Roman Catholic Church. He went further to say that the four main Protestant traditions that emerged from the Reformation were the Lutheran (known in continental Europe as the Evangelicals), the Calvinist

(Reformed), the Anabaptist and the Anglican. Despite the considerable differences among these streams of Protestant traditions in doctrine and practice, they agree in rejecting the authority of the Pope and emphasise the priesthood of all believers, the sole authority of the Bible, the sanctity of all suffering among Christians in Nigeria: callings, vocations and the importance of individual faith. Among them were also grouped and subdivided as Fundamentals (Evangelicalism) and Evangelicals (Fundamentalism).

Peels (2022) propounded that the term 'Fundamentalism' gradually came to designate only the most uncompromising and militant wing of the movement. However, the more moderate Protestant conservatives began to adopt the older designation of Evangelicalism. Evangelicalism as a movement transcends denominational boundaries. It emphasizes conformity to the basic tenets of the faith and a missionary outreach of compassion and urgency. Thus, we hereby turn to the Evangelicals to have a representative view of the Protestant perspective of suffering.

The origin and purpose of suffering appear controversial among evangelical scholars. Morrison (n.d.) says that some opine that God is the source of suffering, others vehemently oppose such, while some struggle to maintain a middle position. However, they seem to agree that suffering in the universe is a result of the fall of man and as a result of which all humanity is subject to suffering. It is agreed that while suffering is an intrusion into life, it is not without divine purpose, for it provides the opportunity for Christian witness, service and the development of godly character as the faithful share in the suffering of Christ. Nduku (2025), on his part, pointed out that the Evangelicals affirm that though suffering is caused, directly or indirectly, by sin, it is not necessarily a punishment for sin. The evangelical position on suffering appears to have broadened across the ages in view of socio-economic and political challenges and changes observable throughout the world. Nduku (2025) goes further to say that suffering in contemporary times includes hostility and persecution being faced by Christians, imprisonment and torture of Christians by the state or by political parties dominated by ideologies that introduce repressive measures against Christians. Some sufferings come in the form of killing and oppression of converts from other religions by their own people.

Kaftanski and Hanson (2022) advanced that relevant answers to the problem of suffering demand an understanding of the fact that the question is intertwined with human life and existence. He argues that answers to be provided by scholars should not be mere intellectual conjectures. The question must be approached from angles beyond academic and intellectual pursuits.

From the foregoing, the Protestant position on suffering is clear. Suffering is a reality, an experience that Christians are not exempt from. It is an experience to be expected by every human being. It is an instrument of pruning. It is

fellowship with Christ and a means of identifying with the Gospel. Every day observation reveals that in urban cities and among people influenced by Western individualism, the younger generation tends to regard suffering as an experience to be avoided at all costs. Some people this writer interacted with on the subject matter of Pentecostal members said that they had never had such a subject discussed in their churches. Such observation makes this work relevant and timely. It is not an overstatement to say that much still needs to be done by the Protestant denominations in their social response to the problem of suffering vis-à-vis contemporary socio-political and development in the country. The paper now moves to consider the views of Pentecostals on human suffering.

### **Pentecostals' view of suffering**

The term Pentecostal is used to describe Christian groups that affirm a post-conversion work of the Holy Spirit, sometimes called "Baptism in the Spirit." According to Hocken (2009), this baptism is generally understood as empowerment for mission and ministry. Anderson (2014) further stresses that glossolalia holds particular significance for Pentecostals as the initial physical evidence of Spirit baptism. He also suggests that the term Pentecostal is sufficiently descriptive of all churches and movements that emphasise the operation and manifestation of the gifts of the Spirit, both on phenomenological and theological grounds. This term, Pentecostal is one of the operative definitions in this study.

Concerning suffering, however, Pentecostal perspectives reveal a distinct departure from Catholic and Evangelical traditions. Nduku (2025), a Pentecostal pastor, submits that suffering is anti-covenant because the Fall accounts for the existence of suffering. According to him, suffering manifests as being under the curse of the Law, which contradicts God's covenant. Since Jesus died vicariously for believers, the truly saved are exempt from suffering. Such believers, he argues, can enjoy God's prosperity by obeying covenant principles rooted in the Abrahamic promises.

In a similar vein, Tinney (1980) declared that Pentecostals often regard suffering as a matter of personal choice—arising from spiritual neglect or failure to follow biblical principles. In their framework, suffering in whatever dimension is foreign to the "kingdom experience." Pentecostals emphasise that Jesus Christ has conquered suffering and evil, meaning that saints are no longer subject to them. Through faith, believers can claim health, wealth, and protection while rejecting adversity (VandenBerg, 2007). Lack of suffering, therefore, becomes a theological badge that validates their covenantal status in contrast to the struggles of others. For them, Satan, not God, is the author of suffering, which enters a believer's life through disobedience, ignorance, or weak faith.

Summarising these perspectives, Nduku (2025) insists that those who suffer do so because they lack knowledge of covenant blessings. Thus, suffering is viewed as demonic and contrary to Christian identity. Since Christ's death guarantees total well-being, security, and material blessings, the Pentecostal worldview tends to reject suffering as illegitimate for Christians who obey biblical principles.

Nevertheless, this view has provoked significant criticism. Scholars argue that the Pentecostal rejection of suffering does not align with biblical revelation or observable reality. Precious (2025), for instance, observes that many Pentecostal believers, despite their adherence to faith confessions, still struggle with poverty, sickness, and insecurity. Ojo (2025) adds that such experiences reveal a gap between Pentecostal theology and lived realities, exposing adherents to frustration when their expectations of a suffering-free life are unmet. Victor (2025) contends that the overemphasis on prosperity can erode pastoral care, as those who suffer are sometimes stigmatised as faithless or disobedient.

Furthermore, socio-religious analysis shows that suffering is a universal human condition that cannot be completely dismissed as demonic. Okiki (2025) argues that the Pentecostal denial of suffering creates unrealistic expectations that ultimately weaken resilience in the face of hardship. This contrasts sharply with the New Testament witness, where suffering is often depicted as a means of spiritual growth, character formation, and participation in the sufferings of Christ (cf. 1 Peter 4:12-13; Romans 8:17).

Finally, while Pentecostalism offers a theology of triumph and victory that empowers many adherents with hope and positive confession, its categorical rejection of suffering remains problematic. A balanced approach would affirm God's power to heal and deliver, while also acknowledging the biblical and existential reality of suffering as part of the Christian journey.

### **BRIEF EVALUATION OF THE CONTEMPORARY VIEW(S)**

So far, the views of some selected church traditions have been examined. From these, a diversity of opinions emerges, some arising from ancient but revered traditions of the church, others borne out of subjective interpretations of Scripture, and still others conditioned by socio-economic, cultural, and political realities. It is noteworthy that each of the church traditions discussed above possesses a theological framework through which it interprets and responds to the reality of suffering among Christians in Nigeria. Agbaje (2025) opined that suffering does not take religiosity into account; whether one is a devout Christian or Muslim, suffering excludes no one. Similarly, Akano (2025) corroborated the above fact that suffering is part of human existence. Building on this

general reality, it becomes necessary to examine not only the views of church traditions but also the perceptions of ordinary Christians whose lived experiences shed further light on the subject.

One major example is that a look into the Roman Catholic understanding reveals a very strong and deep-seated belief that suffering is part of the Christian experience. Another concept worthy of critical examination is their perception that suffering is salvific, a divine call to participate in the redemptive process and thereby complete or supply what is lacking in Christ's afflictions. On the part of the Evangelicals, their views appear more biblically balanced as far as biblical theology is concerned. However, the social response of this tradition to suffering is rather too poor. This is an area where contextual orientation needs to be developed so that the suffering ones might experience the comfort of other believers as they go through suffering. To achieve this, the spirit of communality needs to be emphasised, for only then would Christians in such traditions see the suffering ones as members of the household of God. Of great concern in this work is the "no-suffering" theology being taught and preached within the Pentecostal strand of faith. This study notes that most of the advocates of this theology either lack requisite skills in sound biblical interpretation or are materialistically minded and under a kind of delusion that confuses or entices members into rejecting biblical truth on the subject.

When the perspectives of ordinary Christians are considered, an even broader spectrum of views becomes evident. Some believers, especially those living in rural communities, see suffering as an unavoidable aspect of life in a fallen world and interpret it through a fatalistic lens: "what will be, will be." For them, suffering is endured quietly as part of the natural order of existence, often with little theological reflection. In contrast, urban Christians who are more exposed to prosperity preaching sometimes argue that suffering is evidence of weak faith or unconfessed sin. They expect that a faithful believer who prays diligently and gives generously should not encounter prolonged suffering. Such views reveal how social location and exposure to certain streams of preaching shape people's understanding of pain and hardship. Okiki (2025), for instance, observed that prosperity-oriented Christians in Lagos often equate prolonged hardship with a spiritual failure rather than a test of faith.

There are also those who regard suffering as a test of faith or divine preparation for greater responsibility. In interviews, some church members expressed the conviction that "without suffering, one cannot grow in character or learn endurance." This view resonates with biblical passages such as James 1:2-4, which exhort believers to count it all joy when faced with trials. Ojo (2025) highlights that many Nigerian Christians interpret their suffering as a spiritual refining process that deepens their dependence on God. Likewise, Precious (2025) records

that some believers find consolation in viewing their pain as a temporary passage to ultimate glory. In contrast, Victor (2025) notes that others grow frustrated, interpreting suffering as a sign of divine neglect, particularly when confronted with persistent poverty, insecurity, or sickness.

## CONCLUSION

Looking at the Book of I Peter, the author of the book was identified as Apostle Peter. However, there are reasons why some scholars do not believe that he was the author of the book. There are two important things some germane to note from this: First, what Jesus accomplished by His undeserved suffering and second, what this means for the life of a Christian today. The death of Jesus Christ is presented as the atonement that reconciles sinners to God.

The letter is an apostolic exhortation to stand firm in the faith even during difficult situations, challenging the faith and endurance of Christian believers who were apparently widespread across Northern Asia Minor.

From the foregoing, it is observed that the suffering experience of the innocent or, more particularly, of a Christian, should be better explained and interpreted in the light of biblical revelation with Christ's event as the core. According to the Book of I Peter, "Suffering can be understood as a marker of disordered living, a means of cultivating characteristics that are essential to the flourishing life or an opportunity for worldwide orientation." Above all, one could conclude that the role of suffering is not to endure it for its own sake, but for the sake of cultivating the flourishing life, for this will have such a great impact on the quality of the Christian life one desires to live.

It is pertinent to also note that the suffering Christian is, however, sustained by the apprehension of the fact that Christ did not only suffered for His people, but also wishes that suffering becomes a fellowship in Christ. Suffering with Christ is requisite to being glorified with Him. Therefore, Christians can respond positively and with joy in suffering.

While the suffering to which a believer responds aright contributes to the spiritual growth and fellowship with Christ, it is also a form of witness to each sufferer of his own salvation, to the unsaved for their conviction and to fellow Christians for their edification, encouragement and comfort. Therefore, suffering is a source of "harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it" (Heb. 12:11). Above all, since Christ suffered as a human. Christians must be prepared or ready to suffer as a point of divine package (1 Peter 1:6; 4:7).

Finally, Christians must also be able to give a reasoned and intelligent explanation to anyone who might ask or is passing through suffering, their belief and practice on the subject matter, that is, Christians must follow the example of Christ, even though suffering and be aware that suffering reveals the genuineness of our faith.

## Recommendations

It is an established fact that there are varying attitudes towards the purpose of suffering. The following recommendations are given for both churches and Christian leaders in the world:

1. Church leaders should assume a prophetic role and show passion on behalf of the suffering people of God (church). Leaders should intercede for their church members through serious and fervent prayers and counselling in times of suffering.
2. Church leaders should develop sound theological education in order to interpret the Word of God thoroughly. They should be students of the Bible who contextualise the Word of God for every situation, thus interpreting the Bible according to Christ's mind and mandate. There is also the need for church leaders to write spiritual books to fit the local context because "pen and paper are powerful and instructive." Leaders should preach sound and balanced biblical doctrines to their audience.
3. Church leaders should make it a point of duty to establish and organise social welfare programmes. Some kind of suffering could be alleviated with little money, a piece of advice or a follow-up. Church leaders should talk to Christian politicians in high standing to help with some minor needs of individuals and encourage members to join politics with the aim of sensitising the political arena for Christ.
4. Above all, the Church of God (Christians) should have in-depth knowledge of what the church is all about, that is, be mission-minded, and we should try to avoid schism, segregation and other negative behaviours that will not allow the church to be one. The church should thus carry out the mandate of God and Christ to the whole world (John 3:16; Matt. 28:18-20). The church must emulate Jesus Christ by his accomplishment through suffering on the cross. As such, Christians should note that after passing through suffering, as substantiated by I Peter, we shall be victorious and wear a cross. Also, suffering is part of the Christian experience. In that respect, we should live our lives for Christ as Paul said, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21).

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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