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## The Need for Faith that Endures (Matt 17:14-20): An Exegetical Reflection for Christians Today

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**ABSTRACT:** *The possibility of someone claiming to be a follower of Christ without having sufficient faith, or even any faith at all, is clearly highlighted by Jesus himself in this text under consideration. Hence, his healing of the boy possessed by a demon, after his disciples' curious inability to do the same, made Jesus to decry the faithlessness and perversity of that generation of his followers as they also faced the imminence of his final departure from this world (Matt 17:17). This led to Jesus' insistence that for his followers to be meaningfully so, the need for faith, that is even as small as a mustard seed, is imperative (Matt 17:20). This paper aims at a deep study of that text of Matt 17:14-20 so as to bring out, as much as possible, how the behaviour of Jesus' disciples as well as the injunctions of Jesus therein would be of greater benefit to the Christians of this day and age. The methodology employed in the study is theological-sociological, augmented with the Historical Critical method which is used particularly in the exegesis of that biblical text. All these have helped to throw more light on the mind of Jesus in that text especially, revealing also that the situation of faithlessness, decried by him, seems to be even more pronounced in this day and age, mainly, on account of the rapid developments in science and technology, particularly in the area of communication – otherwise also known as the social media. These advancements, although veritably beneficial to humanity, tend, however, to also precipitate a loss of interest on matters which are not purely scientific, so to speak, especially faith and religion – often leading to the weakening of the faith of many Christians as well as its active practice or even the outright abandonment of the same, especially by the youth. Therefore, this paper recommends that Christians have to go the extra mile in nourishing their faith, especially through its more active and dynamic expression, so as to make it ever relevant to all epochs, including this digital age – the role of Christian leaders in that task being, in the main, indispensable. This, then, leads to the significance of this paper in the emphasis that the knowledge of God and, hence faith in and worship of him in Christianity, for example, actually enhance human dignity instead of undermining or destroying it. Thus, the clear consciousness of this axiom and its application in practice, the author maintains, would naturally lead Christians today, and indeed humankind, to a life of general fulfilment, ultimate balance and equilibrium even amidst the many advancements in science and technology in this day and age.*

**KEY WORDS:** Christians, faith, endurance, exegesis, reflection.

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## INTRODUCTION

Faith in Christ should be a strong distinguishing factor between Christians and non-Christians. But in the case of the boy possessed by a demon in Matt. 17:14-20, the disciples of Jesus were seriously found deficient in faith resulting in their daunting inability to heal him. Hence, Jesus decried their faithlessness and perversity as a generation (Matt 17:17), calling, rather, for a strong faith, even as small as a mustard seed (Matt 17:20), on the part of all his followers.

This paper has embarked on a deep study of that text of Matt 17:14-20. The author began with the explanation of the key words and concepts used in the paper followed by the delineation of the text under consideration. That text was then exegetically analysed with particular reference to Jesus' climactic rejection of the faithlessness of his followers in Matt 17:17 as well as his strong call for "faith that endures" in its conclusion in Matt 17:20. Comparative references were also made, where necessary, to the parallel synoptic texts of this same episode in Mark and Luke, capping it up with Matthew's general emphasis on faith, that of the NT and the Bible in general. From this informed background, the author then delved into the needed reflection for the Christians of this day and age, mirroring Jesus' disappointment with his disciples in this pericope even more pronouncedly in the general situation of Christians today.

The article then rounds off with the emphasis that it is the natural duty of Christians to always nourish their faith and renew it, so as to make it relevant in every age. In that wise, they, the Christians, would, in turn, also be continually nourished and refreshed by the same faith and its practice – as, ultimately, the knowledge of God and, hence, the Christians' active faith and lives, actually enhance human dignity instead of diminishing it in any way.

### Explanation of Key Words and Concepts

A Christian is, broadly speaking, a follower of Christ. Faith (*pistis*), according to the Letter to the Hebrews, is "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb 11:1) – and all these things concern "the heavenly world."<sup>1</sup> Hence, the letter expatiates: "For by it the men of old received divine approval. By faith we understand that the world was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was made out of things which do not appear" (Heb 11:2-3). Broadly speaking, therefore, faith "is man's response to God, who reveals himself and gives himself to man, at the same time bringing man a superabundant light as he searches for the ultimate meaning

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<sup>1</sup> M. M. BOURKE, "The Epistle to the Hebrews", in R. E. BROWN – J. A. FITZMYER – R. E. MURPHY, ed., *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Bangalore: Theological Publications, 1994) 939-940.

of his life.”<sup>2</sup> On this note, faith becomes indispensable for humans if they are to have the right relationship with God in all the situations of life.<sup>3</sup>

Regarding “endurance,” the verb “to endure” according to *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 9<sup>th</sup> Edition, transitively means “to undergo (a difficulty, hardship, etc.);” intransitively, it means “to remain in existence; last”. Therefore, “faith that endures,” in the title of this paper, combines both senses to mean the “faith that lasts despite difficulties and hardships.”

“Reflection”, according to the same dictionary above, means also “meditation on” or “thought about” something while “exegesis” generally refers to the act of “interpretation” or “explanation”. Derived from the Greek word, *exegeomai*, which basically means “to lead out of”, exegesis, when applied to texts, denotes the “reading out” of the meaning of the text in question.<sup>4</sup> Biblically, therefore, “exegesis involves the analysis of the biblical text in the language of its original or earliest available form, since any translation presents at least a slight barrier to precise definition of the intent of the passage’s words.”<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the “exegetical reflection” embarked upon in this paper would be done from the background of the text of Matt 17:14-20, as the title of this paper duly highlights.

### **Delimitation of the Text of Matt 17:14-20.**

This text presents the healing miracle of the boy possessed by a demon by Jesus after his disciples had failed to heal him. It is framed, at the beginning, by Matthew’s account of the Transfiguration (Matt 17:1-8) and the command of Jesus regarding it to his disciples (Matt 17:9-13) and, at the end, by Jesus’ announcement of his forthcoming death and resurrection (Matt 17:22-23). Hence, Matt 17:14-20 is an independent unit.

Following the failure of the disciples in healing the boy, his father came to Jesus, passionately begging to be helped by him and, in a somewhat frustrated manner, recounting his futile experience with those disciples (vv. 14-16). After reacting to the faithlessness of the generation (vv. 17-18), Jesus healed the boy. Then all that experience became the occasion for him to give a strong teaching to the disciples on the need for faith, faith that endures (vv. 19-20).

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<sup>2</sup> *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 26 (Nairobi: Paulines, 1994) 38.

<sup>3</sup> For more on these concepts, cf. E. U. DIM, “Abraham the Father of Faith (Gen 12-17) – Challenge to Christians in Nigeria”, *Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (2022) 55-56.

<sup>4</sup> J. H. HAYES – C. R. HOLLADAY, *Biblical Exegesis: A Beginner’s Handbook*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (London: SCM Press, 1988) 5.

<sup>5</sup> D. STUART, “Exegesis”, in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 682.

Therefore, this text is mainly composed of two parts: Part one is the healing proper (vv. 14-18) and part two is the discussion between Jesus and the disciples (vv. 19-20). In the first part, where the man came and begged Jesus for his son, the following subdivisions are also evident: a) the man's request, describing the symptoms (vv. 14-15), b) the initial failure of the disciples in healing him (v. 16), c) Jesus' response of lament (v. 17) and d) the healing of the boy (v. 18). Part two of the story has two parts: a) the disciples' question to Jesus on why they failed (v. 19) and b) Jesus' answer which includes a further statement about faith (v. 20).<sup>6</sup>

There is, as yet, no general consensus as to why Matthew placed this pericope in its present position in his gospel, almost towards the end of it. But most scholars think that it was at this time when Jesus was approaching the end of his ministry, that the incident actually took place – as one can also conclude from Luke 9,37 where the time was specifically referred to: “on the next day, when they had come down from the mountain” of the Transfiguration.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the record of this miracle is also found in the other two Synoptic Gospels, in Mark 9:14-29 and Luke 9:37-43.

Some of the ancient authorities go further to add v. 21 to Jesus' explanation in this text: “But this kind does not come out except by prayer and fasting.” But this addition, which is not found in the best manuscripts, is perhaps due to a later editorial assimilation to Mark 9:29.<sup>8</sup>

### **Exegetical Analysis of Matt 17:14-20**

There is an obvious Christological aspect to this miracle. This is brought out especially by the fact that it was only Jesus who could restore the possessed boy to health, the disciples having really failed in that aspect, as already noted. However, the evangelist does not seem to emphasize this Christology, as he leaves it rather implicit – unlike Luke who concludes the pericope on that strong note: “And all were astounded at the greatness of God” (Luke 9:43). Matthew rather emphasizes the importance of faith in that miracle story – in both parts of it.<sup>9</sup> He begins to do this right from the beginning of the story, bringing it to a climax in the response of lament of Jesus in v.17, and making it more explicit in Jesus' instruction to the disciples in v. 20.

Thus, right from the beginning of the story, Matthew presents the father of the possessed boy as one who has faith in Jesus. He portrays him as worshiping Jesus by the use of three Greek words in v.14: *prosēlthen* (he came to) which has cultic connotations and which also points to the

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<sup>6</sup> D. A. HAGNER, *Matthew 14-28* (WBC 33B; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995) 503.

<sup>7</sup> HAGNER, *Matthew 14-28*, 502.

<sup>8</sup> W. F. ALBRIGHT – C.S. MANN, *Matthew* (The Anchor Bible 26; New York: Doubleday, 1971) 209.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. B. T. VIVIANO, “The Gospel According to Matthew”, in R. E. BROWN – J. A. FITZMYER – R. E. MURPHY, ed., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Bangalore: Theological Publications, 1994) 660.

messianic character of Jesus;<sup>10</sup> *gonupetōn* (kneeling down); and he even called Jesus *Kurie* (Lord), a more reverent title,<sup>11</sup> as against Mark's and Luke's *didaskale* (teacher) in Mark 9:17 and Luke 9:38 respectively. Even the expression which the man uses in his request to Jesus in v. 15, "have mercy on my son" (*eleēson mou ton huion*), also highlights him as a man of faith.<sup>12</sup> His desperate report to Jesus that he has earlier brought the boy to the disciples who could not help him in any way (v. 16), seals this point of view regarding his faith in this first section.

It is all these faith-laden developments on the part of this man which helped to elicit the response of lament from Jesus: "O faithless and perverse generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you..." (v. 17). The word "faithless" (*apistos*) is a very strong description which is addressed to the whole "generation" (*genea*) of the people gathered around Jesus – already described as "the crowd" (*ton ochlon*) in v. 14. This description would naturally include the father of the boy – even though he has some faith as already shown – as well as the disciples who had earlier failed in the healing. This clearly points to the insufficiency of their faith, as those disciples could be said to have actually "regressed to the spiritual level of the multitude."<sup>13</sup> This, perhaps, is the reason why Jesus describes them as "perverse" (*diestrammenē*) as well, a word also employed by Paul together with *genea* in the context of faith and good behaviour in Phil 2:15 – both of these NT usages being directly traced back to Moses' employment of the same expression in Deut 32:20 where the "perverse generation" (*genea exertrammenē*) of Israel is said to have no faith (*pistis*).<sup>14</sup> In short, Jesus expresses his exasperation at the disciples' lack of faith here by using the phrases which Moses had used in describing Israel's faithlessness in Deut 32:5,20.<sup>15</sup> It is on account of this lack of faith that Jesus asks the questions regarding the imminence of his absence, as already foretold in Matt 17:9 and taken up in Matt 17:22-23 – texts which actually frame this miracle story, as already indicated. Hagner points it out: "There is an undeniable frustration in Jesus' questions – a frustration over the breakdown of the dawning kingdom in his absence, reflected in the powerlessness of the disciples. They appear themselves to have been affected by the unbelief of the crowd, and they will receive their rebuke in v. 20."<sup>16</sup> Thus, Jesus "is disappointed at their failure to cope without his being on the spot, for his physical presence will

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<sup>10</sup> D. A. HAGNER, *Matthew 1-13* (WBC 33A; Nashville, Thomas Nelson, 1993) 86.

<sup>11</sup> VIVIANO, "The Gospel According to Matthew", 660.

<sup>12</sup> HAGNER, *Matthew 14-28*, 503.

<sup>13</sup> W. D. DAVIES – D. C. ALLISON, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, Vol. 2 (The International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: T & T. Clark, 1991) 724.

<sup>14</sup> DAVIES – D. C. ALLISON, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, Vol. 2, 723.

<sup>15</sup> A. LESKE, "Matthew", in W. R. FARMER, - al, ed., *The International Bible Commentary* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1998) 1305.

<sup>16</sup> HAGNER, *Matthew 14-28*, 504.



not be with them for long, and then they will have to learn to rely upon him spiritually.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, “when he was already feeling that he had groomed them well,” those disciples disappointed and frustrated him.<sup>18</sup>

This background then sets the stage for the final instruction by Jesus on faith, following from the disciples’ question to him after healing the boy: Why could we not cast it out? (v. 19). He then replied: “Because of your little faith. For truly, I say to you, if you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you” (v. 20). His introduction of this comment with “for truly I say to you” (*amēn gar legō humin*) in v. 20, is emphatic and authoritative.<sup>19</sup> The mustard seed is the smallest of all seeds (Matt 13:31-32). Therefore, “faith as a grain of mustard seed” (*pistin hōs kokkon sinapeōs*) refers to the smallest possible amount of faith: “Just that small amount of faith has unlimited potential and through God’s power makes everything possible.”<sup>20</sup> This fact is illustrated with the “proverbial and hyperbolic analogy” of moving mountains and the affirmation which concludes the whole verse: “and nothing will be impossible to you” (*ouden adunatēsei humin*).<sup>21</sup>

The issue of moving mountains with faith is also spoken of in Matt 21:21: The fig tree had withered at Jesus’ words, when he could not find some fruit on it. The disciples had marvelled, asking: “How did the fig tree wither at once?” (Matt 21:20). Then Jesus answered them: “Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and never doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and cast into the sea,’ it will be done. And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith” (Matt 21:21-22). In any case, this reference to “mountain” in these passages has to “be taken figuratively of any seemingly immovable obstacle.”<sup>22</sup>

Thus, in Matthew, faith is a very important concept. It is always emphasized by Jesus, especially as a pre-requisite for miracles (cf. Matt 9:2,22,29; 15:28; 17:20; 21:21 and 23:23). Hence, the central concern, in this pericope, is the relation between faith and healing. But unlike in other places where this issue is discussed in the Gospel, the focus here is not on the faith of the person receiving the miracle (cf. Matt 9:28-29) but on the faith of those by means of whom that healing

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<sup>17</sup> R. E. NIXON, “Matthew” in D. GUTHRIE – *al*, ed., *New Bible Commentary*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1970) 838.

<sup>18</sup> A. I. EZEOGAMBA, “The Frustration of Jesus (Luke 9:37-43) in the Context of Catholics in Anambra State”, in C. A. ONYILOHA – C. A. UGHAERUMBA, *Perspectives on Religion, Society and Development: Essays in Honour of Rev. Fr. Raphael D. Nwankwor, PhD (1946-1993)* (Nnewi: CLI Publications, 2020) 93.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. HAGNER, *Matthew 14-28*, 505.

<sup>20</sup> HAGNER, *Matthew 14-28*, 505.

<sup>21</sup> HAGNER, *Matthew 14-28*, 505.

<sup>22</sup> NIXON, “Matthew”, 839.

is carried out – hence, Jesus’ strong emphasis on the faith of the disciples (v. 20). Nevertheless, from what has been shown, it must be said that Matthew’s emphasis on faith, especially regarding healing, has three sides to it: the faith of those who are the means of the healing, the faith of the recipient of the healing and the will of God regarding the healing. In fact, it is the will of God which is the final determinant in any healing ministry, as Hagner notes in this lengthy observation:

Healings require faith, yet faith, even genuine faith, whether of the healer or the would-be-healed, cannot demand healing. Disciples, moreover, cannot depend on a mechanistic approach to the works of the kingdom. With faith all things are possible – but only within the sovereign and sometimes mysterious will of God. In this instance, as we come to know, it was God’s will for the healing of the man’s son, but that healing was at first hindered by the uncertainty of the disciples. Nothing is impossible for the disciple of Jesus who with faith works within the established will of God. It is, therefore, the case that not every failure in the performance or reception of healing is the result solely of insufficient faith.<sup>23</sup>

### **Reflection for Christians Today**

In this text of Matt 17:14-20, Jesus underlines the need for faith on the part of all his followers (Matt 17:17,20). However, it is only a single instance of that emphasis in the Gospel of Matthew, as has been highlighted above. But faith is also emphasized not just in that Gospel of Matthew, or in all the Gospels, or even in the NT alone, but actually in the whole Bible. To that end, the history of salvation, as revealed right from the OT, is the journey of God’s people in faith.<sup>24</sup> This history reaches its climax in Jesus in the NT, hence the emphasis of this paper also on faith.

From Jesus’ comments in the text under analysis, the lack of faith is a big “minus” for everyone, and more so, for the Christian – as faith is even the first requirement for salvation. Hence, Jesus asks the disciples: “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16:15-16; cf. also Matt 28:19-20 and John 3:36). The entire NT is also emphatic on this (here cf., for instance, 2 Cor 5:6-7, and Jas 2:14-17), as also the Christian Religion down the centuries.

The present day and age is often described as the digital age, characterized by many developments and advancements in science and technology. These have generally helped to improve the quality of life in the human society but have also brought many challenges, among them issues concerning faith and religion. Thus, “while not a few have achieved a lively sense of the divine” by means of

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<sup>23</sup> HAGNER, *Matthew 14-28*, 506.

<sup>24</sup> Here cf. for instance, the summary of the history of Israel as a journey of faith in God in Heb 11:17-37.

these modern advancements, on the one hand, “greater numbers are falling away from the practice of religion,” on the other:<sup>25</sup>

In the past it was the exception to repudiate God and religion to the point of abandoning them, and then only in individual cases; but nowadays it seems a matter of course to reject them as incompatible with scientific progress and a new kind of humanism. In many places it is not only in philosophical terms that such trends are expressed, but there are signs of them in literature, art, the humanities, the interpretation of history even civil law: all of which is very disturbing to many people.<sup>26</sup>

The Council Fathers made these observations in the early 60’s, precisely in 1965. Today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the situation has naturally become more challenging especially with the issue of Globalization<sup>27</sup> – particularly with the seemingly uncontrollable boom in modern means of communication which has made the world a global village. Globalization has, naturally, both positive and negative aspects. These include, positively, the breakthroughs in science and technology, advanced health facilities, better networking and sharing of information, and higher standard of living for some sections of society. But among the negative effects are the consumerist-materialist lifestyle, inequitable accumulation of wealth, monopoly, waste of scarce resources, ecological degradation, unfair trade relations, widening gap between the rich and the poor of society, and increasing indebtedness of the poor countries.<sup>28</sup> Then comes the emphasis: “While the trend can easily be seen as an economic issue, it is also a socio-political, religio-cultural and spiritual issue. For as some theologians have said, globalization has brought to the fore a new religion: the market. Or, as others say, it is not so much a new religion but the old worship of mammon in another form.”<sup>29</sup>

Of special mention here are the youth who, as digital natives so to speak, are really very active in this world of globalization particularly in the area of communication or “social media”, in common parlance:

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<sup>25</sup> VATICAN II, “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*”, no. 7.

<sup>26</sup> VATICAN II, “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*”, no. 7.

<sup>27</sup> This concept has, technically, no definite and all-agreeable definition. But, generally, it is a modern worldwide trend towards unification, touching all aspects of human life and, hence, occasioning the emergence of very powerful alliances all over the world.

<sup>28</sup> C. T. GOTAN, “Challenges of Globalization: An Agenda for Theological Formation of Youths in Nigeria,” in L. E. IJEZIE – S. AUDU – A. ACHA, ed., *Youth Formation and Globalisation in the Nigerian Context (Proceedings of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Conference of Catholic Theological Association of Nigeria [CATHAN])* (Port Harcourt: CATHAN Publications, 2018) 19.

<sup>29</sup> GOTAN, “Challenges of Globalization: An Agenda for Theological Formation of Youths in Nigeria,” 19-20.



The cyberspace is their world and very often they would meet their friends online before physical contact. Social media has become for them the modern *Areopagus*, a place where all of the rival philosophical and religious ideas of the period were advertised and publicly debated. With easy-to-use browsers, wireless devices with quick internet access, citizens of this e-generation find it most convenient to surf the web for their lives-social interactions not excluding learning, entertainment and leisure. Connectivity and interactivity are part of their worldview; a day without use of any social media platform for a great majority of the youth could be dreary and unexciting. Many youth would give up their meals for a “chitty chatty” session with online friends and virtual communities with much excitement and containment ....<sup>30</sup>

All these tend, in their turn, to have a major influence on faith and religion, generally speaking, in the world today – tending to relativize them to the private confines of the individual, to almost a relegated status, in preference to the secular and seemingly more pressing but mundane demands of modern society. The end result may, unfortunately, give rise to the situation where people generally claim to be Christians but do not actually bother to practically live out that vocation in their day to day lives – the very situation decried by Jesus in our text (Matt 17:17). Thus, going by Jesus’ reaction in that text, many do not stop to wonder what his reaction would actually be were he to be physically present in the world of today!

This wonder is actually fuelled by the fact that Christians, by that fact of being Christians, are citizens of two cities: the heavenly and the earthly cities and they, therefore, have obligations to both, according to each one’s state in life.<sup>31</sup> All Christians are, therefore, called upon to strongly participate in Christianity’s task of preaching the gospel to the world; but for the laity, especially: “not only are they to animate the world with the spirit of Christianity, but they are to be witnesses to Christ in all circumstances and at the very heart of the community of mankind.”<sup>32</sup> But this requires faith, active faith, as Jesus demands in our text – but it is that faith that is seriously under threat in the world of today.

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<sup>30</sup> I. K. EGERE, “Social Media and Youth formation: Participative Technology and Ecclesial Transformation,” in L. E. IJEZIE – S. AUDU – A. ACHA, *ed.*, *Youth Formation and Globalisation in the Nigerian Context (Proceedings of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Conference of Catholic Theological Association of Nigeria [CATHAN])* (Port Harcourt: CATHAN Publications, 2018) 504.

<sup>31</sup> E. U. DIM, “The Plot to kill Joseph by his Brothers (Gen 37:2-36): It’s Place within the Joseph Story and Lessons for Christians in Nigeria”, *International Journal of Academic and Applied Research (IJAAR)* Vol. 6, no. 12 (December, 2022) 145.

<sup>32</sup> VATICAN II, “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: *Gaudium et Spes*”, no. 43.

### **Pertinent Recommendations**

The fact that it is only Jesus who could heal the boy possessed by a demon in this text of Matt 17:14-20 strongly highlights the Christological emphasis of that pericope, a fact that Luke further underlines in his own text – as already stated. Thus, God is almighty and, right from the OT, believers in him “reflect and are convinced that God initiates, sustains, and governs the universe, and that he directs history.”<sup>33</sup>

Consequently, it has to be stated that knowing God and, hence, living with strong faith in God as a Christian, for instance, does not in any way oppose the dignity of human beings. It rather enhances it: “The Church holds that to acknowledge God is in no way to oppose the dignity of man, since such dignity is grounded and brought to perfection in God. Man has in fact been placed in society by God, who created him as an intelligent and free being; but over and above this he is called as a son to intimacy with God and to share in his happiness.”<sup>34</sup> Therefore, the eschatological hope in the life that is yet to come does not in any way diminish the importance of this present one. Rather, such a hope further vivifies it, dignifying it all more:

She further teaches that hope in a life to come does not take away from the importance of the duties of this life on earth but rather adds to it by giving new motives for fulfilling those duties. When, on the other hand, man is left without this divine support and without hope of eternal life his dignity is deeply wounded, as may so often be seen today. The problems of life and death, of guilt and of suffering, remain unsolved, so that men are not rarely cast into despair.<sup>35</sup>

Consequently, although faith is a gift from God as already pointed out, those who believe in him have the duty to protect and nourish that faith, else it weakens, stunts and, even dies – and this, this writer believes, is the emphasis that should constantly be made to the Christians of this day and age. This is only a natural phenomenon which also applies to all human endeavours. Jesus is, indeed, very clear on this fact, as is expressed, for example, in the Parables of the Sower (Matt 13:1-9, 18-23; Mark 4:1-9, 13-20; Luke 8:4-8, 11-15) and of the Weeds among the Wheat (Matt 13:24-30, 36-43) respectively. St. Paul does the same (1 Cor 9:24-27). The Acts of the Apostles is replete, as well, with many efforts by the early Christians to plant the faith and to fructify it: Peter and the other eleven Apostles strongly proclaiming their faith and ardently appealing to others to embrace it, with overwhelming results of conversion (Acts 2:14-47; 4:1-37); Paul

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<sup>33</sup> J. J. SCULLION, “God in the OT”, in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 1042.

<sup>34</sup> VATICAN II, “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: *Gaudium et Spes*”, no. 21.

<sup>35</sup> VATICAN II, “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: *Gaudium et Spes*”, no. 21.

embarking, with his companions, on three extensive and heavily tasking missionary journeys (Acts 13:3-14:28; 15:40-18:22 and 18:23-21:15) to mention but these two.

Thus, Christians enliven their faith through acts that make that faith grow, by always coming “together to praise God in the midst of his Church, to take part in the Sacrifice and to eat the Lord’s Supper.”<sup>36</sup> In other words, apart from constant private prayer (1 Thess 5:17), where they pray to their heavenly Father in secret (Matt 6:6), Christians are, in good disposition, to also participate in community liturgical worship and actions, hearing and sharing the word of God together, fraternal relationships with one another aimed especially towards mutual upliftment, encouragement and sustenance especially in difficult situations<sup>37</sup> – for Jesus promises to be among two or three of his followers gathered in his name (Matt 18:20). This recommendation is particularly important because often, “this faithlessness and frustration of Christian faith is manifested in the lack of active participation in liturgical activities as well as when faith comes into conflict with the culture of a people.”<sup>38</sup> Thus, to keep their faith alive, active and dynamic, Christians – particularly the Christians of today – are to “always profess it, celebrate it and renew it.”<sup>39</sup>

In fact, Paul emphasizes all that has just been stated above as, speaking of the righteousness that comes from faith, he underlines:

The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart (that is, the word of faith which we preach); because, if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For man believes with his heart and so is justified, and he confesses with his lips and so is saved (Rom 10:8-10).

Christian leaders, of course, have very serious roles to play in this also. As they are the ones who take charge of Christian communities and groups, at various levels – and they include Priests, Religious, Pastors, Elders and General Overseers<sup>40</sup> – they have to be open to the demands of the times regarding the faith of the people under their care. Such a disposition would naturally make the Christian groups to move forward with the times, as much as is possible, in order to make the Christian message to be perennially relevant to all times, ages and circumstances. For the youth,

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<sup>36</sup> VATICAN II, “The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy: *Sacrosanctum Concilium*,” no. 10.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. VATICAN II, “The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy: *Sacrosanctum Concilium*,” nos. 11-13.

<sup>38</sup> A. I. EZE OGAMBA, “The Frustration of Jesus (Luke 9:37-43) in the Context of Catholics in Anambra State”, 71.

<sup>39</sup> E. U. DIM, “Abraham the Father of Faith (Gen 12-17) – Challenge to Christians in Nigeria”, *Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol. 10, no. 1 (2022) 63.

<sup>40</sup> E. U. DIM, “St. Paul, an inspiring Leader in the Early Christian Communities (2 Cor 11:23-29) – Points for Reflection for Priests and Christian Leaders”, *Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol. 10, no. 5 (2022) 2.

specifically, “we need to think new ways of presenting the perennial truths of our faith, our unchanging values in a changing world, so that the youth, who are destined as the successors of our successes, will embrace Jesus, the Church, and eternal values with passion, desire, and ‘coolness’”<sup>41</sup>

Furthermore, these Christian leaders have also to bear the following notable observation in mind:

When isolated from the life of the people, religion becomes mere establishment with its abstract notions of what comprises religion and how its interests must be upheld. This type of religion is often very fixated, very comfortable with the way things are, and therefore rejects change. Our youths must be brought to see religion as a way of life, rooted in the concrete realities of the people and concerned about the quality, dignity, fulfilment and the sanctity of the web of life. Consequently, theology would function to nurture this way of life and living where the youth are challenged to be exemplary by being the light and salt of the nation.<sup>42</sup>

Thus, globalization should also be turned into a valuable and veritable instrument for the advancement of the Gospel and Christianity in this age. “The same media, internet, and cell phones should be used as a means to globalize Christianity to fulfil Christ’s great Commission in such a way that even young people who do not come to church, are reached.”<sup>43</sup> In that way, the Christian message would become better preached in this day and age, leading to stronger, more dynamic and enduring faith among Christians.

## CONCLUSION

Jesus healed the boy who was possessed by a demon after his disciples had failed to do so (Matt 17:14-20). This prompted him to decry the faithlessness and perversity of the generation of his disciples of that time and age when the healing was performed (Matt 17:17), insisting that faith, even as small as the seed of a mustard, would actually have seen them through, not only concerning that issue of healing, but also in their general lives as his followers (Matt 17:20).

From the analysis of this text in this paper, there emerges the clear admission that the faithlessness decry by Jesus about his followers at that time, equally applies to Christians of the present day

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<sup>41</sup> R. O. AINA, “Can Jesus and the Church be ‘cool’ Today?”, in L. E. IJEZIE – S. AUDU – A. ACHA, ed., *Youth Formation and Globalisation in the Nigerian Context (Proceedings of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Conference of Catholic Theological Association of Nigeria [CATHAN])* (Port Harcourt: CATHAN Publications, 2018) 13.

<sup>42</sup> GOTAN, “Challenges of Globalization: An Agenda for Theological Formation of Youths in Nigeria,” 36.

<sup>43</sup> GOTAN, “Challenges of Globalization: An Agenda for Theological Formation of Youths in Nigeria,” 36.

and age, otherwise also known as the digital age. That faithlessness seems even to have become more pronounced today mainly on account of the rapid technological advancements of this age, especially in the area of communication, which seem to lead to widespread loss of interest on matters which are not purely scientific, so to speak, especially faith and religion. The tendency for many these days, therefore, is to see faith and religion as largely outmoded and mainly irrelevant to their day to day lives.

This paper disagrees with that trend of thought and living, maintaining that it is the knowledge of God and faith in him, the almighty Being, which actually enhance human dignity and ensure man's sustained fulfilment amidst all the vagaries of life even in the digital age. To that end, Christians have to do all in their power to always nourish and live out their faith so as to make it, especially through their leaders, relevant to all, including the youth, even in the digital age. In so doing, they would naturally be fulfilled in their lives, generally, while, at the same time, living out a "faith that endures" (Matt 17:20) – thereby shining out, as Jesus actually wishes, in the fulfilment of their roles as the light of the world and the salt of the earth (Matt. 5:13-15).