Emotional Toxicity and Divine Healing: A Study of Ephesians 4:31 and its Implications for Pastoral Care in the Redeemed Church in, Lagos, Nigeria

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Abstract

In a culture where divine healing is celebrated but emotional struggles remain silenced, the Church must confront the unseen wounds of the soul. Despite the prominence of healing theology in academia, emotional toxicity—manifesting as bitterness, anger, and malice—and its impact in Nigerian churches remains largely unaddressed in pulpit ministry and pastoral care. The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) in Lagos State, Nigeria, represents one of Africa's largest Pentecostal movements, celebrated for its divine healing ministries yet increasingly scrutinised for pastoral practices that may perpetuate emotional harm. This study examines emotional toxicity within RCCG pastoral care through a focused theological analysis of Ephesians 4:31. The study analyses the Greek terms pikria, orgē, thymos, kraugē, and kakia within the literary context of Ephesians 4:17 to 32, exploring how Paul's ethical mandate informs pastoral strategies for emotional and spiritual healing in RCCG contexts. Findings reveal a significant disconnect between New Testament mandates for emotional renewal and prevailing healing practices in RCCG Lagos parishes, where physical restoration is prioritised and emotional wounds are frequently spiritualised or suppressed. The study recommends incorporating New Testament ethics into RCCG pastoral care training, enhancing mental health literacy among parish pastors, and promoting interdisciplinary research on emotional toxicity within Nigerian Pentecostalism.

Keywords: emotional toxicity, divine healing, Ephesians 4:31, pastoral care, Redeemed Christian Church of God, Lagos, Nigerian Pentecostalism

Introduction

There is a vibrant expression of faith and flourishing Christian healing ministries celebrated in Nigerian Christianity yet emotional toxins often remain concealed or disregarded, camouflaged behind vibrant worship or testimonies of divine intervention. The dominance of celebratory healing culture, which foregrounds physical deliverance, tends to overshadow the silent struggles of emotional and mental health issues, which are often stigmatized or silenced in the religious context. The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) in Lagos State, Nigeria, presents this compelling paradox that warrants careful theological examination. On one hand, the church flourishes with testimonies of divine healing and physical restoration, with healing services, anointing ceremonies, and mass crusades forming central features of its worship life. On the other hand, emotional, mental, and psychological wounds among its members often remain overlooked, creating what scholars increasingly recognise as emotional toxicity within the religious landscape.[1] This phenomenon manifests through persistent shame, suppressed anger, unresolved bitterness, and spiritual manipulation that damage both individual wellbeing and congregational health.[2] Despite the prominence of healing theology, the integration of emotional healing into pastoral practices

remains substantially disregarded.[3] Paul's instruction in Ephesians 4:31, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice," provides a fundamental biblical framework for understanding emotional toxicity and its remedy in the Christian community. This passage, situated within Paul's broader discourse on Christian unity and renewal, offers insights for contemporary pastoral theology, particularly where spiritual authority and healing practices intersect with social and psychological dynamics.[4] The verse identifies specific emotional conditions - bitterness, wrath, anger, clamour, and malice - that undermine community cohesion, and calls for their deliberate removal as a mark of Christian transformation.

The RCCG, founded in 1952 by Pa Josiah Akindayomi and now led by Pastor Enoch Adeboye, has become Nigeria's most prominent Pentecostal denomination, with its international headquarters in Lagos and thousands of parishes across the state.[5] The church's emphasis on divine healing, prosperity theology, and spiritual warfare creates distinctive pastoral challenges for addressing emotional toxicity. While these emphases have brought hope to millions, they have also created environments where emotional vulnerability is stigmatised, psychological struggles spiritualised, and pastoral authority exercised in ways that can perpetuate rather than heal emotional wounds.[6] This is particularly evident in Lagos State, where RCCG's dense parish network and high-profile programmes such as the Holy Ghost Congress and monthly Holy Ghost Services attract millions of worshippers, yet pastoral care models often prioritise physical restoration over comprehensive emotional and psychological healing.

The significant gap in pastoral theology and African Christian studies in examining how New Testament principles, particularly Ephesians 4:31, can inform pastoral care within a specific Nigerian Pentecostal context is the lacuna this study hopes to fill. Existing literature on RCCG have focused extensively on its growth strategies, leadership structures, and healing theology, but has given limited attention to the emotional dimensions of congregational life and the psychological impact of its healing practices. The research question guiding this study is therefore: How can Ephesians 4:31 serve as a theological foundation for developing pastoral responses to emotional toxicity within RCCG congregations in Lagos State, and what practical implications emerge for divine healing ministries in this specific context? This study draws upon secondary literature in biblical studies, pastoral theology, and African Christianity to propose a framework for emotionally informed pastoral care that remains faithful to RCCG's theological commitments while addressing the psychological needs of its members.

Defining Emotional Toxicity

Emotional toxicity in religious contexts refers to patterns of emotional harm that occur within faith communities, characterised by chronic shame, suppressed anger, unresolved bitterness, and psychological manipulation that is presented as spiritual authority.[7] Within the specific context of the Redeemed Christian Church of God in Lagos State, this toxicity may manifest through pastoral practices that prioritise per-

formance-based spirituality, where members feel pressured to demonstrate unwavering faith through emotional suppression rather than honest expression of psychological struggles. Recent research has documented increasing concern about what scholars term toxic pastoral behaviours, including manipulation, breach of trust, defensive leadership styles, and in extreme cases, various forms of abuse that erode congregational wellbeing.[8] These behaviours are not unique to any single denomination, but their expression within RCCG's highly structured hierarchical system, where pastors exercise significant spiritual authority over parishioners, creates particular vulnerabilities for emotional harm.

Studies indicate that religious leaders themselves often experience significant emotional distress, with fragmented personalities and ministry practices that can produce controlling or abusive dynamics within their congregations.[9] This creates a cycle where wounded leaders may inadvertently wound others, perpetuating emotional toxicity through generations of church leadership and membership.[10] In the RCCG context, where the General Overseer and senior pastors are regarded with near-apostolic authority, the emotional health of leaders becomes critically important for congregational wellbeing as leaders model emotional suppression or spiritualise their own psychological struggles which tends to replicate across the church's extensive parish network in Lagos State.

It is important to distinguish between the experience of difficult emotions, which is a normal aspect of human psychology, and the cultivation of toxic emotional patterns that poison relationships and community life. Bitterness, for instance, refers to a settled resentment that poisons relationships, while wrath describes explosive anger that erupts destructively.[11] These conditions, identified in Ephesians 4:31, are not merely individual moral failures but communal problems that threaten the unity of the body of Christ. The present study focuses specifically on how these emotional toxins operate within RCCG congregations in Lagos, recognising that the church's emphasis on positive confession and faith declarations may inadvertently discourage the processing of negative emotions that, if left unaddressed, become toxic.

Emotional Health and Spirituality

The relationship between emotional maturity and spiritual maturity has gained significant attention within global pastoral theology. [12] Theologically, the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23, the call to renewed minds in Romans 12:1-2, and the put off or put on ethic in Ephesians 4:22-24 present a moral psychology of Christian transformation that integrates emotional and spiritual development. This integration challenges any theology that treats emotional struggles as merely spiritual failures rather than complex psychological realities requiring pastoral attention. Empirically, pastoral counselling literature identifies unresolved anger, bitterness, and shame as drivers of interpersonal dysfunction, ministry burnout, and congregational conflict. [13] These findings suggest that emotional health is not peripheral to spiritual life but central to it.

Within the Redeemed Christian Church of God, this connection between emotional and spiritual health carries particular significance. The church's theological framework emphasises the believer's authority over sickness, poverty, and demonic oppression through faith, prayer, and the power of the Holy Spirit.[14] While this framework has brought hope to millions, it can create pressure to demonstrate faith through the sup-

pression of negative emotions or the denial of ongoing psychological struggles.[15] Members who experience depression, anxiety, or relational conflict may interpret these conditions as evidence of insufficient faith rather than legitimate emotional experiences requiring care. This spiritualisation of emotional distress represents a significant barrier to holistic healing within RCCG congregations in Lagos State, where the church's programmes and teachings reach millions across its parish network.

Paul's instruction in Ephesians 4:31 to remove bitterness, wrath, anger, clamour, and malice assumes that these emotions are real experiences within the Christian community, not merely signs of spiritual deficiency. The passage validates the reality of difficult emotions while providing guidance for their appropriate expression and transformation.

Religious Trauma and Shame

Religious trauma refers to psychological injury that specifically involves the misuse of spiritual authority, sacred texts, and religious practices to create or maintain patterns of emotional control and manipulation.[16] This form of trauma differs from other psychological injuries because the harm is inflicted through the very structures and beliefs that are meant to provide comfort and meaning. Within the Redeemed Christian Church of God in Lagos State, religious trauma may emerge when pastoral authority is exercised in ways that shame members for their emotional struggles, when biblical teachings on faith and healing are used to pressure individuals into denying their psychological pain, or when church discipline becomes a tool for emotional control rather than restorative correction.

Chronic shame emerges as a particularly significant mechanism in religious trauma. It is often cultivated through theological frameworks that emphasise human depravity without adequate emphasis on divine grace and restoration.[17] When shame becomes the primary motivator for spiritual behaviour rather than love and gratitude, it can create what researchers describe as shame-based spirituality that undermines rather than supports psychological health.[18] In the RCCG context, where sermons frequently address sin, spiritual failure, and the need for holiness, members may internalise messages that equate emotional struggle with spiritual deficiency. This is particularly evident in healing services where individuals who do not experience expected physical or emotional healing may be implicitly or explicitly blamed for lacking sufficient faith.

The emerging field of religious trauma studies provides crucial insights into how doctrinal formations and cultural practices can themselves become sources of ongoing psychological harm.[19] For RCCG in Lagos, this means examining how teachings on divine healing, prosperity, and spiritual warfare may inadvertently contribute to emotional toxicity when they are presented in ways that shame members for their psychological realities. The study does not claim that RCCG intentionally promotes religious trauma, but rather recognises that the unintended psychological consequences of certain pastoral practices and theological emphases warrant critical examination. Paul's call in Ephesians 4:31 to remove bitterness and malice from the community implies that the Christian congregation should be a place of safety rather than a source of emotional harm, a standard against which current practices can be evaluated.

Divine Healing Theology in RCCG, Lagos and Its Implications

Christian healing doctrines in Nigeria have historically evolved from early missionary introductions through charismatic and Pentecostal revivals that emphasise divine intervention and miraculous healing as signs of God's kingdom.[20] The church's healing practices include prayer for the sick, anointing with oil, prophetic declarations, deliverance from demonic oppression, and mass healing crusades.[21] These practices are not merely therapeutic interventions but theological statements about God's power, covenantal blessing, and victory over spiritual forces that oppose human flourishing.

The RCCG's emphasis on divine healing is most visible when Pastor Enoch Adeboye, the church's General Overseer, regularly ministers healing to congregants through prayer, prophetic declarations, and the laying on of hands. These are broadcast across Nigeria and globally. However, the church's healing theology, while bringing hope to millions, has also been criticised for what scholars term spiritual reductionism, where complex psychosocial problems are interpreted solely in spiritual categories.[22] This reductionism is particularly relevant to emotional toxicity, as psychological struggles may be attributed to demonic oppression or lack of faith rather than addressed as legitimate emotional experiences requiring pastoral and professional care. These practices often produce significant spiritual encouragement and community support, yet they may also contribute to emotional toxicity when they fail to address underlying psychological or relational issues.23

Charismatic leadership dynamics within RCCG have profoundly shaped its healing practices. The General Overseer and senior pastors are regarded as vessels of special spiritual gifts that inspire followers and foster faith in healing and deliverance.24 This charismatic authority creates an environment where members may feel reluctant to question healing outcomes or express ongoing emotional struggles for fear of appearing faithless. Research into independent Pentecostal churches in Lagos underlines how leadership charisma enhances organizational growth and sustains healing ministries, yet may insufficiently address the emotional and psychological needs underlying visible physical symptoms. [24]

Furthermore, observations suggest that many healing ministries within RCCG concentrate on the external manifestations of sickness or demonic oppression while paying less attention to the invisible wounds of emotional toxicity. This oversight reflects a narrow understanding of healing that situates pastoral care models as physical restoration over comprehensive healing of body, soul, and spirit. The church's theological framework typically emphasises the believer's authority over sickness through faith and prayer, which can create pressure to demonstrate healing through emotional suppression when physical cure is not immediately evident.[25] Research indicates that while divine healing practices can provide psychological benefits, including hope and community support, they can also create shame and self-blame when healing does not occur as expected.26 This is particularly problematic within RCCG when emotional or psychological struggles are interpreted primarily through spiritual warfare paradigms that may not adequately address trauma, mental health conditions, or relational dysfunction.27 Members who continue to experience anxiety, depression, or relational conflict after receiving prayer may conclude that their faith is insufficient, thereby internalising blame for conditions that require pastoral and professional attention.

A significant challenge in RCCG contexts is what researchers term emotional invisibility, the tendency for emotional and psychological struggles to be overlooked or spiritualised in ways that prevent appropriate care.28 Unlike physical ailments, which are readily acknowledged and prayed for in RCCG services, emotional wounds such as depression, anxiety, and trauma responses may be viewed as evidence of spiritual immaturity or demonic oppression.29 This dynamic can create spiritual bypassing, where spiritual practices and beliefs are used to avoid dealing with psychological and emotional issues.30 While spiritual resources are crucial for healing, they become problematic when they substitute for rather than complement appropriate psychological care and emotional processing.

The psychological implications of these practices are particularly significant in Lagos State, where RCCG's extensive parish network means that healing teachings influence millions of worshippers across diverse socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. Pastoral care models that prioritise physical healing and spiritual warfare over emotional and psychological care may inadvertently perpetuate the very conditions of bitterness, suppressed anger, and shame that Ephesians 4:31 calls the Christian community to remove.

Implications for Pastoral Theology

The framework of Ephesians 4:31 offers several insights for pastoral theology within the Redeemed Christian Church of God. First, it validates the reality of difficult emotions while providing guidance about their appropriate expression and resolution.31 This validation is particularly important in RCCG contexts where members may feel pressured to suppress negative emotions in order to demonstrate faith. Paul's acknowledgment that anger itself is not intrinsically sinful, as indicated in Ephesians 4:26, provides a theological basis for distinguishing between legitimate emotional experience and toxic emotional patterns that require transformation. Pastoral care in RCCG can therefore affirm that feeling anger, grief, or disappointment does not indicate spiritual failure, while still calling for the removal of bitterness, wrath, and malice that poison community life.

Second, Ephesians 4:31 situates individual emotional health within the broader context of community wellbeing, suggesting that pastoral care must address both personal and systemic dimensions of emotional toxicity.32 In the RCCG context, this means examining how church structures, teachings, and leadership practices may inadvertently contribute to emotional harm. For example, the pressure of positive testimonies of healing and prosperity may create a culture where members feel unable to express ongoing struggles, thereby fostering the very emotional suppression that Ephesians identifies as harmful. Pastoral theology must therefore critique not only individual behaviours but also congregational cultures that perpetuate emotional toxicity.

Third, the passage provides theological warrant for practices of confession, forgiveness, and restoration that facilitate emotional healing without bypassing legitimate grievances.33 This is particularly important in contexts where spiritual authority has been misused, as it allows for accountability and restoration rather than mere suppression of anger and hurt.34 For RCCG pastors in Lagos, this implies developing pastoral care models that can hold both truth-telling about harm and grace-filled processes of

reconciliation, rather than urging members to simply forgive and forget without addressing the underlying wounds that produce toxic emotions.

Practical Implications for Pastoral Training

Pastoral training within the Redeemed Christian Church of God in Lagos State requires enhancement to address the emotional and not merely spiritual demands of congregational care. The Redeemed Christian Bible College and other RCCG training institutions currently emphasise biblical knowledge, preaching skills, and church administration, yet give limited attention to the psychological dimensions of pastoral ministry. This gap is significant given the emotional toxicity that may emerge within RCCG's hierarchical and charismatic leadership structure, where pastors exercise substantial spiritual authority over members who often disclose deeply personal struggles.

First, pastors need training in biblical interpretation methods that can uncover resources for emotional healing in biblical texts rather than focusing primarily on prohibitive or corrective aspects. This includes understanding the cultural and theological contexts that inform New Testament approaches to validate emotions in community life. Ephesians 4:31, for instance, is frequently preached as a call to moral behaviour without adequate attention to its communal and transformative dimensions. Training in narrative and theological exegesis can equip RCCG pastors to preach this text in ways that validate emotional experience while calling for communal transformation.

Second, given the prevalence of emotional toxicity in the Nigerian society, Pastors need basic training in recognising and providing emotionally informed care that does not inadvertently re-traumatise vulnerable individuals.35 This training should include understanding the signs of emotional abuse, the dynamics of shame-based spirituality, and appropriate pastoral responses that balance spiritual resources with awareness of psychological complexity.

Third, Pastors need education about common mental health conditions, their symptoms, and appropriate responses. This includes understanding when spiritual interventions are helpful versus when they may be harmful, and developing comfort with referring congregants to mental health professionals. Within RCCG, where professional psychological care is sometimes viewed with suspicion, pastoral training must address the theological legitimacy of interdisciplinary collaboration in healing ministry. Such training would equip RCCG pastors in Lagos to discern when pastoral care should be supplemented with or referred to mental health professionals, particularly in cases involving trauma, abuse, or serious mental health conditions.

Conclusion

This study has examined emotional toxicity and divine healing within the Redeemed Christian Church of God in Lagos State, Nigeria, through the lens of Ephesians 4:31, revealing both significant challenges and promising opportunities for more holistic approaches to pastoral care. The research demonstrates a substantial disconnect between the New Testament's comprehensive vision for emotional and spiritual healing and current practices in many RCCG congregations, where physical healing is celebrated while emotional wounds remain largely unaddressed. The analysis of Ephesians 4:31 provides a theological framework for understanding emotional toxicity not as evidence of spiritual failure but as an indicator of wounds that require careful, community-cen-

tred attention. Paul's approach validates difficult emotions while providing clear guidance for their transformation through practices of kindness, compassion, and forgiveness that honour both individual dignity and community wellbeing.

The study has shown that RCCG's emphasis on divine healing, prosperity theology, and spiritual warfare, while bringing hope to millions, can inadvertently create environments where emotional vulnerability is stigmatised and psychological struggles are spiritualised. The church's healing practices, including mass crusades, anointing services, and prophetic declarations, often prioritise physical restoration over comprehensive emotional care, contributing to what researchers describe as emotional invisibility and spiritual bypassing. These findings do not diminish the genuine spiritual benefits that RCCG members experience, but rather call for a more integrated approach that addresses the full range of human suffering.

The framework developed in this study offers practical pathways forward for RCCG pastors and leaders in Lagos State. These include recognising and validating emotional pain, theologically reframing difficult emotions as indicators of wounds requiring care, pursuing community-centred healing through the church's existing cell group structure, and integrating professional mental health resources when appropriate. These approaches honour the spiritual authority of Scripture while acknowledging the complexity of human psychology and the need for multiple resources in addressing emotional toxicity. The journey toward emotionally healthy RCCG congregations will require sustained effort from pastoral leaders, theological educators, and denominational authorities working together. However, the potential benefits for individual believers, church communities, and Nigerian society make this effort both necessary and worthwhile.

Recommendations

1. The Redeemed Christian Church of God should revise its pastoral training curricula at the Redeemed Christian Bible College and other training institutions to incorporate mandatory modules in pastoral counselling and mental health literacy, with practical skills development through supervised clinical experience.
2. RCCG should develop clear denominational policies and procedures for addressing emotional abuse, pastoral misconduct, and congregational conflicts, including both preventive measures and restorative processes when harm has occurred.
3. RCCG parishes in Lagos State should create practical resources for implementing emotional healing ministries, including curriculum for small group studies, training materials for lay counsellors.
4. RCCG should actively develop partnerships with Christian mental health professionals for referral and integrated care models that honour both spiritual and psychological healings.
5. Further research should examine the long-term effects of different approaches to emotional healing within RCCG congregations, comparing outcomes between parishes that integrate professional mental health resources with those that rely primarily on spiritual interventions.
6. Further biblical and theological research should develop comprehensive frameworks for understanding emotions, and healing from Christian perspectives that can inform pastoral practice across different denominational and cultural contexts in Nigeria.

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