




# Pauline concept of ministry in 2 Corinthians 4:1–15 and the religious celebrity syndrome in Nigeria



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## Research Project Registration:

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**Project Number:** 2400030

## Dates:

Received: 06 May 2024

Accepted: 18 July 2024

Published: 29 Aug. 2024

## How to cite this article:

Enobong, S.I., Ituma, E.A. & Uroko, F.C., 2024, 'Pauline concept of ministry in 2 Corinthians 4:1–15 and the religious celebrity syndrome in Nigeria', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 80(2), a9903. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i2.9903>

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This study aims to investigate the Pauline concept of ministry as delineated in 2 Corinthians 4:1–15 and its correlation with the prevalence of the religious celebrity syndrome within the Nigerian Church, with the objective of offering insights into addressing this phenomenon. In contemporary Nigerian Christianity, there has been a noticeable emergence of religious celebrities in Christian ministry who prioritise personal fame, material gain and sensationalism over the sincere and honest proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This trend raises concerns about the deviation from the biblical model of ministry, as exemplified by the apostle Paul, and its implications for the spiritual health of the church and its impact on society. Through a critical exegesis of 2 Corinthians 4:1–15, this study delves into Paul's understanding of ministry, focussing on themes such as integrity, humility, suffering, selfless sacrifice and the exaltation of Christ. Additionally, qualitative research methods, including interviews, surveys and case studies, were employed to examine the extent and effects of religious celebrity syndrome in the Nigerian Church. The analysis of 2 Corinthians 4:1–15 underscores Paul's emphasis on the sacrificial nature of Christian ministry, wherein servants of God are called to embody humility and prioritise the proclamation of the gospel above personal gain or acclaim. Concurrently, the qualitative research reveals the pervasive influence of the religious celebrity syndrome in the Nigerian Church, leading to spiritual shallowness, moral compromise and a distorted view of Christianity and Christian ministry in particular within the church and the larger society. Based on the findings, it is recommended that the Nigerian Church reaffirm its commitment to the Pauline model of ministry by promoting humility, integrity and a Christ-centred focus among its leaders and congregants.

**Contribution:** This study highlights the importance of aligning contemporary ministry practices in the Nigerian Church with the principles elucidated by Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:1–15. By embracing humility, integrity and a fervent devotion to Christ, the Church can effectively combat the religious celebrity syndrome within its fold and reclaim its role as a catalyst for societal change.

**Keywords:** 2 Corinthians 4; Paul; ministry; celebrity; Pentecostal Nigerian churches.

## Introduction

The text, 2 Corinthians 4:1–15 is set in the context of Paul's defence of his apostleship and ministry (Barnett 2003). In Corinth, Paul came in contact with a society that was adapted to class and status distinction. There were the Romans, the freedmen and the slaves (Grant 2001). This status consciousness found incursions into the community of believers. It is noted that a gulf existed between the rich members of the church and the poor members, noticeable during the celebration of the Lord's Supper. While the poor were left hungry, the rich class were eating well and full (1 Cor 11:21) (Sider 2005). Also, spiritual abilities and experiences became the basis for recognition and status.

Paul also came in contact with opponents and detractors who questioned the authenticity of his apostleship and lifestyle in ministry (Wright 1978). Although the identity of Paul's opponents in 2 Corinthians remains a subject of academic debate, Clements (2021) notes that they are not labelled heretics by Paul. Therefore, it is likely that their creed was at least loosely orthodox. It was their methodology Paul objected to. It was all too crafty, too devious and too shaped by the marketing techniques of the world.

These opponents of Paul obviously engaged in methodologies that promoted and projected themselves. For Paul, the indulgence in boasting and self-praising on the basis of letters of

**Note:** Special Collection: Africa Platform for NT Scholars, sub-edited by Ernest van Eck (University of Toronto, Canada).

recommendation, spectacular spiritual experiences, and the working of miracles by his detractors amounted to seeking recognition and status (Gibson 2015). In so doing, they created followership-fan-based structures that promoted personality allegiance and adulation, fame and celebrity status. These created structures resonated with the celebrity consciousness within the Corinthian congregation and the larger society (Chrysostom 2016).

Nigeria is a materialistic society that values material and status achievements (Essien 2012; Ndubueze 2021). This value system has created a celebrity consciousness which is driven by the excessive desire for material acquisition, power, prestige, social recognition and celebrity. Indeed the phenomenon of celebrity has become intricately woven into the cultural tapestry of Nigerian society (Chukwuma & Clement 2014). The idea of becoming rich and famous has risen to dimensions that can rightly be termed a syndrome (Akah & Uzoh 2019). The desire to be famous and be celebrated cuts across gender and age (Johns 2007). Uzuebumam (2017) notes that 'interest in the famous seems to be a human phenomenon as far as recorded history'. It is a common understanding that fascination with the famous dates back to the dawn of time the desire for fame and the celebrity it brings is therefore not new. In antiquity among African peoples, as in Nigeria, the desire to be famous can be traced to the ancient reverence for courageous heroes, beautiful princesses and powerful rulers. People with special endowments and bravery were seen as bearers of divine imprints. Rojek (2001) avers that famous individuals were used as social comparison mirrors that enabled other people to benchmark their lives. The famous and the celebrated were associated with achievements and exploits. Hence, they were seen as role models of success and inspirations for hard work within their environments.

This situation has an overpowering influence on the congregants, who now regard status as a worthwhile goal and a destiny to be achieved (Adesoji 2017; Ayorinde & Ajose 2022). Today, many Christian ministers measure success in ministry in terms of wealth, prestige and power (Engstrom 1978; Irvine 2005; Welch 2011). Ministers who are caught in this syndrome engage in all forms of gimmicks in the promotion of self and exploitation of the people. Although celebrity syndrome is distinctive of the Nigerian church and affects its leaders profoundly, there are few studies on record that discern the ramifications of this phenomenon (Agazue 2013; Casciano 2021; Magbadelo 2004). Existing literature has not approached the issue of celebrity syndrome in the Nigerian context from the periscope of 2 Corinthians 4:1–15. This is the gap that this study has engaged.

The historical-critical approach was adopted for this study. The historical-critical approach is a scholarly method used to analyse texts, particularly religious and historical documents, by examining the text's origins, context and development over time. This approach seeks to uncover the intentions of the original authors, the historical circumstances surrounding

the text's creation and how the text has been transmitted and altered throughout history (Charles 2010). This method is especially prevalent in biblical studies, where it helps to understand the Bible within its ancient Near Eastern context and the various sources that contributed to its composition (Hayes & Holladay 2007). The general aim of this study is to examine the Pauline concept of ministry in 2 Corinthians 4:1–15 and the religious celebrity in the Nigerian Church. The specific objectives include, but are not limited to, understanding the Pauline concept of ministry; carrying out exegesis on 2 Corinthians 4:1–15; examining Christian ministry in the context of 2 Corinthians 4:1–15; examining the culture of celebrity in the Nigerian church and Christian ministry; and highlighting the impact of celebrity syndrome on Christian ministry.

## Historical context of 2 Corinthians 4:1–15

As regards the purpose of the second letter to the Corinthians, several views have been proffered. This section of the review examined the opinions of scholars on the subject. Calvin (2024) argues that from the thoughts expressed in the second letter to the Corinthians, it could be concluded that Paul's first letter did not achieve its desired result. For him, many of the Corinthian Christians and other Christians as well despised Paul's authority as an apostle. They were persistent that Paul's apostleship was doubtful. Paul understood this clearly and knew the impossibility of his planned visit to Corinth. So, knowing there was a need to convince his opponents, including those in doubt in the Corinthian church, he had to write the second letter to the Corinthians from Macedonia. In line with this argument, Bullinger concluded that Paul's purpose in writing the letter was to clarify doubts about his ministry and apostleship as well as get things organised when he might visit the Corinthian church again (Bullinger 2022).

Bullinger, a contemporary of Calvin, asserted that Paul's second letter to the Corinthians is almost completely apologetic and that the purpose of its writing lay in its arguments (Bullinger 2022:4). He noted that in the letter, Paul is objecting to the campaign of calumny of the false apostles. Added to their campaign of calumny is their argument that Paul is tyrannical, ambitious and inconsistent. They accused him of trying to dominate especially in the authoritative manner he ordered that the fornicator be handed over to Satan. So, in order to clear these issues, Paul wrote a second letter to the Corinthians (Bullinger 2022).

Bullinger (2022:4) argues for an understanding of the purpose of the Second Corinthians in the context of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. For him, the first letter that Paul wrote did not have the desired effect on the Corinthian Christians. There were some Christians there engaging in vain talking, particularly their teachers, who were sowing the seed of rebellion towards Paul's ministry and apostleship. So, in order to refute the claims of these false teachings and also find things well-ordered should he visit again, he decided to

write Second Corinthians. For Koukl (2013), therefore, the purpose of the letter is apologetic, making a case for both Paul's ministry and his apostleship.

In Autry's thoughts, the Second Corinthians letter was written as a response to Paul's detractors in Corinth (Autry 2015). According to him, Paul had met Titus in Macedonia on his way to Corinth. Titus reported that the Corinthian Christians had responded favourably to Paul's tearful letter and Titus himself. But even at that, Paul did not know that there was still trouble in the church, this time in the form of false teachers and detractors. It was his determination to deal with these detractors that made him write the Second Corinthians letter.

Martin (1985) similarly suggests that Paul wrote Second Corinthians in response to his detractors. He argues that Paul's ministry should be understood in the context of the controversy that arose from his conversion and subsequent teachings. Martin makes the case that Paul's apostolate had never been fully accepted by those in Jerusalem. As time went by, according to Martin, Paul became estranged from his Antiochene missionary base owing to some fallouts with some apostles there. He cited the confrontation of Peter by Paul, recorded in Galatians, as regards the acceptance of the Gentiles and their requirements to become Christians. By and large, Paul, according to Martin, made many enemies owing to his teaching with many of his opponents and detractors citing his non-apostleship as a case. For Martin (1985:16), it was still the same problem that Paul was confronting in his second letter to the Corinthians, where apparently his opponents were once again questioning his apostolate and ministry in Corinth. The second letter by Paul to the Corinthians was therefore a polemic against detractors of his apostolate in Corinth. These detractors may have come after Paul's establishment of the church there. They may also have come from within the ranks of the Corinthian Christians. Second Corinthians is Paul's polemic attack against these detractors questioning his apostolate and ministry.

## Structure of the text (2 Corinthians 4:1–15)

The pericope has three structures, viz: verses 1–4, verses 5–7 and verses 8–15. The reason for this division is because of the specific subthemes they have.

### Verses 1–4: A ministry is given

Paul uses the word *διακονίαν* to represent ministry in the text. It is used in the accusative sense of *διακονας*. According to Strong (2009), *διακονίαν* has a wide range of meanings in the New Testament. *διακονας* is a feminine noun that may mean 'attendance', 'aid' and render service, especially for the Christian teacher.

According to Thayer, Grimm and Wilke (1996), the word *διακονίαν* has the following meanings: (1) service, ministering,

especially of those who execute the commands of others, (2) those who by the command of God proclaim and promote religion among men, (3) the office of the apostles and its administration and (4) the ministering of those who render to others the offices of Christian affection especially those who meet the need of others either by collecting or distributing charity. The word occurs about 34 times in the New Testament depicting the various meanings rendered above. Within 2 Corinthians, Paul used it 10 times. In Paul's usage in 2 Corinthians 4:1 and as in other 2 Corinthians contexts, *διακονίαν* means ministering the word of God which relates to the definitions given by Thayer referring to *διακονίαν* as those commanded by God to proclaim the word of God among men. Understood in this sense, ministry here depicts the act of proclaiming the gospel by those who are called. These people are Christians who proclaim the gospel of Christ within a setting which may be a church. Paul goes on to stress that the reception of this ministry by Christians is through mercy. He links the ministry to the process of having mercy from God (*καθώς ἠλεήθημεν*); receiving the mercy of God, in Paul's conception, is equated to receiving the Christian ministry. Having then received the Christian ministry as we received the mercy of God, we do not faint. Faint is represented in the verse as *ἐγκακοῦμεν* which is a plural verb in the present tense.

Being not afraid, Paul stresses also that Christians need to renounce certain vices. The vices Paul mentions are dishonesty represented as *αἰσχύνης*, avoidance of craftiness [*περιπατοῦντες ἐν πανουργίᾳ*] and avoidance of deceitful handling of God's word [*δόλοῦντες τὸν λόγον τοῦ Θεοῦ*]. Paul advises Christians to do the opposite of these by manifesting the truth [*φανερῶσει τῆς ἀληθείας*]; they are also to commend themselves to the conscience of every Christian. Verses 3 and 4 continue that the gospel should not be hidden; even if this must be so, then it has to be hidden from those who are lost *ἀπολλυμένοις*. The 'lost' that Paul is referring to here, probably, are not his detractors, but those who have refused the gospel of Christ. Thus, Constable (2012) avers that:

By 'veiled' Paul means obscure. The reason some people did not immediately understand and appreciate the gospel is that Satan had blinded their minds. It was not because Paul had sought to deceive his hearers by making the gospel obscure. The gospel is obscure to the lost until the spirit enlightens their minds. (p. 1)

Such a reading of the text above relates to Paul's teachings in 1 Corinthians 2:14; 2 Corinthians 4:6; 1 Corinthians 1:21 and 2 Corinthians 11:14 on spiritual blindness and the teaching of the gospels on the topic. Unger (1972) even goes further to link the spiritual blindness of those who reject the gospel being referred to here by Paul to the influence of the demons. The interpreter will reject this type of reading of the text by lingering on the fact that the context of the text does not make for a linkage with demonic influence.

Paul, simply, is referring to people who have rejected the gospel of Christ; these people do not want the light of the gospel to shine in their lives. According to Barrett (1971):

Paul was responding to the criticism that, to some, his gospel is no revelation at all, in other words, it is 'veiled' ...from whom, according to them, would his gospel be 'veiled'? Their reply would be, it is veiled from fellow Jews because Paul's message is unacceptable to them. (p. 216)

Barnett (1997) identifies fellow Jews, as those to whom the gospel of Paul is hidden. The researcher doubts if this is applicable contextually. Even if Paul's teaching in verses 3–4 is taken as a diatribe against his detractors at Corinth, discussions so far in the study have shown that the identity of these detractors is not easily known. So, linking Paul's thoughts here with the Jews is not right. Even the Corinthians, who forsook the gospel Paul gave them for other Corinthian 'vices', may be guilty of being qualified as 'the lost' because they did not allow the glorious light of the gospel to shine upon them. Thus, their minds became blinded, spiritually, to understand the glorious gospel of Christ. For the audience, therefore, both Paul's detractors at Corinth, the Corinthian Christians, and all Christians who rejected Paul's gospel of Christ being preached in a plain way, qualify as those who Paul referred to as being blinded spiritually.

### Verses 5–7: The core of the ministry

Paul begins verse 5 by stressing the core of the preaching of a Christian minister. Put differently, Paul was concerned to make the Corinthian Christians understand that the core of the ministry already given is 'preaching Christ' [κηρύσσομεν ἄλλὰ Χριστὸν Ἰησοῦν Κύριον]. Before the stress of preaching Christ, Paul demonises the preaching of the selves [ἑαυτοῦς κηρύσσομεν]. ἑαυτοῦς translates as 'ourselves' which refers to Christian ministers in the context. It is a reflexive pronoun in the plural accusative sense. Its usage includes both Paul and the apostles. This, of course, would include the disciples of Jesus who spread his gospel in the Roman Empire then. κηρύσσομεν refers to preaching or proclaiming. In this context, it refers to the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In Paul's understanding, the heart of the ministry given by Christ is the preaching of him (Christ). Any preaching besides this is unacceptable to Paul. Thus, Collins (2013) avers that the Christ that Paul teaches is the focal point of his apostleship. Therefore, instead of advancing himself in his ministry, he proclaims Jesus Christ to be Lord. This language is an expression of faith that calls for everyone to submit to Jesus and declare his sovereignty.

Right from the inception of Paul's ministry, that is after he encountered the risen Christ, he made preaching Christ the cornerstone of the gospel. Christ was at the heart of it and he intended to keep it that way in the Corinthian context. Again Constable (2012:1) asserts that Paul never elevated himself, even though on occasion he had to appease every man's conscience (v. 2; 6:4). Rather than promoting himself, he preaches Jesus Christ, just like a devoted slave does. He had acted in this manner in Corinth.

By insisting on preaching Christ, Paul's message here is likened to a herald, a forerunner, who announces not himself but the presence of his master. But here, Paul even goes one step further. He likened Christian ministers to slaves of those being ministered to. He uses the word δούλους [slave], a word used in the plural accusative sense. It can also mean a servant (Thayer 2011). In the context of 2 Corinthians 4:5, it refers to slaves or better put, bond servants. Ministers, as slaves, are firstly slaves to Jesus through preaching his word, and secondly, slaves to those being preached to. Thus, Paul's idea of the Christian ministry depicts ministers as slaves of Jesus and the slaves of those they preach to.

It is in this sense, that Dunn (1998) noted that:

What humbler views of himself could a messenger of the gospel take than to regard himself not only as a bondservant of Jesus Christ (as Paul delightfully called himself) but even as the bondservants of those he minister. (p. 572)

Calling himself the bondservant of Christ is not new in Pauline writings. In places like Romans 1:1, Galatians 1:10, Philippians 1:1, Paul describes himself with the word 'Bondservant'. What may be a little different in 2 Corinthians 4:5 is that he equally calls himself a bondservant to those whom he ministers.

Paul had his detractors in mind here, definitely. Unlike those who preached the gospel 'observed', Paul's preaching is strictly Christ-centred. It is devoid of the self, in this sense, the ministers' selves. It is Christ that is the focal point of his preaching. In verse 6, Paul goes on to state why he preaches Christ only. God commanded the light to shine out of the darkness. Such a light shines in our hearts to give light to the knowledge of the glory of God in Christ.

The Greek word φῶς [light] is a word that both Paul and the gossellers use for Jesus Christ. The Gospel of John had, in various ways, described Jesus as Light. In fact, in John's Gospel, it was Jesus who used such a title for himself. The 'world' is regarded as being in darkness. Even the Genesis creation account associated God with light which dispelled the darkness which dominated a formless earth. It was God who, as light, dispelled darkness. God, thus, in many Jewish conceptions became associated with light, while evil, or the 'world' and its works, referred to the absence of light, that is, darkness.

Paul uses such ideas in verse 6 when he stresses that God commanded εἰπὼν the light to shine in our hearts. God did this, according to Paul, by dispelling the darkness in the hearts of the Christians by letting them come to the knowledge of Christ, his Son. It is in this light that Wiersbe (2004) writes of the verse that:

Like the earth of Genesis 1:2, the lost sinner is formless and empty; but when he trusts Christ, he become a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). God then begins to form and fill the life of the person who trusts Christ, and he begins to be fruitful for the Lord. God's 'let there be light' make everything new. (p. 102)

Without knowledge of Christ, a Christian is in pure darkness. Therefore, the knowledge of Christ illuminates the heart of the Christian. By making this assertion, Paul was alluding to his own personal conversion experience. It was through this experience that Paul, who was in darkness, came to light. He saw God's glory revealed to him just as he makes such a reference in verse 6 here. For Paul, Jesus is the Light. His knowledge brings light to the life of the Christian which, in turn, shines through the heart.

### Verses 8–15: The ministry and the troubles of the world

From verses 8–9, Paul makes a catalogue of suffering, which has become characteristic of his ministry and that of the Christian as well.

Paul's writings are no stranger to such a list of sufferings. Firstly, in Romans 8:35–39, Paul writes about a catalogue of sufferings which threatened the Christian. Secondly, such a list would resurface in 2 Corinthians 6:4–5 in which he stresses the sufferings again. Could this list of sufferings come from Paul's own sufferings since meeting Christ? Nobody really knows. But that can be inferred from all the travails that he had come across in his missionary journeys and the quest to spread the gospel.

Verse 15 represents Paul's utmost and most sincere wish for the good and welfare of the Corinthians. Thus, he could confidently declare that *τὰ γὰρ πάντα δι' ὑμᾶς* [for all things are for your sake]. He wishes that through pains and travails, the Corinthians' lives would be made glorious and good in the Lord. This is why he wishes also the grace of God unto the Corinthian Christians in his characteristic way. And he is also confident that through the thanksgiving of other ministers and Christians, this glory he wishes upon them would be manifested. Hence, according to Clines, all of Paul's sufferings are for the sake of the Corinthians through which God is glorified greatly. And through the thanksgivings of the community grows in proportion, the increasing number of those who accept Paul's grace-filled message and become capable of glorifying God. A similar thought by Pascuzzi (2008:547) indicates that 'verse 15 expands the thought of verse 12. Everything Paul suffers is for the community, so that the life more and more of them come to experience, will occasion praise and thanks to God'.

### The problem of celebrity culture in Nigeria

In the Nigerian academic space, there are some studies on celebrity culture. The focus of the study here is to review some of these works, with particular attention to the Nigerian context. The term celebrity culture is difficult to define (Drissans 2014:109). He firstly linked celebrity culture with media cultures, while also arguing that celebrity culture is of various categories: national, sub-national and even international. He secondly concentrated on what he called cultural working

memory which improves the understanding of remembering and forgetting of actual celebrities. For Bulk and Tambuyzer (2008), celebrity culture is defined as 'a culture in which fame is central' and is primarily driven by the media. On the other hand, Gamson (1994) conceptualises celebrity status as being governed by the concept of celebrity logic, although he did not provide a clear explanation of what he meant by this term.

Others such as Cashmore (2006:13) connect celebrity culture with the idea of marketing and promotion of commodities. He stated 'We have to examine celebrity culture and consumer society as a tennis fan watches a match; constantly switching focus from one to the other. One cannot exist without the other'. Therefore, just as a tennis fan watches a match in which he ends up watching both the tennis player sell him or herself and the tennis match as well, Cashmore saw celebrity culture as a process through which celebrities sell or market themselves as well; it is marketing-driven. While the researcher is not attempting to define celebrity culture here, what may be deduced from the reviewed works is that celebrity culture involves a 'culture' that is driven by celebrity. Such a 'culture' makes celebrities the focus of attention and idolises such. It is also linked with the media, or what is popularly called media culture.

Kate et al. (2016:200) have studied celebrity culture and its influence on the youth using some Nigerian universities as case studies. Their findings indicated that celebrity culture has become dominant among the youth aided by the media. Many of the students they interviewed admitted to being exposed to celebrity culture with the aid of the media. The aspects of celebrity culture that the youth are mostly influenced by include fashion, speech and communication confidence which the authors identified as positive influence of celebrity culture on these youths. On the negative side, the authors identified celebrity worship, consumerist culture and erosion of cultural values, among others. This study has contributed greatly to the subject of celebrity culture particularly as it has become dominant among the youth of Nigeria. It has shown that celebrity culture is an integral part of the Nigerian youth's lives and as such should be taken seriously.

### Applying 2 Corinthians 4:1–15 to ministry in Nigeria

#### Not behaving in craftiness

A close look at the pericope reveals that Paul refused to employ trickery and gimmicks. In the context of celebrity culture, individuals often attain fame and influence through various means, including talent, charisma or societal privilege. However, this verse reminds celebrities that their platform and influence ultimately come from God's mercy. Paul encourages his audience not to lose heart amid the pressures and expectations of fame, but to recognise their responsibility to use their platform for positive impact and service to others (Przygoda 2020:1–9). Bringing this to bear in the Nigerian context, ministers of God always think that the preaching and miracles they do are a result of their power.

Some of them also think that it is because they went to school which is why they are able to preach very well or perform many miracles. Some even consider their physical features as reasons for their success in ministry without acknowledging the place of the mercy of God. This thesis was corroborated by Akpandem (2022) that in Nigeria, pastors appear to be infallible. The church community's creed is 'see no evil and say no ill' regarding the pastor or his conduct. Those who dare risk invoking 'Holy Ghost Fire' because the preacher is guided by the spirit. Nobody has the right to question any activity. Congregants simply believe, worship and say amen to any proclamation from the pulpit, no matter how insignificant. The pastor is god, and they have become robots.

### Not distorting the word of God

In the pericope, precisely in verse 2, many times, in the pursuit of fame or status, leaders in the Nigerian church might resort to deceptive practices. This could involve misrepresenting their actions, teachings or even their personal lives. The verse calls for a renunciation of such practices, emphasising the importance of honesty and transparency. For Paul, he is a person who has shown honesty, sincerity, transparency and dignity. Celebrity culture can sometimes lead to the distortion of biblical teachings to fit personal agendas or to maintain popularity. Nigerian church ministers may twist scripture to appeal to their followers or to justify their actions. However, this verse urges against such distortion and encourages a faithful and accurate presentation of God's word. According to Pokol (2018), Nigerian society is bedevilled with life-denying abuse of integrity because many people have taken to operating on the fast lanes of life in order to achieve what they want. Also, in Nigeria, this desire has characterised both men and women for millennia, and flatterers have used it to enrich themselves in a variety of ways. Instead of relying on charisma or celebrity status, Paul in the pericope noted that church ministers should prioritise clear and honest communication of the truth. Bringing this to bear in the Nigerian context, it could be seen that Nigerian ministers are not presenting the gospel and biblical principles in a straightforward manner, without embellishment or manipulation. Instead, they twist the scriptures to suit their aims and objectives. Osaremen (2013:1) notes that undoubtedly, certain verses of the Bible have been significantly distorted by Nigeria's religious leaders to fit their teachings. As a result, what we see are various doctrines and a state of confusion, all in an attempt to gain respect from their followers. Paul, in 2 Corinthians 4:2, noted that true credibility in the church does not come from celebrity status, but from a life that aligns with the truth of God's word. Leaders should aim to commend themselves to the consciences of believers by living out the principles they preach, rather than relying on superficial measures of success or popularity. Applying 2 Corinthians 4:2 to the issue of celebrity syndrome in the Nigerian church calls for a rejection of deceptive practices, a commitment to truth, clear communication of the gospel and a focus on living lives that align with biblical principles rather than seeking celebrity status.

### Being sincere and open to the judgement of God and men

Paul insisted that ministers of God should preach Jesus Christ rather than themselves. Paul, in verse 3, warns against the celebrity culture that can sometimes obscure the true message of the gospel. Paul emphasised that when the focus shifts from Jesus Christ to the personalities of church leaders, the essence of the gospel may become obscured. Paul is often regarded as the zealous missionary who projected Christ before himself. In relation to the Nigerian context, church ministers seem to be projecting themselves ahead of Jesus. This is seen in the fact that members of the churches in Nigeria give more respect to the pastor or priest than Jesus Christ. Lamenting on this sad development (Efekodo 2023), the problem of celebrity is so intense that it just leads people to go meet Pastor this and Pastor that, for any positive encouraging words. Unfortunately, some pastors also use the people's weakness to take away whatever little money these people have left. According to Paul, in verses 4-5, people might be more attracted to the charisma or fame of the preacher rather than the message of salvation. Paul insisted that church ministers are servants of God and not the head of God. Bringing this to bear in the Nigerian context, Nigerian church ministers seem to have the charisma of preaching and performing miracles. Thus, the people pay more attention to these Nigerian ministers rather than God. So many Nigerians now go to churches to see what the man of God looks like, because of their love for the pastor's preaching and his ability to provide solutions to their problems rather than coming to Jesus for the solution to their problem. It was on this basis that Fani-Kayode (2013) laments that the Church in Nigeria today is similar to the Laodicean Church, as described by our Lord and Saviour Jesus Himself in the Book of Revelations: 'they are rich, they are wealthy, but they have nothing' and 'they blow neither hot nor cold'. They are weak and obsessed with money and material possessions. According to the Bible, when God's judgement comes to a nation, it first affects the country's religious leadership.

### Persecution of sincere ministers of God

Notwithstanding the fact that Nigerian ministers are much involved in celebrity, Paul reminds Christian ministers that the celebrity status may try to entice those genuine ministers of God; however, they should not be discouraged to continuously live the humble life because they will not be destroyed (verses 8-9). According to the pericope, suffering is a normal aspect of Christianity in this current evil age, and persecution for the faith is part of God's design for the life of a believer. This is so in the Nigerian context where celebrity pastors bring immense pressure, scrutiny and even criticism on those pastors who refuse to engage in fame. Paul assures this set of Nigerian pastors in the text that despite the challenges they face, they are not alone. It reminds them that God's presence and grace sustain them through difficult times, offering hope and resilience amid adversity. Sincere ministers of God may bring confusion or doubt regarding one's identity, purpose or calling. Paul

insists that, even in moments of perplexity, leaders can find hope in God. Thus, Nigerian leaders who may be unwilling to join the bandwagon of famous celebrities should put their trust in God's faithfulness and promises, avoiding despair.

In verses 9–10, the Apostle Paul assured believers that Church leaders may face criticism, opposition or persecution, especially if their actions or teachings deviate from popular expectations. Thus, some Nigerian pastors who are sincere in the discharge of their duties may face ridicule from their members and also other Pastors. However, Paul assured that despite the hostility, church ministers in Nigeria should take solace in the assurance that God never abandons his faithful servants, and in times of adversity, Paul calls on Nigerian ministers to rely on God's presence and protection. However, Paul mentioned that being a genuine minister does not exempt church leaders from personal trials, failures or setbacks. However, even when they experience moments of defeat or weakness, they are not ultimately destroyed. Through Christ, they can rise again, finding strength and resilience in their identity as children of God. In Nigeria, especially among Christian ministers, they feel that are right with God and do not experience trials and tribulations. However, Paul is reminding Nigerian church ministers that notwithstanding their genuineness, trials and temptation will still come. From verses 10–12, Paul reminds leaders of the sacrificial nature of Christian discipleship. The text insisted that Christian ministers are called to embrace the cross, denying themselves and living lives of self-sacrifice. In the pursuit of celebrity status, leaders should not prioritise personal glory but rather embody the humility and servanthood exemplified by Jesus. Thus, Nigerian Christian ministers are called to follow the humility of Jesus who died on the cross by practising servant leadership. Nigerian ministers are not living a life of self-sacrifice; instead, what they usually seek is a life of self-glory. According to Kolawole (2023), it is the members of the church who practise self-sacrifice and not the church minister or leaders. For Adeyemi (2023), what drives people in church leadership now is money, rather than making sacrifices for Christianity.

### Freedom to choose Jesus or celebrity path

In verse 15, Paul mentions that celebrity status within the church should not be pursued for personal gain or glory. In the pericope, leaders are made to realise that their influence and platform are meant for the benefit of others. Bringing this to bear in the Nigerian context, Nigerian ministers and church leaders do not check if their actions, teachings and leadership serve the congregation and the broader community, and lead them closer to God. Instead, their interest is whether their teachings or leadership style is bringing people closer to them. This is why some people know the pastor without having a personal relationship with God. Nigerian Church celebrity syndrome has led to a focus on individual achievements or fame. However, Paul in this verse reminds church leaders that the purpose of their

influence is to extend God's grace to more and more people. Rather than seeking recognition for themselves, leaders should prioritise sharing the message of grace and salvation, reaching out to those who have yet to experience the transforming power of God's love.

## Conclusion and recommendation

In examining the Pauline concept of ministry as delineated in 2 Corinthians 4:1–15 and its intersection with the religious celebrity syndrome in the Nigerian church, it becomes evident that the principles articulated by the apostle Paul offer profound insights and timeless truths for navigating contemporary challenges in Christian leadership and discipleship. Throughout 2 Corinthians 4:1–15, Paul emphasises the centrality of Christ in ministry, the necessity of servant leadership and the paradoxical relationship between weakness and power. He presents a vision of ministry characterised by humility, integrity and unwavering commitment to the proclamation of the gospel, even in the face of adversity and opposition. However, the Nigerian church, like many other contexts, is confronted with the pervasive influence of the religious celebrity syndrome, where charismatic personalities often overshadow the message of Christ, leading to distortions in theology, ecclesiology and spiritual practices. The elevation of human leaders to celebrity status has fostered a culture of dependency, materialism and spiritual manipulation, undermining the authenticity and transformative power of the gospel. Despite these challenges, there is hope for renewal and transformation within the Nigerian church. By returning to the foundational principles of Pauline ministry and reorienting towards a Christ-centred paradigm, the church can overcome the allure of celebrity culture and reclaim its identity as a community of faith called to embody the love, grace and truth of Christ. This is an encouragement to pastors and church leaders in Nigerian congregations, urging them to prioritise teaching and preaching that exalts Christ above personalities. It is important to promote a robust exposition of Scripture that highlights the gospel message and emphasises the transformative power of Christ's work in the lives of believers.

## Acknowledgements

### Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

### Authors' contributions

S.I.E., E.A.I. and F.C.U. contributed equally to this study.

### Ethical considerations

This article does not contain any studies involving human participants performed by any of the authors.

## Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

## Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Disclaimer

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