


Article

The Prosperity Message as a Syncretistic Deviation to the Gospel of Jesus

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Abstract: The prosperity message preached mainly by independent apostles and prophets in Network Christianity's new prophetic churches with some Pentecostal leanings has become popular among many Africans. The link between the American prosperity message and its African nephew is discussed to disclose the unique African elements, such as Africa's traditional emphasis on a holistic spirituality which includes attaining health and prosperity by pacifying evil spirits and angry ancestors. One of the reasons for the popularity of the prosperity message is that it links closely with the African enchanted worldview and the spirituality that characterizes African traditional religion. This challenges Pentecostals to consider its compatibility with the gospel of Jesus Christ, based on the discipleship of the cross and servanthood, and suggests that the neo-Pentecostal prophet and apostle have become the modern equivalent of Africa's diviner and healer. Their message of prosperity deviates from the essence of the gospel of Christ in several respects: firstly, it entails a distorted view of God and the Bible, described in almost pantheistic terms; secondly, its anthropology and Christology view relegates Christ to a man empowered by the Spirit and elevates human beings' union with God; lastly, its view of revelation authorizes extrabiblical revelation to the same extent as the biblical text. This paper concludes that the prosperity message represents a dangerous fallacy based on a syncretistic contextualization of the gospel to African spirituality.

Keywords: prosperity gospel; new prophetic churches; African syncretistic deviations



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1. The Context: Africa and the Prosperity Message

Prosperity teaching in Africa is popular, as illustrated in a 2006 survey that Pew Research undertook in various African countries. To the question, "would God grant material prosperity to all believers who have enough faith," 85 percent of Kenyan Pentecostals, 90 percent of South African Pentecostals and 95 percent of Nigerian Pentecostals¹ answered positively.² These churches that preach the prosperity message expanded in Africa twice as fast as the Roman Catholic Church and three times more than other non-Catholic churches (Kalu 2009, p. 73). As a result, Paul Gifford refers to the phenomenon as a paradigm shift that stands out in new developments in African Christianity (Gifford 2004a, pp. 23–24; Gifford 2007, p. 22). They emphasize a new black consciousness based on the dignity of Africans.³ For that reason, their message about realizing the African dream of empowering black people by enrichment has become an attractive alternative to believers (Anderson 2005, p. 71).

Douglas Bafford's ethnographic fieldwork shows that the context for proclaiming prosperity theology is "charismatic" worship services characterized by Spirit-driven, affective worship and the believers' participation in delivering "spiritual gifts" that include healing (Bafford 2019, p. 2). They are led by a "prophet" or "prophetess" that claims an extraordinary and unique relationship with God. The unique element lies in the prophet's ability to bestow material rewards when believers faithfully obey biblical injunctions as they interpret them. Their authority is unchallengeable because they accord the same power and authority to the Bible and their private revelations that they call "*rhema*" and

“revelation knowledge”. They interpret the Bible with their new hermeneutical principle that every believer should be healthy, rich, happy and prosperous.

Why are prosperity preachers so popular when their affluence to prove the success of their theology juxtaposes with their clients’ experience of extreme poverty? Bafford argues their popularity serves as a “legitimate critique of contemporary economic and social trends, even if their solutions do not accord with dominant liberal norms,” especially when viewed in terms of Africa’s inequality between the haves and the have-nots. In addition, many poor people seek succor in spirituality, and the promises of the prosperity message catch their attention (Bafford 2019, p. 4). In the process, the message reinforces, psychospiritually, that becoming and being rich is the highest good that one can strive for (Egan 1990, p. 63). Another reason for its popularity is that it taps into the most basic human desires. However, the unbiblical, misleading and ultimately detrimental solution leaves many believers discouraged, disillusioned and bitter when the promised prosperity does not realize (Mbugua 2015, p. 66).

Traditionally in Africa, suffering followed the offending of someone that simultaneously offended the Supreme Being and aroused their anger (Mburu 2019, p. 53). Misfortunes required calling in the assistance of diviners to find out who and what had offended the spirits or the ancestors, to be followed by sacrifices and prayers to overturn the punishment or suffering resulting from witchcraft: the work of malevolent, evil spirits that someone employed. The prosperity message indigenizes the gospel, using the same themes to explain why Africans are poor.

African indigenous spirituality had already emphasized prophethood and holistic healing; hence, many Africans experienced missionaries’ Christianity with an emphasis on Bible study as too cerebral and non-experiential. African “spiritual” religions protected adherents from spiritual forces’ negative influence in daily life; the Christian message was seemingly powerless against these forces that caused suffering (Taylor 1963, pp. 21–22). Pentecostalism provided for this need with its emphasis on a direct encounter with God and divine intervention in their lives at critical junctures.

2. Theological Presuppositions

Prosperity preachers differ among themselves in terms of some aspects of their message. Still, they agree on the essence, which is captured by the popular African chorus, “Everything will double double: Your house will double double, your cars will double double” (Dube 2014, p. 6). They mainly agree on the following aspects that also illustrate how their shared theological presuppositions represent a syncretistic deviation from the essence of the gospel.

2.1. View of God

While new prophetic churches managed by prosperity teachers subscribe to most of the traditionally accepted Christian teachings on God, their theoretical confessions differ in some critically important respects, following the American prosperity tradition of E.W. Kenyon, Kenneth Copeland, Joel Osteen and others.⁴ They portray God as the One who realizes the promised prosperity, which is the right and heritage of all believers. God’s rules and principles that govern the world coincide with spiritual laws that result in prosperity, consisting of certain formulas found in “God’s Word”. God’s Word contains the necessary recipes for wealth. God and God’s Word are one; the Bible is a manifestation of God and divine power, implying that employing the Word necessarily leads to the realization of its promises (Copeland 1974, p. 46). The Bible, as the “textbook with God’s laws and rules for success,” works in an almost magical way when these laws and recipes are being applied. God, as a good God, intends believers to have all the best things in life. Believers realize the good things by carefully following the laws and formulas found in the Bible because God is the owner of a heavenly storehouse with unlimited supplies, and God has given believers the keys to the storehouse without setting any limitations. Now believers should learn to speak, live and act like the rich people God intended them to be, visualizing and

experiencing that it is in the process of happening.⁵ Positive confession conceives whatever is in one's mind that will eventually occur when one's words come to pass; words release the force of faith. Hagin's "little formula" for faith consists of four steps: all you must do is say it, do it, receive it and tell it (Hagin 1980, p. 29).

However, the faith formulas reveal a deistic god because they represent ways to manipulate God (Fickett 1984, p. 8), the "slavish puppet of anybody that knows the 'formulas' and 'spiritual laws' of how to control him" (McConnell 1988, p. 133). This mechanistic and manageable God does not represent the God presented in the Bible. This represents a deviation from the message of the Bible that touches the nerve of believers' view of God. The "prosperity god" does not require or result in a unique living, personal relationship with God who reveals and realizes the unique divine will in the individual's life, demanding the believer to trust God and God's control in all situations, including suffering and economic woes. In contrast, prosperity teachers reduce the divine involvement in the believers' lives to a mechanized way that is supposed to unlock divine provision without any proviso. Their message compromises the essence of God.

2.2. Prosperity Theology's View of Christ and Humankind

In theory, prosperity teachers subscribe to the traditional doctrine of Christ. Still, their emphasis on the upgrading of man is so prominent that it threatens the divinity of Christ, as illustrated by the concepts of the "spiritual death" of Jesus, his rebirth and "incarnation" in human beings.⁶ They follow E.W. Kenyon, who taught that Jesus left his divine nature in heaven when he became a human being. That is why Jesus referred to himself as the "Son of man" and "second Adam"; he did not have God's nature but accepted that of a human being's (Capps 1982, pp. 91–94) in order to upgrade human beings to be on par with God (Copeland 1979a, p. 90). Jesus, empowered by the Spirit, functioned on earth like any other human being.⁷ He was stripped of his deity so that human beings may be adorned with his divine nature, and his death on the cross was not the final work; in fact, it demonstrated his defeat because he received Satan's nature on the cross. That is why he had to struggle in hell for three days to conquer the powers of evil. The real mystery of who the Messiah was and why he came to the earth was only revealed in revelation knowledge to prosperity teachers; no one else has ever shared in this unique knowledge (Kenyon 1969, p. 9).

When he died, Jesus bore humanity's sinful nature and changed the nature that caused them to sin. So now believers lose their ability to sin; they live sinless lives. By his resurrection, Jesus became the first born-again human being. For that reason, Paul in Acts 13:28–33 explains that when God says, "today I have begotten you," it refers to when God raised Jesus from the dead, making Jesus the first person to be born again (Copeland 1979b, p. 9) when he took back the divine nature he had left in heaven.

The doctrine is based on knowledge hidden from other people and does not occur in the Bible; it was hidden from biblical authors (and the first Christian believers as well). The prosperity teacher can only now reveal and share these new truths to a specific group; they become the "privileged few" who will ever know it. The secret knowledge empowers them to interpret the Bible and what is uniquely happening in their lives. Like mythological presentations in second-century Gnosticism, secret knowledge revealed to a few privileged people becomes the way to become and be like God and even to become God. By knowing this secret knowledge, one is restored to become like Adam before the Fall, a perfect being infused with the divine. The secret knowledge consists of the "fact" that Jesus did not die on the cross to bear the price of one's sins. He had to die as a satanic figure to represent the reality of this sinful, fallen world in order for believers to become and live like God/gods. Jesus had to visit hell to reinstate the conditions before the Fall as a prerequisite for believers to become like Adam before the Fall, sinless and divine.

That Christ suffered under Satan in hell can be seen in two passages, according to these teachers. The first reference is found in Matthew 12:40, which explains that as Jonah was three days in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of man would be three days in the heart of the earth. Jesus' words are his response to the request of the scribes and Pharisees

to see a sign from him (v. 38). However, the only sign he offers them is the sign of Jonah; he had spent three days and three nights in the fish's belly as Jesus would also. Therefore, the interpretation changes the large fish into Satan and its belly into hell to be able to reach this conclusion. The second passage is found in Ephesians 4:9–10. The author refers to the grace each believer receives according to the measure of Christ's gift he gave them when he ascended to heaven (or "above"). That he ascended implies that he first had to descend "into the lower parts of the earth," referring to hell. However, the reference is clearly to the incarnation when the divine took on a human body.⁸

Prosperity teachers use their "knowledge" of what happened to Jesus on the cross and in hell to explain how it became possible to be equal with Jesus in all respects (Matta 1987, pp. 35, 37). Traditional theology interpreted Jesus' death as a sacrifice. As a sinless substitute for sinners, he earned forgiveness for them, saving them for a sure (second) death. However, his death did not serve to cancel humanity's sinful nature; believers will still struggle with their inclination to sin until the end of life on earth (Rom 7:21–25). Their relationship with God has been restored, but they remain enslaved to the law of sin.

Prosperity theology argues that Jesus was not a sinless substitute for sinners but a substitutive sinner (Horn 1989, p. 99). His nature changed and became sinful when he was nailed to the cross. He received Satan's nature, resulting in the spiritual death of his sinful nature. In other words, it was Satan that hung on the cross and was sent to hell to enable believers to be born again. And when he died and rose again, believers received the right to become sinless creatures, like the resurrected Jesus, and to receive all the divine privileges, such as health, wealth, happiness and prosperity. Their previously sinful humanity was upgraded to the level of God. Christ became sin so that believers could become divine. To believe that believers are "simul justus et peccator" is self-defeating in the opinion of these teachers.

Prosperity theologians argue that Jesus had to die twice, in a physical as well as in a spiritual way, as the plural use of the noun "death" in the Hebrew text of Isaiah 53:9 explains. However, the plural in Hebrew does not necessarily signify numerical plurality; in many cases, it carries the extent of the term's association. Jesus' death was so profound that the plural explains that he killed death using his own. The teachers' teaching of Jesus' spiritual death implies that the Spirit abandoned him, an unthinkable idea, given the unity that exists in the Trinity.

The fact of the matter is that unrepentant sinners die both a physical death at the end of their lives and death resulting from their due before God's judgment throne. With "spiritual death," the teachers connote that he became like a sinful human, not that his spirit or ability to stand in a relationship with God died.

What confuses many believers is the claim that prosperity teachers have absolute authority because of the unique "revelation knowledge" or "*rhema*" revealed to them. And they justify their denial of what the New Testament clearly teaches about Christ's death by claiming that they, as the anointed ones and prophets, received their knowledge immediately from God. Believers dare not contradict them because they are warned of dire consequences if any should dare to question their authority.

Prosperity's Christology focuses on the effects of the atonement for believers. What is vital is not what Christ did to save sinners but its results, which are to provide human beings with a new identity, like Christ's, with every divine privilege he enjoys as their inheritance. Sin, sickness and human needs are eradicated for them. If believers remain sick and poor, it is because they failed to realize their new identity in Christ (McConnell 1982, p. 34). Because they now live in complete union with God as an incarnation of Jesus Christ, they imply that all Christians are God to the same extent as Jesus (Copeland 1987, p. 9). As one author explains, "If sons of man are men, then it follows that sons of God are gods . . ." He concludes, "Ye are gods! . . . you are no longer an ordinary human being. You are superhuman, super extra-natural . . . you are gods".⁹ The devastating effects of original sin, as well as the sinful nature of human inclination to sin, were utterly neutralized in the atonement. Humans who trust in Christ are reinstated in their original Adamic stance; the

image of God is restored fully in their lives, and they become like Adam and Eve before their act of disobedience led to their banishment from the garden of Eden.

The first Adam was perfect and, therefore, a god. He was not only the representative of God, as in the image of God, but he was “god on earth”. The second Adam restored that capacity for contemporary believers; they were created to be gods over the earth, and now they have received the ability to become what they were intended to be and what Adam initially was. Christians do not only have God living within them because they are filled with the Spirit; they are gods. Christians are a Godkind creature. God made humans gods under God.¹⁰

Prosperity teaching does not place humans fully on a par with God; they acknowledge that as gods they do not have the same creative capabilities as the Creator. However, they are “gods under God” and “gods over the earth,” although not of the universe. Although the distance between God and humans is radically narrowed, it is still there. However, at the same time, human beings are cast as superheroes reigning victoriously over the earth and its evil powers, claiming the privileges of gods in the form of prosperity and wealth.¹¹ The teachers love to quote Psalm 82:6 which states that all of them are gods, children of the Most High, as Jesus was supposed to quote according to John 10:34, without referring to the next verse: “nevertheless, you shall die like mortals, and fall like any prince (or: fall as one man or princes)”.¹² It is clear that the term “gods” as a first denominator is qualified by “sons (or children) of the Most High”.

The privileges of believers include that they are destined to be creators of health, wealth and prosperity through the power of their words and positive confessions. “And since He created our spirits to be like Him, He expects us to be creators as well”.¹³ In other words, the good news is not that people’s relationship with God is restored, empowering them to establish the divine reign on earth, but that they can become rich, healthy and prosperous. The focus shifted from a life in service of the gospel, lived in the hope of the final establishment of the divine reign, to the betterment of one’s earthly life. What matters is what believers want and what they can acquire for free through faith. One seldom finds any eschatological expectations of life with God after death among prosperity teachers. The emphasis is instead on material possessions and human desires (Prosper 2012, p. 6).

The deviations from the generally accepted view of salvation and the emphasis on grace and faith are clear. The prosperity message changes the heart of the atonement message of the good news into a deification of human beings at the cost of Christ’s suffering on the cross.

2.3. African Definition of Poverty

The basic structure that prosperity theology uses to ground its theology is the Protestant assumption of salvation through faith by grace. It differs in a few presuppositions, the last of which is how it defines poverty.

Africa traditionally defined poverty differently from the capitalist system. In Africa, the basic community consisting of family and community serves as a condition for existence as an individual. It is based on the *ubuntu* principle: a person co-exists with others or because of others; “I am because you are”. The only way to exist is with and through the people around one. People worked, played and lived as part of a specific community, not as individuals. Whatever they did was part of a communal effort (Mburu 2019, p. 39). For that reason, people did not attempt to earn a salary to support only their close family of wife and children, as people in the Western world usually do, and they did not spend their money somewhat selfishly to satisfy only their own needs and desires. People in Africa worked to provide for the family, defined in terms of the totality of blood relatives. No one accumulated personal wealth, a cornerstone of the capitalist system. Africa instead used a socialist system where everyone took responsibility for the rest of their community members. Children cared for their aged parents when they could not work anymore, and children learned the value of hard work for the community’s benefit. For that reason, it was more important to maintain good relationships with others at work than to finish

the work quickly. Their worldview permits Africans to appreciate relationships between people as one of their highest values. To a certain extent, it shared some sentiments with the ancient Israelite worldview that valued the same traditional concerns that held the family connection as the most significant (Mburu 2019, p. 39).

One result of the African value of family life is that it defined poverty in an alternative way. Poverty did not primarily imply that an individual person lacked the necessary finances to provide the material provisions that a family needed; it is instead associated with any lack in life that reduces a person's status in life. One was poor when one lost the social acclamation and respect of the family and community. As a result, a poor person cannot attend to other people and their needs, disqualifying the person from a life considered to be worthwhile. For that reason, the solution to poverty was not found in generating enough money to subsist on by, e.g., acquiring a job. Poverty "dedefined" people's socioeconomic and political status and identity and reidentified and redefined them within new and depersonalizing social strata seen as horrendous (Quayesi-Amakye 2008, p. 33). When people or a family became poor, they, as it were, acquired a new name, face and identity in society. Other people could not see them anymore, while the rich and powerful became vulnerable victims. As shamed and humiliated persons, they became defaced and depersonalized. Their value depreciated because they had been downgraded by society. In other words, poverty was seen as the realization of a curse in peoples' lives with vital spiritual consequences and causes. When the prosperity message arrived in the African context, it redefined its view of poverty to include Africa's unique definition, serving as one explanation for the impact and popularity of the message.

In line with the African dualist way of interpreting suffering as a curse, the prophets of the independent network churches view poverty as a curse resting on certain people. As a result of the curse, they experience illnesses and diverse adversities, including the lack of the vital material means to survive and earn others' respect. They have lost face in the community and are rejected, all because of the curse resting on their lives. What they need is deliverance from the evil forces that caused the curse and held them in their sway. The teachers ask why biblical faith heroes like Abraham, David, Solomon and Job were prosperous and responded that it was the sign of God's blessing that rested on their lives.¹⁴ Contemporary Christians lose their wealth or have never received the prosperity God intended them to have because Satan's curse on their lives robs them of their heritage in Christ. They cannot become successful and prosperous, as is their right and privilege. Only when an anointed man of God releases the blockage the blessings will start flowing in their lives (Gifford 2004b, p. 172). The "magical name of Jesus" has the power to deliver believers from the curse, but it cannot happen without the mediation of the prophet. Without the assistance of the anointed person, no deliverance from curses can occur.

Because poverty is a curse from Satan, it implies that accursed people are sinful. Poverty is hence also a sin (Folarin 2007, p. 81). Christians that remain in material poverty are sinning against redemption because it is sin that brings on poverty. When they have become atoned with God, they receive material blessings and healing from all their diseases. The implication is that a faithful believer cannot be poor and ill.

In viewing poverty as a curse and sin, neo-Pentecostals do not necessarily acknowledge that poverty may have many causes in the African context, related to historical reasons such as colonialism and social injustices or current political factors like state corruption and instability that leads to slow economic growth. As a result, it disqualifies them from becoming involved in seeking solutions to Africa's widespread poverty endemic. At the same time, it inspires believers faithfully paying for the services of the anointed prophet to hope that the curse resting on their lives would be lifted without realizing that they may be victims of historically or politically generated violence or denying their responsibility for the suffering that may be due to self-inflicted causes, and that they should assist in developing a healthy work ethic of integrity and hard work while addressing the theodicy challenge of widespread poverty in Africa with integrity and honesty.

As explained, Africa's traditional dualist emphasis on the spiritual world in its interaction with the visible world views prosperity in terms of inner peace, social harmony, healing and health and liberation from evil spirits, witchcraft and demons. Much less materialistic than the capitalist system requires, it is concerned with becoming and being rich in a communitarian way (Kalu 2008, p. 124). They have not sold their souls yet to Western materialism since the vast majority suffers from increasing economic poverty, especially in countries that owe more to banking institutions and developed countries than they earn, as national debts have spiraled out of control. At the same time, a new elite middle class characterizes the African democratization process that birthed a neo-colonial political model with its inherent dynamic of unequal power relations; they are primarily the benefactors of Africa's vast resource deposits, economic liberalization and corruption, forming Africa's new economic elite (Deacon and Lynch 2013, p. 110).

3. Effects of Syncretistic Deviations

Suppose the African prosperity message presents a syncretistic deviation from the gospel of Jesus Christ, as the previous section argues. What challenges does it present to the Christian church in Africa? The last section investigates some of the effects and proposes some solutions to address them.

Since its inception at the beginning of the twentieth century, Pentecostalism emphasized direct contact with the supernatural in miracles of healing and deliverance, and the practice of the "charismata", in line with Africa's interest in the spiritual world, partly explains the movement's impact on the continent from its first exposure to it. A vital element of this emphasis for Pentecostals is that encounters with God form the backbone of their spirituality.

Prosperity theology also emphasizes the miraculous and supernatural, resulting in their African-friendly definition of poverty and the significant role of a charismatic leader. He (in most cases, a male) produces and facilitates miracles of healing and provision in material needs in distinction from what Pentecostals traditionally recognized as the work of the anointed pastor. The prophet claims that due to his direct contact with God, he received miraculous power as well as special revelation knowledge hidden from all other people. It changes him into a diviner in African terms, providing an acute need of many Africans for special knowledge about the causes of their mishaps and misfortunes, and ways to handle them.

When other churches criticized the new movement, the prophets ascribed it to jealousy because of the threat they purportedly posed for the continued existence of conventional Christianity scarred by its dead formalism. However, later, the movement did begin to routinize and regulate their practices when it became essential to become more acceptable to the broader establishment (Christerson and Flory 2017, pp. 125–26).

They often oversold the miraculous, and many of their prophecies failed miserably. Some of their large-scale prophecies expected that all wealth would be transferred to qualifying believers, leading to large numbers of new conversions and the appointment of "kingdom-minded" (shorthand for supporters of the prophetic movement) believers in top government, education, media, arts, entertainment and business positions. It would introduce Christ's return to rule the earth by employing these believers.

Overselling the miraculous is also found in some sensationalized testimonies used strategically in worship services and publications. People testify how they became fabulously rich when they consulted the prophet or apostle, followed their recipe for success by giving amply from their poverty, and testify positively of their changed status even before it was realized. The purpose of the testimonies is to build listeners' faith to trust God for the same miracles. Noticeably, most testimonies focus on finances, a promotion at work and the acquirement of wealth. In Paul Gifford's research, he finds that only ten percent refer to moral reform (Gifford 2004b, p. 173).

The challenge of the hype that guarantees that sowing money will result in harvesting blessings in terms of business and personal financial benefits is that it eventually terminates

in many disillusioned customers that leave the movement because they have lost confidence in the leader's ability to help them achieve their dreams. Some of them might even abandon religion altogether, as illustrated by the remark of an African bishop in 2018 that the popularity of the African prosperity message had led to widespread disillusionment among many Christians (Zaimov 2018).

Suppose the church provides a site where Spirit-filled believers are emboldened to bear prophetic witness and learn how to live prophetically in the Spirit in order to engage the world, as Amos Yong (2010) asserts. Should it not also provide a prophetic alternative to African politics and business scarred by corruption, patronage and oligarchy, which continues to be the worst of the colonial past? Should their message of the alternative reign of God not include that the church becomes a display window of the integrity, honesty and harmony associated with the divine presence? Then, church can become an alternative community where people share their lives and livelihood in harmony, resulting in provision for all people, as was the case in traditional African *ubuntu* economies (and some congregations, according to the book of Acts). Unfortunately, and in contrast, some African neo-Pentecostal groups have instead been characterized by a history of corruption and patronage. One such instance occurred when a prophet in Kampala, Uganda, convinced his adherents that if they sold everything they had and gave him the money, he would pay them back many times. This was the only way that they could become instantly rich. Unfortunately, the prophet then disappeared with the money, and no word had been received about him yet (Guyson 2016).

Christians associated with the charismatic network earn adequate protection from swindlers and charlatans. However, it requires the movement to organize itself into a structure that cooperates with law enforcement agencies and the government to weed out similar incidents. Otherwise, the movement can expect governments to respond decisively to such abuses. In Rwanda, for instance, the government in July 2018, in a controversial decree, closed most Pentecostal prayer houses and many Catholic churches to counter what they called the "troubling behavior of unscrupulous individuals masquerading as religious leaders" (Luxmoore 2018). Likewise, Roman Catholic bishops in the Ivory Coast responded to these unfortunate incidents. They opened a hotline against "swindlers and impostors," advising their church members to be vigilant against "badly intentional individuals" who had solicited financial donations while claiming to be Catholic clergy (Luxmoore 2018).

Neo-Pentecostal prophetism is characterized by its attention to the prophet's supposed charisma, requiring the adoration and reverence of adherents. The prophets' status, in many cases, then leads to their enrichment and personal gain when clients are forced to present prescribed gifts for them in order to secure their services (Banda 2016, pp. 208–29). J. Kwabena Quayesi-Amakye correctly calls it "prophetic monetization".¹⁵ On the other hand, the rich prosperity leaders justify their wealthy lifestyles by calling it a demonstration of the success of their theology.

When apostles and prophets assume absolute leadership and are not held accountable and transparent by anybody, they and their followers are not protected from financial practices that frequently have ended in scandals in the past. If the apostle reserves the right to make all financial decisions, the ground is prepared for financial excesses and abuses of power.

To demonstrate the wealth of some African prosperity teachers, *Forbes* found in 2011 that Nigeria's top five wealthiest preachers earned between USD 10 million and USD 150 million a year.¹⁶ For instance, Chris Oyakhilome owns a hotel, a fast-food chain and several mansions, amassing a fortune estimated at USD 30 to USD 50 million (Kingsbury and Chesnut 2018). Another report estimated T.B. Joshua's wealth at around USD 15 million (Guyson 2016). The top six wealthiest pastors in Africa, according to indapaper.com (2018), are all from Nigeria (Maxon 2019). Dominic Umoh concludes that "religion appears to be the most lucrative business today" in the Nigerian church scenario. And that applies to other parts of Africa as well (Umoh 2013, p. 656).

4. Conclusions: A Dire Warning

The study found that Pentecostal spirituality and African traditional religion share significant features that define primal spirituality. This also led to prosperity theology adopting and adapting certain beliefs and practices that contain Africans' traditional spiritual needs. For example, in both traditions, the prophet or diviner facilitates reconciliation with evil forces and angry ancestors, the causes of personal problems and poverty. Neo-Pentecostalism's prosperity teaching also links to the African dualist enchanted worldview. It presupposes that poverty (and prosperity) cannot be understood if the close relationship between the visible and invisible world is not kept in mind because they influence each other directly. By manipulating the invisible world, the circumstances of the visible world can change dramatically for better or worse.

Additionally, African prosperity teachers accept the American assumptions of mind-cure and positive thinking, found in the New Thought movement initiated by E.W. Kenyon.¹⁷ He argued that to become wealthy and prosperous, one should turn into the power of God by believing that it is one's heritage as a child of God, and then one should act as though it has already happened. The believer's faith "compels" God to give them their hearts' desires because prosperity, as salvation, is God's will for all believers, the result of Christ's act of atonement.

Several elements of the prosperity message may lead to abusive practices. Such elements include an epistemology of revelation knowledge that undermines the authority of the biblical revelation to form the basis for the prophet's authority. The prophet then teaches unorthodox and unacceptable views about God, Jesus and humanity, denying the essence of the gospel of grace, and their governance model allows the leader to make all financial decisions without accountability to anybody. Otherwise, the bad press these practices receive will reflect on all Pentecostals. Unfortunately, many researchers, journalists and participators on social media do not distinguish between classical Pentecostals and prosperity teachers. In contrast, as argued, prosperity teachings are incompatible with the Pentecostal ethos and the proprium of its theological tradition.

On the other hand, while the New Apostolic Reformation or prophetic movement contributed some positive aspects and represents a diversity of views and practices, their basic prosperity message represents deviations from the essential gospel. Their leaders should be confronted with these deviations in a spirit of ecumenical love. These leaders should be encouraged to acknowledge theologically qualified teachers with a message based on the Bible, and their own theological schools should also expose students to traditional Christian theology.

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Notes

- ¹ The differentiation in Pentecostalism is complicated by the diversity that marks the movement. One way is to distinguish between classical Pentecostalism that originated at the beginning of the twentieth century, the charismatic renewal of the 1960s, with the experience of Spirit baptism within mainstream churches and contributing to their acceptance of charismatic practices representing a second wave of Pentecostalism, and a third wave of neo-charismatic movements (McQueen 2009, p. 2). The last group is diversified, consisting of various categories: neo-Pentecostal groups, some of which were denominational and others independent, and Word of Faith or non-denominational prosperity churches (Luxmoore 2018, p. 7). The prosperity gospel spread far and wide because the message suited the economic mood of the times. Kate Bowler (2013, p. 125) explains that religious

communities were still barred from the luxury of separating spiritual and socioeconomic spheres and had to assume the task of fostering economic mobility themselves; the spiritual solutions proposed by the prosperity gospel joined up with other forms of social and economic liberation. The Africa of the past few decades was more influenced by the African American Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal movement and their leaders than by classical Pentecostalism (Marti, "Adaptability of Pentecostalism" discusses the relationship between prosperity theology and individualization in the North American context; the suspicion is that the new elite middle-class African *nouveau riche* may also be implied by an acceptance of the widespread American individualism). Pentecostal churches and groups teaching the prosperity gospel showed the fastest growth of all Pentecostal groups (Maxon 2019, p. 1). A wave of independent ministries brought an emphasis on spiritual gifts, ecstatic worship and prosperity as an expected blessing for all believers. Their leaders positioned themselves as media literate and expansionist.

² <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2006/10/05/spirit-and-power/>; accessed on 8 February 2023. Discussed in (Phiri and Maxwell 2007, p. 24).

³ Black consciousness represents the movement that started in the middle of the twentieth century among blacks that stated that the most potent weapon in the hands of their oppressors was the mind of the oppressed. Blacks should rise to a self-awareness, expressing pride in being black and determine to rise and attain the goal of deliverance from racial oppression and discrimination and political and social independence. In particular, black students, professionals and intellectuals formed the heart of the movement and they mobilized the masses.

⁴ Horn (1989, pp. 86–89) discusses the influence of American prosperity teachers on these African leaders extensively.

⁵ See <https://www.joelosteen.com/Pages/Article.aspx?articleid=6505>; accessed on 30 January 2020.

⁶ (Horn 1989, p. 96). The article does not leave room to discuss the orthodox doctrine of Christ, accepted by most Protestants and Pentecostals but it is supposed.

⁷ David Oyedepo, quoted in (Ntui-Abung 2017, p. 28).

⁸ (Hanegraaff 2009, p. 182). In discussing these verses, Ben Witherington III (2007, pp. 288–90) shows that the reference to the one who ascended and who is thought to have descended can refer to the preexistent Christ's descent in incarnation, Christ's descent into Hades after his death (in line with 1 Pet 3) or the descent of the Holy Spirit after Christ ascended to heaven. The least likely is decidedly the descent into Hades despite church fathers like Irenaeus, Origen, Tertullian, Chrysostom and Jerome's support of it. The view that it refers to the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost relies on Peter's speech in Acts 2 and the context in Ephesians 4. To identify the descent with the coming of the Spirit requires that Christ is identified with the Spirit; Paul never held to a simple identity of the two. Three points favor the view that the descent in question is of the preexistent Christ in the incarnation: the focus in vv. 8–9 is on going up, not on coming down, and on the giving of gifts as a result of going up; various early witnesses added the word "first" before "came down" in v. 9, in an early attempt to make clear that the descent preceded the ascent; and the contrast is between going up on high and coming down to earth by the same person.

⁹ Quoted in (Ntui-Abung 2017, pp. 38–39).

¹⁰ See (Hunt and McMahon 1985, p. 84), for more quotations and explanations of prosperity teachers that illustrate this dangerous teaching.

¹¹ Although some early Pentecostal preachers like John G. Lake also used the terms applied much later by the prosperity movement, including the idea that Christians become gods or God-men, the teaching was never accepted by the majority of Pentecostalism and the ideas died an early death in the movement.

¹² David Oyedepo Jnr., in a sermon entitled "Vital keys for unlocking the supernatural," states that many spiritual people are not Spirit-conscious (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tgq33sCo25U>; accessed on 2 January 2020).

¹³ Chris Oyakhilome, quoted in (Ntui-Abung 2017, p. 18).

¹⁴ Pastor Chris Oyakhilome explains in a sermon that Job lost everything he owed because Satan's curse rested on his life. He again became rich when God delivered him from the curse. The devil was the thief who stole his riches (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yQppu1NnbuE>; accessed on 17 December 2022).

¹⁵ (Quayesi-Amakye 2016, p. 303). Cf. also the critical work of (Chitando et al. 2013).

¹⁶ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/mfonobongnsehe/2011/06/07/the-five-richest-pastors-in-nigeria/?sh=74b079896031>; accessed on 8 February 2023.

¹⁷ New Thought is a movement focused on mind-healing that originated in the United States in the 19th century. Its origins can be found in dissatisfaction with scientific empiricism and the resultant religious skepticism. Phineas P. Quimby (1802–1866) is the earliest proponent and practiced mesmerism (hypnotism). He taught that physical illness is a matter of the mind. He influenced the theosophical movement, Mary Baker Eddy and her Christian Science and E.W. Kenyon. Many adherents of New Thought consider themselves to be Christian, though generalizations about their relations to Christianity have been questioned (<https://www.britannica.com/event/New-Thought>; accessed on 8 February 2023).

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