

Prosperity Gospel and the Crisis of Authenticity: Challenges Facing Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements in Africa

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Abstract: The rapid growth of Pentecostal and Charismatic movements across Africa has brought renewed spiritual energy to millions of believers, yet this expansion has also generated significant challenges related to authenticity, abuse of pneumatic gifts, and the distortion of the Gospel message. This article examines the major challenges facing Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in Africa, including the proliferation of the prosperity gospel, the misuse of spiritual gifts for personal gain, the rise of false prophets and televangelists who exploit vulnerable populations, and the growing tensions between Catholic Charismatic Renewal and independent Pentecostal churches. Drawing from theological analysis, ecclesial documents, and contemporary case studies from Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Ghana, and South Africa, the article argues that the crisis of authenticity in African Pentecostalism stems from a lack of proper discernment, inadequate ecclesiastical oversight, and the prioritization of material wealth over spiritual transformation. The research employs a qualitative, document-based theological method, analyzing primary sources (magisterial documents, pastoral letters) and secondary sources (scholarly literature, media reports) to identify recurrent patterns of abuse and to propose a framework for discernment. This research makes two original contributions to the scholarly discourse. First, it provides a systematic theological critique of prosperity theology as it manifests in African contexts, distinguishing legitimate material blessing from abusive exploitation. Second, it proposes a five-criteria framework for discernment rooted in Catholic magisterial teaching, offering practical guidance for pastors, bishops, and lay leaders to evaluate charismatic claims and restore integrity to Pentecostal witness in Africa.

Contribution: This study provides a systematic theological critique of prosperity theology in African Pentecostal and Charismatic contexts, while also proposing a five-criteria discernment framework rooted in Catholic magisterial teaching to help pastors and bishops evaluate charismatic claims and restore integrity to Pentecostal witness.

Keywords: prosperity Gospel; Pentecostalism; Catholic Charismatic renewal; discernment; authenticity; Africa; false prophecy.

INTRODUCTION

The African continent has witnessed an unprecedented explosion of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity over the past five decades, transforming the religious

landscape from Cape Town to Cairo. According to the Pew Research Centre, Pentecostals now represent approximately 12 percent, or about 107 million, of Africa's population of nearly 890 million people, with the fastest growth occurring in sub-Saharan nations such as Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, and Zambia.¹ This growth has been accompanied by the emergence of thousands of independent Pentecostal churches, many of which emphasize the "Baptism in the Holy Spirit," the exercise of pneumatic gifts such as healing, prophecy, and speaking in tongues, and a gospel that promises material prosperity as a sign of divine favor.² While these movements have brought hope and spiritual renewal to many Africans suffering from poverty, disease, and social marginalization, they have also created unprecedented challenges related to doctrinal distortion, financial exploitation, and the abuse of charismatic authority.³

The phenomenon of the prosperity gospel—often referred to as the "Health and Wealth Gospel" or "Faith in the Fat-Pocket Christianity"—has become particularly pervasive across African Pentecostal and Charismatic circles. This teaching claims that financial blessing and physical healing are always God's will for believers, and that faith, positive speech, and donations to religious ministries will invariably cause an increase in material wealth.⁴ Prominent African televangelists and "prophets" have built massive followings by promising miraculous solutions to poverty, unemployment, sickness, and marital problems, often demanding substantial "seed offerings" or "sacrificial giving" in return.⁵ The allure of such promises is particularly strong in contexts where state welfare systems are weak, unemployment is high, and access to healthcare and education remains limited for the majority of the population.⁶

Scholarly literature on African Pentecostalism has grown substantially over the past two decades, with researchers examining the movement from sociological, anthropological, historical, and theological perspectives. Ogbu Kalu's seminal work *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* provides a comprehensive historical overview of

¹ Pew Research Centre, "Overview: Pentecostalism in Africa," 2006, accessed October 27, 2018, <http://www.pewforum.org/2006/10/05/overview-pentecostalism-in-africa>.

² Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 1–15.

³ Clement Majawa, *The Holy Spirit and Charismatic Renewal in Africa and Beyond* (Nairobi: A.I.C. Kijabe Printing Press, 2007), 262–281.

⁴ Raphael Vittorio Zatturro, *Material Opportunities for Contextual Evangelization* (Kent: St. Joseph's Press, 2003), 88.

⁵ Aluko Gerald Chimbotosya, *Seeking God in the Contexts of Material Exploitation and Spiritual Degradation* (New York: Patrick Publishers, 2005), 96.

⁶ Jones Choppi, *The Unjust Economic Trade Policies* (London: Pearson INC, 2002), 101.

the movement's development from the early twentieth century to the present, tracing its roots in both Western missionary endeavors and indigenous African religious sensibilities.⁷ Allan Anderson has documented the distinctive features of African Initiated Churches (AICs) and their pneumatological emphases, arguing that the movement's "enacted spirituality" represents a dynamic African response to the challenges of modernity and globalization.⁸ Birgit Meyer's ethnographic studies in Ghana have explored the relationship between Pentecostalism, money, and the occult, demonstrating how prosperity preaching engages with traditional beliefs about witchcraft and spiritual causation of poverty.⁹

Regarding the prosperity gospel specifically, scholars such as Paul Gifford have offered critical analyses of the movement's theological assumptions and social implications, particularly in the context of African political economy.¹⁰ Gifford argues that the prosperity gospel often functions as an ideology that legitimizes inequality by attributing poverty to individual lack of faith rather than structural injustice.¹¹ Other researchers, including J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, have examined the prosperity gospel's appeal among urban, educated Africans who seek spiritual explanations for economic success and failure in a rapidly changing globalized economy.¹² Within Catholic scholarship, theologians such as Clement Majawa have addressed the challenges posed by the prosperity gospel to Catholic Charismatic Renewal, calling for proper discernment and catechesis to distinguish authentic charismatic spirituality from its distortions.¹³

Despite the growing body of literature on African Pentecostalism and the prosperity gospel, several significant gaps remain in the scholarly discourse. First, most studies focus on Protestant Pentecostal churches, with relatively little attention given to how prosperity theology has influenced or been resisted within Catholic Charismatic Renewal

⁷ Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction*, 1–15.

⁸ Allan Anderson, "African Spirituality in African-Initiated Churches," in *Inculturation in the South African Context* (Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa, 2000), 146–147.

⁹ Birgit Meyer, "The Power of Money: Politics, Occult Forces and Pentecostalism in Ghana," *African Studies Review* 41, no. 3 (1998): 15–37.

¹⁰ Paul Gifford, *African Christianity: Its Public Role* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 45–67.

¹¹ Paul Gifford, *African Christianity: Its Public Role*, 56.

¹² J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *Contemporary Pentecostal Christianity: Interpretations from an African Context* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013), 88–92.

¹³ Clement Majawa, *The Holy Spirit and Charismatic Renewal in Africa and Beyond*, 262–281.

movements in Africa.¹⁴ Second, while many researchers have documented cases of abuse and exploitation by Pentecostal pastors and prophets, few have offered systematic theological and ecclesiological frameworks for discernment that can be applied across denominational boundaries.¹⁵ Third, the relationship between the prosperity gospel and traditional African spiritualities—particularly beliefs about ancestors, witches, and curses—remains undertheorized, despite the fact that many prosperity preachers explicitly engage with these beliefs in their ministries.¹⁶ Fourth, there is a notable absence of research that integrates magisterial Catholic teaching on discernment with the practical challenges facing African Pentecostal communities, both Catholic and Protestant.¹⁷

This article argues that the crisis of authenticity facing Pentecostal and Charismatic movements in Africa is primarily rooted in three interrelated factors: (a) the theological distortion of biblical teachings on wealth, healing, and divine blessing into a mechanical “give-to-get” system that exploits the poor; (b) the widespread abuse of pneumatic gifts—particularly prophecy, healing, and speaking in tongues—for personal financial gain, sexual exploitation, and ecclesial power; and (c) the absence of effective ecclesiastical oversight and discernment mechanisms to distinguish authentic charisms from their counterfeits. The article contends that while the prosperity gospel addresses genuine human needs for material security and spiritual meaning, its uncritical acceptance leads to spiritual manipulation, financial predation, and the erosion of Christian witness. Furthermore, the article proposes that the five criteria for discernment articulated by Pope Leo XIII and reaffirmed by subsequent magisterial teaching provide a robust framework for evaluating charismatic claims and restoring authenticity to Pentecostal and Charismatic movements in Africa.

This research makes two original contributions to the scholarly discourse on African Pentecostalism, prosperity theology, and charismatic discernment. First, it offers a systematic theological critique of the prosperity gospel as it manifests specifically in African contexts, distinguishing between legitimate affirmations of God’s desire for

¹⁴ Jeffrey Gros, “The Significance of Global Pentecostalism for Catholic Ecumenism,” *Emmanuel Journal* (September/October 2011): 429–430.

¹⁵ Thomas Rausch, *Catholics and Evangelicals: Do They Share a Common Future?* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2000), 37–40.

¹⁶ Clement Majawa, *The Holy Spirit and Charismatic Renewal in Africa and Beyond*, 113–120.

¹⁷ Thomas Rausch, *Catholics and Evangelicals: Do They Share a Common Future?*, 37–40.

human flourishing and illegitimate teachings that equate faith with financial transaction. By analyzing case studies from Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Ghana, and South Africa, the article demonstrates how prosperity theology is adapted to local cultural conditions, including traditional beliefs about spiritual causation of poverty and the role of ancestors. Second, the article proposes and applies a five-criteria framework for discernment rooted in the magisterial tradition of the Catholic Church, providing practical guidance for bishops, pastors, and lay leaders who must evaluate charismatic claims and address abuses within their communities. This framework—based on faith, love, unity, and truth; humility and obedience to legitimate authority; rootedness in Scripture and Tradition; preservation of the Church's four marks (one, holy, catholic, apostolic); and the righteous use of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit—offers a transferable model for discerning authentic spiritual movements across denominational lines.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative, document-based theological research method with a comparative multiple case study design. The research is descriptive-analytical, aiming to identify, categorize, and interpret patterns of teaching and practice within Pentecostal and Charismatic movements, as well as to propose and test normative theological criteria for evaluation. The multiple case study design allows for cross-national comparison and identification of recurrent abuse patterns that transcend local contexts.¹⁸

Case Selection Criteria

Five cases were selected using purposive sampling based on three explicit criteria. First, each case required documented evidence of abuse from at least two independent sources (e.g., investigative journalism, court records, government commission reports, or church disciplinary documents). Second, cases were selected to maximize geographic diversity across sub-Saharan Africa, representing East Africa (Kenya, Malawi), West Africa (Nigeria, Ghana), and Southern Africa (South Africa). Third, cases were chosen to

¹⁸ Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods*, ed. ke-6 (Los Angeles: Sage, 2018), 91–95.

represent the most common types of abuse identified in preliminary literature review: financial exploitation (all five cases), false miracles (Kenya, Nigeria), sexual misconduct (Kenya, South Africa), and authoritarian leadership with no accountability (all five cases). The cases are not intended to be statistically representative but rather theoretically informative, illustrating the range and patterns of the crisis of authenticity.¹⁹

Data Sources

The study draws from three categories of sources. Primary ecclesiastical documents include magisterial teachings from the Catholic Church (Pope Leo XIII's *Satis Cognitum*, Vatican II's *Lumen Gentium*, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, and pastoral letters from African bishops such as Cardinal John Njue's 2009 directive on CCR). Secondary scholarly sources include peer-reviewed books and journal articles on African Pentecostalism, prosperity theology, and charismatic movements by authors such as Kalu, Anderson, Gifford, Asamoah-Gyadu, Meyer, Majawa, and recent contributions from Wariboko, Ojo, Ukah, and others. Third, contemporary case study materials include investigative journalism reports (from *The Nairobiian*, *Daily Nation*, *The Guardian*, *BBC News*, *Al Jazeera*), government commission reports (South Africa's CRL Rights Commission 2017), and court documents where available.

Analytical Procedure

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework for thematic analysis.²⁰ Phase one involved familiarization with the data through repeated reading of all case study materials and ecclesiastical documents. Phase two generated initial codes using an open coding approach, identifying 47 distinct codes related to types of abuse, theological claims, and responses. Phase three searched for themes by grouping codes into candidate themes (e.g., "financial exploitation," "false miracles," "sexual misconduct," "lack of accountability"). Phase four reviewed themes against the coded data and the entire dataset, resulting in five final themes that correspond to the Results section. Phase five defined and named each theme with clear descriptions. Phase six produced the written report, integrating thematic findings with theological analysis. Coding was

¹⁹ Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods*, 147–150.

²⁰ Virginia Braun dan Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101.

performed manually by the author; no software was used. To enhance reliability, a second coder (a doctoral candidate in religious studies) independently coded 20% of the data, achieving 89% inter-coder agreement.²¹

Researcher Positionality

The author is a Catholic theologian based in East Africa with over fifteen years of experience in Charismatic Renewal movements. This positionality brings both insider knowledge of Catholic discernment frameworks and potential bias toward magisterial authority. To mitigate bias, the analysis deliberately includes case studies from non-Catholic (Protestant and independent) Pentecostal contexts and engages with critical scholarship that challenges Catholic positions. The author's ecclesiastical affiliation is disclosed to allow readers to assess potential interpretive biases.²²

Ethical Considerations

Since this study uses only publicly available documents (published media reports, government records, and previously published scholarship) and does not involve primary data collection from human subjects, formal ethics board approval was not required under the author's institutional guidelines. Nevertheless, the analysis treats victims of abuse with respect by avoiding gratuitous detail and focusing on systemic patterns rather than individual suffering. Pseudonyms are not needed as all cases are already publicly identified.²³

Limitations

This study is limited by its reliance on publicly available sources (media reports, commission reports, and published testimonies), which may not capture the full extent of abuse or the perspectives of victims who remain silent. Additionally, court proceedings

²¹ Virginia Braun dan Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology", 96. Inter-coder agreement was assessed using a simple percentage agreement calculation.

²² This positionality statement is informed by ethical guidelines for qualitative research; see Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods*, 168–170.

²³ The study adhered to the research ethics guidelines established by the Council for the Internationalization of Theological Education (CITE) (2021).

against some accused pastors are ongoing, and final judicial determinations are not available for all cases. The theological analysis is situated within a Catholic magisterial framework; while the proposed discernment criteria are intended to be ecumenically applicable, Protestant and independent Pentecostal readers may evaluate them differently. Finally, the case selection, while diverse, does not include Francophone or Lusophone Africa, limiting generalizability to those regions. Future empirical research involving interviews with congregants, pastors, and victims would complement the present document-based approach.²⁴

RESULTS

The thematic analysis of primary and secondary sources yielded five principal findings, organized below as distinct thematic results. A summary table of the five case studies is provided in Table 1.

Result 1: The Prosperity Gospel in Africa Is Theologically Distinctive and Pervasive.

The prosperity gospel in Africa is not a mere copy of American televangelism but has been indigenized through integration with traditional African beliefs about spiritual causation of misfortune.²⁵ The teaching that poverty, sickness, and failure are caused by ancestral curses, demonic attacks, or personal lack of faith resonates deeply with African worldviews that posit a spiritual dimension to all material realities.²⁶ Consequently, prosperity preaching is widespread across sub-Saharan Africa, with variations in emphasis but consistent core claims: (a) God desires believers to be wealthy and healthy; (b) faith, positive confession, and “seed” offerings unlock divine prosperity; (c) sickness and poverty are curses to be broken through deliverance; and (d) tithing and offerings are investments that guarantee multiplied returns.²⁷ Data from the Pew Research Centre and the World Christian Database confirm that prosperity-oriented Pentecostal churches are among the fastest-growing religious organizations in Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, and Zambia.²⁸ A 2021 study by Ojo found that 68% of Nigerian Pentecostal sermons

²⁴ Clement Majawa, *The Holy Spirit and Charismatic Renewal*, 330–335; Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods*, 188–190.

²⁵ J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *Contemporary Pentecostal Christianity: Interpretations from an African Context*, 90–91.

²⁶ Birgit Meyer, “The Power of Money: Politics, Occult Forces and Pentecostalism in Ghana”, 20–22.

²⁷ Paul Gifford, *African Christianity: Its Public Role*, 60–62.

²⁸ Pew Research Centre, “Overview: Pentecostalism in Africa.”

sampled contained explicit prosperity gospel themes, up from 42% in a comparable 2005 sample.²⁹

Table 1: Summary of Case Studies

Country	Leader/Church	Primary Abuses	Sources	Criteria Violated
Kenya	Victor Kanyari, Salvation Healing Ministry	Staged miracles (potassium permanganate), financial exploitation (310 KES seed offerings), sexual misconduct (fondling during “healing”)	<i>Nairobi</i> (2015), Kenyan media reports	1,2,3,4,5
Nigeria	T.B. Joshua, Synagogue Church of All Nations	Staged miracles, financial exploitation of pilgrims, negligence leading to guesthouse collapse (116 deaths)	<i>BBC</i> (2014), Coroner’s inquest (2015), Marshall (2009)	1,2,3,4,5
Ghana	Multiple unnamed pastors (investigative report)	Demanding sale of homes/belongings for offerings, luxury purchases (private jets, mansions)	Asamoah-Gyadu (2013), Ghanaian media (2018)	1,2,3,5
South Africa	Shepherd Bushiri, Enlightened Christian Gathering	Fraud, money laundering (approx. \$15 million), sexual assault, false miracles	CRL Rights Commission (2017), South African court records (2020)	1,2,3,4,5
Malawi	Brighton Thokozire Bamubamu (street preacher)	Promising “antelopes, booze, wives, husbands, jobs, prosperity” through prophetic powers	Bamubamu (1998, unpublished pastoral study)	1,2,3,5

Result 2: Documented Cases Reveal Recurrent Patterns of Financial Exploitation and Fraud.

The analysis of five case studies from five African countries identified consistent patterns of abuse that transcend national boundaries. In Kenya (Victor Kanyari, Salvation

²⁹ Matthews A. Ojo. “Prosperity Gospel and Economic Empowerment in Nigerian Pentecostalism: A Reassessment.” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 29, no. 2 (2020): 165–166.

Healing Ministry, exposed October 2015), the pastor used potassium permanganate mixed with water to simulate bleeding miracles, demanded "seed offerings" of 310 Kenyan shillings (approximately \$3 USD at the time) from followers with promises of hundredfold returns, and engaged in inappropriate sexual touching of a female congregant under the guise of spiritual healing.³⁰ In Nigeria (T.B. Joshua, Synagogue Church of All Nations, active 1987–2021), allegations included staging miracles, financial exploitation of international pilgrims charged fees for "deliverance," and criminal negligence leading to a guesthouse collapse on September 12, 2014, that killed 116 people, mostly South African pilgrims.³¹ A coroner's inquest in 2015 found multiple building code violations and recommended prosecution, though no charges were ultimately filed.³²

In Ghana, a 2018 investigative report by The Guardian documented how some Pentecostal pastors demand that congregants sell their homes and belongings to make "sacrificial offerings" that are then used to purchase luxury vehicles, private jets, and mansions for the pastors.³³ One pastor interviewed admitted to owning three private jets valued at over USD 30 million while his congregants lived in shanties.³⁴ In South Africa, Shepherd Bushiri of the Enlightened Christian Gathering (active 2010–2020) was accused of fraud, money laundering totaling approximately USD 15 million, and sexual assault by multiple female congregants.³⁵ The South African CRL Rights Commission's 2017 report documented that Bushiri claimed to have walked on air and healed incurable diseases, but no independent verification existed.³⁶ In Malawi, a street preacher, Brighton Thokozire Bamubamu, claimed to provide "antelopes, booze, wives, husbands, jobs, and prosperity" through his prophetic powers, attracting thousands despite lacking any

³⁰ P. Kemmoi Ng'enoh, "Singer Betty Bayo left me but we expect things to turn round – Pastor Victor Kanyari," *The Nairobiian*, 6 Oktober 2015, 12–14.

³¹ Ruth Marshall, *Political Spiritualities: The Pentecostal Revolution in Nigeria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 156–158; BBC News, "Nigeria Synagogue Church collapse: Coroner's report," 7 Juli 2015, diakses 1 Juni 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-33430052>.

³² BBC News, "Nigeria Synagogue Church collapse."

³³ *The Guardian*, "Revelations: Ghana's Prosperity Pastors and the Price of Faith," laporan investigasi oleh Emmanuel Akyeampong, London, 15 Oktober 2018, 12–15.

³⁴ *The Guardian*, "Revelations," 14.

³⁵ South African CRL Rights Commission, *Report on the Investigation into the Commercialization of Religion and Abuse of People's Belief Systems* (Pretoria: CRL Commission, 2017), 45–47; *The Sunday Times* (Johannesburg), "Bushiri Accused of R25m Fraud," 12 Maret 2020, 3.

³⁶ CRL Rights Commission, *Report*, 48–50.

denominational affiliation or theological training.³⁷ These cases share common features: authoritarian leadership with no external accountability, explicit promises of material return on financial "seeds," use of spectacle and emotional manipulation, targeting of poor and desperate individuals, and absence of effective intervention by ecclesiastical or state authorities until after significant harm occurred.

Result 3: The Prosperity Gospel Produces Specific Theological Distortions.

The theological analysis of prosperity gospel literature and sermons revealed four systematic distortions. First, the prosperity gospel reduces God to a transactional dispenser of goods, where faith becomes a mechanism to control divine power rather than a relationship of trust and surrender.³⁸ As Wariboko argues, this "mechanistic theology" transforms prayer from dialogue into a "spiritual technology" for wealth acquisition.³⁹ Second, it attributes poverty solely to individual lack of faith, personal sin, or generational curses, thereby legitimizing structural inequality and diverting attention from systemic injustice, corruption, and exploitative economic policies.⁴⁰ Third, it distorts the atonement by claiming that Christ's death secured not only forgiveness of sins but also material wealth and physical healing for all believers, confusing spiritual blessings (Ephesians 1:3) with temporal circumstances.⁴¹ Fourth, it reinterprets biblical texts out of their original literary and historical contexts (e.g., Malachi 3:10, 3 John 2, Deuteronomy 28) as universal promises of financial return on giving, ignoring countervailing texts that warn against the danger of wealth (Matthew 19:23–24; 1 Timothy 6:9–10).⁴² These distortions are not peripheral but strike at the heart of the Gospel, substituting a theology of glory (where suffering is always a sign of sin) for a theology of the cross (where suffering can be redemptive) (1 Corinthians 1:18–25).⁴³

³⁷ Brighton Thokozire Bamubamu, "The Local Preachers Scrambling for the People of God: A Pastoral Challenge," *studi pastoral*, Keuskupan Agung Blantyre, 1998 (tidak dipublikasikan), 2–3.

³⁸ Harris Garon, *The Ideology of Christian Tradition and Human Transformation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 80–81.

³⁹ Nimi Wariboko, *Pentecostal Paradigms of National Economic Prosperity in Africa* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 72–74.

⁴⁰ Paul Gifford, *African Christianity: Its Public Role*, 62.

⁴¹ Harris Garon, *The Ideology of Christian Tradition and Human Transformation*, 79–80.

⁴² Thomas Rausch, *Catholics and Evangelicals: Do They Share a Common Future?*, 82–83.

⁴³ Harris Garon, *The Ideology of Christian Tradition and Human Transformation*, 81.

Result 4: There Is a Widespread Crisis of Discernment in African Pentecostalism.

The findings indicate that most African Pentecostal and Charismatic communities lack effective mechanisms for testing spirits and evaluating charismatic claims. In the five case studies, none of the churches had independent oversight boards, financial audits, or formal procedures for investigating complaints against leadership.⁴⁴ In many independent churches, questioning a pastor's prophecy or miracle is considered a sin of doubt or a sign of demonic influence, creating a culture of fear and silence.⁴⁵ The absence of denominational accountability structures—unlike the Catholic Church's hierarchical oversight by bishops—allows abusive leaders to operate without correction.⁴⁶ Even within Catholic Charismatic Renewal, some groups have been accused of exaggerating healings or operating independently of parish authority, prompting pastoral interventions such as Cardinal Njue's 2009 letter.⁴⁷ The crisis is exacerbated by poverty and desperation: when a person lacks access to healthcare, a pastor who promises miraculous healing is a last resort, and when a person cannot afford food, a pastor who promises hundredfold returns on a small "seed" offering becomes irresistible.⁴⁸ Ukah notes that the average income of congregants in Nigerian prosperity churches is significantly lower than the national average, indicating that the poor are disproportionately targeted and exploited.⁴⁹

Result 5: The Five Criteria from *Satis Cognitum* Provide a Transferable Discernment Framework.

The analysis of Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Satis Cognitum* and subsequent magisterial documents yielded a five-criteria framework that can be applied across denominational contexts.⁵⁰ Criterion One (Faith, Love, Unity, Truth) requires that authentic charisms promote core Christian virtues and avoid division or falsehood.⁵¹ Criterion Two (Humility

⁴⁴ Asonzeh Ukah. "Building Castles on Sand: Prosperity Gospel and the Fragility of Pentecostal Accumulation in Nigeria." *Pentecostudies* 20, no. 1 (2021): 60–62.

⁴⁵ Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction*, 230–235.

⁴⁶ Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction*, 232.

⁴⁷ John Cardinal Njue, "A Brief Clarification on the Pastoral Approach of Catholic Charismatic Renewal in the Catholic Archdiocese of Nairobi Based on Pentecost" (Nairobi, 4 August 2009), 5–6.

⁴⁸ Aluko Gerald Chimbotosya, *Seeking God in the Contexts of Material Exploitation and Spiritual Degradation*, 97.

⁴⁹ Asonzeh Ukah. "Building Castles on Sand: Prosperity Gospel and the Fragility of Pentecostal Accumulation in Nigeria": 63.

⁵⁰ Pope Leo XIII, *Satis Cognitum* (Vatican, 1896), nos. 5–10.

⁵¹ Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* (Vatican, 1964), no. 12.

and Obedience to Authority) demands that charismatic leaders submit to legitimate ecclesiastical oversight and not operate as lone “apostles” accountable to no one.⁵² Criterion Three (Rootedness in Scripture, Tradition, Magisterium) insists that no authentic charism contradicts the Word of God as interpreted by the Church’s living Tradition.⁵³ Criterion Four (Preserves the Church’s Four Marks) evaluates whether a movement fosters the unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity of the Church.⁵⁴ Criterion Five (Righteous Use of the Seven Gifts) measures charismatic claims against the fruits of wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord (Isaiah 11:2).⁵⁵

When applied to the five case studies, all five criteria were violated in every case. Regarding Criterion One, prosperity preachers promoted greed and division rather than love and unity. Regarding Criterion Two, all five leaders rejected accountability, with Bushiri and Kanyari actively intimidating whistleblowers. Regarding Criterion Three, they twisted Scripture (e.g., interpreting “seed” offerings as financial investments) contrary to patristic and magisterial interpretation. Regarding Criterion Four, their movements caused schism and lacked apostolic succession or connection to historic churches. Regarding Criterion Five, they exhibited the opposite of the seven gifts: foolishness (staged miracles), manipulation (instead of counsel), and irreverence (sexual acts in healing sessions).⁵⁶ The framework thus demonstrated strong diagnostic utility across all five cases.

DISCUSSION

Interpretation of Results

The pervasiveness of the prosperity gospel and the recurrence of abuse across five African countries are not coincidental but stem from identifiable structural and theological vulnerabilities. Result 1 demonstrates that the prosperity gospel’s indigenization through engagement with traditional African spiritualities is a double-

⁵² Dominique Ruthermann, *The Role of Magisterial Wisdom in Church and Society* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2008), 85–87.

⁵³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, ed. ke-2 (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), nos. 77, 85–88, 95.

⁵⁴ Peter Stravinskias, ed., *Catholic Dictionary* (Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 2002), 170–171.

⁵⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1830–1831.

⁵⁶ Clement Majawa, *The Holy Spirit and Charismatic Renewal*, 325–327.

edged sword: it makes the Gospel relevant to local worldviews, but it also opens the door to syncretism and manipulation.⁵⁷ The emphasis on spiritual causation of poverty resonates with traditional beliefs, yet when combined with the “seed faith” doctrine, it creates a powerful incentive for pastors to promise wealth in exchange for offerings.⁵⁸

Result 2’s documentation of fraud, sexual exploitation, and financial predation indicates that the prosperity gospel is not merely a theological error but a source of concrete harm to vulnerable populations. The pattern of targeting the poor—those most desperate for hope and most likely to give sacrificially—reveals a predatory ecclesial economy in which the wealthy pastor prospers while the impoverished congregant remains poor.⁵⁹ This is the opposite of the biblical vision, where the early Church shared resources so that “there was not a needy person among them” (Acts 4:34).⁶⁰

Result 3’s theological distortions have serious ecclesial consequences. When God is reduced to a transactional dispenser of goods, prayer becomes a technique for control rather than an expression of relationship.⁶¹ When poverty is blamed on lack of faith, the Church abandons its prophetic role of challenging unjust structures.⁶² When the atonement is reduced to material prosperity, the cross is emptied of its power to address sin, suffering, and death.⁶³ These distortions are not harmless; they transform Christianity into a form of magical thinking that ultimately collapses when suffering inevitably comes.⁶⁴

Result 4’s finding of a widespread discernment crisis points to an institutional failure. In the Catholic tradition, the local bishop has the responsibility to “judge the genuineness and proper use” of charisms (*Lumen Gentium* No. 12).⁶⁵ In independent Pentecostal churches, no comparable authority exists, leaving congregants unprotected.⁶⁶

⁵⁷ Birgit Meyer, “The Power of Money: Politics, Occult Forces and Pentecostalism in Ghana”, 20–22.

⁵⁸ J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *Contemporary Pentecostal Christianity: Interpretations from an African Context*, 91.

⁵⁹ Aluko Gerald Chimbotosya, *Seeking God in the Contexts of Material Exploitation and Spiritual Degradation*, 97–98.

⁶⁰ Thomas Rausch, *Catholics and Evangelicals: Do They Share a Common Future?*, 83.

⁶¹ Harris Garon, *The Ideology of Christian Tradition and Human Transformation*, 80–81.

⁶² Paul Gifford, *African Christianity: Its Public Role*, 62.

⁶³ Thomas Rausch, *Catholics and Evangelicals: Do They Share a Common Future?*, 81–82.

⁶⁴ Harris Garon, *The Ideology of Christian Tradition and Human Transformation*, 81.

⁶⁵ *Lumen Gentium*, no. 12.

⁶⁶ Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction*, 232.

Even within Catholic CCR, inadequate catechesis has sometimes allowed prosperity thinking to seep in, as Cardinal Njue's letter acknowledged.⁶⁷

Result 5 demonstrates that the five-criteria framework is not merely theoretical but operationally applicable. Each criterion provides a concrete test that can be used by pastors, bishops, and laypeople to evaluate charismatic claims. For example, when a prophet demands a "seed offering" of 310 shillings and promises a hundredfold return, Criterion Three (rootedness in Scripture) would ask: Does any biblical text actually promise a guaranteed financial return on giving? The answer is no—the New Testament warns against the love of money (1 Timothy 6:10) and calls for generous giving without expectation of return (Luke 6:35).⁶⁸

Engaging Counter-Arguments: Potential Positive Aspects of the Prosperity Gospel.

Some scholars argue that prosperity theology, despite its distortions, has empowered African Christians to pursue economic agency and challenge fatalistic worldviews. Wariboko contends that the prosperity gospel's emphasis on "seed faith" and entrepreneurial risk-taking can foster a culture of savings, investment, and economic aspiration among the poor.⁶⁹ Ojo notes that some prosperity churches have established vocational training programs, microfinance cooperatives, and small business incubators that provide tangible economic benefits to congregants.⁷⁰ In Ghana, Asamoah-Gyadu documented cases where prosperity preaching motivated believers to pursue education and formal employment as pathways to "dominion."⁷¹

This study acknowledges these potential positive dimensions. However, the preponderance of evidence from the five case studies suggests that the harms—financial exploitation, spiritual manipulation, theological distortion, and in some cases physical harm and death—outweigh any benefits in the absence of robust discernment mechanisms.⁷² The positive examples cited by Wariboko and Ojo typically occur in

⁶⁷ John Cardinal Njue, "A Brief Clarification on the Pastoral Approach of Catholic Charismatic Renewal in the Catholic Archdiocese of Nairobi Based on Pentecost", 2–3.

⁶⁸ Thomas Rausch, *Catholics and Evangelicals: Do They Share a Common Future?*, 82–83.

⁶⁹ Nimi Wariboko, *Pentecostal Paradigms of National Economic Prosperity in Africa*, 112–115.

⁷⁰ Matthews A. Ojo, "Prosperity Gospel and Economic Empowerment in Nigerian Pentecostalism: A Reassessment", 168–170.

⁷¹ J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *Contemporary Pentecostal Christianity: Interpretations from an African Context*, 94–96.

⁷² Asonzeh Ukah, "Building Castles on Sand: Prosperity Gospel and the Fragility of Pentecostal Accumulation in Nigeria": 65–66.

churches with accountability structures, financial transparency, and social service programs—precisely the characteristics absent from the abusive cases documented in this study. Thus, the solution is not to reject all prosperity-related emphases but to subject them to rigorous discernment using the five-criteria framework.

Implications for Ecclesiastical Practice

The results have several practical implications. First, Catholic bishops in Africa should strengthen their oversight of CCR groups, ensuring that prayer meetings, healing services, and prophecy are conducted in accordance with diocesan guidelines. Cardinal Njue's pastoral letter provides a model that could be adapted by other dioceses, including prohibitions on "spiritual blackmailing" and requirements that only priests lay hands for healing.⁷³ Second, theological formation for seminarians and lay leaders must include robust teaching on discernment of spirits, including the application of the five criteria to contemporary charismatic claims.⁷⁴ A curriculum module on "Testing the Spirits" could be developed using the case studies from this article as teaching materials.⁷⁵

Third, ecumenical cooperation between Catholic, Protestant, and independent Pentecostal churches could establish shared accountability mechanisms, such as regional pastoral oversight boards, to address abuse across denominational lines. The Kenya Episcopal Conference's joint statement with the Evangelical Alliance of Kenya and the National Council of Churches of Kenya calling for government regulation of churches provides a model for such cooperation.⁷⁶ Fourth, given the vulnerability of poor populations, churches should combine spiritual ministry with practical social services (healthcare, education, economic empowerment) that address the root causes of desperation, reducing the appeal of exploitative prosperity preachers.⁸² The Catholic Church's network of health facilities and schools in Africa positions it well to model an integrated approach.⁷⁷

⁷³ John Cardinal Njue, "A Brief Clarification on the Pastoral Approach of Catholic Charismatic Renewal in the Catholic Archdiocese of Nairobi Based on Pentecost", 3–6.

⁷⁴ Clement Majawa, *The Holy Spirit and Charismatic Renewal*, 330–335.

⁷⁵ The following recommendation is developed from the proposals presented in Thomas Rausch, *Catholics and Evangelicals: Do They Share a Common Future?*, 85–87.

⁷⁶ Kenya Episcopal Conference, Evangelical Alliance of Kenya, dan National Council of Churches of Kenya, "Joint Statement on the Regulation of Churches" (Nairobi, 2015).

⁷⁷ Clement Majawa, *The Holy Spirit and Charismatic Renewal*, 410–415.

Limitations and Future Research Directions.

This study's reliance on publicly available case studies means that many instances of abuse likely remain undocumented. Future research should employ ethnographic methods, including interviews with victims and participant observation in prosperity-oriented churches, to capture the lived experience of exploitation and resistance. Additionally, comparative studies between countries with different regulatory environments (e.g., Kenya's registration efforts vs. South Africa's CRL Commission) could identify best practices for government engagement without violating religious freedom. Finally, theological research should further develop an African Pentecostal ethics of wealth that affirms God's desire for human flourishing while rejecting the distortions of the prosperity gospel. A constructive theology of "responsible prosperity" could draw from Catholic social teaching on economic justice and from traditional African communal values (uBuntu) that prioritize sharing over accumulation.⁷⁸

CONCLUSION

This article has examined the major challenges facing Pentecostal and Charismatic movements in Africa, focusing on the prosperity gospel, the abuse of pneumatic gifts, and the crisis of discernment that has allowed fraudulent and exploitative leaders to flourish. Using a qualitative document-based method with purposive case selection and thematic analysis, the study analyzed primary ecclesiastical sources, secondary scholarly literature, and comparative case studies from five African countries (Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, Malawi). The results revealed that the prosperity gospel in Africa has been indigenized through integration with traditional beliefs, creating a pervasive teaching that promises material wealth in exchange for "seed offerings." Documented cases demonstrated recurrent patterns of financial exploitation, staged miracles, sexual abuse, and authoritarian leadership.

The theological analysis identified four systematic distortions: the reduction of God to a transactional dispenser, the blaming of poverty on lack of faith, the distortion of the atonement, and the decontextualization of Scripture. The crisis of discernment stems from the absence of effective accountability mechanisms, particularly in independent

⁷⁸ Nimi Wariboko, *Pentecostal Paradigms of National Economic Prosperity in Africa*, 120–125; J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *Contemporary Pentecostal Christianity: Interpretations from an African Context*, 98–100.

Pentecostal churches, and from inadequate catechesis even within Catholic Charismatic Renewal. To address this crisis, the article proposed and empirically tested a five-criteria framework for authentic discernment rooted in Pope Leo XIII's *Satis Cognitum* and magisterial tradition: (1) faith, love, unity, and truth; (2) humility and obedience to legitimate authority; (3) rootedness in Scripture, Tradition, and the Magisterium; (4) preservation of the Church's four marks; and (5) the righteous use of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. When applied to the five case studies, all five criteria were violated, confirming the framework's diagnostic utility across diverse national contexts.

The discussion interpreted these findings as indicating structural vulnerabilities and theological distortions that require both ecclesiastical and, where appropriate, governmental responses. Catholic bishops should strengthen oversight of CCR groups; theological formation must include discernment training; ecumenical cooperation can establish shared accountability; and social services should address the root causes of vulnerability. The article also engaged counter-arguments acknowledging potential positive aspects of prosperity theology while concluding that harms outweigh benefits without discernment. Only through concerted action—grounded in prayer, rigorous discernment, and a commitment to the truth of the Gospel—can African Pentecostalism overcome the crisis of authenticity and fulfill its potential as a genuine movement of the Holy Spirit for personal renewal, deeper evangelization, and holistic transformation.

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