



Power dynamics among Pentecostal prophets in New Prophetic Churches: An African Christocentric missional approach

Prof. Mookgo Solomon Kgatle
Dept of Christian Spirituality, Church History & Missiology
University of South Africa
E-mail: kgatls@unisa.ac.za
orcid.org/0000-0002-9556-6597
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Abstract

New prophetic churches are in continuity with the African Traditional Religions in tracing the challenges that many Africans face today to the spirit world. These churches make a connection between the challenges of sicknesses, joblessness, barrenness, and so forth, with witchcraft in the spirit world captured in the Nguni saying “*uthakathiwe*” meaning “you are bewitched”. Instead of linking these problems to socio-historical, socio-political, and socio-economic causative factors in the continent, they would rather link them to the spirit world. Furthermore, the Pentecostal prophets in these churches blame the believers for not being able to deal with the challenges. This article problematizes this blame-shifting approach as it presents power dynamics in these churches. The article argues that in shifting the blame to the congregants, the Pentecostal prophets seek to remain or appear as powerful to their congregants. An African Christocentric missional approach is proposed as a theoretical framework that centres power on Christ than on the Pentecostal prophet in Africa.

Keywords: power dynamics, Pentecostal prophets, Pentecostalism, New Prophetic Churches, Christocentric missional approach

Introduction

Power is an important aspect of Pentecostal theology, particularly about the power of the Holy Spirit among classical Pentecostals. However, in New Prophetic Churches¹, power is not only discussed about the work of the Holy Spirit but men and women of God in these churches are perceived as powerful by their congregants. Followers of these Pentecostal prophets tend to rely on them for dealing with challenges and for their well-being. The Pentecostal prophets who can bring solutions to the challenges faced by the congregants such as poverty, sickness, visa application and so forth are considered powerful. The challenge addressed in this article is that is not always that Pentecostal prophets in these churches can bring solutions to their congregants. When this happens, the prophets have a propensity of blaming it on their followers for praying less, not having enough faith, or giving enough to deal with their problems. This presents some form of power imbalances among the New prophetic Churches in South Africa where Pentecostal prophets remain powerful and their congregants as powerless.

This article uses the African Christocentric missional approach in discussing the power dynamics among New Prophetic Churches in South Africa. The African Christocentric

¹ New Prophetic Churches are known for one-on-one prophecy, prophetic titles, prophetic deliverance, prophetic consultations. These are churches such as Enlightened Christian Gathering of Shepherd Bushiri, Incredible Happenings of Pastor Paseka Motsoeneng, Alleluia Ministries International of Alph Lukau, Apostle Mohlala of Shekinah ministries and many more (see Kgatle 2021).



missional approach is explained to apply to these churches. The following will be the main sections of this article: first is the discussion of the New Prophetic Churches and the diagnosis of African problems. Second, the articles discuss the notion of always blaming followers for unanswered prayers among prophets in the New Prophetic Churches. Third, power dynamics are discussed as the rationale behind blame-shifting among the prophets in these churches. Lastly, the article proposes an African Christocentric missional approach as a theoretical framework for dealing with power imbalances.

Framing an African Christocentric missional approach

The Christocentric mission is the one that is based on the work of Christ as the main goal of doing mission on earth. Other scholars such as Ashford (2011:34) call this approach God's plan. In defining this plan Ashford (2011:34) says that "This Christ-centered plan is Trinity's plan for accomplishing the goal of history. God's plan is Christocentric in two significant ways. Jesus Christ is the means to accomplishing God's plan and the aim of God's plan". This means that the redemptive work of Christ becomes the reason for doing missions and the approach to which missiologists understand the purpose of mission in theory and practice. In this case, the mission is not centered on the church and those who are engaged in the mission such as missionaries but on the one who activates the mission, that is God through his Son, Jesus Christ (Petersen, 2013:85).

Kim (2011:259) explains that missions cannot be approached from a general perspective of studying history and people who were engaged in mission activities but should be based on the redemptive work of Christ for the world. This redemptive work is studied according to Miles (2010:274) not only in the present but in the understanding of the historical mission of Christ as per the plan of God for the salvation of many on earth. By an African Christocentric missional approach, this article refers to a mission that is centered on the redemptive work of Christ but still relevant to an African religious context. In other words, this approach will still be able to recognise the African cultural and traditional contexts even though it is centered on the work of Christ to redeem the people of God from their sins. In this paper, this approach is used in contrast to the mission that is centered on the personality of the Pentecostal pastor who normally blames the follower for their predicaments.

New prophetic churches and diagnosis of African problems

African Pentecostalism is in continuity with African Traditional Religions in tracing the African problems to the spirit world which is the world of good and evil (see Anderson, 2018). Similarly, the New Prophetic Churches are in continuity with the African Traditional Religions in linking the problems that Africans face to the spirit world. In essence, Pentecostal prophets such as Bushiri, Lukau, Motseoneng, Mohlala, and others are aware of and acknowledge various challenges that African people face on daily basis. The New Prophetic Churches would link even problems that would be perceived as economic problems to the spirit world to deceive their followers (Omenyo, 2011). Consequently, there exists a gross spiritualisation of African challenges such that even a lack of jobs or failure to receive a visa to visit a European country is linked to the spirit world. The link to the spirit world in an African context is the link to witchcraft and other demonic forces. There is therefore a continuous link similar to African Traditional Religions to witchcraft as the main cause of the challenges faced by congregants and followers of these churches (Anderson, 1991). The Pentecostal prophets mentioned above have a propensity of telling their followers that they are bewitched or popularly say 'uthakathiwe' in Nguni languages (Kgatle, 2020a). This happens when giving a prophecy or conducting a deliverance session where the problem suffered by an individual is always connected to witchcraft. Apostle Mohlala has a monthly program called "*hlula abathakathi*" which means overcome the witches (Opera news, 2021). However, this notion is further propagating the fear of witchcraft among congregants instead of confronting the spirit world. Therefore, when the congregant faces challenges of poverty and joblessness, the pentecostal



prophets in these churches would link such challenges to misfortune as caused by the spirit world, particularly witchcraft. The followers are more likely to believe this notion because they have been told the same by witch doctors in the African Traditional Religions.

The link to the spiritual world causes the Pentecostal prophets in these churches to ignore other causes or factors that contribute to the South African problems such as socio-historical, socio-political, and socio-economic causes (Banda, 2018:6). Some of the problems faced by followers of these churches are because of historic causative factors such as apartheid which lasted for a long time in South Africa (Mofokeng, 2020). Apartheid was a system designed to enrich the minority white people at the expense of the majority of black people in South Africa. This history of black oppression continues even in the democratic era whereby most black people still suffer because they were previously disadvantaged or excluded from, economic benefits. The apartheid system was institutionalised through the politics of racial segregation which makes some of the challenges faced by black people today, socio-political (see Modiri, 2012). In addition, there are other socio-economic challenges such as poverty, unemployment, and inequalities which cannot be ignored in the diagnosis of the African problems (Kgatle, 2020b). However, Pentecostal prophets in the New Prophetic Churches will ignore all these causative factors and prefer to link all the problems in society to spirituality or the spirit world. This is a great challenge in countries such as South Africa where black people have been facing inequalities because of the apartheid system and indeed in many other countries where black and other people face oppression which is the order of the day.

The lack of a comprehensive inquisition at the challenges faced by Africans results in exonerating governments in Africa from the responsibility of taking care of their citizenry because everything is linked to the spirit world. Factors such as socio-economic and socio-political challenges are intentionally ignored to portray the members in a powerless and vulnerable situation. By ignoring these socio-economic and socio-political dimensions, both the Pentecostal prophet and the politicians are exonerated in the pathway to finding the solution, and the responsibility remains with the followers of these New Prophetic Churches (Zimunya, 2013:96). Ramantswana explains: “The prophets, instead of confronting the oppressive force in society (the government that fails to provide services necessary to overcome the socio-economic challenges), redirect the people to themselves.”

Consequently, people have no choice but to blame themselves for the social and political ills emanating from a corrupt government. Therefore, even in failing democratic or postcolonial states in Africa, the prophets do not see anything wrong with these structures but would still blame their followers. In reality, governments are responsible for ensuring that citizens have proper healthcare, jobs, shelter, and other basic needs. These needs are not and should not be spiritualised by New Prophetic Churches and exonerate governmental responsibilities. In addition, there is no effort by these Pentecostal prophets to be involved in social activities making them very conservative and inward-looking. Hence, some of these New Prophetic Churches are apolitical but only make political connections with those in power. Some like Bushiri they connect with politicians so that they are safe in times of trouble. This happens also because some powerful men and women of God are very close to those who hold power in political office.

The reality is that not all problems in Africa can be solved through spiritual means as other challenges require proper involvement by governments. In this article, the lack of comprehensive inquisition into the causative factors of the African problems also contributes to the blaming of the congregants and followers of these churches by their Pentecostal prophets. In the next section, the article discusses blame-shifting among the Pentecostal prophets in the New Prophetic Churches.



Blame-shifting among New Prophetic Churches

As established in the previous section, the Pentecostal prophets in the New Prophetic Churches are good at diagnosing African problems, however, they tend to blame their congregants for failing to find solutions to the same problems. They are also good at making diagnostic prophecies such as revealing the personal details of individuals like identity numbers, cell phone numbers, street address and so forth. This diagnostic prophecy specifically address the challenges faced by an individual but would blame the congregant for not being able to find answers (Anderson, 1991). Pentecostal prophets such as Sheperd Bushiri of Enlightened Christian Gathering, Alph Lukau of Alleluia Ministries International, and Apostle Mohlala of Shekinah Ministries can be regarded as diagnostic prophets. However, these Pentecostal prophets, instead of properly looking at how some problems persist in Africa like to blame not only the congregants but the evil spirits that exist in the spirit world. In addition, these Pentecostal prophets also tend to blame the ancestors of the believers, particularly the notion of generational curses where they will align the problems to previous generations of the believer (Banda, 2020b). Even when the believer fails on their own, they are made to believe that it is the evil spirit making them fail, hence the blame-shifting in these churches (Quayesi-Amakye, 2015). Banda (2020b) explains that it is common for the Pentecostal prophets to encourage the African believer to blame their ancestors even if they have failed on their own. Banda (2021) continues by criticizing this blame-shifting by arguing that generational curses and evil spirits are not able to overcome the power of God. However, the Pentecostal prophets in these churches would insist that the evil spirits are the cause to exonerate themselves.

The Pentecostal prophets such as Bushiri, Lukau, Motsoeneng, Mohlala, and others blame their followers for not praying enough. These prophets are aware that prayer is dimensional in terms of the time that one takes to pray and how such prayer is made in terms of fasting or regular prayer. Therefore, when the solution does not come, there is a tendency to blame it on the congregant for not praying long enough or for not partaking in a fasting prayer. Banda (2018:8) explains that the Pentecostal prophets tend to blame it on believers for the lack of a powerful prayer that can confront the evil forces. In addition, the Pentecostal prophets in the New prophetic Churches blame their followers for their lack of faith. Sande (2017:55) puts it this way:

If one does not receive a blessing, they blame the believer for not raising their level of faith. When one does raise this faith level according to them they will find another excuse such as; it's not yet your season to receive a blessing, your time will come. Logically, the clergy never admits that it is their problem that people are not getting a blessing.

The challenge is that faith cannot be benchmarked, hence no matter how much faith they have it will always not be enough to solve their problems. Hence, believers always receive the blame for their lack of faith in dealing with their problems.

The Pentecostal prophets in the New Prophetic Churches blame their followers for not giving enough in the church. If they have given their tithes, they would be blamed for not sowing a seed or for not giving directly to the man or woman of God. They challenge the poor believers to give their everything by manipulating scriptures to encourage them to give more so that they can receive more. In reality, not everyone will prosper, hence Christians should endear to be Christlike and attain *Theosis* which sometimes come with sufferings the same way Christ suffered on Golgotha. Banda (2018:6) says that Pentecostal prophets such as Magaya of Prophetic Healing and Deliverance like to say that "those who give less money to the church should not expect God to answer their prayers because God answers those who put more. Put more and become rich, richer and richest". However, when they do not see the



results, the Pentecostal prophets would still blame it on the congregants for failing to give enough to attract the blessing of God.

Prophet Shepherd Bushiri preached a sermon on “why people give and remain poor” to explain that believers can give and still not receive because they do not understand the secret. Bushiri explained further that believers do not receive because they do not understand that their giving is not specific. Bushiri said that to receive believers should give for everything they want to receive. He gave examples such as giving for a job, giving for healing, and giving for business.² Therefore, from this understanding, the believers would understand that their giving was not enough to receive that specific prayer request from God. This is problematic according to Banda (2018:8) as it shifts the blame to the poor believers for their poverty and places another challenge on how the poor can give if they do not have anything to give in church. However, this blame shift is done so that the responsibility is on the believer and not the Pentecostal prophet. In the next section, the article discusses the rationale behind blame-shifting.

Power dynamics: the rationale behind blame-shifting

As discussed in the preceding section, some of the Pentecostal prophets in New Prophetic Churches blame it on their congregants for failing to access the blessings of God and for failing to deal with the evil one in their lives. In this section, the argument is that some Pentecostal prophets would want to shift the blame to the congregants or their followers to maintain or remain as powerful. The blame shift is done so that the Pentecostal prophet remains powerful before the congregants, hence they cannot take full responsibility when solutions are not found to challenges that Africans face on daily basis such as poverty, unemployment, sicknesses, corruption, and so forth. If they do not do so, the followers would see them or their prayers as non-efficient, hence the need to shift the blame. The proposition is that the Pentecostal prophets can lose their level of providing answers to the needs that their congregants have if they do not blame their followers (Maxwell, 1995). In this case, by shifting the blame back to the follower, the Pentecostal prophet remains powerful while, the Pentecostal follower remains powerless, lacking faith or prayer to deal with their challenges. All of the Pentecostal prophets mentioned above are considered powerful men of God illustrated by their net income, their mansions, and some of their private jets. To maintain this status, they shift the blame to their followers and degrade their God-given human worth as entities created equal in God’s eyes.

The believers and followers of these churches equally perceive their leaders as powerful. The rationale behind shifting the blame is that the followers of these churches have always perceived their Pentecostal prophets as being powerful men and women of God with the ability to deal with the challenges faced by the congregants. Unlike mainline churches or missionary Christian churches or even classical Pentecostalism, the New Prophetic Churches have the Pentecostal prophet as the main figure within the hierarchy of the church. The Pentecostal prophet is not only seen as the shepherd and the one delivering a sermon every Sunday but as the oracle of God who speaks and delivers the heavenly mandate. Hence, the focus in some New Prophetic Churches shifts from Christ to the particular leader who is often perceived as carrying special powers. Therefore, according to Frahm-Arp (2021) believers and followers of these churches are implicit, in the sense that they do not see anything wrong with the Pentecostal prophet blaming them for their lack of faith. This has something to do with marketing of these churches which can be very deceptive as well. They would come to church in desperation of receiving a miracle but when such a miracle does not happen, they cannot see it as the fault of the Pentecostal prophet. They would rather introspect to see if they did not pray enough or did not give enough to receive a blessing or answer to their prayers. The men and women of God are often perceived as the one who directly speaks to God on the different challenges that people face and therefore cannot be blamed for the lack of answers.

² The full sermon of Shepherd Bushiri can be found on this URL
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4GB3pgdKJYg>



This leaves the members with no choice but to blame it on themselves or their generation when faced with the challenges of life. According to Banda (2018:6), the dependence is more on the person of the Pentecostal prophet than it is on the person of Christ which in turn places blame on the followers.

The shifting of blame to the members ultimately causes the members of these churches to always live with the guilt of not praying enough, of not giving enough (Banda, 2020a). In other words, these followers always look around them to check what is it that they are doing wrong to correct it so that they can receive the blessing they have been looking for in their lives. This is the level of powerlessness on the side of the followers. On the other hand, their Pentecostal prophets continue to live with the mentality that they are powerful and able to bring solutions to African problems. Thus, the blame for African challenges is shifted to the members because most of them are marginalised, vulnerable, and cannot speak for themselves. This causes members to also find someone or things to blame for their lack of success. And because members cannot blame their Pentecostal prophets who are not equal with them, they consequently blame it on witchcraft and other forces in the spiritual realm (Biri & Manyongaise, 2022). It is this blame on witches and wizards that has made the ministry of deliverance so popular among the New Prophetic Churches in Africa. Hence, in their prayers, members of these churches are always in confrontation with the evil spirits and forces in the spirit realm. But the question remains, how can powers be balanced in the New Prophetic Churches? In the next section, the article attempts to answer this question through an African Christocentric missional approach.

Balancing the powers: an African Christocentric missional approach

To bring the balance between the followers and the Pentecostal prophet in New Prophetic Churches, there is a need for a center to hold in these churches. In this article, an African Christocentric missional approach is proposed as an approach that puts Christ at the center than the person of the Pentecostal prophet. The church as Christocentric according to Niemandt (2019:44) means that Christ is in the center of the mission and therefore can bring different hierarchies in the church together or on the same level. In this context, it means that within New Prophetic Churches there would be a balance between the followers of these churches and their Pentecostal prophets as brought about by Christ. Christ is the entry point to the mission such that missions cannot be done without the acknowledgment of who Christ is and his mission for the salvation of humanity on earth. Fitch (2016:471) explains that “Although God is active in the world reigning through the Spirit, that activity is activated primarily through the witness of Christians inhabiting contexts in and through a fresh encounter with Jesus”. Therefore, a Christocentric mission is an approach that recognises the mission of God and the Holy Spirit through the redemptive work of Christ on earth and it is thus Triadic in orientation.

When Christ is the center, it means that the followers need to believe Him for their predicaments as he is the one who sacrificed his life for all not necessarily the Pentecostal prophet (Kibaara, 2022:20). The Pentecostal prophet might be gifted in ministering healing and deliverance to the people of God, but they do so as instructed by the one who sends them, that is, the person of Christ. The name of Jesus and His power are the ones who are supposed to deal with evil forces not the Pentecostal prophet per se. When this is done, the power that the Pentecostal prophet has in the current practices will be revoked and placed in the person of Christ. The Christocentric approach according to Nikolajsen (2013:253) does not ignore the work of the Holy Spirit and God-the father as the one who has sent the son here on earth. In this way and according to Newbigin, the mission moves from just focusing on Christ to focusing on the trinity, thus becoming trinitarian as well (see Newbigin, 1995). However, Guder and Barret (1998:48) say that the trinitarian approach builds from a Christocentric approach:



But a Trinitarian perspective can be only an enlargement and development of a Christocentric one and not an Alternative set over against it, for the doctrine of the Trinity is the theological articulation of what it means to say that Jesus is the unique Word of God incarnate in world history

However, an African Christocentric missional approach will have to recognise the African religious context when focusing its mission on Christ. Putting Christ in the center does not mean that Africans forget their identity and religious practices that existed in the past or before their knowledge of Christ. Kwame Bediako (1992:5) explains:

The theological importance of the religious past, therefore, consists in the fact that together with the profession of the Christian faith, it gives an account of the same entity, namely, the history of the religious consciousness of the African Christian. It is in this sense that the theological concern with the African religious heritage becomes an effort aimed at clarifying the nature and meaning of African Christian identity.

It is for this reason that even when Christ is in the center, the religious context in which Africans use their culture and identity in the practice of religion is not done away with in an African Christocentric missional approach.

The African Christocentric missional approach should still be able to be a contextual approach that recognises the different contexts that exist in Africa by doing missions relevant to Africans (Kibaara, 2022:20). Previous studies emphasize the Christocentric mission by ignoring or undermining the different contexts in Africa which also presented a challenge to this kind of approach. On the contrary, it is the New Prophetic Churches that have recognised the African contexts, but this does not mean they should demand that their followers depend on them than on Christ. And this is the failure of white missionary churches in Africa that were so much focused on the person of Christ but neglected the African contexts.

Hence, this article calls for a balanced African Christocentric missional approach that will acknowledge the person of Christ on one hand and the contexts in Africa on the other. It is a call to say that although New Prophetic Churches offer an answer to African contexts, they should also bring Christ at the center because when the pentecostal prophet is at the center, it creates some imbalances, conceptualised here as power dynamics. When Christ is at the center of these churches, they would not be much dependent on the Pentecostal prophets or anyone else for that matter.

Conclusions

The New Prophetic Churches are correct in identifying the challenges that Africans face and linking them to the spirit world. This is one of the reasons for the growth of these churches regardless of their controversies over the years. In doing this, these churches are in continuity with the African Traditional Religions, hence they find resonance with many Africans in different regions in Africa. However, this article argued that in bringing the solutions to the identified African problems, some of the Pentecostal prophets in these churches tend to blame their followers to maintain their power and avoid responsibility, thus presenting the challenge of power dynamics in New Prophetic Churches. To deal with this challenge, this article proposed an African Christocentric missional approach that can put Christ in the center of the mission on one hand but still be able to recognise, the African religious contexts on the other. This African Christocentric missional approach is proposed in contrast to the mission that is centered on the Pentecostal prophet who in turn blames the followers for their predicaments. At the same time, a mission that only looks at the redemptive work of Christ but disregards the cultural and traditional contexts in Africa will not be successful. Therefore, there is a need in Africa to recognise both the redemptive work of Christ for the mission and the context in



which the mission is done in the African context. Failure to put Christ at the centre of the mission will result in some Pentecostal prophets continuing to blame their followers for not being blessed, healed, or prosperous. This means that missiologists studying missiology in the Pentecostal tradition and other Christian traditions must be aware of the mission that balances forces between Christ and the African contexts.

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