


A critical view on the rising spate of Pentecostal churches in Port Harcourt, Rivers State

**Author:**Peace N. Ngwoke^{1,2} **Affiliations:**

¹Department of Religion and Cultural Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria

²Department of New Testament and Related Literature, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Peace Ngwoke,
peace.ngwoke@unn.edu.ng

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Background: This study scrutinises the cult of personality cultivated by Pentecostal leaders, creating an atmosphere of unquestioning devotion conducive to financial exploitation. Promising miracles for money to create dependency and financial strain among vulnerable followers.

Objectives: The aim of the study is to investigate the exploitation and commercialisation of the gospel as a contributing factor to the rising spate of Pentecostal churches in Nigeria, and propose remedial strategies.

Method: The article employs the phenomenological methodology. Purposive sampling technique was used to interview five selected participants from Port Harcourt city in Rivers State. Information extracted from participants' interviews, newspaper, documentaries, books and journal articles were reviewed and analysed using discourse analysis.

Results: Findings show that the insidious methods employed by some Pentecostal leaders to amass wealth at the expense of their followers such as elaborate seed-sowing schemes to prophetic extortion, and commercialization of spirituality through the sale of anointing oils, miracle stickers, and exorbitant fees for 'prayer sessions' further underscores the exploitation rampant within certain Pentecostal circles.

Conclusion: Ultimately, addressing the challenges require a collaborative effort from all stakeholders. Thus, the need for all stakeholders to join forces in fighting the phenomenon and working towards solutions that can uphold the integrity of religious practice, protect the welfare of believers, and ensure that Pentecostalism continues to be a force for positive change in Nigeria.

Contribution: This study introduces novel insights by unravelling the manipulating and exploiting practices of some Pentecostal churches in Nigeria.

Keywords: exploitation; manipulation; Pentecostal Church; Pentecostalism; Nigeria.

Introduction

Pentecostalism has emerged as a dominant force with presence and adherents from both urban and rural areas in Nigeria, captivating millions with its fervent worship, dynamic spirituality and promises of divine intervention. Through vibrant worship, charismatic preaching, and promises of divine intervention, Pentecostal churches in Nigeria have become powerful magnets drawing people seeking spiritual renewal, healing and solutions to their problems (ed. Brown 2011; Owoye 2012). However, while many Pentecostal churches in Nigeria genuinely strive to provide spiritual guidance, support and solutions to their members' challenges and problems, there are undeniable instances where some Pentecostal churches use manipulative and exploitative practices, particularly towards members seeking divine intervention and solutions to their pressing challenges. Contrary to the clear directive from Jesus in Matthew 10:8 'Freely you have received, freely you must give,' some Pentecostal churches and pastors in Nigeria have veered off course (Diara & Mokwenye 2019). They turn the church into money making venture, promoting false teachings and engaging in deceptive practices to attract followers and manipulative means to extort people. This assertion is supported by many scholars who observe that financial gain often drives some people to open Pentecostal churches in Nigeria (Akabike, Ngwoke & Chukwuma 2021; Uroko 2024). Some of the pastors are using their churches to amass wealth and duping members, leading to the situation where many unemployed graduates now open their own churches as they see the church as a recruiting business (Diara, Onukwufor & Uroko 2020).

Unfortunately, this situation has shaped the theological view of most Pentecostal churches in Nigeria. They emphasise the giving of offering of various kinds even from people they know to

be corrupt (Akabike et al. 2021; Smith 2021). The bitter truth is that they reserve the front seats for these corrupt people and push their congregation into praising them because of their fat offerings (Memunat 2024). Furthermore, some Pentecostal church pastors use manipulative tactics by preaching sermons on seed sowing as the only means to attract financial breakthroughs, protection or healing from God and then ask for large sums of money from their congregants who are already struggling financially (Akabike et al. 2021; Smith 2021). These actions of some Pentecostal churches are seen as a triggering factor responsible for the rising spate of Pentecostal churches in Nigeria.

An interesting discussion has emerged recently about the increasing growth and spread of Pentecostal churches in Nigeria. Studies reveal that the increasing growth and spread of Pentecostal churches in Nigeria is attributed to the various deeds of miracles (healing the sick, raising the dead, making the unemployed to gain employment, and making one's business to flourish, among others) which they publicise via social media and different television broadcast media to attract more followers (Adesoji 2017; Magbadelo 2004). Thus, by publicising the miraculous deeds, they attract more people, especially, people who are seeking solutions to their challenges. Some authors proposed that Pentecostalism is negatively used for exploitation, manipulation, social stigma and perceived wickedness (Diara & Onah 2014; Smith 2021). The case studies in this article will further illustrate some of the negative use of Pentecostalism for exploitation and manipulation.

Studies reveal attitudes of some Pentecostal pastors leveraging their influence and position to enrich themselves at the expense of their followers by employing tactics ranging from emotional manipulation to outright financial extortion (Akabike et al. 2021; Magbadelo 2004). The case studies in this article will further illustrate these points. From exorbitant seed offerings to promises of miraculous blessings in exchange for monetary contributions, these practices not only undermine the integrity of Pentecostalism but also inflict profound harm on vulnerable individuals and communities.

This study introduces novel insights by connecting the socio-economic factors driving Pentecostalism's growth with the practices of commercial exploitation. It provides a detailed analysis of how economic and political instability, along with health crises, create fertile ground for the proliferation of Pentecostal churches, which promise immediate solutions to desperate populations. By offering a comprehensive framework for understanding these dynamics, the study significantly contributes to the existing body of literature and paves the way for practical interventions aimed at addressing the ethical challenges within Pentecostalism in Nigeria. Firstly, this study explains Pentecostalism in Nigeria. Secondly, it examines the cases on commercialisation of the gospel and extortion within Pentecostal churches in Nigeria. Thirdly, it uses Osmer's practical theological interpretation to describe and interpret this phenomenon.

Research methods and design

This study adopts a qualitative methodology using a phenomenological design. Phenomenology serves as a philosophical approach within a specific research design, enabling researchers to undertake adaptable strategies to describe and understand intricate phenomena, especially different facets of human social encounters (Alhazmi & Kaufmann 2022). This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon from the perspective of those who experience it first-hand. The study employs purposive sampling technique to select participants who can provide rich, relevant and diverse insights into the rise of Pentecostalism in Nigeria. Participants include a range of stakeholders such as victims of extortion by a Pentecostal church, victims of manipulation by a Pentecostal church, victims of abuse by a Pentecostal church pastor and clergy. The criteria for selection is based on their involvement and experience of the phenomenon, ensuring that the sample is both representative and informative. The data collection involved gathering information from both primary and secondary sources. From the primary sources, five ($N = 5$) participants were selected (see Table 1). The data were collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing for flexibility in probing and exploring participants' experiences and views in depth. The interview questions were designed to elicit detailed narratives and reflections of the phenomenon. Each interview was conducted face-to-face or via telephone, depending on the participants' availability and preferences, and were recorded for accuracy and thorough analysis. Information was also extracted from secondary sources, such as newspaper and journal articles. The data analysis followed a phenomenological approach, involving several steps to ensure a deep understanding of the participants' experiences and perspectives.

Pentecostalism in Nigeria

Historically, the origin of Pentecostalism in Nigeria can be traced back to the early 1910s, from an Anglican deacon who launched an indigenous prophetic movement that later became the Christ Army Church (Pew Research Center 2006). Initially, Pentecostalism met resistance from previously established religious institutions, but gradually gained traction, particularly among disenfranchised Nigerian communities seeking spiritual renewal and empowerment (Nel 2018). Furthermore, Pentecostalism has become a dominant force with its penetration in all urban and rural areas, shaping the spiritual beliefs, practices, and cultural expressions of millions of people across the country. The church capitalises on people's openness to

TABLE 1: Socio-demographic data of participants.

Serial number	Participant name	Age interval (years)	Area of origin	Gender
1	Pastor Ononye	45–50	Urban	Male
2	Mrs Ogbonne	35–40	Urban	Female
3	Mr Obinna	40–45	Rural	Male
4	Mrs Nwakaego	50–55	Rural	Female
5	Miss Ngozi	30–35	Urban	Female

Note: The names of participants are pseudonyms.

change; hence, the prolegomenon on the rising spate of Pentecostalism in Nigeria.

Originating from the global Pentecostal movement, which emphasises the experience of the Holy Spirit and the practice of charismatic gifts, Pentecostalism in Nigeria has evolved into a distinct form characterised by vibrant worship, dynamic preaching, and a focus on personal transformation (Babalola 2016). Some Christians claim to have the power of the Holy Spirit and showcase charismatic gifts such as speaking in tongues and prophecies, which tend to attract many Nigerians who are seeking solution to their problems. From the last decade, Pentecostal churches have proliferated across Nigeria, attracting a diverse array of followers drawn to the movement's promises of healing, prosperity, and spiritual transformation. Nigerians are always seeking solutions to their physical and spiritual challenges. Pentecostal churches promise solution to these challenges and this has helped in the number of adherents that they command. From a historical lens, it is paramount to state that Pentecostalism began to gain prominence in Nigeria in the early 20th century, with the arrival of charismatic evangelists and missionaries who introduced a new wave of evangelical fervour (African Pentecostalism 2023; Pew Research Center 2006). Their aim was to spread the gospel and provide social action evangelism. However, contemporary Pentecostal movements have been favoured by social action evangelism of missionaries seen in the increasing number of people willing to join one Pentecostal church or the other. The rise of Pentecostalism in Nigeria is a fascinating historical journey that cuts across religious revival, socio-political changes and cultural shifts.

Around 1918, a group from the Anglican Church established a prayer group called the Precious Stone Society with the aim of healing those affected by influenza and left the Anglican Church in the early 1920s as they affiliated with Faith Tabernacle, a church based in Philadelphia (Okai 2016). Thereafter, the *Aladura* (praying people) movement, which began in the 1920s, is often cited as one of the earliest forms of Pentecostalism in Nigeria. Also, 'Early *Aladura* (praying people) churches include the Eternal Sacred Order of the Cherubim and Seraphim Society, was founded in 1925, and the Church of the Lord, was founded in 1930' (Agha 2013:42).

Traditional African religious beliefs and practices, with their emphasis on spiritual experiences, healing, and the supernatural, provided a fertile ground for the acceptance of Pentecostal teachings and practices. Thus, the early Pentecostal movement in Nigeria was presented with emphasis on spiritual experiences and divine intervention. However, around 1930s, Joseph Babalola of Faith Tabernacle led a revival that converted thousands; this movement initiated ties with the Pentecostal Apostolic Church of Great Britain after coming into conflict with colonial authorities, but the association dissolved over the use of modern medicine (Pew Research Center 2006). The evolution of Pentecostalism continued in 1941, as Babalola founded the Independent

Christ Apostolic Church, which is estimated to have over a million members by 1990 (Pew Research Center 2006). Foreign Pentecostal denominations such as the Welsh Apostolic Church came up in Nigeria around 1931, followed by the Assemblies of God which came up around 1939, and the Foursquare Gospel Church that came up around 1954 (Okai 2016). From 1980s new charismatic churches such as Living Faith Outreach Worldwide, Redeemed Christian Church of God, and Mountain of Fire and Miracle Ministry, among others, emerged and have been thriving as popular mega Pentecostal churches in Nigeria (Kalu 2008).

From the 1980s, there have been an unprecedented increase in the number of Pentecostal churches in Nigeria. This is because of the system of worship and preaching that they engage in. They are highly involved in worshipping and praying which is believed to be a way of giving their congregants the assurance that their problems will be a thing of the past. Thus, more people are prepared to open more Pentecostal churches, because a large number of people are prepared to join them if they can be assured of a solution to their problems.

Pentecostalism in Nigeria has had a profound socio-cultural impact, influencing not only religious beliefs and practices but also shaping attitudes towards family, morality, and social issues (Akanbi 2017). The movement's emphasis on prosperity, healing and deliverance resonates with the aspirations and concerns of Nigerians grappling with economic hardships, health challenges, and social upheaval (Ojo 2018). Many Pentecostal churches in Nigeria promote and influence moral values, advocating for strong family bonds, mutual respect, and shared religious practices that promote social coherence and harmony (Ajibade 2020; Onah & Agbo 2021). Their emphasis on unity and values has influenced many Nigerians to prioritise their family roles and responsibilities, often seeking spiritual guidance from their church leaders on matters related to marriage, parenting and relationships with people.

Pentecostal churches in Nigeria have also become increasingly politically engaged, with some church leaders wielding significant influence and playing active roles in national politics. For instance, during the nation's election period, the politicians engaged in visiting prominent Pentecostal churches to seek prayers from their religious leaders (Eyoboka 2018; Kayode-Adedeji 2015; Onapajo 2012). This trend has seen prominent pastors and church figures gathering together to pray for peaceful elections, endorsing political candidates, participating in political campaigns, and even running for public office (Eyoboka 2015; Patrick 2020). This interplay of religion and politics in Nigeria has thus become more pronounced, reflecting the growing power and reach of Pentecostalism in the socio-political landscape of the country.

While some Pentecostal leaders have advocated for social justice and political reform, others have faced criticism for aligning too closely with political elites and neglecting their

prophetic role as voices of conscience (Ojo & Nwankwo 2020). For instance, the presence of the former vice-president of Nigeria, Professor Yemi Osibanjo, who is a senior pastor in one of the mega Pentecostal churches in Nigeria played a significant role in Nigerian political sphere. His involvement led to the defeat of an incumbent government, which happened to be the first time an incumbent government was defeated in a democratic election in Nigeria (Carbone & Cassani 2016; Owen & Usman 2015).

Despite the growth and influence of Pentecostalism in Nigeria, there exist challenges and criticisms such as scrutiny over financial transparency, doctrinal integrity and ethical conduct, with some Pentecostal churches accused of exploiting their followers for financial gain (Adedibu 2023). In his comprehensive study of Pentecostalism in Nigeria, Kalu (2008) shed light on the multifaceted challenges confronting Pentecostal churches in the country. He highlights the increasing scrutiny over financial transparency, with many Pentecostal leaders facing accusations of financial impropriety and a lack of accountability. Additionally, Kalu (2008) addresses concerns regarding doctrinal integrity, noting how some Pentecostal churches have been criticised for deviating from orthodox Christian teachings and embracing prosperity theology, which promises material blessings in exchange for monetary contributions. Moreover, they underscore the ethical challenges faced by Pentecostal leaders, with reports of exploitation and manipulation of followers for financial gain tarnishing the reputation of the movement.

Cases on commercialisation of the gospel and extortion within Pentecostal churches in Nigeria

Instances of manipulative rhetoric and exploitation within certain Pentecostal churches in Nigeria have raised significant concerns and sparked debates about the ethical conduct of some Pentecostal churches, and the impact on their followers. One prominent example of commercialisation of the gospel within Pentecostal churches is the practice of seed sowing, where congregants are encouraged to sow seeds of varying amounts as a demonstration of faith and obedience. One of the participants, expressed how she was made to buy anointing oil at a high price from a Pentecostal church she went for prayers. She said:

'I was made to pay N50,000 [fifty thousand Naira] for anointing oil when I visited the new Pentecostal church in Aba. They told me that the angel of God had passed through oil as the pastor had prayed on it and left it at the altar for 7 days. I was instructed to drink from it for 7 days and anoint my head with it for me to be able to attract divine helper and favour that will help me get job employment.' (Miss Ngozi, Female, 30–35 years old)

While the principle of giving is biblical and many believers willingly contribute towards the work of the church, critics argue that this practice has been manipulated to exploit desperate members seeking divine intervention in areas such as employment, business breakthroughs and fertility issues (Oluduro & Akinlabi 2020). While proponents argue that seed sowing is a biblical principle of sowing and reaping,

critics contend that it is often used as a tool for financial exploitation. In some cases, congregants are pressured to sow seeds beyond their means, with promises of miraculous blessings and financial breakthroughs in return. They use manipulative means to exploit people brainwashing them into believing that their promised windfall from God won't materialise unless they give large donations of money or properties (Soboyejo 2016). This practice not only places undue financial burden on followers but also perpetuates a culture of prosperity sermon, where material wealth is equated with spiritual favour. This can lead to debt, financial instability and even poverty for individuals and families who are already struggling socio-economically (Akabike et al. 2021; Oluduro & Akinlabi 2020).

Another common tactic used by some Pentecostal pastors is the sale of anointing oils, miracle stickers and other spiritual paraphernalia purported to confer divine protection and blessings. In some instances, Pentecostal churches in Nigeria have been accused of commercialising spiritual services such as prayer, anointing and deliverance. Members seeking divine intervention for specific challenges may be required to pay for special 'prayer sessions', anointing oils or miracle stickers, often at exorbitant prices. This commodification of spiritual services not only undermines the integrity of religious practice but also exploits the vulnerability of members seeking genuine help (Benyah 2018). While these items are marketed as conduits of spiritual power, critics argue that they are often sold at exorbitant prices, exploiting the desperation and vulnerability of followers seeking divine intervention.

Thus, with these manipulative actions and exploitation, some of these Pentecostal churches engage in the commercialisation of spirituality undermining the integrity of religious practice, reducing sacred rituals to mere commodities for profit.

Furthermore, there have been numerous reports of Pentecostal pastors engaging in prophetic extortion, where individuals are manipulated into making financial contributions under the guise of receiving prophetic guidance or blessings. In some cases, Pentecostal pastors demand a certain amount of money before they will pray for someone who is facing challenges. For instance, Pastor Ononye in an interview, reported an experience from a couple who narrated how they were exploited by a Pentecostal pastor to pay N1.5 million for prayers for childbearing, but after paying the huge sum of money, she still was unable to get pregnant. Mr Obinna also narrated how he gave N750,000 for prayers to a pastor in a Pentecostal church.

Some Pentecostal pastors have been known to make extravagant promises of divine intervention to attract and retain members. Whether it is a prophecy of imminent job promotion, business success or miraculous conception, these promises often come with an implicit or explicit expectation of financial contributions in return. Members who are desperate for solutions to their challenges may feel compelled to comply, even if it means going into debt or depleting their savings (Ojo 2018).

In some cases, followers are told that failure to comply with the prophet's directives will result in divine retribution or withheld blessings, effectively coercing them into parting with their hard-earned money. For instance, in a personal interview, A participant narrated her personal experience with one of the Pentecostal churches at Port-Harcourt, Rivers State. She reported:

'I was lured into going to the Pentecostal church when I heard their offer of giving money to pay your house rent, give money to support people in their business, give N500 000 [*Five hundred thousand Naira*] to widows and all kind of support through their advert from a radio station. When I went to the church, I met a lot of people who came for the same purpose. We were all talked into given offering. After the offering time, the pastor called for people that need support for payment of their house rent to come out, of which I was one of them. They gave us a paper to write down the amount we need for our house rent. We were then asked to drop the paper in a box and the pastor will pray on it with the notion that after the prayers, some people's paper will be picked as the people their house rent will be paid. The pastor then called on all widows to come forth and some widows were selected to receive N500000 each. The pastor called on the business men/women to come forth and they also selected some people to be given support for their business. I continued going every Sunday with the hope that one day my paper will be picked and they will give me money to pay my house rent. I was talked into paying monthly membership fee which is from N5000 [*Five thousand Naira*] to be able to have better chances of been among the favoured one. It was at that point that my eyes opened and I started asking questions and reasoning within myself how can someone who needed help would be paying such an amount. One day, a woman out of frustration started shouting and saying that she has been coming for more than 2 years and had been paying monthly dues, offering all necessary payments but had not received anything from them. I now asked myself, all the money she had been paying, if she had put it together, it would have been enough to solve her problem. I now investigated further and found out that the so-called people they have been giving money to were all staged to deceive people. My discovery of their manipulative activities and exploitation of people made me stop attending that church.' (Mrs Ogonne, Female, 35-40 years old)

This form of emotional manipulation preys on the fears and insecurities of individuals, exploiting their trust in religious authority figures for personal gain. Manipulative tactics such as emotional manipulation and guilt tripping are often employed to pressure members into making financial contributions. Some Pentecostal churches use manipulative methods such as performing fake miracles and giving fake testimony. For instance, pastors Favour David and Favour Chimobi of the Elijah Ministry were arrested by the police force for conducting fake miracles, prophecies and testimonies for unsuspecting members of the public to collect money from them and engage in other dubious means of enriching themselves. The police force reported that:

Bunmi Joshua, gave fake testimony to church members that her son, who was deaf and dumb, could now hear and talk and was healed by pastor, Favour Chimobi of the Elijah Ministry who works alongside Pastor David Favour. (Lambo 2019)

The report shows that these Pentecostal pastors hire people to share testimonies of miraculous healing. They also hired Rukayat Folawewo and Bunmi Joshua, who pretended to be members and were miraculously healed by the pastor after being involved in a car accident (Lambo 2019). Also, in a similar case, a popular pastor reputed for miracles in one Pentecostal church in Benin City, Edo State, was caught by the Nigerian police force over an allegation of faking miracles to defraud unsuspecting church members. A report from the Nigerian police force shows that the pastor engaged a young man and had an agreed fee for him to be sitting in a wheelchair as a crippled man for 6 days before he received his 'healing' during the church deliverance programme (Emenyonu 2016). Through the publicity of miracles, some Pentecostal churches in Nigeria attract members to their church. Members may be told that their lack of faith or disobedience to God's word is the reason for their challenges, creating a sense of guilt or inadequacy that makes them more susceptible to manipulation. This form of emotional manipulation preys on the fears, insecurities and desperation of members seeking divine intervention and solutions to their problems (Asonzeh-Umeh 2017). For instance, Mrs Nwakaego, a victim of emotional manipulation and exploitation, narrated in a personal interview how some Pentecostal church prophet and prophetess exploited her after instilling fear in her through their manipulation and deception. She reported:

'I was exploited by some Pentecostal prophet and prophetess who told me that my 2 daughters were possessed by evil spirit and that they needed to be delivered. They convinced me that the evil spirit in my daughters is responsible for the financial challenges and all life challenges I am passing through. They exploited a lot of money from me and made me to even apply for a loan of N300,000 [*three hundred thousand Naira*] from the bank to be able to get money which I gave them to carry out the deliverance on my 2 daughters.' (Mrs Nwakaego, Female, 50-55 years)

These instances underscore the urgent need for greater transparency, accountability and ethical conduct within Pentecostal churches in Nigeria. Since it is established that some Pentecostal churches in Nigeria engage in manipulative practices and exploitation, the prevalence of such cases highlights systemic issues that must be addressed to safeguard the integrity of religious institutions and protect the well-being of their followers.

Osmer's practical theological interpretation in context of Pentecostal churches in Rivers State

Using Osmer's practical theological interpretation framework, this discussion seeks to describe and interpret the phenomenon of the commercialisation of the gospel and extortion within Pentecostal churches in Nigeria. Osmer's model comprises four tasks: the descriptive-empirical task, the interpretive task, the normative task and the pragmatic task. This framework helps to systematically explore and understand the practices within Pentecostal churches that have led to significant ethical and theological concerns.

Descriptive-empirical task

The descriptive-empirical task involves gathering information that helps to discern patterns and dynamics within the Pentecostal churches in Nigeria (Osmer 2008). Over recent decades, the Pentecostal movement has grown exponentially, with many churches adopting practices that commercialise religious experiences. Commonly, pastors in these churches sell anointing oil, prayer handkerchiefs and other religious items at exorbitant prices, claiming these items have been divinely empowered to bring blessings and protection. For instance, Pastor Emmanuel Makandiwa, a prominent figure in African Pentecostalism, has been reported to sell 'anointed oil' for substantial sums, promising it would bring miraculous healings and financial prosperity to those who purchase it (Rupapa and Shumba, 2014). Additionally, these pastors frequently employ emotionally charged and persuasive language to extort money from their congregants. Sermons often emphasise the necessity of substantial financial donations for receiving divine blessings, miraculous healings or financial breakthroughs.

Interpretive task

The interpretive task seeks to understand why these practices are occurring. This can be analysed through several lenses, including socio-economic factors, cultural influences and psychological manipulation. Socio-economically, many Nigerians face significant hardships, including poverty and unemployment. In this context, the promise of divine intervention and financial breakthrough becomes particularly appealing. Pentecostal pastors exploit this desperation by presenting financial giving as a form of investment in one's spiritual and material future (Uroko 2024). Theologically, the prosperity sermon, which presents the belief that faith, positive speech, and donations to the church will increase one's material wealth, has taken root in many Pentecostal churches, driving the commercialisation of religious practices.

Psychologically, the use of persuasive language, coupled with the creation of an emotionally charged atmosphere, can lead to a form of collective emotional manipulation. Congregants, influenced by the authority of the pastor and the fervour of the group, may feel compelled to give beyond their means, believing that their financial sacrifices will be rewarded by God.

Normative task

The normative task involves evaluating these practices from a theological and ethical standpoint (Osmer, 2008). Commercialisation of the gospel and extortion within the church are antithetical to core Christian values of integrity, humility and genuine faith. Scriptural teachings emphasise the importance of helping the poor and the dangers of placing monetary gain above spiritual well-being (Tm 1 6:10; Mt 6:24).

The prosperity sermon, as practised in these contexts, often distorts these teachings, placing undue emphasis on material wealth as a sign of divine favour (Smith 2021). This not only

misrepresents biblical teachings but also exploits vulnerable individuals seeking spiritual and material relief. From a theological perspective, the commercialisation of religious items and the coercion of financial donations undermine the true essence of faith and spirituality, reducing religious practices to mere transactions. It also erodes trust in religious institutions and undermines the integrity of spiritual leadership. This erosion of trust not only damages the reputation of individual churches but also tarnishes the image of Pentecostalism as a whole (Diara & Mokwenye 2019). Moreover, followers who have been exploited or deceived may become disillusioned and withdraw from church activities, leading to rifts and tensions within congregations. This fragmentation weakens the social cohesion and collective identity that are essential for the vitality of religious communities, further exacerbating the negative impact of manipulative practices (Onah & Agbo 2021).

Pragmatic task

The pragmatic task looks at how these issues can be addressed and reformed (Osmer 2008). Addressing this phenomenon requires a concerted effort to realign church practices with core Christian values, ensuring that the spiritual and material well-being of congregants is prioritised over financial gain. By doing so, Pentecostalism in Nigeria can reclaim its integrity and truly serve as a source of hope and support for its followers. This article thus recommends a holistic effort that involves the following:

1. Church members should be educated about the true teachings of the Bible regarding wealth, blessings, and giving. This could involve Bible study groups, seminars, and sermons that focus on theological integrity and ethical giving. Through education programmes, workshops, and sermons, church leaders can equip their followers with critical thinking skills and discernment to identify exploitation and false teachings. Encouraging congregants to ask questions, seek clarification, and hold leaders accountable fosters a culture of empowerment and collective responsibility.
2. Religious bodies and government agencies should collaborate to set guidelines that prevent exploitative practices. This includes transparent financial reporting by churches and the establishment of ethical standards for fundraising and the sale of religious items. Government agencies responsible for religious affairs should collaborate with religious bodies to develop and enforce robust regulations that promote transparency, accountability and ethical conduct within Pentecostal churches. This includes mechanisms for monitoring financial transactions, ensuring compliance with legal standards, and addressing complaints of abuse and exploitation promptly and effectively. Establishing interdenominational councils or oversight bodies to monitor and evaluate the conduct of church leaders can provide an additional layer of accountability and oversight. By working together across denominational lines, churches can demonstrate a collective commitment to upholding ethical standards and protecting the welfare of their members.
3. Seminaries and theological institutions should incorporate teachings on ethical ministry practices, focussing on the dangers of commercialisation and the importance of pastoral care that prioritises the spiritual well-being of congregants over financial gain.

4. Churches should develop support systems that address the socio-economic needs of their members without resorting to exploitation. This could involve creating job training programmes, financial literacy workshops and other initiatives that provide tangible assistance to those in need.
5. Encouraging a theological reformation within Pentecostalism that emphasises the core values of the faith, including selflessness, integrity and compassion, can help steer the movement away from commercialisation and towards a more authentic expression of the gospel.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the rising spate of Pentecostalism in Nigeria is a multifaceted phenomenon driven by many complex factors including socio-economic, cultural and spiritual factors. While the movement has brought spiritual renewal, community empowerment and hope to millions, it is not without its challenges. However, the study identifies some cases on commercialisation of the gospel and extortion within some Pentecostal churches which has cast a shadow over the integrity of religious institutions and has raised serious concerns about the well-being of their members. The evidence of manipulative rhetoric, financial exploitation and emotional manipulation targeting vulnerable individuals seeking divine intervention and solutions to their challenges cannot be ignored. The promise of prosperity, healing and breakthroughs has sometimes been exploited by unscrupulous leaders for personal gain, leading to financial hardship, emotional distress and disillusionment among followers.

Therefore, addressing commercialisation practices and exploitation within Pentecostal churches in Nigeria requires a multidirectional approach involving regulatory reforms, educational initiatives, ethical guidelines, interdenominational collaboration and support for victims. All stakeholders, including government agencies, religious bodies, clergy, members and civil society organisations, must work together towards a solution to ensure the integrity, credibility and welfare of the Pentecostal movement in Nigeria. There is an urgent need for greater transparency, accountability and ethical conduct within Pentecostal churches, with clear mechanisms for oversight and accountability in financial matters. Church leaders must uphold the highest standards of moral integrity and prioritise the well-being of their members above personal gain. At the same time, members of Pentecostal churches must be empowered with knowledge, awareness and critical thinking skills to recognise and resist manipulative practices. Therefore, there is need for the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN) to rise up to the task of curbing the irregularities by some Pentecostal churches by floating education programmes and support networks that can help equip members to navigate the complexities of religious dynamics and safeguard themselves against exploitation.

Regulators and policymakers also have a role to play in ensuring that religious institutions adhere to ethical standards and fulfil their obligations to the communities

they serve. By enforcing existing laws and regulations, promoting transparency and providing support for initiatives that promote accountability and integrity, regulators can help mitigate the risks of manipulation and exploitation within Pentecostal churches. Ultimately, addressing the challenges posed by manipulative practices and exploitation within Pentecostalism in Nigeria requires a collaborative effort from all stakeholders. By working together towards solutions, we can uphold the integrity of religious practice, protect the welfare of believers and ensure that Pentecostalism continues to be a force for positive change and spiritual renewal in Nigeria.

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Author's contributions

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The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, P.N.N., upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

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