

Good News For Africa? The Challenge of Other Gospels to the Church's Mission in Contemporary Sub-Saharan Africa

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KEY WORDS

| African Christianity | Gospel of Legalism | Hyper-Grace Gospel |
| Poverty | Power Gospel | Prosperity Gospel |

ABSTRACT

The gospel of Jesus Christ is the message of the church's mission. It is a message of love, grace, forgiveness and salvation. However, many messages that are taught at mission rallies, crusades and conferences or preached in churches across sub-Saharan Africa differ significantly from the gospel that the apostles of Jesus and the early church proclaimed. The most prominent of these other gospels is the prosperity gospel, but it is not the only one. There are other "other gospels" whose impact on the African church and its mission should not be underestimated. Among these messages are the power gospel, the hyper-grace gospel and the gospel of legalism. The power gospel lacks the Christ and cross-centredness of the apostolic gospel, and while the hyper-grace gospel twists the biblical concept of grace, the legalistic gospel is short of it. With its emphasis on the outward manifestations of the Holy Spirit, the power gospel has led to a redefinition of spirituality. The marks of Christian discipleship and leadership are no longer godly conduct and maturity but the exercise of power. The hyper-grace gospel has contributed to this paradigm shift by claiming that there is no need for ongoing repentance anymore. Sin has no place in hyper-grace preaching, whereas the gospel of legalism declares the disregard of certain rules and regulations as sinful, which are not sinful in a scriptural sense.

There is both a need for a pastoral response that welcomes those affected by these other gospels and a need for biblical teaching that is contextual and helps Africans deal with the manifold challenges of life on their continent. However, the ultimate antidote to these other gospels is the Christ-centred, cross-centred and grace-centred gospel as we find it in the Scriptures..

INTRODUCTION

John Stott, an Anglican theologian and elder statesman of evangelical Christianity, once wrote about the mission of the church: "The Christian Church is called to mission, but there can be no mission without a message."¹ Stott continued with the question "So what is our message for the world?"² Most practitioners and scholars answer this question by pointing to the gospel as we find it in the Scriptures. There is wide agreement that the gospel of Jesus Christ

constitutes the message of mission. Zambian Baptist theologian Conrad Mbeve, for example, notes that mission demands the proclamation of the gospel.³ He explains vividly what he means by that: "If we lose the gospel, we have lost missions – no matter what else we have. We may have significant church buildings and budgets that are enabling us to send money to missions. Yet, if our money is going to a place where the gospel is not being proclaimed, then we are not

1 John R.W. Stott, *Evangelical Truth: A Personal Plea for Unity, Integrity and Faithfulness*. (Leicester: IVP, 2003), 96.

2 Stott, *Evangelical Truth*, 96.

3 Conrad Mbeve, *Foundations of the Flock: Truths About the Church for All the Saints* (Hannibal: Granted Ministries Press, 2011), 292.

truly participating in the world-wide call for soldiers of the cross to arise and bring others to Christ. In a word, we are not participating in missions.”⁴

The central role of the gospel in mission is also well described by New Testament scholars Andreas Köstenberger and Peter O’Brien. They state: “The mission of the exalted Jesus is accomplished through the witness of the apostles in the power of the Holy Spirit. The one who is himself sent by God sends his representatives to bear testimony to his salvation, to announce the forgiveness of sins and to make disciples of all nations. In other words, his witnesses continue the mission of Jesus by declaring to men and women everywhere the glorious gospel of the grace of God. As the Father has sent him, so Jesus sends them.”⁵ But what exactly is this glorious gospel?

In one of his sermons recorded by the evangelist Luke the Apostle Peter speaks about “the good news of peace through Jesus Christ” (Acts 10:36). It is the good news of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.⁶ It is the good news that Jesus “is Lord of all” (Acts 10:36) and not just of Israel, “anointed (...) with the Holy Spirit and power” (Acts 10:38), killed by hanging on the cross (Acts 10:39) but “raised (...) from the dead on the third day” (Acts 10:40) and “that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:43). That the person of Jesus is actually the gospel is also at the centre of the Apostle Paul’s letters. In 1 Corinthians 15:1–11, Paul demonstrates that the gospel is Christ-centred,

cross-centred and grace-centred.⁷ The apostle defines the essence of the gospel by listing five gospel truths.⁸ First, Jesus is the Christ (verse 3), i.e., the promised Messiah. Secondly, he died for our sins, was buried and was raised to life again (verses 3–4). His death on the cross was an atoning death. “That it was “for our sins” points to a vicarious atonement – paying the penalty we deserved to pay on our behalf,”⁹ Craig Blomberg explains. Thirdly, we can know this through the Scriptures (verses 4–8), i.e., the Old Testament, and the reports of many witnesses, including the apostles. To put it another way, we can find the gospel in the whole Bible. Fourthly, we need to respond to the gospel message by holding firmly to it, i.e., by faith (verse 2). Fifthly, if we do so, we will receive salvation (verse 2). Leon Morris comments on this passage: “The upshot of all this is that there is but one gospel, whoever might preach it. Paul has stressed that he received the gospel, he did not originate it (v.3). He has listed some of the more important points in the apostolic message, in particular the strong evidence for the resurrection. Now he is able to say that this is the common message of the preachers [...]. *We preach* is the present continuous tense; this is the way both Paul and the other apostles habitually preach. This is the authentic gospel, that which all the apostles make it their habit to proclaim. *This is what you believed* reminds the Corinthians that this was the basis of their faith. It was this message and not another that they had believed when they became Christians. Anything else is an innovation.”¹⁰

4 Mbewe, *Foundations of the Flock*, 300.

5 Andreas J. Köstenberger and Peter T. O’Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006), 269.

6 Cf. John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Acts* (Leicester: IVP, 2000), 191.

7 Cf. David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 683–685.

8 Victor B. Cole, “The Message and the Messenger of the Gospel,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 29/2 (2005), 180.

9 Craig Blomberg, *1 Corinthians: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 296.

10 Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the*

While the true gospel is a message of grace, forgiveness and salvation, which is for all nations, Christians in sub-Saharan Africa (and elsewhere) are often confronted with “gospel” messages that bear little resemblance with the good news of Jesus Christ. Many messages that are taught at mission rallies, crusades and conferences or preached in churches across sub-Saharan Africa differ substantially from the apostolic gospel which the apostles of Jesus and the early church proclaimed. The most prominent and influential of these other gospels is the prosperity gospel which claims that God wants to give us success, wealth and health.¹¹ Today the prosperity gospel, as South African missiologists Thinandavha Mashau and Mookgo Kgatle note, “is sweeping across the continent like a gale-force wind, which is irresistible.”¹² Its impact is undoubtedly massive. The prosperity gospel creates false hopes and further marginalises the poorest of the poor who are already severely affected by increasing levels of corruption.¹³ It is only good news for

those who preach it. For the weakest and most vulnerable community members, it is bad news indeed. Mashau and Kgatle identify social justice as one of the victims of prosperity preaching.¹⁴ “Instead of fighting the triple challenges of unemployment, poverty and inequality”, they write, “prosperity gospel perpetrates such challenges.”¹⁵ There are, however, other “other gospels” whose ramifications for the African church should not be underestimated. Among these messages are the power gospel, the hyper-grace gospel and the gospel of legalism.

THE POWER GOSPEL

Closely related to the prosperity gospel is the power gospel, a gospel version that has been present throughout sub-Saharan Africa for some time now. At the heart of the power gospel lies a new and radically different understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit. According to the New Testament writers, the Holy Spirit is the one who works the miracle of the new birth in people, dwells within them, sanctifies them, gives them spiritual gifts for ministry in the church and enables them to witness to Christ and his gospel.¹⁶ The Spirit helps Christians to pray, guides them and assures them of their status as children of God.¹⁷ However, advocates of the power gospel see the work of the Holy Spirit in a different light. We can distinguish between a militant and a diffused version.

Advocates of the militant form see the

https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/36766-doc-the_impact_of_corruption_on_children_-_final_report.pdf

14 Mashau and Kgatle, “Prosperity Gospel and the Culture of Greed in Post-Colonial Africa”.

15 Mashau and Kgatle, “Prosperity Gospel and the Culture of Greed in Post-Colonial Africa”.

16 See John 3:3–7; Romans 8:9; 2 Thessalonians 2:13; Romans 12:6–8; Acts 1:8.

17 See Ephesians 6:18; Acts 16:6–7; Romans 8:16.

Conrinthians: An Introduction and Commentary (Leicester: IVP, 1993), 205.

11 For a more in-depth discussion of the prosperity gospel in Africa, please see: Femi B. Adeleye, *Preachers of a Different Gospel: A Pilgrim’s Reflections on Contemporary Trends in Christianity* (Carlisle: HippoBooks, 2011); Basilius M. Kasera, *The Biblical and Theological Examination of Prosperity Theology and Its Impact Among the Poor in Namibia*, MTh thesis (Sandton: South African Theological Seminary, 2012); Marius Nel, *The Prosperity Gospel in Africa: An African Pentecostal Hermeneutical Consideration* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2020); Nelson Kalombo Ngoy, *Neo-Pentecostalism: A Post-colonial Critique of the Prosperity Gospel in the Democratic Republic of Kongo* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2019); Viateur Habarurema, *Christian Generosity according to 2 Corinthians 8-9: Its Exegesis, Reception and Interpretation Today in Dialogue with the Prosperity Gospel in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Carlisle: Langham Partnership, 2017)

12 Thinandavha D. Mashau and Mookgo S. Kgatle, “Prosperity Gospel and the Culture of Greed in Post-Colonial Africa: Constructing an Alternative African Christian Theology of Ubuntu,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* (Online) 40/1 (2019), <http://www.scielo.org.za/pdf/vee/v40n1/09.pdf>

13 See, for example, African Union, *Stolen Futures: The Impact of Corruption on Children in Africa*, 30 June 2024,

Holy Spirit, first and foremost, as the one who empowers Christians for healing, deliverance and miracles.¹⁸ The main focus of their ministries lies on visible demonstrations of supernatural power and not so much on living holy lives that are pleasing to God. Thus, the late Pentecostal preacher Reinhard Bonnke, who was well-known for his evangelistic mass rallies across Africa, said the following about his ministry: “We open the meetings to the Holy Spirit completely. The results are thrilling. Whole countries are challenged by the mighty power of Christ. Where false religion and doctrines of demons previously have prevailed, they are shaken and broken! (...) These breakthroughs are part of the End Time blessings that the Lord promised.”¹⁹

For Bonnke, deliverance from demon possession and physical healing are part and parcel of the Christian gospel. In his bestseller *Evangelism by Fire*, he writes: “Deliverance includes divine, miraculous healing. Some have thought that healing was an incidental result, a mere attachment to the Gospel. Never! It is an ingredient of the gospel.”²⁰ Bonnke compares the preacher of such a gospel to an archer who only has to release the “arrow of deliverance.”²¹ He continues to explain that “[t]he Spirit of God alone can plumb the depths of a man’s own spirit. He will not err.”²² When Bonnke speaks about the Holy Spirit one can easily forget that he is talking about the third person of the Trinity whom Jesus promised to his disciples describing

him as the Counsellor (or Advocate).²³ Bonnke’s description of the Holy Spirit sounds more like that of a powerful high-precision weapon that is at his disposal: “When a gun loaded with blank ammunition is fired, the bang and recoil are the same as they would be with live ammunition. A difference can be observed in the use of live ammunition and blanks, but not in the noise. The blank ammunition makes no mark on the target because it never reaches it. The real bullet can hit its mark. We are not interested in bang and recoil, excitement and spectacular gospel displays, even if those drew hundreds of thousands of people. We want to see something live hit the target. The crowds may come, but we must, by faith, let loose a true broadside of Holy Spirit firepower in order for something to be accomplished. Multitudes are born again, lives are completely changed, churches are filled, hell is plundered, and heaven is populated. Hallelujah!”²⁴

How different are the Apostle Paul’s words and goals as we can find them in his First Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 9, verse 22: “I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.” In contrast to Bonnke, Paul’s words demonstrate both a high degree of humility and a strong sense of realism. Paul wants to reach as many people as possible with the gospel, but he knows that he cannot reach all people on earth. He knows that through his ministry only a relatively small number of people might come to faith in Christ. Having said that, he is convinced that when the true gospel is preached the Holy Spirit is active both in the preacher and in those convicted by the message.²⁵ In his First Letter to the

18 See, for example, Andrew M. Nkoyoyo, *Catch and Release God’s Supernatural: Keys to Operating in God’s Miracles, Healing, and Power* (-: Spirit Life Publishing, 2020)

19 Reinhard Bonnke, *Evangelism by Fire* (Lake Mary: Charisma House, 2011), 19.

20 Bonnke, *Evangelism by Fire*, 113.

21 Bonnke, *Evangelism by Fire*, 184.

22 Bonnke, *Evangelism by Fire*, 184.

23 John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7.

24 Bonnke, *Evangelism by Fire*, 20.

25 Cf. Leon Morris, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (Leicester: IVP, 1989), 45.

Thessalonians, the apostle states: "For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction" (1 Thessalonians 1:4-5).

An increasing number of advocates of the power gospel teach their church members that demons can become their *spiritual wives* or *spiritual husbands* who will make life difficult for them. These evil spirits are responsible for relationship problems and the main reason some people find it hard to get married in the first place.²⁶ But even if they manage to find a spouse their spiritual husbands or wives will continue to torment them. Apostle Mark Essien Excel, who promotes this kind of teaching, explains: "For those who have succeeded to marry, miscarriages become a common phenomenon. The night before a miscarriage occurs, the woman is most likely be approached by a man in [a] dream, who would resemble her husband and will have sexual relationship with her in the dream. After the relationship, the woman may awake haemorrhaging or with pains that would later result in a miscarriage. On the part of the man with a spiritual wife, his living spiritual wife could find herself fighting with other women in her dream who would hit her stomach and the results would be serious pains, bleeding or a miscarriage."²⁷

At the same time, the man or woman of God offers a solution. Some like Excel recommend the daily declaration of Bible verses, such as Ezekiel 18:1-20 or 1 Corinthians 3:16-

17.²⁸ Others, as Mbewe points out, suggest deliverance ministry: "Usually, the diagnosis involves being asked about your dreams. If you have dreamt of yourself swimming (for the most stubborn ones are marine spirits), or missing your menstrual period, becoming pregnant, breastfeeding, vomiting, going shopping, having sex with a man who is not your husband, having a miscarriage, getting married, or about to get killed, then this is sure evidence that a spirit husband has entered into your life. You need deliverance. The 'Man of God' will often tell you that you are dreaming about having sex with someone other than your husband. You might deny this. If you do, he will claim that your spirit husband wiped it out of your memory. It is something like demonic manipulation or memory loss."²⁹

Not unlike the traditional witchdoctors, Christian pastors, bishops and apostles who claim to have supernatural powers that can "divorce" the poor victims from their unwanted spiritual wives and husbands and protect them from other forms of witchcraft. Maxey and Ozodo note: "It is to be feared that in some instances the Christian 'man of God' has replaced the age-old shaman or witch-doctor. African respect for their leaders is important and is to be accepted and encouraged. Yet it is easy for the pendulum to swing too far. Too often it is assumed that the man of God has peculiar powers given to him that he alone possesses."³⁰ This explains why tens of thousands flock to the most prominent leaders of African Initiated Churches (AICs) and try to touch them or get hold of anything these leaders have touched.³¹

26 Conrad Mbewe, "Why I Can't Believe in 'Spirit Husbands' and 'Spirit Wives,'" *The Gospel Coalition Africa Edition*, 26 June 2020, <https://africa.thegospelcoalition.org/article/why-i-cant-believe-in-spirit-husbands-and-spirit-wives/>.

27 Mark Essien Excel, *Crisis Management: A Spiritual Approach: Solving Life Problems From Their Spiritual Roots* (-: Xulon Press, 2011), 264.

28 Cf. Excel, *Crisis Management*, 265

29 Mbewe, "Why I Can't Believe in 'Spirit Husbands' and 'Spirit Wives'".

30 Gary S. Maxey and Peter Ozodo, *The Seduction of the Nigerian Church*, (Ipaja: WATS Publications, 2017), 133.

31 Maxey and Ozodo, *The Seduction of the Nigerian*

While the “good news” that people can be delivered from their spiritual spouses attracts an increasing number of people all over sub-Saharan Africa, such a message does not stand the test of the Bible.³² The New Testament speaks of demon possession (e.g., Matthew 9:33; Lukas 4:33; John 10:21) but is completely silent on the issue of spirit marriage as promoted by some AIC leaders. However, what it does is to urge Christians not to fall for such false teachings. In his first letter to Timothy, for example, the Apostle Paul asks his spiritual son to “command certain people not to teach false doctrines any longer or to devote themselves to myths” (1 Timothy 1:3–4). Furthermore, the supposedly good news of deliverance from unwanted spiritual spouses discourages Christian believers to repent of their sinful behaviour and seek God’s forgiveness. Instead, they are encouraged to blame evil spirits for their sexual sins and failures. Mbewe notes: “Responsibility is shifted from them onto some powerful spiritual force. The Bible, however, calls people who are guilty of sin to repent. God urges us to find forgiveness through faith in Christ. He also commands us to pursue holiness with the help of the Spirit.”³³

According to Maxey and Ozodo, the emphasis on the outward manifestations of the Holy Spirit has led to a redefinition of spirituality among Nigerian Christians.³⁴ They note that, traditionally, a Spirit-filled person was seen as someone who was an example of “Christlike living and holiness in character.”³⁵

Church, 133.

32 Mbewe, “Why I Can’t Believe in ‘Spirit Husbands’ and ‘Spirit Wives’”.

33 Mbewe, “Why I Can’t Believe in ‘Spirit Husbands’ and ‘Spirit Wives’”.

34 Maxey and Ozodo, *The Seduction of the Nigerian Church*, 161–162.

35 Maxey and Ozodo, *The Seduction of the Nigerian Church*, 166.

A Spirit-filled person was also someone who served God and his church in the power of the Holy Spirit. This understanding of the term Spirit-filled, however, has changed. Today a Spirit-filled person is understood as someone whose main ministries are signs and wonders. Maxey and Ozodo explain: “Through a subtle shift from a center in personal morality and holiness to a center in outward signs of power and healing and miracles the Bible concept of holiness or spirituality was gradually muted and the measure of spirituality was significantly changed. A ‘Spirit filled’ person was no longer necessarily an exemplar of holy living or Christlikeness in character.”³⁶ As a result of this shift from a morality-based spirituality to a spirituality based on signs and wonders the Nigerian Church has reached a point where leaders, who perform healings and other supernatural acts, are no longer rebuked or disciplined for the serious sins they have committed.³⁷ In other words, the marks of Christian leadership are no longer godly conduct and maturity but the exercise of power and increasingly “personal flamboyance and mesmerizing rhetoric.”³⁸

There is, as already mentioned, a more diffused version of the power gospel. Supernatural experience is not restricted to special events like gala dinners or mass rallies at which the man or woman of God demonstrates his or her miraculous healing powers. A special anointing with the Holy Spirit is available to everyone through other means, so they claim.³⁹

36 Maxey and Ozodo, *The Seduction of the Nigerian Church*, 162–63.

37 Maxey and Ozodo, *The Seduction of the Nigerian Church*, 165.

38 Maxey and Ozodo, *The Seduction of the Nigerian Church*, 167.

39 Samuel Waje Kunhiyop, *African Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 97.

All people need to do is use holy water or holy oil. These substances blessed by pastors, bishops or apostles have the power to protect them from all kinds of calamity, improve their relationships with family members, neighbours and business partners, increase their wealth and give them new spiritual gifts. Allan Anderson writes the following about the role such water plays in the Zionist and Apostolic churches in southern Africa: "The water represents cleansing and purification from evil, sin, sickness, and ritual pollution, concepts carried over from traditional thought. Sometimes the place from where the water is drawn is also important – as in baptisms, in some churches the water must be 'living' or running water, and seawater or rainwater gathered during a thunderstorm is thought to be particularly powerful. (...) In these churches, holy water and other symbolic objects are used for purification, protection, prosperity, success, and healing, and are seen as visible manifestations of God's power to heal. But without faith in this power of God, the symbols are useless."⁴⁰

Many preachers have adopted this practice and turned it into a profitable business. They sell their brands of holy water and holy oil in numbered bottles to their followers, and some even demand that people buy these bottles before they are allowed to come to the man or woman of God for a private consultation.⁴¹ This is just one of many examples of the commercialisation of the gospel that can be observed in Pentecostal and other churches on the African continent.⁴²

40 Allan H. Anderson, *African Reformation: African Initiated Christianity in the 20th Century* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2001), 236.

41 Nel, *The Prosperity Gospel in Africa*, 162.

42 See also Kelebogile T. Resane, "'Simon the Sorcerer Offered Them Money (Acts 8:19)': Some Pentecostals Have Gone Commercial Instead of Evangelical," in *The Use and Abuse of the Spirit in Pentecostalism*, ed. Mookgo S. Kgatle

In the final analysis, this version of the power gospel deifies objects like water or oil by claiming that, in some miraculous ways, they have come to possess the power of the Holy Spirit.⁴³ Nigerian preacher and founder of the Living Faith Church Worldwide, David Oyedepo, for example, states: "The anointing oil is not a chemical product. It is the Spirit of God mysteriously put in a bottle, mysteriously designed to communicate the power of God bodily. It is the power of God in your hand, in the person of the Holy Spirit, to humiliate Satan. It is the power of God placed in a tangible form in the hand of man, to make an open show of the devil."⁴⁴

Furthermore, as Samuel Waje Kunhiyop points out, the understanding of anointing as an extraordinary spiritual experience that is different from the giving of God's Spirit to all believers is problematic. The New Testament writers portray Jesus as the Messiah/Christ, i.e., as the anointed one. In the Book of Acts, Luke, as mentioned earlier, explicitly states that Jesus was anointed by God "with the Holy Spirit and power" (Acts 10:38). The same message can be found in Luke's gospel. At the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus quoted the following words from the prophet Isaiah to refer to himself, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me" (Luke 4:18). It is Jesus who then at the end of his earthly ministry promised the Holy Spirit to his disciples, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you" (Acts 1:8). In other words, the anointed Jesus passed on his anointing to his followers. Likewise,

and Allan H. Anderson (London: Routledge, 2020), 93–114.

43 Femi B. Adeleye, "The Prosperity Gospel: A Critique of the Way the Bible Is Used," *Lausanne Movement* 02 October 2015, <https://lausanne.org/content/the-prosperity-gospel-a-critique-of-the-way-the-bible-is-used>; Date of access: 17 July 2023.

44 Quoted by Adeleye, "The Prosperity Gospel".

on the day of Pentecost, the Apostle Peter promised the gift of the Holy Spirit to all who would repent and be baptised (Acts 2:38). That the anointing of the Holy Spirit is the common experience of all believers is also taught by the Apostle Paul. In 2 Corinthians, the apostle states: “Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come” (2 Corinthians 1:21–22). Kunhiyop’s conclusion is worth quoting in full: “While it is true that in the Old Testament in particular anointing was used to consecrate religious objects and commission and empower priests, prophets and kings, this was only one of its functions. In the New Testament, and especially for believers, anointing is linked to Jesus who is the Anointed One. He is the one from whom Christians get their anointing. Other uses of anointing that detract from this basic meaning often reflect traditional beliefs and practices rather than biblical teaching.”⁴⁵

To conclude, one has to say that the power gospel in its various forms is a distortion of the apostolic gospel. The latter’s central focus on Christ’s reconciling work on the cross has been shifted by the power gospel advocates to physical healing and deliverance from the work of evil spirits. The power gospel lacks the Christ and cross-centredness of the biblical gospel. The message that spiritually dead and sinful people can receive forgiveness of all their sins and eternal life through faith in Christ is more or less replaced by promises of divine miraculous interventions. The power gospel also ignores that the gospel as it was first proclaimed by the apostles demands something from the Christian believers, namely faith and holy living. It overlooks that the good news

needs to shape the life of believers. Followers of Jesus are called to live lives in line with the gospel and its truth, or as the Apostle Paul puts it in his letter to the Philippians: “Whatever happens, conduct yourself in a manner worthy of the gospel” (Philippians 1:27). In contrast to the apostolic message, the message of the power gospel is a rather self-centred one. The gospel of Jesus calls Christians not only to love God and their neighbours as they love themselves but also to make sacrifices.⁴⁶ If they do not live according to the truth of the gospel they become hypocrites.⁴⁷ However, if they do it they will see that the gospel has the power to transform their lives and the lives of others into the likeness of their Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, or in the words of the Apostle Paul: “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18).

THE HYPER-GRACE GOSPEL

There are followers of Jesus who recognise the Lord’s Prayer as a model prayer but would not use it personally. In their view, the prayer that Jesus taught his first disciples has become an empty ritual in many churches, something that they would want to avoid. Having said that, there is an increasing number of African Christians who teach that the Lord’s Prayer should not be used at all - neither verbatim nor as an exemplary prayer. They argue that it was taught by Jesus before his death and resurrection and therefore belongs to the old covenant. This side of the cross, they believe, the Lord’s Prayer together with all of Jesus’ teachings have lost their relevance.⁴⁸ Christians who reject the

46 2 Timothy 1:8–10.

47 Galatians 2:14.

48 R.T Kendall, *Whatever Happened to the Gospel?* (Lake

45 Kunhiyop, *African Christian Theology*, 101–102.

Lord’s Prayer as an expression of the Christian faith take offence, in particular, at the request for the forgiveness of sins. Andrew Wilson clarifies: “They think confessing sin is introspective and legalistic, and asking for forgiveness from God results in works-righteousness, insecurity, and self-obsession. According to them, it would be incoherent for Jeremiah to prophesy that our sins would be remembered no more in the new covenant, and for us still to ask for forgiveness once the new covenant had come. The Holy Spirit doesn’t convict us of sin, there is no real difference between conviction and condemnation, confessing sin is something you only have to do when you first become a Christian, 1 John 1 is written about unbelievers, and the Lord’s Prayer is not something we should pray this side of the cross.”⁴⁹

Stressing the biblical truth that all the sins have been dealt with by the atoning death of Jesus,⁵⁰ advocates of the hyper-grace gospel conclude that Christians do not need to confess their sins anymore. Joseph Prince, perhaps the best-known and most influential proponent of such teaching, states: “God’s forgiveness is not given in instalments. Don’t go around thinking that when you confess a sin, He forgives you only for that sin. Then, the next time you sin, you need to confess your sin again for Him to forgive you again. Such is the kind of belief that cheapens grace.”⁵¹ Instead of confessing their sins to God and being remorseful, Prince insists that Christians need to “know, believe and confess” that they are loved by God and that

they are “well-pleasing to Him all the time.”⁵² All they need to do is to remember God’s unmerited favour and confess their righteousness. “But here’s the good news”, Prince writes, “When you start seeing and believing that you are righteous in Christ when you start confessing your righteousness through Jesus in that area, your breakthrough is just around the corner.”⁵³ Specifically, repentance has no place in the lives of Christians. The same applies to obedience, as R.T. Kendall notes: “But hyper-grace teaching tells us that obedience is out of the question on our part; we are saved entirely by grace alone through faith alone.”⁵⁴ On the surface, such teaching, Kendall continues to explain, sounds like good news, but it is not; the hyper-grace gospel ignores large parts of the Bible, twists the biblical concept of grace and ignores the call to sanctification.⁵⁵

Hyper-grace preachers like Prince rarely mention sin and repentance. Yet, when they do so, they usually do not address the sins that can be observed in their communities and among their followers. African churches dominated by the hyper-gospel tend to be *sin-free* churches, or as Maxey and Ozodo observe: “They can go on and on about the sin of legalism or Phariseism, of course, but when it comes to the concept of rebellion against God, they tend to be silent. And of course, they have little to say in rebuke of sin among believers.”⁵⁶

Hyper-grace theology is very much a pick ‘n choose theology. It happily points its followers to verses like Hebrews 10:17, “Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more” but

Mary: Charisma House, 2018), 43.

49 Andrew Wilson, “The ‘Grace Revolution’, Hyper-Grace, and the Humility of Orthodoxy,” *Think Theology* 2 January 2013, https://thinktheology.co.uk/blog/article/the_grace_revolution.

50 1 Petrus 3:18.

51 Joseph Prince, *100 Days of Favor* (Lake Mary: Charisma House, 2011), 124.

52 Prince, *100 Days of Favor*, 277.

53 Prince, *100 Days of Favor*, 288.

54 Kendall, *Whatever Happened to the Gospel?* 41.

55 Kendall, *Whatever Happened to the Gospel?* 41, 42, 44.

56 Maxey and Ozodo, *The Seduction of the Nigerian Church*, 193.

ignores verses 26 to 39 of the same chapter which strongly warn believers against unholy living.⁵⁷ God's call to followers of Christ to live holy lives (e.g., 1 Thessalonians 4:3-7; 1 Peter: 1:15-16; Romans 8:12-13) tends to play no role in hyper-grace teaching and preaching. Unlike the Apostle Paul, hyper-grace preachers do not urge their hearers to work out their "own salvation with fear and trembling".⁵⁸ Hyper-grace theologians hold, as Michael Brown notes, that believers "are already completely sanctified by faith."⁵⁹ Consequently, there is no need to lead a life in obedience to God, as Jesus did.⁶⁰ Instead, they promote the idea of an effortless transformation. Prince writes: "Just when my family members had given up their hopes on me, my Daddy God did a miracle changing me effortlessly from within into a new person!"⁶¹ Hyper-grace advocates like Prince shut their eyes to the many encouragements by the New Testament writers to strive and labour in pursuit of godliness (1 Timothy 4:8-10), strain forward to what lies ahead (Philippians 3:13) or "run in such a way as to get the prize" (1 Corinthians 9:24).⁶² The Christian life is many things, but it is certainly not effortless. One can only agree with Paul Barker when he writes: "For Prince effort is a contradiction of grace. But this is simplistic and selective."⁶³ The absence of a biblical understanding of sin, repentance and sanctification in hyper-grace theology explains

57 Michael L. Brown, *Hyper-Grace* (Lake Mary: Charisma House, 2014), 45-46.

58 Philippians 2:12.

59 Brown, *Hyper-Grace*, 17.

60 See John 15:10; Philippians 2:8.

61 Prince, *100 Days of Favor*, 167.

62 Cf. Paul Barker, "The Hypergrace of Joseph Prince: A Review of 'Destined to Reign,'" *The Gospel Coalition Australian Edition* 04.04.2017, <https://au.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-hypergrace-of-joseph-prince-a-review-of-destined-to-reign/>.

63 Barker, "The Hypergrace of Joseph A Prince".

why most sermons of hyper-grace preachers tend to be positive, motivational messages.⁶⁴ Maxey and Ozodo conclude: "God loves you, He is happy with you, He has forgiven you, and He wants to give you all kinds of prosperity. All of those things are part of the message of the Bible, but when we do not preach the whole counsel of God it is like feeding our children with a strict diet of sugar and honey. It will not end well."⁶⁵

In sum, the hyper-grace gospel is a gospel that is based on a false understanding of grace. The concept of grace that the hyper-grace preachers promote falls into the category that Dietrich Bonhoeffer once named cheap grace: "Cheap grace", the German theologian wrote, "is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution with personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship (...)"⁶⁶ In contrast, the biblical gospel is based on what Bonhoeffer calls costly grace. Costly grace is the opposite of an effortless transformation. "Costly grace", Bonhoeffer notes, "is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock."⁶⁷

THE GOSPEL OF LEGALISM

Many African mainline churches have a system of fixed membership fees. In some Namibian Protestant denominations, for example, the failure to pay membership fees can have far-

64 Maxey and Ozodo, *The Seduction of the Nigerian Church*, 194.

65 Maxey and Ozodo, *The Seduction of the Nigerian Church*, 194.

66 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM Press, 2015), 4.

67 Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 5.

reaching repercussions. Church members who fail to pay their fees might be disqualified from holding a church office, be denied their voting rights in church affairs, or lose certain privileges.⁶⁸ They might be told that their children cannot be baptised or their deceased parents cannot be buried in the church cemetery because their fees are in arrears. Failure to “bring regularly all contributions and offerings which have been decided upon by the Church,”⁶⁹ as stipulated by the constitution of one Namibian church, is considered a serious matter. Not paying one’s membership fees (or tithes) is seen as a sin that needs to be punished. However, there is “good news” for church members: as long as their payments are up to date, they can enjoy their membership rights and are safe from public shaming.

In the case of membership fees, the gospel of legalism punishes poor church members who are struggling to make ends meet. Instead of receiving support from their church, it is the church that puts extra pressure on them and threatens to shame them in their community. A church that acts like that forgets that Christian giving is not by compulsion, or as the Apostle Paul puts it, “Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Corinthians 9:7). How much one gives to the church is a private matter.

The legalistic gospel is a gospel of works. As such its focus is not solely on Christ and his work of salvation. It expects Christians, as Stott notes, to finish what Jesus has begun; they

“must finish Christ’s unfinished work.”⁷⁰ They must add their work to the work of the Son of God upon the cross. Thus, the legalistic gospel consists of rules and regulations that Christians are strongly encouraged to obey. The adherents of the legalistic gospel believe, as Samuel Ngewa puts it, “that strict obedience to God’s laws, and particularly to the Ten Commandments, is a way of gaining his acceptance.”⁷¹ While the hyper-grace gospel twists the biblical concept of grace, the gospel of legalism lacks grace. It ignores that the Christian’s relationship with God is solely based on his or her faith in Jesus which is a gift from God.⁷² It fails to understand that Christians are to follow Jesus only and are not called to keep human traditions or meet their church leaders’ expectations. In legalistic African churches, these expectations usually go beyond the financial sphere. Church members are not only expected to attend the Sunday services but also to take part in other church activities such as prayer nights and evangelistic outreaches. Furthermore, dress codes can be quite strict. While in many mainline Protestant denominations, either suit and tie or a more traditional attire is a must for male worshippers, most Prophet-healing and Spiritual Churches expect both their male and female members to wear uniform-like clothing. The United African Apostolic Church, for example, stipulates: “It is mandatory for all UACC members to wear the church uniform whilst attending all church functions. With a few exceptions, distinctive outfits are worn with a blue belt [with the] printed the name of the church in full. The outfits are worn in relation to a position a member

68 Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Republic of Namibia, *Constitution of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Republic of Namibia* (Windhoek: Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Republic of Namibia, 2009), 12.

69 Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Republic of Namibia, *Constitution of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Republic of Namibia*, 11.

70 John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians* (Leicester: IVP, 1984), 22.

71 Samuel Ngewa, “Legalism,” in *Africa Bible Commentary*, ed. T. Adeyemo (Nairobi: WordAlive Publishers, 2006), 1421.

72 See, for example, Ephesians 2:8-9; Romans 1:17; 3:24; Galatians 3:5-7.

holds in the church.”⁷³ Regulations like these are more reminiscent of a military force than a Christian church body. J.S. Pobe identifies one of the reasons for legalistic tendencies in African churches: “African Christian spirituality is very much Old Testament in texture and orientation. The values of family, hospitality and corporate personality are similar. Old Testament imagery and symbolism are appropriated and much appreciated. The exodus motif, for example, is much in use, especially when liberation and salvation are discussed. The Jerusalem or holy city motif is common in African songs to signify the hope of ultimate salvation. African Christianity, for partly the same reason, is very much legalistic in approach, following Jewish legalism.”⁷⁴

The preaching in legalistic churches is often dominated by ethical issues and a strong reminder of the importance of nation-building. Nonetheless, legalistic preaching cannot only be observed in mainline Mission Initiated Churches. Research into the preaching practice in the Church of the Lord (Aladura), an African Initiated Church based in Nigeria, found legalistic tendencies too.⁷⁵ Thus, the Gospel of Matthew was used more often than the other three gospels. John Mbiti explains the relevance of this discovery: “Matthew contains teaching on a number of individual themes that are characteristic of the Church of the Lord, and that its teaching in general is congenial to the church’s cast of thought. The presentation of the gospel as the new law, or as the final edition of the old law, appeals to a church that

has a legalistic emphasis and an Old Testament interpretation of the gospel (...).”⁷⁶

Legalism in African churches has severe consequences not only for individual believers but also for the African Church. Legalism enslaves Christians as faith becomes a burden. It knows little of the joy of belonging to Christ. Ultimately, the legalistic gospel contributes to nominalism, i.e., Christianity in name only. People regularly attend the Sunday services but not to worship the living God. In African communities, which have been shaped by Christianity, they do what the community expects from them. Attending church becomes a box-ticking exercise to avoid shame and social exclusion.

In conclusion, unlike the apostolic gospel, the legalistic gospel is not centred on God’s grace. Those who promote it seem to forget that salvation is entirely God’s work. Christians cannot contribute anything to it. As the Apostle Paul puts it: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves. It is the gift of God – not by works, so that no-one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8–9). We can only embrace the gospel of reconciliation with a gracious God. However, we cannot add anything to what Christ achieved on the cross. Followers of Christ are saved by God’s grace alone, through faith in Christ alone. Ultimately, insisting on keeping Old Testament laws or human-made rules and regulations will only hide Jesus from people who desperately need him.

CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

The gospel of Jesus Christ is the message of mission. It is a message that, as Stott notes, “centres (...) on the fantastic truth of a God who

73 United African Apostolic Church, <https://uaac.church/uniforms/>

74 John S. Pobe, “African Spirituality,” in *The SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Gordon S. Wakefield (London: SCM Press, 1983), 7.

75 Hans S.A. Engdahl, *African Church Fathers: Ancient and Modern: A Reading of Origen and John S. Mbiti* (Cape Town: UWC Press, 2020), 109.

76 Engdahl, *African Church Fathers*, 109.

loves us, and who gave himself for us in Christ on the cross.⁷⁷ Having said that, there are preachers on the African continent who have made it their mission to spread gospel messages that do not deserve that name. God's love for his world, his son's death and resurrection, forgiveness and reconciliation, as well as the promise of eternal life are not at the centre of their proclamation. Instead, some of them declare that the gospel is good news for those who are willing to give away their money; God will reward them with wealth and health. Others claim that the gospel is the good news that people can become partakers in the supernatural powers given by the Holy Spirit to the man or woman of God. Then there are those who insist that Christians do not need to repent anymore because of God's grace. Finally, some preachers assert that their hearers can earn God's favour. All they have to do is to keep the Old Testament law and their church's rules and regulations. Are these gospels of prosperity, power, hyper-grace or legalism identical to the liberating good news that we can find in the Bible? The answer to that question has to be "No!". These gospels are distortions of the Christian gospel. They confuse and exploit African believers. They give them false hope and false security. Ultimately, they discredit the church's mission. These messages are different gospels which, as harsh as it may sound, deserve a response like the one the Apostle Paul gave to the Galatians: "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – which is really no gospel at all. Evidently, some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ" (Galatians 1:6–7).

But how should African churches respond to these other gospels? Let us make no mistake

here - all these false gospels can have deeply damaging effects on people. Consequently, there is, first and foremost, a need for a pastoral response that warmly welcomes the victims of the prosperity, power, hyper-grace and legalistic gospels and gives them time and space to work through their experience and receive healing. This, however, presupposes scriptural teaching which is contextual and helps African believers to deal with the manifold challenges of life on their continent. One reason why these false gospels are so successful is a lack of biblical teaching that recognises and grapples with the harsh realities of everyday living, such as corruption, unemployment, food insecurity, insufficient medical care and gender-based violence. Another reason is the negative attitude among many theologically orthodox pastors and missionaries towards traditional African culture. What is needed here is a more sympathetic understanding without falling into the trap of syncretism. Having said that, the ultimate antidote to these other gospels is Jesus and his gospel. The church is called to witness to him, and him alone.

77 Stott, *Evangelical Truth*, 96.

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