Sanctified or Exploited: A Theological Anthropology of the Prosperity Gospel in Nigeria

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Abstract

The prosperity gospel remains one of the most contentious expressions of contemporary Christian theology, offering promises of both spiritual deliverance and material abundance. This study employs a theological-anthropological framework to examine the dialectical tension at the heart of these promises, interrogating whether adherents are genuinely sanctified by divine favour or unwittingly exploited by a system that commercialises faith. The study examines how biblical texts, typically symbolic of divine grace, are reinterpreted to support a transactional spirituality that links faithfulness with financial success using a combination of historical contextualisation and sociological analysis, particularly in the Nigerian context. Prosperity teachings have the potential of encouraging exploitative behaviours that skew Christian ethics and worsen socioeconomic inequalities inside church structures, even while they may also promote a sense of empowerment and religious action, particularly in economically unstable environments. The article urges a re-evaluation of the doctrinal and practical implications of prosperity theology by closely examining the stories of sanctification versus exploitation. It makes the case for a revitalised Christian practice that is based on genuine spiritual transformation, one that rejects materialistic distortions and restores the Church's role as a place of prayer rather than a haven for opportunistic profit.

Keywords: Sanctified, Prosperity, Exploited, Corruption, Theological anthropology

Introduction

One of the most significant and contentious theological developments in modern Christianity is the prosperity gospel, which is especially prevalent in Pentecostal and Charismatic traditions throughout the Global South (Nel, 2020, p. 24). Marius said it is more evident and active in Nigeria than anywhere else, where it influences not only religious discourse but also socioeconomic goals and cultural imaginations. The prosperity gospel, which has its roots in American evangelical movements such as Word of Faith and Positive Confession from the mid-20th century, claims that faith, seed sowing, and prophetic declarations would grant access to divine health, material wealth, and victorious life as manifestations of covenantal favour. In Nigerian cities, where religious leaders were both spiritual patrons and business models, this theological movement has developed into a major religious industry. The question of whether the prosperity gospel sanctifies human or takes advantage of weak believers through commercialised displays of faith is raised by the profound anthropological and ethical contradictions discovered underlying its joyous declarations of wealth.

At its core, the prosperity gospel represents a departure from classical Christian teachings on suffering, discipleship, and divine providence. By recasting the human-divine relationship as a contractual exchange governed by spiritual laws of giving and receiving, it introduces a utilitarian vision of the *Imago Dei* that is deeply entangled with neoliberal economic logic. Human worth, in this framework, becomes increasingly measured by the capacity to activate divine favour through visible prosperity. As scholars have observed, this reshaping of theological anthropology often distorts biblical narratives of grace, turning them into formulaic systems that reinforce wealth accumulation and marginalise those who do not "manifest" such outcomes (Kate, 2013, p. 208). The gospel of Christ crucified is thus substituted with what has been called a "gospel of affluence," where spiritual legitimacy is tied to material success (Paul, 2016, p. 57).

To examine the prosperity gospel's implicit presumptions about human nature, divine agency, and communal life, this study places itself within the larger discipline of theological anthropology. It queries whether the anthropology ingrained in prosperity theology indicates a theologically meaningless commodification of faith or is in line with Christian ethical commitments and doctrinal tradition. This paper critically engages the prosperity gospel not just as a religious phenomenon but as a theological anthropology that profoundly shapes human identity, action, and destiny. It does this by using Nigeria as a primary site of investigation because of its distinctive religious vibrancy, socio-economic uncertainty, and theological creativity.

The study uses an interdisciplinary approach to do this, incorporating ideas from sociological research, historical theology, postcolonial critique, and Biblical interpretation. Theological analysis of biblical passages commonly used by prosperity preachers, like Malachi 3:10, 3 John 2, and Deuteronomy 28, is conducted in light of their original contexts and canonical function. The development of prosperity speech from its American origins to its African modifications is traced using historical and social data. This research revolves around Nigerian voices, both affirmative and critical, which highlight the necessity for a theology that upholds the fundamental principles of the gospel while also speaking to indigenous circumstances.

This paper's main argument is that, although the prosperity gospel in Nigeria has given economically marginalised groups a stronger sense of religious identity, it frequently does so by promoting a theological anthropology that is highly transactional, morally dubious, and ultimately unsustainable. It establishes a framework where faith is used as a weapon for upward mobility but is rarely questioned for its capacity to accept suffering in a redemptive way, its eschatological hope, or its communal commitments. Accordingly, the prosperity gospel is a reflection of a more profound issue facing Christian anthropology in postcolonial Africa, one that calls for both critical analysis and a positive theological response.

Theoretical Framework

The prosperity gospel's conception of the human person, divine agency, and religious practice in modern-day Nigeria is examined in this study using an interdisciplinary theoretical framework based on the theological anthropology and postcolonial theological critique. In addition to facilitating a thorough theological analysis, these frameworks guarantee that the study is ethically responsible, socially critical, and contextually rooted. When combined, they allow for a positive assessment of whether Nigerian prosperity theology develops a commercialised religiosity influenced by exploitative structures or an authentic vision of sanctified humanity.

1. **Theological Anthropology: Imago Dei, Vocation, and Commodification**

Theological anthropology, at its core, concerns itself with the doctrine of the human person with God. It explores what it means to be created in the *imago Dei* (image of God), the nature of human freedom and vocation, the effects of sin and redemption, and the eschatological destiny of humanity. Within the Christian tradition, human beings are understood not merely as rational or economic agents, but as relational and covenantal beings whose identity is grounded in divine love, not material achievement.

This anthropological vision is seriously contested in the context of prosperity theology. The prosperity message frequently portrays people as spiritual entrepreneurs whose success depends on their ability to show faithfulness through financial contributions, vocal confessions, and loyalty to church leadership. (Ruth, 2009, p.186). This transactional view of the self implicitly links spiritual favour with financial prominence by reducing the imago Dei to a performance statistic. Such a viewpoint runs counter to traditional theological views from thinkers such as Augustine and Karl Barth, who highlight the uniqueness and improbability of human existence, which are based on grace rather than money or hard effort. (Karl, 1960, p.198 - 202)

Willie James Jennings and Kathryn Tanner are two modern theologians who provide critical viewpoints on how economic logics have changed the field of theological anthropology. Tanner, for example, contends that by portraying life as a competitive market where human value is determined by success and output, neoliberal capitalism has colonised religious imaginaries. (Kathryn, 2019, p.45 – 47). The prosperity gospel undercuts the gospel's message of

radical grace in these situations by promoting an "economic anthropology." By encouraging individualism, hierarchy, and exclusion in the name of divine blessing, Jennings further questions the ways that racial and colonial forms distort Christian identity and community. (Jennings, 2010) These criticisms are especially useful for comprehending prosperity theology in Nigeria, where a unique religio-economic topic has emerged as a result of the intersection of spiritual desire, economic precarity, and international Pentecostal networks.

Thus, theological anthropology provides a crucial framework for interrogating the kind of human person the prosperity gospel constructs, the virtues it promotes, and the communities it imagines. The danger is not merely doctrinal distortion but an ecclesiological rupture, wherein the church becomes a marketplace for divine transactions rather than a communion of sanctified persons in Christ.

2. **Postcolonial Theological Critique: Empire, Power, and Context**

To complement theological anthropology, this research draws on postcolonial theology as a critical lens through which to examine the structural and historical forces shaping prosperity teachings in Nigeria. Postcolonial theology interrogates the enduring impact of colonialism on religious belief, practice, and identity formation. It challenges theological systems that uncritically adopt Western epistemologies, economic ideologies, and political structures, especially when they marginalise local cultures and perpetuate systemic injustice.

Despite being widely seen as indigenous and contextually sensitive, the prosperity gospel in Nigeria is influenced by global Pentecostal capitalism and is spread through American televangelism, media outlets, and ministry franchises (Ukah, 2014, p.307-333). By following this paradigm, Nigerian mega churches can unintentionally support what Comaroff (2001) refers to as a "neoliberal theology of success", a religious reasoning that normalises inequality in the name of divine election. In addition to warping theological conceptions, this feeds colonial logics of dominance, hierarchy, and accumulation under the pretence of religion.

Katongole (2010) & Maluleke (2011), two postcolonial African theologians, have argued that African theology must avoid becoming a "chaplaincy to empire" and instead resurrect the subversive memory of Christ crucified, who stands with the poor, the marginalised, and the suffering. Katongole cautions that if modern African Christianity does not address the systems of exploitation and violence that are maintained in religious contexts, it runs the risk of turning into "a spectator church." (Maluleke, 2000, p.19-37) Therefore, a radical rereading of scripture, history, and ecclesial identity from the perspective of power is required by postcolonial theology. When applied to Nigeria, postcolonial theology emphasises how the prosperity gospel may legitimise charismatic authoritarianism and sacralise wealth disparities, thus re-inscribing colonial processes. Churches run the risk of committing a new kind of spiritual imperialism when they demand tithes in exchange for miracles while denying accountability or transparency. The theological imagination and power structures ingrained in prosperity language are examined in this critique, which calls for a broader ecclesiological and ethical discernment that goes beyond economic outcomes.

Postcolonial critique and theological anthropology work together to provide a strong theoretical framework for this study. While the latter places this perspective within the historical context of empire, neoliberalism, and theological colonisation, the former challenges the prosperity gospel's understanding of the human person about God, grace, and vocation. Based on these viewpoints, the study goes on to investigate how Nigerian prosperity theology develops, disciplines, and uses the human subject, and for what moral and theological purposes. In addition to highlighting the theological compromises and risks associated with commodifying the divine-human relationship, this paradigm allows for a nuanced study that validates the true aspirations for flourishing within Nigerian Pentecostalism.

The Concept of Prosperity Gospel

The way the prosperity gospel reshapes religious subjectivity, especially in African contexts, has been better understood according to recent studies. A "reconfigured anthropology of faith," according to Adeyemo (2023, p.134-157), is provided by Nigerian Pentecostalism, in which the believer is viewed as an active participant in a spiritual marketplace who navigates divine favour through strategic prayer and economic obedience. Adeyemo (2023) argues that this form of agency is both empowering and insecure; it provides upward mobility and a sense of

purpose, but it is plagued by the ongoing demand to demonstrate the tangible effects of divine grace. Oduro's (2022) ethnographic study conducted in southern Nigeria also examines how Pentecostal believers incorporate prosperity ideas into their spiritual self-fashioning. Oduro (2022) points to a recurrent theme in "soteriological capitalism," where redemption is perceived as both an instantaneous financial breakthrough and eternal stability. This experience strengthens a neoliberal ethic of self-responsibility and meritocratic grace, even as it empowers people to fight socioeconomic marginalisation.

The ecclesiological implications of prosperity theology have likewise drawn more and more attention from scholars. Nwosu (2024) critically examines how corporate models, branding tactics, and performative leadership are reshaping church institutions in Faith Incorporated: Pentecostalism and the Business of Church in Africa. According to Nwosu, (2024, pp. 88-115), Nigerian prosperity gospel churches operate as "spiritual corporations," where pastoral charisma is marketed and the congregation is used as a customer base to be cultivated, grown, and profited from. Danjuma (2021), echoes this criticism, emphasising how church governance in prosperity circles frequently lacks theological accountability and openness. Her research highlights the gendered aspects of ecclesial capitalism by pointing out that women, who make up the majority of attendees, are often the main source of funding yet are nevertheless shut out of decision-making and the discussion of doctrine. An essential gendered perspective for assessing the anthropological framework of Nigerian prosperity Christianity is offered by Danjuma's work.

The reinterpretation of Scripture remains central to the theological architecture of prosperity teachings. Contemporary scholarship has moved beyond merely listing the common proof-texts to examining the hermeneutical methods that undergird prosperity exegesis. Gyang (2022, pp. 98-117) offers a compelling analysis of "entrepreneurial hermeneutics," a mode of scriptural reading that foregrounds narratives of success, dominion, and divine transaction while marginalising texts on suffering, sacrifice, and communal justice. Gyang (2022) situates this approach within a larger Pentecostal cosmology that views the Bible as a manual for divine negotiation and individual breakthrough. Building on this, Akinwale (2025, p.50-73) has argued for the need to retrieve a "cruciform hermeneutic" that re-centres the cross, not as an obstacle to blessing but as the pattern of Christian life. Akinwale (2025) critiques the prosperity gospel's displacement of the theology of the cross and calls for an interpretive posture that holds divine power and human vulnerability in tension. This resonates with global theological voices calling for a return to kenotic models of discipleship in response to the triumphalism of prosperity rhetoric.

Lastly, over the last five years, literature has more deliberately concentrated on the contextual factors influencing the appeal of prosperity theology in Nigeria. According to sociological research by Ajayi (2023, p.77-94) religious movements that offer instant fixes and spiritual empowerment have flourished as a result of pervasive economic precarity, youth unemployment, and state dysfunction. Ajayi cautions against over-contextualising prosperity theology, pointing out that some of its excesses must be viewed as theologically and institutionally fostered occurrences rather than being justified by poverty alone. Moreover, Boateng (2022) provides a pan-African theological critique of the prosperity message in African Christianity and the Crisis of Prosperity Ethics, contending that it undercuts the Church's prophetic call and the community ethos of African spirituality. In the face of Christian commercialisation, he promotes a theology of solidarity that recovers the Church's social mission.

Historical and Socio-Theological Development of the Prosperity Gospel in Nigeria

The Nigerian prosperity gospel is the result of intricate historical developments, theological discussions, economic concerns, and cultural compromises. Tracing its global influences, mapping its indigenisation in Nigeria's postcolonial religious environment, and examining the socio-theological circumstances that made it possible for it to be received and institutionalised are all necessary to comprehend its evolution. The development of the prosperity gospel in Nigeria is mapped out in this section along three interconnected axes: doctrinal change, local adaptation, and historical transmission.

The prosperity gospel in Nigeria has its origins in American evangelicalism in the middle of the 20th century, particularly in the Charismatic revivals led by Oral Roberts and T.L. Osborn,

the Word of Faith movement (Kenneth Hagin), and the Positive Confession theology of E.W. Kenyon. (Bowler, 2013, p.89-112) These leaders promoted the idea that faith could ensure worldly wealth and bodily health when it was sparked by speech and selfless giving. These ideas aligned with the global Pentecostal movement's emphasis on individual strength and divine immediacy.

Nigerian ministers like Benson Idahosa were instrumental in bringing these ideas to the country in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Idahosa, a dynamic leader who received training from T.L. Osborn, combined African revivalism and public evangelism with American prosperity theory to present success and wealth as spiritual achievements. (Marshall, 2009, p.143) His extravagant way of living, miracle missions, and emphasis on "believing big" shaped the Pentecostal imagination of Nigeria. These teachings were further systematised through books, radio, television, and later digital media by his spiritual descendants, including David Oyedepo, Chris Oyakhilome, and Matthew Ashimolowo. (Ukah, 2022) These ministries did not merely replicate American models; they indigenized prosperity theology by framing it within African cosmology and local aspirations. Concepts such as curses, ancestral bondage, spiritual warfare, and destiny enhancement were integrated into the theology of success, creating a uniquely Africanized expression of the prosperity message (Kalu, 2021, p.178-192)

The socio-political backdrop of postcolonial Nigeria played a significant role in the rapid proliferation of prosperity gospel ideology. The 1980s and 1990s were marked by economic decline, structural adjustment programs, political instability, and rising unemployment. During this period of national uncertainty, prosperity churches offered an alternative vision of hope and self-determination (Wariboko, 2011). This development has also been echoed by Omosor (2013) in his submission that the poor and deplorable political economy of Nigeria and the susceptibility of the masses is a major factor in the negative manipulation of religion in the country. In addition to spiritual redemption, these churches offered social mobility and personal development. Similarly, Omosor (2019) held that Christian clerics have so much dwelt on prosperity preaching and self-enriching gospel that they often lose sight of their roles as socio-political reformers like Prophet Amos. The "born-again entrepreneur" became a representation of divine election, overcoming systemic limitations with faith and calculated generosity. This philosophy was in line with what Obadare (2022, p.54-63) refers to as "charismatic citizenship," where Pentecostal Christians build spiritual networks of legitimacy and support to deal with political failure. According to this theory, in the absence of a responsive state, the church turns into a location for socioeconomic empowerment.

Furthermore, the prosperity gospel is consistent with deeply ingrained African concepts of spiritual causality and reciprocity. According to Wariboko (2011, p.102), the African religious worldview sees the material and spiritual worlds as inextricably intertwined in a causal continuum rather than as distinct entities. The prosperity message appeals to traditional beliefs in spiritual exchange, covenant ceremonies, and cosmic justice because it emphasises sowing and reaping, divine favour, and prophetic breakthroughs.

Nigeria's religious landscape had institutionalised the prosperity gospel by the early 2000s. Mega churches like Christ Embassy, Daystar Christian Centre, and Living Faith Church (Winners Chapel) developed into religious corporations with vast media empires, financial alliances, and real estate holdings. Their leaders are spiritual CEOs, and their money is presented as proof that God approves of them. (Nwosu, 2024, p.88) Alongside this corporate ecclesiology is a theology of dominion, which holds that Christians are meant to be in charge of the media, education, commerce, and politics. Originally popularised in American evangelical circles, the "Seven Mountains Mandate" was modified by Nigerian preachers to further a theology of economic conquest, territory domination, and influence. (Oduro, 2021, p.101-120)

These churches' theological education and discipleship initiatives support this goal. Theology institutes and leadership academies frequently portray poverty as a spiritual shortcoming or curse and prosperity as an unavoidable component of covenant life. A theological atmosphere where suffering is stigmatised, questions are suppressed, and monetary prosperity is associated with divine favour is produced by this normalisation of wealth as orthodoxy. (Ajayi, 2023, 81-84) However, this theological monopoly has been contested by various Christian voices, including mainline and evangelical. Pastors and theologians have

started advocating for a return to Biblical examples of suffering, humility, and stewardship. (Boateng, 2022, p.71) However, among young people, urban migrants, and the business class in particular, the prosperity gospel continues to be prevalent in mainstream Nigerian Christianity.

The prosperity gospel's historical origins and socio-theological consolidation in Nigeria are a reflection of both local cultural disputes and worldwide religious flows. Through indigenous cosmology, postcolonial struggle, and a contemporary business mindset, imported ideas were reinterpreted. The result is a theologically problematic yet highly contextualised movement that reframes Christian identity in terms of spiritual production, prophetic performance, and financial success. To evaluate the anthropological effects of prosperity doctrines and to imagine a theology that rejects commodification while recognising the actual needs of the Nigerian people, it is imperative to comprehend this evolution.

Theological Anthropology in the Prosperity Gospel

The core of theological anthropology is the question of what it means to be human in the eyes of God. The idea that people have intrinsic dignity, moral agency, and a transcendent vocation because they were made in God's image has long been upheld by Christian theology. (Barth, 1960) The prosperity gospel, on the other hand, fundamentally reinterprets this idea by placing human worth in the ability of the individual to manifest divine favour by faith-filled speech, giving, and vision rather than in divine grace or moral adherence to Christ. In this sense, the prosperity gospel promotes a theological ethos of power, productivity, and performance that is frequently divorced from self-denial, suffering, or solidarity. The economic instrumentalisation of the *imago Dei*, the emergence of the self-authoring religious person, and the theological marginalisation of suffering are the three main anthropological assertions that are examined in this stage of the analysis of prosperity teaching.

1. **Imago Dei as Economic Capacity**

The imago Dei is redefined by prosperity theology as the divine endowment of creative, wealth-generating potential rather than as involvement in divine relationality or moral resemblance. By exercising control over their circumstances through spiritual rules and entrepreneurship, humans are encouraged to imitate God's sovereignty. "You are born to reign," a well-known statement by Oyedepo, exemplifies how dominion theology is distorted through the prism of financial success. (Oyedepo, 2022, p.14). According to this concept, poverty is a theological aberration rather than merely a socio-political issue; it is a sign of either ignorance, demonic resistance, or a lack of faith.

This convergence of theological anthropology with economic knowledge, as Kathryn Tanner cautions, turns the human into "a bearer of capital potential," wherein material possessions and outward affluence are used to gauge heavenly blessing. (Tanner, 2019, p.32) Sermons in Nigerian prosperity circles frequently assert that a person's worldly condition is a reflection of their spiritual status, a belief that weaponises riches as a mark of deservingness. According to this perspective, violent self-assertion takes the place of traditional Christian emphasis on stewardship, humility, and kenosis (self-emptying). Moreover, this reasoning calls into question the imago Dei's theological universality. The prosperity gospel divides people into two groups: those who have "activated" divine favour and others who have failed, rather than recognising everyone as a bearer of God's image regardless of position. (Gifford, 2016, p.63) With colonial meritocracy and capitalist elitism, where success is not only praised but even exalted, this functional anthropology is in perilous alignment.

2. **The Self-Authoring Believer and the Power of Confession**

A second feature of prosperity anthropology is its promotion of the self-authoring religious subject. Drawing from Word of Faith theology, prosperity gospel preachers teach that the tongue is a tool of creation. By "confessing" abundance, "claiming" blessings, and "rejecting" negativity, believers are taught to shape their reality by spiritual decree. (Bowler, 2013, p.135) This performative speech model has a strong anthropocentric bent. It implies that humans are capable of using their spiritual will to channel divine power towards their ends. Prayer becomes a tool of command rather than a means of surrender and communion. The believer uses faith to speak what they want into existence rather than waiting on God in trust. This tends to lean towards a magical religiosity that is unrelated to theological investigation, even while it could encourage a sense of action and empowerment.

Akinwale (2025) criticises this anthropology for encouraging a "non-relational metaphysic," in which a person's abilities to create results define them rather than their covenant with God or their community. (Akinwale, 2025, p.68) Furthermore, the focus on positive confession undercuts the prophetic tradition and Biblical lament, which allow for pain, scepticism, and dissent as legitimate spiritual expressions. The prosperity subject must always win, even if the performance is at odds with reality.

3. The Erasure of Suffering and the Theology of Denial

Perhaps the most troubling dimension of prosperity anthropology is its near-total marginalisation of suffering. While classical Christian theology understands suffering as a cruciform path to maturity, solidarity, and eschatological hope, prosperity teachings often depict suffering as a failure of faith or a sign of divine disapproval. (Wright, 2016, p.253) The cross is thus emptied of its existential and theological weight. In Nigeria, where poverty, instability, and systematic injustice cause a great deal of pain, this denial is pastoral malpractice as well as theological. Emmanuel Katongole notes that any theology that fails to explain suffering in the African setting runs the risk of turning into "a false gospel proclaimed not from the basis of the cross, but from the steps of a palace." (Katongole, 2011, p.90) There are real-world repercussions to this distortion: it silences people who are grieving, shames the ill, and alienates the impoverished. Moreover, the prosperity gospel falls short of developing a theology of compassion by eschewing stories of group hardship and redemptive perseverance. Instead of being a place of mutual support, the church's body politic turns into a contest between testimonials and miracles. Thus, the anthropology of the prosperity movement separates people from one another as well as from their suffering.

The prosperity gospel creates a performative, individualistic, and economically conditioned theological anthropology. Its denial of pain, celebration of self-authoring activity, and redefinition of the imago Dei all combine to create a human perspective that is incompatible with the historical Christian witness. This anthropology erodes the ecclesial vocation to represent Christ in both joy and pain, commodifies faith, and distorts divine grace, even though it may empower certain believers in situations where others lack it. A revitalised theological anthropology that restores the dignity of the impoverished, acknowledges the complexity of suffering, and reminds that being human before God is not about possessing more but about becoming more like Christ must be the first step in any reinvention of Christian praxis in Nigeria.

Sanctified or Exploited?

A basic theological and anthropological question is at the centre of this article: Does Nigeria's prosperity gospel sanctify human life by reaffirming divine dignity, agency, and flourishing, or does it take advantage of vulnerable groups by passing off a commodified form of faith and materialism as divine favour? While prosperity teachings frequently promise sanctification through divine empowerment, the research's findings, which interface theological anthropology with postcolonial critique, show that they typically function within a framework that subtly but profoundly exploits human longing, particularly in situations of economic uncertainty and ecclesial dependence. Using both theoretical techniques and empirical findings, this section addresses the main conflicts revealed throughout the paper and demonstrates how the prosperity gospel's anthropology is structurally exploitative despite being verbally empowering. The axes of critique will be three dimensions: suffering, silence, and ecclesiastical manipulation; spiritual agency and transactionalism; and divine image and economic commodification.

The Nigerian prosperity gospel reinterprets the *imago Dei* in terms of economics, holding that being made in God's image entails having the innate capacity for material success. This turns theological anthropology into capitalist anthropology, even though it seems to validate human potential and inventiveness. (Tanner, 2019, p.31) An instrumentalist perspective of the human being as essentially a producer and consumer of divine promises is the outcome. According to this paradigm, having financial success is a prerequisite for dignity; not having it suggests a lack of spirituality or disapproval from God. Traditional Christian anthropology is incompatible with this notion. The *imago Dei* is best viewed relationally, as participation in God's love and moral resemblance, rather than as economic output, according to the traditions of Barth and Bonhoeffer (Barth, 1960, p.200-204). Prosperity theology runs the potential of what

Emmanuel Katongole refers to as "a sacramental inversion," when money becomes the ultimate mediator of grace, by equating human worth with accumulating wealth. (Katongole, 2011, p.91). This is dangerous for two reasons: it not only marginalises the poor, but it also takes away the theological significance of humility, solidarity, and interdependence among communities.

According to the prosperity gospel, believers are empowered by learning how to "sow seeds," "claim their miracles," and "speak things into existence." Anyone can succeed if they engage their faith, according to this ideology, which supposedly democratises access to God. However, this empowerment is false and based on a spiritual meritocracy rather than grace, as demonstrated by Adeyemo (2023) and Akinwale (2025). To achieve heavenly breakthroughs, it establishes a system that commodifies faith and continuously exhorts believers to contribute more, pray louder, and confess more.

Neoliberal subjectivity, which internalises blame and externalises failure, is consistent with this religious reasoning (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2001, p.19) Seldom are believers allowed to challenge the system; if they are still impoverished or sick, it is because they did not have faith or did not abide by the "spiritual laws." This creates a wearying religiosity that is performance-driven and does not allow for protest, lament, or structural criticism. Moreover, uneven power dynamics between charismatic leaders and followers are fostered by the transactional structure. Pastors end up serving as gatekeepers of heavenly favour, giving forth blessings, economic keys, and prophecies. (Ukah, 2022) In addition to undermining ecclesial responsibility, this concentration of spiritual power turns the Church from a place of sacrament and unity into one of spectacle and exploitation.

The way prosperity theology addresses suffering is arguably its most morally problematic aspect. It is pastorally detrimental and theologically irresponsible to deny or stigmatise suffering in the context of Nigeria, which is rife with poverty, displacement, instability, and trauma (Ajayi, 2023). In discussions of wealth, suffering is frequently viewed as a sign of infidelity, a curse, or a retribution. To avoid speaking negativity into their lives, believers are discouraged from sharing their sorrow or struggles. This narrative erases the bent logic of Christian discipleship in addition to silencing those who are wounded. As Akinwale properly pointed out, the cross in prosperity preaching is scandalous, a barrier to glory rather than redemptive. (Akinwale, 2025, p.69). Conversely, the Christian practices maintains that the mystery of redemptive suffering is essential to eschatological hope, community building, and human sanctification (Phil. 3:10-11; Rom. 8:17). A church that is unable to share in the suffering is, in Pope Francis's words, "a sterile museum," not a makeshift hospital for injured people. (Pope Fancis, 2013, p.49) The institutional continuation of injustice is also made possible by the systematic suppression of suffering. When churches demand tithes from the unemployed, promise miracles without providing justice, and preach prosperity without criticising inequity, they are implicated in systematic poverty. Stripping the most vulnerable of their value, both financially and spiritually, is what these activities transform sanctification into.

Consequent on the above, the study's main argument is validated: the prosperity gospel in Nigeria promotes a theological anthropology that guarantees holiness yet structurally allows for exploitation. While disregarding or sustaining systemic suffering, it elevates economic aspirations. It provides a kind of spiritual strength that masks Church control. The divine mystery of grace in weakness is denied, and human agency is elevated. Nevertheless, this does not imply that all manifestations of prosperity preaching are evil or unsalvageable. The need for plenty, dignity, and transformation is profoundly human and, in many respects, a valid spiritual goal. However, the Church's answer needs to go beyond catchphrases and schemes for planting faith to a comprehensive theological anthropology that celebrates grief, practices justice, acknowledges dignity in frailty, and reorients the faithful towards true spiritual development as opposed to performing religiosity.

Conclusion

Through economic reductionism and performative religiosity, this study has investigated the theological anthropology ingrained in the prosperity gospel in Nigeria, asking whether its framework sanctifies human dignity or covertly takes advantage of poor communities. Through the application of modern theological theory and Nigerian religious practice, the study has shown that the prosperity gospel creates a commercialised faith that trivialises suffering, distorts

the *imago Dei*, and upholds unequal power dynamics within ecclesial structures. This is even though it presents a rhetorically empowering vision of the human person. Despite its claims to affirm divine favour and spiritual agency, the prosperity gospel in Nigeria frequently promotes an exploitative ecclesiology that compromises theological integrity, genuine Christian discipleship, and the Church's mission of compassion and righteousness.

Recommendations

1. To address the exploitative theological patterns ingrained in prosperity discourse, it is recommended that Nigerian theological seminaries and church-based training institutions review their curricula to incorporate strong teachings on theological anthropology, ethics of suffering, and ecclesial accountability.
2. It is recommended that Pentecostal church leaders reconsider the focus on worldly prosperity as proof of heavenly favour to recover a comprehensive gospel that embraces the redemptive significance of suffering and promotes human dignity above and beyond financial measures.
3. To enable believers to critically engage and oppose commercialised representations of faith that undermine the gospel's transformational power, Christian social thinkers and public theologians in Nigeria are recommended to promote grassroots theological literacy within their congregations.

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