

**The Prosperity Gospel and an Unprosperous Reality in Post-Apartheid South Africa:
Conservative Evangelical Responses to Charismatic Christianity**

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Abstract:

The global rise of Pentecostalism and other relatively charismatic forms of Christianity has prompted extensive commentary in the social sciences, whether through the lens of syncretic cultural practice, psychological experiences of transcendence, or the socioeconomic logics of millennial capitalism. Despite a growing popularity on the South African religious landscape, charismatic leaders are not immune from suspicion within the popular media—from anxieties that their material gains are unjustified to claims their conduct is “cultish” or even “criminal.” Unsurprisingly, these criticisms are echoed among conservative evangelical Protestants whose more conventional Christian practice positions them against preachers who claim “spiritual gifts” for healing, worldly prosperity, and prophecy. Christians perturbed by the rise of charismatic followings describe them as trafficking in what they call the “prosperity gospel,” a false promise of material gain based on a misreading of biblical prophecy. While their condemnation of these Christian practices is trenchant, they share an ironic overlap with charismatics on other theological and social matters; consequently, tensions arise in how properly to attend to believers who are at once uncannily similar yet nevertheless socially excluded. Drawing on continuing ethnographic fieldwork with multiracial conservative evangelical congregations centered in Johannesburg, I trace discourses around the prosperity gospel that emerge from an intertwining of theological, social, and racial arguments. Although at some points evangelicals raise concerns via textual exegesis, they also contend that prosperity preaching is a socially unjust phenomenon that exacerbates existing racial gaps in wealth. I suggest that conservative responses to the rise of charismatic Christianity offer unique insights into ongoing debates about race, neocolonialism, and material inequalities in South Africa, as they mediate an uneasy relation between religious promise and the disappointments of post-apartheid life. This work also contributes a more dynamic perspective of global Pentecostalism by examining its interactions with its discursive opponents.

Introduction

It is hard to walk far in Johannesburg without seeing posted advertisements for upcoming religious services. Whether promising the blessings of a visiting prophet or inviting passersby to an all-night healing gathering, the ubiquity of these signs points toward how Christianity is being practiced in twenty-first-century South Africa. Often classified under the heading of “charismatic” worship, these services, typically led by a “prophet” or “prophetess” who claims an extra-ordinary connection to God, incorporate elements from Pentecostal churches that emphasize the power of “spiritual gifts” to receive divine messages and effect healing from all types of ailments, as well as bestowing material rewards for faithful obedience. The religious landscape remains diverse, with the Afrikaner-based Dutch Reformed Church, the Catholic church, and mainstream Protestant denominations maintaining their sizable institutional presence. Nevertheless, the sheer volume of prosperity material culture and its massive growth in following make it a prime object for social research: What is motivating its increasing popularity, and how is it affecting communities?

Not all charismatic practices take such an overt form, and the spectrum of these forms of Christianity extends across racial, socioeconomic, and formal denominational status. Churches like Ray McCauley’s Rhema Bible Church, one of the first contemporary “prosperity” churches to establish a presence in South Africa, have attracted congregants from even wealthy classes, all the more so after apartheid restrictions began to ease in the transition to democracy (van Wyk 2019). Nonetheless, they tend to be concentrated among the downcast, including churches with sizable immigrant populations and others who face difficult lives in urban settings like Johannesburg (Katsaura 2017). The struggling experience of these congregants is often juxtaposed with displays of affluence from the prophets themselves. Whether explicit or implicit,

their message is one holding out the promise of material prosperity, despite ongoing deprivation and inequality.

Although increasing numbers of South Africans are turning to prosperity churches for various reasons (e.g., spiritual, economic, or social), their popularity has spurred a backlash from an unlikely alliance of commentators. Traditional Christian theologians, especially Protestants, contend that promises of material prosperity on earth (as opposed to heaven) for believers and belief in ongoing prophethood are misguided and even heretical misreadings of scripture. At the same time, though, journalists and others writing from a secular perspective contend that these churches are just as dangerous as mainstream theologians would take them to be, but they make their arguments on the basis of the economic plights they exploit. Drawing on ten months of ongoing ethnographic fieldwork with conservative evangelicals, I suggest that their opposition to the “prosperity gospel” is based on a combination of theological and social justifications. While they oppose charismatic prophets on their particular biblical exegesis, their critique extends to a more nuanced vision of how these churches are embedded in economic and social exploitation. Their actions ought best to be read as a legitimate critique of contemporary economic and social trends, even if their solutions do not accord with dominant liberal norms.

The Rise of Charismatic Christianity as an Anthropological Problem

The growing anthropological focus on charismatic Christianity over the past several decades parallels its growth across much of the postcolonial world. As Simon Coleman (2000) notes, scholars have sought to explain what drives its growth across Africa, Latin America, and the Pacific world, not to mention its popularity in North America. Initially emerging from a group of American charismatics hailing from Zion City, Illinois, in the early twentieth century, Pentecostalism soon spread globally as a form of Christianity that emphasized baptism in the

Holy Spirit and the subsequent ability to draw on spiritual powers, such as glossolalia, laying of hands in healing, and prophecy. Allan Anderson and Gerald Pillay (1997, 241) note that many early Pentecostal elements borrowed from the African-American Holiness movements that themselves had roots “in traditional African religion—the shout, antiphonal singing, simultaneous and spontaneous prayer, and dance.”

In southern Africa specifically, questions of charismatic leaders’ fusion of indigenous religious practices with Christian rhetoric occupied the anthropological thinking of scholars like Bengt Sundkler (1961) and Martin West (1975), who focused on the rise of Zionist churches, typically small congregations led by a prophet and selectively incorporating elements of Pentecostal theology—especially prophethood, healing testimony, and ecstatic worship—that accord well with traditional (in this case, Zulu) frameworks. In explaining the appeal of such churches and their growth in the mid-twentieth-century, Sundkler described their roles as “one of the few psychological safety valves” available to blacks “in a society of racial discriminations” (1961, 296-7). Among seTswana-speaking Tshidi Zionists, religious practice consists of a “*bricolage* whose signs appropriate the power both of colonialism and of an objectified Tshidi ‘tradition,’” whose resulting ritual complex “seeks to reverse estrangement, to reconstitute the divided self” (Comaroff 1985, 12). In other words, religious practice was at least in part directed as a response toward social disruptions and alienation wrought by colonial interference. Structural contradictions that were contained within the earlier system were no longer tenable, and the conjuncture of the two cultural systems sowed the seeds of resistance to a hegemonic capitalist order (1985, 76-7). While syncretism was still a focus of analysis, the rise of charismatic worship was now understood as taking place within a particular sociohistorical setting that demanded mediation.

This socioeconomic/materialist focus has continued to shape explanations for Pentecostalism's dominance on the global religious landscape. Comaroff and Comaroff (1999; 2000) tie together the emergence of "occult economies" in South Africa during a period of millennial capitalism. In this sense, the prosperity gospel echoes and speaks to a neoliberal mentality: the eternal hope of visionary material gain with little investment. Charismatic churches draw on a long tradition of anxieties about supernatural forces (cf. Geschiere 1997) to promise the power of the Holy Spirit to vanquish any additional spiritual enemies and to equip adherents with worldly success.

Although the imbrication of charismatic worship in a changing economic world continues to drive social research into these churches, other recent anthropologists have pushed back against what they see as a reductionist explanation for the role of Pentecostalism in practitioners' lives. Naomi Haynes's (2017) ethnography of Pentecostals on the Zambian Copperbelt, for instance, acknowledges the challenges brought to everyday life by imposition of a neoliberal order, but she resists an analysis of Pentecostalism that sees it as simply "a handmaiden of neoliberalism" (2017, 1) or that ties it to completely overhauling existing social relations, as Birgit Meyer (1998) suggests characterizes Pentecostal conversion. What Zambian Pentecostalism does more than anything else, Haynes argues, is that it provides a creative reorientation of values, allowing people to make a "good life" despite the spiritual and material dangers they face. Similarly, Ilana van Wyk (2014) writes of the emic meaning practitioners embed within an economy of giving at the Durban branch of a Brazilian-initiated international Pentecostal megachurch. She suggests transactions that from an outside perspective may appear materially exploitative, such as "sacrificing" money to God in return for long-term prosperity, are powerfully meaningful for the people who undertake them. In both of these case studies,

Pentecostalism as the foundation for a semiotically coherent social order takes precedence over structural analysis of the national and global economics that condition them.

However, these two levels of analysis are not mutually exclusive, nor does taking seriously the appeals of a social world preclude the possibility of making a critique of it. As I seek to demonstrate in the following sections, understanding a religious phenomenon as emergent within a particular sociohistorical context may be treated independently of the individual narratives that brought people to these churches, despite an interrelation between life histories and histories of a broader sort. Moreover, by no means is sophisticated critique limited to secular “outsiders.” Theologians develop social critiques just as secular scholars do, and not exclusively resorting to religious arguments. Even those within Pentecostalism have expressed discontent with the structure of its promises. Ruth Marshall (2009, 239-243) claims that the big promises and apocalyptic hopes in Nigerian Pentecostalism have come under increasing scrutiny even there, as social and political stability remain elusive, and even ex-members, as early as the 1990s, became disillusioned with the materialism and the empty hopes offered by prosperity preachers. It should therefore be unsurprising that Christians with differing theological commitments should begin to develop criticism along similar lines.

Finally, I want to conclude this section with a brief comment on the attractions and dangers of geographic distance. Since one of the prevailing themes of charismatic preaching is the international circulation of prophets, with renowned speakers and healers often coming from faraway places like Nigeria or the United States, it is important to consider the semiotics of distance. David Amponsah (2015) explores the recurrent valuating in West African communities of ideas, materials, and practices that come purportedly from far away (see also Helms 1993). The trope of the distant prophet having special potency is enacted in the circulation of

Pentecostal preachers, but it is also a potential liability if it can be used as a mechanism of reframing them as a foreign threat, as will be seen in the following section.

The Confluence of Pentecostal Theology, Spirit Practices, and the Prosperity Gospel

Even in its early American days in the first decades of the twentieth century, Pentecostalism grew out of a confluence of curiously intersecting traditions. In separate yet parallel ways in black and white communities, a pervasive and growing spiritualism—an early form of New Age belief in which family members sought to contact deceased relatives—crept into Christian frameworks and borrowed elements from the existing religious traditions of practitioners. These “cross-pollinations of New Thought, pentecostalism, and African-derived traditions (hoodoo, voodoo) began to flourish in the urban north,” whose leaders “promised to smooth the rough edges of capitalism and industrialism with theologies that countered poverty, disease, and despair. They sounded the ram’s horn declaring the world to be—despite all evidence to the contrary—fundamentally good and ripe with opportunity” (Bowler 2013, 26). With the migration of black Americans to urban centers, they began to experiment with admixtures of all kinds of new supernatural powers with religious traditions from rural settings (and, as Herskovits [1941] would have it, from West Africa). The “fluidity of metaphysical Christianity in urban African American communities” (Bowler 2013, 26) was something that left an indelible mark on Pentecostal practice before it was exported around the world. Already these theologies were mobilized to offer a hope of escape from “poverty, disease, and despair,” yet in an echo of criticism to come, they are depicted as a coping mechanism for the rise in capitalistic inequalities: the promise that the world is “ripe with opportunity” and in the process occluding systems of economic inequality themselves.

From a syncretic perspective, these mixtures are unsurprising, but for orthodox, conservative Christians, they pose a threat to the unity and purity of religious doctrine. In a contribution to a volume on the prosperity gospel in Africa, Kenyan pastor Michael Otieno Maura (2015) describes some of the specific ways in which foreign-influenced prosperity churches fit into uniquely African models of “prosperity.” He writes, “Some people today see polygamy as a mark of prosperity. In Africa, having many wives can be associated with wealth, power, and fame.... There is even a preacher who said that God appeared to him and told him to marry another wife; he is now advocating polygamy” (2015, 37). In response, he makes a case for polygamy as not only biblical proscribed but also socially harmful: “Polygamy is not prosperity, but a transgression of God’s law, and the Bible makes clear its consequences.... I come from a polygamous family and I understand this well. When the father of the family dies, even before the burial, arguments and rivalry can pull the family apart. Polygamy is not prosperity” (2015, 38). This example serves as a prototype for similar kinds of rhetoric employed by other evangelicals; namely, they index worldly suffering brought about by prosperity preaching while maintaining an ultimately otherworldly justification in the biblical text.

Conrad Mbewe, a lead pastor at Kabwata Baptist Church in Lusaka and a central figure in international evangelical speaking circuits, has notably written about how the prosperity gospel in Africa consists of a culturally mediated adaptation of imported theology. In a blog post, he writes, admittedly polemically, of “Nigerian religious junk,” after the perception in southern African settings that many of these preachers come from Nigeria. However, he does not place the blame entirely on African soil. “Evidently, this junk originated from mega-churches in the USA and then found ready soil in West Africa, and specially in Nigeria. Having given it an African flavour, it is now being exported across Africa at a phenomenal rate” (Mbewe 2011). He

correctly identifies the U.S. origins of much Pentecostal theology, but he also draws attention to its unique imbrication with African traditions. He goes on to describe the mechanism through which this syncretic phenomenon came about:

The *Africanisation* of this religious junk is primarily in the way it has been made to appeal to African spirituality. The pastor is the modern witchdoctor calling all and sundry to come to him for “deliverance.” Just as the witchdoctor appealed to us by inviting us to see him for spiritual protection or when we were struggling with bad luck, childlessness, joblessness, illness, failure to attract a suitor for marriage or to rise in a job or get a contract, etc., these pastors do precisely the same thing.... Let’s face it: this is our African traditional religions coming into the church through the back door. [Mbewe 2011]

It is this unholy synthesis of American materialism and African spirituality that, according to Mbewe, is at the root of the sinful traction the prosperity gospel has garnered in the past few decades. Christian anxieties over the intermingling of African traditions and Christian practice are nothing new (cf. Etherington 2002), but Mbewe’s critique suggests Western influence may be part of the problem. In the same post he suggests that people’s hesitancy to challenge charismatic preachers stems at least in part from the tradition of not speaking out against a powerful *sangoma*. He sees this as an affront to the principles of proper church discipline, as a person with great power and no accountability is bound to exploit it.

Conservative evangelical positioning against the prosperity preaching is usually made in terms of a misreading of biblical passages on *spiritual*, not material prosperity. In the text on the African prosperity gospel cited earlier, Maura writes that Christians should be weary of preachers that elevate material prosperity in this sill-filled world above spiritual prosperity “in

the light of eternity.” As he acknowledges, “Of course, material things are not necessarily bad. But if we live for material prosperity and success, then we are building our house on sand” (2015, 39). As the logic goes, it is not that the prosperity gospel encourages material prosperity *per se* but that it fosters materialist desire as the “alpha and omega” of Christian worship, subsuming faith in Christ with faith in worldly riches.

However, in practice the dividing line between the “prosperity gospel” and sufficiently “biblical” churches can be blurry. Both types of churches often involve equally conservative stances toward social issues like homosexuality (Hackman 2016), and both employ a similar rhetoric of biblical inerrancy, even if this takes different exegetical paths. These tensions of inclusion and exclusion were present in multiple evangelical pastoral training initiatives. One organization, newly founded in order to address a perceived need for more theologically informed teaching from the pulpit, seeks to provide conservative evangelical resources to churches at affordable costs while also inviting pastors to training conferences to learn the principles of properly biblical preaching. When asked who attended these conferences, the director said a sizable number of Pentecostals joined them, almost outnumbering those who came from conservative evangelical backgrounds. They were welcomed to participate, as he hoped they would learn to preach more biblically-based messages (as opposed to more prosperity-tinged ones). They chose to put aside theological differences in the hope of ultimately imparting their own views on proper scriptural interpretation.

Attending a pastors’ training conference hosted by a separate organization, I observed the tensions of cross-denominational differences, especially disagreements over the role of women in church leadership. It is not uncommon for Pentecostal prophets to be women, either singly or at the same ecclesiastical position as their husbands (e.g., the healing services offered by Pastor

Mukhuba at Unity Fellowship Church in Soweto). Of the several dozen people in attendance, at least one woman was identified as a pastor. During the question-and-answer session at the conference's conclusion, questions from the audience that has been submitted throughout the earlier sessions were read without attribution. One of the questions asked was what is the role of women pastors in the church. One of the organizers from the host church responded clearly and strongly. His forceful response reveals the tensions among conservative evangelicals to welcome fellow Christians, especially those who align with them on critical issues of biblical inerrancy and the centrality of the church in social life, yet to reject the theologies that often accompany Pentecostal preaching. Encounters such as these point toward the tensions conservative evangelicals face in maintaining a united Christian brotherhood yet challenging prophetic claims seen to be unfounded, or even heretical.

Popular Reactions to Charismatic Preaching

Despite their quantitative popularity and the fervor they inspire, Pentecostal churches are not without recurrent criticisms in the secular public media. Opinion articles and tabloid-style presentations claim the massive followings certain prophets generate are part of a “cult” or are otherwise entranced by the promise of supernatural power. These reactions follow similar contours as classic responses to new religious movement (especially those launched from a modernization/secularization perspective), but they also index ongoing fears of the occult, even among those who ostensibly profess disbelief in such powers (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; McIntosh 2016). Thus, South Africans often embody a Janus-faced reaction to charismatic worship, simultaneously titillated by the spectacle of charismatic worship yet also concerned with its hold over people.

The latest and ongoing cause célèbre of South African prosperity preachers is Shepherd Bushiri, a Malawian preacher and the “prophet” at Enlightened Christian Gathering Church based in Pretoria. This multinational and well-financed megachurch is known for its promises of God’s blessings for those who give to the church. In early February 2019, Bushiri was arrested by South African authorities for fraud and tax violations stemming from his management of the church. Although released shortly thereafter, his case sparked a wave of criticism claiming he has swindled his followers for his own enrichment. One story noted how congregants were left without taxi fare to return home after donating all their money in the hope of receiving additional blessings. Although the religious affiliation of these commentators is not always immediately clear, at least some of them have come from both Christian and non-Christian perspectives.

Anthropologist Ilana van Wyk (2019) recently published a popular opinion piece cautioning against these public reactions against prosperity church members as “dupes” or being involved in a cult. She distinguished her own perspective as a social scientist “interested in the kinds of people who swear undying support for men like Bushiri” from the standpoint of “theologians who argue about the legitimacy of Biblical interpretations and questions of doctrine.” She traced the history of the prosperity gospel as merely an extension of a “materialist Christian tradition” with strong roots in the missionization of Africa. In defending those who follow such prophets, she argued that adherents do not remain beholden to a single pastor but typically move around among churches that can satisfy their material needs, so that “it is not a con, just a different approach to their God.” While she correctly identifies South Africans’ flexibility in pastoral allegiances, neither her exclusive focus on the emic perspective of adherents, nor her narrow characterization of how mainline theologians respond to prosperity preaching, tells the full story. Her analysis ignores the socioeconomic consequences of moving

wealth from a relatively impoverished flock to ecclesial leadership. Moreover, this non-doctrinal criticism is one voiced by the theologians she claims hark only on “the legitimacy of Biblical interpretations.” Thus, while van Wyk is not wrong to claim theology as a major religious complaint against the prosperity gospel, it is by no means the extent of their concerns.

Conservative Evangelical Critique I: The Northern Suburbs

Conservative evangelicals contest the rise of the prosperity gospel in theological terms, but as I argue over the next two sections, that is not the full extent of their critique. To demonstrate some of the diverse means by which Christians are discursively challenging the rise of the prosperity gospel, I offer the ethnographic examples of two churches in two starkly different socioeconomic settings and provide extended quotations from interviews and sermons. These churches, one in a mixed-race northern suburb of Johannesburg and one in one of city’s former black townships, share a similar theological orientation, leaders who partake in similar religious networks, and parallel objections to the rise of charismatic preaching. However, as will become clear, they differ in the social challenges facing their respective congregations, and consequently the stakes of their protest against the prosperity gospel differ, even as they draw on a similar extra-theological framework within which to base their critique.

The first setting, Calvary Baptist Church, is a medium-sized congregation of about 150 members recently established in a northern suburb as a church plant from other larger suburban churches within the last decade. Since its recent establishment, it has grown quickly and, of special importance, among young people, serving students at several nearby universities. Unlike other conservative church leaders who worry about a “greying” of the flock, this church is experiencing an influx of young adults alongside older congregants. In addition to being heterogeneous in age, Calvary draws a racially diverse attendance, with a majority-black

membership yet maintaining significant numbers of white attendees. Its leadership is likewise racially diverse, with black and white elders and elders-in-training. Although racially and linguistically diverse in its composition, services are conducted almost exclusively in English, and most attendees are employed in professional-class positions and, if not wealthy, at least financially well-off, especially compared to the majority of South Africans.

Even in a conservative, theologically orthodox setting like this, seemingly far removed from the reaches of the prosperity gospel, it is never too far from people's minds. One of the lead pastors, Philip, a relatively young white man with a strong educational background in Baptist theology, has been particularly vocal in his protest against the effects of charismatic preaching in Johannesburg.¹ His stance became especially pronounced in the immediate aftermath of the public scandal surrounding Shepherd Bushiri in early 2019. The day after Bushiri was arrested by South African officials, he expressed his pleasure that he was, at that point, sitting behind bars rather than before the pulpit. At a men's study meeting, he gave informal thanks to God for having begun the process of brining justice to a man who had swindled so many people in the name of the Gospel. This reaction was both glib and serious at the same time, reflecting his conviction that what Bushiri was involved in was not only theologically unjustified but socially injurious to his (largely economically marginalized) flock.

Philip incorporated elements of this informal reaction into a sermon a week later. In expositing a passage from the book of Titus, which deals with qualifications for church leadership and the basis for true and false teachings, he called attention to the qualities of unbiblical—and therefore irresponsible—church leadership:

¹ The names of interviewed church leaders and congregations are pseudonyms. Publicly available materials from well-known preachers (those cited in the references) are real names.

One of the historic understandings we have here at Calvary Baptist is that the office of prophet was fulfilled in Jesus Christ as the great prophet, priest, and king. So as we have no more kings in the church, as we've got no more priests in the royal priesthood, in the same way Jesus is the great prophet that gives the final revelation from Jesus Christ. But it's, it should be a warning sign to us that even traditions in Christianity today that do have prophets, it's interesting that even those traditions don't comply very often with what the New Testament called prophets to do then when they existed. So listen to this, I Corinthians 14, verse 29, "Let two or three prophets speak and the others judge." And what I see happening in South Africa, not in our church by God's grace, but what I see happening in South Africa is that "I've got one prophet and no other prophet judges me in the church, and I will tell everyone what God is saying, and no one will hold me accountable; I'm insubordinate. I don't like proper church order, I don't like accountability because I'm the one with the connection to God. How can other prophets judge me? How can anyone else judge me?" So even within the New Testament model of how prophets *were* judged in the first century, it seems not to happen today, and there's a danger there, friends.

Here Philip contrasts the tradition of plural leadership—of having more than one church leader to provide accountability for one another—with what he sees taking place in churches led by a single prophet with his or her own divine revelation. He sets out the Baptist conviction that the office of prophet was fulfilled in Christ, and therefore there is no longer any justification for new prophets, as the finished Scripture has superseded them. However, he goes on to make the

argument that even according to the New Testament standards they claim to follow, there is no basis for prophets accountable to no one.

In both of these cases, he relies on a theological logic to challenge what he sees “happening in South Africa,” but that’s not where he leaves the point. He proceeds to make a more interpersonal and social argument against the prosperity gospel:

And I’ve got all of these stories coming to my mind. One of the reasons Calvary Baptist was planted was that there was a need close to the universities for sound biblical teaching. There, there were no churches – I would go to the university campuses with my now wife—at the time fiancée—and I talked to philosophy students who were in prosperity churches, and churches that have these wonderful prophets—“wonderful [in air quotes], right?—leading them, and they’re in philosophy courses and they don’t know how to handle what’s happening. ‘Cause no one’s ever taught them the actual Bible, and they’d ask me, “Well what church should I go to?” And there’s nowhere to refer them, that’s close by where someone could give them the Word.

Besides a short synopsis of the explanation for planting Calvary Baptist, this anecdote is meant to highlight the disjuncture between intelligent young people (“philosophy students” and others studying at varsity) and the confusions they are facing while attending prosperity churches (not knowing “how to handle what’s happening”). They come off as victims of a sort: not being well-versed in “true” biblical literacy to make sense of prosperity claims yet with no accessible church to be able to teach them. Philip’s sarcastic label “wonderful prophets” also indicates the gap between the adoration adherents often have for the wondrous powers of prophets and what he sees as their ultimate disappointment of their trust.

In a more concrete example of the effects he had seen brought about by the disappointment in visiting prophets, Philip described going with his fellow pastor to confront a prosperity gathering:

In the early days, when [Jacob] and I had a big passion for this and we saw how destroyed people were by lone-range prophet/apostle teachers that had no accountability, one famous one was imported from America to come and teach at the Dome [a large-capacity arena in the suburbs of Johannesburg]. [Jacob] and I in our enthusiasm – do you remember what we did? We decided we were going to stand in the parking lot and do some open-air preaching outside warning people. Remember, shouting or speaking out to large groups of people from the book of Hebrews, right? In these last days – in times past God spoke through the prophets, now He has appointed His Son, and I remember one young man that we both spoke to, he was with his family and he was walking in kind of slowly, in it seems like a lot of pain, and he told us a bit of his story, and he said, “Well, I’ve been a Christian for all these years, things haven’t been going right in my family, and, and, and this has been happening and that’s been happening, but if I can just see this man here today, *if I can just see him*, if he’ll just see me, I know everything will be right.” My heart was just broken. There’s no Jesus, there’s no “I need Jesus,” there’s no “I need to get hold of the Gospel more,” there’s, there’s this *aggrandizement* and idolizing of a man, of an insubordinate man who’s not under the authority of a local church and his elders, and the same thing is just being proliferated again and again in our country, in our continent. And so one of the

things that elders' jobs are to do is to ensure that doesn't happen in the local church, but it breaks my heart that it happens in our own city.

This young man who is desperate to escape a pain both physical and familial seems to believe that visiting this prophet from America will deliver him from his troubles. But for someone like Philip who does not believe human beings possess these kinds of prophetic powers, it looks only like false hope at best, and active exploitation at worst. For him the solution comes directly from a proper theology: needing Jesus and rejecting the “idolizing of a man” in His place. Still, the criticism is one that could as easily have come from an atheist who bemoans people placing their hopes for redemption in unreliable religious leaders. A theme from Mbewe's criticism of the prosperity gospel discussed earlier is also visible in this passage, viz. that “long-range prophet/apostle teachers” are “insubordinate” and reject the authority of fellow elders to keep them in line. The conservative evangelical focus on proper submission to authority—a key element of their ecclesiology more broadly—emerges as a means through which they articulate the dangers of prophetic teachers. In other words, it is not only their claims of spiritual gifts that is worrisome but, more importantly, their roguish lack of accountability to authority.

Later in the sermon, Philip returns to a takeaway point for his audience in why they should be weary of prosperity teachings. The context of Titus he is elaborating stems around concerns in the early church over Hebrew cultural practices, hence his use of these kinds of examples, but consider how he moves almost imperceptibly from examples of Judaic rituals to those commonly found in prosperity churches:

But this is the point for us. Any heresy is any group that is heretical as a group that is adding something to Christ in order for you to be a real Christian. Adding something to Jesus in order for you to truly please God. If you want to really be

holy, if you want to really be set apart, well here's a prophet, and listen to this prophet tell you "if you really want to be really pleasing to God, you need to start worshipping on the Jewish sabbath, then you'll be really pleasing to God. If you want to be really pleasing to God, you have to stop eating meat on Fridays; eat just fish." That's what our *new person* who's speaking God's Word and restoring the church is saying. That's what you need to do. If you really want to be pleasing to God; if, I mean there's Christians everywhere, but if you want to be the unique, select group, you need to come to Mount Moriah every year at this time and meet with God's representative. If you want to be part of God's unique, special group, you need this oil or you need this water or you know what, you need my touch. You know what, come to Jesus, it's so great that you guys have the Gospel, but after the service if you come to the front and let me touch you, just let me touch you, it will sort out your life, you'll be a special Christian. I'll give you the blessing. All these other Christians don't have it; I'm *adding* something; you need something *besides Jesus*, besides His work on the cross. Look at what he [apostle Paul] says, "they must be silenced. They are upsetting whole families by teaching for shameful gain," and there you've got the motive, generally—it's not always the motive, but as you read these pastoral epistles, I Timothy and Titus here in particular, you'll see that shameful gain is a recurring theme. What they ought not to teach, that's what they're teaching.

In comparing contemporary charismatic practices (like receiving a prophet's touch, a special oil, or a unique blessing) to the Jewish rituals over which early church leaders sparred (like circumcision or keeping Mosaic dietary laws), Philip makes a typical Reformed case for belief in

“Christ alone” as the means for salvation and justification with God. He relies on Pauline theology to support the notion that anything “added” to trust in Jesus is heretical. However, the second part of the passage reiterates what he takes to be underlying these practices: the motive of “shameful gain.” Given his earlier reference to charismatic preachers, those who are “upsetting whole families” for their own material gain and who “must be silenced” are those peddling the prosperity gospel. He later supplemented this point by asking rhetorically, “Have you seen anything about African magic, Middle Eastern magic, and maybe particular ways that we can break a spell over this person who’s been captured by this, and how we can break a curse that’s been put onto that person? There’s none of that in the Bible, and particular ways to break it, so we don’t preach it.” This example redoubles the point about not preaching things external to the biblical text, but its inclusion so close to a discussion of the prosperity gospel indexes the link between African religions and the syncretic forms taken by Pentecostal practice. Taken as a whole, this analysis of Philip’s sermon suggests the anxieties conservative evangelicals express over the prosperity gospel and a perceived need to bring these to their congregation.

Moreover, it is not merely in explicit condemnations of prosperity preachers that conservatives position themselves against these churches; they also quietly yet deliberately shift their own practices to avoid association with religious exploitation. In an interview in which he described some of the challenges of establishing a Reformed tradition church for younger generations, Philip explained his church’s decision to forego the traditional segment of Sunday worship services in which attendees are passed a collection plate for tithes and offerings. Even though this practice has a long historical precedence in Protestant circles and is supported by Reformed understandings of the need to support local church operation, Calvary instead places collection boxes at the back of the church (and allows for app-based donations), with elders and

deacons only casually inviting people to donate if they are able and are so moved to do so. Philip explained that this choice was motivated by a desire to distance themselves from churches that are seemingly too fixated on offerings. Younger people especially, he suggested, were disillusioned with prosperity preachers who asked for money in exchange for blessings. Although Calvary requires funding from its congregation like any other church, the elders made the decision to sacrifice some financial support in favor of avoiding any association with churches primarily oriented toward capital accumulation. This decision—while not universal or even terribly common among conservative churches, many of which still adhere to a tradition of collecting a formal goodwill offering—nevertheless illustrates the lengths to which some evangelicals go to distinguish their *moral* finances in the service of a properly stewarded local church from *immoral* redistribution of wealth away from the poor.

Conservative Evangelical Critique II: Township Charismatics

I now turn to a second example from a differently positioned church. Jabulani, a black man in his 30s trained at a well-known South African Bible college, is the pastor of a Baptist church in a black township east of Johannesburg. Citing the apostle Paul, he said, “I desire to preach Christ where He is not known” as opposed to the places in South Africa where He is currently known, so “for me I was thinking there is a need there.” While still at seminary he began preaching at a church planted by several missionaries in the township, and he struggled to bring people to the church on the basis of a “Christ alone” theology. If Philip wrestled with young people entranced by the promise of visiting prophets coming to sold-out arenas, Jabulani faces similar challenges from the preponderance of prosperity preachers in a more economically outcast community.

Jabulani's elaboration of why he felt a calling to minister in the township indicates the challenges of prevailing prosperity preaching:

I'm seeing there's a lot of need in the townships, of which that's what we said even in school, where like there's a need in the townships, the churches in the suburb have got good pastors, well-trained, very few churches in the townships that will say their pastor even got theological training. There's only charismatic churches, Pentecostal churches, there's no sound biblical teaching churches in the township. So that was really, really coming in my heart more at this stage, so that was the *drive* that is beginning to push me to say there's a great need [as] you're looking at the township. Where we were, I couldn't point to any likeminded church at the time. I was sort of feeling like Elijah; you are the only one. At that time, that's what I was beginning to feel.

In contrast to the privilege of suburban churches having resources to attract well-trained preachers, townships are saddled not only with the economic, moral, and social burdens that have been well-documented in secular literature (e.g., Swartz 2009), but with a corresponding spiritual poverty. As someone who grew up in a township environment but received a coveted formal education in theology, Jabulani desired to move from ministering to where "Christ is known" to where He was in greater need.

At the same time, ironically, some of the white missionaries he came to assist were concerned that he himself was too close to charismatic practices. Although not known to him at the time, Jabulani described a series of tensions between his plans for the township church plant and the missionaries who were there. "So they were suspecting that – because I was more big, charismatic in my presentation, in my preaching – so they were not quite sure whether I want to

start a charismatic church,” a worry he discovered only later. Despite coming from a conservative, orthodox theological background, he exhibited an admittedly “charismatic” style of preaching that indicates how Pentecostalism is not merely a set of doctrines but an aesthetic in its own right. This incident demands greater and more nuanced analysis than can be provided here, including on the (racial, class, and cultural) politics of accusing other Christians of being too charismatic. However, echoing the mention earlier of the fine line between “proper” conservative evangelicalism and Pentecostal evangelicalism, it suggests some of the ambiguous effects of calling out religious practitioners when sharing so much with them.

Jabulani’s concern with being seen as associated too closely with Pentecostal churches emerged in his discussion of physical buildings. His church originally met in a tent before moving to a small permanent structure near his home. When I asked about the move and the various associations with different kinds of buildings, he explained how residents typically view tents:

Honestly speaking, a tent is more traditionally now known as a church. I’ve realized since we have made a shift...I mean while we were here it was still in that reaching out stage because we had more visitors when we were in a tent than when we were in this [building]. And I’ve also seen, it’s been very hard to, to describe to people where is the church now with this than when there was a tent. Because people know “oh, where there’s a tent,” [there’s a church gathering] So people have got that when they see a tent, it’s a church, so it’s easier. Even now, I mean it’s not far away, if we were to do a crusade or whatever ... if we can’t even put a tent up there, people might see that and say “oh, there must be some meeting that is going on.”

In this sense, they sacrificed some recognizability as a church—and the greater foot traffic that goes along with it—by moving away from a tent. However, what they gained was a broken association with charismatic preachers, especially in their more extreme varieties:

Now the problem has been what has been happening recently of people feeding people snakes, those issues, now all of those who will say it's being done in those tent churches because these are the churches that do more of the outreach, they go there to the people, to the community, and people go there, so there's no strategy, you know, to deal with that church. Because of that many people, maybe they start being skeptical now, to say what will I find in a tent, where before they will only hear the Gospel, they will pray for me, but now it's more, they're a bit skeptical.

With a recent rise in sensationalist stories of charismatic prophets forcing people to handle snakes and claiming to turn petrol into wine, Jabulani recounts an increasing skepticism toward what takes place in tents. Other Reformed ministers in townships have expressed similar tensions between attracting people via “gatherings” in big tents and fearing association with the charismatic practices that often take place there. One Anglican church planter told of how quickly these tents get put up, seemingly coming in overnight. Just as Philip wanted to implicitly avoid association with prosperity preachers by foregoing a traditional offering, Jabulani avoided a similar association in his decision to move into a permanent structure. In these moves, the pragmatic demand to dissociate from the practices popularized by prosperity preaching is seen in churches' reactions in turn.

Conclusions

That Christian frameworks should be mobilized to combat social injustice in South Africa is nothing surprising or terribly new. The signers of the Freedom Charter in 1954 were heavily influenced by biblical sentiments, and Christianity continued to permeate ANC rhetoric and historical documents (Balcomb 2008, 191-2). Most famously, Desmond Tutu's (1994) Catholic vocation afforded him the language of a divinely authorized resistance against apartheid. At the same time, though, more conservative churches, especially certain elements within the Afrikaner Dutch Reformed Church, interpreted biblical accounts to support a vision for separate development and racial exclusion from what was taken to be a godly white nation. Even when twentieth-century South African churches remained supportive of—or at least apolitically tolerant of—the racialized dispossession of the NP government, evangelical voices called not only state leaders but fellow Christians to account for their cowardice and injustice. Black theologian Allan Boesak (1984), among other figures emerging in their ministries from the 1960s to the 1980s, challenged racialized thinking within Reformed circles (and extending into more mainline denominations, cf. Harrison 2006) and exhorted their fellow Christians in South Africa and globally to support the liberation struggle. Thus, both black and white South African evangelicals have cultivated a tradition of incorporating social and political critique into their theologies and vice versa, even those from what might be deemed religiously “conservative” perspectives and even when they are in opposition to other forms of “liberation theology” (see de Gruchy 1991; cf. Gutiérrez 1973). The exhortations of pastors like Philip and Jabulani partake in this tradition while simultaneously moving it forward to address concerns with fellow Christians. If the barriers to living out the Gospel in the 1970s were churches' complicity with

apartheid governance, the barriers facing the church in the twenty-first century are taking advantage of postcolonial aftereffects for the personal greed.

This point about the aftereffects of colonialism leads to a potential reorientation of how conservative theology is treated within academic literatures. Rather than seeing it as reactionary or conjuring a colonized status quo as ideal, it often has more in common with secular critiques of Pentecostalism's neoliberal impulses. Although it approaches contemporary realities in South Africa through a decidedly religious lens, this strain of evangelicalism addresses the problem of capital accumulation through “fleecing the flock” (Meyers 2013), and the concern with establishing a society on material gain in a context of perpetual material deprivation. The point is not to equate evangelical critiques with secular ones; while critiques of global economic inequality are often premised on a call to reform social and political organization, Christian authors instead point to Christ as the ultimate salvation for anyone experiencing material suffering (or in cases where financial and protective laws are violated, perhaps some governmental intervention as well). Yet a fuller understanding of evangelical discourse requires broadening the perceived scope of their criticism from one limited to theological matters to one that includes social and interpersonal factors like exploitation and inequality. Alternatively, if the category of “theological” is broadened to encompass the structural features of social hierarchy and injustice, the various kinds of anti-charismatic discourse may fit more neatly as part of a holistic response to the challenges facing South Africa.

In this paper, I have considered the criticisms—theological, cultural, and social—leveled by conservative evangelicals against fellow evangelicals who they see as trafficking in the “prosperity gospel.” As Pentecostalism and the academic study thereof grow in influence around the globe, it is provoking counterreactions as people become disillusioned with the often-

unfulfilled promises of health, wealth, and prosperity. It is unclear whether recent scandals, such as that of Shepherd Bushiri and other charismatics caught up in legal and ethical dilemmas, will have much effect on the growing followings men and women like them attract. As people continue to seek out what Pentecostal churches promise, a critical component of this global—and peculiarly South Africa—story is the voice of Christians who contest its legitimacy, who draw from a repertoire of cultural resources to plot an alternative path to redemption from a shared set of hardships and malaise.

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