

# Materialism in Pentecostal churches. Case study of selected churches in Nakuru County

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## Abstract

African Pentecostal Christianity has seen many phases of expressing spirituality since the European colonial authorities left Africa. Many of the African churches that started during and after colonialism were mainly driven by protest against white domination and fight for independence. It is almost fifty years after the independence of most African nations and Christianity in Africa is now importing foreign traits of Christianity namely, Pentecostalism, whose modern origin is the Azusa Street Revival of 1873 – 1929, in Topeka, Kansas. Pentecostal Christianity and its materialistic approach to spirituality, which defies biblical teaching on the same, have been overwhelmingly embraced in Africa. Pentecostal Christianity, largely an import of American Christianity, has now become a popular expression of spirituality in Kenya. This study focused on the materialism: desire to be wealthy and healthy, as distinctive characteristics of Pentecostalism in Nakuru town. Prosperity gospel was evaluated in light of the teaching of the Scriptures. Churches in Nakuru were selected through the use of in-depth interviews to know what views the prosperity gospel teaching pastors held on success, health and material wealth. Questionnaires were issued to the youth, men and women in Pentecostal churches that have embraced prosperity gospel teachings, to determine their views on the same. The data was analysed with the intention of comparing and contrasting the findings in the field concerning prosperity with the biblical position on the same and found out that there is deception in the presentation of prosperity gospel. Pastors who present prosperity gospel twist the Scriptures so as to make money out of the unsuspecting congregants. Theological knowledge was found wanting among pastors and their congregations. Therefore, it is highly recommended that pastors get exposed to adequate theological training before they lead churches.

Key words: Pentecostalism, materialism, spirituality

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## 1.0 Introduction

While Pentecostalism has its origin in the Pentecost experience of Jerusalem (Acts 2:1 – 4), a later expression of the same, that is, global Pentecostalism has its origin that backdates to 1901, the Azusa Street Revival of Charles Parham's (1873 – 1929) Bethel Bible School in Topeka, Kansas. Since then Pentecostalism has been described as a worldwide 20<sup>th</sup> Century Christian movement that has its emphasis on the experience of the Holy Spirit Baptism, evidenced by speaking in tongues among many other gifts of the Holy Spirit. From Azusa Street, it spread rapidly throughout America attracting mainly the marginalized in the society.

After gaining root in America, Pentecostalism has spread throughout the globe, especially in the Third World continents.

In Africa, Pentecostalism is a later development of African Instituted Churches. Since the twilight years of the Aladura era in the 1970s, African Pentecostalism has blossomed in many directions. Kalu (2005) argues that Classical Pentecostal denominations, some of which have roots in the 1901 Charles Parham and 1906 William Seymour Azusa Street revivals of North America, have gained much prominence in Africa. In Africa, these churches have been formed on the basis of the failure of the former mission churches, “which in their process of institutionalization had become very cerebral and theologically distant from its people” (Kalu, 2005) However, mission churches maintained strongholds near and around the mission stations.

Pentecostal churches have since been classified into three categories: the Classical Pentecostalism which were direct descendants of the first wave of the Pentecostal revival in the early part of the twentieth century and who have been in existence for at least fifty years; Independent or Indigenous Pentecostalism, which emerged in 1960s and have no relationship with mission Pentecostal churches and the churches are founded by Africans; Neo Pentecostal Movements which appeared in the 1970s and 80s. This group sharply differentiates itself from the first two types; the Classical and Indigenous Pentecostalism. To this date, Neo Pentecostalism remains distinct from the other New Religious Movements in Africa.

Globalization has also played a major role in this, in as much as many people in Africa have an access to a Television. As Pentecostal-charismatic programming has flooded Africa, renewal numbers have risen from seventeen million in 1970 to one hundred and forty seven (147) million in 2005. Through Trinity Broadcasting Network and God TV, Prosperity Gospel has been propagated in Africa very rapidly, without which prosperity gospel still flourishes.

### **Statement of the problem**

The images of success and wealth predominates the Kenyan landscape. Prosperity, whether imagined or real stands as a new symbol of our country. a new wave of Pentecostalism labelled ‘charismatic’ to distinguish it from Classical Pentecostalism has emerged. As a matter of generalization, prosperity gospel has to do with success, wealth and status. This generalization of the term is the first hint to deception in prosperity gospel. Pentecostal forms of worship are appreciated, taking on new symbolic resonances that are wholesomely transferable from one country to another. According to Park (2010), Pentecostalism in Kenya is a viable option that meets the needs and yearnings of the African people due to its perceived pragmatism. However, perceived pragmatism is exalted with little or no discernment of the content at all, creating favourable environment for subtle deception.

### **Study objective**

1. To establish the prevalence of prosperity gospel in Nakuru town.
2. To determine the understanding of prosperity gospel and practice among the Pentecostal Churches.
3. To describe charismatic Pentecostals’ understanding of prosperity gospel in light of Biblical teaching on giving so as to see if worshippers have been deceived.

## Research questions

1. What is the percentage of the Christian population in Nakuru that subscribes to prosperity gospel's teaching and practice?
2. How do the Pentecostals interpret and appropriate the Biblical usage of prosperity in their lives?
3. Do the Pentecostals' usages of prosperity and material wealth reflect the Biblical meaning of the same?

## 2.0 Literature review

### The Hermeneutics of offering Time in Churches

In many churches the centerpiece is now the 'offering time' and not a few churches have specially skilled and designated people to be masters of this significant ceremony. The popular saying is 'Offering time is blessing time', not least because for many it is viewed as investment time. It is often regarded as sowing time, which looks forward to significant returns. The Word itself is often twisted to back the centrality of offering time, and in some churches there is a mini-sermon to 'urge' the congregation to give (Gifford, 2004). However, quite often there can be as many as five or six different collections taken in a single service. One cannot but feel a sense of the flock being fleeced bare.

### Commonly Scriptural Verses Used in Support of Prosperity Gospel

One of the appeals of the charismatic movement is its ability to respond to existential and pragmatic needs faced by modern, urban congregations, including domestic and economic problems. The Scripture is the primary tool used as an avenue for solving these problems. Almost the same verses are quoted in motivating or mobilizing the congregation to give across all Neo Pentecostal churches. Luke 6:38, is one of them which says, "Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." This verse is quoted with relish and often backed by a mini-sermon on the benefits of giving. Its use, however, is often not faithful to the text or context. Its context is Jesus' teaching on love and mercy and how we relate to and treat others. The paragraph begins with "Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven." Firstly, looking at the authorship of the book of Luke, the writer Luke himself "was a man of love and sympathy for the underprivileged and those of humble estate; for women, children, and the poor; and for the outcasts, such as the Samaritans" (Irvin 1981). Luke's writing was designed to relate the gospel with the downtrodden. Therefore, in relationships, how people treated each other in the context of ordinary living was very important to him.

In Malachi 3:10, God was inviting people of that day to test him. The idea of God testing man is rather common but the idea of man testing God is rather rare. Instances like Ahaz to ask for a sign (Isaiah 7:11-12), Gideon putting out the fleece and God honoured his request (Judges 6:36-40), God gave Moses signs to increase his faith and the faith of his people (Exodus 4: 1 – 9), etc. Those were all unusual and special circumstances. It may be that this often quoted verse (Malachi 3:10) should be understood as a one time, special act on

God's part to renew the fires of faith in an age of skepticism and indifference. If so, present-day tithing can be questioned on two accounts. Firstly, this is not an open-ended promise to bless in a material way anyone and everyone who tithes his possessions. Secondly, people cannot presume on God's goodness. People cannot just give large amounts of offering in the present day church to test God. The church can only test God on his invitation to do so.

### **3.0 Methodology**

#### **3.1 research design**

This study has adopted experimental research method, where different study instruments were administered as explained later in this chapter. This is because the researcher plays the biggest role by manipulating the dependent variables. A true experimental design is one in which study participants are randomly assigned to experimental and control groups. The participants under study here might not be sharing same characteristics even though all are prosperity gospel presenters or recipients. Therefore, the research design under use here is comparative descriptive design for it compares two or more groups and also it is advantageous in the sense that it explores the differences. This has provided a comparison in the way the pastors, men, women, and youth understand prosperity gospel.

#### **3.2 Target population**

Nakuru has a population of 103 registered Christian churches, with an average of twelve thousand Christians. The target population was seventy registered churches that are of the Pentecostal movement in Nakuru, with an average of four thousand, four hundred people. While there are about twenty unregistered Pentecostal churches in Nakuru, this study was interested in the registered ones since there was a degree of assurance of their permanence in terms of existence. Out of the target church population of sixty registered churches, a sample population of eight churches was selected which was above the required 10% representation of the whole. The eight churches characterized success, health and wealth gospel that this study was doing. The criteria of selecting the eight churches were that: first, the church had to have been operating for the last ten years. Secondly, it had to be of health and wealth charismatic Pentecostal nature. Lastly, it had to be within the urban settlements of Nakuru town.

#### **3.3 Data collection**

Data collection involved gathering both numeric information as well as text information so that both quantitative and qualitative information was accrued. The data was collected from the specified target population. The data was collected by the researcher aided by a research assistant, who issued out questionnaires so as to deal with any possible biasness when collecting data.

#### **3.4 Research instruments**

This study used two research instruments. Primary data collection methods which included in-depth interview guides and questionnaires were used in this study. Descriptive data was collected through in-depth interview guides and questionnaires. The validity of research instruments in this study was tested through a pre-test method.

Both the interview guides and questionnaires were semi-structured, thus containing both open-ended and closed-ended questions. The open-ended questions were used to collect qualitative data as respondents may be able to express themselves more freely in terms of feelings, interest and opinions. On the other hand, closed-ended questions helped to gather

quantitative data. In both of the instruments used in this research, open-ended questions were more than closed-ended questions for maximum gain of information, especially from the pastors, who were the key informants.

**3.5 Data analysis**

Data processing and analysis involved the researcher examining raw data using many interpretations in order to find linkages between the research objectives and the outcomes with reference to the original research questions. Data analysis was done using SPSS with the aid of a computer. Analysis of data employed descriptive statistics such as frequency distributions and percentages. The software was chosen because it is the most widely used package for analyzing survey data. Besides being the most used package, the software has the advantage of being user friendly. It can also be easily used to analyze multi-response questions. The data was presented on tables and figures followed by explanations.

**4.0 Results and discussion**

Having sought the education background of prosperity gospel preachers, it is apparent that majority of them have theological training. Out of the eight pastors interviewed, 50% of them indicated that they have diplomas offered from short term Bible Institutes. Only 25% of the pastors interviewed have undergraduate degrees offered from similar institutions as indicated in Table 2 below. The remaining 25% have Masters Degrees with one of these having attended a credible institution. Prosperity gospel presenters’ have gone through theological training. This finding contradicts what the study had assumed that the pastors have no training at all. Having this proof then it might raise issues of either adequacy of their training due to the credibility of their training institutions or faithfulness to the hermeneutical principles of the Bible while in ministry.

**Table 1: the clergy’s education level**

	Frequency	Percent
Masters	2	25.0
Undergraduate	2	25.0
Diploma	4	50.0
Total	8	100.0

Majority of the charismatic Pentecostal churches revolve around the leadership of one person. However, while these pastors are their own bosses, a few of them do have a group of elders who work behind them for accountability sake, a finding that raises questions of accountability in ministry. The employment status leads to the findings on the salary scales for the charismatic Pentecostal pastors who participated in the research. Table 2 below shows that 25% of the respondents are paid over Kshs. 100,000 while 12.5% are paid between Kshs. 50,000 and Kshs. 80,000. The findings indicate that a quarter of charismatic Pentecostal pastors earn over Kshs. 100,000 which confirms the concern of high pays as compared to the economic state of most parishioners.

**Table 2: Pastor’s monthly income**

	Frequency	Percent
Between 10,000-20,000	1	12.5
Between 20,000-30,000	1	12.5
Between 40,000-50,000	1	12.5
Between 50,000-80,000	1	12.5
Over 100,000	2	25.0
Total	6	75.0
Missing system	2	25.0
Total	8	100.0

The flipside of the above finding is the appalling reality that 37.5% of the parishioners in the charismatic Pentecostal churches earn between Kshs. 10,000 and Kshs. 20,000, while 25% of them earn less that Kshs. 10,000 as captured in Table 5. Only 12.5% seem to be economically stable. This finding shows the income gap between the pastors and the worshippers.

**Table 3: Parishioners’ average monthly income**

	Frequency	Percent
Less than 10,000	2	25.0
Between 10,000-20,000	3	37.5
Over 50,000 per month	1	12.5
Total	6	75.0
Missing system	2	25.0
Total	8	100.0

As pertaining to the church’s’ total monthly income, 37.5% of the pastors were not comfortable to disclose what their churches’ make from their monthly collections. This finding confirms a lack of financial accountability raised in this study. Others complained that the Likert scale was limiting to only above Kshs. 200,000 per month. Interestingly, with 62.5% of the worshippers earning less than Kshs. 20,000, 37.5% of the churches are still able to collect over 200,000 per month as indicated in Table 6. This finding suggests a probable over-emphasis on giving that was earlier stated, that manipulates worshippers give beyond their financial ability.

**Table 4: Church’s average monthly income**

	Frequency	Percent
Less than 50,000 per month	1	12.5
Between 50,000-100,000	1	12.5
Over 200,000 per month	3	37.5
Total	5	62.5
Missing system	3	37.5
Total	8	100.0

Seventy five percent of the pastors who participated in this study indicated that the proceeds from church projects benefited the parishioners, and the surrounding community, especially the poor as seen in Table 8 below. Also, 12.5% of the pastors interviewed showed that the proceeds from church owned projects do not go towards helping the poor in the church. This finding highly contradicts the context of Nakuru people, having earlier stated that most of the worshippers are economically poor. With 75% of the churches helping the poor there should be visible upgrading of lifestyle among the worshippers, which is not the case.

**Table 5: Indication of whether the proceeds from the projects do benefit the poor and needy in the church and its environs**

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	6	75.0
No	1	12.5
Total	7	87.5
Missing	1	12.5
Total	8	100.0

The research indicated that 49.9% of the parishioners are self-employed. In contrast, only 19.7% are on permanent and pensionable employment while 21.1% are employed on contract as indicated in Table 6. This finding confirms Daneel’s (1987) argument that charismatic Pentecostals are generally very enterprising in nature. Majority of the parishioners run private businesses as opposed to being employed. Prosperity gospel teachers also target this economic class of people.

**Table 6: The current employment status of the parishioners**

	Frequency	Percent
Permanent and pensionable	14	19.7
Employed on contract	15	21.1
Casual labourer	2	2.8
Self employed	35	49.9
Not working at all	4	5.6
Total	70	98.6
Missing	1	1.1
Total	71	100.0

The parishioners’ response to the teachings and theology passed on to them was sought given evidence to their salvation. For instance, on giving, 88.7% of participants indicated that they do give regular Sunday offerings as seen in Table 7. This is normal and is accepted in all churches, with the worshippers not having a specific amount that is offered every Sunday. Also, 8.5% of the respondents indicated a no to offering saying that they might not have money to give in most Sunday church meetings.

**Table 7: The number of people who give regular Sunday offering**

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	63	88.7
No	6	8.5
Total	69	97.2
Missing system	2	2.8
Total	71	100.0

In Table 8, 90.1% of the respondents indicated that they do tithe faithfully on monthly basis. Only 8.5% of the respondents said no to tithing citing the same reason as in Table 7, that they have no regular income to tithe from. This finding confirms the argument by Richards (1985) that believers in churches still tithe even when the Scripture is clear that tithing in the Church age is misguided. The worshippers may not be taught the truth on tithe offerings from the Scripture.

**Table 8: The percentage of people who tithe monthly**

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	64	90.1
No	6	8.5
Total	70	98.6
Missing system	1	1.4
Total	71	100.0

On determining the understanding of prosperity gospel and practices among the Pentecostal worshippers, the researcher sought to know people’s preference to charismatic Pentecostal meetings for administration of fresh ‘anointing’ and success in all they do. This was necessary because 48.6% of the participants strongly agreed while 31.9% agreed that it was to seek for fresh “anointing” from God to succeed in their endeavours as seen in Table 9. A further 14% disagreed and 4% of the congregants strongly disagreed meaning that not all who attend the Sunday meetings seek these experiences. However, looking at those who generally agreed, 80.5% of the participants understand prosperity gospel as the vehicle that carries fresh filling with power to pursue progress in life. These findings confirm that the worshippers practise the teachings of prosperity gospel as they understand it from their pastors.

**Table 9: People’s drive to attend charismatic Pentecostal churches meetings so as to receive fresh anointing from God for success in all they do**

	Frequency	Percent
Strongly agree	35	48.6
Agree	23	31.9
Disagree	10	13.9
Strongly disagree	4	5.6
Total	72	100.0

This finding is a confirmation that Scripture, as a key source of theology, has been used to manipulate people to give money. Contrary to giving God money, Jesus encouraged his followers to give God their total devotion. "Then he said to them, 'Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.'" Matthew 22:21 (NIV). Also, on receiving material blessings, Apostle Paul remembering the words of the Lord said that, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" Acts 20:35.

#### **4. Conclusions and recommendations**

Prosperity gospel presenters target the upwardly mobile, young and enterprising worshipers, especially between the ages of 20 to 40 years. The reason is that, within that category of age, young and enterprising people have easily accepted the pastors' messages on giving tithes, first fruit and seed money. Whoever offers these offerings faithfully is promised multiplication of blessings in this life. Prosperity gospel emphasizes among many other things on promotion, success, investment, and generally going up the ladder of life, which resonates very well with the young and enterprising worshippers in Nakuru town.

Seventy five percent of the pastors in the charismatic Pentecostal churches teach on success, health and wealth more than any other subject in a month. For messages on prosperity to be preached throughout the month shows that there must be a ready market for it, that appreciates prosperity gospel preaching. True to this statement, 64% of believers in Nakuru prefer hearing messages on success, health and wealth related subjects. These are the pointers necessary to prove beyond reasonable doubt that worshippers in Nakuru subscribe to the teachings of prosperity gospel. Therefore, both the poor and upwardly mobile Christians are vulnerable to prosperity gospel.

#### **Recommendations**

From the findings, it was confirmed that the charismatic Pentecostal pastors have had an access to theological training. Therefore either the pastors deliberately choose to twist the Scriptures with the intention to deceive people or the training they received was inadequate. This creates an educational gap as far as order in the Church is concerned owing to lack of a sound theological basis to anchor her ministry, hence giving way to deception. Emphasis should be focused to creation of credible and sound bible institutions by the relevant Church leaders.

When prosperity is viewed in context of improving the well-being of the community, then this approach will restore the dignity of the poor people: parents, for example, will realize that, demons are not the ones driving their sons mad in the streets, but the problem of drugs due to idleness, high rate of school drop-outs, unemployment, etc. For the church to restore sober approach to the biblical meaning of prosperity, that is, the well-being of all people, it must think of starting a research arm of the church in Nakuru under some of the conciliar movements in the country. A research centre for instance may be set up in Nakuru for the pastors in the area to access good reading materials for ministry equipment. Also, a research centre may help pastors to research on better and effective ways of doing theology so as to maintain relevance to present day challenges.

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