

Perception on Faith, Wealth, and Whole-Life Stewardship: A Case of Africa Gospel Church in Kampala, Uganda

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Abstract: *The aspiration for wealth disclaims Biblical doctrine on the simplicity of life and commitment to Christian stewardship. In particular, use of selective biblical passages to intensify the strong relationship between faith and wealth has put into question its hermeneutics. To claim that one has to appropriate the promise of material prosperity based on salvation in Christ is a misrepresentation of the gospel. The biblical teaching commands believers to give to the Lord and not for people to live affluently. It was therefore the purpose of this study to analyse the perceptions on faith and wealth in the context of Africa Gospel Church (AGC) in Kampala, Uganda. The objective was to explore the degree to which members of Africa Gospel Church perceive faith in association with wealth. The study adopted the biblical philosophy of stewardship as cited by Tilghman, which asserts that every individual on this planet is God's steward and should manage his or her resources well. The study employed a cross-sectional survey research design on a target population that comprised of 923 church members. Simple random sampling procedure was applied in selecting the lay members while purposive sampling was utilized in selecting the lay leaders and pastors. The sample size of the study was 279 respondents from seven AGCs in Kampala who included; 216 lay members, 14 pastors, and 49 lay leaders. The research instruments adopted in the study were questionnaires and focus group discussions to collect data. The data collected was analysed using SPSS version 25. Findings from the study revealed that AGC members have imbibed the gospel of prosperity, which limits effective whole-life stewardship. The study therefore recommends that the church should adopt a more zealous approach in exposing the deceptions of PGT through media, literature, conferences, seminars, and social media without attacking or condemning its proponents.*

Keywords: Faith and wealth, perception on faith, Stewardship, Africa Gospel Church, wealth and affluence, poverty and faith, Abrahamic covenant

1. Introduction

Prosperity Gospel Teaching (PGT) according to (Gifford, 2007), is a doctrine based on the Abrahamic covenant found in Galatians 3: 14. "He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit." Specifically, it states that God has endorsed that every faithful Christian should prosper materially. Kitause and Chukwuka (2015) report that the World Council of Churches (WCC) acknowledged that the Prosperity Gospel (PG) movement has witnessed astonishing growth, accounting to nearly one-quarter of the global Christian community. In Uganda, PGT was welcomed around 1970s. Its growth is attributed to a notable Pentecostal pastor, Simeon Kayiwa, who began Namirembe Christian Fellowship in 1977 in Kampala. Popular PG preachers in Uganda such as, Jackson Senyonga, Robert Kayanja, and others attract large congregations that desire to escape from poverty and attain an upper-class-lifestyle. For instance, in his Miracle Centre Cathedral, Kayanja has over ten thousand congregation members whom he promises wealth if they follow his teachings on PGT (Valois, 2014). The perspective of PGT as advanced by Kayanja is that when congregants have faith, they manifest material increase and consumptions.

The explosive growth of the PGT finds fulcrum in the Abrahamic Covenant. Mumford (2011) notes that God promised Abraham that he would bless his future posterity based on his obedience to his commandments (Deuteronomy 9: 27; 2 Kings 13:23). Hence, those who consider themselves children of God through faith are entitled to

material wealth. They argue that they have the right to claim prosperity as a demonstration of their faith in Christ Jesus (Ongonga and Akarang, 2015). Lausanne Theology Working Group (2010) acknowledged that the PG perception on faith and wealth spawns from the teachings of Jesus in Mk. 11:22-24, which states, "Have faith in God," Jesus answered. "I tell you the truth if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen; it will be done for him. Therefore, I tell you whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours." This kind of perception considers wealth as a signature for righteousness and faithfulness to those who are Christians (Bowler, 2013). They must be importunate and persevere in prayers in the promises of God to enjoy wealth and affluence. This therefore implies that those who languish in poverty are responsible for their predicament because they are faithless.

In addition, Christians can appropriate wealth when they consistently listen to teachings that relate to affluence. In particular, they should hear anointed preachers who believe and experience God's abundance. Clifton (2014) avows that the prosperity devotees understand the accumulation of wealth as a sign of serving a wealthy and a loving God. Thus, their live testimonies create an aura of mystery, honour, respect, and dignity for which their audiences treat them as faithful servants of God whom they admire and want to emulate. Adherents want such leaders to speak in their lives for inspiration to develop holistically. This explains why their followers pay allegiance to whatever their spiritual leaders instruct them. Ayegboyin (2006) expects his members to honour their vows and give without questioning.

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No wonder, they give tithes, different kinds of offerings as their apostles instruct them. Those who are loyal hope that because of their commitment to “men of God,” they too will experience enormous amount of economic prosperity. Their members consider their teachers as prophets who have special divine abilities to discern and interpret their situations and provide the solutions (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2004). Likewise, Mumford (2011) asserts that the proponents of PGT, and in particular Creflo Dollar, challenges Christians to increase their faith by meditating and confessing the Scriptures. This promotes the quest for their audience to want to hear their preachers through any available media to increase their faith and escape poverty.

Furthermore, PG promotes testimonies on how to get rich. According to Blomberg (2000), “The liberation that God in Christ grants includes a physical or material dimension to it as well.” On the same note, Oyugi (2017) is convinced that the gospel makes the audience better and wiser besides bringing a transformed life. It changes perspective, and believers are empowered to think wisely, leading to a great positive development in their lives. However, as (Yong, 1996) stresses, the PG proponents take the gospel too far when they insinuate that believers should declare, “I am blessed and exceedingly rich,” “Let the poor say I am Rich.”

Believers come to faith hoping to find hope in material acquisition and not to experience the heart transforming power of God’s grace. Many from evangelical milieu argue that the uncritical listening by PG audiences has created perpetual dependency on the “anointed man of God” and is replacing the Word of God with philosophies of men. Many who are impoverished want to hear testimonies anticipating gaining faith and receiving the miracles, they seek. It also becomes an assurance that God is not only faithful but also cares for his people both spiritually and materially (Oyedepo, 2007). Corbett and Fikkert (2009) assert that wealth accumulation is beneficial for survival, economic investments, and savings and this causes many people to desire testimonies that given them assurance of God’s future providence. Scriptures and Christian traditions believe that while God blesses his people spiritually and materially, affluence or lack of it in the context of the Christian faith should not define righteousness and commitment to the Lordship of Christ. According to Adeleye (2011), serious Christians find the PGT disturbing because the doctrine primarily deals with poverty and temporal sufferings. It offers a limited understanding of the Christian faith that fails to address the need for a deeper heart transformation and renewal of mind in relation to wealth. Thus, the devotees of PG misuse Scriptures to undermine the place of true understanding of faith and ossify genuine worshipers from faithful stewardship.

2. Methodology

The study adopted a cross-sectional survey research design. Triangulation of research methods was employed which involved collecting, analyzing, and integrating qualitative and quantitative data. The qualitative approach enabled the examination of people’s perceptions on faith and wealth in the Africa Gospel Church.

The target population in this study comprised of different categories of church members in AGC. Specifically, the study targeted seven churches from Kampala area, which comprised of 923 church members. The study segmented the target population into three categories that included the lay members, lay leaders and the pastors.

The study employed both probability and non-probability sampling techniques such as simple random sampling and purposive sampling techniques respectively in order to select the participants in the study. Purposive sampling applied to pastors in AGC because of the relevant information they had towards the study.

The researcher distributed 216 questionnaires to members from the seven AGCs in Kampala Area. The members had demonstrated their faithfulness in church attendance over a period of at least three years. Fourteen (14) more questionnaires were conducted with AGC pastors (2 from each local church) and 49 AGC lay leaders who participated in the FGD. These lay leaders actively participate in different leadership roles in AGC. FGD in each of AGC numbered seven people. The study used Yamen Taro (2013) sample size formula to calculate the sample size.

The research instruments used in this study were questionnaires and focus group discussions. A semi-structured questionnaire was applied to collect both qualitative and quantitative data. The questionnaires used the Likert scales of Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree and Strongly Agree to allow respondents to answer each prompt research statement. The study further obtained qualitative data from the questionnaire by allowing the respondents to give their comments in spaces provided after each prompt statement to yield rich and more genuine responses from the participants. The study further employed the FGDs to generate a richer understanding of Christians’ views on perception on faith, wealth and whole-life stewardship.

Before the actual data analysis, the researcher with the help of an assistant validated the gathered data, edited and then coded. The data collected from the study was analyzed statistically with the help of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25. Distributions of findings from these data involved the use of frequencies and percentages.

3. Results

Social-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The study sought the social demographic characteristics of participants to establish their distribution based on gender, age, and education levels. Study findings revealed that amongst the lay church members, 61.5% were female and 38.5% were male respondents. According to the study findings, most of the respondents were females (61.5%). Furthermore, the results showed that most of the church pastors were male (71%) compared to the female (29%).

The study also captured the ages of respondents as actual distinct values. Particularly, the findings indicated that 18-25 constituted the largest percentage of respondents, who were

44%. Those who were in an age group of 26-35 were 34.3%, 11% were in the age group of 36-45 years, and 46 years and above age group were 10%. Seventy nine percent of the respondents in the study formed the majority since 70% of the Ugandan population is aged below 35 years. Study findings also revealed that 36% of the total respondents (pastors) were aged 46 years and above, 29% were aged between 36 and 45 years, 21% were aged between 26 and 35 years, while 14% were aged 18-25 years.

In regards to education, 36% of the total respondents had a High school education, 32% had a College or University education, and 30% had a Primary school education, while 2% had other qualifications including Masters, Vocational qualifications among others. From the results on education, the data revealed that 43% of the pastors had a High school level of education, 29% had College/University, while 29% had a Primary school level of education.

AGC Perception on Faith and Wealth

Assessment Areas for Popular Claims of PGT	Frequency/percentages				
	SD	D	N	A	SA
Material poverty comes due to lack of faith	19.30% (42)	28% (61)	8.30% (18)	22% (48)	22.50% (49)
Frequent teaching on faith should be encouraged for believers to be materially rich	11.90% (26)	25.70% (56)	11.50% (25)	25.20% (55)	25.70% (56)
Pastors should encourage testimonies on how to get rich	21.10% (46)	19.70% (43)	7.30% (16)	29.40% (64)	22.50% (49)
Wealth comes to those who know God’s promises	10.10% (22)	16.50% (36)	10.10% (22)	32.10% (70)	31.20% (68)
Material riches prove that one has much faith in a wealthy God	26.10% (57)	29.80% (65)	12.40% (27)	14.30% (31)	17.40% (38)

Key: Strongly Disagree (SD), Disagree (D), Neutral (N), Agree (A), Strongly Agree (SA)

Study findings from the Table above show that 28% disagreed that material poverty comes due to lack of faith, 23% strongly agreed, 22% agreed, 19.3% strongly disagreed while 8% remained neutral. The biggest percentage (47%) of respondents refuted that material poverty results from lack of faith. However, quite a large percentage (45%) concurred with the prompt statement that poverty comes due to lack of faith. In support, results from the FGDs disclosed, *“Christians experience material poverty because they lack faith. Those with faith who patiently wait upon the Lord to bless them experience abundant possessions.”* This therefore implies that it is right to associate faith with wealth, and poverty with the lack of it.

Findings further demonstrated that a big percentage (51%) of respondents agreed that frequent teaching on faith should be encouraged in order to achieve material advancement. Twenty six percent strongly agreed that frequent teaching on faith should be encouraged for believers to be materially rich, 25% disagreed, 25% agreed, 12% strongly disagreed while 12% neither agreed nor disagreed. The study shows that 38% of the respondents disagreed that frequent teaching on faith should be encouraged for believers to be materially rich. Responses from the FGDs also revealed, *“Frequent teaching on faith should be encouraged because faith is an outcome of hearing the Word of God and encompasses both the divine and the mundane aspects of life.”* This implies that most AGC members who strongly believe in spiritual

Results on income levels indicated that 71% of lay church members earn less than UGX 190,000 per month, 26% earn between UGX 193,800 and UGX 570,000, 3% earn between UGX 573,800 and UGX 1,330,000. One percent of the respondents earn between UGX 1,333,800 and UGX 1,900,000 per month. On the other hand, 57% of the pastors earn between UGX 193,800 and UGX 570,000, 21% earn between UGX 573,800 and UGX 1,330,000, and 21% earn less than UGX 190,000.

AGC perception on faith and wealth

The respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with various statements on AGC perception on faith and wealth. Responses were categorized as follows: strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree.

interventions stress much prayers and “sowing seed.” Nevertheless, those who believe in natural means to acquire riches would encourage hard work and financial discipline.

Concerning whether pastors should encourage testimonies in AGC for members to get rich, 29% of the respondents agreed that they should. Twenty two percent strongly agreed, 21% strongly disagreed, and 20% disagreed while 7% neither agreed nor disagreed to the above. Most (52%) of the respondents agreed that pastors should encourage testimonies from Christians on how to get rich in life. This implies that AGC respondents want their pastors to provide an environment for them to hear testimonies of financial breakthroughs to inspire them to prosper. The finding agrees with many responses from the FGDs as one participant stated, *“The promotion of testimonies on getting rich in the church is commendable because of its potential ability to give hope to church members who are facing material lack and all kinds of injustices in the society.”* No wonder, a big percentage of the participants advocated for testimonies related to garnering wealth.

The data also showed that a total number of 63% of the Christians agreed that wealth comes to those who know God’s promises. Thirty one percent strongly agreed, 32% agreed 16% disagreed, 10% strongly disagreed while 10% were neutral. Findings from the FGDs also acknowledged that as one respondent highlighted. *“God owns all the*

wealth on earth and in heaven so he rewards Christians who adhere to his promises with spiritual as well as material prosperity." This implies that most members who gather for worship at AGCs would welcome preachers who inspire them towards faithfulness to gain wealth.

Study findings revealed that majority (56%) of the respondents disagreed that material riches prove that one has much faith in a wealthy God. Thirty percent disagreed that material riches prove that one has much faith in a wealthy God, 26.1% strongly disagreed, 17% strongly agreed, 14% agreed while 12% neither agreed nor disagreed. Results from the FGDs indicated two divergent opinions. While others said, "Material riches prove that one has much faith in a wealthy God" the majority attributed material riches to "several factors such as hard work, financial discipline, inheritance, and investment since even none Christians prosper." This can be explained by the fact that some respondents in AGCs fail to see the coherence between faith and riches.

4. Discussion

Findings from the study indicated that most of the respondents were females. This concurs with a study by Sherilyn (2018) which established that the biggest proportion of Christians in most churches in Africa is women. On the same note, majority (79%) of the respondents in this study were females. The Uganda Demographic and Healthy Survey (2016) also established that 25 % of the population male while 75% were female.

The study indicated that majority of respondents were 35 years and below. This agrees with the Uganda Demographic and Healthy Survey (2016) that 70% of the Ugandan population is aged below 35 years. Lippmann and McIntosh (2010) further support the findings in a study on high involvement of young adults in spiritual and religious activities in which 634 young adults were surveyed online.

The biggest percentage (48%) of the respondents agreed that material poverty comes due to lack of faith. Results from the FGDs also supported the notion that Christians experience material poverty due to lack of faith. Those with faith who patiently wait upon the Lord to bless them receive from him whenever he deems necessary. These findings concur with research by Jones and Woodbridge (2011) who quote prosperity preacher Gloria Copeland's line of "give \$ 10.00 and receive \$ 1,000.00; give \$ 1,000.00 and receive \$ 100,000." In essence, the research by Jones and Woodbridge concludes that confessing and claiming God's promises to acquire wealth may contribute to Christians being irresponsible in executing whole-life stewardship.

Findings from the study demonstrated that 51% of the respondents agreed that frequent teaching on faith should be encouraged in order to achieve material advancement. The results also indicated that 38% of the respondents disagreed that frequent teaching on faith should be encouraged for believers to be materially rich. The later perspective aligns with research by Withrow (2007), which highlights that Jesus commended the Smyrna Church members for their unwavering commitment to God despite their sufferings.

Jesus tells them of his knowledge about their afflictions and poverty yet they were rich. This indicates that the Christians at Smyrna, though poor, possessed riches far more valuable than any treasure in the world. Therefore, there is a limited association between faith and wealth.

The data also revealed that most of the respondents agreed that wealth comes to those who know God's promises. This agrees with a research by Oyedepo (2005) which asserts that when Christians fail to "sow a seed" by faith, they attract all manner of misfortunes in life. Milemba (2015) further buttresses the results in a study in which a high percentage of the respondents agreed that poverty is a sign that God is unhappy and it is a curse and a sin before God. A high percentage of participants noted that material wealth is a sign of God's blessings. The findings indicated that many followers in AGCs perceive material wealth as a sign of God's blessings for all faithful believers.

5. Conclusion

The perception of members of AGCs on faith and wealth has revealed that there is a strong influence of PGT on whole-life stewardship. The perception of equating faith and wealth to God has significantly limited the stewardship of AGC Christians in the Kampala area. Consequently, AGC followers would turn faith into means of acquiring material wealth and affluence by the false doctrine of PG, which would lead to poor stewardship. The church has not adequately enlightened its members on the dangers of such perceptions and this explains why many are still turning to PGT in moments of economic crisis. The church needs to be more zealous in exposing the deceptions of PG through media, literature, conferences, seminars, and social media without attacking or condemning its proponents.

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