

# Cultural Perception on Prosperity Gospel Teaching and its Ramification on Whole-Life Stewardship: A Case of Africa Gospel Church in Kampala, Uganda

James Ouma

Africa Nazarene University, School of Religion and Christian Ministry, P.O. Box 53067 Nairobi, Kenya

**Abstract:** *The objective of this study was to determine the cultural perception on Prosperity Gospel Teaching (PGT) among members of Africa Gospel Church (AGC) in the Kampala area and its ramification on whole-life stewardship. The study was guided by a cross-sectional survey research design on a target population that comprised of 923 church members. Simple random sampling procedure was designated for the lay members while purposive sampling applied to the lay leaders and pastors. The sample size of this study was 279 respondents from seven AGCs in Kampala area, who included; 216 lay members, 14 pastors, and 49 lay leaders. The research instruments adopted in the study were questionnaires and Focus Group Discussions (FGD) to collect data, which was analysed using SPSS version 25. Findings from the study revealed that AGC members and PGT share many similar features on wealth. However, the features tend to contravene the fundamental Christian doctrine on whole-life stewardship. Consequently, this promotes syncretistic tendencies which are unhealthy in promoting whole-life stewardship among the congregants. The study therefore recommends that AGC appraises its cultural values on wealth in light of the Scriptures, encourage the biblical knowledge and discussions on contextual theology of stewardship; conduct seminars and workshops and share series of sermons on good stewardship, have Bible study on proper use of God's resources, develop and equip members with practical skills that will advance relevant application of God's gifts in the church and society.*

**Keywords:** African Traditional Culture, Prosperity Gospel Teaching, Whole-life Stewardship, Wealth and Affluence, Africa Gospel Church

## 1. Introduction

The Christian faith continues to mushroom in the African continent and many believers who are committed to the evangelical understanding are seeking ways on how Christianity addresses their daily concerns. The world of Christianity is presented by the New Testament understanding of the gospel and commitment to discipleship. Whole-life stewardship refers to the biblical principles related to economics and material possessions. The Context of the African traditional culture where this research was conducted vibrates with social, economic, and religious pulsation. As Ngewa (1998) has noted, the African world understands concepts like traditions, spirits, poverty and cultural authenticity. These aspects of the culture must be impacted by the Christian worldview for God's honour. Over the past decades, the global upsurge of PGT with its strange and disturbing biblical interpretation on faith and wealth has created a new understanding of how stewardship should be undertaken by Christians. According to Ma (2011), PGT associates faith and righteousness to God's immediate intervention in providing wealth and happiness. From evangelical persuasion, the need to understand African perception on PGT and its ramification on whole-life stewardship in the context of AGC in Kampala area motivated the study.

Devotees of PGT and those of African traditional culture share numerous common spiritual sentiments on the contribution of symbols on wealth acquisition. Among the Africans, symbols are essential realities in the process of worshipping the divinities and experiencing blessings from the spiritual world. Hillman (1993) and Mbiti (1999) avow that among the Maasai people of East Africa, application of

spittle and oil from animal fats, gestures, and declaration of words are applied in their rituals through their special elders. The elders use spittle, *inkamulak*, as an efficacious way to enact divine occurrence for any desired fecund. Likewise, the PGT also employs symbols in anticipation for blessings from God. Schliesser (2014) asserts that teachers of the prosperity gospel encourage their members during their worship to apply holy anointing oil on items such as mantles, and other physical objects to attract affluence. The oil also wards off spirits of poverty and decrees prosperity. Clark (2014) observes that for PGT adherents to invoke wealth and affluence, they apply anointing oil and water. The oil and water are used in juxtaposition with the declaration of theological vocabularies that underpin the spiritual focus of their desires. Clark (2014) further states "Anointing for breakthrough opens doors and the heavens", and enhances "financial independence". Africans value anointing oil as a symbol that carries divine powers to cleanse and avert misfortune. The diviner or medicine man unleashes mystical powers to worshipers through the application of charms, amulets, rags and feathers for wealth. Therefore, those who attach signs and objects to influence prosperity find common features that shape their favourable response to the PGT. Many people in African traditional contexts construe this acquaintance method with the PGT as contextual and thus embrace it. Admittedly, while such perception on symbols as means to acquire affluence from the divine may be interesting, it departs from the biblical theology on acquiring blessings and consequently on whole-life stewardship. This presupposition inevitably creates uncertainties that thwart the criterion for encouraging faithful stewardship among believers.

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Furthermore, both apostles of PGT and Africans believe in the power of words to change circumstances. Proponents of PG promote prophecies and urge their congregations to demonstrate their faith through positive confessions on what they desire. Mumford (2011) argues that those who promote prophecies encourage believers to give money cheerfully in trust that God will bless them with affluence. He also asserts that the proponents of the PGT, and in particular Creflo Dollar, challenge Christians to increase their faith by meditating and confessing Scriptures such as Romans 10:17, Hebrews 11:1, James 2:14-17, Mark 4:2, Hebrews 4:2, and Matthew. 1:20. On the same note, Gifford's (2007) observation at Winners Church in Nairobi on New Year's Day 2007 in order for the congregation members to have faith and own cars in years ahead they were to "buy ten stickers, and prophesy over them every day." Such promises and prophecies to garner wealth are superstitions and therefore incongruent with the Christian faith. Horton (1995) contends that PGT and the African traditions perceive words as effectual in influencing the spiritual realm. The biblical theology and Christian evangelical traditions affirm that there is no corroboration between the Christian faith and the confessions of Scriptures concerning their potency to manipulate the supernatural to manifest material wealth. Several scholars of religion note that this notion of incantation features prominently among many African societies and other worldly religions that believe in magic. As Noss (1963) has noted, "world religions use utterance of set words to bend the spiritual powers of the world to man's will." Cope (2011) provides a sobering reminder, "Words have power, but they are not the power of control; they are the power" that influences people towards the Lordship of Christ. Therefore, such misuse of Scripture towards individual selfishness and greed undermines the place of true understanding of God's faith and ossifies genuine worshipers from faithful stewardship. This cannot be a sober and solemn manner of acquiring wealth and putting it into practice as designed by God in Genesis 2:15. God intended Adam and his progeny to work and care for his creation.

Finally, PGT and African cultures generally attach poverty and misfortunes to capricious divine forces. They contend that material lack emanates from the devil and evil spirits but prosperity and affluence ensue from God and bring happiness and not sorrow. The prosperity followers construe the Scriptures as promising wealth and pleasure to all Christians now. Obadare (2016) posits that it is wrong to attribute suffering to God because all he does is good (Genesis 1:25). God cannot be the source of a curse or pain. Hence, many Christians try to elude curses as much as possible because their perception of God is seen in light of temporal happiness and worldly fulfilment. On the same note, Kalu (2003) avows that such a plain understanding of biblical texts resonates well with the African attitude of God. Africans believe that God is powerfully active and willing to enrich his followers. No wonder, Oyedepo (2005) testifies, "I am redeemed to be enriched! So, I will be an abuse to redemption if I don't actualize that dimension of my redemption. Jesus came to lift me up" and that, "Friends, you are saved to display His wealth." This mutual compliance in both the PGT and the African worldview offers a causal connection that enhances a false mentality on material bounty for those committed to God. Ogungbile

(2014) reports that the PG advocates argue that they are being contextual in their response to the reality of the challenge of poverty in Africa. According to Burton (2007), Africans regard the Bible as a practical book that addresses the pragmatic concerns of God's people. Therefore, both the African cultural perceptions and the PGT view of God on wealth cohere to show that he is concerned about the holistic affairs of his faithful people. To be true and honest, the Biblical narrative reveals faithful men and women who despite their love for and commitment to God still faced sufferings and pain. A case in point is Job, Daniel, Paul, and the number is endless. The call to the children of God is for them to be keen to the perspicuous Scriptures on suffering which the Lord often allows as means of grace for service and spiritual maturity.

## 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 PGT and its ramification on whole-life stewardship in AGC.

The target population in this study comprised of different categories of church members in AGC. Specifically, the study targeted seven churches from Kampala, 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 the church. FGD in each of AGC numbered seven people. The study used Yamen Taro (2013) sample size formula to calculate the sample size.

A semi-structured questionnaire was utilised 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 FGD. The FGD generated a richer understanding of Christians' views on African traditional culture, PGT and its ramification on whole-life stewardship in AGC.

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 the 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%). Further, from the results, most of the church pastors were male (71%) as compared to the females (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, it was revealed further that the following percentages reflected various education levels of pastors. Forty three percent had a High school education, 29% had a College/University education, while 29% had a Primary school education.

Results on income levels indicated that 71% of the 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 monthly. 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.

#### Cultural Perception on PGT and Stewardship in AGC

The study asked the respondents to indicate the extent to which they agreed with statements on AGC cultural perception on PGT and stewardship. Their responses were categorized as follows: strongly agree, strongly disagree, neutral, disagree and strongly disagree.

Cultural Perception on PGT and Stewardship in AGC

Assessment Areas on African Culture and PGT	Frequency/percentages				
	SD	D	N	A	SA
Positive confessions and repetition of words can increase faith for material success	21.6% (47)	21.6% (47)	14.2% (31)	23.9% (52)	18.8% (41)
Material wealth can result from evil spirits and demons	22.9% (50)	17.4% (38)	9.2% (20)	28.4% (62)	22% (48)
Deliverance prayers should be conducted in churches to avert material lack	18.3% (40)	14.7% (32)	12.8% (28)	34.9% (76)	19.3% (42)
Symbols are useful to increase faith for wealth	41.3% (90)	25.7% (56)	14.7% (32)	13.3% (29)	5% (11)
Believers should go to their pastors for prayers of financial break through	15.1% (33)	21.1% (46)	12.8% (28)	29.8% (65)	21.1% (46)

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

Findings from the study indicated that 23.9% (52) agreed that positive confessions and repetition of words could increase faith for material success, 22% (47) strongly disagreed, and 22% (47) disagreed while 14% (31) neither agreed nor disagreed. Findings showed that 44% disagreed, while 43% agreed that positive confessions and repetition of words could increase faith for material success. Almost an equal number had divergent opinions regarding the application of positive confessions for material success. Those who were opposed to the confessions stressed the need for Christians to use their God-given capacity and ability to work hard to garner material blessings.

Findings showed that 28% (62) of the total respondents agreed that material wealth can result from evil spirits and demons, 23% (50) strongly disagreed, 22% (48) strongly agreed, 17% (38) disagreed while 9% (20) neither agreed nor disagreed. The data revealed that 50% of the respondents

agreed that material wealth at times result from evil spirits and demons. Satan uses evil spirits/demons to promote wickedness in the world. A pastor stated that, "Many people covet material possessions and this provides a favourable environment for the demonic deception." This explains why many who participated in the study agreed that material wealth could result from evil spirits and demons.

Study findings in the Table indicate that 32% (69) of the study respondents agreed that special deliverance prayer is important to avert poverty, 27% (59) strongly agreed, 15% (33) disagreed, while 14% (31) neither agreed nor disagreed to the above. Findings showed that 54% of the respondents agreed that special deliverance prayer is important to avert poverty. Many Christians believe that there is power in prayers and the more one prays the more his/her faith increases. Since the Almighty God is merciful and listens, many Christians believe that through special deliverance



prayers, God answers the concerns of his people. However, some Christians argued that wealth comes through hard work and trusting in God to bless the labour of one's efforts. In the FGD, some Christians also emphasized that, "One must have faith and apply hard work for him/her to realize material blessings." This explains the rationale behind the sizeable number of respondents who disagreed that special deliverance prayer is a prerequisite in averting poverty.

Findings show that 41% (90) of the total respondents strongly disagreed that symbols like oil and water are useful in a worship service to increase congregants' faith for material gain, 26% (56) disagreed, 15% (32) neither agreed nor disagreed, 13% (29) agreed while 5% (11) strongly agreed. Most of the respondents (67%) disagreed that symbols such as oil and water are useful in a worship service to increase congregants' faith for material gain. One of the respondents in the FGD asserted, "In the Bible, anointing oil was used for those assuming public offices (Kings and prophets), physical healing and for other matters to signify the spiritual presence of the Holy Spirit. It was never used to amass wealth." This means that the AGC believers deem those who use oil and water in their Christian faith to acquire wealth as contradicting the Scriptures, misusing the Christian faith, and misrepresenting the name of the Lord.

The study further indicated that 30% (65) of the respondents agreed that believers should go to their pastors for prayers of financial breakthrough, 21% (46) strongly agreed, 21% (46) disagreed, 15% (33) strongly disagreed while 13% (28) neither agreed nor disagreed. Findings showed that 51% of the respondents agreed that believers should go to their pastors for prayers of financial breakthrough. FGD noted that, *Christians believe that God called the pastors into his ministry and that they have the divine connection with the Holy Spirit who gives them extraordinary powers to communicate directly to God on their behalf.* Therefore, when they conduct prayers, the members assume that the Lord answers them and brings change in lives of their followers.

#### 4. Discussion

Findings from the study showed 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, Seventy-nine percent of the respondents in the study formed the majority. This agrees with the Demographic and Healthy Survey (2016) that revealed that 70% of the Ugandan population is aged below 35 years. Lippmann and McIntosh (2010) further support the findings in a study on spirituality and religious involvement of young adults in which 634 young adults were surveyed online. The study also established that 25 % of the respondents were male while 75% were female.

Forty-four percent of the respondents refuted the prompt statement that positive confessions and repetition of words can increase faith for material success while an almost equal number of 43% agreed with the statement that Christians should practice positive confessions to be wealthy. This agrees with the findings by Ongonga and Akarang (2015)

who conducted research in the Kenyan Urban centers. They found out that Christians believe that if they confess promises of wealth, they demonstrate their faith in God who honors his word and makes them rich. African culture shares the same sentiment as stated by Noss (1963). Many Africans regard some magic to be favorable to humanity and people can manipulate evil forces through utterances of set words to achieve the desired end, including wealth. According to Magesa (1989), many scholars perceive religion and culture as inseparable. This explains why many Christians in AGC associate such compatibility between their African culture and PGT on wealth.

Data indicated that majority (50%) of the respondents supported that material wealth at times results from evil spirits and demons. According to Gehman (1989), many Africans understand poverty and wealth as a phenomenon influenced by spiritual forces. Gifford (2016) acknowledges the African belief on the existence of the capricious spiritual powers such as spirits and demons that influence human life. On the same note, Magesa (2004), a scholar on religious studies and philosophies together with other notable scholars articulate that Africans believe in the spiritual forces that are both evil and good. The malignant ones cause vile and misfortunes upon humanity while the good ones can be manipulated to be favourable to people. Thus, those who seek for hope, find PGT that encourages cultural philosophies in seeking wealth as relevant. However, 40% of the respondents refuted the statement and emphasized knowledge, hard work, and financial discipline as some of the fundamental factors that contribute to wealth creation. This concurs with Ogungbile's (2014) findings that attribute wealth and affluence to a positive attitudinal change in economic matters and not necessarily to spiritual powers.

Fifty-four percent of the respondents agreed that pastors, ministers, and 'anointed servants of God' should often conduct deliverance prayers (exorcism) to avert material lack particularly to those who have been bewitched and cursed to be poor. To the champions of PGT, the ministry of deliverance has provided a space in the heart of many African Christians who believe in the power of the divine enablement for prosperity. Even those who attribute suffering to some factors other than spiritual, they assert their desire to be emancipated from poverty, suffering and pain. Bishau's (2013) findings in Zimbabwe support the same sentiment:

A number of respondents interviewed argued that whichever way we look at it they would never like to be poor. Poverty is not an option. If poverty comes, it comes as something undesirable and unwelcome. In our view, it is this dislike of poverty that has seen huge crowds being attracted to prosperity gospel churches. It is reasonable to assume that the sheer number themselves of people that throng these churches are thumbs up to the prosperity gospel.

Many people in Kampala flock churches where 'deliverance' from poverty is conducted since many believe that poverty comes through curses, witchcraft or disobedient to the voice of "God's anointed servants", (his prophets and special representatives from PG apostles). The PGT and African cultural perception on wealth have failed to give

dignity and identity to those who are poor and find themselves in diverse challenges. The views are swallowing the understanding and practice of whole-life stewardship which is God's fundamental purpose for his children. The Lord's calling to the church is for her to give him room to restore the selfless life of Christ that is embodied in the unconditional love of God while on earth. The church must incarnate the values of the Kingdom of God on earth in order to abound in whole-life stewardship.

## 5. Conclusion

The study demonstrated that African cultural perception on PGT has negatively impacted the practice of whole-life stewardship in AGC. The cultural perception and PGT are flawed when subjected to the Christian understanding of Scriptural teaching on whole-life stewardship. The implication is that if AGC members continue with their current cultural perception and follow PGT the outcome of their lives would deepen in syncretism, which would eventually curtail whole-life stewardship. In moments of economic crisis, they would not accept patience and suffering. Instead, they would seek pastors and traditional doctors to avert their miseries which would lead to wrong perceptions of the Christian faith. The church has not adequately enlightened its members on the dangers of such perceptions and this explains why many are still being duped by fake preachers. The church needs to be more zealous in exposing the deceptions of such masquerading preachers and offer biblical knowledge on wealth. This can be done through seminars, workshops, Bible study discussions and series of sermons during Sunday services. Further research should be carried on the educational levels of church members of AGC in the urban and rural areas of Uganda to determine their perceptions on PGT towards stewardship.

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