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Allure of Pentecostalism in Mainstream Churches in the Wake of the Commoditization of the Gospel.

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ABSTRACT:

Commoditization of the Gospel and the rise of prosperity Gospel have altered the Christian dogma. Principles such as humility, poverty and solemnity have been replaced with opulence and charisma. Human suffering including diseases, joblessness, poverty and other social-economic challenges are associated with curses or lack of faith while wealth, luxury and prosperity are equated to blessings bestowed on Christians by God out of their faithfulness to service, tithing and offering. These beliefs and practices have been associated with Pentecostals, Evangelicals and African Initiated Churches for a long time. The commoditization and sale of Christian symbols, relics, grace and blessings have been a reserve for Pentecostal churches but the opulence exhibited by their pastors have attracted Christians from mainstream churches. Catholics, Anglican and Presbyterian Christians are attracted to the utilitarian approach of Pentecostalism and are steadily joining them. Mainstream church leaders on the other hand are adopting to the Pentecostal practice to forestall the exodus of their sheep into the Pentecostals and to share in the lavish lifestyle of Pentecostal bishops and pastors. This paper looks at the allure of Pentecostalism in mainstream churches.

Key Words: Pentecostalism, Mainstream, Charismatic, commoditization.

Introduction.

Christianity began as a religion of love and sharing. Jesus in John 14: 34 gives a new commandment to love one another. This words are echoed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 13: 4-8. Love became a pillar of the early church and Christian took it up from there. They sold their earthly belongings and shared with those who were in need. Even when there was a complaint that some members were being segregated in the distribution of resources, seven deacons were chosen to ensure that all got what they needed, (Acts 6: 1-15). This love did not last for long as the spirit of receiving took the space and became the norm. What God was giving freely became a commodity for sale.

The Bible has a long history of human desire to appreciate the good done to them. Anybody receiving feels obligated to return the favour as a token of appreciation. In 2nd Kings: 5, a Syrian Army Commander called Naaman was devastated by leprosy. He learnt of a strong Israelite prophet, Elisha who could heal him. When he went to the prophet he was healed and was so grateful that he loaded his camels with gifts to return the favour. Elisha knew that he was just a vessel for the glory of God and could therefore not take it. Naaman was not happy about it and left albeit dejected.

Elisha had a servant called Gehazi who looked at the rejected treasures with greed, he imagined how sweet it would be to possess a share of the treasure and quickly followed Naaman who was very glad to give the treasure to Elisha because Gehazi lied that the prophet had changed his mind. When Gehazi went back to his master he lied that he had neither followed the Syrian army officer nor taken his property. The outcome was a curse for his family and himself as Elisha pronounced that the leprosy that had devastated Naaman would strike Gehazi and his family. 2 Kings 5:27; "Naaman's leprosy will cling to you and your descendants forever." This doesn't scare the modern day prosperity gospel preacher.

Prophet Elisha knew that the healing was given to Naaman by God for free and it shouldn't be commoditized. This lesson was brought out later by Jesus when he taught his disciples in Mathew 10:8 to heal the sick, cleanse those with leprosy, drive out demons and raise the dead for free because; "freely you have received so freely you should give". The vicars of Christ have chosen to ignore this lesson.

Jesus' lesson was clear but was not understood by all, immediately the disciples started to evangelise, people who didn't have the power to heal and perform miracles desired that they too would benefit from similar powers. As the early church was taking shape a sorcerer called Simon was amazed by the power possessed by Phillip and was baptised. However, when he saw that Peter and John placing hands on people and they received the holy spirit, he offered them money so that he could buy the power to perform the wondrous acts they were doing, Acts 8:18.

The sale of God's free gifts and salvation has continued in the church for a long time. Among the grievances that split the Catholic church during the protestant reformation was the sale of indulgence. In the year 1515, the Archbishop of Mainz, Albrecht, borrowed money to pay Pope Leo X so as to be allowed to take up two other districts that had no bishops at the time. He had been asked to pay 10,000 gold coins to the pope. The Archbishop was unable to repay the loan, (Lumindong and Pakpahan, 2022).

Pope Leo X suggested to the Archbishop that he could sell indulgences, use half of the proceeds to pay the loan and half would be given to the pope to build a magnificent St. Peter's church in Rome. Johan Tetzel, a Dominican friar and preacher was chosen as the propaganda machine for this enterprise, (Lumindong and Pakpahan, 2022). Tetzel was eloquent, he was able to explain indulgences as the "most precious and most sublime of God's gift". The letter of deletion that Tetzel sold was able to buy the buyer's salvation for their, family both living and the dead. "Once the coin hits the coin box, the soul jumps from purgatory into heaven" became the selling point of this merchandise.

A unique aspect of these indulgencies was that one could buy forgiveness for sins that were yet to be committed. If you knew you are about to commit a sin, you could buy the indulgences and sin later and you would still be forgiven. Tetzel prevailed on the living to redeem the souls of departed relatives instead of letting them endure suffering in hell. This negates teachings of Christ in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16: 19 – 3, which is clear that after death, intervention by relatives is in vain.

This is a good example of commoditization of God's free grace to Christians by the vicars of Christ. The practice is not limited to the early and middle ages church. It has permeated all the eras of church history as we know it.

Commoditization of the Gospel

Prosperity gospel which has turned the word of God into commodities for sale has speedily spread throughout the world. The blessings and grace of the Lord have been packaged and sold in churches just like other commodities are sold in the market. Benya (2018) posits that Pentecostal and Charismatic pastors as well as prophets in Ghana have commodified the gospel by advertising, branding and packaging religion as a consumer or spiritual product that should be bought to solve life debilitating issues.

Benya (2018) argues that religion in Africa is used as a medium to assuage life challenges which makes it a kind of economic goods and service. People will acquire religion for its utilitarian value. It is used to deal with existential needs of the believer and the aspirations of the society. With Faith, the believers will survive even in the most difficult situations. A believer who is in the right standing with God through payment of tithes and offerings will have a charismatic appearance, modern outlook, is sophisticated and powerful, (Benya 2018).

Such believers are protected from malevolent spirits and the enemy Satan who is an obstacle to those saved by the blood of Jesus Christ from enjoying the goods and blessings bestowed on them by God. To ward off these attacks on the believers, the church has adopted to the sale Christian symbols such as the anointing oil, handkerchiefs, car stickers and wristbands among other symbols. There are also fees charged for counselling and consultation which results in the commercialization of church services. Advertising these merchandise has been aided by the liberalisation of the media as rich churches can open up television and radio stations to advertise their services (Benya, 2018).

Gbotee (2013) argues that Christians believe that through the power of the Holy Spirit which is accorded believers once they accept Christ can be used to do supernatural things. They believe the gifts from the Holy Spirit can unleash magical forces that can bring personal success and human achievements. There is also a general believe that the pastor is endowed with spiritual powers that can among other things foretell the future of the congregants, heal and give special blessings to the congregation. The pastor also has the power to bind the devil and that Christ has given Christians the ability to defeat evil.

This kind of believes lead to the commercialization of the gospel which is against Jesus teaching of preaching to the whole world. Because the congregation is looking for blessings from the pastors who have conditioned God's blessings to be a result of an exchange with a commodity, the sale of spiritual "merchandise" becomes a part of worship. The notion that God can only bless humanity after a financial donation is evil and ungodly according to Gbotoe (2013).

Quoting Ephesians 2: 8-9, Gbotoe (2013) says that grace and salvation are offered to human beings by God for free and not out of human works. This gifts from God are not pegged on human resources and therefore the portrayal of material wealth as a blessing from God and poverty as a sign of little faith or curse depicts a God who is unfair in his distribution of blessings. The arguments that God's blessings and miracles are automatic to those who sow seeds in the church is also not in line with the gospel.

Sangwa and Mutabazi (2025) collaborates this assertion when they say that Pentecostal, Charismatic, and Evangelical churches throughout the world but more particularly in Africa adopt market-driven practices such as branding and marketing with strategies such as television worship, faith branding, celebrity pastors and financial behaviour in miracle offerings and tithes. As a consequent religious ministries resemble commercial corporations blurring sacred missions with profit motives. According to them, churches operate in a religious marketplace where the congregation behave like consumers and expect value for their donations

According to Sangwa and Mutabazi (2025) market logic has been institutionalized into faith. The congregation is taught to "name it, claim it" believes thus expect return on spiritual investment. The congregants are required to give money in return for blessings or healing just like in the market place. Miracle products such as anointing clothes and holy oil are sold to needy believers who expect material miracles. God's grace here becomes a commodity for sale as poverty, inequality and technology becomes points of business. Material success is equated with God's favour and traditional Christian ethos are forgotten. Even where evils like corruption are criticised, material wealth is justified as divine reward.

Sangwa and Mutabazi (2025) look at the branding of pastors and churches. They invest heavily in professional media teams and communication gadgets such as videos, lighting and social media to advertise their merchandise. They advertise services such as miracle healing and deliverance on radio, television and on billboards. Tithing and seed offerings are advertised as investment schemes promising guaranteed multiplied returns on investment. Constant giving is seen as a direct route to prosperity. Congregants are deceived that the more they give the more the blessings they should expect, (Sangwa and Mutabazi, 2025).

The practices of the commoditization of God's grace has a negative impact among the poor believers. Benya (2018) says that they are disregarded because they neither portray the good images and symbols of prosperity Gospel nor possess the means to purchase their healing or redemption from their predicaments. Despite being the actual centre of the ministry of Christ who was very concerned on the socially marginalised; the sick, the poor and the outcasts, they will lose any kind of social capital or social cohesion. This denies them the social economic well-being, transformation and economic development which are symbols of the modern day born again Christian.

According to Sangwa and Mutabazi (2025), Pentecostals equate poverty with insufficient faith. They argue that God doesn't want his people to remain poor and they must increase in faith to tap God's blessings. The poor are urged to pull themselves up by faith. Communal salvation is no more as individualised self-improvement is appraised. The church's liturgy is seasoned with pledge drives, anointing ceremonies and the sale of consecrated items for miracles and relics. This becomes an avenue for the poor to buy their way to prosperity. Unfortunately, as Sangwa and Mutabazi (2025) found out, the proceeds end up paying for the lavish lifestyles of the pastors. Some pastors are said to buy jets and live in mansions in high end estates.

In many countries churches are neither taxed nor audited. The pastors decide on what to do on the finances they receive from their congregants. This challenges the pastors to increase the amount of money they collect. They therefore sell spiritual items, charge for prayers and blessings and encourage tithing. Accountability for the corrections is not enforced because the gifts given to the churches are confidential in line with in Mathew 6:3, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing when giving alms. This leads to governance and ethical crises but for the pastors the only thing that matters is their own lavish lifestyle.

Pentecostalism is the fastest growing form of Christianity in the world. Nyabwari and Kagema (2014) observes that Pentecostalism is shaping Christianity in the 21st century because it is the fastest expanding stream of Christianity. Speaking in tongues, dancing for the lord, singing praises to God, declaring the mighty acts of God among other charismatic testimonies are the hallmark of Pentecostalism which are attracting many Christians hoping for miracles, healing and spiritualism.

According to them, most Pentecostal Christians in Kenya are former members of mainstream churches which calls upon these denominations to reflect on the challenges that are hindering spiritual satisfaction of their members. Are there social-spiritual needs of their congregants that they are unable to meet? Would adopting some Pentecostal practices that are attracting their congregants lead to spiritual growth or it would make their members happy sinners?

Pentecostalism in the Mainstream Churches

The allure of Pentecostal lifestyle has hit the mainstream churches. It has been largely believed that Pentecostalism is a reserve for Pentecostal, evangelical, Charismatic and African Initiated Churches. This notion has been challenged by the rate at which the mainstream churches such as the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Church are embracing Pentecostalism. Kuate and Ndokuo (2020) argue that the mainstream churches such as the Baptist Church, Roman Catholic church and the Presbyterian church of Cameroon are borrowing and practicing Pentecostal cultures in their churches.

According to Kuate and Ndokuo (2020) the mainstream churches have progressively borrowed styles of singing, praying, preaching and vocabulary from the Pentecostals in the context of religious competition. They are avoiding emigration of their members to Pentecostal churches by doing the activities that are done by the churches. They posit that mainstream churches have adopted Pentecostal religious forms which emphasize on appearance and materiality.

Many mainstream churches have put money (wealth) before the Gospel and the congregation. The sale of spiritual gifts such as handkerchiefs, stickers and the concept of planting seed have been borrowed and in many churches, the sharing of the Word of God is assigned minimal time in the services. Sacraments like the Holy Communion that have been the most sacred of the Christian objects are used as baits to lure the congregation into Pentecostalism. Their timing is no longer definite and will be changed in line with the priest's interest.

Chesnut and Kingsbury (2018) observes that the number of Catholic's who believe that money can buy divine rewards is increasing. According to them prosperity Gospel has proliferated the Christian world with astonishing speed and have found a receptive audience more in developing countries. The message has been magnified through social media and televangelism and has not spared Catholic clergy men either. The desire to amass wealth is increasingly overtaking the desire to live righteously.

The challenges facing Africans and the absence of viable structures to alleviate these challenges force Africans to seek succour in spirituality. Prosperity Gospel promises believers precariousness is a curse and challenges such as sickness and scarcity can be obviated by tithing generously and attending the church service faithfully. This avails the priest a chance to perform healing miracles and release abundant wealth through the Holy Spirit (Chesnut and Kingsbury, 2018).

While Catholic priests abhor the lies propagated by the prosperity Gospel ministers who claim to do wonders including the healing of diseases such as HIV/AIDS, they have been unable to forestall the creeping of the prosperity Gospel in the Catholic Church. To them the concept that the more you give to God the more you will receive is evil. It is tantamount to heresy where Jesus Christ holds a key to a cosmic supermarket where he gives out free gifts to the faithful. The Holy spirit is equated to a supernatural servant responding to worldly desires of the individual, (Chesnut and Kingsbury, 2018). Worship service according to Chesnut and Kingsbury (2018) has been reduced to a money making enterprise. Some churches in Brazil will spend a third of their time soliciting for donations beginning with the highest denomination. Congregants are asked to put their donations on an open Bible. Some churches have even been known to increase the tithe from 10% to 30% to have 10% each for the father, the son and the Holy Spirit. It is unfortunate that the health and wealth Gospel has really infiltrated the Catholic Church.

Corruption has riddled these mainstream churches as the rich and the poor are segregated. In one of the Anglican dioceses in Kenya, you need to pay over 10,000 Shillings in evangelical support for the bishop to visit your home. There is also a clear record of tithes that dictate the spiritual services that the faithful can get. Fund drives are conducted in all services while Pentecostal like praise and worship teams aided by state of the art music systems lead the congregation into glossolalia.

An attempt by the Roman Catholic Church in Kenya to stop donations from political leaders who have used the pulpit for political motives have failed because other churches take the opportunity to welcome these preachers. Millions of shillings are donated to churches even where the donors are known to be riddled with cases of corruption in the guise that it is unchristian to judge other as stated in Mathew 7: 1- 5. "Do not judge or you too will be judged. In the same way you judge others..."

Kuate and Ndokuo observes that mainstream churches have taken up vocabulary that was a reserve of the Pentecostals such as, God forbid, praise God and in Jesus' name. They have also replaced the traditional solemnity and silence of the congregation during mass and sounds and shouts can be heard during mass and prayers. The churches advertise their Charismatic Renewal Crusades on billboards and in the media just like the Pentecostals. This forestall the exodus of church members into Pentecostal churches because they are able to get what they are looking for in their churches.

Pentecostalism is not all about materiality. It brings about satisfaction of the believer and is able to meet the needs of Christians. Majawa (2020) avers that Pentecostalism is a means of retaining church membership. It also paves way for living harmoniously and working as a team within the body of Christ. According to him it brings out a better understanding of the scriptures and a closer encounter with God.

Majawa (2020) argues that Charismatic spiritualities and Pentecostal churches and Charismatic spiritualities are in Africa to stay. They contribute to the transformation of believers as they are led by the Holy Spirit who the main agent of renewal and reformation. The fuse the Christian gospel with charisma and the needs of Africa and overcome the fear of inculturation that have stalked mainstream churches ever since they introduced Christianity in Africa. He however notes that the mushrooming of pneumatic sects and charismatic challenges bring about Pentecostal confusion.

Conclusion:

Pentecostalism and Charismatic growth in the world were initially seen as a Christian revival movement that would bring about spiritual growth among Christians. The movement would enhance evangelization of the Gospel the world over and win souls for Christ while at the same time meeting the social-spiritual needs of the modern day Christian. The movement was however overtaken by prosperity Gospel and the commoditization of the Gospel. Mainstream churches that would have been a yardstick of holiness have been lured into the fray of this materialism and the fear of losing adherents. In most of the churches, the competition in the dioceses is not the number of souls that have been won for Christ, the number of people baptised or confirmed but on the amount of money each congregation has collected in the never ending fundraisers. The desire for material wealth and worldly treasures is replacing the need for holiness and all factors constant, Christianity might end up being a commercial enterprise. This must be addressed by all Christians of good will because worldly treasures; money and property should be the least of Christians' priorities as they journey towards holiness and the promises of God.

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