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**Chapter 2:**

Prophetic Neo-Pentecostal churches and the theodicy challenge

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Prophetic churches and theodicy

# Abstract

Many African prophetic Neo-Pentecostal groups proclaim a message emphasizing prosperity as an essential and expected heritage element for those with the required faith. They view prosperity as a vital element of what Jesus acquired for Christians on the cross. Their prophets’ exclusive claim to revelation knowledge supports the prophetic message of prosperity, compelling believers to trust their version of the gospel. How do these groups explain their message in the face of the challenges of theodicy? For instance, what did they teach during the early Covid-19 pandemic that killed many African people? In this chapter, the prosperity message is evaluated regarding the inevitable challenge of theodicy. It combines a comparative literature study with auto-ethnographical observations over the years of two subjects. The first is the scrutiny of sermons delivered by prominent African prosperity teachers. The second is the teaching of divine healing to design a theodicy to inform Neo-Pentecostalism’s pastoral and practical response to suffering and the question of divine justice.

Keywords: Neo-Pentecostals, prosperity theology, theodicy, salvation, hermeneutics

# 2.1 Introduction

As a problem of logic, the three propositions that constitute theodicy are incompatible: God is omnipotent (all-powerful); God is omnibenevolent (all-loving); and evil and suffering exist. The challenge is that the affirmation of any two of these negates the other. Where does God fit in the face of the presence of suffering and evil? If God is an omnipotent being, God must be able to destroy all evil. If God is a perfectly good being, God must want to abolish all evil. Yet evil exists. Therefore, God must either not be omnipotent or not be perfectly good because God did not destroy evil.

No consensus exists about an adequate theodicy proposal that answers all challenges, necessitating Amos Yong to refer to a plurality of theodicies.[[1]](#endnote-1) All theodicies consist of particular strengths and weaknesses. For example, most victims experience suffering as senseless. Biblical evidence also motivates one to think in terms of several responses to different situations, requiring a diversified theodicy. To do justice to Pentecostal sentiments, we limit theological endeavors to reflections based on encounters with God’s Spirit.[[2]](#endnote-2)

It is a temptation to theorise and eventually end with “eternally valid propositions” that explain suffering. However, each suffering victim is unique and requires an individual theodicean explanation. Theodicy may also not remain at a theoretical level; indeed, the Bible does not contain a “one-size-fits-all” answer. One believer may experience that suffering has become a catalyst for changing their ways, ascribing the suffering to God’s grace. Another believer may experience their suffering as senseless and meaningless or as a call to greater self-sacrificial service to others.

Since it is the church’s pastoral task to relate suffering to the perspective of faith, it needs to account for its view of God as almighty and omnipotent. However, the church has no ready-made answers to the complex and challenging phenomenon of suffering. Natural catastrophes even further complicate the challenge. Suppose the earth will be renewed as the place where God will establish the divine kingdom, as the church expects. Will it include interrupting natural weather cycles and movements to exclude droughts, floods, earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, typhoons, etc.?

Many African Pentecostals proclaim prosperity theology.[[3]](#endnote-3) For instance, John Ntui-Abung found that about 92 percent of poor Africans, Latin Americans, and those living in Third World countries are completely influenced by the movement.[[4]](#endnote-4) The glocalized world technology carries the prosperity message into the heart of each village and township where electricity is available.

# 2.2 Reasons for the popularity of the prosperity message

What are the reason(s) for its popularity? David Barrett reckons that in 2025 there will be 460 million neo-Pentecostals of a total of 523 million Pentecostals.[[5]](#endnote-5) It is ironical that many of them strive to implement the principles of the prosperity message to attain wealth and health because sixty-six percent of Pentecostals live in the Third World of which 87 percent are living in poverty. It is also interesting to note that only 16.7 percent of Africans were Christians Africa in 1900, 63.2 percent of the population were Christians by 2010 and by 2025, it will be nearly 70 percent.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Three factors seem to play a role in the popularity of the prosperity message: the origins of independent or charismatic network Christianity and its wide influence, also on African church leaders; the role played by the traditional African notion of prosperity in terms of the African worldview and African traditional religions; and its appeal to the deep longings of every human heart for peace, health, happiness, wealth, and prosperity.[[7]](#endnote-7)

It is a challenge that the prosperity movement does not use or exercise a consistent theology, making it difficult to refer to a single definite theology of its own and requiring instead that we speak of speak of prosperity theologies.[[8]](#endnote-8) The diversity in the prosperity message requires a distinction between a hard prosperity message that evaluates people’s faith by their immediate circumstances and a soft one that appraises believers with a gentler, more roundabout assessment.

However, what is clear is that Africans’ prevailing interest in the prosperity gospel does not come exclusively from the influence of American prosperity teachers via mainly Nigeria.[[9]](#endnote-9) It is also related to the African worldview and African traditional religion. Due to the abuse of colonial forces in their exploitation of natural resources to acquire their own wealth at the cost of indigenous people, Africans did not share in the continent’s riches.[[10]](#endnote-10) That is partly why liberalized Africans are interested in prosperity.

# 2.3 Forms of prosperity theology

Maria Frahm-Arp argues that prosperity theology developed into three different forms.[[11]](#endnote-11) The first she calls “abilities prosperity” that teaches that if Christians live according to biblical principles and work hard, then they will succeed in whatever they choose to do.[[12]](#endnote-12) Many Christians support this view, that a good work ethic and integrity contribute to success in one’s professional life.

A second strand, “progress prosperity,” teaches that any small blessing or step of progress represents a form of prosperity, requiring believers to change their attitudes so that they can see things as they truly are and promoting an entrepreneurial mindset or spirit.[[13]](#endnote-13) It propagates a change of perspective and contributes toward personal ambition to challenge existing employment challenges.

Lastly, “miracle prosperity theology” teaches that prosperity can be achieved through miracles that reflect God’s will for believers. In response to personally and communally (as a faith community) vanquishing the devil, God will perform miracles. By applying God’s laws of faith, as taught by the Faith gospel, miraculous wealth and health result in a mechanical manner.[[14]](#endnote-14) Commitment to the faith principles always leads to health, professional success and prosperity. It forces God to fulfil the divine promises of blessings.

All prosperity theologies also preach the centrality of tithing and giving generously, or “excess giving,” as some refer to it, as a means of winning God’s favor and blessing. For instance, Timothy O’Malley states that giving in excess is at the heart of Christian life and based on Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross.[[15]](#endnote-15) As a result of such living, believers share in the resurrection life of Jesus, consisting of every blessing conceivable.

# 2.2 Prosperity theology in Africa

Prosperity theology in Africa comprises a synthesis of American materialism characterized by profligate consumption as a status symbol of wealth and self-worth[[16]](#endnote-16) and Africa’s traditional religious imagination of fertility, abundance, and wholeness, explaining the attraction of the prosperity gospel for Africans.

Conrad Mbewe argues that Neo-Pentecostal pastors act in the African imagination as the counterpart of the witchdoctors, offering spiritual protection and deliverance from bad luck.[[17]](#endnote-17) As a result, Africans do not challenge the financial and emotional abuse of charismatic preachers because of the ancient dangers of speaking out against a powerful *sangoma*. Neo-Pentecostalism especially appeals to Africa’s upwardly mobile youth with its charismatic, successful and wealthy leaders, expressive and exuberant worship style and high amperage gospel music, and the innovative appropriation of modern media technologies.[[18]](#endnote-18)

An integral element is the movement’s prophets who claim a unique relationship with God that results in unique revealed knowledge and empowers them to deliver divine messages and effect healing.[[19]](#endnote-19) Because of their special gifts, they are unchallengeable. As a result, Paul Gifford argues that these churches function as associations of clients of a particular “man of God” or patronages.[[20]](#endnote-20)

At times, some church members in poverty are juxtaposed with the affluence prophets display to prove the success of their theology, that God blesses believers with prosperity. Ironically some prophets live in luxury while their adherents spend their lives in slums.

The prosperity gospel valorises many Africans’ nostalgic material aspirations. Lifestyles of conspicuous consumption represent an embodiment of prosperity.[[21]](#endnote-21) Large parts of Africa are characterized by protracted economic malaise, and the prosperity gospel creates a culture of self-belief, optimism, and dreams of a better life characterised by expensive high-tech gadgets, etc. As a result, prosperity is hegemonic and counter-hegemonic simultaneously by endorsing and questioning dominant social reality framings.

Although it is akin to Pentecostalism, the prosperity message, way of governance through authoritarian structures of apostles, the significant role that prophets play, and their hierarchical nature distinguishes Neo-Pentecostalism from traditional Pentecostalism.

A last issue is that prosecuting authorities in Africa increasingly scrutinise certain abuses that occurred among Neo-Pentecostals such as the eating of grass to “be closer to God”,[[22]](#endnote-22) telling people to sleep and then ordering other congregants to slap those that were asleep and trample on them, feeding church members flowers,[[23]](#endnote-23) encouraging them to drink petrol,[[24]](#endnote-24) spraying people with a pesticide,[[25]](#endnote-25) staging a resurrection from the dead,[[26]](#endnote-26) and raping young girls while Timothy Omotoso and Alph Lukau respectively allegedly ministered to them in the privacy of his own home.[[27]](#endnote-27) Examples from other incidents and African countries can be added to the list.

# 2.3 Prosperity theology and salvation

The Neo-Pentecostal independent church movement emphasises that believers should be prosperous and filled with victory, health and wealth. Proponents refer to it as the Faith, Word of Faith or prosperity gospel movement. Others pejoratively call it the health and wealth, and name it and claim it movement. The movement is connected to international ministries of celebrities like Creflo Dollar, Kenneth Hagin, Leroy Thompson, Mike Murdock, A.A. Allen, Joyce Meyer, Benny Hinn, Morris Cerullo, John Avanzini, Robert Tilton, Charles Capps, Duncan Williams and Joel Osteen in the USA. African leaders include Benson Idahosa, David Oyedepo, Chris Oyakhilome, Enoch Adeboye, Mathew Oshomolowo (Ashimolowo), Nevers Mumba, Mensa Otabil, Duncan Williams, Sam Korankye Ankrah, Charles Agyin Asare and Dag Heward-Mill and T.B. Joshua. Most of these churches function independently and non-denominationally. Their pastors do not advertise themselves as “prosperity preachers,” even though they preach regularly about finances, health, victory and wealth. Some of the congregations are mega-churches; others constitute small groups.

It is not possible to interpret the prosperity gospel in terms of fundamentalism, Pentecostalism, or Evangelicalism. However, its message of holistic salvation shows affinities with theological conservatism.[[28]](#endnote-28)

The prosperity gospel centres around four themes, faith, wealth, health and victory.[[29]](#endnote-29) It is not exclusively concerned with prosperity but utilises a concept of holistic salvation that makes it very attractive for Africans because it is a vital part of their primal spirituality. A further attractive element is that “S(s)eldom if ever, has there been a gospel that has promised so much, and demanded so little.”[[30]](#endnote-30) The only activator of power that is necessary to release spiritual forces is faith that turns the spoken word into reality.

In Africa, invisible forces traditionally influenced the visible world. It is critical and vital to appease evil forces and remain on the side of good forces. In Neo-Pentecostalism, it consists of combating evil forces through spiritual warfare. One’s wealth, health and victory palpably demonstrate one’s success in doing so.

The prosperity gospel equates material prosperity with the salvation of the soul, and material success with divine favor.[[31]](#endnote-31) They teach that nothing can stop believers from being victorious financially and healthy because their faith allows them to live in total victory on earth. They ascribe materiality with spiritual meaning.

To experience prosperity, believers need confession as the affirmation of what they believe in, based on what they know, and witnessing for a truth that they have embraced.[[32]](#endnote-32) What one need to know is the secret of the perfect redemption in Christ and one’s “identity” and the resultant “rights and privileges” in Christ. Christ is the provision in every need of life. All that is needed is that one makes contact with and turn on the power of God by believing and then accepting by faith that it has already happened.[[33]](#endnote-33) “What we believe is a result of our thinking. If we think wrong things, we will believe wrong things…If we believe wrong things, our confession will be wrong. In other words, what we say will be wrong and it will all hinge on our thinking.”[[34]](#endnote-34) Faith is the operation of the thought forces in the form of an earnest desire, coupled with expectation as to its fulfilment.[[35]](#endnote-35)

The switch that turns on the omnipotent power is faith that God turns into power. The law of faith rests on two overlapping instruments of power, a legal instrument that that grants believers rights to salvation, protection, and victory through the death of Christ, and a scientific one that guarantees believers all rights and privileges in Christ, including healing, financial security, prosperous business prospects and happiness.[[36]](#endnote-36) The law of faith, like natural forces such as gravity and electricity, is a universal causal agent and power that actualizes events and objects in the real world. Faith is the invisible operators of cause and effect.[[37]](#endnote-37)

The faith movement’s hermeneutic sees the Bible in magical terms. For instance, Chris Oyakhilome teaches believers to speak the word of God as the way to prosperity and success.[[38]](#endnote-38) “In other words if you would keep the word on your lips, you are sure to prosper and be successful in every area of your life, which of cause (sic), includes your physical body.”[[39]](#endnote-39) The Bible provides “the principles of the kingdom” and shows how to “use them to your advantage and enjoy your inheritance in Christ,”[[40]](#endnote-40) which are the rules and laws of prosperity. The principle to expect financial miracles is to pay tithes and think positively, serving as an easy trigger.

For prosperity theology, salvation begins here and now. The materiality of redemption is demonstrated in tangibly changed circumstances. God’s kingdom is realised in financial well-being and good health, serving as the public and perpetual demonstrations of Christians’ spiritual progress.[[41]](#endnote-41) For that reason, believers should reject sickness and lack. The materiality of salvation has become the sign of a believer’s faithfulness to Christ. Therefore, prosperity is not a gift from God’s hand to some but the right and heritage of all believers. God’s rules and principles automatically bring every single good thing into existence because the “world of the spirit” functions in terms of salvation. You know when you call on the Lord’s name, you will be saved. In the same manner, when you believe you will be prosperous. These laws are God’s unchangeable way of governing the world, implying that even unbelievers can have prosperity if they apply the rules concerning prosperity.[[42]](#endnote-42)

God and God’s word is one; the presence of the word is God, implying a pantheistic relationship between God and the Bible. The *logos* (“word”) is the Bible, that is the power of God.[[43]](#endnote-43) The Bible is the “textbook with God’s laws and rules for success” that works in a magical way when believers apply them.[[44]](#endnote-44) To be prosperous implies a life based on these principles.[[45]](#endnote-45) One such principle is that if you give God one rand, God will give you back a hundred rand because the word promises that God’s word guarantees you a hundredfold. If you donate one car, you will have a supply of cars for more than a lifetime.[[46]](#endnote-46)

Prosperity teachers teach that conversion and Spirit baptism is to be followed by the final part of the pattern of salvation, a crisis experience of dedication with faith for the impartation of health and wealth. Revelation knowledge proved that this is the final and “complete” revelation, furnishing believers with a direct pipeline to truth.[[47]](#endnote-47) The revelation of salvation is incomplete without this “new” revelation.

In prosperity’s holistic salvation, Christ’s cross results in forgiveness of sins but also holds implications for life. It includes ethical and moral transformation, healing and prosperity, peace and joy, etc. Atonement is sufficient only for human sinfulness but includes the believer’s wholeness, including holiness, health, and wealth.

What does prosperity teaches when believers become chronically or terminally ill, suffer financial losses, etc.? This is the next question that we will answer.

# 2.4 Prosperity theology and theodicy

Why are some people blessed and others not? Why do some people become sick, such as of Covid-19 or monkeypox, while others remain healthy? Why are some believers healed and others not? Why are some Christians prosperous while others languish in poverty? Why do children die?

Kate Bowler argues that the prosperity message is essentially a theodicy, an explanation for the problem of evil.[[48]](#endnote-48) It views the world as unfair to some people and promises an easy solution. Faith guarantees the unlocking of spiritual laws that consistently lead to health, wealth and good luck. Life is inherently just because God had established principles that keep the world in order, laws such as confession, agreement of requests in corporate prayer that guarantees an answer, tithing, first fruits and seed faith. These laws are the “elegant solution” to the problem of unfairness; it establishes a Newtonian universe in which one can reduce the world’s chaos to simple cause and effect. Undeserved pain and tragedy cannot ever occur in the believer’s life.[[49]](#endnote-49)

The “Lausanne Theology Working Group Statement on Prosperity Gospel” published their report in 2010 after two years of consultations. It explains the unbiblical notion that spiritual welfare can be measured in terms of material welfare as an integral element of prosperity’s theodicy, a notion that it argues should be rejected[[50]](#endnote-50) because prosperity teachers exploit the poor, distort the Scriptures and partake in and promote greed.[[51]](#endnote-51) Although it is not true of all individuals and groups, it distinguishes a significant part of Neo-Pentecostalism.

# 2.5 Pentecostal hermeneutical perspective on theodicy

Amos Yong refers to several theodicies that qualify to explain suffering from a perspective of faith. First, ontological and theological models understand evil as either intrinsically (ontologically) woven into the fabric of the universe or as the result of God’s (at least permissive) will for the world.[[52]](#endnote-52) Secondly, freewill theodicy views the problem of evil as either the result of creaturely freedom unleashed by the fall of humankind (Gen 3) or the primordial fall of angels. In other words, God is not per se responsible for evil because free creatures can choose to commit good or evil acts ad cause evil.[[53]](#endnote-53)

Thirdly, “soul-making theodicy” believes that evil is allowed by God because of its formative capacities to develop moral virtues. Evil becomes beneficial because of its soul-shaping outcomes.[[54]](#endnote-54) And lastly, a developed cruciform theology states that God enters the world’s suffering through the cross of Jesus Christ and the current suffering of the individual. While it is impossible to explain evil’s origins because of its intractability, God is not removed from human suffering but has entered into it as the crucified God.[[55]](#endnote-55)

Traditionally, Pentecostals did not engage with theodicy as a potential challenge to believers’ faith. Instead, they emphasised that God continues to work the same kind of miracles and wonders that people in biblical times experienced and described. According to Chris Green, Pentecostals have not yet developed a theologically and pastorally adequate account of suffering. Instead, their Pentecostal praxis an alternative possible means of coping with pain and suffering.[[56]](#endnote-56) They are not concerned with why they suffer but direct their attention to trust God to deliver them from suffering. “Historically Pentecostals have not reflected upon the traditional problem of evil from a philosophical perspective. In other words, no formal theology of the problem of evil exists from a Pentecostal perspective.”[[57]](#endnote-57) As a result, the tension between their theology of victory and their experience of suffering is their Achilles’ heel.[[58]](#endnote-58)

Steven Fettke and Michael Dusing agree that Pentecostals do not adequately respond to evil and chronic and unrelieved suffering.[[59]](#endnote-59) Instead, they repeat God’s promises for deliverance and command evil spirits to depart, denying that God might not want to do what they require. They “pray through” and “receive their victory;” they “claim the promises” and believe that “in Jesus’ name” they are delivered. And they blame a lack of faith when the miracle does not realise.[[60]](#endnote-60)

Christians cannot justify what God does because of the mysteriousness of God as suchandGod’s ways, implying that the puzzle of theodicy necessarily remains unsolved. It will be resolved only when the present world is consummated and the new earth and heaven established.[[61]](#endnote-61) In any case, God did not call believers to resolve the challenge but to adore and worship the great Creator God in the divine self-revelation to them. God calls them to encounter the divine and not to compile information about God. In other words, Christians are not responsible for an adequate theodicy that answers the challenge of human logic. Pentecostals believe their mission is instead to reach the lost world with God’s love and trust God with their lives.

It is submitted that Christians should respond to suffering, evil and human sin, not by attempting to justify God’s ways in allowing the suffering of people and creation but by contributing to the realisation of the reign of God in the world by acts of compassion to the needy and helpless.[[62]](#endnote-62) They should attend to combating the roots of evil as far as possible. At the same time, they should take care of its sufferers. Theorising about the causes of suffering and evil is a waste of precious time that believers need instead to spend in practical ways.

The question can be asked whether God knows of the suffering that befalls humans and creation and whether God is able to prevent it. It is argued that, in line with open theism, God does not have exhaustive foreknowledge because God is finite and dependent on the world by divine choice, leading to divine emptying in the way described by Philippians 2:5-11.[[63]](#endnote-63) But unlike process theology, at the same time, it affirms divine infinity, necessity, ontological independence of the world, transcendence and omnipresence. God is flexible in how God works in the world.

The only theological angle that makes sense in thinking about God is dialectical, attempting to combine different views of God simultaneously. Pentecostal hermeneutics develop its theological epistemology from Pentecostals’ charismatic experiences with the Spirit, implying the impossibility of limiting the divine to theological propositions or dogmatic statements that supposedly contain the divine with great certainty. Instead, God functions outside the human frame of reference, consisting ultimately of the universe, and can by grace be experienced but not described or contained in fallible and limited human words. God can be encountered but not trapped in essentially anthropomorphic notions.

For that reason, all theodicy can only be provisional, as Jürgen Moltmann argues.[[64]](#endnote-64) He writes that there are no definitive, final answers in the attempt to vindicate divine justice and explain suffering. Instead of attempting to understand suffering, he suggests that one should instead address its diverse roots and positively acts to address its causes. No one will ever be able to answer the theodicy question, in Moltmann’s opinion, because suffering remains the “open wound of life” in our world.[[65]](#endnote-65) When one realises the inevitability of theodicy as an open question, one may suspend final judgments until the arrival of the eschatological future while keeping oneself busy with the realisation of that new kingdom in the present reality. Christians pray for the coming of God’s kingdom while at the same time they spend their energies to realise it in their personal world, society and environment.

Bernard Adeney-Risakotta adds that human tragedies do not have a single, fixed ontological meaning.[[66]](#endnote-66) The implication is that the meaning of suffering may differ from person to person; it is not fixed for all time and all humans. Every human being needs to find a specific meaning for their suffering or alternatively concludes that it is meaningless. That does not imply that the meaning they assign to the specific suffering incident is subjective or arbitrary. One cannot assign just any meaning because the meaning is substantively objective. As a result, it must be developed in terms of the social surroundings and personal perceptions. The meaning may also be evolving over time. In the case of natural tragedies, Adeney-Risakotta writes that the affected people create collective meaning in relation to each other that may initially be superficial and wrong. Eventually, however, the meaning they establish most of the affected people may then accept, implying the potential to change the meaning of the remembered event and the future of the community shaped by the memory.

Adeney-Risakotta quotes Nietzsche who wrote, “One must still have chaos in oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star.”[[67]](#endnote-67) Natural disasters and other communal suffering display the chaos underlying us and the human task to find meaning in it for themselves. To do so successfully, they may use different sources, sometimes in combination. It may include folk wisdom, religious language and scientific discourse. The meaning they assign to their experience of suffering represents symbolic moral systems based on assumptions they can never prove. Their discourse system is not more or less important or valid than any others. It is vital that affected people require such symbolic and extended vocabularies to help them establish and describe meaning in suffering, given that such events can easily confound their conventional understanding.

One finds several such discourses in the Bible. It relates to suffering and includes topics such as the results and retribution for sin and human freedom to decide about individual participation in good or evil actions. People also assigned different meanings to their suffering, such as acts of disciplining, testing or as conditional for character development. Others explain their suffering in terms of their participation in the suffering of Christ. The variety of such discourses implies that people in biblical times did the same as we do: they assigned meaning to respond to their own perceptions and probably shifted perspectives that may again shift in the future. It implies that contemporary believers have permission and they are tasked to find meaning for themselves in their suffering. They need to develop their own discourse that reflects and explains their experience adequately.

In addition, Christians can only fulfill their mission for the redemption and healing of the world when they look for and address the underlying causes of the evil that oppresses human beings. For instance, Mother Teresa said, “Poverty was not created by God. We have caused it – you and I – by our selfishness.”[[68]](#endnote-68) Their concern should be to address and solve the underlying causes with wisdom and fervour, as far as it is in their power. For instance, South Africa sees millions of its inhabitants doomed to poverty, unemployment and hopelessness through structural inequality that is historically structured. The country has one of the highest levels of inequality when measured by the commonly used Gini index. As a result, the top 20 percent of the population holds over 68 percent of income, compared to a median of 47 percent for similar emerging markets. On the contrary, the bottom 40 percent holds 7 percent of income, compared to 16 percent for other emerging markets and countries.[[69]](#endnote-69) Concerned citizens need only to look past the privileged neighborhoods to the squatter camps and shantytowns that litter the outskirts of South African cities and towns to see the scope, range and extent of poverty.

While they attend to the most pressing needs of the needy, believers must also address the historical, political and economic causes of such inequality. Their mission as witnesses to Christ requires them to carry evangelical standards into politics, economy, health care and education. Their example they find in some of the early Christians who opted to avoid explaining the suffering of poverty by choosing to live communally to support and care for the poor and hungry. They enjoyed a meal once a day together where they shared what they had to eat and as a result, those without food also got fed (Acts 2:42, 46; 20:7). In the words of Stanley Hauerwas, the suffering that surrounds us is not a metaphysical problem. It does not require complex philosophical debates about solutions. It can only be addressed effectively as a practical and existential challenge because people are dying.[[70]](#endnote-70) They need an adequately urgent response from our side.

The way we respond to suffering, whether our own or others’, illustrates our view of humanity and mortality. At the same time, it also realizes how significant and meaningful one would experience one’s life. In the case of believers, our faith may provide us with relevant means to address these challenges because we have learned that the most adequate response is not to attempt to explain suffering but by participating in the *missio Dei.*

In terms of other people’s suffering, the crucial element required of us is our potential to feel empathetically with another who suffers. It is a feeling that requires genuine engagement. It needs to be cultivated and developed intentionally. However, empathetic feeling for the victims of suffering is not enough. One must also dirty one’s hands by taking responsibility and caring for such people.

Jesus directed his attention deliberately to the marginalised in society and the early Pentecostals followed his example. Their mission required that they saw alcoholics and drug addicts who abused their families with Christ’s eyes. As a result, such people formed the first adherents of the movement and formed its basis and foundation. They cared for uprooted migrants who were not welcome in the host society and the unemployed and unemployable who were, in many cases, homeless. Society looked down upon early Pentecostals because these people, including former alcoholics, drug addicts, abusive people and even criminals who were converted, joined the movement and eventually formed its core.

Neo-Pentecostals need to regain this perspective to address the suffering world by looking at the needs of the people around them with Jesus’ eyes. At present, they primarily attend to people’s needs exclusively by prayer and trusting God for miracles or by proclaiming that sufferers only need to have faith to acquire prosperity. Instead, they should rally with sufferers by emphatically experiencing their suffering and then address the causes. The world needs to find them with those rejected due to their alternative sexual orientation, race and gender. They should be with the migrants, caring for them and advocating their cause.

Their focus should include the victims of current xenophobia consisting of the rejection of and discrimination against refugees and migrants from other countries. They should resist the temptation to speak for others. They know there are no easy solutions for most forms of suffering. They avoid any attempts to encourage others by affirming that God is in control, and everything will work out fine. They acknowledge the agony and pain of people who suffer and listen patiently, being present for them. They do not dehumanize sufferers.

Instead of excluding people by exclusively using their mother language (as in the case of Afrikaans, keeping other South Africans from their worship services), they should be accommodative of all language groups.[[71]](#endnote-71) At the same time, they address the preventable causes of suffering due to human cruelty or callousness, acting as advocates for its voiceless victims.[[72]](#endnote-72) Believers keep the final restoration of creation in view and do not become discouraged due to the immense suffering that is characteristic of the current creation. Only then will they be able to shift the faith community into a caring community.

In other words, in conclusion, Pentecostals do not need a sophisticated philosophical theodicy. Instead, they need a pastoral theodicy that will realise the priesthood and prophethood of every believer through their empathic involvement in the lives and suffering of other people in constructive and loving ways. In this way they bear the burdens of fellow believers and other victims of suffering (Gal 6:20). They live sacrificially like Christ to impact and change their world for the better. They aspire to address the injustices that confront society and rally for the victims of the injustices. They have learned from their Master what a significant life consists of, to live ex-centrically. Such people find their center outside themselves by sharing the commitment to the realisation of the coming divine reign by remaining among the poor, implying their selfless service to the suffering. They carry the message of God’s grace and power through their loving actions to the people who need it the most. To succeed in their mission, they need much wisdom, courage and boldness.[[73]](#endnote-73)

# 2.6 Synthesis

The African version of prosperity theology influenced Pentecostalism and especially Neo-Pentecostalism, with many adherents believing its message that health, wealth and prosperity is the heritage of all Christians. It combines American prosperity theology with African values such as holistic salvation that includes the whole of a person’s life, contributing to its popularity among Africans. The synthesis of American materialism and Africa’s traditional religious imagination of fertility, abundance and wholeness find a ready audience in Africa. Health, wealth, prosperity and victory is within the reach of every believer because Jesus earned our salvation on the cross. The message influenced and reached especially younger people impressed by its charismatic leaders with their prosperous lifestyle, worship style, music and appropriation of modern media technologies.

The chapter argued for different types of prosperity among its teachers, such as “abilities prosperity” that encourages believers to work hard for success, “progress prosperity” that encourages a change in attitudes that promote an entrepreneurial mindset, and “miracle prosperity theology” that encourages believers to trust God for miracles.

The irony is that many adherents of Neo-Pentecostalism nearly perish in poverty and misery in contrast to their leaders’ affluent lifestyle. The prosperity gospel valorises these Africans’ nostalgic material aspirations.

Their version of the gospel emphasizes faith, wealth, health and victory as a result of the gift of holistic salvation. The cross of Christ bought forgiveness of sins but also healing and prosperity.

How does Neo-Pentecostalism reconcile its emphasis on prosperity with the suffering of many people, including believers? The prosperity gospel as a theodicy views suffering as unfair and proposes an easy response to it in the form of spiritual laws such as confession, agreement of requests in corporate prayer that guarantees an answer, tithing, first fruits and seed faith that unlock all the riches that the cross brought, including health, wealth and good luck. In Neo-Pentecostalism’s Newtonian universe, the world’s chaos is solved because undeserved pain and tragedy cannot ever occur in the believer’s life.

Traditionally, Pentecostalism did not attempt a theodicy; instead, the trusted God for deliverance from all suffering. It was argued that a more adequate response to suffering would be to assist its victims tangibly while addressing its causes as far as possible. The mystery that God and the divine will hold for Christians imply that the puzzle of theodicy is unsolvable and will only solved with the establishment of the new earth and heaven established. In the mean time, believers encounter the divine that empowers them to fulfill their mission on earth.

It is argued that a more adequate response to theodicy would be to assist the victims of suffering while at the same time addressing its causes, as far as possible. Such a pastoral theodicy will imply believers’ empathic involvement with sufferers, informed by Christ self-sacrificial lifestyle and death. They find their life’s center outside themselves by sharing their lives and livelihood with the less privileged and in this way realizes the coming divine reign. They illustrate their gospel of grace and power in loving actions.

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