Missio Dei and the challenge of prosperity practices: A missiological critique from the Global South, focusing on East Africa

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Abstract
This article offers a sharply critical missiological examination of the growing dominance of prosperity-oriented practices within churches in the Global South, with particular focus on East Africa. It argues that the prosperity gospel has effectively displaced the Missio Dei—God's mission of reaching sinners with the saving message of Jesus Christ—by substituting the gospel of salvation with a transactional religion of wealth acquisition. Drawing on the works of David Bosch, Lesslie Newbigin, Kate Bowler, and Paul Gifford, the article demonstrates that prosperity teaching has become more attractive to many churchgoers than the gospel of repentance and redemption, a trend that should alarm every serious theologian and pastor. In East Africa, vulnerable believers have been manipulated into selling their properties, emptying their savings, and surrendering their livelihoods to churches and pastors who promise miraculous financial returns—effectively reducing God to an Automated Teller Machine or a cosmic lottery. This article contends that such practices constitute a fundamental betrayal of the church's missional vocation, a form of spiritual abuse, and an affront to the character of God. It proposes a prophetic recovery of Missio Dei grounded in the proclamation of salvation, justice for the poor, and the dismantling of exploitative ecclesial structures.

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I. Introduction

Something has gone terribly wrong with the church's mission in the Global South. At a time when Christianity is experiencing unprecedented numerical growth in Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia, the theological content of that growth is increasingly cause for alarm rather than celebration. The twenty-first-century church in the Global South—particularly in East Africa—is growing, but what is it growing into? Scholars such as Philip Jenkins and Lamin Sanneh have celebrated the demographic shift of Christianity's centre of gravity toward the Global South, but they have also acknowledged that this growth is accompanied by theological movements that raise disturbing questions about the authenticity of the faith being propagated (Jenkins 2011).

Chief among these disturbing movements is the prosperity gospel—a theological system that promises material wealth, physical health, and social success as the guaranteed entitlements of faithful Christians. This is not a fringe phenomenon. According to a Pew Research Center survey, substantial majorities of Christians in Kenya, South Africa, and several other African nations affirm that God grants material prosperity to those who have enough faith (Pew Research Center 2010). In East Africa, prosperity teaching has become the dominant theological framework in many of the fastest-growing churches, overshadowing and in some cases entirely replacing the historic Christian message of repentance, forgiveness of sins, and salvation through Jesus Christ. This is the crisis at the heart of this article: the prosperity gospel is not merely a theological error; it is a rival religion that has hijacked the mission of God and redirected it toward the enrichment of a clerical elite at the expense of the very sinners Christ came to save.

The Missio Dei—the understanding that mission belongs fundamentally to God and that the church is called to participate in God's redemptive purposes—provides the theological lens through which this article evaluates the prosperity phenomenon. Originating in the deliberations of the Willingen Conference of the International Missionary Council in 1952 and subsequently developed by theologians such as Karl Hartenstein, Georg Vicedom, David Bosch, and Lesslie Newbigin, the concept of Missio Dei insists that the primary content of God's mission is the reconciliation of sinful humanity to God through Jesus Christ and the transformation of the whole of creation according to God's justice and love (Bosch 2011a). When this mission is distorted—when the church ceases to proclaim salvation and instead peddles financial promises—the church ceases to participate in God's mission and begins to serve its own interests.

The central thesis of this article is uncompromising: the prosperity gospel, as practised in many churches across the Global South and particularly in East Africa, represents a fundamental deviation from the Missio Dei. It has replaced the gospel of salvation with a gospel of success. It has made the accumulation of wealth more attractive than the forgiveness of sins. It has turned pastors into predators and congregants into prey. It has convinced vulnerable believers to sell their properties, drain their bank accounts, and mortgage their futures on the promise that God will return their investment with interest—as though the Creator of the universe were an Automated Teller Machine dispensing cash on demand, or a lottery that pays out to those who insert the right spiritual coins. This article argues that these practices are not merely misguided; they are sinful, exploitative, and antithetical to everything the Christian gospel represents.

The significance of this critique extends far beyond academic missiology. Across East Africa, real people are suffering real consequences from prosperity theology. Families have been impoverished by the very churches that promised to enrich them.

Widows have given their last shillings to pastors who drive luxury vehicles. Young people have abandoned education in pursuit of miraculous financial breakthroughs that never come. The sick have rejected medical treatment in favour of faith declarations, sometimes with fatal consequences. These are not hypothetical scenarios; they are documented realities that should provoke not only theological reflection but moral outrage (Gifford 2015a; Parsitau 2017; Ukah 2018).

II. Method

Methodologically, this article draws on a critical review of the scholarly literature in missiology, African Christianity, and the sociology of religion. It engages particularly with the works of David Bosch, Lesslie Newbigin, Kate Bowler, Paul Gifford, Ogbu Kalu, and a range of East African scholars. The article employs a missiological hermeneutic that reads prosperity practices through the normative lens of Missio Dei, while remaining attentive to the contextual factors that make prosperity teaching so seductive in economically precarious settings. The aim is to produce an article that is not only analytically rigorous but prophetically urgent—one that calls the church back to its fundamental mission of proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ to a lost and broken world.

III. Discussion

The theology of Missio Dei: Mission as God's initiative—Reaching sinners for Christ

The concept of Missio Dei represents one of the most important paradigm shifts in the history of Christian mission theology, and its implications for the prosperity debate are devastating. Prior to the twentieth century, mission was predominantly understood as an activity of the church—an ecclesiocentric enterprise driven by human initiative. The Willingen Conference of 1952 decisively reoriented this understanding: mission does not originate in the church but in the very nature of the Triune God. God is a sending God—the Father sends the Son, the Son sends the Spirit, and the Spirit sends the church into the world. The content of this sending is not ambiguous: God sends the church to proclaim salvation to sinners, to call the lost to repentance, and to announce the kingdom of God in word and deed (Flett 2010; Bosch 2011b).

This is precisely where the prosperity gospel fails most catastrophically. The Missio Dei is fundamentally about reaching sinners with the saving message of Jesus Christ. It is about the cross, the resurrection, the forgiveness of sins, and the hope of eternal life. It is about a God who so loved the world that He gave His only Son—not a God who so loved the world that He promised to make everyone rich. Georg Vicedom, in his foundational elaboration of Missio Dei, argued that God's mission encompasses the entire sweep of redemptive history—from the fall to the consummation—and that the church's role is to serve as an instrument of God's saving purposes (Vicedom 2016). When the church substitutes salvation for financial prosperity, it is no longer participating in God's mission; it is conducting its own enterprise under a fraudulent theological banner.

David Bosch's magisterial Transforming Mission identified the essential elements of authentic Christian mission: evangelism, contextualisation, liberation, justice, and

ministry to the whole person (Bosch 2011b). Notice what is at the centre of this list: evangelism—the proclamation of the good news that sinners can be reconciled to God through Jesus Christ. Bosch did not deny that mission has material dimensions; he insisted that it does. But he was equally insistent that the material dimensions of mission serve the larger purpose of God's redemptive work, not the other way around. The prosperity gospel inverts this order: it makes material blessing the purpose and reduces the gospel to a means of obtaining it. This inversion is not a minor theological adjustment; it is a fundamental corruption of the Christian message.

The trinitarian foundation of Missio Dei further exposes the bankruptcy of prosperity theology. If mission flows from the self-giving love of the Trinity—the Father giving the Son, the Son giving His life on the cross, the Spirit poured out upon the church—then the church's participation in mission must likewise be characterised by self-giving love, sacrifice, and other-centred service. The kenotic or self-emptying nature of God's mission stands in absolute contradiction to a theology that encourages accumulation, self-enrichment, and the concentration of resources in the hands of religious elites. A God who empties Himself for the sake of sinners cannot be coherently invoked to justify the enrichment of pastors at the expense of the poor (Flett 2010).

Church participation in God's Mission: The alarming displacement

Lesslie Newbigin argued that the church exists not for its own sake but as a "sign, instrument, and foretaste" of the kingdom of God (Newbigin 2012). The church is called to embody the values of the kingdom—justice, mercy, compassion, reconciliation, and shalom—in its corporate life and public witness. What is alarming—and it should be stated plainly that it is alarming—is that in many East African churches today, the kingdom of God has been replaced by the kingdom of mammon. The Sunday sermon is no longer about salvation from sin; it is about strategies for financial breakthrough. The altar call is no longer an invitation to repent and receive Christ; it is an invitation to sow a seed offering and claim a harvest of wealth. The prayer meeting is no longer a gathering to intercede for the lost; it is a session of positive confession aimed at commanding material blessings into existence.

This displacement of the gospel of salvation by the gospel of prosperity should frighten every serious Christian. When a sinner walks into a church seeking forgiveness, healing for a broken soul, and a relationship with the living God, and instead receives a lecture on how to give money to the pastor in order to trigger divine financial favour, that sinner has been robbed of the gospel. The Cape Town Commitment of the Lausanne Movement declared that integral mission means proclaiming and living out the biblical truth that the gospel is God's good news for every dimension of human life (Lausanne Movement 2011). But prosperity churches have taken this affirmation and twisted it beyond recognition, reducing "every dimension of human life" to a single dimension: money. The World Council of Churches' Together Towards Life affirmed that mission from the margins—centring the voices of the poor and marginalised—is essential to authentic participation in Missio Dei (World Council of Churches 2013). Prosperity churches, however, centre the voices of the wealthy pastors and marginalise the very poor they claim to serve.

Prosperity practices in the Global South prioritize success over salvation

The prosperity gospel did not emerge from the soil of Africa. Its roots lie in the New Thought movement, the Word of Faith tradition, and the American televangelism industry of the twentieth century (Bowler 2013). But it has been exported to the Global South with

devastating efficiency, transmitted through satellite television, social media, transnational ministerial networks, and the aspirational power of American cultural influence. What arrived in Africa was not the gospel of Jesus Christ but a counterfeit gospel—a theology that promises what the biblical gospel never promised: that faithful Christians are entitled to material wealth, physical health, and social success as automatic rewards for their faith and financial giving.

Kate Bowler's Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel identified the core tenets of this movement: faith as a positive confession that activates divine power; wealth as evidence of God's favour; giving to the pastor or ministry as a mechanism for triggering divine financial return; and health as the normative condition of the faithful believer (Bowler 2013). These ideas have been transplanted into African soil where they have merged with pre-existing cosmological frameworks that emphasise the relationship between spiritual power and material outcomes (Kalu 2018).The result is a theological hybrid that is enormously attractive—and enormously dangerous.

Paul Gifford's Christianity, Development, and Modernity in Africa argued that prosperity teaching in Africa functions as a form of enchanted modernity—promising access to the benefits of globalised capitalism through spiritual means (Gifford 2015b). This is the key to understanding the appeal: in contexts where legitimate economic pathways are blocked by corruption, inequality, and structural injustice, the prosperity gospel offers a spiritual shortcut to success. It tells the poor that they do not need political reform, economic restructuring, or educational opportunity; they need only to believe hard enough and give generously enough, and God will make them rich. This message is not merely wrong; it is cruel. It blames the poor for their poverty by implying that their suffering is the result of insufficient faith, and it absolves the powerful of their responsibility for the systems that perpetuate deprivation.

Preying on the vulnerable: The economics of exploitation

The economic dynamics of prosperity churches in the Global South are nothing short of scandalous. Congregants—many of whom live on less than two dollars a day—are systematically encouraged to give far beyond their means, with the promise that God will multiply their seed offering and return it as a material blessing. This is not generosity; it is extraction. This is not worship; it is a business model dressed in theological language. The pastor stands before a congregation of impoverished believers and asks them to give their rent money, their children's school fees, their medical expenses—and promises them that God will return it sevenfold, tenfold, a hundredfold. When the promised return does not materialise, the congregant is told that their faith was insufficient, that they must give more, that the breakthrough is just around the corner (Ukah 2018; Wariboko 2014).

The most alarming manifestation of this exploitation is the phenomenon of believers being convinced to sell their properties—homes, land, livestock, businesses—and give the proceeds to the church or the pastor, on the promise that God will replace what they have given with something far greater. This is not a marginal practice confined to a few extreme cases; it is a recurring pattern documented across multiple countries in the Global South. Families have been rendered homeless, farmers have been dispossessed of their land, and small business owners have been bankrupted—all in the name of "sowing a seed" into God's kingdom. The theological question must be asked directly and without euphemism: Is God an ATM? Is the Almighty Creator of heaven and earth a cash machine that dispenses money when you insert the right amount of faith and giving? Is the Holy One of Israel a lottery—a game of chance in which the faithful hope to hit the jackpot? The question

answers itself. The God revealed in Scripture is neither an ATM nor a lottery. He is the God who calls sinners to repentance, who promises eternal life to those who believe, and who explicitly warned that those who seek to gain the world may forfeit their souls (Mark 8:36).

Nimi Wariboko observed that the prosperity gospel functions as a mechanism for the upward redistribution of resources from the many to the few, masquerading as divine economy (Wariboko 2014). The tragedy is that the people who can least afford to give are the ones most aggressively targeted. Widows, orphans, the unemployed, the disabled, and the chronically ill—precisely the people whom Scripture identifies as the special objects of God's concern—are the ones most likely to be exploited by prosperity preachers who promise them deliverance from their suffering in exchange for their last material resources. This is not Christianity; it is predation. It is not the Missio Dei; it is the missio diaboli—the mission of the devil disguised as an angel of light.

East African church prosperity practices exploit fertile ground for deception

East Africa presents a particularly instructive—and heartbreaking—context for examining the devastation wrought by prosperity teaching. The region has experienced rapid Christianisation, with Christianity now constituting the majority religion in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, and Rwanda. According to the World Christian Database, Kenya is approximately 85 percent Christian, Uganda approximately 86 percent, Tanzania approximately 63 percent, and Rwanda approximately 93 percent (Johnson and Zurlo 2022). Within this broadly Christian landscape, Pentecostal-Charismatic movements have grown exponentially since the 1980s and 1990s, and it is within these movements that prosperity teaching has found its most aggressive and destructive expression.

The political and economic context is crucial. Despite significant GDP growth in several East African nations over the past two decades, inequality remains staggering, youth unemployment is epidemic, and large segments of the population continue to live below the poverty line. Access to healthcare and education remains profoundly uneven, and corruption erodes public trust in government institutions.

In this environment—where the state has failed, the market excludes, and hope is scarce—the prosperity gospel enters with a seductive promise: that God's favour, accessed through faith and giving, can bypass every systemic failure and deliver personal transformation. It is a message perfectly calibrated to exploit desperation, and it works precisely because that desperation is real.

Patterns of exploitation across the region

In Kenya, the prosperity movement is exemplified by a range of megachurches and high-profile ministries, many of which are based in Nairobi and have extensive networks spanning rural areas and neighbouring countries. These churches employ sophisticated marketing strategies, including carefully curated testimonies of miraculous financial breakthroughs, to attract and retain followers. Damaris Parsitau documented how Kenyan prosperity churches cultivate an atmosphere of urgent expectation, in which giving is presented not as a voluntary act of worship but as a compulsory transaction necessary to unlock God's blessing.

Congregants who do not give—or do not give enough—are publicly shamed, spiritually threatened, or marginalised within the community. Meanwhile, senior pastors live in mansions, drive imported luxury vehicles, travel by private charter, and send their children to the most expensive international schools—all funded by the sacrificial giving of people who can barely feed their families.

In Uganda, the prosperity movement intersects with a broader landscape of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity that has been growing since the 1980s. Ugandan prosperity churches emphasise the connection between spiritual warfare and material success, teaching that poverty is a demonic condition that must be overcome through prayer, fasting, and—above all—sacrificial giving. Henni Alava noted that prosperity messaging in northern Uganda operates in a context still recovering from decades of armed conflict and displacement, raising acute ethical concerns about the exploitation of traumatised and desperate populations (Alava 2017).Telling a widow in Gulu who lost her husband to the Lord's Resistance Army that her continued poverty is the result of her lack of faith is not theology; it is cruelty.

In Tanzania, Päivi Hasu examined how prosperity churches appropriate and transform traditional concepts of blessing and reciprocity, reframing them within a Christian vocabulary that serves the financial interests of church leaders (Hasu 2012). Hasu found that while prosperity teaching offers a veneer of hope and agency, it also creates new forms of social pressure and financial obligation that can exacerbate rather than alleviate economic hardship. The pattern is consistent: the poor are told to give what they do not have, in expectation of a return that does not come, while the pastors who receive the giving grow wealthier and more powerful with each passing Sunday.

In Rwanda, the post-genocide context adds a particularly tragic dimension. The Rwandan government's emphasis on national development and economic modernisation has fostered a cultural environment in which prosperity theology's language of success, progress, and blessing resonates with national aspirations. Yet Timothy Longman raised critical questions about the capacity of Rwandan churches to serve as authentic agents of reconciliation and justice, given the complex legacy of ecclesial complicity in the 1994 genocide.

A prosperity church in post-genocide Rwanda that focuses exclusively on individual wealth while ignoring the ongoing need for communal healing, truth-telling, and restorative justice is not merely theologically deficient; it is morally bankrupt.

Across the region, several alarming patterns are consistent. First, the figure of the senior pastor or prophet is elevated to a position of virtually unchallengeable authority—a spiritual strongman whose pronouncements carry the weight of divine oracles and whose financial demands are treated as sacred obligations. Second, testimony functions as propaganda: carefully selected stories of financial breakthrough are publicly broadcast, creating a narrative ecosystem in which wealth is the expected outcome of faith, while the far more numerous stories of disappointment, loss, and ruin are suppressed and silenced. Third, the transnational flow of prosperity theology—from Nigeria, South Africa, and the United States into East Africa—raises questions about theological dependency and cultural imperialism, as locally generated theological resources are marginalised in favour of imported models that serve the economic interests of a globalised religious industry (Asamoah-Gyadu 2015).

Missiological critique: Gospel overshadowed by allure over salvation

Here is the most alarming dimension of the prosperity phenomenon, and it must be stated with maximum clarity: for millions of churchgoers in East Africa, the prosperity gospel has become more attractive than the gospel of salvation. This is not an exaggeration; it is an observable reality confirmed by scholars, pastors, and sociological surveys alike. When given a choice between a church that preaches repentance from sin and the hope of eternal life, and a church that preaches financial breakthrough and the

promise of material abundance, a growing number of East Africans are choosing the latter. The sinner who needs to hear that Christ died for them is instead hearing that God wants to make them rich. The lost sheep that the Good Shepherd came to find is being directed not to the fold of salvation but to the offering basket of the prosperity preacher.

This is a direct and devastating betrayal of the Missio Dei. God's mission, as articulated in Scripture and affirmed by the best of the Christian theological tradition, is the reconciliation of sinful humanity to God through Jesus Christ. The Great Commission—"Go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19)—is a command to bring people into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ, not a command to establish spiritual multi-level marketing schemes that funnel money upward to a charismatic leader. When the prosperity message becomes more attractive than the message of salvation, the church has not merely drifted from its mission; it has abandoned it. And the consequences are eternal: souls that might have heard the saving gospel are instead hearing a counterfeit message that cannot save, cannot reconcile, and cannot deliver what it promises (Bosch 2011b; Wright 2013).

The Missio Dei framework exposes the prosperity gospel at every point. First, Missio Dei insists that mission is directed toward the whole of creation—justice, reconciliation, ecological integrity, and the liberation of the oppressed. Prosperity theology reduces God's purposes to individual material enrichment. Second, Missio Dei understands the church as a servant of God's kingdom, characterised by humility and solidarity with the poor. Prosperity churches function as vehicles for the aggrandisement of clerical leadership, reproducing the very patterns of patrimonial authority and unequal distribution of resources that Christian mission ought to challenge (Kalu 2018). Third, Missio Dei calls for a preferential option for the poor—a commitment affirmed by liberation theologians and ecumenical missiology alike (Bevans and Schroeder 2011). Prosperity theology interprets poverty as spiritual failure, thereby blaming the poor for their condition and absolving the powerful of responsibility for unjust structures.

Fourth, the ecclesiology of prosperity movements diverges radically from the missional ecclesiology required by Missio Dei. In the Missio Dei paradigm, the church is a provisional, pilgrim community that exists for the sake of the world. Its identity is derived from its participation in God's mission, not from its size, revenue, or the charisma of its leaders. Prosperity churches, by contrast, measure their faithfulness in terms of financial turnover and numerical expansion. This metrics-driven ecclesiology transforms the church from a missional community into a religious corporation governed by market logic rather than gospel imperatives (Walls 2017). The church becomes indistinguishable from a commercial enterprise—complete with branding, marketing campaigns, product launches disguised as prophetic declarations, and customer retention strategies dressed up as pastoral care.

Fifth, there is an epistemological crisis at the heart of prosperity theology. Prosperity preachers claim direct, infallible knowledge of God's financial intentions for their congregants. They prophesy specific amounts of money, specific dates of breakthrough, specific properties and vehicles that God has allegedly prepared for the faithful giver. This epistemological certainty is the opposite of the posture of humility, patience, and trust that characterises genuine biblical faith. The stories of Abraham waiting decades for the promised child, of Israel wandering forty years in the wilderness, of Job sitting in ashes and refusing to curse God despite receiving no explanation for his suffering—these narratives depict a faith that trusts God without guarantees, that obeys without contracts, and that hopes without demanding receipts. Prosperity theology has

no room for such faith because it has replaced trust with transaction and hope with entitlement (Wright 2013).

Is God an ATM? Is God a lottery? Theological and ethical reckoning

The theological implications of prosperity practices must be confronted without diplomatic evasion. The prosperity gospel has effectively reconceived the nature of God. The God of prosperity theology is not the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He is not the God who met Moses in the burning bush, who led Israel through the wilderness, who spoke through the prophets, who became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, who suffered on the cross, and who rose again on the third day. The God of prosperity theology is a transactional deity—an entity who operates on the principle of financial exchange: you give money, He gives wealth; you sow a seed, He produces a harvest; you insert your offering into the church, He dispenses blessing from heaven. This is not the God of the Bible; this is a divine vending machine. This is God reimagined as an ATM—an Automated Teller Machine that responds to deposits with withdrawals, rewards inputs with outputs, and runs on the currency of faith rather than the grace of unconditional love.

Or perhaps the lottery analogy is even more apt. In the prosperity church, the congregant gives their offering not knowing whether the promised return will materialise—but hoping, desperately hoping, that this time will be the time, that this seed will be the seed, that this Sunday will be the Sunday when God finally comes through. The testimony of the one congregant who received a financial breakthrough is broadcast loudly, while the silent disappointment of the ninety-nine who received nothing is ignored. This is structurally identical to the logic of the lottery: the winner's story is publicised to encourage continued participation, while the overwhelming statistical reality of loss is hidden from view. But God is not a lottery. God does not operate on the basis of probability and chance. God is a faithful Father who gives good gifts to His children—but the greatest gift He gives is not money; it is salvation. It is not a new car; it is a new heart. It is not a plot of land; it is eternal life (Ramachandra 2013).

The ethical devastation caused by this distorted theology is incalculable. Families who sold their homes on the promise of a divine real-estate upgrade now sleep on the streets. Farmers who sold their land to sow a seed into the pastor's ministry now have no means to feed their children. Students who dropped out of school because the pastor prophesied an imminent financial miracle now have neither education nor income. When these believers—broken, impoverished, and disillusioned—return to the church to ask why God's promise has not been fulfilled, they are told their faith was deficient, that they harboured hidden sin, and that they did not give enough. The victim is blamed, the perpetrator is enriched, and God's name is dragged through the mud of human greed. As Vinoth Ramachandra observed, the prosperity gospel domesticates the radical, costly grace of God into a mechanism for personal advancement—and in doing so, it blasphemes the very God it claims to serve.

The gendered dimensions of this exploitation compound the injustice. Scholars such as Philomena Mwaura and Damaris Parsitau have shown that women make up the majority of congregants in many East African prosperity churches, yet leadership and financial power are overwhelmingly concentrated in the hands of male pastors.

Women—many of them single mothers, widows, or survivors of domestic violence—are told that their sacrificial giving will unlock divine favour for their families. They give their meagre resources, their market earnings, their children's food money—

and the male pastor grows richer while they grow poorer. This is not empowerment; it is patriarchal exploitation baptised in religious language.

Furthermore, prosperity theology's dismissal of suffering and lament represents a profound spiritual impoverishment. The biblical tradition of lament—found in the Psalms, the Prophets, the book of Job, and the cries of Jesus on the cross—is not a sign of weak faith but a faithful response to the realities of injustice, loss, and the apparent silence of God. By teaching that suffering is always the result of insufficient faith, prosperity theology deprives believers of one of their most powerful spiritual resources and distorts the biblical witness to the complex relationship between faith and material well-being (Brueggemann 2012). The believer who is told that their cancer, their unemployment, or their bereavement is caused by their lack of faith is not being pastored; they are being spiritually abused.

Faithful mission: Recovering the gospel of salvation

If the missiological critique offered in this article is to have any practical consequence, it must point toward constructive alternatives. The first and most urgent imperative is the recovery of the gospel of salvation as the central message of the church's mission. This does not mean a retreat into a disembodied spiritualism that ignores material realities; the Missio Dei, as Bosch insisted, addresses the whole person—body, soul, and spirit (Bosch 2011b). But it does mean an unequivocal reaffirmation that the primary purpose of the church's mission is to reach sinners with the saving message of Jesus Christ—to call people to repentance, to proclaim the forgiveness of sins, and to invite human beings into a transformative relationship with the living God. Material well-being is a legitimate concern of the church, but it is a fruit of God's kingdom, not the root; it is a consequence of faithful discipleship, not a prerequisite for it.

The recovery of the holistic mission is essential. The Cape Town Commitment affirmed that integral mission integrates evangelism, social action, peacebuilding, and advocacy for justice into a seamless whole (Lausanne Movement 2011). Churches in East Africa that seek to participate authentically in Missio Dei must move beyond the narrow, distorted focus on individual prosperity and embrace God's broader purposes for the whole of creation. Models of holistic mission already exist across the region: community health programmes in rural Kenya, peace and reconciliation initiatives in post-genocide Rwanda, educational projects in Uganda, and cooperative economic initiatives in Tanzania all demonstrate that the church can engage material realities without reducing the gospel to a financial transaction (Myers 2011; Corbett and Fikkert 2014).

Justice, accountability, and the empowerment of the poor

A faithful missional practice must place justice and the empowerment of the poor at its centre. This means a fundamental reorientation from prosperity theology's focus on individual enrichment to a communal vision of economic justice and shared flourishing. The biblical witness is unambiguous: the Torah legislates protections for the vulnerable, the Prophets denounce those who exploit the poor, Jesus announces good news to the poor as the hallmark of His messianic mission, and the early church practises radical economic sharing (Marshall 2022). A church that genuinely participates in Missio Dei cannot tolerate the economic exploitation of its members by its leaders.

The recovery of accountability and transparency in church governance is not optional; it is a matter of theological integrity. Prosperity churches typically operate with minimal accountability structures, concentrating financial and administrative power in the hands of a single leader. This is not merely a governance problem; it is a theological

scandal. The body of Christ is constituted by the gifts and contributions of all its members, and no individual should dominate or exploit the community for personal gain (Magezi 2015). East African governments, civil society organisations, and ecumenical bodies must work together to establish regulatory frameworks that protect congregants from financial exploitation by religious leaders, including requirements for financial transparency, limits on the proportion of church income that can be directed to pastoral compensation, and legal remedies for believers who have been defrauded by false promises of divine financial return.

Theological education and critical biblical literacy are indispensable. One of the most effective strategies for countering prosperity theology is equipping laypeople and pastors with the tools to read Scripture critically, contextually, and communally. When believers engage the Bible in its fullness—including its traditions of lament, its prophetic critique of wealth and power, its portraits of a suffering Messiah, and its vision of justice and peace—they are better equipped to discern the difference between authentic gospel and theological fraud (Dyrness and Kärkkäinen 2015). African contextual theology, rooted in indigenous values of communal solidarity and ubuntu, offers powerful resources for constructing an alternative theological vision that takes material well-being seriously without collapsing into the distortions of prosperity teaching (Mugambi 2013).

Finally, the church must recover its prophetic voice. A church that confines its message to individual spiritual advancement while remaining silent about corruption, land grabbing, economic injustice, and political oppression has abdicated its vocation (Katongole 2011). The prosperity gospel is politically convenient for the powerful because it diverts the poor's attention from structural injustice to individual spiritual inadequacy. A faithful missional church, by contrast, names injustice, confronts exploitation, advocates for the vulnerable, and refuses to be co-opted by any system—religious or political—that enriches the few at the expense of the many.

IV. Conclusion

The explosive growth of Christianity in the Global South is one of the defining developments of contemporary world history, but growth without theological integrity is not a cause for celebration; it is a cause for alarm. The prosperity gospel has hijacked the church's mission in East Africa, replacing the gospel of salvation with a gospel of greed, substituting the cross for the cash register, and reimagining the Almighty God as a divine ATM or a celestial lottery. This article has argued that these practices constitute a fundamental and dangerous deviation from the Missio Dei—a betrayal of God's mission to reach sinners with the saving message of Jesus Christ and to transform the whole of creation through justice, reconciliation, and love.

The human cost of this betrayal is enormous. Across East Africa, families have been impoverished, communities have been fractured, and the credibility of the Christian witness has been compromised by pastors who promise what they cannot deliver and take what they have no right to demand. When a widow in Nairobi sells her house on the promise that God will give her a mansion, when a farmer in Kampala surrenders his land on the assurance that a hundredfold harvest is coming, when a mother in Dar es Salaam gives her children's school fees to a preacher who drives a Mercedes—these are not acts of faith; they are acts of desperation exploited by those who should be shepherds but have become wolves.

Yet this critique is offered not in despair but in hope. The church in East Africa possesses extraordinary resources of faith, resilience, communal solidarity, and theological creativity. African Christianity at its best is vibrant, courageous, and deeply rooted in the realities of its context. The challenge is to channel this vitality toward a missional practice that is faithful to the Missio Dei—a practice that proclaims salvation to sinners, that pursues justice for the poor, that holds its leaders accountable, that resists the temptation of easy wealth, and that trusts in a God who is neither an ATM nor a lottery but a loving Father whose greatest gift is not material prosperity but eternal life through Jesus Christ.

The question this article has posed is one that demands an answer from every church, every pastor, and every believer in the Global South: Can churches truly participate in the Missio Dei while promoting prosperity practices that benefit leaders more than struggling communities? The answer is a resounding no. But the refusal of the prosperity distortion is only the beginning. What follows must be the hard, sustained, and joyful work of rebuilding a missional church—a church that preaches Christ crucified and risen, that serves the poor with integrity, that speaks truth to power, and that participates faithfully in the mission of the God who loved the world enough to give His only Son. That mission—not the mission of wealth, not the mission of success, but the mission of salvation—remains the church's highest calling and most urgent task.

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