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Prophetic Obsession and its Challenges in African Churches: a Christian Polemical Perspective

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Abstract

This research critically examines the unchecked rise of questionable prophetic practices in Africa, exposing their distortion of biblical teachings and exploitation of vulnerable believers. It challenges the growing trend of elevating prophetic utterances above scripture, which fosters manipulation, deception, and spiritual confusion. The study explores the corruption of prophecy within contemporary African Christianity and its societal consequences, particularly the misinterpretation of divine messages for personal gain. Employing qualitative research, it analyses prevailing prophetic traditions, their harmful effects, and the urgent need for theological accountability. This paper calls for a reformation that prioritises biblical truth, encourages daily scripture engagement over prophetic sensationalism, and rejects unverified prophetic claims that undermine sound doctrine.

Introduction

Polemics is a branch of theology that addresses controversies within or involving the Christian church, defending essential doctrines and denominational beliefs. It extends beyond doctrinal debates to encompass ethics, church organisation, law, liturgy, missions, and even art (Nicole no date). As Carson observes, engaging in serious theological reflection inevitably involves polemical issues – polemics often arise alongside doctrinal discussions, prompting necessary engagement with internal disputes (2009:155).

One of Africa's most striking contemporary theological controversies is the rapid rise of prophetic movements within Christianity. This trend reflects a growing desire among believers for direct divine guidance, often sought through prophetic utterances claimed to be revelations from God (Deke 2015:11–12). However, the increasing obsession with prophecy has not been without controversy or consequences. Many individuals have taken extreme, sometimes devastating actions based on supposed divine messages.

A tragic example I witnessed occurred in Zaria, Kaduna State, Nigeria. A young man, invited by friends to a revival programme at a Pentecostal church, was told by the preacher – a self-proclaimed prophet – that his hardships were caused by his mother, whom he labelled a witch. In despair, the young man returned home and attempted to set his mother on fire using the little petrol he had. Fortunately, neighbours intervened in time to prevent a tragedy. Sadly, this incident is not isolated, highlighting the dangers of unchecked prophetic declarations and their impact on vulnerable individuals.

Similar occurrences across Africa highlight the dangers of unchecked prophetic influence, where manipulation or misinterpretation of supposed divine messages can lead to harmful consequences. Scholars and theologians have noted that the growing attraction to prophetic pronouncements often shifts believers' focus toward contemporary revelations at the expense of the foundational truths of scripture (Twongyeirwe 2021:97). Such deviations undermine the authority of the Bible, which repeatedly warns against false prophets and upholds scripture as the ultimate guide for faith and practice.

This paper critically examines contemporary prophetic practices in Africa, exploring their theological and societal implications. It calls for a firm re-centring of the Bible as the foundation of Christian belief and conduct while advocating for a balanced approach to prophetic insights that values genuine prophecy without succumbing to its abuses. Ultimately, this research aims to deepen believers' discernment regarding prophecy's role within Christianity, reaffirming the pre-eminence of biblical revelation in navigating the diverse spiritual influences present in today's world.

Biblical Understanding of Prophecy

A proper appreciation of prophecy in the Bible requires thoroughly examining how it is treated across the Old and New Testaments. This includes establishing the criteria for a true biblical prophet, distinguishing between true and false prophecy, and understanding prophetic revelation's scope, limitations, and implications. This study is not merely a historical or theological analysis but is crucial for identifying how doctrine is distorted in contemporary Christianity.

Prophecy in the Old and New Testaments

In the Old Testament, prophecy is fundamentally a divine message delivered by individuals chosen explicitly by God – prophets (Jon and James 2012:79). These prophets, including Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and Isaiah, served as God's messengers, calling his people to obedience and faithfulness. Old Testament prophecy operated within a covenantal framework, where prophets reminded Israel of their covenant obligations and warned of impending judgement and restoration (Hamon 1999:63–64). Because of this covenantal structure, prophecy in the Old Testament often reflected both divine discipline and the promise of redemption.

In the New Testament, prophecy plays a significant role but takes on a new form within the framework of the new covenant inaugurated by Christ. Jesus is identified as the ultimate prophet in whom the prophecies of the Old Testament find their fulfilment (Hebrews 1:1–2, Luke 24:44). This function is further elaborated in the apostolic writings, and it is predominantly charged with edification, exhortation, and comfort (1 Corinthians 14:3).

The prophetic gift in the New Testament, though it manifests itself in various ways, is always submitted to the authority of apostolic teaching and subsumed under the broader narrative of Christ's redemptive work. (Lamorte and Hawthorne 2001:961)

Role of Biblical Prophecy

Biblical prophecy is broad in scope, influencing individuals and the faith community (Powell 2006:237). It edifies, exhorts, and comforts believers by providing immediate spiritual guidance, encouragement, and correction.

Prophecy demands a response – faith, obedience, and alignment with God’s will. Additionally, prophetic gifting plays a crucial polemical role, revealing God’s will and calling people to redemption. This function is evident throughout scripture, as seen in passages like Jeremiah 35:15 and Judges 6:7–8. At its core, prophecy discloses God’s involvement in human history. It encompasses moral and ethical judgement, spiritual interpretation of events, denunciation of evil, and divine pronouncements, including promises and warnings.

A well-rounded understanding of biblical prophecy – rooted in the Old and New Testaments – is essential in contemporary Christian practice. Such understanding enables believers to discern true prophets, recognise the scope of prophecy, and uphold its role in maintaining scriptural authority and doctrinal integrity. A balanced and biblically informed approach to prophetic ministry ensures it fulfils God’s purpose of strengthening and guiding his people.

Identifying a True Prophet of God

A true biblical prophet is distinguished by specific characteristics centred on their divine mission and message. A genuine prophet receives direct revelation from God through visions, dreams, or audible messages. Because their communication comes from God, their message is rooted in divine authority rather than human imagination (Hamon 1999:147). As outlined in scripture, a true prophet’s words will never contradict God’s revealed nature and purposes. Instead, prophecy maintains continuity with God’s covenant, guiding his people toward faithfulness rather than leading them astray. Therefore, alignment with scripture is essential in evaluating the legitimacy of any prophetic message.

Another key mark of a true prophet is their moral and ethical integrity. Prophets such as Samuel, Elijah, Elisha, and Jeremiah lived lives of purity and unwavering devotion to God’s truth, even in the face of opposition and persecution. Their faithfulness serves as an enduring example for believers. Through their prophetic ministries, God transformed the lives of those who listened, affirming that true prophecy conveys divine truth and produces real spiritual change.

Distinguishing between True and False Prophecy

The responsibility of distinguishing between true and false prophecy falls upon the church, as it is essential for maintaining doctrinal purity and spiritual well-being. False prophets in scripture are identified by their deceptive messages, which promote idolatry, moral compromise, personal power, and financial gain. Unlike true prophets, whose messages are rooted in divine revelation and ethical integrity, false prophets manipulate prophecy for personal or material advantage (Micah 3:11, Matthew 7:15).

In the New Testament, believers are explicitly instructed to test prophetic claims and discern the spirits, ensuring that any prophecy aligns with the apostolic gospel. True prophecy always upholds a Christ-centred focus, affirming Jesus Christ's incarnation, atonement, and resurrection as God's ordained means of salvation. Any prophecy that deviates from or contradicts these core truths is false and should be rejected. The dangers of false prophecy can be mitigated by adhering to a biblically defined framework, drawing from both the Old and New Testaments. These scriptural principles guide the modern church in discerning genuine prophecy and ensuring its alignment with God's revealed truth.

The Scope and Content of Prophecy in Scripture

Prophecy in scripture is broad, addressing significant events, shaping individuals, and transmitting divine truth. Prophetic messages encompass moral, spiritual, social, and eschatological dimensions of human experience. Biblical prophecy can be categorised into two primary aspects: foretelling and forth-telling. Foretelling refers to the prophetic ability, through divine inspiration, to reveal future events. The central themes of foretelling are God's judgement and salvation. This is evident in prophecies concerning Israel's destiny, the coming of the Messiah, and eschatological events (Isaiah 9:6–7, Daniel 7:13–14, Revelation 21:1–4). Such prophecies highlight God's sovereignty over human history and his unfolding plan for redemption.

Forthtelling, on the other hand, involves declaring God's truth and purpose within a present context (Powell 2006:238–239). This aspect of prophecy emphasises moral exhortation, calling people to repentance, faithfulness, and obedience to God's commandments (Amos 5:24, Micah 6:8). Forthtelling addresses everyday moral and ethical concerns, condemning wickedness,

idolatry, and societal corruption while urging communities to live according to God's ordained laws.

Biblical prophecy can be classified into three main categories. (1) Prophecies concerning Israel's future – these prophecies pronounce God's judgement on Israel for unbelief and disobedience while also promising restoration after a period of trial and exile (Jeremiah 29:10–14, Ezekiel 36:24–28). They emphasise the conditional nature of Israel's relationship with God, which is tied to obedience and faithfulness. (2) Messianic prophecies – these prophecies foretell the coming of the Messiah and describe his birth, life, death, and resurrection as part of God's redemptive plan (Isaiah 53, Micah 5:2, Psalm 22:16–18). They reveal God's promise of salvation and its fulfilment in Jesus Christ. (3) Eschatological prophecies – these prophecies focus on the end times, revealing that God's kingdom will ultimately be established on earth (Daniel 12:1-3, Revelation 21:1-4). They depict God's final judgement and the restoration of creation, culminating in the fulfilment of his divine purpose. Together, these elements of prophecy demonstrate God's active role in history, guiding humanity toward redemption and the fulfilment of his eternal kingdom.

An Analysis of Unhealthy Prophetic Practices in African Churches

The most significant growth in ministry across the African continent in recent decades has been within the prophetic movement, marked by the rise of charismatic leaders who claim to possess divine revelation and power. This phenomenon is often accompanied by the manifestation of miraculous events (Twongyeirwe 2021:98). These prophets further assert that their messages are directly from God, offering solutions to all forms of affliction – financial struggles, health challenges, or personal crises – often reinforced with biblical references that seemingly legitimise their claims.

However, a critical examination reveals that, despite their assertions of divine authority, there is often a departure from foundational biblical teachings and theological principles. This trend highlights the strong appeal of prophetic pronouncements in times of existential uncertainty while simultaneously presenting ethical and theological challenges due to their irresponsible

propagation. Addressing these concerns requires a careful theological evaluation of prophecy rooted in scriptural fidelity, discernment, and a balanced approach to spiritual expressions within Christianity. Consequently, some of the prevalent unhealthy prophetic practices in Africa and their implications include the following.

The Pursuit of a Better Life and Destiny

Through prophetic declarations, pursuing a better life and destiny has become a dominant trend in African society, particularly in response to everyday struggles. This pragmatic style of prophecy encourages people to seek immediate solutions to their problems, believing that prophetic pronouncements offer a direct resolution rather than relying on biblical teachings (Twongyeirwe 2021:97). As a result, prophetic words are viewed as powerful instruments for financial breakthroughs, healing, and success, fostering a transactional approach to faith in which offerings and rituals become mere means to an end (Bishau 2013:56).

This elevation of prophecy above scripture has led to a significant theological deviation from traditional orthodoxy. Augustine Deke notes that some prophets in Africa claim their prophecies are more immediate and authoritative expressions of God's will than the Bible itself (2015:11). Consequently, followers tend to prioritise prophetic messages over personal Bible study, thereby undermining the foundational authority of scripture in matters of faith and practice. A key factor contributing to the appeal of these prophets is their ability to present their messages as guaranteed to manifest both physically and spiritually, particularly in times of crisis. They cultivate an exclusive sense of divine favour by positioning themselves as closer to God than their followers. This creates the perception that their words are infallible, much like the teachings of Jesus Christ, reinforcing dependence and unwavering devotion. While the intention behind these prophetic declarations may be to bring transformation, such practices risk distorting foundational theological truths and fostering reliance on charismatic leaders rather than encouraging a personal relationship with God grounded in scriptural truth.

Lack of Personal Commitment to Studying God's Word

The lack of personal commitment to studying God's word presents a significant cultural and theological challenge to the prophetic movement. Many believers,

weary from personal study demands, prefer to trust the revelations and interpretations of prophets about scripture. This leads to a superficial understanding of Christian doctrines and morality, hindering the depth of biblical knowledge necessary for discernment and spiritual maturity (Gwamna 2008:106). Part of this stems from the fact that in traditional African religious life, spirituality is often mediated through diviners and spiritual guardians rather than a sacred text (Abbas 2019a:178). As a result, there is a cultural trend where people seek divine wisdom from personal intermediaries instead of engaging with scripture directly. The consequences of this lack of personal interaction with the Bible are twofold. On one hand, it creates a dependency on prophetic figures, which can lead to spiritual stagnation. On the other hand, it makes individuals more vulnerable to manipulation (Tishken 2010:201). This increases the risk of subscribing to doctrines and practices that contradict the teachings of the Bible because the individual lacks the foundational knowledge to critically assess prophetic claims against scripture (Shoko and Chiwara 2013:134)

While the quest for prophecy in the lives of Christians in Africa may address cultural and existential needs, the absence of personal engagement with the Bible creates numerous theological and spiritual challenges. To address this issue, promoting a culture of personal scripture study as fundamental to Christian faith and practice is essential, fostering discernment, spiritual maturity, and doctrinal fidelity.

The Presence of Spiritual Forces as a Causative Factor of Evil

In many African prophetic movements, there is a prevalent belief that spiritual forces are the root cause of adversity and misfortune. Prophets often attribute the hardships faced by individuals or communities to influences such as demonic forces, witchcraft, and ancestral curses (Quayesi-Amakye 2011:298). This worldview, deeply rooted in traditional African cosmologies, suggests that human existence is spiritually defined and that spirituality must intervene in the struggles of daily life. This overemphasis on spiritual warfare and evil forces can create fear and foster a sense of dependency among followers (Maxey and Ozodo 2017:130). Prophets, in turn, exploit these fears by offering deliverance services and rituals, which often become emotionally and financially burdensome for their followers (Maxey and Ozodo 2017:130). For example, when believers attribute all their misfortunes to spiritual causes, they may

neglect personal responsibility and practical solutions, choosing instead to wait for supernatural interventions.

The most evident consequence of this belief system is the adoption of prophetic practices that encourage spiritual quests and divine intervention in addressing life's uncertainties. Prophetic movements in Africa have gained popularity by tapping into people's curiosity and desire to harness metaphysical powers to improve their destinies. Some prophetic expressions focus on predictive prophecies that promise deliverance from spiritual afflictions and adversities, often overshadowing the foundational authority of the Bible.

In light of African prophetic movements' cultural and spiritual aspects, it is essential to adopt a theological balance. This requires considering scriptural teachings with discernment, addressing spiritual and emotional needs. Doing so fosters spiritual growth through the actual truths of scripture, empowering believers to navigate their challenges with the discernment necessary to distinguish between genuine spiritual guidance and exploitative practices.

Exonerating Prophetic Declarations as Solutions to Life's Realities

The tendency to regard prophetic declarations as ultimate remedies for life's challenges is problematic for African Christianity. Prophets often offer simple solutions to complex issues, claiming instant healing, financial breakthroughs, and success without addressing the underlying causes of the problems or considering the sustainability of these solutions. While appealing in their immediacy, such approaches can lead to profound disillusionment among believers and sometimes trigger a faith crisis.

This reliance on prophetic speech assumes that such declarations are divine revelation, effectively sidelining the authority of God's written word (Geisler 2013:376). It can suggest that prophecies hold equal weight or even greater weight than scripture. The rise of numerous prophets as spiritual authorities further amplifies this notion, as their pronouncements are often treated as direct communications from a higher spiritual realm. Without critical examination or biblical analysis, these prophecies go unquestioned, potentially undermining the authority of scripture in guiding moral behaviour and

decision-making. This reliance fosters dependence on prophetic figures rather than encouraging personal spiritual discernment rooted in the word of God.

Manipulation and Control

In African prophetic ministries, manipulation and control present significant ethical and theological concerns. Some prophets assert authority not only to offer spiritual guidance but also to dictate individual choices and regulate the behaviour of their followers (Jon and James 2012:78). This often infringes on personal autonomy, as believers relinquish their judgement in favour of prophetic directives they believe originate from a divine source. The implications of such control extend beyond spiritual matters, affecting emotional and psychological well-being. Followers may feel trapped and dependent, leading to emotional and psychological abuse within the congregation, where dissenting opinions are suppressed and critical thinking discouraged in favour of blind obedience.

In addition, authoritarian control within prophetic ministries can create divisions within church communities, fostering dissent and eroding the respect and unity needed for collaboration. This hierarchical structure, where prophetic authority supersedes the collective decision-making of the community, can hinder healthy development, limit the diversity of thought, and degrade the quality of dialogue within the congregation.

Charismatic Celebrity Culture

A further deviation from biblical prophetic practice is the rise of charismatic celebrity culture within African prophetic movements, contrasting with the servant leadership model outlined in scripture. Prophets, by virtue of their public claims to divine connection, often amass large followings and media attention. This widespread attention centred on personal charisma and public acclaim can obscure the core biblical values of humility and selflessness exemplified by prophets in scripture. Elevating prophets to celebrity status creates the risk of idolisation, where their words and actions are unconditionally revered, and their authority remains unquestioned. This environment discourages critical engagement and accountability, leading to a new 'marketing paradigm' for prophetic teachings (Jon and James 2012:77).

Furthermore, the celebrity culture within prophetic movements can distort faith by prioritising outward displays of success and affirmation over inward spiritual maturity and faithful discipleship. This damages the communal values of mutual respect and accountability, weakening the capacity for accurate, Christ-like leadership, which should be characterised by humility and service. Addressing this issue requires confronting the inherent vices of the charismatic celebrity culture by reaffirming biblical principles of servanthood, humility, and accountability. By rooting prophetic ministry in these values, spiritual practices can be preserved, fostering a disciplined and genuine community rather than a platform for personal fame.

Countering Unhealthy Prophetic Practices in Africa

This section explores polemical approaches and responses that can assist the African church in navigating the complexities of unhealthy prophetic practices. It emphasises the importance of scriptural criteria for discerning prophecy, educating believers on biblical principles, and promoting sound doctrine and theological education. The aim is to equip the African church with the necessary tools to differentiate between true and false prophecy, safeguard the integrity of the Christian faith, and cultivate a community firmly grounded in the timeless truths of scripture.

Scriptural Guidelines for Discernment of Prophecy

The Bible is the primary medium through which God has chosen to guide Christians in faith and practice. As the final authority, the Bible must be the standard by which all prophecy is judged and discerned. It is a unique divine revelation, unparalleled in its capacity to truthfully predict the future, as God alone possesses complete knowledge of all things to come. Taken as a whole, the Bible offers an unmatched coherence and consistency, with its prophecies continually fulfilled. As John M. Frame asserts, ‘There is no authority higher than Scripture by which Scripture may be judged’ (2015:15). This underscores that the Bible is the ultimate authority in determining the truth, including evaluating the validity of prophetic statements.

Given this, prophetic ministry within the church must never undermine the pre-eminence of God’s word. While prophesying for the edification of believers is not inherently a threat to the faith, such prophecies must adhere

to biblical revelation's logical and theological boundaries. Prophecy is a means by which the rational nature of God's word is explained and emphasised. It is a hermeneutical exercise that must support and clarify the biblical text, not introduce new doctrines or revelations. This is why prophecy must be rigorously tested for authenticity. The apostle Paul urged in 1 Thessalonians 5:21, 'But test everything; hold fast what is good' (ESV) meaning that the litmus test for prophecy is its consistency with the truth revealed in scripture.

This 'spectacle of Scripture' offers a hermeneutical framework within which all prophecies must be evaluated by Christians (Erickson 1999:282). Specifically, prophecy in Africa must be examined in such a way that no aspect of it contradicts or is inconsistent with the word of God or with God's plan and revelation as expressed in his word, through his son Jesus Christ, and in the person and nature of the Holy Spirit. All prophecies should be tested against these standards. If a prophecy appears fulfilled but contradicts scripture, it must be rejected accordingly. The word of God, as written, is infallible; it does not err or contradict itself. Any prophecy that does not lead people to Christ or goes against the gospel message must be regarded as coming from lying spirits. Therefore, the Bible remains the unchangeable benchmark for Christian doctrine and practice – any deviation from this benchmark, whether by addition or subtraction, is heresy and manipulation. Many Christians in Africa have fallen prey to misguided prophecies precisely because they have neglected this critical tool for assessing prophecies in light of the inscripturated word of God.

Throughout the history of the church, figures such as St Augustine of Hippo, John Calvin, and Martin Luther – to name a few – have eloquently provided clear and decisive answers against claims of direct revelation that bypassed canonical scripture (Ramm 1984:164). They emphasised the inseparable unity of the word and the Spirit, viewing the scriptures as sufficient for all things necessary for salvation, with the Holy Spirit alone illuminating the word of God. As Millard J. Erickson articulates, Christian authority consists of the objective word, scripture, and the subjective word, inner illumination and conviction, enlightened by the Holy Spirit alone (1998:278). However, this dual authority highlights the inherent limitation of prophecy compared to the infallible written word of God. The written scriptures will always occupy the highest place as the definitive norm for faith and practice, a position that need not

assume equality or primacy with prophecy. This was evident in the apostolic witness of Paul and the early disciples of Christ, who identified the written word with the divine utterance.

Therefore, the role of a prophet is to convey the Bible without deviating to extraneous issues, applying its truths to human needs without straying from its core message. Bernard Ramm cites Calvin:

Scripture is Scripture because it is Scripture! The Church cannot make it something that it isn't, and if it is Scripture, the Church can't add anything to its certainty as Scripture. (Ramm 1984:164–165)

This statement reinforces the supremacy of the Bible over prophetic declarations, establishing it as the ultimate authority in all matters of faith and Christian living. God's revelation through prophecy does not contradict his self-revelation through the Bible. According to Julius D. Twongyeirwe, biblical exposition is the primary ministry or office of prophecy in the church today (2021:102). Thus, only scripture addresses humans' universal, eternal existential questions. Prophetic utterances should explain and confirm scriptural truth, ensuring their particular applications are neither obscure nor contradictory. True prophecy, therefore, is clear and accurate, and its solutions are based on biblical truth – not on aligning with people's desires.

While prophecy in the African context may often lead believers to bypass engagement with God's written word, presenting immediate solutions to existential crises, there should be a deeper engagement with the Bible to safeguard the church against such prophecies. This engagement can align prophetic gifts with the biblical text. Prophets should encourage individuals to read, study, and reflect on the Bible, fostering biblical literacy and, in turn, reducing vulnerability to deception. The criteria for judging prophecy against what is considered canonical are evident in scripture. As the Bible is divinely inspired, it provides a satisfactory framework within which all prophetic revelations must fit. The Bible's perfection and infallibility establish it as the ultimate standard to which all prophecies are held accountable (Geisler 2013:354–355). 2 Timothy 3:16–17 states,

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

This passage outlines scripture's multifaceted role in equipping believers to discern truth from error.

Consistency with the scriptural canon thus serves as the primary criterion for judging prophecy. Deuteronomy 18:20–22 provides an explicit instruction:

But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die. And if you say in your heart, 'How may we know the word that the Lord has not spoken?' – when a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the Lord has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him.

This passage underscores the necessity for prophecy to be confirmed by God's revelation and validated by actual events. It also highlights the crucial role of the Holy Spirit in discernment. John 16:13 states:

When he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.

Similarly, as the Holy Spirit is the supernatural interpreter of prophecy, his interpretation will always adhere to the boundaries of the revealed scriptural text.

Biblically Based Education Regarding Prophecy

Educating believers on the biblical standards of prophecy is crucial for fostering a well-informed Christian community. This education should integrate doctrine and practice, enabling believers to understand and apply prophecy within the

context of the church. The foundation of this educational process is doctrine, which systematically presents the nature, purpose, and structure of prophecy as established in the holy scriptures. A key aspect of this education is making clear distinctions between the roles and functions of Old Testament prophets and New Testament prophetic gifts.

In the Old Testament, prophets served as the primary mediators of God's revelation, speaking on his behalf. Their words carried authoritative weight, as many of their prophecies were later included in scripture, representing the very words of God (Hamon 1999:237). In contrast, New Testament prophecy operates within the framework of the completed canon of scripture. Ephesians 2:20 describes the church as built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone. This highlights the foundational role of early church prophecy. Contemporary prophetic messages must align with this understanding and remain subordinate to the closed canon (Agubama 2010:95).

Another vital component is the application of these doctrines. Christians must be taught how to test and evaluate prophetic words against the infallible word of God. As 1 Thessalonians 5:20–21 instructs: 'Do not despise prophecies. Test everything; hold fast what is good'. This guidance encourages believers to practise discernment in relation to prophecy. The testing process should include examining whether a prophecy aligns with scripture, its potential to edify the church and its verifiable accuracy. Acts 17:11 commends the Bereans for their diligence in examining the scriptures daily to verify the accuracy of Paul's words. This approach should serve as the model for today's believers when engaging with prophecy.

The Berean spirit should inspire a sense of curiosity in believers, encouraging them to become diligent students of the word. In such an environment, biblical literacy will be nurtured. Believers should internalise the depths of scripture in their hearts and minds, enabling them to discern true prophecies from false ones. Equipping believers with regular Bible reading, memorising key verses, and understanding the overall redemptive storyline that unifies the Bible is essential. Theological colleges and church seminars should prioritise biblical hermeneutics and systematic exegesis as foundational components of their curricula. This invaluable knowledge will empower believers, especially those

in prophetic ministry, to properly use the necessary tools to interpret scripture (Agubama 2010:95).

A select group of individuals in the church should teach believers the standards for biblical prophecy, with pastors and church leaders primarily entrusted with this responsibility. They are called to provide their congregations with sound doctrine, offering a clear standard by which truth can be distinguished from error (Ndyabahika 2004:202). Ephesians 4:11–12 affirms that Christ gave the church apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers to equip the saints for ministry and build up the body of Christ. Regular preaching and teaching must uphold the authority and sufficiency of scripture, clarify the nature of prophecy, and provide principles for discernment.

Theological educators and scholars also play a critical role in this process. Their academic expertise and commitment to classical theological study form the foundation for equipping believers with a well-rounded understanding of biblical prophecy. Through scholarly work, seminars, and appropriate courses, these scholars are indispensable to the church's efforts to ensure the proper functioning of prophetic ministry. Their academic contributions bridge the gap between theology and practical ministry, helping believers become well-informed and adequately equipped to discern prophetic utterances.

The Holy Spirit serves as the divine interpreter and enlightener of scripture, enabling believers to discern and apply the prophetic word rightly. This divine guidance protects the church from deception and false teachings, ensuring that true prophecy always aligns with the truths revealed in scripture. Consequently, this process should have a corporate focus. It is most effective to test prophetic words within the context of the faith community rather than in isolation. In this collective discernment, the wisdom of all those present is reflected, and the spiritual maturity of the body of Christ serves as a foundation for the careful and tactful examination of prophetic utterances for reliability. As 1 Corinthians 14:29 states, 'Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said'. Using communal discernment practices, prophetic gifts are held accountable, and the risk of mishandling or misinterpreting them through self-uniqueness is minimised.

Sound Doctrine and Theological Education

Promoting theological education is essential for teaching sound doctrine and maintaining the life of the church while accurately reflecting prophecy. The goal of this education is twofold: to preserve orthodoxy and to stimulate intellectual engagement with the church's faith so that it remains strong in truth despite cultural challenges. Jude 1:3 urges believers to 'contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints', emphasising the need to protect the foundational pillars of Christianity from distortion due to heresy or deviant doctrine. The church must be vigilant in safeguarding vital doctrines such as the Trinity, incarnation, atonement, and resurrection – all of which are central to Christian belief. These theological concepts are essential for the church's life and mission (Mbewe 2020:194–196). In line with the Nicene-Chalcedonian creeds, historical and doctrinal affirmations serve as dogmatic benchmarks of orthodoxy, helping the church uphold ideological purity and continuity.

Of all the aspects of theological education, the foremost priority is measuring healthy doctrine. Seminaries and Bible colleges must offer comprehensive curricula that cover biblical studies, church history, systematic theology, and practical ministry. These educational programmes should provide a solid foundation that equips pastors, teachers, and lay professionals with the tools they need to teach, defend, and uphold faith in honesty and truth (Enyinnaya 2011:73–74). 2 Timothy 2:15 encourages believers to

do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.

Theological education creates a crucible where well-trained Christian leaders can realistically engage with the challenges of contemporary ministry and defend the church's doctrinal integrity.

Integral to theological education is the harmonious integration of faith and reason. Christianity has always been a faith that welcomes intellectual investigation without becoming sceptical or overly analytical. The philosophical tradition of the church, exemplified by figures such as Augustine of Hippo, John Calvin, and Martin Luther, highlights the significance of deep

theological reflection and critical thinking (Abbas 2019b:13–15). As Erickson notes, Christian authority is found both in the objective word, scripture, and the subjective word, inner illumination by the Holy Spirit, affirming that faith and reason are united (1998:278). This perspective ensures that any theological inquiry remains rooted in divine revelation while constructively engaging with human rationality. Additionally, the lives of believers require the promotion of lifelong learning for the ongoing development of the church, both theologically and spiritually. This should not be viewed as a one-time accomplishment but an ongoing process extending beyond traditional schooling (Agubama 2010:95).

Churches can foster lifelong learning environments by offering adult education classes through small groups or by providing access to a wide range of theological resources – books, journals, and online courses – available in a searchable library. This approach encourages continuous exploration and reflection, enabling believers to deepen their understanding of the faith and apply it more effectively in their lives and ministries. Theological learning institutions play a significant role in this lifelong educational journey. These institutions can design curricula to maintain academic rigour while offering opportunities for advanced theological study throughout life, reaching a broad range of believers. For example, online platforms can make theological education more accessible, democratising access to essential resources and equipping lay leaders and congregants to engage deeply with theological ideas – not merely for reference but to wrestle with the material.

In this context, the church must cultivate an intellectual environment that encourages theological inquiry. This means challenging believers to ask difficult questions and seek answers through scripture, church tradition, and reason. Theological education should be dynamic, addressing contemporary issues while remaining grounded in the timeless truths of the Christian faith. This ensures that believers are well-equipped to address the moral, ethical, and spiritual questions of their time with theological depth and pastoral sensitivity. When promoting sound doctrine and theological education, it is essential to acknowledge the role of the Holy Spirit. As John 16:13 states, ‘But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth’. The Holy Spirit enlightens the mind to understand scripture and guides believers in understanding truth. Thus, theological education becomes an intellectual

pursuit and a spiritual journey that leads individuals to know God more deeply and faithfully.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has explored the interconnected relationship between Christian polemic and the quest for prophecy in African churches. The introduction began with a biblical perspective on prophecy, outlining its historical and theological foundations. This was followed by examining unhealthy prophetic practices in Africa, highlighting the harmful consequences of such practices. Effective polemical strategies and responses were then discussed. The review concludes by affirming the sufficiency of God's written word in revealing his will to Christians in Africa. While contemporary prophets in Africa may address the needs of their followers, reliance on prophetic messages at the expense of the Bible is misguided and should be avoided. From this discussion, some key recommendations emerge.

First, African Christians must dedicate quality time to daily Bible reading. To effectively test prophecy, believers must have a deep understanding of scripture. The Bible serves as the ultimate authority, equipping believers with the necessary tools to discern and evaluate prophetic claims. Prophecies must align with biblical truth and not contradict its foundational doctrines.

Second, there needs to be clarity on what is intrinsically Christian and culturally specific. This distinction will prevent African Christians from merging cultural or personal interpretations with biblical texts. It will also ensure that doctrines and prophetic messages are applied in their proper context, maintaining their purity.

Finally, while Christians should remain open to prophecy, they must ensure that prophetic messages align with the established teachings of the church and the broader Christian community. Prophecies must be consistent with the core teachings of the Bible and the historical understanding of the church, grounding the faith community in sound theological and scriptural principles.

While modern prophecy has a place in addressing the needs of believers, it should never replace or override the authority of the Bible. African Christians

must engage in disciplined study of scripture to distinguish truth from falsehood, preserving the integrity of the faith by aligning prophecy with biblical truth. By integrating these polemical strategies, the church can establish a solid framework that will help foster a biblically grounded Christian community, enabling it to respond to unhealthy prophetic practices effectively.

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