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Review

The Abandoned Gospel: Confronting Neo-Pentecostalism and the Prosperity Gospel in Sub-Saharan Africa

Barnes, Philip W., Bazil Bhasera, Matthews A. Ojo, Jack Rantho, Trevor Yoakum, and Mischeck Zulu (eds.), Maiden Publishing House, Lusaka: 2021, ISBN 9789966121448, 308pp.

Review by Dr Ryan Faber¹

Twenty-four authors from eleven African countries representing every region in sub-Saharan Africa contributed to *The Abandoned Gospel*. Eleven of them hold doctoral degrees. All are Baptist; all but one are male. The volume, the inaugural publication of AB316, a task force of the Africa Baptist Theological Education Network (www.abten.org) dedicated to protecting the integrity of the Gospel, “represents the beginning of a comprehensive and cooperative strategy to seek to protect the gospel and safeguard the Scriptures from false teachings across Africa” (Barnes et al. 2021:8). It is “the first phase of a multi-phase / multi-year education series that will address the dangers of Neo-Pentecostalism and the prosperity gospel in Africa” (Barnes et al. 2021:9) - which contributors to this volume consider “poisonous pills” (Barnes et al. 2021:2), “the clearest and most present danger to the evangelical faith in Africa today” (5), “dangerous and damning lies” (Barnes et al. 2021:8), “the number one problem that causes many to stumble in Africa” (Barnes et al. 2021:50), “anti-gospel and anti-truth” (Barnes et al. 2021:285).

The volume’s first three chapters recount the history and development of Neo-Pentecostalism and the prosperity gospel in Africa. Particular attention is given to the charismatic movements of the 1970s that produced independent churches led by self-styled apostles and prophets, as well as the influence of

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foreign - mostly American - televangelists and faith preachers. In these chapters - and throughout the volume - the terms Pentecostal, Charismatic, and Neo-Pentecostal are often used synonymously. Though the writer acknowledges “classical Pentecostal churches” that were planted by North American Pentecostal missionaries in the 1930s (Barnes et al. 2021:15), prior to the rise of Neo-Pentecostalism and the prosperity gospel in the 1970s, it is not clear whether these are including among those the volume considers poisonous pills.

The subsequent six chapters offer biblical responses to various aspects of Neo-Pentecostalism and prosperity teaching: spiritual powers; dreams and visions; illnesses, curses, and afflictions; speaking in tongues; prophecy; and miracles of healing and deliverance. Most of these chapters offer appropriate nuance. Can God speak through dreams and visions? Yes. But “God will never give guidance or a fresh revelation that stands in contrast to His eternal and authoritative Word” (Barnes et al. 2021:73). Can God work miracles? Absolutely. Indeed, the cry for miracles is “legitimate and biblically warranted” (Barnes et al. 2021:113). But “the display of God’s power in miracles of healing and deliverance is not normative in the Bible or in the Christian life” (Barnes et al. 2021:111). “What the Scripture offers us is not the promise of miracles but the promise of a Deliverer” (Barnes et al. 2021:112). Its hope is not for this life but for the life to come.

Are their demonic powers? Yes. But are they primarily responsible for human suffering and poverty? No. One contributor wisely notes: “How we understand the source of our illnesses and afflictions will inform the way in which we seek to remove the curses” (Barnes et al. 2021:79). “The problem with our cultural view [reflected in Neo-Pentecostalism] that our illnesses and afflictions are caused more immediately by angered spirits is that it undermines our capacity to seek solutions that are based on knowledge.” (Barnes et al. 2021:82) “Scripture leaves us the responsibility and freedom to address problems with multiple causes in mind” (Barnes et al. 2021:59).

The final fifteen chapters provide positive instructions for the church including, inter alia, engaging in holistic gospel ministry, establishing Scripture as the final authority, insisting on viable hermeneutics, emphasising the Christ of

Scripture, emphasising the sin nature, presenting salvation as reconciliation, instilling an evangelical DNA in the church, and developing balanced leaders.

A consistent theme in these chapters - and the entire volume - is the affinity of Neo-Pentecostalism, the prosperity gospel, and African Traditional Religion (ATR). Contributors claim that the “Neo-Pentecostal movement has opened a significant door at the back of the church and has let in the African traditional religions” (Barnes et al. 2021:45). “Neo-Pentecostalism is a new form of African Traditional Religion” (Barnes et al. 2021:258). The church is partly to blame: Lack of critical contextualisation “the primary factor” that has led to the embrace of Neo-Pentecostalism and the prosperity gospel (Barnes et al. 2021:153). For too long, “missionaries and pastors have presented a truncated gospel” (Barnes et al. 2021:119). “As a result, Africans have unanswered questions and unmet needs that have readily been answered by Neo-Pentecostalism and the prosperity gospel” (Barnes et al. 2021:162).

The church needs to embrace a “holistic gospel message,” “the conviction that Jesus Christ not only redeems souls but will also redeem the entire created order.” This is “the spiritual antidote to the Neo-Pentecostal contagion” (Barnes et al. 2021:120). Only holistic ministry - gospel proclamation and gospel demonstration - will “engage a key component of the ATR worldview upon which Neo-Pentecostalism thrives” (Barnes et al. 2021:126). The book’s positive encouragement for gospel ministry is its strength. There is much to appreciate, much from which one can learn, here.

The volume ends with a “historical comparison between pre-Reformation Europe and modern day Africa.” The writers conclude that “these are dark days for the church in Africa” (Barnes et al. 2021:285). “The situation of the church in Africa today requires a reformation” (Barnes et al. 2021:286). To accomplish this, the church must know and stand firm in the gospel, proclaim the gospel faithfully, and live a life worthy of the gospel.

The Abandoned Gospel is clearly written for an evangelical audience. Its authors hope that “evangelical theological institutions ... will take heed of the warnings in this book and will seek to prepare their students to confront and reject false teachings” (5). They also “pray that pastors will benefit from this book as they seek to shepherd the men and women God has given them”

(Barnes et al. 2021:6). The book offers clear biblical criticism of Neo-Pentecostal and prosperity gospel teachings. It also provides constructive advice for the church's life and ministry. Its intended audience - the already convinced - will likely find it a helpful.

But the book is not without its weaknesses. It lacks a clear, concise, and consistent definition of Neo-Pentecostalism and the prosperity gospel. Authors fail to distinguish between classical Pentecostal churches and Neo-Pentecostal churches. Some authors appear to be addressing the influence of Neo-Pentecostal doctrine and practice within Baptist churches; for others, Neo-Pentecostalism and the prosperity gospel seem to be external threats.

Many of its allegations about Neo-Pentecostalism and the prosperity gospel are unsubstantiated. This lack of evidence and failure to engage directly with Neo-Pentecostal sources suggests that the book is attacking a "straw man." Though they would certainly disagree with the book's conclusions, would Neo-Pentecostals and prosperity preachers think that they are represented fairly in this volume? This reviewer is skeptical.

But perhaps most seriously, the volume does not explain, defend, or justify some of its harshest statements about Neo-Pentecostalism and the prosperity gospel. Nowhere does the volume explain exactly how "Neo-Pentecostalism and the prosperity gospel ... are deadly to the life of individuals and churches, slanderous to the purity of Christ's bride, and dishonouring to our Creator God and Christ" (Barnes et al. 2021:2), nor how "the prevailing perspectives of Neo-Pentecostalism ... have not only failed the church, but ... have also damaged the image of the church, put to death the church's missional responsibility, destroyed spirituality in the church, and made the church a stench to the perishing world" (Barnes et al. 2021:209).

Such serious allegations should be made neither lightly nor without explanation. The already convinced may appreciate this book. It may strengthen the walls of Zion, but with its harsh tone and condemning statements will it win hearts and change minds. I don't think so. But isn't that what the reformation that this volume seeks requires?