


Competing with Christ? A critical Christological analysis of the reliance on Pentecostal prophets in Zimbabwe



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How can we make Christological sense of the Zimbabwean Pentecostal prophets' mediatory role? This article analyses the domineering and mediatory role of the Pentecostal prophets from a Christological perspective. The mediatory role of the Pentecostal prophets is riddled with competition against the mediatory role of Christ between God and humanity (1 Tm 2:5) as it tends to usurp Christ's role over the church. Instead of being channels that lead people to depend only on Christ for their spiritual security, prosperity Pentecostal prophets present themselves as super spiritual authorities who must be relied upon by the believers in addition to Christ. Prosperity Pentecostalism, also known as the gospel of wealth and health, emphasises that prosperity in material wealth and good health is an integral component of the Christian faith. As super spiritual authorities, Pentecostal prophets project themselves as uniquely anointed by God. This places them closer to God than other people and, in turn, they receive spiritual power and authority over other believers. The prophets mediate their presence in the lives of their followers through anointed objects such as their personal pictures, anointed oil and armbands. This article analyses the distorted views about Christ created by the reliance on the prophets. The article concludes by proposing steps that should be taken to empower Christians to dissuade themselves from reliance on such prophets.

Introduction

Although the existence and operations of prophets in Zimbabwe can be traced to the initial rise of pioneer African indigenous prophets such as Samuel Mutendi, Johanne Marange and Johanne Masowe in the early 1900s, contemporary Zimbabwe is 'under the grip of a "prophetic craze"' (Chitando, Gunda & Kügler 2013:10). The catalyst in the prophetic craze is prosperity Pentecostal¹ prophets distinguished by their gospel of wealth and health as well as their emphasis on material and health prosperity as an integral component of the Christian faith. They distinctively hold the title 'Men of God' which they use 'extensively and exclusively either through self-propagating or by accepting the title when it is issued by their followers' (Gunda & Machingura 2013:17). Masculinity dominates the Zimbabwean prophetic terrain (Biri & Togarasei 2013:82; Chitando & Biri 2016:75), because, although there are 'women of God', most of them are married to the 'men of God' and generally exercise their prophetic calling, not independently, but in tandem with, and within, the prophetic ministries of their prophet-husbands. Furthermore, paternalism and patriarchy seem to mark the prophetic turf, as the prophets are relied upon as authoritative father figures whose voices cannot be disobeyed by their followers. This is illustrated in the common practice of the followers to glue stickers on their private cars bearing the portraits of the prophets (in some cases, the prophet and his wife) with inscriptions such as: 'I am a child of the prophet' (Gunda & Machingura 2013:23). This demonstrates the serious extent to which some Christians are heavily reliant on the prophets.

While the Zimbabwean prophetic turf is dominated by popular prophetic figures such as Emmanuel Makandiwa, Walter Magaya and Urbert Angel, and international acclaimed figures like TB Joshua and Shepherd Bushiri, the number of Pentecostal prophets in the country is too high to quantify. Furthermore, new prophetic figures continually emerge into the scene. The prophetic movement is controversial, as some prophets have been charged in the courts for abusing their followers of which the most common charges are rape and fraud (Chingarande 2016; Dube 2017; The Herald 2017; Zanamwe 2016). Interestingly, many people continue to fall victim to unscrupulous prophets and consult them despite the wide publicity of such cases. This demonstrates that many people are in desperate need of their services. The desperation is so high that many people are willing to take risks despite of many reported cases of abuse by prophets.

1. A key distinction between prosperity and classical Pentecostals is the following: whereas classical or traditional Pentecostals focus on holiness, self-denial and hold to a suspicion of the 'things of this world', prosperity Pentecostals affirm material wealth and good health as spiritual rights to be possessed and enjoyed by all true believers (Martin 2008:14; Maxwell 2006:9).

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Various scholars attribute the growing dominance of Pentecostal prophets to the prevailing poor socio-economic and political contexts in Zimbabwe that cause many desperate people to rely on the miraculous intervention of prophets (Biri & Togarasei 2013; Chitando et al. 2013; Chitando & Biri 2016; Magezi & Manzanga 2016; Maxwell 2006; Togarasei 2005). This means that prophetic Pentecostalism is a 'coping mechanism in the poverty and suffering context of Zimbabwe [and Africa]' (Magezi & Manzanga 2016:1).

However, despite many demonstrable merits in functioning as a coping mechanism, prophetic Pentecostalism promotes a serious overreliance on the prophets that turns them into mediators of God's blessings to their followers. This article investigates this domineering and mediatory role of the Pentecostal prophets from a Christological perspective, because this often leads to competition with the mediatory role of Christ between God and humanity (1 Tm 2:5). Indeed, the Pentecostal prophets under review in this article also preach the gospel of material and health prosperity. However, because the focus of this article is on their mediatory role as channels of God's blessings and not their message of prosperity, a detailed analysis of the prosperity gospel falls outside the scope of this article.² This article will argue that the mediatory role of the prophets usurps Christ's mediatory role over the church, because it creates a parallel structure through which both Christ and the prophets are needed as channels of God's blessings. Rather than channels that lead people to depend on Christ only for their spiritual security and blessings, Pentecostal prophets impose themselves as super spiritual authorities who must be relied upon by the believers in addition to Christ. The belief that they are uniquely anointed by God often grants them super spiritual status which implies that they are considered to be closer to God than all other believers. Eventually, the ministry of Pentecostal prophets is filled with the contradiction of proclaiming faith in God as a requirement for blessing and healing, and yet, in the very next breath, an emphasis is laid on the need to seek the real personal presence of the anointed men of God. This mixed message ends up either undermining personal faith in God and individual reliance on God or creating a personal faith and reliance on God that must be augmented by a reliance and dependence on the input of the prophets. It is argued that this nature of mediatory role by prosperity Pentecostal prophets threatens the Christological integrity of African Christianity, because it does not proclaim absolute and exclusive reliance on Christ. Therefore, this article reflects on the following basic question: How do prosperity Pentecostal prophets play a mediatory role and what Christological problems are created by the undergirding theology of this mediatory role?

The nature of the reliance on the mediation of Pentecostal prophets

It is important to begin by describing how Pentecostal prophets' mediatory role overshadows Christ's mediatory

²Some useful analyses of the prosperity gospel in Africa have been provided by Balcomb (2007); Gifford (1993:146–189; 1998; 2004); Haynes (2012); Horn (1989); Marshall (2009); Martin (2008); Wariboko (2012).

role between God and humanity resulting into believers placing greater dependence on the prophets than on Christ.

Channels of encountering God

Pentecostal prophets present themselves as so closely connected to God that they function as channels of encountering the presence of God. This is indicated in the words of the Archbishop Ezekiel Guti of the Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa (ZAOGA) recorded by Biri (2012) as follows:

[H]ow many of you dreamt me [sic] when they had challenges? It is not me but God [who] sends angels to you, that personify themselves as me. But they will be angels to deliver you. Then your problems will be gone! (p. 6)

In this statement Guti portrays himself as so intimately connected to God that he can personify the angels sent by God to troubled Christians. By these words attributed to him, Guti is a channel of encountering God. In prophetic Pentecostalism, the unique calling and anointing of prophets qualifies them to bridge the chasm between God and ordinary human beings.

News reports in Zimbabwe have shown the desperate measures taken by many people to gain access to the presence of Pentecostal prophets. In one unfortunate incident, the stampede for a close personal encounter with the prophets resulted in several deaths and injuries (Bulawayo24News 2011; News24 2014). In another reported incident, Prophet Uebert Angel had to abandon his meal at a popular fast-food outlet in Gweru as a large crowd jostled to be touched by him (The Chronicle 2012). A lucky man who managed to shake Prophet Angel's hand was quoted celebrating: 'Thank God, I am now a new man. I am blessed to have been greeted by this great man of God' (The Chronicle 2012). These reported incidents demonstrate that people yearn for personal proximity to the prophet, because it is viewed as closeness to God.

In some cases, as Biri (2012:5) shows in an incident where the portrait of Ezekiel Guti was used to drive out a stubborn demon that refused to be exorcised, various paraphernalia associated with the prophet is considered to have healing powers. This shows that Pentecostal prophets either directly act as agents of encountering God's redemptive presence or are treated as such channels by their followers. The serious problem in treating prophets as channels of encountering God is that people end up depending more on the prophets and their anointed paraphernalia than on God. The stampedes for personal access to the prophets indicate a greater dependence on the prophets than on God. The danger is that people seem more interested in the personal presence of the prophet than in working on developing a personal reliance on God.

Channels of receiving God's blessings

Interrelated to the above point is that Pentecostal prophets are channels through which God's blessings are transmitted

to the seeking believers. Therefore, many Christians feel they need the mediation of the prophet to experience God's blessings. One of Zimbabwe's prominent Pentecostal prophets, Uebert Angel (2013), announces:

You see there is a time you have to understand that there are men of God who are good ground for every seed. When you find them they will be able to sustain every seed, sown by their anointing. These are Men of God with great anointing and you don't have to guess who they are. Look at their substance. What do they have? Do they have plenty or less? What achievements do they possess? What is the impact they have made on earth? (pp. 86–87)

The content of Angel's message implies that God has a 'get rich quick scheme' for his people that can only be accessed through a few prophets chosen and anointed by God. This means that the uniquely anointed prophets are the 'fertile soil' upon which Christians who want a fast way to material wealth must sow their 'seeds'³, which is their investment of faith. In this light, the prophets are viewed as mediators of God's blessings to the people by virtue of possessing unrivalled spiritual powers to heal and to bless materially (Gunda & Machingura 2013:24). As mediators of God's therapeutic blessings, African Pentecostal prophets proclaim that when people heed God's voice and make financial and material contributions to them their suffering will end and blessings will flow (Biri & Togarasei 2013:83). Zimbabwe has witnessed many controversial practices from Pentecostal prophets acting as conduits to God's blessings, such as the case where Prophet Makandiwa's spokesperson, Pastor Prime Kufa, was reported to have encouraged people to prepare for a blessed 2017 by sowing 'seed' (money ranging between \$77, \$770, \$7700 and \$77 000 (The Sunday Mail 2017). In this reported incident, the prophet is clearly emerging as a channel towards God's blessings. The essence of the message is that when the prophet receives the money ('seed') he will open the door that leads to God's blessings. This is tantamount to abuse and even commercialisation of religion. Apart from the abuse, they are forced to develop an affinity towards the prophet – who is a conduit towards blessedness – instead of empowering people to develop a closer walk with God.

Possessing the authority of God

Flowing directly from the above point is the highly authoritative nature of the Pentecostal prophets deriving from their claim that they are uniquely called and anointed by God. As Gunda and Machingura (2013:21) explain: Pentecostal prophets are viewed 'as descendants of the line of the specially chosen few who stood before God and who shared in God's authority'. This status of being the chosen and anointed by God places them in a unique relationship and role between God and humanity that grants them absolute authoritative power over their followers. This often turns Pentecostal prophets into quasi-divine beings who

3.'Sowing a seed' is a popular concept in prosperity Pentecostal churches, referring to the giving of monetary and property offerings to the prophets as an act of planting a seed in faith anticipating that God will bless the giver and cause what has been given to the prophets to return to the giver in multiplied form.

possess the authority of God resulting in many Christians fearing to question their words and actions. Hence, many Christians unquestioningly submit to the prophets.

However, Christians' fearful submission to Pentecostal prophets is not a uniquely Zimbabwean problem. The journalist, Ntando Makhubu (2016), shows some Christians in South Africa submitting to the prophets' instructions to be sprayed by insecticide, to drink toxic substances like petrol and antiseptics liquids, to eat grass and snakes and even allow the prophets to drive over them. The abusive nature of these events has attracted the intervention of the South African Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities who have objected to the commercialisation of religion and the abuse of people's belief systems (CRL Rights Commission 2016:3, 7–8). These events demonstrate that fear of the authoritative nature of Pentecostal prophets and the consequent fearful submission to them may be a widespread problem in the church in Africa. The ease with which many African Christians readily submit themselves to the authority of the prophets may be attributed to the African background of highly authoritative nature of the words of African Traditional Religion (ATR) practitioners such as *izinyaga* [traditional healers] and *izangoma* [diviners]: to disobey the words of spiritual practitioners is tantamount to disobeying one's ancestors who are guardians of the living descendants.

Some Pentecostal believers assert and defend the absolute authority of their prophets. For example, a member of Prophet Makandiwa's church, Takura Rukwati (2012), wrote an article entitled 'Prophets Mustn't Be Questioned' in the Zimbabwean daily newspaper *The Herald*. Rukwati (2012) asserted: 'A prophet is a man⁴ of insight to the will and purposes of God.' Substantiating how the prophet has insight into God's will and purposes, Rukwati (2012) declared:

[A] prophet is a man who seats [*sic*] in the cabinet with the Almighty and can hear the discussion of heaven and can bring them to men ... Our father in the Lord, Prophet Emmanuel Makandiwa, in United Family International Church, is a typical example of a prophet of that calibre whom the Lord has given to us as a gift ... The Prophets therefore are said to be among members that seat [*sic*] in the council of God ... The prophets are the eyes and minds of God, members of the heavenly cabinet. That is why there is always a violent reaction from the heavens when his prophets are touched, embarrassed, harassed, persecuted or killed. Touching a prophet is a shortcut to the grave according to Psalms 105:14–15, graves of sicknesses, poverty, misfortunes, even spiritual and physical death.

In view of the high regard of the Bible as supreme authority among Christians in Zimbabwe (Gunda 2012:31; 2015:24–25), it is peculiar that Rukwati presents Prophet Makandiwa as deriving his insights into the will and purposes of God by sitting in God's heavenly council, and not from a deeper understanding of the Scriptures. The resultant image of the prophet is of an infallible individual that is uniquely closely

4.It is interesting to observe that despite an acknowledgement (although very brief) of Prophet Makandiwa's wife, Prophetess Ruth Makandiwa, the article is written with a heavy masculine tone.

connected to God and that his words and actions should actually just be accepted as God's words. In this perspective, Pentecostal prophets possess the power of God – not in the sense of the radical and transformative aspects of their insightful preaching or ministry. Rather, they are viewed as intrinsically endowed with God's authority that places them above biblical authority. In essence, the prophet is the conduit through which God's authority is extended to the believer. Sadly, this creates opportunities for prophets to abuse their followers, because they are feared as beyond questioning.

The Pentecostal prophet's prey on African spiritual insecurity

Viewed from an ATR perspective, it can be argued that Pentecostal prophets take advantage of the high sense of spiritual insecurity in African believers. This section will discuss the high sense of fear and insecurity in the ATR and how Pentecostal prophets prey on this sense of spiritual vulnerability among African Christians.

The factor of fear in Zimbabwean Pentecostalism

Observably, fear dominates Pentecostalism in Zimbabwe. Prophetic Pentecostal Christianity emphasises the Christians' vulnerability to Satan and his evil malevolent forces. This can be seen in the following incident recorded by Biri (2012):

In spite of the claims of being 'born-again' and undergoing several deliverance sessions, many members still point to witchcraft activities, haunted by evil spirits even within the church. In one incident, a pastor scolded a teenage girl: 'You like your demon of witchcraft, why is it refusing to go? You are failing to maintain your deliverance I am leaving you like that'. (p. 3)

This recorded incident shows that born again Pentecostal believers live in danger of being repossessed or re-haunted by the evil spirits from which they have been delivered. In the noted example, Pentecostals express a fear of bondage to evil spirits. There is heightened fear of vulnerability to acts of witchcraft among Zimbabwean Pentecostals, particularly in the form of Satanism (Biri & Togarasei 2013:85). Beyond Zimbabwe, Ezenweke (2013:101) observes that Nigerian Pentecostal home movies (which have large following across Africa) contain an 'excessive emphasis on occult, demonic influence and wrath of angry God'. Furthermore, the dominance of fear is demonstrated by the fact that deliverance from bondage from evil spirits is a prominent feature in the worship services of Pentecostal prophetic churches (Maxwell 1998:360–361) that can be witnessed in the daily televised services of prophets like TB Joshua of Nigeria. Mass media in Zimbabwe has, among many other things, reported on manifestations of Satanism in schools (DailyNews 2015; The Chronicle 2017) and evils spirits called 'spiritual spouses' that are believed to sexually harass people (Chidavaenzi 2015). Prophet Uebert Angel's book *Defeating the demon of poverty* (2016) treats poverty as a demon. This shows that prophetic Pentecostalism is a religion of fear. These fears

raise the profile of Pentecostal prophets, as they are relied upon as security agents against evil forces. It is further observed that these are the same fears that have been known to prompt mainline mission Christians into religious syncretism of placing 'one foot' in the church while retaining the other in the ATR (Maimela 1991:9; Mugabe 1999:240).

The adoption and incorporation of African traditional religious worldview

A critical analysis of the prophetic Pentecostalism in Zimbabwe reveals an adoption and incorporation of the ATR worldview of spiritual security. Biri's study of Zimbabwean Pentecostalism (2012) highlights the serious influence of the ATR beliefs and practices on some Zimbabwean Pentecostal churches. Biri (2012:10) observes that Zimbabwean Pentecostals ironically reject the ATR practices and condemn them as belonging to darkness, and yet still maintain a religious outlook and practice embedded in the ATR worldview. In essence the Pentecostals condemn the ATR and supposedly abandon it, but adopt a religious life constructed not in biblical categories, but in the ATR categories that included spiritual vulnerability and fear of evil spiritual powers.

Vulnerability to evil spiritual powers is a strong notion in the ATR (Bhebhe 2013:52). According to Mbiti (1969:99), 'African peoples are much aware of evil in the world and in various ways they endeavour to fight it'. In essence, African traditionalists 'perceive and approach life like a hunted animal under the watchful eye of a hunter waiting an opportune moment to take a decisive pounce' (Banda 2005:23). The ATR feared evil powers that permeate human existence include evil spirits that function independently, acts of witchcraft and sorcery commissioned by envious and jealous people or ones' enemies, avenging spirits called *uzimu* (in Ndebele) or *ngozi* (in Shona), and severe disciplinary actions by one's ancestors (Amanze 1998:14; Banda 2005:23; Magezi & Myambo 2011:164–166; Nyathi 2001:121). Therefore, as Bhebhe (2013:53–56) shows, in the ATR dichotomous worldview religious life focuses on winning the protective favour of the good spirits that include one's ancestral spirits and wading away the harmful evil spirits. Naturally, this causes a heavy reliance on the mediation of the ancestral spirits, traditional practitioners and objects conferred with magical power.

The excessive reliance on prophets in Zimbabwean Pentecostalism resembles what is common in the ATR. Prophetic Pentecostals place their faith in prophets who, in similar fashion as in the ATR, play a mediatory role and prescribe things with magical value such as the anointed oil, anointed clothes and various paraphernalia as defence mechanism from evil forces. Pentecostal Christians address their insecurity by placing confidence in the prophets who are considered the mighty anointed of God, but who operate in near similar fashion as the ATR healers (Biri 2012:2). This shows serious contradictions and inconsistencies in the Pentecostal understanding of Christian conversion. It would

be expected that conversion is yielding to the lordship of Jesus Christ and confidence in his shepherding power – he who victoriously conquered death and the devil’s evil kingdom. Yet, prophetic Pentecostals conversion often does not translate into abandoning the ATR worldview dominated by the fear of malevolent spirits and adopting a new worldview informed by and based on Christ’s victory over all evil forces, and thus induce a dependence on Christ for protection from the feared evil powers.

Furthermore, like in the ATR, prophetic Pentecostalism approaches God from an appeasement perspective rather than worshipping and glorifying him. Tithes, seed offerings and intense religious activities function as means of securing blessings and protection from malevolent powers God’s presence and actions are seen as regulated by the believer’s religious activity. This reflects a superstitious view of God, found in the ATR, where God is ‘sometimes believed to be the Lord of magic, and Himself subject to its influence, His true image is blurred by exaggerated anthropomorphism’ (Nyamiti 1997:58). Nyamiti (1997:58) points out that the outcome of this view of God is ‘confusion, pessimism, mistrust and a feeling of insecurity’. For, rather than a religion of freedom, what results is a religion of fear. In her tribute to the late ATR lecturer, Chirevo Kwenda, Melissa Browning (2013) records that he classified the ATR as ‘deal-making’. In other words, the ATR has ‘high utility value’ (Nyathi 2001:6). This means that ‘[e]nergy in the religious effort is channelled towards warding off the evil effects of the negative side, that is the evil ancestral spirits and their mediums’ (Nyathi 2001:6). Therefore, the prompting for religious ceremonies and rituals in the ATR does not seem to be a reverence for God, but a quest for security of life, maintenance of peace and the defence for prosperity (Banda 2005:24; Imasogie 1985:226; Mbiti 1969:196). Through critical lenses, one will find the same principle in prophetic Pentecostalism, as worship of God seems to be not necessarily out of reverence and awe to his majesty, but as a protective mechanism against the malevolent forces that bring destruction in one’s life. Like in the ATR, the prophets have emerged as mediators between the physical and spiritual world, essentially as mediators of God’s power needed by the believer to be victorious over all threats and impediments to a successful existence in this present life.

The adoption of the African indigenous prophets systems

Apparently, Zimbabwean Pentecostalism shares some traits of African indigenous prophets who broke away from mainline mission Christianity in protest due to its lack of relevance to the African context (Amanze 1998:62–82).⁵ The African indigenous prophets addressed the foreign European nature of Christianity by adopting and creatively Christianising the ATR elements. It is as if the ATR elements

5. Daneel (1987:100) finds no evidence to support the idea that the Shona AIC were a protest movement against mission Christianity. However, considering that some Africans who joined the Shona AICs were products of mission school education where some had undergone catechism classes, their turning to AICs was tantamount to protest, because, in doing so, these Africans were turning against religious heritage received in mission schools (Daneel 1987:99–100).

were baptised into Christianity. Daneel (1987:100) comes to the conclusion that the Shona African Initiated Churches (AIC) ‘real attraction for members and growth derive from their original, creative attempts to relate the good news of the gospel in a meaningful and symbolically intelligible way to the innermost needs of Africa’. Often, the AIC prophets retained the main the ATR structures in recreated Christianised form. For instance, as Daneel (1977:186–187) highlights, Bishop Samuel Mutendi banned his followers from participating in the ATR rain ceremonies conducted at the Njelele shrine in Matopos and, in its place, instituted a parallel rain ceremony, *Ungano yembewu* [seed conference], at the church’s headquarters that kept similar aspects of the ATR rituals, but in Christianised form. This highlights the extent to which the AICs ‘have modelled their practices on traditional patterns’ (Daneel 1977:189). The concept of the ceremony to pray for the rains and bless the seed to be planted was retained, but the prophetic bishop replaced the priestly and mediatory role of the ATR priests and spirit mediums. The prophet’s headquarters replaced the Matojeni (Njelele) shrine and became the centre of all the major Christianised rituals.

In the AIC perspective the prophetic leader function as a ‘mediator’ ‘whose representative function goes far beyond the biblical concept of intercession and who interferes with the individual’s free access to the presence of God’ (Daneel 1988:23–24). This resulted in a greater reliance on the prophetic leader by the members as a channel to God (Daneel 1988:109–110).⁶ The same approach is seen among Pentecostal prophets who are constantly bombarded with requests for prayers in a manner that suggests they are the only effective channel to the throne of God. Although it is undisputable that Pentecostal prophets do indeed preach Jesus Christ as the One who has victoriously demolished Satan and his evil kingdom, they ultimately contradict the zeal with which they make this proclamation by continuously holding onto a worldview dominated by fears and associated with witchcraft and harmful evil powers, the very same fear-filled worldview that dominates African traditionalists. Overall, prophetic Pentecostalism is challenged to transform its worldview according to the victorious reign of the resurrected Christ.

A Christological evaluation of the mediatory role of Pentecostal prophets

Christologically evaluated, the mediatory role played by the prophets gives them the charge of competing with Christ and usurping his mediatory role in the lives of the believers. In order to entirely understand this phenomenon, the following facets are illustrated.

Proclaiming Christ as Lord while promoting practical atheism

Indubitably, the Pentecostal prophets do indeed proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. Most Pentecostal church

6. For a detailed discussion of the mediatory function of AIC prophets, see Daneel (1988:23–24, 109–117).

auditoriums are adorned with banners inscribed with some form of affirmation of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. The healings and deliverances are conducted in Jesus Christ's name as he is proclaimed redeemer and liberator. The prophets generally project themselves as in service of Christ.

However, as already indicated in the preceding discussion, the prophets portray themselves to their believers in a manner that creates parallel soteriological structures that ultimately undermines Christ's liberating, securing and empowering lordship on the believer. This undermines Christ's deity and breeds practical atheism among prophetic Pentecostal believers. By practical atheism is meant that while Pentecostal Christians cognitively believe in the power of Christ, they heavily rely on prophets and their prescriptions as if Christ does not exist at all or is powerless to sufficiently help them. In other words, while proclaiming the Lordship of Christ, the Pentecostal prophets play a mediatory role in the lives of their followers that ends up undermining Christ's mediatory role. The prophets give much greater prominence to their role in the lives of the Christians to such an extent that they create a spiritual parallel structure where Christ and the prophets eventually compete for controlling the believer.

Christ, as presented by the Pentecostal prophet, lacks sovereign power and independence, because he is either inadequate to stand alone or is subject to the aid of magical charms in the form of anointed water and seeded offerings – to name but a few. Instead of a divine and omniscient Jesus Christ with a sovereign will who searches the intentions of all human beings, 'the Jesus of Pentecostal prophets' can be manipulated through anointed objects and rich tithes and offerings. Rather than causing God to work in one's life by prayer and faithful dependence on him, Pentecostal prophets prescribe various anointed paraphernalia and sacrificial actions to sway God to work in one's favour. When prophets implement structures and solutions that usurp God's unique role among Christians as they place their confidence in anointed water, anointed armbands and anointed oil given by the prophet, 'recourse to God [*becomes*] rather rare, and in most cases the general attitude is almost "practical atheism"' (Nyamiti 1997:58). Ultimately, Christ ends up being seen as powerless and needing the back-up of the prophets with their anointed charms. The end result is a Christ who has no sovereign control over the affairs of the world and therefore needs the mediatory assistance of the anointed prophets.

Furthermore, the emerging 'Christ' from Pentecostal prophets in Zimbabwe is rather partial and subject to religious manipulation. The above-noted concern of Nyamiti (1997:58) about the superstitious view of God in the ATR as 'the Lord of magic, and Himself subject to its influence' is also applicable to this discussion. Rather than sovereignly gracious, independent and impartial, the Christ in Pentecostal prophetic churches appears as the Lord of anointed objects and seems subject to their influence. This further implies that his special blessings are only reserved for those who sow their valuable incomes and makes him a partial Christ that is

far from the Saviour who opts for the poor as demonstrated in passages such as Matthew 25.

Ultimately, the mediatory role of Christ is undermined as Christians end up depending on the miraculous and piety of the prophet for all of their spiritual needs and security. Furthermore, as already pointed out, the matrix of faith among Pentecostal prophets instils a dependence on magical manipulation of Christ rather than a dependence on faith in Christ's gracious acceptance of the Christian. Instead of yielding to Christ's redemptive work on the cross, the Christians undertake efforts of appeasing Christ by religious activities and sacrificial giving of material gifts. Therefore, a major Christological challenge in prophetic Pentecostalism is the proclamation of Christ as Lord while pursuing religious practices that ironically promote practical life that is not dependent on him.

Proclaiming Christ as Saviour while undermining his soteriological work

The ripple effect of the above-noted problem is the undermining of Christ's soteriological work. Indeed, we have already affirmed that Pentecostal prophets do undeniably proclaim Christ as the Lord and Saviour. However, these prophets impose themselves in the lives of their followers in a manner that ultimately contradicts and undermines the Lordship and soteriological work of Christ in the lives of the believers by prescribing, to desperate believers, items such as anointed oil (Rupapa & Shumba 2014), anointed regalia branded with their names, anointed branded bottled water (Chaya 2017), anointed cucumbers (Chaya 2016), anointed pens for exams (Bulla 2016), anointed condoms (Mbanje 2015) and even spraying insecticides. When believers have to undertake pilgrimage to the prophets' shrines to be healed, instead of praying and even fasting in dependence to Christ only as the healer of all illnesses, the end result is the undermining of Christ's soteriological work. Ultimately Christ's soteriological prominence in the troubled believer is overshadowed and usurped by the prophet. It gives the impression that one can just rely on the prophet for their salvation and healing. It also means that the prophet performs Christ's soteriological functions. This imposes an ATR framework where trust can be indirectly given to God by directly trusting the ancestors. This prompts the veneration of the prophets as saviours and securers of the Christian. The already noted example from Biri (2012:3) highlights a dependence on the pastor that undermined the soteriological work of Christ. It is disturbing to note that the delivered girl was left undisciplined to grow in her relationship with Christ so that she would not constantly depend on her pastor. In some cases, people unreasonably submit to the authority of Pentecostal prophets in fear that they will be condemned and abandoned to fight their battles alone. In such cases the prophets force themselves on their followers and undermine the soteriological work of Christ. Seemingly, falling out of favour with the prophet can withhold the soteriological work of Christ to the believer. This has resulted in serious abuse of power by Pentecostals

prophets who use (false) prophetic predictions to manipulate people to submit to their authority and taking advantage of them materially and even sexually (Chingarande 2016; Dube 2017; The Herald 2017; Zanamwe 2016). It seems that once doubt has been cast on the sufficiency of Christ as the only Saviour in all situations, believers easily fall prey to manipulation and abuse by the prophets.

The unreasonable validation and promotion of the African Traditional Religious view of spiritual insecurity

As pointed out already, fear is a dominating factor in the ATR (Bhebhe 2013:52–74). Instead of challenging the ATR worldview of spiritual insecurity, Pentecostal prophets affirm it as true and leave it unchallenged and untransformed by Christ's victory on the cross. Instead of challenging the superstitious tendencies in the ATR, Pentecostal prophets authenticate them as real. A significant problem related to practical atheism in Africa is the notion of 'limited cosmic good' (Van Rooy 1999:238). This means that the good spiritual power – the cosmic vital source of life – that causes good things to happen in an individual is limited and therefore individuals must make all attempts necessary to possess, control and deploy it to their exclusive advantage (Van Rooy 1999:238). The use of magical charms, religious activities and good works are ways of maintaining the limited cosmic good to oneself and manipulating it to exclusively bless the concerned individual. This effectively means manipulating it to withhold blessings from other people so that all the blessings remain with the concerned individual. In African traditional life, witchcraft essentially blocks other people from accessing this vital cosmic source of life. Prophetic Pentecostalism in Zimbabwe displays signs of operating under the notion of limited cosmic good.

The ATR view of spiritual insecurity must be challenged in accordance to Christ's mission and work to save and bless the believers. Christ must not be compared to some form of limited magical cosmic power that can run out or be manipulated to work against his will, holiness and goodness. It is true that the devil's kingdom of darkness is powerful and should not be taken lightly. However, it must be noted that in light of the mightiness of Christ, who conquered death by his resurrection and who now reigns supremely on the right hand of the Father, has power over kingdoms of darkness and prophets.

Towards a framework of Christological security that addresses reliance on the mediation of Pentecostal prophets

How should Christ's provision of spiritual security be understood in order to instil, among African Christians, a certain reliance on Christ that replaces the reliance on the mediation of Pentecostal prophets?

Teaching African Christians to recognise the adequacy of Christ to their unique African context

Pentecostal prophets thrive on the African Christian's lack of confidence in the sufficiency and relevance of Christ in their unique African context. To a large extent, the prominence of Pentecostal prophets in Africa is a manifestation of the old Christological problem of the Western white foreignness and remoteness of Jesus Christ in Africa that left him irrelevant to the unique contextual of felt needs (Banda 2005:5–6; Magezi & Magezi 2017:1–2; Taylor 1963:16). This shows that even before the arrival of Pentecostal prophets with their mediatory role, the problem of Christological insecurity had already become rampant in African Christianity, as many African Christians wrestled with Christ's relevance to their African identity. However, rather than solve the problem, Pentecostal prophets have exacerbated and complicated it. Effectively, the Pentecostal prophets create a distance between believers and Christ, and then set themselves as the only effective priests that can bridge the gap between Christ and humanity. The perennial problematic Christological issue in Africa continues to be the one posed by Taylor (1963:16) several decades ago: 'But if Christ were to appear as the answer to the questions that Africans are asking, what would he look like?' The answer to this question is that an appropriate Christ in Africa is one that would be reachable to Africans, be interested in the unique African problems and adequately address these unique African fears. Such a Christ must be adequately present in several situational crises of the African life, birth, puberty, marriage, illness and death, politics and economics (Appiah-Kubi 1997:65).

Therefore, an important practical step towards addressing the reliance on the mediatory role of the Pentecostal prophets is presenting biblical and theological knowledge that empowers Christians to be connected to Jesus Christ as personal Lord and Saviour who is relevant to their unique African context. Through appropriate biblical and theological studies Christians must discover that Jesus Christ is not an abstract power that can be manipulated through certain specially anointed prophets. Rather, Christ is a personal Saviour, with whom all Christians can relate in personal terms. Bediako (1994) says:

Jesus Christ is unique not because he stands apart from us; rather he is unique because no one has identified so profoundly with the human predicament as he has done, in order to transform it. The uniqueness of Jesus Christ is rooted in this radical and, direct significance for *every* human and *every* human context and *every* human culture. (p. 114)

In light of Bediako's statement, Pentecostal Christians must be helped to be grounded in Jesus as a personal being who understands their African uniqueness.

In concert, Imasogie (1985) affirms the relevance of Christ to the African context as follows:

Christ must be proclaimed as the cosmic Lord who is more than able to supply all human needs within the context of each

individual. Christ's saving concern must be seen as transcending narrow spiritual salvation to include liberation from human oppression and the reconciliation of [hu]man[ity] to God, to fellow humans, and to nature. Given the traditional religious and the African worldview ... any apologetic endeavour that does not present Christ, as being able to respond to all areas of human experience cannot command a total commitment of the African who has a holistic view of reality. (p. 228)

Imasogie highlights that Christ is interested in the whole spectrum of African life. If Christ is keenly interested in the African affairs, prophetic Pentecostals must be helped to seek a personal relationship with Christ through true personal faith instead of trying to invoke and manipulate Christ's presence and attention by anointed objects from the prophets. This means that Pentecostal Christians must be taught to realise the essence and implications of important biblical statements such as the Apostle Paul's declaration that: 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself' (2 Cor 5:19) which show that a relationship with Christ ultimately leads to a personal relationship with triune God. Prophetic Pentecostal believers must be helped to realise that the triune God interacts with all classes of society in their unique cultural contexts, including the Africans. The incarnation means that it is the triune God that secures the believer and is present and at work in every aspect of the believer's life (Banda 2005:46–48). Therefore, rather than pursue Pentecostal prophets, African Christians should pursue Christ as the only perfect and sinless mediator between God and humanity – the One who now reigns on the right hand of the Father and who guarantees the active presence of God.

Implementing Christian discipleship that instils a Christocentric worldview of reality

The logical conclusion of the biblical and theological training in the church is discipleship. Instead of validating and promoting the fear oriented African worldview dominated by terrifying malevolent evil spirits, Pentecostal prophets must undertake a programme of discipleship that instils a Christocentric worldview in their followers. Among other things, a Christocentric worldview of reality views life from the perspective of Christ's victory on the cross and his enthronement at the right hand of the Father (Eph 1:20). Moreover, the Scriptures present Christ as the Creator and Maintainer of the universe (Col 1:17). It means that the occult glorifying home movies that instil and reinforce fear in many African Christians (Ezenweke 2013:101) must be discarded and replaced by those that affirm the victorious reign of the resurrected Christ. In other words, the primary requisite in the quest for Christological security in the African church is a life disciple according to the image of Christ and what he has accomplished for every believer (Banda 2005:42).

A Christocentric worldview values spiritual disciplines such as personal Bible study, personal prayer and fasting that foster personal relationship and dependence on God. Therefore, rather than the common Pentecostal use of Jesus's name as an incantation to produce signs and wonders, Christ must be related to as a personal Being who is sovereign,

independent, omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent among many other attributes. This means that Pentecostals must operate from a worldview of Christ as a divine personal being and not a magical charm. Therefore, instead of leading believers to be attached to anointed objects such as oil and armbands, Pentecostal prophets should lead the believers into a personal attachment with Christ who desires to relate to his people personally and not magically. This requires that Pentecostal Christians should be assisted to realise the full extent of biblical imagination of salvation such as ontological newness (2 Cor 5:17), being delivered from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of life (Col 1:13), of being 'in' Christ (Rm 8:1; Col 2:6–7), of being adopted into the family of God (Jn 1:12) and be a temple of God (1 Cor 3:16; 6:19). These motifs of the new state and status of the Christians calls believers to constantly view themselves as in a personal relationship with God. Pentecostals must consider themselves as recreated, new and planted into Christ who also dwells in them through the Holy Spirit which biblically and theologically makes it illogical for Christians to uncritically fear inheriting the spiritual curses of their ancestors. They need to understand that in Christ they receive a new spiritual state and status that gives them a new life.

Christian discipleship must instil a Christocentric worldview of reality by enabling Pentecostal Christians to view their present sufferings and disappointments eschatologically. The full measure of the reign of Christ's unshakable eternal kingdom (Mt 12:28–29; Rv 21:1) will come at his final come when all reality will be recreated anew and gloriously. This means that what may appear as the devil's victory over the believer will in the end turn out to be a false victory. Pain and disappointments are important reminders that Christians must eagerly expect Christ's glorious return.

Believer's spiritual responsibility rooted within the victorious kingdom of God

The Pentecostal prophets can be credited for highlighting that Christians are involved in a spiritual battle. Indeed, the Bible presents Christians as soldiers in a spiritual warfare that pits God's kingdom of the light against Satan's kingdom of darkness. However, a serious problem of the Pentecostal prophets lies in failing to ground the believers' spiritual responsibility within the victorious kingdom of God. First, while Christ has conquered the kingdom of darkness, he never promises his followers a trouble-free life in this side of the eschaton. Christ assures believers that while he has conquered the kingdom of darkness, in this world they will indeed encounter various troubles (Jn 16:33). Similarly, the Apostle Peter warns Christians that they have an adversary who prowls seeking to crash them (1 Pt 5:8). It is therefore biblically incorrect for Pentecostal prophets to promise Christians in this world a perfect life free from any hardships. It is equally biblically incorrect for Pentecostal prophets to present physical and emotional struggles encountered by Christians in this world as curses that can be avoided by intense religiosity, by using anointed objects and seeded offerings. Christian spirituality, no

matter how intense it may be, 'is not a ticket exempting us from the consequences of the fall' (Letham 1993:152). In other words:

since we live in an imperfect world and our physical bodies are in an imperfect state – in a fallen nature, suffering and trials do not always indicate demonic harassment or witchcraft and not even ancestral curses. (Banda 2005:82)

Therefore, there is need to emphatically root the believer's spiritual responsibility within the victorious kingdom of God. The Christian is commanded to be alert and strong in the power of Christ the Lord (Eph 6:10; 1 Pt 5:8) and to put on the full armour of God to fight and resist the schemes of the devil (Eph 6:11). The implication of these passages is unpacked by O'Brien (1999) who highlights that:

Christ's triumph over the powers has 'already' occurred (Eph 1:21), so believers no longer live in fear of them. But the fruits of the victory have 'not yet' been fully realised, so Christians must be aware of the conflict and be equipped with divine power to stand against them. (pp. 458–459)

Implied in O'Brien's statement is that, while the enemy against God's people is already defeated, Christians still need to respect him and not take him for granted. However, rather than fearing him, they must arm themselves with Lord's full armour. Therefore, instead of the anointed oils, anointed water, branded armbands and other such anointed objects by prophets who actually promote reliance on the prophets, Christians must arm themselves with the amour of the Lord and resist the devil.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to grapple with the Christological implications of the mediatory role of the prophets among Zimbabwean Pentecostals. The critical analysis reveals that Pentecostal prophets end up competing with Christ instead of enabling believers to rely on him only for their needs. The article observed that Pentecostal prophets in Zimbabwe are viewed as possessing the authority of God and Pentecostal Christians rely on them as channels of encountering God and of receiving God's blessings. It was also noted that Pentecostal prophets build on the ATR worldview that is dominated by fear. The mediatory role played by Pentecostal prophets promotes practical atheism in that it leads Christians to depend on the prophets in a manner that denies the existence of God. The mediatory role of the prophets further undermines Christ's salvific work and fails to challenge the African worldview of fear. A Christological framework, which will meaningfully respond to reliance on the mediatory role of the Pentecostal prophets, must realise the sufficiency of Christ in the African context and instil a Christ-controlled view of reality and empower Christians to put on the armour of the Lord instead of reliance on anointed objects. Pentecostals prophets are challenged to critically examine their ministerial roles in the life of their followers in order to avoid enacting parallel spiritual structures that end up competing with Christ.

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Authors' contributions

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