

# Challenges Facing African Christianity

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## **Abstract**

Contemporary African Christianity faces numerous challenges that threaten its unity and faithfulness to biblical teachings. These challenges include theological dependence on Western frameworks, fragmentation and denominationalism, the rise of the prosperity gospel, and socio-political pressures. This paper critiques these issues from a biblical perspective, emphasising the need for theological independence, unity in Christ, and a return to Scripture as the ultimate authority. While African Christianity holds global significance, this paper argues that it must resist cultural and ideological pressures that segregate the Church, calling instead for a renewed commitment to biblical foundations. By addressing these challenges, the African Church can reclaim its identity in Christ and fulfil its mission as a witness to the world.

## **Theological Dependence on the West**

The reliance on Western theological frameworks by many African churches presents a significant challenge to the Church's unity and faithfulness to Scripture. This dependence fosters an identity crisis, with African Christianity often struggling to articulate its theological voice. While Kwame Bediako claims that "*African Christianity remains shaped by an external narrative, often unable to articulate its own theological voice,*"<sup>1</sup> a biblical perspective highlights the universality of the Gospel that transcends cultural frameworks (Galatians 3:28).

Scripture calls for theological independence rooted in God's Word rather than cultural or denominational traditions. Paul's admonition in 1 Corinthians 3:4-7 against aligning with particular leaders underscores the danger of allowing external narratives to eclipse biblical truth. The Church must reject any framework, Western or otherwise, that supersedes the authority of Scripture.

## **Fragmentation and Denominationalism**

The fragmentation of African Christianity, with its thousands of denominations and independent movements, undermines the Church's call to unity (John 17:20-23). The proliferation of denominations founded by charismatic leaders often leads to doctrinal confusion and competition, deviating from the biblical model of the Church as one body in Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12-27).

Ethnic and tribal divisions within the Church further segregate believers, contradicting the reconciling work of the Gospel. For instance, the denominational landscape in Nigeria, marked by ethnic affiliations, mirrors societal divisions rather than reflecting the unity found in Christ. The Church is called to be a witness to the world by exemplifying unity in diversity (Ephesians 4:3-6).

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<sup>1</sup> Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992), 35.

## **The Prosperity Gospel**

The prosperity gospel's emphasis on material wealth and physical well-being as signs of God's favour distorts the biblical teaching on contentment and stewardship. Leaders like David Oyedepo and Shepherd Bushiri attract followers with promises of financial breakthrough and miraculous healing,<sup>2</sup> but this teaching contradicts Jesus' warning in Matthew 6:19-21 to store treasures in heaven rather than on earth.

The prosperity gospel promotes a transactional view of God, reducing Him to a means of personal gain, akin to the merchants Jesus drove from the temple (John 2:16). Vulnerable believers, particularly those in poverty, are often exploited through financial demands disguised as "*seed offerings*," leading to disillusionment and furthering inequality within the Church.<sup>3</sup>

## **Secularisation and Socio-Political Pressures**

Secularisation and socio-political pressures have exposed the Church's struggle to maintain its prophetic voice. While Scripture calls Christians to be salt and light (Matthew 5:13-16), the Church's entanglement in political corruption and ethnic conflicts often compromises its witness. For example, in Sudan, where religious tensions fuel violence, the Church's involvement in political disputes undermines its role as a peace-building force.

A biblical perspective demands that the Church act as a moral and prophetic voice, speaking truth to power without becoming entangled in worldly systems. The prophets of the Old Testament, like Amos and Micah, exemplify this calling by condemning injustice and calling for righteousness (Amos 5:24; Micah 6:8).

## **The Identity Crisis of African Christianity**

The identity crisis within African Christianity is rooted in its historical entanglement with Western colonialism and its ongoing struggle to define itself biblically. While theologians like John Mbiti advocate for integrating African worldviews with Christianity,<sup>4</sup> such efforts must prioritise Scripture as the ultimate authority. Efforts to contextualise theology, while valuable, should not compromise biblical truth or segregate the Church by emphasising cultural distinctives over the unifying message of the Gospel.

## **Rediscovering Biblical Foundations**

Rather than rediscovering "*African roots*," the Church in Africa must return to its biblical foundations. The Apostle Paul's instruction to Timothy to "*preach the Word*" and "*correct, rebuke, and encourage with great patience and careful instruction*" (2 Timothy 4:2) underscores the centrality of Scripture in shaping the Church's identity and mission.

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Gifford, *Christianity, Development and Modernity in Africa* (London: Hurst, 2015), 71.

<sup>3</sup> The Guardian, "The High Cost of Faith: African Prosperity Churches under Scrutiny," published August 2023.

<sup>4</sup> John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1990), 229.

*Ubuntu*, while reflecting valuable communal principles, should not overshadow the biblical teaching of *koinonia*—the fellowship of believers united by the Spirit (Acts 2:42-47). Similarly, African storytelling and proverbs must be evaluated against the authority of Scripture to ensure they align with God’s truth (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

## Global Influence and Local Faithfulness

As African Christianity gains global prominence, it must resist the temptation to conform to cultural or denominational pressures. Programmes like the *"Theology in Context"* initiative by the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians aimed at developing theology that addresses African realities, particularly from the perspective of African women. This initiative seeks to critique and reform traditional theological frameworks that have marginalised women’s voices, while simultaneously engaging with issues such as poverty, gender-based violence, and socio-political injustices in Africa.<sup>5</sup> However these efforts must remain grounded in Scripture. The Church’s primary mission is to proclaim the Gospel and disciple nations (Matthew 28:19-20), not to perpetuate cultural or ideological agendas.

## Conclusion

Contemporary African Christianity faces significant challenges that threaten its unity and faithfulness to Scripture. Theological dependence on Western frameworks, fragmentation, the prosperity gospel, and socio-political pressures contribute to a segregated Church that often fails to reflect the biblical vision of unity and holiness. By rejecting cultural and denominational divides, the African Church can reclaim its identity in Christ and fulfil its calling as a witness to the world. This requires a renewed commitment to Scripture, unity in the Spirit, and a prophetic voice that addresses societal challenges without compromising biblical truth.

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## Bibliography

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<sup>5</sup> Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), 45. Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, "About Us," Circle.org.za, accessed December 12, 2024, <https://circle.org.za/>; "Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians," Wikipedia, last modified July 8, 2024, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Circle\\_of\\_Concerned\\_African\\_Women\\_Theologians](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Circle_of_Concerned_African_Women_Theologians); "Circle Rwanda," CircleRwanda.org, accessed December 12, 2024, <https://circlerwanda.org>.