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## A Biblical-Theological Study of Ephesians 5:1-14 and Its Implications for Contemporary African Christianity

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### ABSTRACT

Many African neo-Pentecostal churches today face doctrinal and ethical challenges that compromise their theological integrity and witness. These challenges include the rise of prosperity gospel theology, commercialisation of the Gospel, spiritual abuse, and works-based salvation theology. The research problem this article addresses is the erosion of biblical foundations in teaching and practice within these churches. The paper investigates the theological and ethical significance of Ephesians 5:1-14, considering these challenges. It explores the original intent of this passage, the theological truth and ethical imperatives it conveys, and the practical relevance it holds for the African church today. Using a literary-theological approach, this study combines exegetical analysis with theological and practical reflection. The main argument is that Ephesians 5:1-14 calls believers to imitate God through self-sacrificial love, holiness, and discernment, offering a corrective to contemporary theological distortions. Key findings reveal that the passage promotes a biblically grounded vision of identity in Christ, sanctification, and teaching that challenges exploitative and unbiblical church practices. This article concludes that Ephesians 5:1-14 provides a biblically grounded ethical and theological framework for reform in African neo-Pentecostalism. The paper contributes to knowledge by offering a contextualised biblical response to concerns regarding African Neo-Pentecostal churches while urging a return to Christ-centred doctrine, leadership, and discipleship.

**Keywords:** *Ephesians 5:1–14, Prosperity Gospel, Paul, African Church*

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Gospel has been in Africa since the first Century and has experienced growth and decline, and then colonial reintroduction over the centuries to date. It has not been received into a vacuum of ideologies and beliefs, but rather into an existing worldview which has long provided understanding of the world. African Traditional Religion speaks to all of life, including poverty, sickness, and material success. In this context, biblical teaching that fails to reflect the full counsel of Scripture and distorts biblical truth, particularly regarding the Gospel, creates a conducive environment for the doctrinal and ethical challenges encountered by the African neo-Pentecostal Church. Such distortions of truth and requisite practices and abuses have misled believers regarding the nature of salvation, the impact the Gospel should have upon the life of a believer and brought misunderstanding regarding the Church and the role of her leaders.

The question African Christianity faces is how to discern authentic biblical teaching and Christ-centred spiritual leadership amidst distortions and aberrations of truth. Scripture itself provides an unchanging plumbline in this regard. Ephesians 5:1-14, rich in Christological and ethical content, provides a benchmark for Christians and spiritual leaders alike regarding identity and conduct. Yet, not many papers have been devoted to this text, especially as applied to the African context. This article, therefore, explores the theological and ethical significance of Ephesians 5:1-14 for contemporary African Pentecostal Christianity. The paper attempts to answer these questions: What was the original context and intent of this passage? What theological truths and ethical standards does it present? And what is the practical and theological significance of Ephesians 5:1-14 for contemporary African Christians? By integrating biblical exegesis with contextual theological analysis, the paper calls for a reform, rooted not in

reaction, but in a return to the foundational truths of the Christian faith

## 2.0 METHODOLOGY

This paper is a non-empirical study that employed a literary-theological and exegetical approach in exploring the context, meaning, and doctrinal and practical significance of Ephesians 5:1–14 for contemporary African Christianity. Established hermeneutical tools and exegetical methods were systematically applied to uncover the text's meaning and relevance (Smith 2008, 169). The background, authorship, date, and recipients of the book of Ephesians were examined. A thematic exposition of the pericope followed, with theological and practical applications made within the African Church context, especially as they relate to prosperity theology, commercialisation of the Gospel, works-based salvation, and human rights abuses within churches. Sources utilised in this paper include the biblical text, academic commentaries, peer-reviewed articles, Logos software, lexicons, concordances, and dictionaries. The research was conducted within an evangelical framework, following sound hermeneutical principles.

## 3.0 KEY CONCERNS WITHIN SELECTED AFRICAN CHURCHES

This section examines selected issues in selected churches in Ghana and South Africa, using these as a representative of what the contemporary African church looks like. Mbiti (1986, 29) summarizes a view still held by many Africans—that Christianity is the religion of the white man, introduced through colonialism. However, Christianity's roots in Africa stretch back to the first century, as evidenced in Acts 2:9–11; 8:26–40; 11:20; 13:1–2; 21:8, suggesting its presence soon after Christ's death (Coombs 2012, 10; Daniels 2009, 42). While North African Christian communities in the first few centuries flourished—evident in events like the AD

256 Carthage conference (Daniels 2009, 42-46) — this growth was later hindered by the Muslim invasions of North Africa in the 7th century, leading to the decline of Christianity and the rise of Islam through conquest and violence (Warner 2012, 15, 19; Firestone 2013, 422–30).

Fast forward to the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Christianity was reintroduced to the Gold Coast by Portuguese merchants and explorers (Boaheng 2019, 29). In Ghana, Boaheng (2018, 1) reports that early missionary efforts diminished, but from the 18<sup>th</sup> century there was increased missionary activity which ultimately laid the foundation for Christianity. In South Africa, Jan van Riebeeck and the Dutch Reformed Church arrived in 1652, while German missionary George Schmidt founded the first Protestant missions among the Khoi-Khoi at Genadendal in 1737. Later, the Hermannsburg Missionary Society began work among the Zulu in 1854 (Ditsong Museums of South Africa 2023).

The historical roots of Christianity in Africa are deep and complex, stretching from apostolic times to colonial reintroductions. Today, African Christianity manifests in diverse forms, including the rapid increase of Charismatic, Pentecostal, and Neo-Pentecostal churches marked by cultural resonance, local leadership, and spiritual vibrancy. *Glossalalia* or ‘speaking in tongues’ is most commonly a definitive characteristic of these streams of Christianity. However, Neo-Pentecostal churches (NPCs), which belong to the third wave of Pentecostalism in Ghana and much of Africa, that emerged prominently in the late twentieth century, have certain distinctive emphases and characteristics (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005, 26). These can include a perception of the leader or founder to be a man or woman of great power, to be held in awe. Much religious activity may revolve around such persons (27). One of the distinguishing characteristics of NPCs is the emphasis on the Prosperity Gospel, that “God rewards faithful Christians with good health,

financial success and material wealth” (202).

Various controversies are sometimes associated with these churches, including their commercialisation of the Gospel, human rights abuses, and the propagation of a works-based theology. The following sections of the paper examine these issues.

### 3.1 Prosperity Gospel

The Prosperity Gospel (PG) teaches that *God desires both spiritual and material well-being for all believers*, presenting this as a way of claiming *Christ’s triumph over sin, disease, curses, poverty, and life’s challenges*. This teaching portrays health, wealth, and material success as evidence of divine favour and covenantal blessing. Jesus’ declaration in John 10:10 that it is the thief who comes to steal, kill, and destroy, but he has come to give abundant life, is foundational in this teaching, along with Old Testament (OT) scriptures regarding covenantal blessings. The declaration in 2 Corinthians 8:9 regarding Jesus becoming poor “so that by his poverty you may be rich” is taken literally to refer to material poverty and abundance. The principle in 2 Corinthians 9:6 regarding sowing and reaping is included, is viewed as a catalyst for material harvest and divine blessing. The PG teaches that believers can access healing, wealth, and success through faith and positive confession, with prosperity being viewed as proof of faith and righteousness (Barron 2022, 89-94; Lauterbach 2020, 11).

The PG teaching, however, is selective in its biblical texts, drawing heavily from those which speak of blessing, health, prosperity, and success, whilst being unable to adequately address themes of contentment, suffering, persecution, trials, and martyrdom. Moreover, by implication, it often suggests a lack of faith as an explanation for persistent sickness, suffering, or poverty. It also tends to rely on eisegesis as opposed to faithful exegesis. Another challenge of this teaching is that it encourages Christians to relate to God in a transactional manner, where blessings are

expected in exchange for religious acts as opposed to the genuine relationship being sought. The excesses of this thinking can produce a self-centred materialism, focused more on personal material and physical well-being than spiritual transformation. The prevailing culture often found in churches which propagate the PG aligns to some degree with the traditional African practices of making offerings to secure favour and solutions to problems. Unfortunately, this can easily be exploited by prosperity gospel ministers for personal gain (Barron 2022, 92; Boaheng 2021a, 226-26; Udekchukwe 2021, 267; Williams 2022, 3)

In Ghana, neo-Pentecostal churches, which emphasize PG, are one of the fastest growing Christian movements (Golo 2013, 378). The leaders are often influential figures who display their wealth as a testament to the fruit of their PG beliefs and practises. These churches attract Ghanaians seeking material success. Beyond the exegetical criticism of the PG, the lived realities within the churches where this is over-emphasized reveal a disturbing pattern. Many facing profound economic hardship become vulnerable to religious demagogues who exploit their sincere faith and hope for a better life (Smith 2021, 103-4). In South Africa, it is frequently the impoverished who are most susceptible, enticed by promises of miraculous breakthroughs, whilst being persuaded to part with their limited resources (Bernard 2019). It is critical to discern between legitimate faith and manipulation, between true ministry and exploitative extortion (Reader 2017, 135-38).

While certain elements of prosperity theology are rooted in biblical principles, it is their disproportionate emphasis, often supported by eisegetic texts and fuelled by the self-interest of leaders who benefit financially from their followers' generosity that renders it doctrinally flawed and pastorally harmful (Barron 2022, 90-94).

### 3.2 Commercialization of the Gospel

History is replete with examples of the commercialisation of religion. In the OT, one reads of Amos, Micah, and Ezekiel denouncing and speaking against corruption and the use of religion for economic gains. In the New Testament (NT), Jesus sends the money changers and those involved in such business ventures out of the Temple (Matt. 21:12–13). These scenarios present commercialization of religion as a violation of religious ethics (Diara, Onukwufor and Uroko 2020, 2). In the current era, commercialisation of the church occurs when the church as an institution prioritizes financial gain and wealth accumulation over its core mission of advancing the Kingdom of God through ministry and service. Often in these cases, the church will apply commercial principles in its operations, with the aim of generating economic profit. Commercialisation of the Gospel then comes into play, involving a manipulation of Christianity—its spiritual and emotional services and appeals — to exploit individuals for financial or economic gains. Thus, wherever a biblical message or service is presented as a commodity for sale for spiritual benefits, or an object of investment with an expectation of rewards from God, commercialisation of the Gospel has occurred. Often, various forms of marketing strategies are used to display “spiritual” products for sale. These could include anything from healing, miracles, and deliverances to any article claimed to catalyze a desired transformative change and improvement in life (Anderson 2019; Benyah 2020, 192; Kgatele 2019).

In recent years, commercialisation of the Gospel is evident in practices such as selling anointing oils, charging “consultation fees” for prayer, deliverance and other ministerial services or promising miracles for money. These churches often adopt sophisticated advertising strategies, blurring the lines between the church and the marketplace. Some Southern African church leaders, such as Shepherd Bushiri, Alph Lukau, Uebert Angel, Emmanuel Makandiwa, ostensibly involved in

prophetic and deliverance ministries, purportedly make their spiritual gifts and services available in exchange for money. Church members are often required to pay significant amounts of money for “one-on-one” time with the leader. They are also expected to purchase products such as anointed water, anointed oil, stickers for protection, customised bracelets, T-shirts, and photographs of the leader and his wife. Once prayed over, the prices of these products increase astronomically. This undermines the Gospel and the concept of the church, reducing both to a profit-driven enterprise (Benyah 2018, 125; Kgatle, 2022, 1-4).

In Ghana, Obeng (2014, 14) highlights a troubling trend within many deliverance practices. He observes that these practices are often marred by a troubling expectation: the demand for monetary support from vulnerable individuals in exchange for blessings. This turn of spirituality into a transactional experience raises significant ethical concerns about the exploitation of those seeking help. Some pastors impose costly donations as prerequisites for healing. This approach distorts the essence of grace, transforming what should be free acts of spiritual benevolence into costly rituals that only a few can afford. Further complicating this issue is the tendency for congregants to be manipulated into making large public donations. Some prophets instruct their followers to place these offerings at their feet, effectively turning acts of faith into performances for public display. This practice not only cultivates a culture of shame surrounding more modest contributions but also places a disproportionate reward on the wealthy, who receive “special” prayers and acknowledgments, further perpetuating social inequality within the spiritual community.

### 3.3 Human Rights Abuses

A number of harmful practices and human rights abuses have taken place within ANPC in recent years (Banda 2020, 1-10).

In South Africa, some church leaders reportedly instructed congregants to eat grass, snakes, dog meat and even rat meat. These church leaders have also led congregants to drink engine cleaner, drink mixtures of rat poison and water, and even be sprayed with “Doom”, an insecticide, to facilitate deliverance. Another example is the Mancoba Seven Angels Ministry, led by seven brothers, who reportedly kept at least forty women as sex slaves. The ministry established a compound in Ngcobo where members were required to relinquish all material possessions before taking up residence (Manona 2018). The CRL Rights Commission had previously raised concerns regarding child abuse and denial of access to education. This was confirmed during police rescue operations (Banda 2020, 4). Other examples include the public impropriety of Ps Motsoeneng’s ministry (South Africa), where inappropriate acts were reportedly performed during “ministry”; Prophet TB Joshua (Nigeria), accused of grooming and sexually abusing women under spiritual pretences; and Ps Timothy Omotoso (South Africa) who at one point in time faced 63 charges related to rape and human trafficking. These examples reveal broader patterns of abuse where spiritual authority is misused to manipulate, exploit, and harm. This has created environments where human dignity has been violated within the church, the very place where it is meant to be protected (Banda 2020, 1-10; BBC, 2024; Jamal 2017).

In Ghana’s contemporary Christian landscape, while some prophets continue to uphold high ethical standards, there is increasing concern over widespread pastoral abuses. These abuses range from moral failures to criminal misconduct, and they seriously undermine the credibility of Christian ministry. Reports of sexual abuse, including affairs with church members, associate pastors’ spouses, fraud, and even cases of child defilement, are on records (Boaheng 2021b, 43).

### 3.4 Works-based salvation theology

Salvation is a gift of grace, received through faith and grounded solely in Christ's redemptive work (Eph 2:8-10; Rom 3:21-25). Good works, therefore, are not the basis for salvation, but the fruit of genuine faith, empowered by the indwelling Holy Spirit. Despite this, works-based salvation theology remains prevalent in many African Christian contexts and has attracted significant scholarly attention (Boaheng 2021a, 271–72). Some ANPC promote this view of salvation, often emphasizing immediate material well-being and upward mobility as indicators of divine favour (Biri 2020, 109). In African neo-Pentecostalism, salvation is understood in a holistic way—encompassing not only eternal life but also tangible blessings in this life (Nel 2019, 6). Within this paradigm, salvation is increasingly perceived in terms of transactional engagement with God, where practices such as tithing, seed sowing, fasting, studying the Bible and prayer are viewed as investments that yield tangible rewards. This theology is frequently associated with the PG and represents a shift from grace to merit. An example of this type of teaching is where Pastor Enoch Adeboye was recorded saying, “Anyone who is not paying his or her tithes fully is not going to Heaven” (Kिताuse and Achunike 2013, 13). He later retracted this (Omosola 2024). Nonetheless, the statement reflects a broader trend: a shift from salvation as a gift of grace through faith, to a reward for performance.

In order appreciate the theological and ethical significance of Ephesians 5:1–14 for the African neo-Pentecostal context, this passage needs to first be explored within its literary, historical, and theological context. The following section examines the authorship, audience, occasion, structure and nature of Ephesians as a whole, thereby laying a firm foundation for the exposition that follows.

### 4.0 THE CONTEXT OF THE TEXT

Despite the author identifying himself as Paul (Eph. 1:1; 3:1), the authorship of

Ephesians has been disputed since the end of the eighteenth century. The language and grammar of Ephesians, the impersonal tone of the letter, and the lack of specificity with respect the audience and the author's context, all raise question marks as to the book's authorship. However, Ephesians expresses the very heart of Paul, and these questions regarding Pauline authorship seem to have been adequately answered. (Cohick 2010, 10-17; Hoehner, 2002; Kuo, 2016; Merkle, 2016, 18; Osborne 2017, 10; Thielman 2010, 1-30; Turaki, 2010, 1451)

Paul indicated that he was writing from prison (Eph. 3:1; 4:1). This imprisonment could have been one of three locations: Ephesus AD 52-56 (1 Cor. 15:32), Caesarea AD 57-59 (Act 24:27) or Rome AD 60-62 (Act 28:30). Paul speaks of facing “wild beasts in Ephesus” (1 Cor. 15:32), and of multiple imprisonments (2 Cor. 11:23), but nowhere is there specific reference to imprisonment in Ephesus. Paul spent two years as a prisoner in Caesarea before being sent to Rome (Acts 24:27; Kuo, 2016). The circumstances of Paul's house arrest in Rome, with his freedom to receive visitors and preach and teach, point to Rome as the location of writing. (Cohick 2010, 25-29; Hoehner 2002, 92–97; Merkle 2016, 21-22; O'Brien 1999, 57; Thielman 2010,19)

Ephesians is the most general of Paul's letters. He greets no one, thanks no one and only mentions Tychicus by name. The expression ‘in Ephesus’ in the letter's first sentence provide the sole indicator in the letter that it was intended for Ephesus, and those words are not present in some of the letter's most reliable manuscripts. However, it is widely accepted that this letter would have been written to the church in Ephesus and circulated to the churches in outlying areas in the province of Asia. (Brown 2016, 225; Cohick 2010, 29; Merkle 2016, 21; Thielman 2019, 1-30)

Identifying the occasion and purpose for the book of Ephesians presents a challenge, with no specific problems addressed and no sense of urgency conveyed. The result is an epistle with a

general set of concerns penned to a primarily Gentile Christian audience. O'Brien (1999, 57) believes Paul was strengthening them and urging them to live their lives in conformity with God's divine plan. Arnold (2010, 45) comments that Paul wanted to promote a greater unity between Jew and Gentile Christians and to affirm their new identity in Christ. He also posits that Paul wanted to encourage a transformation of their lifestyles to conform to the purity and holiness God required of them. Thielman (2010, 28) also comments on the theme of unity and the responsibility placed upon them vicariously due to God's grace and their role in God's plan. Hoehner (2002, 106) concludes the purpose of Ephesians as promoting love for one another amongst Christians, with God's love as its foundation. Merkle (2016, 24) quotes Lincoln, who surmises that Ephesians is a general letter providing strength, knowledge of salvation and identity in Christ. He also comments on how Ephesians addresses issues related to church unity and Christians adhering to Paul's teachings in areas such as speech, sexuality, and household relationships. Thus, we can see that the common themes for the purpose of Ephesians include truths on the new identity in Christ, love and unity amongst Jew and Gentile believers, and theological and ethical responsibilities which arise from the truths contained in Ephesians, especially as they pertain to the everyday life of Christians. (Brown 2016, 225; Cohick 2010, 29; Fowl 2012, 29-30; Merkle 2016, 21; Neufeld 2002, 24; O'Brien 1999, 50; Thielman 2010, 1-30)

The structure of Ephesians is different from other Pauline epistles. It has many long sentences with digressions. Some use this in their argument against Pauline authorship. However, to do this may be misleading as it applies a modern pattern of discourse in attempting to understand the ancient text (Baugh 2015, 15-16). When ancient authorities spoke of the division of Greek text, they did not speak of sentences per se, but rather of the use of the colon and period as the

building blocks of communication. When this is applied to Ephesians, what appears as a single long sentence in English, to the ancient Greek hearer, would be an interconnected paragraph of unified thought with requisite periods or pauses. (Brown 2016, 226; Neufeld 2002, 19; Thielman 2010, 1-30)

Ephesians lacks the fast-paced nature of Paul's other writings, and many scholars think of Ephesians as more of a sermon than a letter. However, what seems evident is that Ephesians can be divided into two halves. The first half (chs. 1-3) outlines the blessings of God for Christians and the second half (chs. 4-6) outlines the reasonable response of Christians in the light of these truths. Brown (2016, 226) describes the first three chapters of Ephesians as being indicative. Paul describes the blessings of God in these chapters, God's mercy and love, resultant salvation, the household of God and wisdom of God being made manifest to the heavenly powers. Brown describes the last three chapters as being imperative, - providing instructions regarding how Christians should live their lives in everyday life in view of chs. 1-3. Neufeld (2002, 19) describes a similar structure; however, he refers to the two halves of the book as epideictic and deliberative, respectively. By 'epideictic', we mean what is being referred to is the practice in public speaking of strengthening the understanding and convictions already held by the audience. Likewise, 'deliberative' refers to the intentional motivation of the audience towards a response or action. (Thielman 2010, 1-30)

What is evident is Paul's goal to provide an understanding of what God has done for the Church and the requisite standard the Church should live by based upon her new identity in Christ (Martin 1991, 46).

## 5.0 THEMATIC EXPOSITION OF TEXT

### 5.1 Imitate God (Eph. 5:1-2)

The controlling purpose of Ephesians 5:1-14 is for the Ephesians to imitate God (v. 1) as His beloved children by living a life of love (v. 2) and living as children of the light (v. 8b) (Merkle 2016, 174). Hoehner (2002, 633) notes that the conjunction “*οὕτως*” or “therefore” is a “resumptive inferential” conjunction referring to 4:1 and 4:17, presenting an additional application from Ephesians 1-3. It reinforces the call to walk, by putting off the old and putting on the new. The phrase, “Imitate God” is unique in the NT. Many deem this as impossible, however Paul believes this is within the believer’s capability God’s children (Cohick 2010, 89, 127-8; Merkle 2016, 164). Verse 2 introduces the first imperative: “live a life of love” modelled after Christ’s self-sacrificial love (Hoehner 2002, 646-7).

### 5.2 Incompatible Conduct and Speech (Eph. 5:3-4)

Paul identifies two distinct groups of sins, both of which are incompatible with love and have no place among believers. The first group includes sexual immorality, impurity and greed. “Sexual immorality” includes any extra-marital sexual activity, with marriage defined as between one man and one woman (Olson 2018, 238). This includes fornication, prostitution (Merkle 2016, 181), homosexuality, adultery, incest, or other forms of sexual misconduct (Baugh 2015, 420; Best 1998, 475-6; Hoehner 2002, 652). “Impurity” speaks of filthiness, obscenity or any manner of acting in defiance of moral standards (Baugh 2015, 414; Merkle 2016, 181). It indicates general defilement, vileness, and filth and is reinforced by the phrase “any kind of”, applicable to all sorts of impurity as in Eph. 4:19 (Baugh 2015, 420; Hoehner 2002, 652). “Greed” means covetousness and likely includes an excessive desire for material gain. It represents an extreme form of selfishness that stands in direct contrast to an attitude of moderation and love for others. According to Hoehner (652-53), Paul may have been addressing a particular type of selfish craving

for material possessions, rather than a generous heart rooted in sincere dependence upon God for provision. This kind of greed, Paul insists, should be so foreign to the body of believers, to the extent that there should be no basis for associating such behaviour with the church. Salmond (n.d., 352) suggests that impurity and greed represent two distinct forms of sin: external and internal. Baugh (2015, 420) clarifies that Paul’s list is not exhaustive and specific, but rather presents broad categories of behaviour incompatible with love.

The second group of sins incompatible with love include obscenity, foolish talk and coarse jesting and likely refer to vulgar conversations with sexual connotations. “Obscenity” encompasses disgraceful and shameful conduct not limited to speech and forms a transition from the previous group of sins. “Foolish talk” refers to foolish or senseless speech that detracts from edification, common in social settings where drunkenness and immorality prevail. “Coarse jesting” involves sarcastic, demeaning, or sexually suggestive humour (Hoehner 2002, 655-6; Merkle 2016, 181). Paul provides the alternative for these: “thanksgiving”, - which honours God for who He is and what He has done (Baugh 2015, 421). Baugh (421) notes that “*eutrapelia*” (coarse jesting) and “*eucharistia*” (thanksgiving) are rough homophones, possibly used for rhetorical emphasis.

### 5.3 The grounds for the Instructions (Eph. 5:5-7)

The conjunction “for” in v. 5 provides the rationale: that those who continue in these sins will have no inheritance in the kingdom of God (Merkle 2016, 182). The pronoun “these” in v. 6 refers to all previously mentioned sins, not just “empty words” (Hoehner 2002, 664). Verse 7 concludes this thought with an instruction not to partner with the sons of disobedience because of the impending wrath of God upon them (668). These warnings reinforce the imperative to walk in love (Cohick 2010, 128-9; Smith 2020).

The present tense of the verb “*ἔρχεται*” (comes) in v. 6 suggests a “solemn present” and future nature of God’s wrath, just as there is a present and



future aspect to the Kingdom of God (Hoehner 2002, 663-4). The warning is clear: those who persist in these sins will have no inheritance in the Kingdom of Christ and God. There are various theories as to the possible meanings of the phrase "will not inherit the kingdom of God" (Lopez 2011, 82). However, it likely indicates that such individuals have no present share in the Kingdom of God and could also indicate that they will not have any inheritance in the Kingdom of God (Hoehner 2002, 661-2; Neufeld (2002, 234). Self-identification as Christian is therefore insufficient if these habitual sins mark one's life.

Paul warns believers not to be deceived by anyone who teaches anything contrary to this standard. Permissive teachings should not replace God's standards, as both deceivers and the deceived will be subject to the wrath of God (Turaki 2010, 1451-64). The "wrath of God" refers to both present and future judgement and is directed towards "sons of disobedience", not "sons of God" (Hoehner 2002, 662; Neufeld (2002, 234). Those attempting to deceive could have been either unbelieving Gentiles or members of the Christian community, trivializing these sins (Merkle 2016, 182).

The conclusion to the first portion of the pericope is an instruction not to be partners with those who practice the sins mentioned above. The word "partner" is referring to one who has communion with or is an accomplice in something (Hoehner 2002, 668). Paul's primary point is that warning against adopting the worldview and lifestyle of unbelievers, especially with respect to extra-marital sexual activity and materialism, is incongruent with God's standards for His people (Thielman 2010, 335-6).

#### **5.4 Walk in Light (Eph. 5:8-10)**

The second portion of the pericope begins with a contrast: "You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord". "Darkness" here has connotations of wickedness, the realm of sin, the absence of

the God of light, whereas "light" refers to the nature and revelation of God. Believers are now light in the Lord and must live accordingly (Hoehner 2002, 670). This walk must be characterized by "goodness, righteousness, and truth", qualities rooted in God's character. "Goodness" here means that quality that embraces generosity towards others, "righteousness" as the quality of life that produces righteous actions, and "truth" as right living and actions stemming from truthfulness as opposed to deceit (Hoehner 2002, 674). These virtues contrast sharply with the sinful behaviours previously described and are a mark of those pleasing the Lord.

#### **5.5 Exposing Darkness (Eph. 5:11-12)**

A prohibition is then given by Paul, - to have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness (cf. v. 7), but rather expose them (Hoehner 2002, 680). Some scholars argue the deeds of darkness to be exposed are those of sons of disobedience (Neufeld 2002, 235), whilst others maintain the fruitless deeds of darkness being referred to are likely those of Christians as the focus of this passage is instructions to believers (de Carvalho 2023, 7; Merkle 2016, 186). Cohick (2010, 91) outlines two interpretations of "expose": direct verbal confrontation, and godly living bringing light, exposing the darkness and transforming it. Hoehner (2002, 679) affirms both. De Carvalho (2023, 7) favours the latter - transformation through the godly living. Paul adds that these deeds are too shameful to even mention. Yet when exposed to the light, are revealed and transformed. The goal of exposure therefore is transformation (Hoehner 2002, 680-2).

#### **5.6 Transforming Darkness (Eph. 5:13-14)**

Unfruitful works of darkness are to be exposed by light for a transformation of darkness to light. Paul then concludes the pericope with a quotation, "Wake up sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you". He introduces this with a phrase "This is why it is said", often reserved for OT citations (Hoehner 2002,

685-6). Paul may be drawing from the OT, or perhaps Paul is referring to an early Christian hymn which brings to remembrance the salvation of the Ephesians and their conversion. (Merkle 2016,178; O'Brien 1999, 372). Hoehner (2002, 687-8) argues that Paul is likely addressing believers, urging them to awaken from spiritual slumber, cease partnering with unfruitful works of darkness, and turn from the path of death. Their repentance will please God and Christ will shine on them. Baugh (2015, 435) sees this light as reflective - Christians will then mirror Christ's glory. Neufeld (2002, 238) interprets this differently. He believes that exposing of works of darkness is not primarily directed at fellow Christians but rather has the goal of transforming the "sons of disobedience" who sit in darkness. De Carvalho (2023, 17-8) concurs, suggesting it is more likely a call to salvation directed at the "sons of disobedience" who if drawn to Christ will themselves become light. The goal of exposure here is evangelistic transformation.

In this pericope, Paul instructs Christians to imitate God their Father by walking in love and walking as children of light. He outlines conduct incompatible with this identity in Christ, urges a decisive break from darkness, and reveals the consequences of Christians persisting in these sins. The exposure of sin—whether within or beyond the community—illuminates and transforms, advancing God's redemptive purposes in Christ.

## **6.0 APPLICATION TO THE AFRICAN CONTEXT**

Ephesians 5:1-14 provides church leaders and members with pertinent and timeless theological and ethical imperatives that transcend culture and personal preference. Considering the doctrinal and ethical challenges facing many ANPCs, including prosperity theology, commercialisation of the Gospel, spiritual abuse, and works-based theology, this passage offers wisdom, truth, and a clear understanding of God's

mind on these matters. The following section reflects on key themes from Ephesians 5:1–14 and considers their practical significance for the African Church, with particular attention to leadership, identity, discipleship, and the moral witness of the Christian community.

### **6.1 Theological/doctrinal Significance**

Ephesians 5 has a lot of doctrinal lessons/implications for African Christianity. However, two areas (namely, Christology and sanctification) will be considered here due to space limitations. The passage opens with a remarkable statement that is not found anywhere else in the NT, "Imitate God". In Paul's letters, imitation is an important concept (Neufeld 2022, 222). Usually, Paul gives instructions for the reader to imitating Paul and his associates (1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1; Phil. 3:17; 1 Thess. 1:6; 2 Thess. 3:9), and Christ (1 Cor. 11:1; 1 Thess. 1:6). Here believers are instructed to imitate God (Merkle 2016, 175; Neufeld 2002, 222). Many dismiss this as impossible due to the enormity of this statement, however, Paul believes this is within the believer's capability (Cohick 2010, 89). This scripture makes evident that imitating God means walking in love, the type that was displayed through Christ's sacrifice (4:32) (Merckle, 2016, 164). In many ANPCs, members are taught to give sacrificially. From a biblical perspective, Jesus exemplified love in leadership through His self-sacrificial death—a model that sets an exceptionally high standard for church leaders to emulate.

The vast dimensions of God's love and forgiveness (Eph. 3:18-19; 4:32) provide the Christian's model for imitation. This theological truth carries critical implications for ANPC leaders and PG preachers: to imitate God is to reject greed, selfish ambition, and exploitation. There is no room in this paradigm for self-enrichment through ministry, the commodification of spiritual gifts, commercialisation of the gospel, or the abuse of power cloaked in religious authority. Paul's theology rests on the

reality that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8). The command to imitate God hinges on the believer's identity as a child of God (Cohick 2010, 127-128). This is grounded in the believer's new creation status – created in the image of God (Merckle 2016, 164). If Christ is the “exact representation” (Heb. 1:3) of God's being, and believers are to live lives characterised by the kind of self-sacrificial love that Christ did (Eph. 4:32; 5:1-2), then, this statement, within its context, informs Christology in that it reveals that God and Christ are one and the same Lord. In other NT passages, both Jesus' equality with God as well as his submission to God is portrayed (Gupta 2016).

Hebrews presents Christ as the “exact representation” and “perfect imprint” of His Father (Heb 1:3 AMP), and the sinless high priest (Heb. 5:7), whose blood cleanses and purifies, granting access to God (Heb. 4:14-16). In Peter (1 Pet. 1:21), Jesus is a model for those who suffer, highlighting the hope of His eternal glory ahead. Philippians 2:5-11 reveals Jesus' humility and exaltation, equal with God, yet self-emptying, now raised above all. Gupta (2016) highlights the coexistence of Christ's equality with and submission to the Father. God and Christ are one and the same Lord. True spiritual leadership should be marked with humility, service and love – not domination, manipulation, or profiteering. The command to imitate God, is corrective. It calls believers and leaders alike to a Christlike ethic.

Aside from Christology the text also speaks to the issue of sanctification which needs attention in contemporary African Christianity. Paul urges believers to become in daily practice who they have already become in Christ (Cohick 2010, 127; Merckle 2016, 164). The Greek verb for “imitate” implies repeated, habitual action – a lifestyle (Cohick 2010, 127-28). Walking in love and walking in light carry with them the idea of consistent obedience. It involves putting off the “old man” and putting on the “new man” (Eph. 4:22-23).

We are called to present our bodies to God daily (Rom 6:13; 12:1) as our reasonable act of worship and discern what pleases Him (Eph. 5:10; Rom 12:2). The Holy Spirit enables us, sanctifying us (1 Cor. 6:11; 1 Pet. 1:2; 2 Thess. 2:13) and producing fruit in our lives (Gal. 5:22-23). In many African Churches, especially NACs, immediate deliverance, miracles, and breakthroughs are emphasized; however, there cannot be complete and lasting deliverance and life change without discipleship, obedience, change in lifestyle, and ultimately sanctification.

Ephesians 5:1-14 contrasts darkness and light portraying the radical transformation that occurs when an unbeliever becomes a Christian. This can be described as the Pauline model of “indicative and imperative”- what God has done (“you were once darkness”) and what believers are to do in response (“live as children of the light”) (Neufeld 2002, 235). This duality affirms that sanctification is a process rooted in grace and walked out in obedience. Other passages reinforce this dynamic. Romans 8:29 outlines God's goal: conforming believers to the image of Christ.

In Philippians (2:12), the audience is instructed to work out their salvation with fear and trembling. All these scriptures are implying a process of becoming which echoes Christ's heartbeat that Christians should “be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mat 5:48). This process is sanctification. Sanctification must be built upon the grace of God, which starts and continues the work in believers' hearts through the Holy Spirit. Thus, the life of a believer should be different from that of an unbeliever because of their new identities (which God gives and cannot be earned by works) and the way they choose to live.

## 6.2 Practical Significance

Ephesians 5:1-14, provides a clarion call to ANPCs – especially amidst challenges such as the prosperity gospel, works-based salvation theology, spiritual abuse and commercialisation of the Gospel.

Christians are to imitate God by living a life of love (Eph. 5:1). This instruction is to church leaders and members alike. Paul provides the reasoning for this high standard: because we are already children of God. This status is a gift of grace, no further works required to attain or maintain this status. However, the expectations of this status are outlined in the rest of the passage. Paul provides specifics of what is incompatible with walking in love: sexual immorality, including any extra-marital sexual relationships and homosexuality, any form of sexual impurity and greed (Eph. 5:3). Greed, whether institutionalised (as we see with the commercialisation of the Gospel) or found amongst the ranks of some church leaders (with the preaching of the prosperity gospel) has no place in the Church.

Paul also included obscenity, foolish talk and coarse joking (Eph 5:4) as sins incompatible with walking in love. Paul is also clear regarding the consequences of these sins: those who persist in these sins will have no inheritance in the Kingdom of Christ and God (Eph. 5:5). This is a strong warning to church leaders driven by greed. Paul is also clear that Christians are not to be deceived by anyone who teaches anything contrary to this (Eph. 5:6). Christians have a responsibility to examine the scriptures for themselves like the Bereans (Acts 17:10-11), and not be carried away by every wind of doctrine (Eph. 4:14).

No matter how persuasive the teaching is, it cannot replace God's standards of truth. Those who teach these things and those who become deceived by such will be subject to the wrath of God according to Paul (Eph. 5:6). Christians are to refrain from partnering with those who subscribe to these ideologies and/or continue in these lifestyles. Christians are to reject these deceptions and not participate in the requisite practices.

Christians are also to imitate God by living as children of the light (Eph. 5:8b). This is comprised of walking in all that is good, righteous, and true, finding out what

is pleasing to the Lord (Eph. 5:9-10). In this regard, Paul prohibits Christians from having anything to do with the deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. This is interesting. Christians are to abstain from the deeds and practices, live correctly as children of the light and allow their lifestyles to be the light or example illuminating the darkness. The exposure also has elements of verbal confrontation. Christians should put on the new man daily, continuously living out the new identities of beloved children of a loving God and children of light, exposing deeds of darkness. In pursuing this, Christians will become transformative agents for the darkness around them.

Considering the theological and ethical concerns facing ANPCs, such as prosperity theology, commercialisation of the gospel, human rights abuses and works-based salvation, Ephesians 5:1-14 provides a clear call to church leaders and congregants alike, regarding identity, leadership and lifestyle.

## 7.0 CONCLUSION

This article has explored the theological and ethical significance of Ephesians 5:1–14 considering the challenges confronting many African neo-Pentecostal churches today. These include the proliferation of PG theology, commercialization of the Gospel, human rights abuses, and works-based salvation theology. Using a literary-theological approach, we have shown that this passage provides a biblically grounded response to these distortions. Paul's exhortation to imitate God by walking in love and walking as children of light provides a clear theological and ethical standard and measure for believers and church leaders alike. The passage also conveys the theme of sanctification and urges the rejection of unfruitful works of darkness and transformation of darkness by the light. It calls the Church back to a biblical understanding of salvation and identity, and the requisite pattern for leadership and lifestyle. Ephesians 5:1–14 not only exposes harmful teachings and

practises but also provides a redemptive framework for spiritual renewal. Its emphasis on our identity, Christ-like love, and practically what walking in love and light look like is critical in contexts where theological imbalance and leadership abuses persist. Ultimately, the text calls the African Church, believers and leaders alike, to imitate God as dear children, walking in love and light in all we do.

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