

The Bible, Social Media and the Public Persona of ill-bodies in neo-Pentecostal Charismatic Churches

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Abstract

A simple Google search can reveal how religion has damaged the image of faithful believers on various social media platforms. Picking from selected faith-healing practices of neo-Pentecostal Charismatic Churches, this paper demonstrates ways in which some Christian churches are, and continue to taint the public persona of ill-bodies on Facebook and other internet websites. The paper takes the position that, when ill-bodies confess of having spiritual husbands or wife; of being witches in order to receive total healing in the name of Jesus Christ, this does not only orient desperate adherents towards self-fulfilment but does greater harm on the public image of ill-bodies. It proceeds to attribute these practices—giving testimonies—to a defective understanding of Jesus of Nazareth’s miracles and a conservative reading of the Bible meant to promote proximity-seeking behaviours. It concludes by pointing out the long-lasting repercussions of those confessions in the lives of believers when uploaded on the internet and circulated on various social media websites.

Key words: Debase; ill-bodies; neo-Pentecostalism; proximity-seeking behaviour; public persona; self-worth; social media; testimonies

Introduction

One of the most cited verses from the New Testament testimonies of healing uploaded on cyber space by neo-Pentecostal Charismatic Churches’ ministries is: “With God/Jesus Christ all things are possible (Mark 9:23;10:27;11:24;18:26; Matthew 17:20; Luke 1:37; Philippians 4:13). This is a unifying belief in all Christians given that the miracles performed by the church are taken as solid evidence that Jesus Christ is a healer - He took up our infirmities and bore our diseases (Matthew 8:17): this is the same today, yesterday and forever (Hebrews 13:8). To make a strong case for this claim, some Christian churches live-stream their healing ministry as a strategy to show the unbelieving world that the resurrected Lord is working wonders in the lives of those who have faith in him. And that the crucified Christ of Nazareth is the Lord and saviour, and there is no another name above his name (Philippians 2:9). Subsequently, the

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miracles performed during healing ministries are uploaded on various internet platforms for prosperity and used in testimonies as indisputable evidence that Jesus Christ is not dead, but that he is alive and doing wonders for those who love him with their soul, strength and spirit.

A simple internet search shows videos of devotees telling their spiritual journey; giving a blow-by-blow account of how a visit to that particular church transformed their lives forever and for the better. In most cases, they detail how, after trying all available options: traditional healers, medical doctors and so on; they got to know of that particular church; how the charismatic leader, in spirit, singled them out from an overflowing crowd: (“I see, there is a man or woman with a --- and, do not be ashamed, come forward so that I can pray for you and you receive your healing⁶); prayed for the him/her and was healed instantly. In most cases, the healing sessions involve emissions of body fluids, vomit and exorcisms: “Come out, out, out in Jesus’ name (the most used catchphrase, Tofa 2013).”⁷ A few days, several months or years later, the healed person returns to the same church to give a testimony of how he or she received healing in the name of Jesus. In a number of videos I have watched, the individual starts by praising the prophet-healer: “Emmanuel! Emmanuel! Emmanuel!”⁸ and then proceeds to give praise to the God of the charismatic healer. The testimony is punctuated with replays of video recordings of what happened on that particular day and a chorus praising the man of God: “Emmanuel! Emmanuel! Major! Major! This is characteristic of a number of major neo-charismatic churches booming in Africa today; from the Synagogue of all Nations to the Prophetic Healing Deliverance ministry. These are some of the defining characteristics of neo-Pentecostal churches in Africa. This paper is not about the truths of the miracle claims, but primarily focuses on how the Bible is used in neo-Pentecostal Charismatic Churches in the background of social media. I raise questions pertaining to the public persona of ill-bodies when these churches upload testimonies of healing on the internet and are circulated on various social media platforms.

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⁶ This is a common practice in the healing sessions I have watched on Emmanuel television <https://emmanuel.tv/> and a number of DSTV stations such as Channel 390

⁷ The understanding is that demons take over the human body and cause untold suffering, a view that resonates with African religious worldviews.

⁸ This is true for neo-Pentecostal churches such as the Synagogue Church of All Nations.

As indicated earlier, the paper looks at recorded testimonies of healing uploaded on the internet against background of the public image of ill-bodies. The point I make is that, charismatic entrepreneurs (Junker 2010) have, among other things, become so innovative given the advent of the internet. This is because, they live-stream their healing ministry and subsequently upload videos so that they are available to a wider audience. The same video is replayed when the healed person returns to give a testimony. A quick glance at the Synagogue Church of All Nations' (SCOAN) websites, for example, shows that biblical passages such as Mark 5:18, 13:10; Luke 8:39; Romans 1:16 and 2 Timothy 1:8-9 are the most cited on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to justify the giving of testimonies of deliverance from bondage by the evil one. It is against this background that I make a critical reflection on the Bible, social media and the public persona of ill-bodies in neo-Pentecostal charismatic churches in Africa.

The focus of the paper is specifically on neo-Pentecostalism and the politicisation of ill-bodies in communities of faith. The argument I make is that neo-Pentecostal Christian Churches are fast-growing in cities (Anderson 2002) possibly because of the way in which they use the media. I also note that this a marketing strategy that does greater harm than good to faithful believers. Because of the media, I observe that these churches are visible after nearly every three kilometres; are converting public institutions into places of worship and rapidly changing the face of Africa. They are building inter-net dominated mega-churches with the biggest so far - the Synagogue Church of All Nations - having a carrying capacity of nearly fifty thousand congregants. What is so distinctive is that the naming of those churches tells it all: God is Able, House of Prayer, Prophetic Healing and Deliverance Ministry, Synagogue Church of All Nations, is a house of for all peoples – Synagogue (possibly representing the Jews) and the all-embracing church of Christ.

The other defining characteristic of neo-Pentecostal Churches is their emphasis on the gospel of prosperity: that to those who believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour will receive abundant health and wealth. This only happens to faithful believers who give generously. The belief is that "Give and it will be given to you, good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put on your lap. For the measure you will give is the measure you get back" (Luke 6:38). This is one of the most used texts to encourage the spirit of sowing the seed and reaping abundantly (Nwaomah 2014). For that reason, some of the churches have portals for receiving donations from members. In short, they are "better understood as a movement

concerned primarily with the experience of the working of the Holy Spirit and the practice of the Holy Spirit” (Anderson 2002:168) blind, as I will show in this paper, to the social and physical environment of ill-bodies when testimonies of healing are uploaded on the internet. To this end, the paper makes a critical reflection of possible construction surrounding those confessions within the individual’s social networks, family, friends, next-door neighbour, acquaintances and prospective client or employers.

Data Collection Methods and Presentation

For purposes of this discussion, I use testimonies uploaded on the internet in two neo-Pentecostal Christian churches: The Christ Missionary Church and the Synagogue Church of all Nations as well as my own personal encounters with the church and what I have seen on their television stations. I use selected postings in which ill-bodies testify of, for example, having spiritual spouses or, killing family members so that they are delivered from, to the audience’s awe - witchcraft - in the name of Jesus Christ. I use a video posted on YouTube on 13 November 2014 viewed by 17402 by 3rd October 2017 to argue my case. In the posting, a middle aged woman in the Christ Missionary Church, confesses of killing immediate and extended family members:

Prophet: How do you feel? In Jesus’ name you are free. I want her to confess and she will be free.

Woman: (Confessing) They were using me to kill my family members from my mother’s side .. They were sending us with a snake red and white in colour. That snake, when I cross the river it becomes a red and white cloth..... I see a cobra and a lion They were using me as a witch.

Prophet: Are you a witch or Satanist?

The testimony goes on and on as the woman tells of how she is being used by the forces of the devil to cause mysterious deaths in her family. She is ‘delivered’ when the charismatic healer prays over her, casts the demon and is saved in the name of Jesus Christ.

In another video, a middle aged woman confesses of having a spiritual husband. In the posting, the Wiseman from the Synagogue Church of All Nations commands the spiritual husband to speak:

Wise man : All over your body, in the mighty name of Jesus Christ.

Fire in the mighty name of Jesus Christ. You demon, fire⁹ in the name of Jesus! Come out! Speak out! Who are you? Speak!

Woman : Spiritual husband. Spiritual husband. Spiritual husband.
 Wiseman : Speak louder!
 Woman : Spiritual husband.
 Wiseman : As spiritual husband, what have you done to this body?
 Woman : I destroy everything.
 Wiseman : What do you (inaudible).
 Woman : She said she wants to work with Jesus.
 Wiseman : Why don't you want her to work? (Speak louder)
 Woman : She belongs to me. Because there is light I do not want her to tell people about Jesus.

I have selected these two testimonies as an entry point but there are many more testimonies of people testifying of being murderers, having snake spirits, mermaid spirits, and so on. During the healing ministry, the individual is required to give the name, place of domicile and illness. It is after this that he or she relates how he or she received healing in the name of Jesus Christ. Such the testimonies are readily available on official church websites, YouTube, Twitter, Facebook and so on with thousands of views and comments at the bottom of the postings.

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In the light of the digital age, the questions that generated my concern are: What makes ill-bodies reveal secrets of their private lives to the audience? Do these individuals consider the extent to which those testimonies damage their reputation? The reply partly lies on the degree to which leaders of neo-Pentecostal Charismatic Churches exercise authority over their followers. This is because they claim to have been given “authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every infirmity” (Matthew 10:1). They can say or do anything to which the faithful believers are asked to repeat or follow. This shows the extent to which the followers have attributed some kind of extra-ordinary status and gifts to the charismatic leader (Dawson 2011). This is true, because I have seen, on various television channels, congregants repeating what the leader says during sermons. The floor can sing the chorus more than three times when the leader says: “I cannot hear you.” The leader is taken as a true servant of Jesus Christ with power over the followers. The charismatic healer has near-absolute authority to the point that devotees can do what he wants at will (Junker 2014).

⁹ This explains why some scholars now call these neo-Pentecostal churches fire churches.

The faith in the leader partly emanates from entrepreneurial skills: who can, in Spirit, tell what happened in your life, what is happening now and what will happen in the future. Some of these entrepreneurs use even cell phones, national identity numbers, and screens to deliver a prophetic message.¹⁰ In the videos uploaded on various internet websites, the prophet discerns, through the Spirit of the Lord, an illness and calls upon the individual to come forward: “There is a wo/man with a (the disease is mentioned), come forward and be healed.”¹¹ On the other hand, ill-bodies do not wait for the healer to tell them what is going on in their lives. As the ten lepers who “stood at a distance ^{and} called out in a loud voice, “Jesus, Master, have pity on us” (Luke 17:11-18), they may take collective action in search for healing. They, as individuals or groups, hold placards revealing their medical condition even sero-status; calling upon the wo/man of God to come and heal them. This is a common practice in neo-Pentecostal Charismatic Churches today.

The observation I have made is that the healing comes with certain requirements. The patient is required to answer a set of preliminary questions: What is your name? Possibly taken from Mark 5:9 when Jesus said to Legion: “What is your name?” to which he replied: “My name is Legion; for we are many.” The patient is required to tell where he or she is from and the reason for coming to that church.¹² This is done possibly to establish the church’s sphere of influence: “But so much the more the report went abroad concerning him; and great multitudes gathered to hear and to be healed of their infirmities ” (Luke 5:15). The miracle is performed and the same or days later, the person returns to give a testimony of how his/her life changed after the wo/man of God prayed over him/her. All these are important questions in the healing process!

From what has been said above, it is evident that neo-Pentecostal Churches have politicised their understanding of the body. On the basis of a literal reading of the Bible, the body is under the attack of Satan and evil spirits as nuanced by these utterances: “You demon!” “What have you done to this body?” To this end, healing involves some kind of exorcism, the casting out of demons including HIV (Adogame 2005; Roura 2010). For this reason, demons open up: “I

¹⁰ This is typical of the the Enlightened Christian Gathering (ECG). I have seen this on videos and prophetic healing during Sunday services.

¹¹ Such practices are common in thenamed neo-Pentecostal Charismatic Churches during Sundayservices broadcasts on their television stations.

¹² This practice is common in the Synagogue Church of All Nations.

am Lucifer”; “I am a witch”; “She is my wife”; “I am a snake” and so on. These confessions are embedded in the belief that the entire universe is populated with invisible forces of evil (Mathew 4:18), demons (Mathew 9:33; Mark 1:34) and evil or unclean spirits (Mark 1:23) that take control of ill-bodies. In this respect, miracles performed in the name of Jesus are evidence that Jesus is at work and involved in the lives of the believer: “For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them” (Matthew 18:20). By and through faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, the charismatic leader casts out a demon in almost every ill-body. The understanding is that every evil spirit shall bow in the name of Jesus Christ (Luke 10:17) and that there is no any other name above that of Jesus Christ who is Lord and Saviour. This is because “God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:9-11).

Ill-bodies are, in neo-Pentecostal theology, the habitat of the evil one, and have to be exorcised for total healing. This, by extension, explains the basis of the command: “Out of this body! I command you demon! Out! Out! Out!”¹³ The healing of Legion in which the demons “begged him [Jesus], “Send us to the swine, let us enter them So he [Jesus and, by extension his followers] gave them leave. And the unclean spirits came out, and entered the swine” (Mark 5:9, 11) is used as an example. The healing is accompanied by certain techniques which “may produce emotions believers interpret to be spiritually meaningful” (Inbody 2015: 337). The demon, for example, screams on top of its voice or goes on the belly like a snake and finally wriggles out and departs to which the healer praises the Lord: “ Thank you Jesus, you are free!”¹⁴ The possessed person is oblivious of the things that took place in the process of the miracle. The person expresses shock to know of what exactly happened the day he or she delivers the testimony and the video is replayed. I now want look at the implications of those testimonies when uploaded on the internet with special focus on the reception of ill-bodies in the public sphere.

Testimonies of Miraculous Healing, Social Media and Self-worth in Neo-Pentecostalism

¹³ This is true for the various videos posted on those churches’ websites readily available on YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, etc .

¹⁴ This is a common catchphrase in neo-Pentecostal Churches.

From what I have said above, it suffices to say that these people are not coerced to tell the whole world what the Lord has done to them. They take personal decisions to recount their spiritual experiences in their search for health and well-being. After being healed in the name of Jesus, they cannot hold back their joy and jubilation and, in response to Jesus' command to "Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you" (Mark 5:19). On the other hand, the giving of testimonies of spiritual deliverance in congregation-based religious networks and the subsequent posting on the internet is, in my view, meant to commercialise the miracles of Jesus. I say so because the leaders, as in any business venture, take testimonies of healing as opportunities to win new converts. This is because collective action certainly tends to "evoke peer pressure on the individual to do the same" (Campbell 2010:447). The thinking is that ill-bodies are by engaging in collective action, "consolidated in a group, and the group exerts pressure on the individual more intensely, confirming both action and belief to the network" (Stroope 2012:273). What this means is that charismatic entrepreneurs have realised that religious embeddedness and networks moderate behaviour and this possibly explains why ill-bodies have shared collective goals: take collective action to be healed from a certain disease. The belief that the charismatic prophet-healer can release them from the bondage of Satan, is an important binding force integral for church growth. The reason being that at these spiritual moments, ill-bodies have absolute trust in the leader as they "dissolve the psychological boundary between the self and the other" (Junker 2014:421). It is under these circumstances they they are manipulated by the prophet-healers for their own benefit.

Conclusion

Given that the possessed persons are not accountable for what they say in a trance, the onus is on the charismatic leader: Papa; Prophet; Major One, as some are known, to protect the self-worth of ill-bodies: "And her parents [after the healing of Jairus' daughter] were amazed; but he charged them to tell no one what had happened" (Luke 8:56). Given that these charismatic entrepreneurs have the ability to win over devotees to tell the whole world about their private lives, the uploading of those testimonies on the basis of a selective reading of some New Testament passages is detrimental to their public image. I argue that this certainly does more harm on their self-worth inside and outside congregation-based networks. The solidarity that emerges on the basis of ill-bodies, the collective action taken to, for example, reveal the

individual's HIV status and the postings of what individuals say under spiritual possession certainly does them greater harm than good. This is true given that just a simple Google search can reveal how religion has damaged the image of faithful believers on social media platforms. The anticipated benefits arguably outweigh their self-value in the background of deep-seated beliefs about health and well-being in the African context.

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