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The abuse of spiritual authority among some African Neo-Pentecostals and its impact on human rights

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Abstract

As a part of the newer versions of the Pentecostal movement that evolved from the 1980s to date, the African Neo-Pentecostals (ANP) are characterised by the practice of spiritual authority (SA). Through the explanatory sequential model of mixed research method which involves juxtaposing a few qualitative pieces of evidence with quantitative empirical results from 414 respondents, this article investigated the existence of human rights violations among the ANP. The quantitative result showed that 82% of the total respondents on all questions agree that human rights abuse exists among the ANP. Subsequently, the article critiqued the practices using New Testament Theology and related human rights treatises on religious freedom. It then opined that when spiritual authority is misappropriated, spiritual authoritarianism becomes the practice, and the abuse of human rights is inevitable. In the end, recommendations were made for the sustainability of human rights irrespective of religious affiliation.

Key words

Spiritual authority; authoritarianism; human rights; African Neo-Pentecostalism

1. Introduction

One of the interesting emphases of the African Neo-Pentecostals is "spiritual authority" (SA)[1]. Holm (1995:18) asserts that the SA debate is a constant sore spot between the Pentecostals and their detractors. The doctrine appropriates esteemed authority to African Neo-Pentecostal Leaders (ANPL) under phrases like spiritual covering, spiritual father, spiritual mother, and spiritual parents. Sadly, the misappropriation of such authority may give rise to spiritual authoritarianism and the abuse of human rights. Concomitantly, Cheryl states that "authority is a marvellous, dangerous word, behind which many a power-hungry person hides, believing that authority gives him the right to rule others, to have others acquiesce to his views of spiritual right and wrong" (1983:87, 157). Also, as William Pitt, the Earl of Chatham, and former Prime Minister of England puts it, "unlimited power is apt to corrupt the minds of those who possess it" (Ratcliffe 2021a). Aptly so, these words remained a popular slogan in leadership spheres across the globe. John Edward Acton rephrased these words in his letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton when he stated that "power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely" (Ratcliffe 2021b). Arguably, presenting such a quote in a letter to a Bishop implies that spiritual leaders have authority in society and there is a propensity for abuse in appropriation. Such propensity cannot be overlooked among some of the African Neo-Pentecostals, being one of the fastest-growing denominations. Therefore, this article aims to investigate the possible misappropriation of spiritual authority and its effect on human rights among the ANPL. To carry out this task, pieces of evidence from qualitative and quantitative surveys, literature and media reports are presented. The

1 Thompson (2020) sees spiritual authority (SA) as divinely delegated and distinct from religious authority and ecclesiastical authority. Aberle (2020) asserts that SA is a God-given right to receive and use God's power that flows from the indwelling Holy Spirit. More precisely SA "is not a feeling of authoritativeness and it is okay not to have authoritative or powerful feelings" (ibid). Contrarily, using Act 16:1-10, Act 17:15, Act 20:3-4,13, 1 Cor. 16:10-12, 2 Cor. 8:6 and 22, Eph. 6:21-22, Phil. 2:25, Col. 4:7, Col. 4:14, Col. 4:7, 14 and 17, 1 Thes. 3:1-2, 2 Tim. 4:9-12 and 20-21, Titus 1:5 and Titus 3:12-13, Watchman Nee seeks to suggest that SA is a system where the spiritually less experienced learned to submit to the direction of the more spiritual by being led and persuaded to act in specific ways. Watchman's thought seems to be the key idea of some African Neo-Pentecostal leaders with regards to the definition and expression of SA; a feeling of having superior spirituality and power to rule over followers (Watchman, 2014).

quantitative research exercise had about 15 questions responded to by 414 adherents. These are followed by a critical analysis using New Testament theological and legal lenses.[2] Finally, the article offers recommendations. The article will now present the reports of the quantitative survey below.

2. Quantitative survey report

In pursuit of data collection to verify the existence of human rights abuse among the African Neo-Pentecostals a quantitative survey was carried out. 414 Respondents' experiences were randomly collected from Africans living in Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya, Ghana, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Cameroon, and Uganda. Among them, 92.3% (382) are members of the Neo-Pentecostals and each respondent answered 11 questions presented by abbreviations in figure 1 below.[3] Also, the respondents fall within three age groups: 72% (31–50years), 17.9% (18–30 years) and lastly, 10.2% (51–70 years). Correspondingly, the survey commentary has been checked to verify the accuracy of the presentation against biasness. The questions focused on forceful obedience under spiritual authority constrain (OSAC); spiritual authority overstressed to achieve adherents' submission (SAOS); spiritual authority abuse on adherents' electoral decisions (SAAED); spiritual authority abuse in adherents' marriages (SAAM); spiritual authority abuse on rights to choose a local assembly (SAARCC); spiritual authority abuse on members' rights to quit a local assembly (SAAMIQ); Adherents desire for the right of choice (ADROC); adherents' perception of pastoral authoritarianism (APASA); abuse of members and ministry staff human rights (AMMSHR); giving under spiritual authority constrain (GSAC) and finally spiritual authority as an obstacle to adherents' demand for accountability (SAOADA).

2 Two reference styles are applied due to the interdisciplinary nature of this research. OSCOLA applies to the legal citations, while Chicago style applies to others.

3 See survey data at https://docs.google.com/forms/d/18bTk2DKN_niYwcqoYNs8F5IbP4sIHtrY5I0_S5QApCk/edit#responses

Questions	Respondents	Yes	Sometime	No	Affirmations
OSAC	402	40.50%	25.90%	33.60%	66.40%
SAOS	401	61.30%	30.40%	8.20%	91.70%
SAAED	401	55.40%	34.90%	9.70%	90.30%
SAAM	402	26.40%	55%	18.70%	81.40%
SAARCC	403	41.20%	41.40%	17.40%	82.60%
SAAMIQ	400	31.50%	43.80%	24.80%	75.30%
ADROC	404	66.80%	18.80%	14.40%	85.60%
APASA	401	49.40%	34.90%	15.70%	84.30%
AMMSHR	404	61.40%	25.50%	13.10%	86.90%
GSAC	405	44.20%	41.70%	14.10%	85.90%
SAOADA	403	60%	26.80%	13.20%	86.80%

Fig. 1: Quantitative data summary

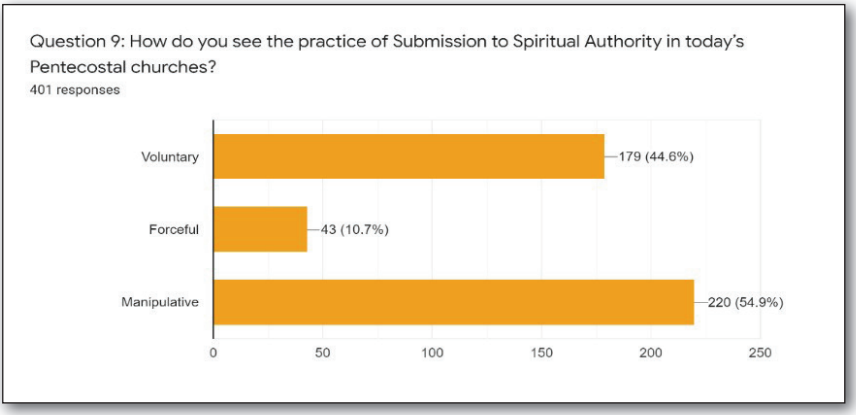

Fig. 2: Shows that some ANPL are authoritarians, manipulative & forceful

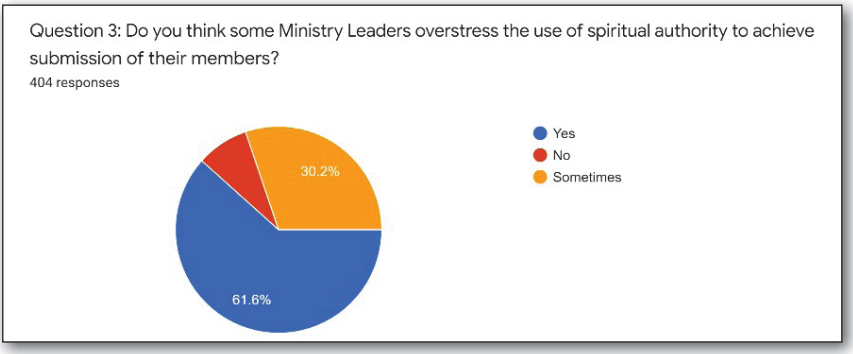

Fig. 3: Shows that some ANPL use Spiritual Authority to achieve forceful submission

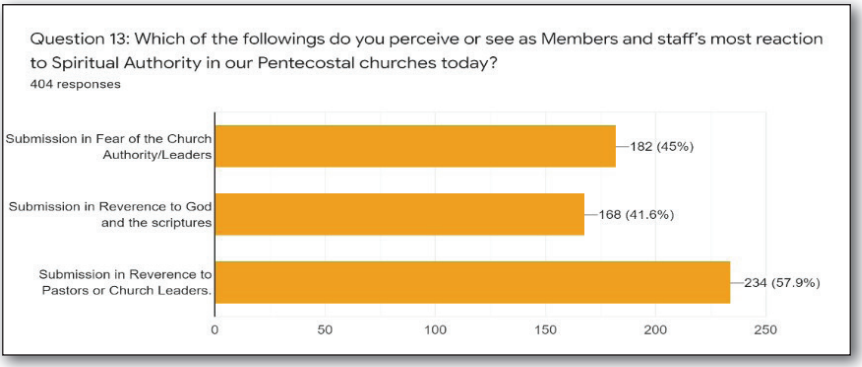

Fig 4: Reverence for God and scripture is the least motivation for submission

Approximately, 70% of respondents have been constrained to carry out instructions from African Neo-Pentecostal leaders (ANPL) without their wishes. In Figure 2 above, over 65% testified that ANPL are authoritarians, controlling, manipulative, and forceful. In figure 3 above, 91.8% claim that spiritual authority (SA) is overstressed to achieve submission. Likewise, 80.4% agree that ANPL control their decision at the electoral polls. Furthermore, 81.5% testified that ANPL exert undue influence in the marriage of adherents. Surprisingly, about 80% of respondents claim that ANPL use their SA to forcefully keep unpleased adherents in the local assembly when they no longer desire membership. Also, about

80.1% perceive authoritarianism in their interaction with their pastors. Similarly, in figure 4, 41% responded to submission in fear. Likewise, 57.9% responded to submission out of reverence for the person or personality of the church leader. Additionally, the report shows that about 86% of respondents have made financial donations on the account of obedience to pastors' authority rather than voluntary donations without any right to demand accountability. This scenario suggests that fear of fellow human beings motivates submission. This is evident in the same report where reverence for God and scriptures are the lowest motivators for submission. Therefore, it can be inferred that when people act in fear, they unwillingly sacrifice their rights.

2.1 Data analyses and interpretations, juxtaposed with interviews, literature and media evidence

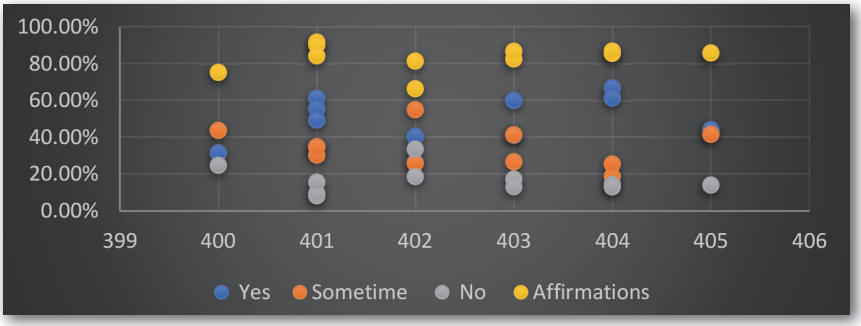

Fig. 5: Affirmation chart of human rights abuse

Figure 5 above provides an affirmative chart analysis and interprets figure 1 data in a scattered chart. This is where the research summary is captured. As represented by the "ash dots", the research outcome shows that only 33.6% and below argued against the existence of abuse of human rights. On a closer view, this *non-affirmative group* falls under 20% on average. Based on this evidence, human rights abuse via spiritual authority (SA) practice exists. The "orange dots" show that in the maximum range 55% of respondents agree that human rights are abused. Interpretively, the percentage reveals that not all ANPL abuse their SA. Concurrently, 55% inferred that spiritual authoritarianism is growing among the ANPL.

Additionally, the "blue dots" on the chart show that in the maximum range 61.4% do not agree that their human rights should be inconsequential when relating with SA figures in the church. Generally, more than 50% of the "blue dots" which represent *the strong affirmative group* show that African Neo-Pentecostalism has strong elements of human rights abuse, especially on adherents' voter behaviour, rights to demand accountability, rights to change a local assembly and interference in adherents' marriages. Ultimately, the "yellow dots" show the *overall affirmation* which represents the cumulative position of the majority on all the questions. The "yellow dots" which is the total sum of the position of the "blue and orange dots" remain on top of the chat. Interpretively, on average 82% of the total respondents on all questions agree that human rights abuse exists among the ANP. In the next subsection, minimal interviews, literature, and media reports will be brought forward to buttress these analyses and interpretations.

2.1.1 Physical abuse

Derick (2021) reports with video evidence of a Cameroonian Pastor who flogs ministry trainees on the altar as a process of assessing their readiness for ministry. Likewise, in Ghana Okeke (2016) with video evidence allegedly published Bishop Daniel Obinim's abuse of authority. The Bishop was recorded beating up a member who engaged in premarital sex. In Nigeria, the popular Anambra prophet called Odumeje (2018) beats up some members (cf. Odozi 2019). Also, Kelly (2020) reports with video evidence of an abusive action where a Ugandan Pastor flogs his members who do not bring tithes and offerings to the church. These and many nondocumented reports imply that physical abuse is gradually becoming a trend. Although the members may not be pleased with physical abuse, they revere the authority of their spiritual leader. This section's empirical survey shows that over 70% of respondents claim that they have been forced to submit to spiritual leaders' demands or actions without their consent.

2.1.2 Sexual abuse

Agazue (2016:1–18) asserts that sexual exploitation of vulnerable women by religious leaders is common among ANPL. For example, Sylvester (2019) reports that a Nigerian Bishop in Warri drugged and raped a 19-year-old daughter of a member during a deliverance session. Raymond (2016) also

points out that a prominent Nigerian preacher reportedly manipulated a female member into a consensual sexual activity. Likewise, a Nigerian Pastor based in the United Kingdom was jailed for raping multiple children and adults about 88 times in 20 years (see Adekanye 2020). Furthermore, Mtshilibe (2019) reports a case in Soshanguve, South Africa, where a Pentecostal pastor is facing a court trial for allegedly raping boys in his congregation. In his conclusion, Mtshilibe claims that South Africans are looking for a quick fix to their problems, and as a result, pastors take advantage of their situation. These reports synchronise with the quantitative data in figure 3 above where over 91.8% of respondents claim that ANPL overstretch SA beyond their moral boundaries.

2.1.3 Economic abuse

In Kenya, Otomoa (2019) interviewed Professor Benson Mulemi who asserts that once the masses have reached a breaking point in their challenges, they bow to fake pastors who take advantage of them. For example, Prophetess Lucy Nduta extracted from HIV victims their hard-earned money to provide cures through a spiritual process. Unfortunately, it turned out that the miracles were fake, whereas the congregants were already extorted. It was on this note that she was convicted and jailed for fleecing Kenyans. Additionally, Mitshilibe (2019) reports some horrific cases of abuse in South Africa triggered by adherents' impoverishment. Some members gave their wealth to prophets and ended up homeless on the streets. These narratives agree with figure 5 where over 86% of respondents claim that human rights abuse is popular in the African Neo-Pentecostal churches.

2.1.4 Abuse of ministry staff's rights and unhealthy marriage interference

One of the most trending human rights abuse cases in the media is between Apostle Johnson Suleman and his associate pastor in Nigeria. Sahara Reporters (2021) made public the effort by the Inspector General of Police to probe the allegation made against Suleman in which Pastor Mike Davids accused him of having an illicit affair with his wife. Although Bolashodun (2021) reports that both Suleman and the woman involved debunked the allegations, the husband maintains that his wife's relationship with Suleman destroyed their marriage. Sahara Reporters (2021) alleged that Davids introduced his wife to Johnson Suleman. Subsequently, Suleman's

unholy relationship with her led to what became a public outcry. Davids claimed that Suleman denied him access to his wife and children for over two years. Worse still, Suleman empowered the woman as head of an Abuja branch of the church without the husband's consent. Subsequently, while Davids received death threats on the matter, Suleman headed to court for intervention. Consequently, Davids was arrested. This story is one among several accusations of sexual abuse against Suleman. Should any of these allegations in the public space be true, they may represent the abuse of staff rights and infringement on adherents' marriage relationship.

Furthermore, two among the 414 respondents narrated their bitter experiences. Firstly, Kilma[4] – a volunteer lay leader of a very popular Neo-Pentecostal Church in West Africa – is currently divorced. This painful experience occurred due to the intervention of his spiritual leaders. As a man under authority, he submitted his marriage crisis to his pastors for positive intervention. Sadly, he claimed the pastors fanned the ember of further crisis. Eventually, Kilma's wife walked out of the marriage. In his concluding remarks, Kilma agreed they have managed some challenges as a couple for over 10 years. Regrettably, when their pastors got involved for the first time, it ended in a divorce. Secondly, Mrs Macron,[5] an Abuja-based Neo-Pentecostal adherent, narrated her brother's ordeal. In the bid to seek counsel and improve his marriage, his pastor was called in for counselling. Sadly, the pastor was biased in his approach because the woman in question was more committed to working in the church. Afterwards, the pastor indulged in an illicit relationship with the woman. Eventually, the marriage ended in divorce. At the time of Mrs Macron's report, the woman in question had moved into an apartment rented by the same pastor as his mistress after a few months of pregnancy. Mrs Macron claimed that the extended family and friends were traumatised by the sad event. These two cases corroborate the survey report in section 2.1 which sustains that over

4 Kilma's original name and the popular Neo-Pentecostal church have been withheld at his request. This is to protect his privacy and avoidance of further escalation of divorce trauma. This is also in accordance with research ethics.

5 Mrs Macron (pseudonym) used with permission. But she withdrew the clergy's name and church to avoid unforeseen reactions from the popular Neo-Pentecostal pastor and his mistress.

81.5% of respondents agree that some ANPL exert undue influence in the marriage of adherents under the guise of spiritual authority.

Overall, from the cases of physical, sexual, economic abuse and unhealthy marriage interference, the pieces of information support the claim that some of the ANPL pastors abuse their spiritual authority over congregants. This is clear from the position of the strong affirmative group and the overall affirmations of the respondents in section 2.1. Agreeably, it takes a high level of manipulation, forcefulness, and control to carry out such abuses. Thus, the quantitative and qualitative research outcome, as well as the literature and media reports represent pieces of evidence that ANPL abuse the rights of adherents. Now that the existence of abuse has been established, the next section will look into the source of the abuse.

3. Sources of human rights abuse: misinterpretation and misapplication of scripture

Cole (2007) expresses scary concerns about the idea of spiritual authority (SA). He gave examples of the cult leader Jim Jones who murdered over 900 followers back in the late seventies. Also, Cole accused religious leaders of using their SA to arrange forceful marriage unions and demand a total handover of adherents' assets to church authority. He then called them extremists and authoritarians. Sadly, as Cole alleged, these leaders use the scriptural clause "touch not my anointed" (Psalm 105:15) to escape any form of questioning, criticism, and correction (2007). Indeed, this represents a misinterpretation and misapplication of scripture by some ANPL. In another instance, Watchman Nee, a foremost Pentecostal leader and proponent of SA theology, claims that "authority" is the highest biblical subject. He states that "God has only one goal in the church, which is to manifest His authority in the universe" (Watchman 1949:3). This opinion is contestable (contra Ross 2014: 1–46; An American Christian 2020). Also, Watchman made an idiosyncratic assertion that God's greatest demand from humankind is not bearing the cross, offerings, consecration, or self-sacrifice; God's greatest demand is submission to God through his deputy authority, which is the church leaders (1949:3). These claims which position God's love as a lesser subject have a psychological impact on religious adherents such that they perceive God's deputy authorities (church

leaders) as most important in the religious space. Contrary to Watchman, submission to deputy authority cannot be the highest requirement or commandment of God. Several scriptures attest to the supremacy of God's love. Of all the commandments, love is the greatest (see Mt 22: 36 – 40, Gal 5:13, 1 Pet 4:8). More precisely, 1 John 4:8 asserts that God is love and not authority. Thus, it can be argued that if God is love, he cannot value authority above himself. Yes! God has authority, but above all, God is love. Hence, God's priority on earth cannot be overexpressing and defending his authority but expressing his love for humankind. This analysis queries Watchman's SA theology and some ANPL who subscribe to it. Clearly, the promotion of SA above God's love, and the elevation of God's deputy authority (Church leaders) shows the theological window through which some ANPL develop tendencies of abuse. For example, among others, House on the Rock (HOTR) uses the Watchman Nee manual to teach adherents about submission to authority. Invariably all branches of HOTR and perhaps some mentees of the general overseer use the same manual.[6] Such subjective scriptural interpretation of Watchman Nee may have influenced some ANPL.

Watchman's second opinion is the conferment of an infallibility and unaccountability status on church leaders. He claims that SA should be far from error and must be seen to be correct always. This is some sort of infallibility. Watchman further asserts that if any leader is in error, God – not any human being – will judge him or her (1949:64–65). Although Watchman acknowledges that there are two problems in the church today, lack of absolute submission, and misrepresentation of authority (1949:67), he sustained a subjective position of vertical submission, accountability, and correction. In his words, "a deputy authority of God must learn not to establish his authority, but to build up the authority of those who are over him" (1949:69). In this instance, Watchman refers to the submission of church authority to a higher authority. Consequently, adherents, contemporaries, church sub-leaders and committees cannot query the error of any higher SA figure in the church. Such non-horizontal accountability assertion alienates adherents' rights in the equation of accountability.

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6 HOTR Manual of SA training manual is at http://tfiverepro.com/pdf/HOTR%20Workbook.pdf. It is an addendum to the textbook of SA by Watchman Nee, a compulsory textbook for workers and leaders training.

Indeed, these theologies of infallibility and vertical accountability create a window for possible abuse of authority. This article will now briefly look at two examples with a similar theological approach in Africa.

3.1 Loyalty and disloyalty doctrine

Bishop Dag Heward Mills of Ghana teaches "loyalty and disloyalty". He travels globally, teaching church leaders how to deal with disloyal members and associates. His teaching does not permit freedom to quit a local assembly or denomination nor questioning of SA in any form[7]. As in the case of Watchman Nee, the effect of Heward's theology of "loyalty and disloyalty" substantiate the claim of the survey respondents in section 2.1 that abuse of SA takes away adherents' rights of choice and desire to demand accountability from their leaders.

3.2 Spiritual authority training manual

In the HOTR spiritual authority manual, the verb "subject" replaces "submit". The phrase "subject to spirit authority" is sustained severally (see HOTR, n.d, 10). This phrase may induce adherents' psychological disposition to forceful submission as it depicts an optionless exercise. Likewise, the manual emphasises obedience through suffering. It is biblically true that Jesus learnt obedience by what He suffered (Heb 5:8), however, the text does not refer to the continuous sufferings of believers in Christ. Christ took the believers' place in suffering and gave them love and salvation. The notion that adherents need to continue to suffer, and endure pain, oppression, and abuse from their bosses and pastors may be scripturally questionable. Also, the HOTR manual (n.d, 13) seeks to infer that inability to endure such pain, oppression, and injustices reveals adherents' spiritual weakness and as such, they need to examine themselves. This notion may be tantamount to indoctrinating adherents to consciously assimilate abuse. Interpretively, it may infer that it is wrong not to submit to what is wrong. Thus, using this ideology as a background to demand submission can easily promote the vulnerability of adherents to abusive spiritual authoritarians. Authority should not be established through obedience to what is wrong,

7 For details see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ofm3cfPmZMU, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-J9R4xhag7M and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9CZpZRhz16k

rather authority ought to be established through obedience to what is right. Furthermore, the HOTR manual (n.d. 17–18) suggests that delegated spiritual authorities are intermediaries between God and man, this is scripturally contestable. The priesthood of all believers presents everyone as equal before God (See Rev 1:5–6). The idea of superiority only confers some deistic authority on the pastors thereby creating the masters-servants model in the church. This doctrinal assertion agrees with the outcome of the survey in section 2.1 where about 70% of respondents attest that they have been constrained to submission without the right to alternative choices. Worse still, this SA model forbids independent reasoning (see HOTR n.d. 21–24).

Consequently, the pieces of information and analyses in this section establish that scriptural misinterpretation and misapplication can create the medium of human rights abuse. Secondly, the information validates the quantitative research evidence in figure 2 where 75.6% of respondents agree that ANPL use authoritarianism derived from scriptural misappropriation, routed through workers' and leaders' training, to achieve forceful submission. Likewise, the information agrees with the notion of 86% of respondents that adherents have no right to demand accountability. With such a model of SA training, African Neo-Pentecostal churches can only continue to build zombies in the pews and subsequently open windows for abuse. Now that the evidence of misinterpretation and misapplication has been established, this article will now critique the practice through theological and legal lenses.

4. Spiritual authority abuse under a theological lens

Harris (2018) described four types of authority in the bible. The first is "koah" which is translated as a great capacity to achieve. This was used in Deuteronomy 8:18 to describe an ability to create wealth. The second is "exousia" which is translated as exercising authority over darkness. Jesus expressed such authority in Mark 3:13–15. The third is "dunamis" which speaks of the power to conduct miracles and healings as seen in Acts 4: 32–33. The fourth is "kratos" which means the power to excel in one's sphere of influence (government, career, business etc). The most applicable to this article is "exousia" which speaks of "authority over". Concurrently, Birkey

(2001) brought forward another word called "epitage" connoting authority. In his opinion, "exousia" is often confused with "epitage". In the Bible Tools (2021), Strong's and Thayer's Greek Lexicon shows that "epitage" was used 7 times in the New Testament, namely Romans 6:26, 1 Corinthians 7:6, 7:25, 2 Corinthians 8:8, 1 Timothy 1:1, Titus 1:3 and Titus 2:15. While Strong's and Thayer's Greek Lexicon interpreted "epitage" as injunction, command, and mandate, it is a feminine part of speech in Greek that expresses affection. By inference, love is the foundation of authority expressed in "epitage". More interestingly, none of the seven scriptures of "epitage" represents authority to rule or dominate fellow human beings. If anything, Titus 2:15 encourages that rebuke with authority is to be done in love according to the female expression of "epitage".

Both *exousia* and *epitage* which are closest to the expression of authority in the context of this article, indicate by no means the characteristics of dominance, forceful control, manipulation, and destructive intervention in marriages. Contrary to some ANPL practices evidenced in Figures 2 and 3, the word *authority (exousia)* in biblical context does not indicate jurisdiction over others. In the N.T. all kinds of personal dominance or rulership among God's people are forbidden (see Matt. 20:25–28, 23:1–12; Eph. 5:21; Phil. 2:1–5, etc.). Correspondingly Birkey (2001) opines that N.T. ecclesial governance is "collegial" rather than "hierarchical", with the whole assembly involved (cf. Mt. 18:15–20; Acts 15; 1 Cor. 5:4). In other words, biblical authority is nowhere pre-packaged based on gender, status, nor conferred on any clerical figure. Thus, the actions of some ANPL in the narratives of Davids, Kilma and Mrs Macron in sub-section 2.1.4, alongside 81.5% of respondents' evidence do not represent a biblical standard of SA. Rather than engaging in destructive marital interventions founded on personal interest, ANPL ought to express their authority via the love of God for the families in crisis. The biblical authority (*exousia* or *epitage*) is given to build and not to destroy or abuse families, and adherents' rights. Authority is used to achieve deliverance from demons and powers of darkness, healing, and miracles (see Mk 1:27, Lk 10:17–19 and Mt 10:8). Invariably, the same authority was transmitted to the church (see Mk 13:34 and 16:17–18, Lk 9:1, Acts 3:6). While Christians are given authority to exercise power over darkness, it is not given to command, control, or abuse humankind. Thus, authority is not given to church leaders to create and

sustain master-servant relationships knowing that all human beings are equal.

4.1. Critiquing spiritual authority abuse with Kowalski's paradigm

When asked about the legitimacy of spiritual authority (SA), Kowalski (2013) an N.T. scholar and a member of the Assemblies of God clergy, stipulated certain considerations. First is the genuineness of spiritual authority. In his opinion, the mere fact that someone claims SA and has a following does not ensure that authority is genuine. Interpretively, where there is a false spiritual leadership, there will be a false SA. Using Hebrews 13:17, Kowalski (2013), suggests that Christians are to submit only to legitimate SA because a blind submission that forbids independent thought will result in confusion and contradiction. Kowalski (2013) suggests that the genuineness of a SA must be carefully interrogated. Thus, actions that are contrary to moral and biblical standards like physical, economic, and sexual abuse as seen in sub-sections 2.1.1 to 2.1.4 above must be categorised as undertakings of false religious leaders. In such cases, adherents ought to withdraw their submission.

Kowalski's second consideration is the extent of true spiritual authority. In his view, Christian leaders are authorities under authority. God is the ultimate authority and God's word is the final authority for doctrine and practice (2013). Cole (2007) agrees no less with Kowalski that "all authority on the human planet is delegated authority" (cf. Rom 13:1–2). Kowalski's thoughts on the extent of true SA provoke questions on the boundaries of some of the African Neo-Pentecostal leaders' authority. Thus, the physical abuse which includes flogging members who do not bring offerings and tithes to the church on one hand and hitting members with harmful objects in the name of deliverance on the other hand indicate an overstep of boundaries. Also, forcefully demanding submission as established in section 3 and figures 2 and 3 all raise theological and moral questions. Nowhere does the bible exemplify these types of abusive actions. For Holmberg "no Christian has an inherent right to control another in Christ's church" (1978: 6, 192). By implication, as God's delegated authority, it is not given to Christian leaders to coronate themselves as unquestionable final authorities. There is a need to legitimize their delegated authority under God with some form of checks and balances using the harmony of scripture

and accountability. Therefore Cole (2007) recommends that authority in a local assembly should be vested in the "Plurality of Elders" so that no man can play God. While dissecting Titus 1:5, Cole (2007) attests that whenever the New Testament refers to elders of a local church, it always uses the plural. So, using the plurality of eldership to check abuse of authority is instructive for the contemporary African Neo-Pentecostal churches.

4.2 Critiquing spiritual authority abuse

Although there are many N.T. Scholars who wrote on the subject of SA, the focus in this section will be on N.T. Wright. While he is rooted in an evangelical denomination, in some cases, his theology embraces the need to think outside the box, thereby embracing some Reformed theological indices that remain within a biblical context (Wright 2018; Devine 2011). Regarding spiritual authority, Wright claims that our generation has a problem with authority. In his words, "In church and in state we use the word "authority" in different ways, some positive and some negative" (2018). Thus Wright agrees that authority is scriptural, but its use can be positive (rightly deployed) or negative (abusively deployed). Wright further asserts that the meaning of "authority" varies considerably according to the context within which the discourse takes place. However, he contends that the word "authority" should not be the fixed point and have adjusted "scripture" to meet it; rather scripture should be the fixed point to define, interpret, and apply authority (Wright 2018; Devine 2011). Among other things, Wright asks: what are we looking for when we are looking for authority in the church? Where would we find it? How would we know when we had found it? What would we do with authoritative documents, people or whatever, if we had them? In an attempt to answer some of these questions, Wright expresses the popular notion in the church. In his words:

> When people in the church talk about authority they are very often talking about *controlling* people or situations. They want to make sure that everything is regulated properly, that the church does not go off the rails doctrinally or ethically, that correct ideas and practices are upheld and transmitted to the next generation. "Authority" is the place where we go to find out the correct answers to key questions such as these. This notion, however, runs into all

> kinds of problems when we apply it to the Bible. Is that really what the Bible is for? Is it there to control the church? Is it there simply to look up the correct answers to questions that we already know? … As we read the Bible, we discover that the answer to these questions seems in fact to be "no" (Wright 2018).

Interpretively, seeing authority as a means to control people or situations, is not synonymous with the New Testament practice. Wright seeks to agree with the contemplation of this article which holds that authority itself is not the problem but its misinterpretation and misapplication. He then reminds both the Reformed and Evangelicals not to take for granted the primary place of the scriptures and that everything else (including the interpretation and application of authority) has to be lined up in relation to scripture.

To misinterpret or misapply authority in Wright's opinion is nothing but "a low doctrine of inspiration" (2018). He then proposes the re-examination of the concept of authority itself to see if the current approach can be better in line with the scriptures. In his words "I want to suggest that scripture's own view of authority focuses on the authority of God himself … If we think for a moment about what we are actually saying when we use the phrase "authority of scripture", we must surely acknowledge that this is a shorthand way of saying that, though authority belongs to God, God has somehow invested this authority in scripture" (2018). In other words, God did not invest his authority in individuals; rather individuals who obey and practice the scriptures are expressing the authority of God through his word. Wright accordingly affirms that in the New Testament authority is ultimately invested in Christ. Although it is also invested in the apostles and other church leaders, the authority has to do with the Holy Spirit. Thus the church through the work of the Holy Spirit is called to work within God's world as God's accredited agent(s) (Wright 2018; Devine 2011)

On the question of the purpose and character of God's authority, Wright asks: what is God doing with his authority? In his words:

> We discover, as we look at the Bible itself, that God's model of authority is not like that of the managing director over the business, not like that of the governing body over the college, not like that of the police or the law courts who have authority over society. God's

> authority is based on the fact that this God is the loving, wise, creator, redeemer God. And his authority is his sovereign exercise of *those powers*; his love and wise creations and redemption (Wright 2018).

So, what is God doing with authority? Wright sustains that

> Authority is not the power to control people, and crush them, and keep them in little boxes. The church often tries to do that – to tidy people up. Nor is the Bible as the vehicle of God's authority meant to be information for the legalist. We have to apply some central reformation insights to the concept of authority itself. In other words, to embrace a reformation insight is to see God's authority as vested in scripture and designed to liberate human beings, to judge and condemn evil and sin in the world in order to *set people free* to be fully human. That's what God is in the business of doing. That is what his authority is there for *(Wright* 2018; cf. Nixon 335–336, 347).

In summary, Wright and the likes of Nixon firstly agree that there is a fundamental error in the misinterpretation and misapplication of spiritual authority in the church. Secondly, Wright thinks SA is vested in scriptures but can be expressed through leaders under the influence of the Holy Spirit and under the guidance of the scriptures. Consequently, it is not about controlling or usurping authority over God's people but expressing God's power through love and wisdom to his creation, including church adherents. Consequently, the New Testament position of N.T. Wright and others, expressed a moral and theological question on all of the issues raised in this article which include physical, economic, sexual abuses, abuse of ministry staff's rights, and unhealthy marriage interference.

4.3 Spiritual authority under a legal lens

In Coughlin's work on law and theology, he claims that the interaction of religion, law and culture is necessary to evoke fresh articulation of what it means to be human (2000:617). He calls for an anthropological approach from a Franciscan point of view, whereby the ideas of Christ should never be detached from his humanity (2000:609, 622). By inference, Christian leaders also need to approach SA from an anthropological perspective

such that while demanding submission from adherents' legal order and especially human rights are considered. Coughlin further maintains that the church must remain *semper reformanda*[8] (2000:623); while retaining the doctrine of SA, the church must remain an organism of constant change. This change must include flexibility to accommodate an anthropological understanding of freedom, respect, and human rights among others (ibid). Consequently, legal provisions must be integrated within the church. This may include the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) among others. Below are some of the legal clauses that address specific issues investigated in this article.

4.3.1 African Banjul Charter (ABC) and International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)

The scriptures remain the ultimate standard for addressing issues of abuse in the church; however, given the submission of Coughlin on the interaction of religion and law for anthropological reflections, ABC and ICCPR articles are possible instruments that can guide ANPL to appropriate SA in a manner that absolves them from abuse-related practices. Most of the issues raised in the survey, literature, and media reports in sections 2 and 3 above have related legal clauses to which Christian leaders ought to give attention, in order to exercise their authority without legal trespass. For example, Article 8 of the Banjul Charter stipulates the free practice of religion.[9] Article 10(2) speaks against any culture of compulsion with regards to religious association.[10] Article 11 provides that the exercise of rights and freedom are paramount in religious practice. This includes the right of choice of place of worship and the right to change a place of worship freely.[11] These clauses indicate that our society cannot accept the abuses narrated in section 2 especially the culture of submission without recourse to reason and the rights of adherents to make personal decisions.

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8 *Semper reformanda* is a Latin phrase interpreted as "always reforming". It suggests that the church remains an organism of constant change and development.

9 Article 8 (2) See details https://www.achpr.org/legalinstruments/detail?id=49

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

Likewise, Article 19 speaks to spiritual authoritarianism. It provides that nothing justifies the domination of a person by another.[12]

Concomitantly, the ICCPR delivers the guarantee of freedom of religion. Article 18 eliminates all forms of intolerance and discrimination. Article 18(2) forbids any form of coercion. This includes the use of threats and sanctions to compel members to adhere to doctrines and beliefs. The summary of the provision is about freedom from coercion.[13] Indeed, these legal clauses speak to cases related to the outcome of this article's investigation. For example, coercing members to purchase fake HIV miracle drugs, as seen in subsection 2.1.3 earlier, is a gross aberration. Such economic exploitation by coercion is scripturally and legally questionable. Also, Article 19 (2) provides that everyone is entitled to freedom of expression, including full rights to seek and receive information regardless of the frontiers. In this sense, frontiers can mean leaders, boundaries, traditions, and doctrines. Besides, in Article 18 (3), the freedom of adherents can only be limited by matters relating to public safety, order, health, or morals. Additionally, The South African Commission on Religious Rights, Language and Culture made significant findings on spiritual authority and religious abuses. Using the Bill of Rights in the South African Constitution, the commission condemned various abuse-related practices of religious organisations and recommended prosecution of those guilty of such practices (CRL Report 2017, 34–37).[14]

Consequently, these legal instruments support religious adherents' rights to demand accountability within the religious setting since accountability is permissible within the framework of order and morals, both in the legal and theological spaces. Clearly, African legal documents are not against religious practices, but the use of such practices as instruments of domination, oppression, and any form of human rights abuse. There is no ignorance in law, irrespective of religious affiliation. Therefore, it is imperative for ANPL to arm themselves with theological and legal knowledge to exercise their authority while respecting human rights at the

12 Ibid.

13 See UN-ICCPR at https://www.ohchr.org/en/issues/freedomreligion/pages/standards.aspx

14 See Recommendations 1, 5 and 6

same time. Moving from the theological and legal critique, this article will now make specific recommendations below.

5. Recommendations

Five recommendations have been suggested below, however, the authors do not claim to have exhausted the list.

5.1 Developing the heart of love as the foundation of spiritual authority

In section 4.1 above, Strong's and Thayer's Greek Lexicon delineates "epitage" as authority in terms of injunction, command, and mandate. Most importantly, the Lexicon shows that the word is a feminine part of speech in Greek that expresses affection. By inference, love is the foundation of authority expressed in "epitage". It is therefore important that ANPL should approach the exercise of SA from the perspective of love. This is the foundation of Christian salvation, mission, and service. Where there is love, leaders are likely to see their followers as precious before God and the law. Where there is love, chances are that human rights abuse will be minimal. Thus, this article recommends that ANPL, through scriptural guidance and the help of the Holy Spirit, should consciously develop the heart of love to lead and serve their adherents. The style of correction is not excluded in this matter as Titus 2:15 advises that rebuke with authority should be done in love.

5.2 ANPL need to understand the horizontal protocol of God-pastor-member engagement

From the literature and survey report, especially the theological evidence of SA training in section 3 above, it seems the abuse of human rights is connected to the notion that ANPL serve God to obtain authority over their adherents. The vertical approach that suggests God is to be looked up to while members are ruled below is not theological and must be jettisoned. Pastors are called in obedience to God and to serve the people, following the example of Jesus as a servant-leader. A horizontal approach is key; God is to be obeyed in Christian service while the members remain the recipients of such services.

5.3 Engaging the associations of Pentecostal leaders as "Plurality of Elders" to curb abuse of power

Cole (2007) recommends that elders who disregard God's word must be confronted, and if possible, be put under church discipline if they are not willing to repent. He concluded that a "Plurality of Elders" is God's way of protecting the church against abuses of authority that may easily happen if a single person runs the church. This is imperative because Christian leaders are not immune to coercive authority for personal achievements. Consequently, this article recommends that Pentecostal bodies like the Alliance of Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches in South Africa (APCCSA), and Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN) among others can come together and integrate a "plurality of elders" in their operations such that pastors and churches can support themselves as accountability partners. Undoubtedly such engagement can curb, to a certain extent, the abuse of power among some of the ANPL.

5.4 The ANPL need to draw the line where authority ends and when abuse begins

Inability to consciously draw the line can lead to cases like sexual, economic, and physical abuse as shown earlier. Perhaps, the discipline to draw the line can play a very important role in curbing all kinds of abuse. This is where Kowalski's thought on the "extent of true spiritual authority" discussed earlier in section 4.1 becomes instructive for ANPL. There are two ways to achieve this. Firstly, the leaders must be consistently conversant with the theological and legal provisions on respect for human rights and the dignity of humankind. Additionally, in their theological tradition and expressions the ANPL must ask a fundamental anthropological question – "What does it mean to be human in pastoral service?" An objective approach to this question will likely help leaders value human dignity and rights. Secondly, the ANPL must be sensitive to the body language of adherents and staff as a signal as to when the exertion of spiritual authority crosses the line and encroaches on the space of personal rights. Where possible a feedback mechanism to trace and reverse abuse-related actions should be put in place. This self-check strategy can help the ANPL turn away from manipulative, coercive and forceful demands of submission with abusive

undertones. Consequently, adherents' submission will come from the point of persuasion rather than coercion.

5.5 Adherents need to courageously speak out and make decisions

Cases of marriage disintegration, economic, sexual, and physical abuses are sensitive and possibly detrimental to adherents' mental health and self-dignity. Thus, adherents need to muster courage and respectfully engage with their leaders on such issues as individuals or groups. Abuse in the church must not be seen as part of the price for Christian service. The Emergency Services Chaplaincy of South Africa (ESCSA) training manual aptly recommends the process of engagement and decision in abusive cases. It states that

> We must however separate the cost of serving and simple abuse. There are also times when servants are truly abused and do need to move elsewhere to be effective for the Lord. We need to have the spiritual discernment to recognise when we are subject to abuse. Abuse is normally internal, within an entity and accompanied by arrogance and lack of Servant Hearts within those that are abusing us. There is often dishonesty, lack of integrity, nastiness etc involved. It is important to calmly discuss or try to discuss the issue with leadership and only if there is no possibility of resolution it may be time to move on (ESCSA, n.d: 11).

By implication, when an attempt to address abuse-related issues with the church leaders fails, adherents must courageously decide to move to another local assembly.

6. Conclusion

Through an empirical research exercise, juxtaposed with literature and media reports, this article established the existence of human rights abuse among some African Neo-Pentecostals. It posits that misinterpretation and misapplication of spiritual authority opened the window for abusive practices. It then critiqued the delineated abuses with both theological and legal lenses. Although the *overall affirmation* report of the investigation showed that not all ANPL abuse the adherents' rights, abuse is an ongoing practice. The article posits that when spiritual authority is twisted via

biblical misinterpretation and misapplication, spiritual authoritarianism becomes the practice. Subsequently, the abuse of human rights is inevitable. Finally, the article made recommendations to promote value for human dignity and respect for human rights irrespective of religious affiliations.

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