

A Biblical and Theological Analysis of New Prophetic Churches Cultic Tendencies in South Africa

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Abstract: *In 2014, the South African print media reported that a pastor of a New Prophetic Church instructed his congregants to go out and eat grass. A few months later, the same pastor asked his congregants to drink petrol. Several New Prophetic Church pastors also mimicked this pastor by causing members to eat snakes and rodents, sprayed members with a pesticide, and made them drink liquid detergents. On one hand, these incidents infuriated the public that called for government intervention, On the other hand, some Southern African African theologians began to address these cultic practices. Consequently, this article asks: How can New Prophetic Church members and Pentecostals in South Africa respond to these identified cultic tendencies? Osmer's practical theology approach was used to answer the question by analysing the works of the above-mentioned theologians regarding the identified cultic tendencies in these churches. The outcome of the analysis is that the origin of these cultic tendencies was traced, the teachings in these churches were identified, some biblical teachings on miracles were provided, and finally some strategies were provided to assist members in these churches and others Pentecostal address these cultic tendencies.*

Keywords: New Prophetic Churches, cultic practices, biblical teachings, theological analysis, CRL Rights Commission

INTRODUCTION

Pastor Lesego Daniel of Rabboni Centre Ministries, one of the New Prophetic Churches (NPCs), instructing his congregants, during his sermon, to go out of the church to eat grass (Sowetan 2014) created public outrage and sparked a huge debate about doctrine and cultic practices. As if that was not enough, the same pastor later asked some of his congregants to drink petrol (News24 2014). All these incidents were done to demonstrate God's power to congregants and show that the pastor is anointed. Pentecostal and non-Pentecostal theologians responded by providing a biblical and theological analysis of the two incidents. As if it was not enough, several incidents from various pastors from NPCs surfaced in the print and electronic media, particularly NPCs social media platforms. These incidents covered causing congregants to eat snakes and rodents, spraying congregants with a pesticide, and making them drink liquid cleaning detergents. The public deemed these incidents dangerous religious practices that needed to be stopped and called for government intervention. This where The Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities (CRL Rights Commission) sought to intervene. However, the pastors enacting them described them as demonstrating God's miraculous power and their anointing during the CRL hearings. Their position contradicts the South Africa is the Charter of Religious Rights (Mokgoathi and Rembe 2017:6-7).

The CRL Rights Commission commissioned a study between 03 November 2015 and 23 March 2016 (CRL 2017; Pothier 2016:1) and later responded by establishing a commission that summoned leaders of Pentecostal Churches, Neo-Pentecostal Churches and New Prophetic Churches to account for their practices and church governance. The CRL Rights Commission then recommended for the regulation of all churches in South Africa (CRL Rights Commission 2017:34) through a peer-review mechanism (CRL Rights Commission 2017:47), and that it be the final arbiter in regulating religion (CRL Rights Commission 2017:39). This, in its view, was a reasonable way to curb these dangerous religious practices in the country. The chair of the CRL Rights Commission was accused for not using proper procedures to address these incidents (Mokhaothi & Rember 2017:7). Furthermore, the Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA) standing committee rejected these recommendations to regulate religion (see Coertzen 2017:22). It, and later joined by members of civil society and religious formations, argued that the courts should deal with cases of abuse as noticed in the court case of “prophet of Doom” (Lethebo Rabalago) who Mookgophong Magistrate's Court found guilty and sentenced him to a four-year imprisonment or a R36 000 fine (Ramothwala 2018).

With these developments that proposed for the regulation of religion and the subsequent opposition to such move, in mind, this article then logically asks: How can New Prophetic Church members and Pentecostals in South Africa respond to these identified cultic tendencies? This question takes cognisance that prophetism in Africa is not a new practice. It is found among followers of African Traditional Religions (ATRs), African Independent/Indigenous Churches (AICs), Classical Pentecostal Churches (CPCs), Neo-Pentecostal Churches (NPCs) and now among the New Prophetic Churches (NPCs). The challenge with prophetism “is how to identify the spurious from the genuine, since there is a thin line between truth and falsehood, and many will go for anything anyway” (Quayesi-Amakye 2015: 172).

Addressing this challenge requires two approaches and the main question. First is to review what literature says about the NPCs and its cultic tendencies in South Africa. Second is to provide what the literature suggests as a biblical and theological strategies with the view of empowering members from these churches and Pentecostal to handle these identified cultic tendencies.

The answer to the main question, the article uses Osmer's (2008) practical theology approach. Generally, practical theology looks at what is happening and suggests what should be the practical solution. Osmer's method is a way four-step in which congregational leaders are equipped to engage in practical theological interpretation of episodes, situations, and contexts that confront them in ministry (Osmer 2008, 90, 101). The four steps are, the descriptive—which is the first step with the task of elaborating the ongoing situation, the second step is the imperative task which focuses on the cause of the ongoing situation, followed by the normative task—which deals with an explanation of how the problem was addressed or how it can be addressed referring to credible sources and lastly the strategic task—which is a strategy or a way of tackling the problem or a method of solving the ongoing problem.

The article responds to Osmer's four tasks by applying a hybrid of literature and empirical study analysis and then asks four subsidiary questions and provides a relevant heading for each of the sub-questions.

The first task relates to what is happening in these churches. The heading is: Identified teachings in the New Prophetic Churches. The second relates to why is it happening? The heading is: The emergence of the New Prophetic Churches cultic tendencies. The third task relates to what does the Scripture teach about miracles. The heading is: Some biblical teachings about miracles. And the fourth task relates to how can members in these churches and Pentecostal circles respond to these miracles? The heading is: Strategies to assist members from these churches and Pentecostals respond to these identified cultic practices.

The first two sections of the article look at what was taught in NPCs in South Africa and how these churches have emerged.

IDENTIFIED TEACHINGS IN NEW PROPHETIC CHURCHES

The initial newspaper reports about grass eating relied on a social media video post showing the pastor of Rabboni Centre Ministries, pastor Lesego Daniel, instructing his church members to go outside to eat grass (Sowetan 2014). Similarly, with the second petrol drinking incident in the same church (News24 2014). Other newspaper reports narrated other pastors from NPCs mimicking pastor Daniels by causing them to eat snakes and rodents, spraying them with a pesticide and to making them drink cleaning liquid detergents.

As mentioned in the introduction, these incidents infuriated the South African public that deemed these incidents dangerous religious practices that needed to be stopped and called for government intervention. Strangely, the pastors enacting them described them as demonstrating God's miraculous power and their anointing.

The teachings in the NPCs enable to understand the practices of grass eating, drinking petrol, eating snakes and rodents, spraying members with a pesticide and causing them to drink cleaning liquid detergents. Table 1 below, provide, in no order, responses of 100 participants from 15 churches consisting of pastors and church members to interview face-to-face questions. This empirical study was done in White-Hazy area, Mpumalanga province, South Africa (Hungwe 2024:23–24, 32).

Table 1.

THE TEACHINGS OF NEW PROPHETIC CHURCHES	
Giving	Worship
Prosperity	Prophetic ministry
Deliverance	Salvation
Sonship and fatherhood	Healing
Spiritual welfare	Living-victorious life
Holy Spirit	Prayer and fasting
Adult water baptism	Rapture
The second coming	

What are members taught in New Prophetic Churches?

Kgatle (2017:2), Mzondi (2021:7–8; 2022:8–9) and Ramatshwana (2017:6) confirm three of the above listed teaching namely, prophetic ministry, healing and deliverance as key in NPCs. The last two are usually related to addressing fear and attacks from evil forces, including curses that causes poverty. Mashao and Kgatle (2019:2–3) and Resane (2017b:7) confirms the presence the prosperity gospel teachings. Mashao and Kgatle (2019:2–3) also confirm the presence of giving through the sowing and reaping teaching. Kgatle's (2020:6) and Banda's (2020a:8–9) discussion of generational curses and evil forces points to spiritual warfare. Regarding deliverance, Kgatle (2017:3) cautions that:

Deliverance has been done before by the use of anointed substances like water, oil, bracelets, stickers, etc. What is new within the Neo- Pentecostalism in South Africa is the unusual practices like the eating of grass, eating of snakes, drinking of petrol, spraying of Doom on the congregants and other experiences.

Banda (2020a:2) explains some of the bases of practising deliverance among NPCs:

Furthermore, the ANP prophets' basing of their teaching on generational curses on Old Testament passages like Exodus 20:4–5 and Deuteronomy 5:9 where God promises to punish the children for the sins of their parents to third and fourth generation has several theological problems.

Finally, Resane (2017b:5) provides a disturbing feature of their teachings and theological insights:

[L]ack of theological essence in their debates. This is because of their low esteem towards theological analysis, insights or debates. This absence or shallowness of theological insight is replaced with unconventional practices tagged miracles. Both their ecclesiology and Christology are always on personal convictions rather than in the hermeneutical principles of the Bible. Hence, their ministries are exceedingly egocentric in structures, methods and objectives.

THE EMERGENCE OF NEW PROPHETIC CHURCHES CULTIC TENDENCIES

NPCs are different from Classical Pentecostal Churches and Neo-Pentecostal Churches. The difference is that NPCs mainly emphasises prophecy, healing and deliverance. Classical Pentecostal Churches mainly emphasises baptism in the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongue while Neo-Pentecostal Churches manly emphasises speaking in tongues and wealth and health, usually called the prosperity gospel.

Southern African African theologians (herein after referred to as African theologians), who constitute the large portion of the literature in this article, provides various reasons for the emergence and proliferation of NPCs in South Africa, Resane (2017b:7;2022:8) call cultic (see also Ramatshwana 2019:6). Galanter and Forest (2006:52) states that:

A cult is one of several types of charismatic groups. A charismatic group consists of a dozen or more members, even hundreds of thousands. It is characterized by the following psychological elements: members (1) have a shared belief system, (2) sustain a high level of social cohesiveness, (3) are strongly influenced by the group's behavioural norms, and (4) impute charismatic (or sometimes divine) power to the group or its leadership. In a charismatic group, commitments can be elicited by relative strangers in a way rarely seen in other groups.

This unethical manipulation seen in the practices of NPC made Banda (2020b:4) call their churches unsafe spaces. Furthermore, some theologians critique their theology. Resane (2017a:1–3) traces this cultic phenomenon to the Torono Blessing, in the United States of America and fuelled by lack of theological training of pastors in Neo-Pentecostal Churches and NPCs (Resane 2017a:3). Mashao and Kgatle (2019:2–3) argue that these pastors follow the prosperity gospel that in turn exploits the poor as it teaches sowing and reaping while argues Ramatshwana (2019:4) they are part of a continental movement that prey on the poor. Kgatle (2023:2–3) argues that their syncretic tendencies reflect the influence of the African worldview in their practice while Banda (2020a:7–8) adds that the belief in the generational curses influences these churches.

Resane (2017b:4) and Mzondi (2019:105–110; 2022:119–124) traces the emergence of the NPCs in South Africa to Nigeria. Mzondi (2019:114; 2022:129) posits that the New Prophetic Church leaders reflect an Ubuntu Pentecostalism that has embraced the Pentecostalism of T B Joshua, leader of the Synagogue Church of All Nations that is based in Nigeria. This kind of Pentecostalism emphasises a form prophecy that reveals people's personal information as part of its core ministry function. This kind of prophetic practice encouraged politicians and ordinary members to visit this church to get a word from T B Joshua about their lives. No only them, many pastors visited T B Joshua to get a word about their ministry and the prophetic anointing (Mzondi 2019:110; 2022:125).

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Consequently, a form of prophetic approach that stem from the prophetic practice of T B Joshua became prevalent in South African Pentecostal circles. During this prophetic practice, people's ID numbers, physical addresses, family names, sickness or generational curses etc., are prophesied from the pulpit. Such utterances lure many as they appear to demonstrate that the prophet has divine connection and God, a key Ubuntu worldview promoting the mediatory role. Hence, they mysteriously reveal these personal details to them. Paseka Motsoeneng of Incredible Happenings Ministry, Stephen Zondo of Rivers of Living Waters Ministries, and Lesego Daniel of Rabboni Centre Ministries are the most prominent South African born prophets who follow this kind of prophetic practice. Furthermore, this form of practice encourages private prophetic session, at a fee, for church members and non-church members who wish to know more about their lives from the prophet. It also promotes the sale and use of anointed tangible elements like holy water, anointing oil, T-shirts, car stickers, badges, bracelets, calendars, necklaces, etc., for personal fortification and for receiving one's healing and deliverance (Mzondi 2019:111–112; 2022:126–127). In addition, these prophets teach members to give large amounts of money so that God bless them in return. Lastly, these prophets teach and promote the view that they are the most anointed and directly hears from God.

Hungwe's (2024:19) empirical study adds more details about by the emergence of the NPCs in South Africa by providing some details about the emergence of the NPCs in White-Hazy area, Mpumalanga province, South Africa. Table 2 below, list what the participants identified as some causes of the emergence of NPCs.

Table 2

RESPONSES TO WHY THERE ARE MANY NEW PROPHETIC CHURCHES
Materialism and greed
Miracles and prophecies
The era of prophets
The era of false prophetic churches
It is hidden spread of Satanism
Need for modernised Gospel
Increase of life adversities
Competition for more church branches among prophets

Rise of New Prophetic Churches

African theologians identified some of the above causes. Mashao and Kgatle (2019:2–3) identified materialism and greed (see also Ramatshwana (2019:4), competition among NPCs leaders is identified in Banda (2020b:5), the era of prophets Ramatshwana (2019:4) says is a continental phenomenon, miracles and prophecies are identified in Ramatshwana (2019:5), the increase in adversities relates to Banda's (2020a:7–8) mention of generational curses, Kgatle (2023:2–3) and Ramatshwana (2019:6) avers with the era of false prophets in the church. Resane's (2022:9) explanation that NPC leaders seek popularism confirm the presence of competition among prophets.

SOME BIBLICAL TEACHINGS ABOUT MIRACLES

The first two sections of the articles looked at what was taught among NPCs in South Africa and how these churches emerged. This third section of the article looks at what is normative regarding miracles in the Bible. Banda (2020b:7–9) and Hungwe (2024:43–75) provides insightful biblical views about miracles.

Banda (2020:7–9) suggests a communal approach expressed in the following and practice of Scriptures (Rm 12:5; 1 Cor 12:12, 27; Eph 4:4) as a measure to address the NPCs cultic tendencies. The Greek word *koinona* expresses this communal element of the church. He further points out that it is important for the believers to embrace the truth that the nature of the church is communal. Doing so will assist them to accept the Trinitarian nature of God, the church serves to renounce elevating the leader of the church above the believers and to further create space for them to be accountable to the community of believers. He emphasises this perspective by citing two sources.

The nature of God's being, not just God's commands, is integral to the character of Christian beginnings and ends (eds. Volf & Welker 2006:3).

And

The church is life in the Trinity, and the organisation and understanding of leadership in the church must therefore reflect this life in the Trinity (Breedt & Niemandt 2013:3).

Hungwe (2024:43–75) applies some New Testament texts (Matt 7:15; Acts 20: 28-31; I Tim 1:3; 2 Tim 2:15, 4:1-5;) to check miracles in the NPCs. Matthew 7:15 reflects that followers of Christ are to be continually on the lookout for false prophets, especially those who encourage the deadly misleading doctrine of the wide gate and the wide way that leads to death and destruction (Ryle 2022:44). The passage in Acts 20:28-31 gives exhortation to the elders of the church to take care of their bodily health, the outward concerns of life, and provide for themselves and families, nor merely as Christians, but as ministers of the Gospel. (Schofield 2015,199). According to Guzik (2005), the major theme which Paul was talking about in I Timothy 1:3; 2 was sound doctrine. Paul was advising Timothy that he should teach sound doctrine to the people. 2 Timothy 2:15, echo that preachers are not supposed to engage in meaningless debates, but they are supposed to work hard and show that they are the true preachers (Gaventa & Patterson 2010,388). 2 Timothy 4:1-5 encourages Timothy avoid being like the false preachers who were preaching words which were sweet to the ears of the hearers, yet it was not the true gospel (Sheets & Jackson 2005,60). The same applies to contemporary pastors.

The above normative discussion leads to formulation of how to address the cultic tendencies mentioned in the article.

STRATEGIES TO ASSIST MEMBERS FROM THIS CHURCHES AND PENTECOSTALS RESPOND TO THESE IDENTIFIED CULTIC PRACTICES

Banda (2020b:2) laments that “[t]he controversial activities are often characterised by prophets’ dramatic acts that turn churches into circuses, thereby distorting the church’s purpose.” Hence, this last section of the article built on the works of Ramatshwana (2019:5), Resane (2017a: 9–14), Resane (2017b:5–6), Mashao and Kgatle (2019:5–6), Kgatle (2020:7–10), and Hungwe (2024:76–78) that suggest some strategies to assist members from this churches and Pentecostals address cultic tendencies among NPCs in South Africa.

Two African theologians list several characteristics of the prophets in these churches. Ramatshwana (2019:5) lists five characteristics of these prophets, namely, they: elevate the office of the prophet, dedicates time to prophecy in the liturgy or church proceedings, act as a channel for deliverance from demons or evil forces, act as a healer, and as channels of blessing and prosperity. Resane (2017:9–14) outlines some characteristics of these NPCs, namely, anti-institutionalism—opposition to organisational structures, anti-intellectualism—most of these leaders do not have proper theological training that prepares them for ministry and often refute it, antinomianism —being free from natural and moral laws by faith and grace, and anti-sacramental—grass

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eating, petrol drinking, eating snakes and rodents etc occurring during a church service belittle the sacramental aspect of the church. These characteristics shows that it is important to note Resane's warning that:

In the current scenario, miracles are the magnet towards the preacher instead of a propeller towards God. Hence, pilgrimages to a particular geographical location or a human figure have become a norm. Miraculous powers are associated with a particular personality or a cultic centre (celebrity and centre cult). This tendency questions faith in the omnipotence and the omnipresence of God (Resane 2017b:6–7).

To the above, Ramatshwana (2019:6) adds that:

When incidents of false prophecies, healings and miracles emerge, this should be viewed not as a prophetic activity, but as preying on people's faith. When false prophets pray for the people, they in fact, are preying on people's faith.

As such, Resane (2017b:5–6) then lists the following as essential six guidelines regarding miracles:

- 1) One quality of a miracle is that it occurs unpretentiously and modestly (Van der Meer 1966:181)
- 2) The performers are to be verified as to by which spirit are they doing these things?
- 3) The morality and the character of the performers should be under the scrutiny of the biblical orthodoxy. The performer and the act itself must be synchronically aligned.
- 4) These *charismata* do not operate on their own. They are accompanied by other gifts to verify or confirm their authenticity, validity and theological correctness
- 5) The community of faith has the legitimate right (*exousia*) to check and discern miracles, as fake and deceit are rife in today's Neo-charismatic circles
- 6) Lastly, miracles, although not an article of faith, arouse interest or point people towards God, not towards the performer or an agent.

Mashao and Kgatle (2019:2–3) accuses NPCs leaders of endemic greed and proposes an Ubuntu theology that consists of six theologies that addresses the culture of greed among NPCs. These theologies are theology of life—this encourages that people should have good interpersonal and communal relations; theology of care—this promotes treating each other well; and theology of hope and accompaniment—this encourages the notion of instilling hope in the lives of the believers and encouraging them wish for meaningful achievements.

Kgatle's (2020:7–10) proposes the following four benefits regarding prophetic ministry, namely, edification—1 Corinthians 14:3–5 emphasises that prophecy should benefit the believers in the local church), unification—prophecy is not intended to divide believers by publicly mentioning divisive matters in the church, discernment—prophecy should be weighed before being brought to the church, and affirmation—prophecy should always affirm the Scriptures.

Hungwe (2024: 76–78) propose a two-pronged strategic to assist church members in NPCs to address cultic practises:

- a) Community Bible Study (CBS) strategy to empower believers.
- b) Roadshows strategy as an awareness campaign among Masoyi pastoral Fraternity committee (MPFC) and member churches.

The article focuses on the first strategy, namely, the promotion of Community Bible Study (CBS).

Community Bible Study

Community Bible Study (CBS) emphasises the importance of belonging to community of believers.

[it] means then that we shouldn't be members of a church that is located outside of our community just because it is the popular church in the area or we like the speaker. No, we must live in proximity to those with whom we attend church. That makes sense if we are going to genuinely devote our lives to one another. That's hard to do if we don't ever see one another. Or if it is a burden or hassle

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to get together with one another. So we must live in close proximity to one another, just as those in the early church did. In other words, the church we attend must be local. (Lewis 2013 n.p.)

Community Bible Study (CBS) will also involve the following for the believers, the promotion of an interconnected community, the promotion of unity in diversity, developing mature Christians, and addressing erroneous teachings.

Promotion of an interconnected community

Sellers (2004,10) posits that community and interconnectedness flows from the nature of the Trinity seen in “Let us make man in our image after our likeness (Gen1:26). Studying God’s word in small groups has the following benefits: (a) makes the word of God alive (Dwight 2022: 6), (b) empowers the participants to gain additional insights and grow in their confidence in handling God’s word (Wallace 2020:2), (c) discourages individualism and promotes an interconnected community (Ortberg 2022: 54), and helps build a healthy community that believe in the life changing knowledge word as they gather, consequently bringing relevance for the way they relate to God and others (Walker 2019, 100).

Promotion of unity in diversity

CBS emphasises Paul’s metaphor of a body with unique functions to promote unity in diversity among the believers (Ortberg 2022:54). Powell, Hicks, Mickinzie (2020, 31) adds that studying the Bible in the community brings people from diverse, multi-cultural society to share the Scriptures in ways that promotes closely knitted relationships.

Developing mature Christians

Lewis (2013, 2) states that CBS enable the helps participants to become mature followers of Christ to disciple others. According to MacArthur (2001,78) and Samra (2008, 11) such maturity deepens spirituality and concretises Christian life among the believers.

Addressing erroneous teachings

Roeleveld (2019,99) says that CBS helps in the correction of erroneous teachings and practices and places Christ the centre and instil the fear of the Lord. It also helps to improve shallow knowledge of our faith like Priscilla and Aquilla assisted Apollos to sharpen his zeal of sharing the Gospel (Ashcroft-Davilla 2021:10) (Acts 18:24-28). Damgaard (2015,1) highlights that CBS creates a safe haven where proper doctrine is taught against false doctrine, control, legalism, and other unsafe maladies.

CONCLUSION

The grass eating and petrol drinking incidents and subsequent dangerous religious practices in NPCs required critical theological responses. Consequently, Resane (2017b:6) pointed out that:

The leader is totally involved in orchestrating the events by giving commands as to what actions are to be initiated. The agent is in charge and directs the events towards his desired goals. There is no obfuscation to open devotees’ eyes and minds to Jesus. It is therefore theologically legitimate to examine these practices in the light of orthodoxy regarding doctrine and discipline in their context.

While Ramatshwana (2019:5–6) laments the state of prophets in NPCs. He states that “[t]he temptations of the prophets are twofold: to engage in acts of deception, rehearsed prophetic utterances and orchestrated miracles and healings, as well as to source powers from traditional healers.”

In addition to the above views, Banda (2020:7) argues that these practices

turn churches into unsafe places, particularly for women and children. These unsafe ecclesiological practices must be addressed by a communal ecclesiology that emphasises the communality of the church.

The article provided what the literature covered about miracles that are deemed dangerous religious practices identified among NPCs in South Africa. Although the leaders in these churches maintain that their miracles show their anointing and God's miraculous power, South African theologians have deemed their practices cultic. The article then asked: How can New Prophetic Churches church members and Pentecostals in South Africa respond to the identified cultic tendencies?

The works of these theologians and one empirical study were used to answer this question. by applying Osmer's four tasks of doing practical theology. The four tasks in this article were: to identify teaching in these churches, how they emerged, provide what is biblical and suggest some practical strategies for members in these churches and in other Pentecostal churches to address cultic tendencies. The article demonstrated that African theologians have pointed the origin of these churches and what they teach. They have further provided biblical teachings on miracles and concluded by suggesting some practical strategies to assist members in these churches and other Pentecostal churches to address these identified cultic tendencies.

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