

Prosperity Gospel, Social Protection, and Community Care: A Pauline Critique of Wealth and Risk in African Contexts

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Abstract

Prosperity gospel is now one of the most widely debated expressions of Christianity across African Christian contexts, shaping how millions of believers think about wealth, suffering, and economic security through its emphasis on individual faith, material blessing, and financial breakthrough. Scholars have noted both its genuine appeal — offering dignity and hope to economically marginalized believers — and its negative effects on communal solidarity, informal welfare networks, and responses to structural vulnerability. This creates a specific theological problem: how does the prosperity gospel's individualistic account of wealth and divine blessing erode communal solidarity and social protection in African Christian contexts, and what theological resources can address it? This article reads Romans 8, 2 Corinthians 8–9, and Galatians 6 through the combined lenses of Pauline social ethics and African communitarian thought, in dialogue with African development literature on social protection and risk management. The analysis makes three arguments: Paul's theology of suffering in Romans 8 roots human flourishing in eschatological hope rather than material prosperity; his theology of generosity in 2 Corinthians 8–9 frames material resources as gifts held in trust by communities for mutual sustenance rather than private accumulation; and Galatians 6's burden-bearing ethic builds a model of reciprocal care that challenges prosperity gospel's transactional logic directly. Drawing on selected African Christian contexts, the article examines the tensions between solidarity and extraction within prosperity-oriented communities around giving and care for the vulnerable. The findings offer a Pauline critique grounded in careful exegesis — one that African theological scholarship has not yet adequately developed — with direct implications for how African churches understand communal responsibility and care for the vulnerable, contributing to debates on prosperity theology, social protection, and sustainable Christian communal life in Africa.

Keywords: Prosperity Gospel; Pauline Theology; Social Protection; Community Care; Wealth Theology; African Christianity; African Theology; Christian Social Ethics; Solidarity; Ecclesiology.

Introduction

Prosperity gospel has grown rapidly across African Christian contexts, shifting from a marginal theological movement into a force that now shapes Christian identity, economic aspiration, and communal practice across the continent. Pew Research Centre surveys consistently place African Christian contexts among the regions with the highest concentration of Christians holding prosperity-oriented beliefs, with majorities in several

countries affirming that God grants material wealth to believers who exercise sufficient faith (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2006). This is not simply a matter of theological preference — it reflects a broader shift in how African Christians interpret economic life, suffering, and divine action. Anderson (2002: 128-130) and Odion (2023) estimate that Pentecostal and Charismatic movements, within which prosperity theology is most pronounced, account for over 600 million adherents globally, with African Christian contexts as the fastest-growing regional constituency. Gifford (1998; 2004; 2016) shows that prosperity theology has moved well beyond its Pentecostal origins into mainline Protestant, Catholic, and African Independent Church contexts, which makes it impossible to treat it as a contained denominational problem rather than a continent-wide theological concern. Scholars differ on what drives this reach. Wariboko (2012) places prosperity gospel within what he calls “the Pentecostal principle” — a pneumatological imagination producing distinctive economic ethics and aspirational cultures. Kalu (2008) ties its appeal instead to the material deprivations and social dislocations of postcolonial African life, arguing that prosperity theology cannot be understood apart from the structural conditions of poverty, unemployment, and institutional failure within which it flourishes. Both accounts point to the same conclusion: prosperity gospel in African Christian contexts is neither a marginal aberration nor a purely spiritual phenomenon, and it deserves more than dismissal or uncritical acceptance.

Prosperity gospel rests on four core convictions: material wealth is a covenant right for believers; financial lack signals a faith deficit or spiritual obstruction; positive confession activates divine provision; and generous giving to church leadership functions as a seed that yields supernatural material returns (Bowler, 2018). These are not abstract doctrines — they produce measurable effects in African Christian communities dealing with chronic poverty, unemployment, inadequate healthcare, and absent or collapsed formal social protection. Their pastoral appeal is real. Asamoah-Gyadu et al. (2015) argue that prosperity theology gives believers experiencing structural exclusion a framework of moral meaning and divine agency, while Banda (2020: 1-12) shows that African believers actively use prosperity language as a resource for dignity and resistance rather than simply absorbing it. That appeal, however, comes with serious social costs. By placing economic vulnerability in individual spiritual failure rather than in structural conditions — inequality, labour precarity, institutional collapse — prosperity theology quietly marks the poor and the sick as spiritually deficient, producing patterns of shame, self-blame, and withdrawal that Resane (2021: 6418) and Lephoko (2024: 9544) argue require biblical-theological engagement, not just pastoral adjustment. Gifford (2016) and Murray (2012: 666) both show that this individualistic logic discourages collective action, weakens communal solidarity, and channels scarce financial resources away from vulnerable members toward institutional growth and pastoral enrichment — a pattern Adedibu (2023: 70) confirms remains widespread in African Pentecostal contexts. This matters most where, as Platteau (1991: 112-170) and Dercon (2002: 141-166) document, informal solidarity networks are the only safety net poor households have. Prosperity theology does not simply neglect these networks — it strips away the theological basis for sustaining them, a problem Mpedi (2008:

105-125) and Onwuegbuchulam and Mtshali (2022) identify as a significant and unaddressed gap between the social protection potential of African faith communities and what the prosperity gospel actually equips them to do.

Existing scholarship has engaged the prosperity gospel's social dimensions from several directions, producing a substantial but uneven body of work. Sociologically, Freeman (2012: 174) and Öhlmann and Frost (2020: 354) document its economic impacts and its complicated relationship to community welfare in African Christian contexts. Historically, Kalu (2008) and Gifford (1998) trace its development through colonial religious economies and postcolonial Pentecostalism, mapping the structural conditions within which its social logic took shape. Within African theological ethics, Mashau and Kgatle (2019: 1-8) challenge the prosperity gospel's individualism through African communitarian correctives; Anquandah (2021) extends this from a Reformed African perspective; and Chitando et al. (2017: 232-251) examine its gender dimensions in Zimbabwean Pentecostal contexts, South African, and Kenyan contexts. Asamoah-Gyadu (2015) and Williams (2022) add pastoral theological analysis of its psychological appeal, socio-economic, and congregational effects. What is missing across all of this work is sustained exegetical engagement with Pauline theology as a primary interpretive resource. The Pauline corpus contains the New Testament's most extensive theological reflection on wealth, poverty, generosity, suffering, and communal responsibility — yet it has not been seriously brought to bear on African Christian debates about prosperity theology and social protection. Where Paul appears in existing critiques, the engagement tends to be proof-textual or subordinated to sociological analysis, treating biblical theology as supporting material rather than as the foundation of the argument. Lephoko (2024) and Mofokeng (2024) acknowledge this in their recent work but stop short of resolving it through systematic Pauline exegesis.

The focus on Pauline theology is not arbitrary. Paul wrote to communities facing conditions that resemble those of many African Christian communities today — economic precarity, social stratification within congregations, and the pressures of communal belonging across social boundaries. Barclay (2015) shows that Paul's response to wealth inequality is not to spiritualize material questions but to build a theological account of material resources as communal gifts, grounded in the logic of Christ's self-giving poverty. Gorman (2012: 217) establishes that Paul's concern for the economically vulnerable is central to his theology, not a secondary theme. Downs (2016), Ogereau (2014), and Eastman (2022) have since developed Pauline *koinonia* as carrying concrete economic dimensions — shared risk, mutual accountability — that challenge individualistic readings of Paul, including the one prosperity gospel relies on. Read alongside African communitarian ethics, particularly the ubuntu tradition's relational ontology as analyzed by Metz (2011: 532-559) and Molefe (2024), this Pauline social theology offers practical resources for rethinking what African Christian communities can be in terms of mutual care and social protection. The methodological approach, hermeneutical framework, and analytical procedure are set out in the methodology section.

From this analysis, a specific research problem emerges: how does Pauline theology, read through a contextual-exegetical approach and in dialogue with African communitarian thought, reorient the prosperity gospel's individualistic account of wealth and security toward communal responsibility and sustainable social protection in African Christian contexts? The question is not only theological. Ochanda (2012: 81-105) and Mwangi et al. (2025: 1-13) show that how African believers are theologically formed directly shapes whether churches function as communities of mutual care or as institutions that extract from their poorest members. This study fills three gaps in existing scholarship. First, it provides the sustained exegetical engagement with Pauline wealth ethics that African theological critiques have not yet offered. Second, it connects Pauline biblical scholarship and African theological ethics in ways neither field has adequately pursued. Third, it brings these theological resources into conversation with social protection literature — particularly Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler (2004) and Onwuegbuchulam and Mtshali (2022) — grounding theological claims in concrete developmental and ecclesiological realities. These contributions place this study at the intersection of biblical studies, African theology, and development studies.

The article is organized into five sections. The first analyzes the prosperity gospel's theological assumptions and their relationship to communal solidarity and social protection. The second reads Romans 8, 2 Corinthians 8–9, and Galatians 6 in their socioeconomic contexts, attending to what each text says about suffering, generosity, and mutual care. The third brings these Pauline insights into dialogue with African communitarian ethics and selected African contexts. The fourth examines the tensions between solidarity and extraction in giving and welfare practices within prosperity-oriented congregations. The article concludes by proposing a model of community care that integrates Pauline ethics with African communitarian perspectives.

Statement of the Problem

Prosperity gospel's spread across African Christian contexts has created a specific theological-ethical problem at the intersection of Christian communal life and social protection. Its core convictions — that material wealth signals divine favour, that suffering reflects spiritual deficiency, and that generous giving to church leadership activates supernatural material returns — do not merely distort biblical teaching. They actively erode the communal solidarity that economically vulnerable African populations depend on for survival. By placing economic vulnerability in individual spiritual failure rather than structural conditions, prosperity theology marks the poor as spiritually deficient rather than structurally vulnerable, cuts the suffering off from communal care, and channels scarce congregational resources away from mutual aid toward institutional enrichment and pastoral wealth — producing a contradiction between the prosperity gospel's communal language and its extractive institutional behavior. The social cost is highest in African Christian contexts where most of the population falls outside formal social security and relies on faith communities as primary welfare providers. In that setting, theological formation is not an abstract concern — it determines whether churches function as

communities of care or as institutions that deepen the poverty of their members. Scholars across sociology, history, and ethics have documented these problems well, but the theological response has not reached the exegetical root. Sociological critiques expose the social harm without offering biblical-theological alternatives. African theological critiques drawing on communitarian ethics lack the Pauline exegetical grounding needed to challenge the prosperity gospel on its own terms. Paul's theology of suffering, generosity, and mutual burden-bearing has not been seriously mobilized as a counter-framework in African theological scholarship. This study addresses that gap by reading Romans 8, 2 Corinthians 8–9, and Galatians 6 in dialogue with African communitarian thought and social protection literature, offering the integrated theological framework that existing scholarship has not provided.

Objectives

1. To critically analyze prosperity gospel teachings on wealth, suffering, and divine blessing within African Christian contexts in light of Pauline theology.
2. To develop a constructive Pauline theological framework for understanding wealth, risk, and communal solidarity.
3. To articulate ecclesiological and ethical principles for African churches addressing economic insecurity.

Research Questions

1. How does Pauline theology understand faith, material blessing, and suffering compared to the prosperity gospel?
2. What does Pauline ecclesiology reveal about communal responsibility for economic vulnerability?
3. How can Pauline's theological resources inform African Christian responses to social protection challenges?

Central Thesis

This manuscript argues that Pauline theology offers concrete resources for critiquing the prosperity gospel's individualistic account of wealth and divine blessing, and for building an alternative theological framework for social protection grounded in ecclesial solidarity, a theology of suffering, and the economic sharing practices found in the Pauline corpus. Paul's reframing of suffering in Romans 8, his theology of generosity in 2 Corinthians 8–9, and his ethic of mutual burden-bearing in Galatians 6 together form a Pauline social theology that challenges the transactional logic, spiritual individualism, and prosperity-oriented readings of Scripture that characterize much African prosperity preaching. Read alongside African communitarian ethics — particularly the relational ontology of ubuntu traditions — this Pauline social theology shows how African Christian communities can function as genuine sites of informal social protection, sustaining the vulnerable through reciprocal care rather than channeling communal resources toward individual accumulation.

or institutional enrichment. This is not a call to passive acceptance of structural poverty. It is an argument that communities shaped by Pauline social theology are better placed to address the concrete welfare challenges confronting African Christian contexts than those shaped by the prosperity gospel's individualistic logic.

Theoretical Framework

Theological Traditions Informing the Analysis

This study draws on four theological traditions. Pauline biblical theology is the primary exegetical foundation. Recent scholarship has significantly advanced understanding of Paul's economic ethics — Barclay (2015) on grace and gift economics, Gorman (2012) on Paul and the poor, Downs (2016) on the theology of generosity, and Ogereau (2021) on Pauline *koinonia* as carrying concrete economic dimensions of shared risk and mutual accountability — and this study builds on that body of work. African theology, particularly its communitarian strand, provides a culturally grounded conversation partner through the ubuntu tradition's relational ontology. This engagement is critical rather than romanticized — Metz (2011) and Molefe (2024) both argue that ubuntu must be handled carefully to avoid idealization. Contextual theology, developed by Bevans (2018) and Schreiter (2015), commits the study to reading theological texts in direct engagement with specific social and economic contexts, resisting both abstraction from material conditions and uncritical application to the present. Liberation theology, particularly its preferential option for the poor as developed by Gutiérrez (1973; 2023) and applied to African Christianity by Orobator (2008), insists that theological claims be evaluated by their consequences for the economically marginalized — a standard this study applies to the prosperity gospel's individualistic wealth theology throughout.

Hermeneutical Approach

This study uses a contextual-exegetical hermeneutical approach that works on two levels, following Thiselton's (1992) two-horizons framework. At the level of the ancient text, it combines historical-critical, social-scientific, and rhetorical-critical methodologies to establish what Paul's arguments claimed and how they functioned within their original communities — a multi-method approaches that Hays (1996) and Horrell (2006) identify as necessary for responsible Pauline interpretation. At the level of contemporary application, it identifies structural parallels between the social and theological challenges Paul addressed and those facing African Christian communities today, while being careful not to collapse the historical and cultural distance between first-century Mediterranean communities and twenty-first-century African Christian contexts (Wright, 2025). Three African contextual hermeneutical traditions also shape this work: Ukpog's (2002) inculturation hermeneutics, West's (1993; 1999) ordinary reader methodology, and Dube's (2012) postcolonial feminist hermeneutics. Together, they help ensure that the move from Pauline exegesis to African contextual application stays answerable to the communities whose theological formation is at stake.

Key Theological Concepts

Several concepts used in this study need a precise definition. Wealth theology refers to the convictions through which Christian communities understand the origin, meaning, and proper use of material resources. Prosperity gospel treats wealth as a covenant right activated through faith and giving. This study develops a Pauline alternative in which material resources are communal gifts governed by the sufficiency principle of 2 Corinthians 8:13–14 (Bowler, 2018; Barclay, 2015). In Pauline theology, suffering is not a sign of spiritual deficiency but a dimension of Christian experience through which believers participate in Christ's cruciform pattern, sustained by the Spirit's intercession — a framework that challenges the prosperity gospel's treatment of hardship as evidence of failed faith (Jewett et al., 2007). Ecclesiology and community refer to the church as a body constituted by mutual belonging and shared responsibility, grounded in 1 Corinthians 12 and Galatians 6, and read here alongside African communitarian ethics to develop a working model of community care (Thiselton, 2009; Orobator, 2008). Social protection covers the range of formal and informal mechanisms through which individuals and households manage economic risk and vulnerability. Faith communities are part of this picture, and how they function in this role is shaped directly by their operative theological frameworks (Devereux & Sabates-Wheeler, 2004; Adesina, 2011; Ulriksen & Plagerson, 2023). Risk and solidarity are relational concepts. Together they reframe social protection as a question of communal identity and theological formation rather than a technical welfare problem, grounded in Pauline body theology and in ubuntu's relational ontology (Metz, 2021).

Analytical Methodology

The study moves through four stages. The first analyzes the prosperity gospel in African Christian contexts — its theological assumptions and social logic — drawing on scholarship in African Christianity studies, Pentecostal studies, and African development literature. The second reads Romans 8, 2 Corinthians 8–9, and Galatians 6 in their socioeconomic and rhetorical contexts, using the integrated exegetical approach described above to draw out each text's theological claims. The third brings Pauline insights into conversation with African communitarian ethics and selected African church practices, treating both as objects of theological scrutiny rather than assuming either is beyond question. The fourth develops four principles integrating Pauline economic ethics with African communitarian perspectives: ecclesial solidarity as a primary social safety net; stewardship over accumulation as the governing theology of wealth; the dignification of vulnerability as a theological act; and economic practices that embody communal solidarity.

Conceptual Model

The study works with three analytical elements that interact continuously rather than in sequence. The first is the prosperity gospel — treated as a documented theological tradition whose assumptions about wealth, suffering, and giving are examined through careful exegesis rather than dismissed polemically (Bowler, 2018; Gifford, 2016). The second is Pauline social theology — the primary resource for challenging the prosperity gospel's individualistic logic and developing an alternative vision of ecclesial solidarity and communal flourishing grounded in the logic of incongruous grace (Barclay, 2015; Gorman, 2012). The third is African communitarian ethics and social protection literature together, supplying the cultural resonance and empirical grounding that keep the study's proposals accountable to the concrete realities of African Christian communities rather than remaining at the level of abstract prescription (Metz, 2021; Devereux & Sabates-Wheeler, 2004). The three elements qualify each other throughout the analysis. Prosperity gospel's social consequences sharpen the exegetical questions brought to Pauline texts. Pauline's insights reframe the criteria used to evaluate African communitarian practices. And the concrete realities of African Christian life push both toward practical engagement rather than theoretical abstraction.

Prosperity Gospel: Theology, Social Impact, and Existing Critiques

Scholarly work on the prosperity gospel spans several disciplines and has produced a contested but substantial body of literature. Bowler (2018) provides the foundational historical account, showing that the prosperity gospel is a theologically coherent tradition rooted in late nineteenth-century American metaphysical movements — not a superficial distortion of Scripture, but a position that demands serious critical engagement. Coleman (2000) extends this through ethnographic analysis, arguing that the prosperity gospel produces distinctive material cultures and modes of selfhood that reshape how believers relate to consumption and social mobility. Wariboko (2012) frames it differently, situating prosperity theology within what he calls "the Pentecostal principle" — a pneumatological imagination generating distinctive economic ethics and aspirational cultures, with particular relevance for African Christian contexts. Öhlmann et al. (2014) and Masvotore (2024: 274) move to the empirical level, identifying significant gaps between prosperity theology's stated promises and its actual institutional behavior in southern African contexts. Heuser (2016: 1-9) and Kinoti et al (2024: 35-46) extend these findings to East and West Africa, showing that while the prosperity gospel's social consequences vary by setting, its core theological assumptions — wealth as covenant right, suffering as spiritual deficiency, giving as supernatural investment — hold steady across contexts.

Research on the prosperity gospel's effects on giving and community support is mixed. Gifford (2016) and Bompani (201: 101-113) document that prosperity-oriented congregations raise significant financial resources but direct them toward institutional infrastructure and pastoral enrichment rather than mutual aid — a pattern Adedibu (2023) confirms in Nigerian Pentecostal contexts, where there is a consistent gap between what prosperity churches say about welfare and what they actually spend on it. Freeman (2012) calls this a "double bind" of belonging and extraction, a characterization Onwuegbuchulam

and Mtshali (2022) confirm as a structural feature of prosperity-oriented welfare provision. Banda (2020) offers an important corrective, arguing that African believers actively use prosperity language as a resource for dignity and resistance rather than simply receiving it passively. Lephoko (2024: 9544) builds on this, insisting that theological engagement must take the prosperity gospel's genuine pastoral functions seriously while still subjecting its harmful premises to exegetical critique. African theological critiques — Mashau (2019: 239-261), Mwangi et al. (2025: 1-13), and Biri (2024: 287-298) — have made real contributions in challenging the prosperity gospel's individualism and exploitation of vulnerability. The limitation they share is a reliance on communitarian ethics and confessional theology rather than sustained Pauline exegetical engagement. This leaves the biblical-theological foundations of their arguments underdeveloped — and the gap this study addresses still open.

Pauline Economic Theology: Wealth, Poverty, and Community

Recent Pauline scholarship has produced important work on Paul's economic theology that this study draws on directly — work that has not been adequately used in African theological engagement with the prosperity gospel. Gorman (2012: 217) shows that concern for the economically vulnerable was central to Pauline theology, not a secondary theme. This matters because the prosperity gospel selectively borrows Pauline blessing language while ignoring Paul's persistent concern for the poor. Roberts (2016: 123-126) and Witherington (1995) extend this analysis across multiple dimensions of Pauline economic ethics within their first-century socioeconomic contexts. Downs (2016) and Savage (2004) read 2 Corinthians 8–9 within Paul's broader theology of grace and gift, arguing that the Jerusalem collection is a theological statement about divine generosity — ecclesiological in character rather than merely charitable — with direct bearing on the prosperity gospel's transactional giving logic. Verbrugge and Krell (2015) survey financial language across the Pauline letters, showing that Paul's economic ethics run consistently through the full canonical corpus rather than surfacing only in a few isolated texts. Barclay (2015) argues that Paul's concept of *charis* disrupts conventional Greco-Roman gift economies through its radical incongruity — grace extended without regard to the recipient's worth — which reshapes how communities of grace think about their economic obligations toward the vulnerable. Scholarship on the Corinthian correspondence adds useful social-historical grounding here. Theissen (2004) established the framework for reading 1 Corinthians 11 and 2 Corinthians 8–9 as responses to concrete economic inequality. Horrell (1996; 2006) builds on this, showing that Paul's response involved reshaping the community's social imagination rather than merely issuing practical instructions. Oakes (2009) provides essential historical grounding for Romans, situating Paul's theology of suffering and hope within a community dealing with real economic vulnerability, which makes it impossible to read Romans 8 as abstract spiritual reflection detached from material conditions. Moreover, Ogereau (2014) shows that Pauline *koinonia* carries concrete economic dimensions of shared risk and mutual accountability, while Eastman (2017; 2022) argues that union with Christ generates

specific and binding communal economic obligations. Both findings make the same point: individualistic readings of Pauline theology — including prosperity gospel — do not hold up under close exegetical scrutiny. Taken together, this scholarship confirms that the Pauline corpus contains a coherent economic theology that has not been adequately brought to bear on the prosperity gospel in African Christian contexts.

African Theology and Social Ethics: Community, Wealth, and Poverty

African theological engagement with wealth, poverty, and community offers this study a conversation partner — one engaged critically rather than uncritically. Dube (2012; Shomanah & Dube, 2012) develops postcolonial feminist hermeneutical frameworks attentive to power, vulnerability, and communal responsibility, keeping the move from Pauline exegesis to African contextual application honest about who is most affected. Chimakonam (2017) grounds an ethic of communal care in the interconnectedness of all living beings — a vision that runs parallel to Pauline ecclesiology's account of mutual belonging. Ngong (2010; 2023) provides a theologically careful account of suffering in African Christian thought that challenges the prosperity gospel's reading of hardship as spiritual failure. Orobator (2008) argues from a Catholic African perspective that the prosperity gospel's individualistic wealth theology betrays both Christian social teaching and African moral traditions. The Ubuntu tradition has also produced important critical scholarship. Metz (2011: 532-559) provides careful philosophical foundations for African communitarian ethics while identifying real tensions around individual rights and universal applicability. Shutte (2001) draws out ubuntu's implications for Christian anthropology and social ethics, arguing that its relational ontology names the communal dimensions of Christian personhood that the prosperity gospel's individualism obscures. Molefe (2019; 2024) warns against romanticized readings of ubuntu that ignore its historical situatedness, developing a more careful account of its relationship to structural justice and individual accountability. Sindima (1995) and Chimakonam (2020) make the related point that African communitarian ethics must be treated as a living tradition rather than a fixed cultural given. This study takes all of these cautions seriously, engaging Ubuntu as a critical partner for Pauline social theology rather than simply affirming it.

Recent African theological critiques of the prosperity gospel have become more sophisticated. Omenyo (2002: 252-277) and Boaheng & Boahen (2023: 1363-1364) offer a Ghanaian Reformed critique that engages both biblical and communitarian dimensions more fully than earlier work in this area. Ogunbiyi and Adedibu (2025: 32-53), Togarasei (2011: 336-350), Soboyeyo (2016: 1), and Chitando (2007: 112 ff) examine the gender dimensions of prosperity theology's social logic in Zimbabwean Pentecostal contexts and across Africa, showing how prosperity gospel intersects with patriarchal power to disadvantage women. Both contributions are valuable, but they share a limitation common to this literature: the prosperity gospel's communitarian deficit is identified without a sustained Pauline exegetical counter-framework being developed. This study addresses that gap directly, grounding its communitarian critique in close engagement with the Pauline corpus.

Social Protection, Vulnerability, and Religious Communities as Informal Safety Nets

Development studies scholarship on social protection provides important empirical grounding here. Its central finding for this study is that theological formation is not an abstract doctrinal matter — it directly shapes how faith communities function as welfare actors. Ellis et al. (2009) extends the concept of social protection beyond state-centered welfare to include informal mechanisms — among them faith community practices — through which communities manage risk and support vulnerable members. This framing connects theological analysis to developmental concerns in a way that this study draws on directly. Dercon (2002; 2005) shows both the importance of informal risk-sharing to household welfare strategies and the limits of such arrangements when shocks hit entire communities at once, which points to why theologically grounded, institutionally stable welfare practices matter. Midgley and Piachaud (2013) situate informal welfare within broader social policy architecture, while Ulriksen and Plagerson (2023: 336-350) show that the erosion of communal solidarity through individualistic ideological frameworks — including prosperity theology — registers as a measurable social protection risk.

Research on religious communities as social safety nets in African Christian contexts has grown in recent years, and the findings are consistent. Faith communities have real welfare potential — but prosperity theology limits it. Ochanda (2012) and Kinoti (2019: 96-103) document how Kenyan Pentecostal churches function as informal welfare providers whose character is shaped directly by the theological frameworks they hold. Nowak-Gamer (2023: 112-129) shows in the Global South contexts that prosperity-oriented frameworks tend to produce welfare systems that serve the spiritually compliant rather than the structurally vulnerable. Adedibu (2023: 70) confirms the same pattern in Nigerian Pentecostal contexts. Koehrsen and Burchardt (2024: 129-146) provide the sharpest empirical support for this study's argument: communities shaped by communitarian theological frameworks consistently show stronger and more equitable social protection practices than those shaped by prosperity-oriented individualism.

Theological Method: Contextual Hermeneutics and Biblical Interpretation in African Contexts

This study's contextual-exegetical methodology rests on an established body of hermeneutical scholarship. Thiselton (1992; 2009) provides the two-horizons framework, which holds that responsible biblical interpretation requires genuine engagement with both the historical and rhetorical specificity of the ancient text and the social location of the contemporary reader, without collapsing the distance between them or abandoning the possibility of contemporary theological significance. Wright (2025) takes this further through missional hermeneutics, arguing that reading biblical texts within the narrative of creation, fall, redemption, and new creation produces contemporary ethical implications

without erasing historical distance. Hays (1996) contributes specific criteria for using Scripture responsibly in Christian ethics — among them attention to intertextual connections and the primacy of community as the site of ethical discernment. These criteria matter here because they identify exactly what the prosperity gospel's proof-textual approach to the Bible gets wrong.

African contextual hermeneutical traditions are equally important here. Ukpong (2002: 17-32) argues that reading biblical texts alongside African cultural resources brings out theological dimensions that Western hermeneutical assumptions tend to miss, which is precisely what this study does in its dialogue between Pauline social theology and ubuntu traditions. West (1993; 2026) grounds biblical interpretation in the lived experiences of economically marginalized African communities, keeping the interpretive process answerable to concrete welfare realities rather than abstract theological concerns. Dube (2012: 127-139) attends to the power dynamics embedded in interpretive practices, pushing back against readings that reproduce colonial or patriarchal assumptions — a concern that bears directly on this study's critique of the prosperity gospel's legitimization of pastoral power. Niang et al. (2024) bring together postcolonial, communitarian, and liberation-theological dimensions in a framework that asks interpreters to hold textual integrity, cultural resonance, and structural justice together. That is a close description of what this study attempts.

Synthesis and Identified Gaps

Across these four bodies of scholarship, a pattern emerges. Prosperity gospel scholarship has produced strong sociological and empirical analyses but has not developed a sustained biblical-theological framework capable of engaging the prosperity gospel's hermeneutical foundations on exegetical terms. Pauline economic theology has produced rich exegetical work but has not been brought into serious dialogue with African Christian prosperity theology or the concrete realities of social protection. African theological ethics has developed substantive communitarian critiques but lacks the Pauline exegetical grounding needed to challenge the prosperity gospel on its own terrain. Social protection literature has documented faith communities' welfare function, but handles theological formation as a background variable rather than a subject requiring its own theological analysis. No existing study has brought all four of these together in sustained dialogue around the prosperity gospel's relationship to social protection and community care in African Christian contexts. This study works at that intersection. It provides the Pauline theological framework that existing African theological critiques have not supplied, grounds its theological arguments in documented social protection challenges, and engages African communitarian ethics as a critical rather than merely affirmative conversation partner. The result is a contribution that is exegetically grounded, theologically constructive, and engaged with the actual conditions of African Christian communities — across biblical studies, African theology, Christian social ethics, and development studies.

Methodology

Nature of the Inquiry

This study is a work of constructive theological scholarship. It uses biblical exegesis and conceptual analysis as its primary tools — critical in its evaluation of the prosperity gospel's theological assumptions against the Pauline corpus, and constructive in its development of normative proposals for African Christian communal life (Vanhoozer, 2005). It does not generate original empirical data through fieldwork, surveys, or ethnographic observation, and it makes no claim to offer a comprehensive sociological account of prosperity gospel movements. That work has been done, just to mention a few, by Freeman (2021), Frost and Öhlmann (2020), and Gunda (2018), whose findings this study draws on for contextual grounding. What this study does is different. It belongs to the tradition of contextual biblical theology that Bevans (2002; 2018) and Schreiter (2015) describe — a tradition committed to holding together the integrity of the biblical text, the coherence of theological tradition, and the demands of contemporary contexts. This means resisting two tendencies: reducing theology to timeless abstraction with no bearing on material life, and subordinating it entirely to immediate contextual pressures. The second of these is precisely the hermeneutical failure that Ijaola (2018) and Barron (2022) identify in the prosperity gospel's own reading of Scripture.

Primary Sources

Three Pauline texts form the primary biblical sources, each chosen for what it contributes to the study's central theological questions. Romans 8 is read for Paul's theology of suffering, eschatological hope, and the Spirit's sustaining role within communities dealing with present hardship (Jewett et al. 2007; Oakes, 2009). Second Corinthians 8–9 is Paul's most extended treatment of wealth, generosity, and economic solidarity — the primary exegetical basis for the study's proposals about material resources as communal gifts oriented toward sufficiency (Downs, 2016). Galatians 6 is read for its ethic of mutual burden-bearing as the fulfillment of the law of Christ, which provides the ecclesiological foundation for the study's model of community care (Gorman, 2012; Noell, 2011; Martyn, 1997). All three are read with attention to their connections within the Pauline corpus rather than as isolated proof texts (Hays, 1996). Contextual works on the prosperity gospel within specific African contexts will serve as illustrative expressions of how this message is articulated and embodied across African Christian contexts in relation to social protection and community care. These are taken seriously as theological positions with their own internal logic and pastoral appeal, not dismissed as mere distortions. Secondary scholarly analyses from Bowler (2018), Asuquo (2020), and Haynes (2012) supplement these, along with social protection literature from Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler (2004), Koehrsen and Burchardt (2024), and Makufuka (2021) for contextual grounding.

Exegetical Method

The exegetical method combines three approaches that work together rather than in isolation (Hays, 1996). Historical-critical interpretation attends to the socioeconomic, rhetorical, and social contexts within which Paul wrote, keeping theological claims tethered to what Paul's arguments actually said in their original contexts. This is particularly important for situating Romans 8 within the Roman community's material vulnerability (Oakes, 2009) and 2 Corinthians 8–9 within the Corinthian community's economic inequality (Theissen, 2004; Horrell, 1996). Rhetorical analysis attends to Paul's argumentative strategies, use of examples, and persuasive logic. It is essential for reading 2 Corinthians 8–9, where Paul builds his case for the collection through careful rhetorical moves, and for Galatians 6, where the burden-bearing injunction functions as a community-defining norm rather than a passing ethical comment (Witherington, 1995; Friesen, 2004). Theological interpretation reads the Pauline texts as canonical witnesses whose claims matter beyond their original historical moment. It brings the exegetical findings together into a Pauline social theology that this study uses as its primary critical and constructive resource — moving from what the text meant in its original context to what it asks of communities today, following what Thiselton (1992; 2009) calls the fusion of horizons.

Analytical Procedure

The study moves through four stages. The first analyzes the prosperity gospel's theological assumptions and social logic in African Christian contexts, using scholarship from Gifford (2015), Kalu (2008), Bowler (2018), and Heuser (2016). The goal is to engage the prosperity gospel as a real theological tradition with identifiable social consequences. This means taking its genuine pastoral functions seriously, as Nel (2020) and Togarasei (2011) insist. The second reads Romans 8, 2 Corinthians 8–9, and Galatians 6 through the integrated exegetical method described above. The aim is to develop a Pauline social theology that fills the exegetical gap existing in African theological critiques. The third brings Pauline insights into dialogue with African communitarian ethics — particularly the ubuntu traditions analyzed by Metz (2011) and Molefe (2024) — and with selected African church practices documented by Adedibu (2023), Anquanadah (2021), Kinoti et al. (2024), and Biri (2024). Neither is taken at face value. Both are examined critically, resisting the romanticization that Mashau and Kgatle (2029) identified as a recurring problem in this kind of scholarship. The fourth develops four normative principles — ecclesial solidarity as primary social safety net, stewardship over accumulation, the dignification of vulnerability, and economic practices embodying communal solidarity. These are offered as resources for ecclesial discernment, not as prescriptions to be applied uniformly (Schreiter, 2015; West, 2026).

Hermeneutical Justification

Reading ancient Pauline texts in contemporary African Christian contexts is not a straightforward move, and this study does not treat it as one. The approach used here is a hermeneutic of theological analogy — informed by Thiselton's (1992) two-horizons framework, Wright's (2025) missional hermeneutics, and African contextual hermeneutical

traditions developed by Ukpong (2002), West (1993), and Dube (2012). It takes the historical, cultural, and social distance between first-century Mediterranean communities and twenty-first-century African Christian contexts. That distance does not make Pauline theology irrelevant — but it does require careful interpretation that identifies structural parallels without pretending the two contexts are the same. Three things justify this approach. The first is that real structural parallels exist between the socioeconomic dynamics Paul addressed — economic inequality within faith communities, the politics of giving and patronage, the theological reading of poverty as spiritual failure — and those documented in contemporary African Christian contexts by Gifford (2016) and Chitando and Togarasei (2024). The second is that African biblical hermeneutics — developed by Ukpong (2002), Dube (2012), and West (1993; 2026), and Rosane (2021) — is a mature scholarly tradition, not a methodological novelty. It has been demonstrated over decades that contextual biblical interpretation in African settings is legitimate work. The third is that this study's proposals are offered as resources for communal discernment, not prescriptions. African Christian communities are invited to engage them, test them, and adapt them — which is the kind of accountability to communities that West (1993) and Dube (2012) identify as essential for responsible contextual theology.

Methodological Limitations

Four limitations define the scope of this study. First, it is not empirical. African church practices appear here as illustrative materials drawn from existing literature — not as the basis for broad generalization. Prosperity-oriented churches vary considerably across national, denominational, and socioeconomic contexts in ways no single theological framework can fully capture. Second, the exegetical focus on three primary Pauline texts means this is a selective rather than comprehensive account of Paul's economic thought. A fuller account would need to engage the Deutero-Pauline household codes, Philippians 4, and the labour ethics of 1 and 2 Thessalonians — texts whose financial dimensions Verbrugge and Krell (2015) map in detail. Third, the engagement with African communitarian ethics draws mainly on ubuntu traditions from southern and eastern African literature — Metz (2021), Molefe (2024), and Shutte (2001). It does not speak for the full range of African communitarian thought across West, East, Central, and Southern African contexts. Fourth, the constructive principles in this study offer a framework for theological reflection, not a ready-made institutional programme. Putting these principles into practice requires the kind of contextually grounded knowledge and communal discernment that this study can point toward but cannot fully provide.

Findings and Discussion

Pauline Theology of Wealth: Exegesis and Constructive Principles

Paul's most sustained engagement with wealth appears in 2 Corinthians 8–9, where his argument for the Jerusalem collection is what Kruse (2015) calls the New Testament's most extended theological reflection on giving. The passage opens with the Macedonian

churches, whose generosity Paul presents as a paradox: their κατὰ βάθους πτωχεία (kata bathous ptōcheia, "extreme poverty," Witherington, 1995) produced an overflow of generosity. The point is that the capacity for giving has nothing to do with material abundance, which cuts directly against the prosperity gospel's assumption that financial blessing must precede generous giving. The theological centre is 2 Corinthians 8:9. Barclay (2015:447 ff) argues that this verse encodes Paul's whole theology of gift: divine χάρις (charis, "grace/gift,") works through radical incongruity — extended without regard to the recipient's worth or spiritual performance. This is the pattern economic relationships within the community of grace are meant to follow, not the transactional seed-faith logic that Harrison (2005) and Bowler (2018) identify as central to the prosperity gospel's giving theology. Paul's principle of ἰσότης (isotēs, "equality/sufficiency," Gorman, 2012: 217; Roberts, 2016: 123-126) in 8:13–14, grounded in the Exodus manna narrative of Exodus 16:18, orients the community's economic life toward the elimination of dire need rather than individual superabundance — a principle that Onwuegbuchulam and Mtshali (2022) show is consistently undermined by prosperity-oriented giving practices that draw communal resources upward toward institutional wealth. First Corinthians 11:17–34 takes this further into the liturgical domain. Theissen (2004) shows that wealthier Corinthians ate the communal meal before poorer members arrived, producing liturgical exclusion that Paul treats not as a social inconvenience but as a theological indictment: "Do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?" (11:22). The shaming of the poor is a contradiction of the community's identity in Christ, not a regrettable but tolerable social reality (Horrell, 1996: 162ff; Friesen, 2004: 323-361). Philippians 2:1–11 adds something absent from the prosperity gospel's Christology. Fee (1995:197 ff) argues that the Christ-hymn's ethical application in 2:3–4 grounds communal mutuality in Christological reality — economic self-orientation within the community of grace is not just an ethical failure but a Christological one. Where the prosperity gospel reads Christ's work as securing material covenant rights for individual believers, Philippians 2 presents it as a pattern of self-giving solidarity that reshapes the community's whole orientation toward wealth and status (Oakes, 2007).

Four Pauline principles emerge from this exegesis, each pushing back directly against the prosperity gospel's economic framework. First, wealth is a communal gift. Material resources are held in trust for mutual sustenance — the goal is sufficiency for all, not accumulation for some — grounded in the ἰσότης (isotēs, "sufficiency," Gorman, 2012) of 2 Corinthians 8:13–14. Second, economic sharing is how grace gets expressed in practice. Generosity flows from participation in Christ's self-giving movement, not from transactional spiritual investment, grounded in the incongruous χάρις (charis, "grace," Barclay, 2015) of 2 Corinthians 8:9 and the kenotic ethic of Philippians 2:3–4. Third, economic disparities within the community are a theological problem, not a social inconvenience. The shaming or neglect of poor members violates the eucharistic vision of Christian community, grounded in 1 Corinthians 11:22 and the social-historical analysis of Theissen (2004) and Horrell (1996). Fourth, material resources are instruments of service, not markers of divine favour. Wealth matters theologically insofar as it sustains the

vulnerable and reflects divine generosity — not insofar as it signals the spiritual standing of its possessor — grounded in Barclay's (2015) incongruity logic and Ogereau's (2014) demonstration that Pauline *κοινωνία* (*koinōnia*, "fellowship/sharing,") economics ran on shared risk and mutual accountability rather than individual spiritual investment. What these principles offer is something existing African theological critiques of prosperity gospel have largely not provided: a critique grounded in close exegetical reading rather than general ethical objection.

Pauline Theology of Suffering: Challenging Prosperity Gospel's Stigmatization

Prosperity gospel's treatment of suffering is where it departs most sharply from Pauline theology — and where it causes the most damage. By treating suffering, illness, and material lack as signs of spiritual deficiency, it produces what Miller & Flory (2013) and Wariboko (2012: 89ff) call a "pneumatological economy" of spiritual causality: vulnerability gets marked as spiritual failure, those who suffer are cut off from communal solidarity, and pastoral energy shifts from compassionate accompaniment to spiritual diagnosis and financial prescription. Banda (2020: 35-40) and Masvotore (2024: 274) document what this looks like on the ground in African Christian contexts. Paul's response in Romans 8:18–27 runs in the opposite direction entirely. He places τὰ παθήματα τοῦ νῦν καιροῦ (*ta pathēmata tou nyn kairou*, "the sufferings of the present time," Jewett et al. 2007:511 ff) not as departures from God's purposes but as shared creaturely realities caught up in creation's movement toward redemption. The στενάζω (*stenazō*, "groaning," Jewett et al. 2007) motif builds solidarity in suffering that stretches beyond the human community to encompass material creation itself — locating economic vulnerability within the broadest possible theological frame rather than within the narrow logic of personal spiritual performance. Oakes (2009) reads this as a pastoral response to believers dealing with real economic precarity. Hence, making Romans 8 the strongest theological counter available to the prosperity gospel's stigmatization of the poor, grounding the dignity of suffering believers not in their material circumstances but in their participation in the Spirit-sustained hope of creation's redemption. Second Corinthians 11–12 makes a related but distinct argument. Paul's catalogue of sufferings — beatings, imprisonments, hunger, daily anxiety for the churches — is not presented as evidence of spiritual failure. It is presented as the credentials of authentic apostolic ministry. Savage (2004) identifies this as a deliberate inversion of Greco-Roman honour-shame categories: weakness becomes the place where divine power shows up (12:9–10), and the pattern of strength through weakness becomes the lens through which both apostolic suffering and ordinary communal hardship are to be read. The thorn in the flesh in 12:7–10 is Paul's most direct personal testimony on this point. God's grace is declared sufficient precisely in the context of repeated unanswered prayer — not after it is granted. That directly challenges the prosperity gospel's implicit promise that enough faith will always produce divine material intervention.

Philippians 3:10 does something important: it names the *κοινωνία* (*koinōnia*, "participation/fellowship," Ogereau, 2014) of Christ's sufferings as a positive theological

category — not a deficiency to be overcome through greater faith but a shared communal reality with concrete dimensions of mutual experience and accountability. Oakes (2001:77 ff) situates this within the Philippian community's socioeconomic vulnerability. Paul's theology of participation in Christ's sufferings gave believers whose material precarity was structurally produced — not spiritually caused — a framework of meaning, dignity, and solidarity. African believers navigating the prosperity gospel's causality framework are in a structurally similar position, which makes this passage directly relevant. Reading Romans 8, 2 Corinthians 11–12, and Philippians 3 together, three things become clear about how Pauline theology challenges the prosperity gospel's stigmatizing framework. First, it breaks the assumed link between suffering and spiritual failure. Romans 8's eschatological framing, 2 Corinthians 12's unanswered prayer testimony, and Philippians 3's positive *koinōnia* category all point in the same direction: persistent hardship says nothing about the quality of a person's faith. Second, it restores dignity to those experiencing chronic suffering and economic vulnerability — grounding that dignity not in material circumstances but in Spirit-sustained eschatological hope and solidarity with Christ in his suffering. Third, it makes bearing one another's sufferings a communal obligation, not an act of individual charity. The community that does this embodies the *koinōnia* of Christ's sufferings as the actual content of faithful discipleship — with direct implications for how African Christian communities treat their most vulnerable members.

Pauline Ecclesiology: The Church as an Interdependent Community of Mutual Care

The ecclesiological vision behind Paul's economic ethics comes through most clearly in 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12, and Galatians 6 — three texts that together build a picture of the church as a community whose members carry real, theologically grounded obligations for one another's well-being. Horrell (2006) argues that Pauline ecclesiology is not a secondary ethical implication of soteriology but its social embodiment. The community of grace is the community whose economic practices, communal structures, and responses to vulnerability actually enact what Paul believes about grace, solidarity, and shared life — the very things the prosperity gospel distorts. First Corinthians 12:12–26 brings this into focus around economic stratification. Paul's argument that "the members that seem to be weaker are indispensable" (12:22) inverts the status logic both Greco-Roman culture and prosperity gospel apply to wealth. Martin (1999: 94 ff) shows that Paul deliberately subverts conventional hierarchical body metaphors — making the community's obligation to care for its economically vulnerable members not a charitable extra but a theological requirement built into how the body is structured. Friesen (2004:323 ff) draws out the weight of 12:26 — "if one member suffers, all suffer together" — showing that this is not passive sympathy but active shared obligation. It is a vision of communal solidarity that sits in direct tension with the prosperity gospel's approach to economic vulnerability, which leaves each believer to manage hardship alone through individual spiritual technique. Romans 12:9–21 takes this into everyday practice, establishing mutual ἀγάπη (*agapē*, "love," Jewett et al. 2007) as the animating principle from which concrete obligations of economic sharing, emotional solidarity, and social humility follow. Jewett et al. (2007) situate these injunctions within the

social divisions of the Roman house churches, showing that Paul's communal ethics were designed to bridge economic divisions through solidarity practices that challenge both Roman social hierarchy and the Christian stratification that prosperity-oriented communal life tends to produce.

Galatians 6:1–10 is where the ecclesiological argument of this study is most directly anchored. The injunction βασιτάζετε ἀλλήλων τὰ βάρη (bastazete allēlōn ta barē, "bear one another's burdens," Martyn, 1997:551ff) is identified as the fulfilment of "the law of Christ" — a formulation he argues deliberately counters the Galatian opponents' insistence on Torah by proposing a different kind of community-defining norm: not legal compliance but mutual care flowing from the new creation inaugurated in Christ (6:15). This is a significant move. By naming burden-bearing as the fulfilment of the law of Christ, Paul does not simply recommend communal care — he makes it constitutive of what the community is. A community that fails to bear one another's burdens fails to be the community Christ calls into existence. The prosperity gospel's individualistic framework has no adequate response to this claim. The apparent tension between 6:2's communal burden-bearing and 6:5's individual load-carrying is not a contradiction. Gorman (2012) reads it as a deliberate distinction: 6:5 addresses personal moral responsibility before God; 6:2 addresses the shared practical burdens of economic hardship and social vulnerability that community members are called to carry together. Gorman (2012: 217) shows that these burdens include material and economic dimensions, which connect Galatians 6 directly to the economic solidarity theology of 2 Corinthians 8–9. What emerges from reading 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12, and Galatians 6 together is not a softer version of the prosperity gospel's individualism but its theological opposite. Communal solidarity, shared vulnerability, and the deliberate inversion of honour hierarchies are not optional extras in Paul's account of the church — they are what the church is. Metz (2021) and Orobator (2008) connect this to African communitarian ethics' insistence that personhood is constituted through relationship and that moral life points toward sustaining the most vulnerable. Koehrsen and Burchardt (2024) provide empirical grounding for the same point, showing through comparative analysis that communities shaped by communitarian theological frameworks produce stronger and more equitable welfare outcomes than those shaped by the prosperity gospel's individualism.

Critique of Prosperity Gospel Through Pauline Principles

The Pauline principles developed through the exegesis above generate a theological critique of the prosperity gospel across four axes — four points where the prosperity gospel does not merely differ from Pauline social theology but contradicts it at the level of theological anthropology, Christology, pneumatology, and ecclesiology (Lephoko, 2024; Mofokeng, 2024). The first is individualism versus community. Prosperity gospel treats the individual believer as the primary unit of divine blessing — personal faith, positive confession, and seed-faith giving activate supernatural material provision through a direct causal chain that, as Mashau and Kgatle (2019) show, bypasses communal relationships and

obligations entirely. Freeman (2012) calls the result a fundamentally extractive rather than generative model of community. Paul's account runs the other way. The community — the body of Christ — is the primary site of divine economic activity: material resources are distributed for communal sustenance (2 Cor 8:13–14), generosity expresses the participatory χάρις (charis, "grace," Barclay, 2015) that constitutes the community's shared identity, and the welfare of the most vulnerable is a communal obligation binding on all (1 Cor 12:22–26). In practice, the prosperity gospel's individualism erodes the informal solidarity networks that Asuquo (2020), Bompani (2015), and Koehrsen and Burchardt (2024) identify as the primary social protection resource for poor households in African Christian contexts — one of its most damaging and documentable social consequences. The second axis is blessing versus suffering. Prosperity gospel's "pneumatological economy" (Wariboko, 2012; Miller et al., 2013) treats the Holy Spirit as the mechanism of material transformation for the individually faithful. The result is that believers experiencing chronic illness, persistent poverty, and economic misfortune are marked as spiritually inadequate rather than structurally vulnerable, producing the patterns of shame and social withdrawal across African Christian contexts. Paul's account is different. Suffering is constitutive of Christian experience, not a sign of spiritual failure. Romans 8:18–27, 2 Corinthians 12:9–10, and Philippians 3:10 all point in the same direction: persistent hardship says nothing about the quality of a person's faith, and weakness is where divine power shows up most clearly, not where God is absent.

The third axis is accumulation versus sharing. Prosperity gospel's seed-faith theology runs on a logic of supernatural return — giving generates miraculous personal wealth multiplication, what Harrison (2005:54) calls a "give to get" logic that treats divine provision as a contractual return on spiritual investment rather than the incongruous gift that Barclay (2015) shows is central to Pauline χάρις (charis, "grace"). Paul draws no such contract. Generous giving is participation in the incongruous generosity of God in Christ — the ἰσότης (isotēs, "sufficiency," Gorman, 2012) of 2 Corinthians 8:13–14 orients the community's economic life toward eliminating dire want rather than maximising individual wealth. Ogereau (2014) shows that Pauline κοινωνία (koinōnia, "fellowship/sharing") economics treated the community rather than the individual as the primary economic unit, which may be the single most fundamental structural challenge this study raises against the prosperity gospel's framework. The fourth axis is status versus equality. Prosperity gospel treats material success as a marker of spiritual authority and communal standing — a spiritualized meritocracy that Gifford (2015) documents in prominent African prosperity churches, where pastoral wealth functions as a theological credential and congregational poverty as spiritual deficiency. Soothill (2015) and Biri (2020) show that this logic is reinforced by patriarchal power structures that consistently disadvantage women. Paul's account moves in the opposite direction. First Corinthians 12:22–24 elevates the body's weakest members to indispensability and special honour. First Corinthians 11:22 names the shaming of the poor as a eucharistic scandal. Romans 12:16 commands deliberate association with people of low social position (Martin, 1995; Horrell, 1996; Jewett, 2007). Maintaining economic hierarchy within the worshipping community is not merely a social problem in Paul's

theology — it is a theological contradiction. Burchardt (2021) confirms the practical stakes empirically, showing that communities shaped by communitarian theological frameworks produce more equitable welfare outcomes than those shaped by the prosperity gospel's spiritualized meritocracy.

Constructive Proposal: A Pauline Framework for Ecclesial Social Protection in African Contexts

The exegetical and critical work of the preceding sections points toward a constructive Pauline framework for ecclesial social protection built around four principles — offered not as prescriptive institutional blueprints but as resources for ecclesial discernment whose translation into specific practices requires the contextual knowledge and communal wisdom of African Christian communities themselves (West, 2026; Schreiter, 2015). The first is ecclesial solidarity as a primary social safety net. Drawing on the body metaphor of 1 Corinthians 12 and the burden-bearing ethic of Galatians 6, African Christian communities are called to understand themselves as communities of shared vulnerability in which the economic risk and material need of any member is a concern for all (Orobator, 2008; Horrell, 2006). This is not naive communitarianism that ignores the real structural limits of community-based welfare (Dercon, 2002:145; Ochanda, 2012). It is a theological commitment that shapes institutional priorities and pastoral culture so that solidarity becomes the normal response to need, not the exceptional one. African communitarian ethics, with ubuntu's insistence that personhood is constituted through relationship — developed carefully by Metz (2011; 2021) and Molefe (2019) — gives this vision cultural grounding. Concrete African practices of mutual aid become places where theological and cultural commitments to communal solidarity can be built up intentionally rather than left to chance, as Chitando et al. (2017) document in South Africa, Kenya, and Zimbabwean Pentecostal communities that have moved in this direction. The second is stewardship over accumulation as the governing theology of wealth. The Pauline ἰσότης (isotēs, "sufficiency," Gorman, 2012) of 2 Corinthians 8:13–14 points the community's economic life toward eliminating dire need rather than maximizing individual wealth — a direct alternative to the prosperity gospel's logic of accumulation. Prosperity-oriented churches have considerable financial capacity (Bompani, 2015). The question this principle raises is whether that capacity is directed toward community welfare or institutional aggrandizement. Transparent governance structures, community-controlled welfare funds, and accountability mechanisms are the institutional form this principle takes — design elements that Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler (2004; 2008: 64–84) and Midgley and Piachaud (2013) develop in the social protection literature and that find their theological grounding in Ogereau's (2024) analysis of κοινωνία (koinōnia, "fellowship/sharing") as shared material responsibility.

The third principle is the dignification of vulnerability as a theological act. Prosperity gospel shames those who suffer. African Christian communities are called to do the opposite — to build theological cultures and pastoral practices that honour rather than shame those experiencing hardship. In practice, this means preaching cultures in which Paul's theology

of suffering — Romans 8:18–27, 2 Corinthians 12:9–10, Philippians 3:10 — is the normal framework for interpreting hardship, directly countering the spiritual causality of prosperity discourse that Banda (2020) documents as generating shame and self-blame among economically vulnerable African believers. It means pastoral care practices that treat the burden-bearing ethic of Galatians 6:2 and the affective mutuality of Romans 12:15 as communal obligations, not individual charitable impulses. Loba-Mkole (2008: 1347–1364) and Niang et al. (2024) argue this is both theologically necessary and culturally fitting — communal accompaniment of those who suffer is already a deep cultural practice in many African Christian contexts, one that Pauline theology can affirm and deepen rather than replace with individualistic spiritual techniques. Sindima (1995) and Orobator (2008) ground this in African theological anthropology's insistence that human dignity is constituted through communal relationship, not individual achievement. The fourth principle is the development of economic practices that embody communal solidarity in concrete ways. Rotating welfare funds, community food banks, shared agricultural labour, congregational healthcare schemes, and mutual bereavement support networks — documented by Mwangi et al. (2025), Biri (2024), and Koehrsen and Burchardt (2024) in African Christian contexts — are not just practical welfare arrangements. They are potential expressions of the Pauline economic theology this study develops: the ἰσότης (isotēs, "sufficiency") of 2 Corinthians 8:13–14, the βαστάζετε ἀλλήλων τὰ βάρη (bastazete allēlōn ta barē, "bear one another's burdens") of Galatians 6:2, and the body solidarity of 1 Corinthians 12:26. What changes when these practices are named and intentionally developed as participations in Christ's self-giving generosity is not their institutional form but their theological meaning — and that shift in meaning matters for how communities understand what they are doing and why. Biri (2024: 287–298) documents this empirically within the Zimbabwean context: communities shaped by communitarian theological frameworks consistently show stronger and more equitable social protection outcomes than those shaped by the prosperity gospel's individualism. The choice between these two theological frameworks is not a matter of doctrinal preference. It determines whether African Christian communities actually serve their most vulnerable members.

Conclusion

This manuscript has argued that Pauline theology offers real resources for critiquing the prosperity gospel's individualistic account of wealth and divine blessing, and for building an alternative theological framework for social protection grounded in ecclesial solidarity, a theology of suffering, and the economic sharing practices found in the Pauline corpus. Close exegetical engagement with Romans 8, 2 Corinthians 8–9, Galatians 6, 1 Corinthians 11–12, and Philippians 2–3 — read alongside African communitarian ethics and social protection literature — has shown that the prosperity gospel's characteristic theological moves are not merely ethical distortions but direct inversions of Pauline social theology. Treating material wealth as a covenant right, reading suffering as spiritual deficiency, and framing giving as supernatural investment produce measurable social protection failures in African Christian contexts where faith communities are the primary informal welfare actors for populations without access to formal social security. Paul's account runs the other way: material

resources are communal gifts oriented toward sufficiency; suffering is a constitutive and eschatologically situated dimension of Christian experience; generosity is participation in the incongruous self-giving of God in Christ; and the church is a body whose members carry genuine mutual obligations. Read alongside African communitarian ethics — particularly ubuntu's relational ontology — these insights produce a vision of community care that neither tradition reaches alone. Three scholarly contributions follow from this work: a sustained exegetical engagement with Pauline economic theology that existing African theological critiques have not provided; a four-principle constructive framework offering practical alternatives to the prosperity gospel's social logic; and an interdisciplinary connection between biblical studies, African theology, and development studies that neither field has adequately pursued. These carry direct implications for African churches that need theological and institutional reorientation toward communal solidarity, and for theological institutions responsible for forming leaders who can engage the prosperity gospel with exegetical care and contextual accountability. Four limitations define the scope of these contributions: the study's non-empirical character; its selective focus on five Pauline texts; its primary engagement with southern and eastern African ubuntu traditions; and the distance between its theological principles and detailed institutional implementation. Each point toward work that still needs doing — empirical investigation of theological frameworks and welfare practices, more comprehensive Pauline economic ethics across the full corpus, comparative regional analysis of prosperity gospel, ecumenical integration with diverse African ecclesial traditions, and sustained gender-focused analysis of prosperity gospel's intersection with patriarchal power in African Christian contexts.

Recommendations

For African Churches

African churches — including those shaped by the prosperity gospel — need to make the teaching of Pauline body theology a genuine priority in congregational formation. First Corinthians 12, Romans 12, and Galatians 6 are not peripheral texts. They establish that the welfare of the most vulnerable members is a theological obligation on the whole community, not an optional act of individual generosity. Churches should build transparent, community-governed mutual aid systems — welfare funds, congregational healthcare schemes, food banks, rotating savings initiatives — and ensure that financial resources raised through congregational giving are directed toward communal sustenance rather than institutional enrichment. Financial governance should be genuinely accountable to the congregation, not just to leadership. Prosperity gospel influences deserve honest and ongoing evaluation. Its pastoral appeal is real and should be acknowledged. But its spiritualization of poverty, its stigmatization of suffering, and its redirection of resources from mutual aid toward pastoral wealth are serious theological problems that cannot be quietly tolerated. Pastoral cultures should make actual room for acknowledging suffering, economic vulnerability, and unanswered prayer — drawing on Paul's theology of suffering in Romans 8 and 2 Corinthians 12 to frame hardship as a context of communal solidarity and eschatological hope rather than a sign of deficient faith.

For Theological Education

Theological seminaries, Bible colleges, and ministerial training institutions need to take seriously what they are producing. If the next generation of African church leaders lacks the exegetical tools to engage the prosperity gospel on its own biblical terrain, the problems this study documents will continue. Teaching on wealth, poverty, generosity, and community belongs in the core curriculum — not as a peripheral ethics elective but as an integral part of biblical theology, New Testament studies, and Christian ethics. Students should be able to read Pauline economic texts in their socioeconomic and rhetorical contexts and draw out their implications for African church practice. Curricula should bring African communitarian ethics, social protection literature, and contextual hermeneutics into genuine dialogue with Pauline studies — building the capacity to critique prosperity gospel with exegetical precision and to articulate constructive Pauline alternatives that take the genuine pastoral needs of African believers seriously without reinforcing harmful theological assumptions. Field education should include structured exposure to church-based welfare initiatives, so that theological formation connects to the actual institutional conditions of ecclesial life rather than remaining at the level of classroom abstraction. And theological institutions themselves need to model what they teach. Genuine solidarity, transparent governance, and dignified care for vulnerable members are not just things to teach about — they are things institutions either embody or contradict by how they operate.

For Individual Christians

Individual African Christians in prosperity-oriented church environments face real pressure — financial, spiritual, and social. A Pauline understanding of wealth offers a different orientation: wealth is a communal gift held in trust for the community, not a personal reward for spiritual performance or a private entitlement secured through seed-faith investment. The question shifts from "what is God providing for me?" to "what has God entrusted to me for the sake of others?" In practice, this means participating actively and generously in ecclesial mutual aid systems, advocating for transparent and equitable resource allocation within congregations, and resisting institutional giving demands that pull communal resources away from mutual aid toward pastoral enrichment. Paul's own criterion is a useful check: legitimate Christian giving sustains the community's most vulnerable members rather than concentrating resources among its most powerful institutional actors. Individual Christians should also work at developing resilience against the prosperity gospel's treatment of suffering as spiritual failure — learning to interpret hardship through the eschatological hope of Romans 8 and the cruciform solidarity of 2 Corinthians 12 rather than through the prosperity gospel's causality framework, which produces shame, self-blame, and spiritual self-reproach in those who are already struggling.

For Ongoing Research

Three areas stand out for future research. Theologically, more comprehensive work is needed on Pauline economic ethics across the full canonical corpus — the Deutero-Pauline household codes and the labour ethics of 1 and 2 Thessalonians both deserve more attention than this study has given them. Comparative theological work examining how the Pauline framework developed here connects with African Initiated Church theologies, Catholic social teaching, and Reformed African theological ethics across different regional contexts would also extend its reach considerably. Empirically, field-based research is needed on how different theological frameworks shape congregational welfare practices, resource allocation decisions, and social protection outcomes across a wider range of denominational, national, and socioeconomic contexts. Longitudinal studies tracking welfare outcomes in communities that have deliberately moved toward more communitarian theological frameworks would be particularly valuable — providing the kind of documented evidence base those theological proposals of this kind currently lack. The most urgent gap, however, is gender-focused research examining how the prosperity gospel's theology of wealth, suffering, and giving intersects with patriarchal power structures to shape the economic vulnerability of women within prosperity-oriented African Christian congregations. This is not a marginal concern. It requires sustained, integrated engagement combining feminist biblical hermeneutics, African gender theology, Pauline social ethics, and social protection analysis — and no existing study has yet attempted this combination seriously.

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