

# “BLESS AND DO NOT CURSE”: CONTEMPORARY PENTECOSTALISM, AFRICAN CULTURES, AND THE PRACTICE OF CURSING

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## **Key Words**

*Contemporary Pentecostalism, weaponization curses, fighting personal battles, Charismatic Christianity and Pentecostal Spirituality.*

We discuss in this article the phenomenon of cursing in African Christianity, specifically contemporary Pentecostalism, and how this relates to African cultures and the teachings of Scripture. In both African cultures and contemporary Pentecostalism, the phenomenon of cursing is quite widespread. In Romans 12:14, Paul states: “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.”<sup>53</sup> Pentecostalism is a religion that believes in biblical authority and so we must ask the question why do their leaders encourage cursing which goes against the grain of Scriptural teaching? The sub questions guiding these reflections include the following: What is a curse? How does it feature in the African traditional worldviews? Why have charismatic leaders of contemporary Pentecostal churches and ministries adopted cursing as an arsenal against their enemies? What does the weaponization of curses teach about contemporary Pentecostal notions of spiritual authority and to what extent does Christian cursing resonate with traditional cultural practices?

The thesis of the article is that although it exists within African traditional cultures, the practice of cursing cannot be justified on biblical grounds. Laurenti Magesa has noted how, despite the growth of Christianity, traditional African cultural perspectives

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<sup>53</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all quotations in this article are from the *New Revised Standard Version* of the Bible.

persist, continuing to exert influences on the way Christianity is expressed.<sup>54</sup> In Christianity, the practice of cursing others also goes against the grain of Pentecostal/charismatic spirituality, which emphasizes transformed living as evidence of the Born-again experience. The Spirit empowered person is deemed to have been made a new creation in Christ (II Corinthians 5:17). In Pentecostal spirituality, Christians are not just reborn, renewed, and empowered with graces, but they also exercise spiritual authority. Such authority, which is often exercised “in the name of Jesus” constitutes a means of dealing with principalities, powers, demons, and situations. Nevertheless, once Born-again, the belief is that in life, speech, and conduct, the Christian will live to reflect the values of Jesus Christ which is to love, forgive, and bless others and not curse them.

### **What is a Curse?**

A curse is the use of words to invoke harm on others with mystical consequences on the cursed. The consequences of curses include loss of wealth, vigor, power, banishment from society (common in rural Africa), and death.<sup>55</sup> Curses are usually invoked in the name of some supernatural being, which meta empirical reality, in the context of African traditional religious practices, could be any deity or the ancestors. In Ghana’s recent political history, we have seen politicians curse their opponents in fits of rage and anger resulting from false accusations and the like.

I argue in this article that, although it is a popular traditional mode of dealing with offences, the weaponization of the curse as a means of fighting personal battles, defies biblical admonishments to love enemies and even pray for them. The reference to “enemies” in this context does not include demonic spirits such as those Jesus drove out of persons who

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54 Laruenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 6.

55 Herbert Chana Brichto, *The Problem of “Curse” in the Hebrew Bible* (Philadelphia, PA: Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis, 1963), 3.

were troubled and whose lives were rendered miserable and dysfunctional by such entities. Jesus cursed an unfruitful fig tree, but whatever the lesson from that event is, he never used it as an example of how to curse others if we do not have positive experiences with them. This study may be considered significant precisely because we are dealing with the uses of extremely violent verbal assaults against real human beings in the name of Jesus and on the authority that the Bible does not offer. To appreciate the extent of the cursing regime, we consider two recent examples from Ghana.

### **Examples of Cursing in Charismatic Christianity**

The authoritative and adjuring use of the spoken word is an important factor in this matter because, as Ruth Marshall argues, prayer is a weapon of spiritual warfare, and thus the central theme of redemptive praxis.<sup>56</sup> It is not the exercise of verbal authority that we problematize here, but the fact that these enchanted forms of speech are understood to encompass the right to curse those who offend the believer and in particular, those who step on the wrong side of the charismatic figure or anointed man/woman of God. I have in various areas of fieldwork in contemporary Pentecostal settings, heard people cursed for issues ranging from unfaithfulness in the payment of tithes to seceding from one church to establish another. Among charismatic Christians who believe in the exercise of authority this way, the use of violent language and obsession with enemies—real and imaginary—underlies the understanding of the use power and militant prayer that have come to characterize the new Pentecostalism.

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56 Ruth Marshall, “Destroying Arguments and Captivating Thoughts: Spiritual Warfare Prayer as Global Praxis,” *Journal of Religious and Political Practice*, vol. 2, 1 (2016), 93.

### **Curses of Bishop Dag Heward-Mills**

In 2021 news reports emerged of a major fallout between Bishop Dag Heward-Mills and several of his former associate pastors. They had sued their former boss alleging among others that their pensions had not been paid with others claiming emotional abuse from confrontation with him over reprimands because of dissenting views over various issues. When a video featuring Bishop Heward-Mills cursing people, the public was quick to make connections between the fractured relationship between the bishop and his former associates. The following words of cursing are contained in the said video which is widely available on the Internet:

[Enemies] in my life, I say, you are finished in the name of Jesus Christ.

Any form of wickedness in this church represented by criticisms, murmurings, speaking against authority...as Miriam became white with leprosy, so also may you be whitened with an incurable disease and never rise from your hospital bed, in the name of Jesus Christ.

Let those that have made themselves opposers, and accusers, let them wither like the fig tree withered when Jesus spoke against it, in the name of Jesus Christ.

Let all forms of wickedness, conspiracies, secret meetings, whisperings, telephone messages and conspiracies and phone calls [resorts to speaking tongues in the video recording at this stage], let it turn into an explosion, in the name of Jesus Christ.

### **Curses of Rev. Anthony Kwadwo Boakye**

One of the U-Tube Videos on curses spewed on detractors by the Rev. Anthony K. Boakye of the Resurrection Power New Generation Church contains the following curses against various groups of people ranging from journalists to former members who have left his church:

- Whoever recorded my voice on a cassette, and doctored my speeches to disgrace me, God should kill them. Those who attended schools of journalism because of me, God should kill them. Radio Presenters who sit on radio and TV Stations to disgrace me, God kill them.
- Frimpong [an acquaintance of Pastor Boakye suspected to have revealed some negative things about him to the media] who brought up all this, God should kill him, his wife, and children. The one who also doctored the cassette and the one who works at the TV Station with so much hatred for me in this world, God should turn him into a corpse.
- Rev. Anthony Boakye then leads the congregation to say "Lord Jesus, whoever brought up a cassette to disgrace Boakye and Jesus in Ghana and the world, in the name of Jesus, Lord, we kill them this afternoon [said repeatedly]."
- Radio presenters, journalists who sit on TV and behind radios, people who have conspired to disturb Boakye... Lord of Resurrection Power, we are sons of Judah, sons and daughters of the Lion of Judah, this afternoon, Lion, go forth, angels present, go forth, attack and deal with them, attack Frimpong, his wife and children [said repeatedly]... we destroy you, we kill you; all the rich people backing them, in the name of Jesus, we dismantle and clear you from the face of the earth.

He then actually prays what he thinks must happen to his detractors:

Father, arise, they've bitten more than they can chew... they and their descendants and wives and children, we clear them, we won't stop till things happen, we won't sleep in Ghana [repeatedly]. Beware, I unleash blindness, stroke, epilepsy upon you, be blinded [repeatedly], catch stroke and be bed ridden, get stuck in your rooms. Judah has risen, the children of the Lion of Judah have risen... in Jesus' name. Lord, Father of Boakye, arise, teach them sense; those who joke with your name and your servants, you have said, those who touch your servants have touched your eyes, Ghanaians have touched your eyes, avenge them, speak... whoever prospers through our church and decides to quit, the money that they have made will be taken back from them.

Most of the African charismatic leaders who weaponize curses, such as the two we refer to here, tend to be very high profile public religious figures leading very large congregations and who also have very far-reaching media ministries. The circulation of these ideas, beliefs, and practices, that have been reinvented in contemporary Pentecostal Christianity is evident in the ministries of leaders like Derek Prince who teaches that, Christian leaders have the authority to speak good or evil and expect what they decree or declare to become reality. Prince goes as far as to teach that bless or curse their followers such as when a pastor clashes with associates who break away from them. These blessings and curses have lives of their own and can affect their targets for generations, especially when uttered by servant of God.<sup>57</sup>

### **Curses in African Traditional Religious Cultures**

In African cultures, libation pouring offers the context in which evil persons in society are cursed.<sup>58</sup> They are cursed as enemies of abundant living, and it is a phenomenon that is also used by individuals to settle personal and family scores. In Ghana, for example, it is not uncommon for communities to find slaughtered fowls alongside a bowl of mashed yam mixed with oil and cracked eggs at various locations in a village or town. As soon as those things are seen, it is a sign that someone has been offended and therefore has placed those ritual items there to curse the offender. The items embodying the curse would usually be placed there with the words of the curse spoken over them and on occasion, the words may be accompanied by libation pouring.

The power of the spoken word, which we find in traditional culture, is also a vital component of Pentecostal spirituality.<sup>59</sup> I

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57 Prince, *Blessings and Curses*, 40-43.

58 See for example, Kwesi Yankah, *Speaking for the Chief: Okyeame and the Politics of Akan Royal Oratory* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), 72-73.

59 J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *Sighs and Signs of the Spirit: Ghanaian Perspectives on Pentecostalism and Renewal in Ghana* (Oxford: Regnum, 2015), 77.

find a direct linkage between the spewing out of curses and the uncritical proclamation of prosperity. In the traditional African context where supernatural evil is considered hyperactive and in which witchcraft, for example, may be wantonly cited as the cause of retrogressions in life, curses are frequently deployed as a weapon of resistance against evil persons. In such a context, curses are rife because they are resorted to as a means for dealing with those who are believed to be working against the prosperity of others. This is a context in which any problem, from ill health to one's inability to secure travel visas, or even proper documentation when living abroad, may all be explained in terms of the doings of one's enemies.

It is not uncommon to hear at Ghanaian charismatic prayer vigils, congregants being led to declare, "anybody in my father's house; anybody in my mother's house; anybody in my workplace, working against my interests, may they die in Jesus' name." The inveighing of curses is not arbitrary, for as we say in Ghana, "every insinuation has an intended target," and that I believe includes cursing in both the African traditional and charismatic Christian tradition.

### **Pentecostal Spirituality and the Cursing Regime**

What those who use such verbal violence against others "in the name of Jesus" do is weaponize the word of God as an instrument of war against other human beings. Cursing has become a means of instilling fear into close associates, church members, and others who may dare to raise any forms of criticism against how a leader uses power and resources. Curses are deployed as a deterrent against any associates who may be entertaining thoughts of leaving their current employment to establish their own ministries. In sections of contemporary Pentecostalism, curses are spewed out in defiance of biblical injunctions regarding retributive justice, and they indirectly challenge the sovereignty of God in determining how to handle those who sin against him by sinning against others.

There are many reasons for the popularity of cursing among certain contemporary Pentecostals and one of them is in the understanding of the nature of charisma itself. Firstly, it is usually justified with references to instances in the Bible in which curses occur. Secondly, charisma tends to resist accountability and in the lives of the churches we look at, the curse is weaponized to instill fear into those who challenge the leader's authority or show dissent in the running of affairs and in decision-making. For all that Pentecostalism has achieved in world Christianity with respect to the growth and public influence, there have been serious scandals among its leaders ranging from the authoritarian use of charismatic power to lack of accountability in the use of financial resources and moral choices in life and ministry. Thirdly, and for Africa, curses within Pentecostalism resonate with the traditional culture as we have noted.

### **Defying Biblical Authority**

The use of imprecatory prayer in cursing others, I point out, is inconsistent with what Jesus stood for and how he wanted his followers to behave towards others. Jesus concludes the parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18:21-35 with the following warning:

So, my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.

In the context of the parable, I take the phrase "will also do to every one of you to mean", being treated like the unforgiving servant who would later be incarcerated, and all his earthly belongings sold to defray his debts. This was his punishment for not reciprocating in showing mercy towards a fellow servant who owed him, when he himself, had been the gracious beneficiary of the king's kindness. It is with a similar principle in mind that Jesus inserted into the Lord's Prayer the line that says, "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."



The point is that anyone who has an unforgiving spirit, bears grudges, curses others, defies the authority of Scripture in how Christians respond to offences against them. Above all, one of the marks of the experience of the Spirit is graceful speech because, the renewal that comes from encountering the Spirit of God in both regeneration and empowerment, includes transformation in the use of the tongue. In contradistinction to the focus of curses, the terms and expressions that define the mission of God in Christ include love, compassion, and empathy.

Thus, if we take it that Jesus is the ultimate example in the human response to offences against us, this is how he responded:

When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly (I Peter 2:23).

It is instructive that this text on how Jesus gracefully bores his humiliation in the crucifixion is immediately followed by references to how “he bore our sins on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness,” for, “by his wounds you have been healed” (I Peter 2:24). If the mission of God is to be expressed in the spirit of Christ, then he becomes the exemplar in the Christian response in terms of dealing with those who offend us.

### **Challenging Divine Sovereignty**

If human beings take on the power of cursing, it challenges the sovereignty of God. Ultimately, the power to bless and curse belongs to God. Those who live in obedience to God are blessed, but those who walk in the way of sinners and sit in the seat of scoffers, experience illbeing. Although he chastises his children through negative occurrences, the bottom line in God’s dealings with human creatures is love, forgiveness, and kindness. In the mission of God sin is detested and brings curses, but once a spirit of genuine repentance is expressed, the

divine gifts of forgiveness, love, and compassion, are available. These are the gifts of God that he makes available in Christ and therefore Christian mission cannot be defined apart from God's restoration in forgiving grace which are embodied in the Christ event.

In the prophecies of Joel, for example, we see how the invasion of locusts in the land, for example, led to a call for genuine repentance and restoration to avoid deaths (Joel 1:6-14). The opposite of cursing is blessing, so when there is repentance in the land, God sends grain, wine, and oil. His people are satisfied and are no longer a mockery among the nations (Joel 2:19). We see that much of these curses arrogantly asks the God who on the cross cried, "father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing," to set aside his own divine principle of forgiveness. Those who curse do so in defiance of the authority of the Bible and implore God, literally demand of him, to destroy lives that people feel need to be taught some bitter lesson. The mark of God's sovereignty in the Old Testament includes statements of curses that could come upon people who defy his authority.

However, the general tenor of biblical teaching is that God is love, and he does not wish any, not even sinners to perish (Ezekiel 18:23; II Peter 2:3). When Jesus met those possessed by demons, he cast out the evil spirits, but the human victims of demonic affliction were never cursed. When it comes to sin, even when a woman had been caught in an adulterous affair, Jesus sent her away forgiven and with the pastoral advice not to sin anymore (John 8:3-11). It is the same authority that Jesus bequeathed to the disciples when he "gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases," and subsequently, sent them out "to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal" (Luke 9:1-2). Healing and exorcism, as we see from this commission, are forms of pastoral care because those afflicted were seen as victims of the evil spirits that possessed them, the sins that alienated them, and sicknesses with which

they are afflicted. The most important thing is the power of utterance in the use of words by Jesus in which, rather than treat victims of sin and spirit possession harshly, he spoke words of forgiveness and drove out the evil spirits also by the word.

If forgiveness is what defines our relationship with God and with each other, why has contemporary Pentecostalism adopted a culture of cursing in defiance of biblical authority? In the African Christian context, the use of curses and the popularity of it could be understood as part of the fallout from the shortfalls of Word of Faith practices. The working presupposition of positive confession, D.R. McConnel notes, is that one's mental attitude determines what one believes and confesses, and what one believes and confesses determines what one gets from God.<sup>60</sup> If one preaches that speaking the word, positive confession, or naming-and-claiming, can unlock prosperity, then when it does not work, the sources of hindrance need to be cursed. Those blamed as the sources of evil in human life often include vulnerable people believed to possess the spirit of witchcraft and political, business and even pastoral rivals, and other such persons whose activities and behaviors may be considered inimical to the progress of others.

The use of the powers of blessing is understandable as it fits into the overall Pentecostal theological worldview that in Christ, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, God intervenes in human life. He does so, not simply for the purpose of eternal salvation, but also the realization of material and spiritual wellbeing or more generally, human flourishing. In the story of the demoniac of the Gerasene in Mark 5, for example, people witnessed the transforming power of God in a man who started life living in the tombs and cutting himself with stone in loud and distressing agonizing cries, but who was later to be found restored, and well-dressed, and in his right mind (Mark 5:15).

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<sup>60</sup> D.R. McConnel, *A Different Gospel*, updated edition (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), 135.

In the Christian context, I consider the use of the powers of cursing to be in defiance of biblical authority based on the biblical teaching on forgiveness. The first is Jesus' teaching that his hearers should turn the other cheek when slapped on one and even to release their inner garment if another should insist on unjustly taking their outer cloak (Matthew 5:39; Luke 6:29). The second is the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant in which Jesus warns that those who do not forgive would be treated even more harshly by God for not extending the divine mercies they have enjoyed towards others (Matthew 18:21-35). The third is Paul's admonition in Romans 12, which reads:

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them...  
Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all (Romans 12:14, 17-18).

In all these passages, including what has come to be designated the Lord's Prayer, forgiveness is considered part of the privileges that God extends to humanity and Christians are thought to reflect this divine nature when they cultivate a forgiving spirit. In conservative evangelical Christian theology, forgiveness is what leads to salvation, and it is in the exercise of God's prerogative of forgives that we are not consumed or destroyed.

The charismatic personalities behind the formation of contemporary Pentecostal churches stand in the same tradition. They are both revered and feared because of the powers of blessing and cursing associated with the anointing on their lives. They have the powers to declare who would prosper and who will fail in life. Most importantly, those who offend them could have their blessings withdrawn whether it be money, material possessions, businesses, the gift of children, or even one's very life. Literally, some of these charismatic figures claim that the powers of life and death are on their tongues. These powers of blessing and cursing are not just attributed to them, they consciously claim them and weaponize them against those who challenge or undermine their authority.

## **Conclusion: Weaponizing Curses in Defiance of Biblical Injunctions**

J. Lee Grady quotes Pastor Larry Stockstill as noting that a person's spiritual gifts, talents and abilities can make room for him in attracting the notice and attention of others, but those gifts, though legitimate and God given, can be operated in pride and arrogance rather than in submission to God.<sup>61</sup> In my estimation, the word of God or prayer is weaponized to avoid accountability. I have used the expression "weaponize" on purpose to indicate that contemporary charismatic Christianity in Africa is one in which patrons looking for personal breakthroughs are literally led to curse their enemies and spiritually incapacitate and physically disable or even kill them to release one's blessing. Beyond the belief that prosperity is impossible without the extermination of one's enemies, an important reason why charismatic pastors curse their "enemies" is disloyalty. It is considered disloyal, as is evident in the curses of Boakye and Heward-Mills for associate pastors to part ways with their spiritual mentors.

This sort of Christianity thrives on the personal charisma and psychology of the leader, as I have noted. In prosperity thinking numbers are important. The bigger the congregation the more legitimate a person's ministry is and so losing important personnel and numbers could be interpreted in terms of failure. Those developments are not taken lightly. It does often happen that when associates feel unable to work with a particular General Overseer, they would breakaway or secede from the original organization. The numbers are important for the legitimization of charisma. That means breakaways undermine charismatic authority. Depending on the strength of their charisma, those breaking away can take away many of the leader's followers and that is why secessions are not taken lightly. Thus, the power of the curse has also been weaponized against such breakaways to ensure absolute loyalty from

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<sup>61</sup> J. Lee Grady, *The Holy Spirit is not for Sale: Rekindling the Power of God in an Age of Compromise* (Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen, 2010), 102.

pastoral associates. Whichever way one looks at it, the use of the curse in contemporary Pentecostalism cannot be justified on the basis of the Christian Scriptures and the ways of the Jesus Christ.