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# Which Jesus, whose Christology? Naming Jesus and the crisis of theological identity in Pentecostal-charismatic practice

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**ABSTRACT:** Within Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity, it is difficult to speak about prayer, preaching, healing, or deliverance without mentioning the name of Jesus. The concern, however, is that the frequent use of his name does not always mean that a person's understanding and presentation of Jesus align with the witness of Scripture. The central argument of this article is that a church may confess orthodox beliefs about Christ while its practices present a different picture of him. Healing, deliverance, provision, and victory are themes within Christian theology. The concern arises when one theme becomes so dominant that it eclipses Jesus' teaching, the cross, discipleship, compassion, or accountability. A therapeutic presentation becomes reductionist when Jesus is portrayed chiefly as a means of obtaining personal benefit; a militant presentation becomes reductionist when spiritual victory is used to justify hostility toward people or to avoid ethical accountability. This amounts to a functional Christology that separates the name of Jesus from his identity, character, and mission. This article uses a theological and exegetical reading of Matthew 7:21–23, Acts 19:13–16, and John 14–16, read in dialogue with scholarship on Pentecostal theology and African Christology. It argues that the use of Jesus' name should be evaluated by obedience to Jesus, submission to his authority, and participation in his mission. The article contributes a three-part biblical framework for reflecting on the relationship between confessed Christology and the practices through which churches represent Jesus. This discussion is especially relevant to Ghanaian and wider African Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity, where the language of power, healing, deliverance, and victory occupies an important place. This article argues that the church must not separate the name of Jesus from the person of Jesus.

**Keywords:** Christology, Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity, African Pentecostalism, functional Christology, trinitarian theology, theological identity.

## INTRODUCTION

One of the most familiar expressions in Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity is the phrase: "in the name of Jesus." Christians say it in prayer; they say it when preaching the gospel, ministering healing, casting out demons, or confronting what is believed to be spiritual opposition. There is a biblical basis for this confidence in the name of Jesus. In Acts 3, the man at the temple gate was healed in Jesus' name, and Acts 4:12 declares that salvation is found in no other name. The question, therefore, is not whether Christians should call upon the name of Jesus. The question is whether every use of his name truly represents him and carries his approval. The New Testament itself provides sufficient reason to take this question seriously. Jesus says in Matthew 7:21-23 that some people will point to the prophecies, miracles, and exorcisms they performed in his name. These are impressive works; however, Jesus responds, "I never knew you." Acts 19:13-16 makes the same point in a different way. The sons of Sceva had heard about what Paul was doing in the name of Jesus, and they decided to use that same name in their own exorcistic ministry. Acts 19:13–16 portrays the sons of Sceva attempting to use the name of Jesus in an exorcistic formula associated with Paul. The narrative exposes the danger of treating Jesus'

name as a technique detached from allegiance to Jesus and the authority represented by his name. The episode supports the argument that the name is not an independently controllable instrument of power. They refer to him as “the Jesus whom Paul proclaims.” Paul knows Jesus and belongs to him, but the sons of Sceva are only borrowing a name they have heard another person use. John 14-16 reveals the flaw in this approach. When Jesus speaks about asking anything in his name, he also speaks about remaining in him, keeping his words, bearing fruit, and doing the work he has given his disciples. In John 14–16, asking in Jesus’ name belongs to the disciples’ continuing relationship with him and their participation in his mission. John 15 connects asking with abiding in Christ, allowing his words to shape the disciples, and bearing fruit; John 16 places the promise within the transition to life after Jesus’ departure. The phrase “in my name” should therefore be interpreted in the context of discipleship and mission rather than as a guarantee of any desired outcome. The article argues that prayer in Jesus’ name is grounded in belonging to Christ, submitting to his authority, and seeking what accords with his mission (France, 2007, pp. 283-286; Keener, 2014, p. 2862).

This article asks how the use of Jesus’ name in Pentecostal-Charismatic prayer and ministry may be assessed in light of the New Testament’s presentation of Jesus. Through a theological reading of Matthew 7:21–23, Acts 19:13–16, and John 14–16, it develops three criteria—obedience, allegiance to Jesus’ authority, and participation in his mission—to evaluate whether ministry practices reflect the Christ they confess. A church can be correct in its official doctrine and still present a different Jesus through its practices. The church may affirm the Nicene and Chalcedonian understanding of Christ, but its prayers, sermons, testimonies, songs, and leadership culture may reduce Jesus to the one who gives people success, destroys their enemies, or supports whatever a spiritual leader says. When this happens, a person is dealing with a functional Christology. This understanding of Jesus emerges from what the church actually does, not only from what it claims to believe (Vanhoozer, 2005, p.96). The theology of a church is heard in its creeds, but it is also seen in what the church celebrates, permits, desires, fears, and repeatedly teaches its people to pursue (Müller, 2024, p. 5).

The argument in this article is simple. Whenever Christians invoke the name of Jesus, the way they pray and minister must agree with the Jesus revealed in Scripture. The name of Jesus cannot be separated from the Son who obeyed the Father, died on the cross, rose from the dead, gave the Spirit, and called his followers to live as his disciples. When a person uses his name in ways that contradict his character and teaching, it misrepresents the person of Jesus. This does not mean that the church should lose confidence in the name of Jesus. A Christian’s confidence, however, is not in the mere pronunciation of the name. It is in Jesus Christ himself, the living Lord to whom the name belongs.

## METHOD AND SCOPE

The article adopts a theological and exegetical approach. Matthew 7:21–23 is examined for its emphasis on obedience; Acts 19:13–16 for its portrayal of an attempt to invoke Jesus’ name as a technique; and John 14–16 for the relationship between prayer, abiding in Christ, obedience, fruitfulness, and mission. These readings are discussed alongside selected scholarship on Pentecostal theology and African Christology. The article does not present original fieldwork and therefore offers a normative theological framework rather than a measurement of how frequently particular practices occur in churches. It pays particular attention to Matthew 7:21-23, Acts 19:13-16, and John 14-16. These passages were chosen because they highlight different aspects of what it means to use the name of Jesus. Matthew 7:21–23 challenges the assumption that invoking Jesus’ name or reporting extraordinary works is sufficient evidence of faithfulness. Jesus emphasizes doing the Father’s will and rejects practices associated with lawlessness. Applied cautiously to contemporary ministry, the passage invites discernment of conduct and conformity to Jesus’ teaching rather than judging faithfulness by public claims of spiritual power alone. Acts shows the danger of turning Jesus’ name into a religious technique. John connects prayer in Jesus’ name with remaining in him, obeying his words, and taking part in his mission. The article does not suggest that Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians are the only believers who can misrepresent Jesus. Any Christian tradition can say the right things about Christ in its official teaching and still present a different picture of him through its practices. Because prayer, healing, deliverance, prophecy, and spiritual warfare are prominent in some Pentecostal-Charismatic settings, these practices provide a useful context for examining how Jesus’ name is understood and used. The movement is diverse, however, and this discussion should not be taken to describe every congregation or national context. The examples are theological patterns to be evaluated, not universal claims about African Pentecostal Christianity. These practices make the question of which Jesus is being proclaimed especially important.

African Pentecostal and Charismatic churches must also not be treated as though they are all the same or known only by their excesses. These churches have helped many believers to recover confidence in prayer, the present work of the Holy Spirit, and the power of the risen Christ. They have also taken the fears, suffering, and spiritual concerns that shape the everyday lives of many African Christians seriously. The criticism offered comes from within the Pentecostal and Charismatic tradition and is intended to be constructive. It is important to preserve confidence in the truth that Jesus is alive and powerful while insisting that every prayer, prophecy, miracle, and claim of spiritual authority must be tested by the character and teaching of Jesus himself.

## THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

### The name and the one named

#### *The divine name in Israel's scriptures*

In the Old Testament, the "name" (*šēm*) is more than a verbal label. It signifies identity, character, reputation, authority, and presence. In Exodus 3:14–15, God's disclosure of his name to Moses is covenantal and promissory: the God who identifies himself also pledges to act for Israel. The name reveals who God is by identifying the one whose faithfulness will be displayed in history (Childs, 1974, p. 62). Deuteronomy develops this theology by describing the sanctuary as the place where YHWH causes his name to dwell (Deut. 12:5, 11). The formulation preserves both transcendence and presence. Israel's God cannot be contained in a shrine; however, he truly makes himself known among his people (Weinfeld, 1972, pp. 191–200; von Rad, 1962, p. 181). God's name must not be understood as though it possesses power apart from God himself. The name is not a spiritual object that worshippers can use to control God or force him to act. It points to God and to the way he has chosen to make himself known. For this reason, Scripture does not treat the divine name carelessly. When people call upon the name of YHWH, they are calling upon the God who has revealed himself and shown his faithfulness (Gen 4:26; Joel 2:32). The command against taking God's name in vain also goes beyond careless speech. It warns God's people against using or bearing his name in a way that gives others a false picture of who he is (Exod. 20:7).

The Psalms elaborate on this point. When the psalmist says, "Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God" (Ps 20:7), the trust is not placed in the word itself (Wright, 1996, pp. 75–78; Goldingay, 2006, pp. 285–290). It is placed in the God whose character and faithfulness that name represents (Ps 33:21). Those who call upon God's name, especially those who bear that name as his people, must therefore live in ways that do not misrepresent him. The later Jewish reluctance to pronounce the divine name expressed reverence, but it did not mean the sounds or syllables of the name carried power on their own. The power belonged to God. His name could be trusted because God is faithful, but it could never be used as a formula for controlling what God would do.

#### *The name of Jesus and divine identity*

The New Testament applies this theological weight to Jesus. Peter's declaration that "there is no other name under heaven" by which people must be saved (Acts 4:12) identifies Jesus as the unique locus of God's saving action. Philippians 2:9–11 goes further. Paul applies the language of Isaiah 45:23 to Jesus Christ, where every knee bows and every tongue swears allegiance to YHWH. The confession that "Jesus Christ is Lord" does not add a second deity alongside Israel's God; it includes Jesus within the unique divine identity (Hurtado, 2003, p. 134). Richard Bauckham argues that early Jewish monotheism was defined not only by numerical singularity but by the unique identity of the Creator and sovereign Lord. The New Testament includes Jesus in those divine prerogatives and in the worship belonging to Israel's God (Bauckham, 2008, pp. 26–28). Larry Hurtado similarly demonstrates that devotion to Jesus emerged within, rather than as an abandonment of, Jewish monotheistic practice (Hurtado, 2003, p. 96). The name of Jesus therefore carries more than delegated institutional authority. It identifies the exalted Son through whom the God of Israel is known and worshipped.

The expression "in the name of Jesus" consequently indicates representation, sphere, and authorization. To act in another's name is to act under that person's authority and in a manner consistent with that person's purposes (BDAG, s.v. "ὄνομα," pp. 713–715). The apostles make this explicit after the healing at the temple: the man was not restored by their "own power or piety," but by faith in Jesus' name (Acts 3:12, 16). The name directs attention away from the human agents and toward the risen Christ. This Christological claim is also Trinitarian. In John 14–16, asking in Jesus' name belongs within the Son's relation to the Father and the Spirit's continuing ministry. The Son glorifies the Father; the Father sends the Spirit in the Son's name; and the Spirit bears witness to the Son (John 14:13, 26; 15:26; 16:13–15). Invocation is thus participation in the divine economy, not access to an impersonal reservoir of power. Pro-Nicene theology rightly describes salvation as participation in the Son's relation to the Father through the Spirit (Ayres, 2004, pp. 236–80; Gunton, 1991, pp. 35-36). Jesus' name cannot be detached from this identity and still retain its biblical meaning.

### Three New Testament tests of invocation

#### *Matthew 7:21-23 and the test of obedience*

Matthew 7:21–23 brings the Sermon on the Mount to a sobering conclusion. Jesus speaks of people who call him "Lord, Lord" and point to the ministries they performed in his name. They prophesied, cast out demons, and did many mighty works. Their confession sounds right, and their ministries appear successful. However, Jesus says, "I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness." What is striking in this passage is the repeated expression "in your name." These people place their confidence in what they have done in Jesus' name. They assume that their charismatic works prove that they belong to him and have his approval. Jesus does not accept that assumption. The use of his name must itself come under his judgment. What finally matters is not the

number of miracles a person can claim, but whether that person does the will of the Father (7:21). Jesus describes their condition as anomia, or lawlessness. This points to a life that stands in opposition to God's will, rather than an occasional failure in the life of a disciple (BDAG, s.v. "ἀνομία," p. 84).

When Jesus says, "I never knew you," he is not suggesting that he has no information about them. He is denying that they belong to him. The word "knew" carries a relational force. Their public confession and ministerial achievements do not arise from the kind of relationship with Jesus that produces obedience (France, 2007, pp. 283–286; BDAG, s.v. "γινώσκω," pp. 199–201). The locus of the passage does not require one to decide whether all the miracles they reported actually happened. The warning is clear without resolving that question. Spiritual manifestations, however impressive they may appear, cannot be treated as proof that Jesus approves of the person or ministry through which they occur. They must be tested by faithfulness to Jesus and obedience to the will of the Father (Keener, 2009, p. 268).

The location of this warning within the Sermon on the Mount helps clarify Jesus' point. In the preceding verses, Jesus says that true and false prophets will be known by their fruit (7:15–20). Immediately after this warning, he contrasts the person who hears his words and obeys them with the person who hears but does not obey (7:24–27). Jesus is therefore not impressed by spiritual claims that are separated from obedience. The question is not simply whether his name was mentioned or whether something extraordinary happened. The real question is whether the life and ministry of the person invoking his name agree with the teaching and character of Jesus.

### *Acts 19:13-16 and the failure of religious technique*

In Acts 19, Luke places the sons of Sceva in Ephesus, a city known for magical practices and attempts to control spiritual powers (Acts 19:18–19). These itinerant Jewish exorcists had apparently observed the authority with which Paul ministered. They therefore attempted to cast out evil spirits "by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims." Their choice of words is important. They knew about Jesus through Paul's preaching, but they did not know Jesus for themselves. They wanted to use his name without submitting to his lordship. The response of the evil spirit exposes the problem: "Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?" The lesson from this passage is not that Paul knew the correct method while the sons of Sceva performed it badly. Paul's authority did not come from a technique. He belonged to Jesus and had been commissioned to bear witness to him. The sons of Sceva, however, tried to take the name they heard Paul using and add it to their existing practice of exorcism. They wanted the authority connected with Jesus' name without the relationship and submission that come with following Jesus (Bruce, 1988, pp. 2860-2865).

In the magical practices of the ancient world, people collected and used the names of spiritual beings because they believed that knowing the right name gave them power over the spiritual reality connected to it (Betz, 1992, pp. xlv–l; Arnold, 1989, p. 65). Acts 19 rejects this understanding. The name of Jesus cannot be added to a collection of spiritual formulas. Jesus is not a force to be controlled. He is Lord. This explains why the account does not end only with the humiliation of the exorcists. It also records that many people renounced their magical practices and publicly burned their books. They did not simply add Jesus to what they were already doing. They abandoned those practices because they had come under his lordship. This passage speaks directly to the way the name of Jesus is sometimes used in Christian practice today. Saying "in Jesus' name" does not automatically bring Jesus' approval to every prayer, declaration, or ministerial action. Shouting the name, repeating it many times, placing it on banners, or adding it to every statement does not make Jesus answerable to us. His name is not an instrument that we can use to achieve whatever we want. The important question, therefore, is whether the person invoking the name is submitted to Jesus or is simply trying to use his name to obtain a desired result.

### *John 14-16 and the life of abiding*

Jesus' promises concerning prayer in his name are sometimes read as unrestricted guarantees: "Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do" (John 14:13); "ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you" (15:7); and "whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you" (16:23). Read within the Farewell Discourse, however, these promises describe formed desire rather than verbal technique. John 14:13 supplies the purpose of answered prayer: "that the Father may be glorified in the Son." The promise stands beside Jesus' call to faith, obedience, love, and participation in his works (14:10–15). Prayer in Jesus' name seeks what accords with the Son's mission of glorifying the Father. The phrase does not mean attaching a conclusion to an otherwise self-directed request.

John 15 gives the relational context: "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish" (15:7). The verb *menō* describes sustained communion and perseverance (BDAG, s.v. "μένω," pp. 630–632; Köstenberger, 2004, p. 452). The branch's fruitfulness arises from union with the vine, not from independent power. As Jesus' words shape the disciples, their desires are reordered toward his purposes. John 15:16 then joins prayer to election and mission: the disciples are appointed to bear lasting fruit, "so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you." John 16 places the promise within the transition from sorrow to joy and the disciples' post-resurrection access to the Father. Asking in

Jesus' name belongs to their participation in his revelation and mission; it is neither an esoteric formula nor a guarantee against suffering (Carson, 1991, pp. 495-496). The third test asks: Does the request arise from abiding in Christ and seek the Father's glory through the Son's mission?

The article proposes three complementary questions for theological discernment: (1) Obedience: does the practice reflect the Father's will and Jesus' teaching (Matthew 7:21–23)? (2) Allegiance: is Jesus' name treated as an expression of allegiance to him rather than as a formula for controlling spiritual power (Acts 19:13–16)? (3) Abiding and mission: does the practice arise from a life shaped by Jesus' words and directed toward his mission (John 14–16)? These questions are a framework for careful discernment, not a mechanical test that removes the need for pastoral judgement. The point is that merely saying the name is not enough. For this reason, we cannot judge a ministry only by the results it claims to produce. Something may appear to work and still fail to represent Jesus faithfully. The New Testament directs our attention beyond the manifestation itself to the minister's life, the ministry's character, and the kind of disciples it produces.

## Functional Christology in contemporary practice

Formal Christology is concerned with what the church officially teaches about Jesus. In this article, "functional Christology" refers to the understanding of Jesus communicated through a church's repeated practices and expectations, as distinct from its formal doctrinal statements. It may be explored by examining how sermons describe Jesus, what prayer and testimony emphasise, how leaders exercise authority, and what conduct is praised or challenged. These practices do not automatically reveal the belief of every participant, but they can communicate a practical picture of Jesus that deserves theological evaluation. This distinction does not place doctrine and experience in opposition to each other. The way a church worships, prays, preaches, shares testimonies, and exercises ministerial authority teaches its members something about God (Vanhoozer, 2005, p. 97). Lived theology highlights this reality. Christians express what they believe not only in doctrinal statements but also in the habits and practices that shape their common life (Müller, 2024, p. 7). A church may therefore say the right things about Jesus and still present a version of him that is not faithful to the witness of Scripture.

One way to identify a church's functional Christology is to pay attention to the expectations it repeatedly places upon Jesus. Is Jesus mainly presented as the one who makes people comfortable, destroys their enemies, guarantees prosperity, or supports a particular leader's authority? Scripture certainly presents Jesus as the one who comforts those who suffer, overcomes evil, provides for his people, and gives leaders to the church. The problem begins when one of these truths is isolated and made to define everything Jesus is and does. In such cases, the church may not openly reject orthodox Christology. It may still confess the divinity, humanity, death, and resurrection of Christ. However, in its actual practice, it rearranges these truths around what people want Jesus to do for them.

### *The therapeutic Jesus*

The Christian faith rightly presents Jesus as healer, comforter, and bearer of our burdens. There is nothing wrong with turning to Christ in times of pain or expecting him to bring healing and comfort. The distortion comes when Jesus is presented mainly as the one who exists to make people feel better about themselves. Sin is then treated only as personal dysfunction, salvation becomes little more than emotional relief, and discipleship is reduced to a method of achieving personal fulfillment. The church may continue to speak about the cross while giving little attention to its call to repentance, self-denial, reconciliation, and obedience. This therapeutic Jesus seldom challenges what people desire. People expect him mainly to affirm their feelings and remove whatever makes them uncomfortable. Prayer in his name then becomes a way of asking Christ to protect the life people have chosen rather than allowing him to transform that life. The issue is not that the church should ignore suffering.

The point is not that the church should pay less attention to people who are suffering. The church must care for them and walk with them through their pain. However, Christians must not present personal comfort as the main purpose of following Christ. The same Jesus who heals and comforts also confronts Christians with our sin, calls people to repentance, commands them to forgive, and expects them to obey him even when obedience is difficult and costly.

### *The militant Jesus*

The New Testament presents Jesus as the one who has defeated sin, death, and the powers of evil. This is an important source of hope, especially in contexts that take the reality of spiritual conflict seriously. The problem begins when people use Christ's victory to justify hostility toward others. Jesus is then presented mainly as a weapon for defeating anyone regarded as a personal, political, or ministerial enemy. At that point, the language of spiritual warfare is no longer directed only against evil. It is also used against human beings. It is important to remember how Jesus won his victory. He did not conquer through hatred, revenge, or the public humiliation of his enemies. He conquered through obedience to the Father, faithful witness, and his sacrificial death on the cross. This is why the same Jesus who gives his disciples authority over evil also commands them to love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them (Matt 5:44). A prayer may use the name of Jesus and still contradict the way of

Jesus. Not every person who opposes a Christian is a demon, and not every disagreement should be described as spiritual warfare. When Christian prayer becomes an occasion for hatred, curses, or revenge against other people, we are no longer presenting the victory of Christ in the way the New Testament presents it (Volf, 1996, p. 285).

### *The prosperity-guaranteeing Jesus*

Christians are right to trust God for their daily provision. Believers can pray for work, healing, money to meet our needs, and opportunities to improve our circumstances. The article's concern is the teaching that following Jesus guarantees every believer wealth, good health, and social advancement. Once this becomes the central message, faith is easily reduced to a transaction. People are taught that if they believe strongly enough or perform the right spiritual actions, success must follow. The person who remains poor may then be told that the problem is a lack of faith. Suffering is viewed as evidence that something has gone wrong spiritually, while material success is treated as proof that God is pleased with a person.

When the kingdom of God is preached mainly in terms of what the individual can acquire, something important has been lost. The New Testament speaks seriously about the dangers of wealth, the Christian's responsibility toward the poor, and the suffering that faithful believers may sometimes endure (Blomberg, 1999, p. 157). This is where the warning in Matthew 7 becomes relevant. Jesus did not accept visible works as sufficient evidence that a person had his approval. In the same way, wealth, numerical growth, and public success cannot by themselves tell us whether a ministry is faithful to Christ. In many of our churches, testimonies are often centered on new jobs, contracts, visas, houses, cars, and financial breakthroughs. There is nothing wrong with thanking God for these things. The concern is the minimal emphasis on people who have turned away from sin, learned to forgive, become generous, remained faithful through suffering, or begun to care for those in need. When material testimonies become the main stories that are celebrated, Jesus gradually becomes important to a believer because of what a person expects to receive from him.

A person may call him Lord, but their attention remains fixed on his gifts rather than on knowing and obeying him. Samantha Miller's dialogue between John Chrysostom and African Charismatic theology is useful at this point. She takes the concern for material well-being seriously, but she does not allow prosperity to be separated from salvation, Christian character, and responsibility toward the poor (Miller, 2021, pp. 89-92).

### *The authoritarian Jesus*

Christ has not left his church without leadership. He calls pastors and other ministers to serve his people, and the church must take their ministry seriously. That is not in dispute here. What is concerning is a leader who does not allow his words or conduct to be examined. Statements such as "The Lord told me" and "Touch not the anointed" can create the impression that questioning the leader is the same as questioning God. A church member who raises a genuine concern may even be told, "To resist this instruction is to resist Christ." At that point, the leader's personal opinion has quietly taken on the authority of a command from Jesus. This becomes dangerous because once a leader claims that every instruction comes directly from Christ, people may become afraid to ask questions or raise concerns. Even clear cases of misconduct may be difficult to address because any challenge to the leader is treated as rebellion against God. This is not the kind of leadership described in the New Testament. The church is to weigh prophetic utterances (1 Cor 14:29). Leaders must meet moral qualifications, and the authority given to them is meant to build up the church, not to control or intimidate its members (Chan, 2000, p. 63). The leader must remain accountable to Scripture and to the Christian community.

Kaunda's work on African neo-Pentecostalism highlights the danger of sacred authority becoming unaccountable when a leader's spiritual position places his words and conduct beyond examination (Kaunda, 2020, pp. 216-237). Golo's study of deliverance ministries in Ghana makes a related point. A pastor-prophet may gain authority because people believe that he can produce the breakthrough or deliverance they seek (Golo, 2024, p. 160). Once results become the basis of authority, members may overlook serious problems in the leader's teaching or conduct. Any Christology that protects the leader from accountability while discouraging the congregation from exercising discernment does not faithfully represent Jesus.

In practice, these pictures of Jesus often come together. People are promised comfort, shown enemies who must be defeated, and assured that material breakthroughs will follow. The leader who promises these results may then claim an authority that no one is permitted to question. Meanwhile, the church can continue to recite the correct doctrines about Jesus. The problem lies in what receives the greatest attention in its preaching and practice. One truth about Jesus is taken out of its proper place and made to carry the whole message. This is how distortion often enters the church. It does not always begin by openly denying Christ. Sometimes it begins by saying one true thing about him so often that other equally important truths are no longer heard.

## Christology, monotheism, and the African Pentecostal context

An inaccurate description of Jesus is not a minor error separate from the church's doctrine of God. The New Testament presents Jesus within the unique identity of the one God. Christians do not first develop a general idea of

God and then add Jesus to it; they come to know the Father through the Son and by the work of the Holy Spirit. For this reason, any presentation of Jesus that contradicts the character of the Christ revealed in Scripture will also affect how the church understands and speaks about God (Bauckham, 2008, pp. 26–59; Gunton, 1991, pp. 31–55). This becomes especially practical in African Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity. People come to church with concerns about sickness, infertility, poverty, insecurity, witchcraft, ancestral fears, and many other forms of vulnerability. These are not abstract theological questions. They touch everyday life. Mbiti's description of African religious life helps a person understand why many African societies do not easily separate the spiritual and material worlds. Religion is not confined to one private part of life. It connects to how people understand family, suffering, health, work, and community (Mbiti, 1969, p. 8). Pentecostal preaching has entered this context with the message that Jesus is alive and has power over the spiritual realities that trouble people. Asamoah-Gyadu's work on Ghanaian Pentecostalism asserts that healing and deliverance ministries should not simply be dismissed as signs of ignorance. They are also attempts to respond pastorally to the whole range of suffering that people experience (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2004, pp. 389-406).

Therefore, it is important not to be embarrassed by the African Christian concern for healing, deliverance, and spiritual power. Bediako is right to insist that Christology in Africa must speak to the questions Africans are actually asking (Bediako, 2000, p. 24). If Jesus has nothing to say to people's fears, afflictions, relationships, and understanding of the spiritual world, he will remain distant from their everyday experience. One important contribution of African Pentecostal spirituality is its insistence that the risen Christ is still active among his people. The resurrection is not only a teaching that Christians must defend in debate. It means that Jesus is alive. He reigns, saves, heals, delivers, and remains present with his church.

Because this African Pentecostal contribution is important, it must remain under the discipline of Scripture. The gospel must speak to the African worldview, but it must also challenge and transform it. Christ cannot simply be placed at the top of an existing hierarchy of spiritual powers while the old desire to control spiritual forces remains unchanged. If Jesus merely becomes a more powerful way of obtaining what people once sought from ritual specialists, then Christian language has changed, but the underlying religious logic has not. Victor Ezigbo's work on African Christologies is helpful here because he refuses to choose between contextual relevance and biblical faithfulness. Our context helps us identify the questions that need answering, but it cannot have the final word on who Jesus is.

This tension is clear in Ghanaian deliverance ministries. The desire to be free from affliction must be taken seriously. People experience real suffering, and the church should proclaim the authority of Jesus over evil without apology. However, the pastor-prophet must never take the place that belongs to Christ. Golo's study of pastor-prophet authority in Ghana shows how reports of supernatural results and breakthroughs can strengthen a minister's authority in the congregation's eyes. The difficulty arises when people begin to believe they cannot receive Christ's help without that particular minister. It becomes even more troubling when testimonies of breakthroughs prevent questions about the minister's character or when those who do not receive healing are blamed for their condition. The name of Jesus may be heard throughout the service, but attention has gradually shifted from Christ to the minister.

The argument, therefore, is not that African Christians should stop speaking about power, healing, deliverance, mediation, or victory. These themes are present in the New Testament. The question is how Jesus defines them. His power is never separated from holiness and love. His victory comes through the cross, not through revenge or humiliating others. As mediator, he brings Christians to the Father through the Spirit. The authority he gives is meant to build up Christians. Once these truths are forgotten, the name of Jesus can be drawn into a spirituality that is mainly concerned with gaining control over God, spirits, circumstances, or other people. This point also helps us understand the place of experience in Pentecostal theology. Pentecostals are right to expect people to encounter God. Christianity must not be reduced to accepting a set of ideas. However, an experience cannot explain itself, and not every manifestation should be accepted simply because something unusual happened.

Pentecostals do not need to become suspicious of every healing, prophecy, or deliverance. We believe that the Holy Spirit is still at work in the church, but this does not mean that every spiritual claim must be accepted without examination. Matthew 7 warns believers that remarkable works can happen without Jesus' approval. The fact that something happened is therefore not the end of the matter. One must also ask whether it agrees with Scripture, reflects the character of Christ, and produces the kind of fruit it should in people's lives. Testing spiritual claims does not quench the Spirit. It helps the church to recognize what truly comes from him.

An African Pentecostal Christology should be unashamed of the power of the risen Christ, but it must remember that the risen Lord is also the crucified Lord. Believers should pray boldly for healing and still show compassion to the person who is not healed. Preaching about God's provision must not give greed a Christian name. One can honor spiritual leaders without placing them beyond correction. Believers can also proclaim Christ's victory over evil without turning other human beings into enemies who must be hated. None of this weakens Pentecostal faith. It helps believers ensure that the power that is celebrated is truly the power of Jesus and bears the character of Jesus.

## Recovering Christological integrity

The misuse of Jesus' name will not be corrected by teaching people to use better words in prayer. What people say in prayer usually reflects what the church has taught them to believe about Jesus. If the church's preaching, worship, discipleship, and leadership practices present a distorted picture of Christ, that distortion will eventually show up in how his name is invoked. The recovery must therefore begin with the whole life and teaching of the church.

### *Canonical identification*

If the church is going to invoke the name of Jesus faithfully, Scripture must shape a person's understanding of the nature and person of Jesus. It is not enough to collect verses that mention his name or promise a particular result. Those verses belong to a larger biblical account. The Jesus Christians invoke is Israel's Messiah, the Son who reveals the Father, the Lord who was crucified and raised from the dead, and the one who gives the Holy Spirit. Christians do not have the freedom to select only the parts of his identity that support what they already want. The canon brings a person face to face with the whole Christ, including the teachings and demands that may make one uncomfortable (Vanhoozer, 2005, p. 102).

This is also important for the language that is commonly used in church. Words such as "victory," "blessing," "authority," and "anointing" do not carry a Christian meaning simply because they are spoken in a church or supported with a Bible verse. Their meaning must come from the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Victory, for example, must be understood in the light of the cross, and authority must be shaped by the servant character of Christ. It is possible to quote Scripture and still use its words in a way that Scripture does not support. For this reason, Christians must ask more than whether a sermon contains Bible verses or whether a prayer mentions Jesus repeatedly; they must ask whether Scripture itself is determining what those words mean.

### *Relational participation*

Matthew 7 and John 15 make the point quite plainly. A person can say, "Lord, Lord," and still not belong to Jesus. In the same way, someone can end every prayer with "in Jesus' name" without living as a disciple of Jesus. In John 15, Jesus describes the relationship as a branch that remains in the vine. The branch does not draw life from the vine occasionally. It depends upon the vine for everything. To abide in Christ is to let his word correct us, his commands direct us, and his life bear fruit through us. Prayer in Jesus' name belongs within that kind of relationship. This protects Christian prayer from superstition. Christians do not need to learn a special verbal formula before God will hear us. One comes to the Father through the Son and by the Spirit. However, relationship with Christ must not become an excuse for disobedience. Jesus himself connects love for him with keeping his commandments (John 14:15). A person cannot claim that they know Jesus while continually refusing the way of life to which he calls them. Those who abide in Christ should increasingly reflect his character.

### *Cruciform power*

The cross tells us more than how our sins are forgiven. It also shows what kind of Lord Jesus is and how he exercises his power. Jesus does not rule through selfish ambition or domination. His lordship is revealed through obedience to the Father, self-giving love, holiness, truth, and service. Gorman uses the term cruciformity to describe the Christian life as participation in this pattern of the crucified Messiah (Gorman, 2001, pp. 20–35). This article does not suggest that the cross leaves no room for miracles, healing, deliverance, or God's intervention. As a Pentecostal, it is an undisputed fact that God still works in these ways. The point is that the manner in which ministry is carried out also matters. If people are shamed during deliverance, frightened into giving money, encouraged to hate others, or used to promote the reputation of a minister, testimonies of supernatural results do not make those practices right. One cannot defend everything that happens in ministry merely by saying that it was done in Jesus' name. The Jesus whose power Pentecostals claim is the same Jesus who gave himself for others on the cross. Kaunda's idea of "emptied authority" is useful here because it directs Christian leaders away from domination and back to the self-giving example of Christ (Kaunda, 2020, pp. 229-235).

### *Trinitarian orientation*

One cannot read John 14–16 without noticing how closely Jesus speaks about the Father, himself, and the Holy Spirit. When Jesus tells the disciples to ask in his name, he says that the purpose is for the Father to be glorified in the Son (John 14:13). He also promises that the Father will send the Holy Spirit in his name (John 14:26). The Spirit will testify about Jesus and glorify him (John 15:26; 16:14). Prayer in Jesus' name belongs within these relationships. This means that when a person says, "in Jesus' name," they are not calling upon a spiritual force. They approach the Father as people who belong to the Son and depend on the Holy Spirit. If the Father and the Spirit disappear from one's understanding, then the name of Jesus can easily become a general expression for divine power; that is not how Jesus presents prayer in John's Gospel. His name identifies the Son who brings us to the Father and gives us the Spirit.

### *Ecclesial discernment and accountable leadership*

The picture of Jesus that governs a church is not formed by one person alone. It is expressed in the preaching, prayers, testimonies, leadership culture, and common practices of the congregation. For this reason, discernment must also involve the Christian community. Churches need to provide room for prophecies to be weighed, testimonies to be interpreted carefully, leaders to be questioned respectfully, and claims of spiritual authority to be tested by Scripture. Simon Chan's Pentecostal ecclesiology is helpful because it places Christian spirituality within the formative and accountable life of the church rather than leaving it under the control of gifted individuals (Chan, 2000, pp. 60–75). When someone makes a spiritual claim, the church should ask a few basic questions. Does this practice agree with the teaching and character of Jesus? Does it bring glory to the Father and serve the mission of the gospel? What kind of people does it produce, and what kind of community does it build? Can members ask questions about it without being threatened or labelled as rebellious? Asking these questions is not an attempt to quench the Spirit. The New Testament itself instructs believers to test spiritual claims.

The church also needs to help believers understand that faith does not give one control over God. Christians can pray boldly and expect God to act, but they cannot force a particular answer by repeating the right words or performing the right spiritual action. Sometimes the answer is delayed, and sometimes it does not come in the form one expected. In those moments, faith continues to trust God, even while a person grieves, asks questions, or waits. A technique, however, must always find someone or something to blame when it fails. The sufferer is told that there was not enough faith, another hidden enemy is identified, or another ritual is introduced. A proper understanding of Jesus' name lets a person pray with confidence without pretending to control God's freedom and wisdom.

Good intentions alone will not make leadership accountable. A church cannot simply hope that a gifted leader will always remain humble and use authority well. Clear structures must protect both the congregation and the leader. Financial dealings should be transparent. Important decisions should not rest with one person. Members who experience or witness misconduct must know where they can report it and trust that their concerns will be taken seriously. No one should be afraid to raise a question simply because a pastor, prophet, or other minister is involved. Ministers also need sound theological training, and no prophecy, vision, or spiritual claim should be placed beyond examination. Putting these safeguards in place does not show a lack of faith in the Holy Spirit. It recognizes that spiritual authority can be misused and that the church has a responsibility to protect its people. The collection edited by Kgatle and Anderson makes this concern clear. Claims about the Spirit cannot be separated from holiness, truth, and responsible Christian conduct (Kgatle and Anderson, 2020).

### *Worship and testimony as Christological formation*

Most church members will hear hundreds of songs, prayers, sermons, and testimonies before they ever read a book on Christology. What they hear week after week will shape the Jesus they come to know. If testimonies are almost always about money, promotion, visas, or property, members may begin to think that these are the main signs of Christ's work. If prayer meetings continually identify other people as enemies, hostility can become spiritually acceptable. If sermons constantly direct attention to the special anointing of the minister, the congregation may learn to depend more on the minister than on Jesus. All this can happen while the church continues to affirm an orthodox statement of faith.

For this reason, any recovery of Christology must enter the worship life of the church. The songs that are sung should help people know who Jesus is, not only remind them of what they want him to provide. The church needs to make room for testimonies about forgiveness, restored relationships, generosity, endurance, and faithfulness during suffering. Prayer meetings should include confession, thanksgiving, lament, intercession, and surrender, together with prayers for healing and deliverance. The pulpit must also present the whole Jesus revealed in Scripture. Pastors must preach about Jesus' compassion and his authority, his mercy and his judgment, his cross and his resurrection, as well as both his promises and his commands. When the church does this consistently, believers learn that invoking Jesus' name means responding to the whole person of Jesus.

### *A Christological test for ministry*

The repeated use of Jesus' name should not prevent the church from examining what is taking place. In fact, the stronger the spiritual claim, the more carefully it should be tested. It is recommended that a person begins with Jesus himself. Is this consistent with the way he taught, treated people, and carried out his ministry? Christians should then pay attention to the fruit. It is important to look carefully at what a ministry is doing to the people who receive it. Over time, are they growing in truth, love, and obedience to Christ, or are they becoming afraid to make decisions without the minister? Attention should be focused on those who are weak or easily overlooked. A church in which people cannot ask honest questions without being accused of rebellion is not a healthy church. Another revealing moment comes when the expected healing or breakthrough does not happen. A ministry's response to unanswered prayer is one relevant indicator of its pastoral and theological character. A responsible

response acknowledges distress, avoids assigning blame without grounds, offers continued care, and does not present a claimed healing or breakthrough as proof of a leader's unquestionable authority. Churches can support this approach through transparent testimony practices, clear procedures for raising concerns, and meaningful accountability for ministers. The way a ministry responds to unanswered prayer often tells us a great deal about the Jesus it represents.

These questions will not answer every difficulty, and they should not become another spiritual formula. Their purpose is to keep Jesus at the center of discernment. Whatever is done in his name must be tested by who he is, what he taught, and the kind of life he produces in those who follow him.

## CONCLUSION

This article has taken the confidence the New Testament places in the name of Jesus seriously. At no point, however, does the New Testament direct that confidence toward the mere sound or repetition of the name. The confidence is in Jesus himself. His name belongs to the Son who obeyed the Father, died on the cross, rose from the dead, and now reigns as Lord. To use his name is therefore to identify ourselves with him and to acknowledge his authority over us. It cannot mean that we add his name to a request and assume that the result must follow. The three main passages considered in this article sharpen the point. Matthew 7 is disturbing because the people rejected by Jesus had prophesied, cast out demons, and performed mighty works in his name. Acts 19 exposes the attempt of the sons of Sceva to use a Jesus they knew only through Paul's preaching. John 14–16 gives the positive picture. Prayer in Jesus' name belongs to those who abide in him, keep his word, bear fruit, and continue his mission. These texts do not allow us to judge a ministry only by whether something happened. Christians must also ask whether the people involved belong to Jesus, submit to his teaching, and display his character. This is why the question "Which Jesus?" remains important. A church may speak about Jesus as healer, victor, provider, or giver of spiritual authority. Each of these descriptions has a place in Scripture. The difficulty comes when one of them is taken out of the larger biblical picture and made to serve human desire. Jesus then becomes the one who protects our comfort, attacks our enemies, guarantees our prosperity, or supports the unchecked authority of a leader.

For African Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians, the answer is not to stop speaking about healing, deliverance, spiritual power, or victory. These concerns are real, and the New Testament addresses them. The responsibility of Christians is to allow the Jesus revealed in Scripture to determine what these things mean and how they should be practised. His power bears the character of the cross. His victory does not give a person permission to hate people. His provision does not encourage greed, and the authority he gives to leaders does not place them beyond accountability. The church does not honour Jesus merely by saying his name often or with great intensity. The church honours him when its prayers, preaching, leadership, and common life tell the truth about who he is. Every invocation of his name carries that responsibility. This article has argued that faithful invocation of Jesus' name must be assessed in relation to obedience, allegiance to Jesus, and participation in his mission. Read together, Matthew 7:21–23, Acts 19:13–16, and John 14–16 offer a theological framework for evaluating the relationship between formal confession and lived practice. Because the present study is exegetical rather than empirical, it does not establish how common the identified patterns are across Pentecostal-Charismatic churches. Further research could examine how specific congregations communicate their understanding of Jesus through preaching, prayer, testimony, and leadership practices. To invoke his name faithfully is to belong to him, submit to his lordship, and allow his character to be seen in us.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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