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Abstract

This work critically evaluates the Theology of the Cross and the Prosperity Gospel within the African context with a view to assessing their theological, socio-economic, and developmental implications, especially for Nigeria. Previous researches lack the juxtaposition of the paradigms and the implications for African development. Adopting a mixed-method approach, the work incorporates biblical exegesis, qualitative interviews with church leaders and academics. Despite the widespread appeal of prosperity teaching, it has its potential theological and ethical shortcomings, including the commodification of faith, the erosion of sound biblical doctrine, and the risk of fostering materialistic Christianity at the expense of spiritual maturity. Whereas theology of the Cross provides a strong foundation for authentic Christian discipleship, an overemphasis on suffering without a balanced understanding of divine provision may lead to passivity in addressing economic and social development. There isthe need for theological synthesis that neither dismisses the reality of suffering nor neglects the biblical promises of divine provision. Also, a balanced approach, integrating the spiritual depth of the cross with an informed and responsible understanding of Gods blessings, can empower African Christians to pursue both spiritual growth and socio-economic transformation.

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Critical Evaluations of Theology of the Cross and Prosperity Gospel for African Development

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ABSTRACT
This work critically evaluates the Theology of the Cross and the Prosperity Gospel within the African context with a view to assessing their theological, socio-economic, and developmental implications, especially for Nigeria. Previous researches lack the juxtaposition of the paradigms and the implications for African development. Adopting a mixed-method approach, the work incorporates biblical exegesis, qualitative interviews with church leaders and academics. Despite the widespread appeal of prosperity teaching, it has its potential theological and ethical shortcomings, including the commodification of faith, the erosion of sound biblical doctrine, and the risk of fostering materialistic Christianity at the expense of spiritual maturity. Whereas theology of the Cross provides a strong foundation for authentic Christian discipleship, an overemphasis on suffering without a balanced understanding of divine provision may lead to passivity in addressing economic and social development. There isthe need for theological synthesis that neither dismisses the reality of suffering nor neglects the biblical promises of divine provision. Also, a balanced approach, integrating the spiritual depth of the cross with an informed and responsible understanding of God's blessings, can empower African Christians to pursue both spiritual growth and socio-economic transformation.

Keywords: Cross Theology, Prosperity Gospel, African Development, Balanced Theology

INTRODUCTION
The cross of Christ stands as the central emblem of the Christian faith, symbolising salvation, sacrifice, and divine love. From the early church to contemporary Christianity, the cross has been both a theological and existential reality, shaping Christian understanding of suffering and redemption. As Trotter notes, the cross represents "the ultimate paradox of power in weakness, victory in apparent defeat."[1] Hooker further explains that the early Christian message of the cross was a radical challenge to prevailing worldviews, offering a vision of salvation that subverts human expectations of power and success.[2]

In the African context, the Theology of the Cross *(Theologia Crucis)* is reinterpreted through communal memory and lived experiences of struggle, suffering, and hope. Africa's socio-political realities—including poverty, systemic injustice, and political instability—often mirror the biblical themes of endurance, faithfulness, and ultimate redemption through suffering. Historically rooted in the theological insights of Martin Luther, the Theology of the

[1] Alexander Trotter, *Theology of the Cross and Christian Suffering: A Historical and Theological Inquiry*. (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 136
[2] Morna D. Hooker,*Paul and the Cross: Apostolic Theology and Christian Discipleship*. (Eerdmans, 1999),7–11

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Cross underscores a faith that finds strength through weakness and redemption through suffering. It affirms that God's power is revealed through the suffering of Christ, and by extension, through the believer's endurance in trials.[3] However, this emphasis on suffering is increasingly challenged by the rapid spread of the Prosperity Gospel, otherwise known as *Theologia Gloria*, which presents an alternative theological vision that promises immediate deliverance from life's hardships.

The Prosperity Gospel, which emerged from Pentecostal and Charismatic movements, is built on the conviction that faith guarantees material wealth, physical health, and social success. Scholars such as Gifford argue that this theology resonates deeply with African cultural values that prioritize communal well-being, prosperity, and divine intervention in daily struggles.[4] Furthermore, Folarin notes that African society, with its strong oral traditions and emphasis on testimonies, has embraced prosperity teachings because of their ability to offer tangible hope in dire economic conditions.[5] While the message of success and breakthrough aligns with indigenous aspirations, critics argue that it often leads to theological distortions, fostering materialism and an overemphasis on financial prosperity at the expense of spiritual growth.[6]

This study critically evaluates these two theological paradigms, examining the implications of these theological orientations for African development. It seeks to propose a balanced theological framework – one that remains faithful to biblical exegesis while addressing contemporary African challenges. The research argues that a holistic theological approach, which integrates the redemptive message of the cross with responsible teachings on divine provision, can foster both spiritual maturity and socio-economic transformation in African Christian communities.

The Theology of the Cross in the African Perspective

The Theology of the Cross *(Theologia Crucis)*is not merely an abstract doctrinal formulation but a lived reality for many African believers. The crucifixion, emblematic of suffering and self-sacrifice, resonates deeply with the historical experiences of oppression, colonial subjugation, and socio-economic hardship. In the African religious consciousness, the cross is more than a theological symbol; it is an existential paradigm that speaks to the struggles of marginalised communities. Theologians such as Jordan argue that the cross embodies a counter-cultural message – a call to humility, endurance, and communal solidarity.[7]Thomas further asserts that in African Christianity, suffering is often understood within a redemptive framework, where endurance through trials is perceived as participation in the suffering of Christ.[8]

Within many Nigerian churches, traditional liturgies continue to incorporate rites that evoke the suffering and redemptive love of Christ. Themes of reconciliation, discipleship, and sacrificial love remain central to ecclesiastical expressions of faith. According to Michael Gorman, African Christian worship retains a strong connection to the theology of suffering, often articulated through hymns, prayers, and scriptural meditations that emphasize Christ's

[3] Martin Luther, *Theology of the Cross: Selected Writings*. (Fortress Press, 2010), 151
[4] Paul Gifford, *African Christianity: Its Public Role*, Hurst & Company, 1998, 61–63
[5] George O. Folarin, *Prosperity Theology in Africa: A Critical Assessment*. Africa Theological Journal, vol. 32, no. 2, 2010, 27–45
[6] Matthews A. Ojo, *The End-Time Church and the Rise of Charismatic Movements in Africa*. (University of Nigeria Press, Nsukka 2006), 98–100
[7] Mark Jordan, *The Cross in Context: Theology and Suffering in the African Church*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 2005), 13
[8] Richard Thomas, *Redemptive Suffering and African Christianity: A Theological Inquiry*, (Nairobi, Paulines Publications, 2011), 204

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passion.[9] Similarly, McGrath highlights that the African experience of socio-economic struggles has reinforced the centrality of the cross in theological reflection, serving as a lens through which believers interpret divine justice and eschatological hope.[10]

However, this robust theological tradition faces significant challenges in a rapidly changing religious landscape. The forces of globalisation and urbanisation have contributed to a shift in worship practices and doctrinal emphasis, leading to what some scholars term a "pragmatic theology" that prioritises immediate solutions to existential problems.[11] The rise of Pentecostal and Charismatic movements, with their emphasis on divine healing, prosperity, and victory over adversity, has further reshaped the theological outlook of many African Christians. According to Gifford, the austere message of the cross, which demands self-denial and suffering, is increasingly seen as incompatible with contemporary aspirations for social and economic upliftment.[12] This transformation reflects broader cultural dynamics, wherein traditional theological constructs are being reinterpreted in ways that align with modern socio-economic realities.

As African Christianity continues to evolve, the challenge remains to uphold a biblically sound theology that integrates the redemptive significance of the cross with relevant teachings on divine provision and human flourishing. The need for a balanced theological approach that neither dismisses suffering as meaningless nor reduces Christianity to material gains is imperative for the spiritual and socio-economic development of African societies.

The Prosperity Gospel and Its African Context

The Prosperity Gospel, often rebranded as the Theology of Glory **(***Theologia Gloria),* originated in the United States and has since been adapted to fit the cultural and socio-economic realities of Africa. Rooted in the Word of Faith movement, this theology emphasises material prosperity, divine healing, and financial success as visible signs of God's favour. Pioneering figures such as the late Benson Idahosa and contemporary preachers like David Oyedepo have played significant roles in popularizing this message in Nigeria.[13] According to G. O. Folarin, prosperity theology gained traction in Africa largely because it aligns with indigenous religious worldviews that associate divine favour with tangible blessings.[14] It offers a compelling alternative to the traditional Theology of the Cross, which places suffering at the heart of Christian discipleship.

In Nigeria, the prosperity message has found fertile ground among congregants who view material wealth as both a divine reward and a means of social upliftment. Many adherents, particularly in Pentecostal and Charismatic circles, see economic success as evidence of faithfulness to God. As Ayantayo and Fatokun observe, Nigerian prosperity preachers often frame financial breakthroughs as spiritual victories, achieved through faith, prophetic declarations, and sacrificial giving.[15] The doctrine is reinforced through sermons, revival meetings, and televised broadcasts that promote the principles of "seed-faith," positive confession, and the expectation of a hundredfold return on offerings. While these teachings offer hope to economically disenfranchised populations, critics argue that they risk distorting core biblical messages about suffering, stewardship, and discipleship.

[9] Michael Gorman,*Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross*,(Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2001), 77.
[10] Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, (Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2011), 192–197
[11] John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, (London, Heinemann, 1969), 134
[12] Paul Gifford, *African Christianity: Its Public Role*, (London, Hurst & Company, 1998), 61–63
[13] Benson Idahosa, *Faith to Change Your World*, (Benin City, Idahosa World Outreach, 1991), 45
[14] G. O. Folarin, *Contemporary Issues in Prosperity Theology*, (Lagos, Divine Grace Publishers, 2010), 67-72
[15] J.K.Ayantayo and S.A.Fatokun, *Religion and Social Change in Nigeria*, (Ibadan, University Press, 2015), 112

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One of the primary concerns surrounding prosperity theology is its hermeneutical approach to Scripture. Scholars such as Paul Gifford argue that many prosperity preachers selectively interpret biblical passages to support their claims, often isolating texts from their historical and theological contexts.[16] For instance, verses such as 3 John 2 – "Beloved, I wish above all things that you may prosper and be in health" are frequently cited without acknowledging the broader biblical teachings on suffering and divine sovereignty. This theological imbalance, critics warn, can lead to a transactional view of faith, in which God's blessings are seen as automatic responses to human actions rather than expressions of divine grace.[17]

Furthermore, the overemphasis on material wealth can sometimes contribute to ethical and theological laxity. According to Koeplin, prosperity theology's promise of financial success may encourage a consumerist mindset that prioritizes personal gain over communal well-being.[18] This can be particularly problematic in the African context, where economic inequality remains a pressing issue. When prosperity preaching overshadows messages of social justice, self-sacrifice, and collective responsibility; the church risks becoming complicit in sustaining systems of inequality rather than challenging them. Yohanna further warns that the prosperity gospel, when misapplied, can lead to disillusionment among believers who do not experience the promised financial breakthroughs, potentially weakening their faith and trust in God.[19]

While the prosperity message undeniably resonates with the aspirations of many African Christians, its theological foundations require careful scrutiny. Folarin's analysis highlights the need for a balanced perspective – one that affirms God's desire for human flourishing while upholding the biblical principles of humility, integrity, and perseverance in faith.[20] Instead of viewing wealth as an end in itself, African Christianity must cultivate a theological framework that integrates economic well-being with spiritual maturity and social responsibility.

Paradigm Shifts and Their Impact on African Development

The tension between the Theology of the Cross and the Prosperity Gospel is not merely theological; it has profound implications for African development. These theological paradigms shape not only individual faith but also socio-economic structures, governance, and community resilience. On one hand, the Theology of the Cross emphasizes perseverance, communal solidarity, and a commitment to justice – qualities that are indispensable in addressing Africa's persistent challenges of poverty, corruption, and inequality.[21] By fostering a theology of endurance, this framework aligns with traditional African values of communal responsibility and mutual support, reinforcing ethical leadership and long-term development strategies.[22]

On the other hand, the Prosperity Gospel, with its emphasis on divine favour manifesting as financial success and material well-being, resonates deeply with societies yearning for economic progress. The message of immediate relief from poverty and hardship aligns with aspirations for upward mobility, technological advancement, and infrastructural

[16] Paul Gifford, *Christianity, Politics, and Public Life in Africa*, London, Hurst & Company, 2009, 93
[17] David Oyedepo, *Understanding Financial Prosperity*, Ota, Dominion Publishing House, 2005, 21–24
[18] J. Koeplin, *The Gospel of Wealth: A Critical Study of Prosperity Theology*, Nairobi, Paulines Publications, 2013, 88-90
[19] S. Yohanna, *Faith and the African Church: Between Suffering and Prosperity*, Jos, ACTS Press, 2017, 56
[20] G. O. Folarin, *Biblical Theology and African Christianity*, Lagos, Grace Publications, 2018, 143
[21] John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy, Nairobi*, Heinemann, 1969, 204
[22] Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1989, 115

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development.[23] Many African Christians, particularly within Pentecostal and Charismatic movements, interpret biblical promises of abundance as divine endorsements of entrepreneurship, wealth creation, and socio-economic transformation.[24] This theological perspective has, in some cases, fuelled innovation, business expansion, and civic engagement by encouraging believers to take proactive steps toward financial empowerment.[25]

Yet, this dichotomy presents significant risks. An overemphasis on prosperity theology can foster a consumerist and transactional view of faith, in which economic success is prioritized over spiritual growth, ethical responsibility, and social justice[26]. The proliferation of "seed-faith" teachings, where financial giving is presented as a prerequisite for divine blessings, can lead to exploitation and deepen economic disparities.[27] Conversely, an exclusive focus on the Theology of the Cross, without a corresponding emphasis on social transformation, may risk perpetuating passive acceptance of suffering rather than inspiring proactive solutions to Africa's developmental crises.[28]

Therefore, there is a pressing need for a balanced theological approach – one that embraces both the transformative power of the cross and the promise of divine provision. African Christianity must cultivate a theology that integrates suffering with hope, self-sacrifice with empowerment, and faith with action. As theologians such as Bediako argue, a truly contextualised African theology must draw from the richness of both traditions, fostering a Christian witness that promotes spiritual depth alongside economic and social renewal.[29] This synthesis is crucial for ensuring that African Christianity remains a catalyst for holistic development, addressing both the spiritual and material well-being of communities.

Towards a Balanced Theological Approach

Building on the insights of both Folarin,[30] response from church leaders and academics interviewed and other scholarly works, it is proposed that a holistic theology must integrate the strengths of both the Theology of the Cross and the Prosperity Gospel. A balanced theological framework in the African context recognizes the importance of both spiritual depth and material well-being, addressing the complex challenges faced by African Christians in a rapidly changing socio-economic environment. Such an approach is not only biblically sound but also culturally and contextually relevant, providing a comprehensive answer to both the spiritual and material aspirations of African believers.

Spiritual depth and material well-being are interrelated. The Theology of the Cross, with its emphasis on suffering, humility, and sacrificial love, is often seen in opposition to the Prosperity Gospel, which emphasizes material wealth and personal success. However, these two theological strands can coexist in a balanced framework. Like Okunoye opines that the sacrificial love and self-denial inherent in the Theology of the Cross can coexist with a belief in God's power to transform material circumstances.[31] As African theologians like Bediako[32]

[23] J. K. Ayantayo,*Prosperity Theology and African Socio-Economic Realities*, Ibadan,University Press, 2012, 78
[24] Paul Gifford, *Christianity, Development, and Modernity in Africa*, (London, Hurst & Company, 2015), 93
[25] David Oyedepo, *Exploring the Secrets of Success*, (Ota, Dominion Publishing House, 2002), 67
[26] G. O. Folarin, *Biblical Theology and African Christianity*, (Lagos, Grace Publications, 2018), 132–136
[27] S. Yohanna, *Faith and the African Church: Between Suffering and Prosperity*, (Jos, ACTS Press, 2017), 89
[28] Peter K. Sarpong, *African Theology Today*, Accra, Ghana Publishing Corporation, 2005, 46
[29] Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*, (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 210-213
[30] Folarin, *Biblical Theology and African Christianity*, 137
[31]Job Okunoye, personal interview; He is an Associate Professor of Old Testament at Ajayi Crowther University Oyo, He is 49years old
[32] Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*, (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1995), pp. 210–213.

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argue, the cross is not merely a symbol of suffering but also a source of strength, empowerment, and hope for the transformation of individuals and communities. Hence, Christians can embrace the transformational power of the cross while seeking tangible improvements in their material lives, seeing them as part of God's redemptive plan.

Besides, Contextual Hermeneutics must inform exegesis. African theologians must critically engage with biblical texts, ensuring that both suffering and prosperity are interpreted within their historical and cultural contexts.[33] A contextual hermeneutic allows African Christians to reframe biblical narratives in ways that speak directly to their socio-economic realities. This requires a move beyond simplistic interpretations of scripture that either glorify material success or emphasize suffering without hope for deliverance. The works of scholars like Ayantayo, Fatokun and Sarpong[34] highlight the importance of reading the Bible through the lens of African history and culture, recognising the need for hope, dignity, and justice amidst material hardship.

Also, Liturgical Practices should reflect dual emphases. Church liturgies and teaching should preserve traditional elements that underscore humility, perseverance, and sacrifice, while also incorporating practices that celebrate healing, deliverance, and tangible blessings. African worship, often characterized by its exuberance and communal expressions, can integrate these two aspects. For instance, as Adetoro pointed out prayers for healing and prosperity can be balanced with hymns and liturgies that emphasize patience, endurance, and faith in God's sovereignty.[35] This balanced approach in worship would encourage congregants to look beyond immediate material gains and embrace a more profound, long-term vision of God's kingdom.

Ethical Responsibility Must Accompany Material Promises: Prosperity must not be divorced from ethical responsibility. The pursuit of wealth and success should always be accompanied by a commitment to justice, compassion, and communal welfare. This means that the blessings God bestows upon individuals must be used in ways that promote the common good, uplift the marginalized, and contribute to societal well-being. Economic and social empowerment initiatives within the church must therefore include a strong emphasis on ethical stewardship, accountability, and social justice. As Folarin[36] argues, the gospel must not become a tool for exploiting vulnerable populations but must challenge believers to live with integrity and responsibility.

By promoting a collocation of theologies – a "balanced gospel" – African churches can better address the multifaceted needs of their congregants. This approach provides a framework for spiritual and material growth, integrating biblical teachings on suffering, sacrifice, and divine provision, while actively engaging with the socio-economic challenges of African societies. It encourages believers to seek not only personal success but also the flourishing of their communities, contributing to sustainable development and long-term transformation.

CONCLUSION

The critical evaluation of the Theology of the Cross and the Prosperity Gospel in the African context reveals not only significant theological divergences but also potential points of

[33]S. Olorode, personal interview; He is a lecturer of Church History at Immanuel College of Theology, Ibadan, He is 55years old

[34] J. K. Ayantayo and O. Fatokun, *Prosperity Gospel and African Spirituality: A Critical Dialogue*, (Lagos, Nigerian Theological Press, 2014), n.p.; Peter K. Sarpong, *African Theology Today*, Accra, Ghana Publishing Corporation, 2005, 46

[35]Emmanuel Adetoro, personal interview; He is a Senior Pastor, Calvary Ministry International, Oyo, He is 57years old.

[36] Folarin, *Biblical Theology and African Christianity*, 137

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convergence that, if appropriately harnessed, can contribute to a more holistic understanding of Christianity. The Theology of the Cross, which emphasizes sacrifice, perseverance, humility, and spiritual solidarity, speaks to the historical and socio-cultural realities of suffering and oppression that African communities have long endured. Conversely, the Prosperity Gospel, with its focus on material empowerment, health, and success, addresses the aspirations for upward mobility and socio-economic improvement that are particularly relevant in contemporary African societies. However, the Prosperity Gospel's materials focus risks reducing the gospel to a transactional relationship with God, neglecting deeper spiritual values and ethical responsibility.

Ultimately, a balanced theological approach – one that integrates both the Theology of the Cross and the Prosperity Gospel – can be a transformative force for African Christianity. Such an approach will not only enrich the spiritual lives of African Christians but will also play a significant role in addressing the socio-economic challenges faced by African nations. The church must be a space where both the cross and the promise of God's material blessings are held in tension, fostering resilient, ethical, and holistic Christian communities that are committed to justice, compassion, and the sustainable development of the African continent.

RECOMMENDATIONS

i. For African development to be spiritually enriching and materially transformative, it is crucial for African church leaders, theologians, and educators to work towards a balanced theological framework – one that recognizes the tension between suffering and prosperity while affirming both as integral parts of the Christian experience. This balanced theology would not only speak to the immediate needs of the African Church but also challenge believers to integrate their spiritual lives with their material pursuits, encouraging a theology that is both spiritually profound and socially relevant.

ii. Church liturgies should be reformed to integrate the ancient rites of the cross with elements that celebrate God's provision, favour, and the holistic blessings of salvation. This reform should aim to create worship practices that provide a balanced emphasis on both the transformative power of Christ's sacrifice and the blessings of healing, deliverance, and prosperity. Liturgies should underscore themes of communal solidarity, justice, and hope, while affirming that both material and spiritual blessings come from God. This integration can help foster a congregation's sense of unity and purpose, strengthening both the individual and collective Christian experience.

iii. Theological seminaries and institutions across Africa should consider revising their curricula to incorporate African contextual hermeneutics. This would involve critical engagement with African realities such as poverty, inequality, and historical suffering, alongside a robust biblical exegesis that allows for the dynamic interplay between the cross and prosperity in the African context. The revised curriculum should emphasize not only traditional theological subjects but also practical theology that addresses the socio-economic challenges facing African nations. This will ensure that future church leaders are equipped to teach a gospel that addresses both spiritual and material needs with integrity and ethical responsibility.

iv. There is a pressing need for ecumenical dialogue and collaboration among different Christian denominations within Africa. Church leaders, theologians, and Christian educators should come together in interdenominational and cross-cultural forums to discuss and develop a shared understanding of the gospel that balances spiritual depth with social relevance. This dialogue should focus on common ground, acknowledging the theological and cultural differences while fostering unity around the central message of the gospel. Such initiatives would promote mutual respect, encourage

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cooperation in addressing socio-economic issues, and enable the Church to present a united front in addressing the challenges faced by African societies.

v. To ensure that the Prosperity Gospel does not distort the ethical values of Christianity, churches must establish frameworks of ethical accountability that accompany teachings on prosperity. Prosperity teachings should be underpinned by principles of justice, communal welfare, and ethical responsibility. Church leaders should regularly engage in self-reflection, ensuring that their teachings do not exploit the faith of vulnerable members of the congregation for personal gain. Moreover, they should prioritize initiatives that empower the marginalized and contribute to sustainable development, thus ensuring that the prosperity preached is not only material but also deeply rooted in the pursuit of justice, equity, and social responsibility.

vi. African Christians must be encouraged to view their faith holistically – recognizing the significance of both spiritual growth and socio-economic development. This approach can be fostered through programs that promote community development, education, healthcare, and justice. Churches can actively participate in initiatives that enhance the quality of life in their communities, such as agricultural programs, literacy campaigns, and small business development projects. By doing so, churches will help bridge the gap between the spiritual and material needs of their congregants, providing practical solutions to real-life issues while deepening their faith.

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