

Contrasting an Individual Authority in South African Neo-Prophetic Churches: A Communal Sovereignty Approach

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Abstract

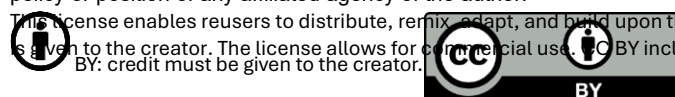
Sovereignty has been studied in political science as a concept denoting the supreme authority of the state and non-reliance on any external forces. Within the study of religion, particularly Pentecostalism, a distinction is made between the authority of an individual and communal sovereignty. Communal sovereignty is also known as alternative sovereignty, contrasting it with individual authority. This article uses the literature review in qualitative research and communal sovereignty as a relevant approach in contrast to the authority of individual prophets in neo-prophetic churches. The approach is proposed as

a way of dealing with various abuses in these churches that are informed by the authority of individual prophets. These abuses are highlighted in the three cases of Enlightened Christian Gathering (ECG), the Jesus Dominion International (JDI), and the End Times Disciples Ministries (ETDM). The study found that communal sovereignty is relevant in harnessing the abuses taking place in the selected neo-prophetic churches in the South African context. Communal sovereignty also aligns with an African philosophy of ubuntu in the enhancement of ecclesiastical interconnectedness and human discourses. Therefore, this study makes a valuable contribution to the broader Pentecostal movement, its theology, and mission by proposing a communal sovereignty that encourages the upliftment and empowerment of the oppressed and the marginalised.

Keywords: Sovereignty, community, authority, prophets, neo-prophetic churches, ubuntu

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Introduction

The Pentecostal movement in the South African context is experiencing numerical growth in the 21st century. However, this growth has come up with so many challenges, particularly the abuse of religion and the abuse of people's beliefs. These abuses are common among the neo-prophetic churches that are part of the broader Pentecostal movement. This article is aimed at addressing the challenges of these abuses as they rise among the neo-prophetic churches. One of the identified causes of the abuses in these churches is the power dynamic that is at play between the prophets and the members or followers. This power dynamic is approached from the subject matter of the sovereignty of the community, which is distinct from the authority of individuals. The sovereignty of the community, in contrast to the authority of individuals, is unpacked using a literature review. The article will also look at the three cases of individual authority in the selected neo-prophetic churches in South Africa. The churches are Enlightened Christian Gathering (ECG), the Jesus Dominion International (JDI), and the End Times Disciples Ministries (ETDM). The article will also look at the implications of communal sovereignty in the selected neo-prophetic churches as opposed to the current practices of the authority of individuals. The last section will explore the relationship between communal sovereignty, the sovereign God, and ubuntu within the broader Pentecostal movement in the South African context. The objective of the article is to evaluate the contribution of communal sovereignty in dealing with the various abuses within the neo-prophetic churches and the Pentecostal movement in general. The study also makes a connection between communal sovereignty and the African philosophy of Ubuntu, particularly the discourses of ecclesiastical interconnectedness and humanity. It will be argued in the study that these discourses, too, are opposed to individual authority.

Communal sovereignty: framing the discourse

Sovereignty denotes holding absolute authority without any external influence. Sovereignty refers to the authority of an individual, a state, or even a deity. However, such an authority is exercised within a community or society in general (Schmitt 2003:17-18). This means that the sovereignty of God is the exercise of his total authority in the universe. In politics or even in religion, sovereignty then refers to the absolute authority that individuals hold in an organisation or even a church. An alternative sovereignty has been proposed by scholars such as Wariboko (2014), suggesting a paradigm shift away from the sovereignty of individuals. Wariboko (2014:171) argues that sovereignty cannot be understood as the power of the individual but rather of the community and its social structures. Latham (2000:3) concurs that "Sovereignty can be and historically has been understood as an attribute not just of states but of other forms of social organization". In the context of religion, then, sovereignty is the authority of the community of believers and their belief system. Therefore, the idea of an individual dominating

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others is negated within the framework of community sovereignty, as individuals become accountable to one another rather than dominating each other. When communal sovereignty is in place, it fosters the development of society as individuals come together to support and develop one another. Similarly, the sovereignty of a community does not depend much on the ability of individuals, but the same individuals bring together their ideas in constructing a unified community where no one is dominant over others. Communal sovereignty does not rely much on the position of the leader but on various responsibilities as executed by various individuals belonging to that community. This means that in the sovereignty of the community, everyone has a role to play that ultimately contributes to the well-being of others without undermining others. In the context of the church, communal sovereignty is an idea that every member of such a church has a valuable contribution to make, rather than the idea that the leader carries absolute power as an individual.

The idea of communal sovereignty is inclusive as opposed to the sovereignty of an individual (Phillpott 1995, Peters 2009, Wariboko 2014). This sovereignty has the potential to include those who are in the margins, as opposed to being only concerned about the elite. Peters (2009:513) explains that this is a sovereignty that seeks to protect communities and puts human beings at the centre of sovereignty. Therefore, communal sovereignty is the authority of the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalised, as they all form part of the community. Communal sovereignty is important because the powerless gain power when they are part of the community in a specific context. In the church, the members gain power when they become part of the church, which is different from the power held by an individual leader. Communal sovereignty brings sense into the laws and policy as it adds the human element to the sovereignty of the state. The same can be said in the church setting that communal sovereignty has a human element rather than being focused on the laws and the commandments. This means that we cannot speak of sovereignty without its social aspect and without including the people. For Wariboko (2014:182), the idea of including the people means giving power to the powerless and giving authority to those who are ordinarily considered weak. This means that communal sovereignty is one where the ordinary people become part of the decision-making rather than delegating this responsibility to an individual. In the context of religion or church, we understand that communal sovereignty gives the power back to the members who may be considered weak and powerless. In the sovereignty of the community, there is a sharing of power that happens between the leaders and the followers as opposed to the power that is in the leader alone. In the development of community sovereignty, power returns to the people, fostering a connection between the powerful and the powerless.

Communal sovereignty differs from that of individuals in terms of the socialization of community members (Latham 2000, Carson 2002, Connolly 2012, Wariboko 2014). Hence, Latham (2000) speaks of social sovereignty as an approach that returns power to a group of people rather than an individual.

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Contrasting an Individual Authority in South African Neo-Prophetic Churches: A Communal Sovereignty Approach

Latham (2000:3) continues to say that social sovereignty is attached to “a wider range of structures than those only identified as or of the state and what is at stake in sovereignty is not the status of an agent (such as a state) but of a body of relations that shape spheres of life operating within or even across state boundaries”. This kind of sovereignty is not centred on individuals, but rather it is a sovereignty of the people. This sovereignty, as Latham (2000:3) puts it, is not the sovereignty of the ivory tower but rather of those who are downtrodden and disillusioned. This calls for a kind of sovereignty that is not top-down but one that is built on the socialisation of the people. This means that sovereignty should be concerned with the development of the people rather than lording or exercising authority over them. Communal sovereignty promotes the power of the society rather than the power of an individual. In the context of the church, this approach promotes the power of the church rather than of an individual leader. Therefore, sovereignty becomes social when there is a relationship between the leader and the people and when there is a connection between the divine and the humane. Connolly (2012:23) says that we cannot speak of a divine authority that cannot be moved by human conditions here on earth. In the end, Connolly (2012:23) suggests a divine authority that results in the sovereignty of the people, thus creating a social contract between the divine and the humane. Therefore, communal sovereignty is an approach that seeks to bridge the gap between the sovereignty of the divine and the sovereignty of the people.

Cases of Individual Authority in the Neo-Prophetic Churches

This study looks at the three cases of neo-prophetic churches to investigate the practice of individual authority of the prophets. The prophets in these churches claim to have supernatural powers far above their congregants (Ramantswana 2018:3). The first neo-prophetic church is the Enlightened Christian Gathering, which was started by Prophet Shepherd Bushiri and used to operate in South Africa; however, the church is now operating in Malawi (Faimau & Behrens, 2016; Ramantswana & Sebetseli, 2021; Matshobane, 2023). Bushiri is one such a prophet who has a propensity to exercise individual authority. He is one prophet who alludes to the fact that he possesses the authority to perform the prophetic utterances and the miraculous. In this kind of authority, it is then expected from the congregants that they will obey anything articulated by the prophet, even though it is leading them astray. This was seen during Bushiri’s appearance in the Pretoria Magistrate’s court, where the majority of his supporters were splashing water on the cars of police in support of their leader (Rall 2020:1). This makes prophets like Bushiri carry this ultimate authority that no one can correct them. Furthermore, in using titles such as Major 1 and “man of God”, it is to illustrate that they can have authority beyond human imagination (Faimau & Behrens, 2016). In addition, these titles are illustrative of the authority that these men of God carry over and above their congregants. This brings an imbalance in terms of the authority equation, whereby prophets like Bushiri are more authoritative, and their followers are less

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Contrasting an Individual Authority in South African Neo-Prophetic Churches: A Communal Sovereignty Approach

authoritative. Furthermore, Bushiri, in calling himself “major 1,” seeks to stand in a distinct position when compared with other prophets and pastors within the neo-prophetic churches. Thus, we not only see the imbalances of authority when it comes to the prophet and member relationship but also among prophets in neo-Prophetic churches. The title of “major,” which is also used in military language, suggests that Bushiri, like “major generals,” is of a higher rank than other prophets, thus illustrative of individual authority as opposed to the sovereignty of the community.

The second case is the Jesus Dominion International (JDI) of prophet Timothy Omotoso, which also used to operate in South Africa (Kaunda 2020, Banda 2020, Kgatle & Frahm-Arp 2022, Mzondi 2024). However, Omotoso has since returned to Nigeria, his home country, after many years of facing trial in the South African courts. He was acquitted of all charges due to the lack of a strong case against him by the National Prosecuting Authority in South Africa. Omotoso used to exercise absolute authority over his female members. According to Kamko (2025:1), Cheryl Zondi testified in court about how Timothy Omotoso manipulated scriptures and abused his power by having sexual encounters with young girls in his church. The case of Omotoso is illustrative of the power dynamics between a male prophet and the female congregants (Kgatle & Frahm-Arp, 2022). Prophets like Omotoso are illustrative of such an exercise of authority over the congregants as powerful men of God who cannot be corrected or reprimanded. Prophets like Omotoso have the propensity of manipulating their followers using a God-talk rhetoric in convincing their victims that God is involved in their abuse of authority (Kobo 2019). Kaunda (2020:217) explains that this kind of rhetoric, coupled with modernisation in the broader newer Pentecostal and charismatic churches, is used by prophets like Omotoso in justifying their sexual abuse of women, particularly young girls. Kaunda (2020:218) goes on to call this a sacred authority that is “individualised, unregulated, fundamentalist, unquestionable, unaccountable, and deinstitutionalised”. Banda (2020:176) explains that the whole case faced by Omotoso is illustrative of “someone misusing their pastoral authority to sexually abuse vulnerable girls by promising blessings to those who consent and curses to those who refuse”. Therefore, Banda makes a direct link between the sexual abuse of women and the abuse of pastoral authority or what Kaunda calls “sacred authority”, which in this current study is conceptualised as individual authority. The point made in this case study is the connection between the individual authority and the abuse of women, which contrasts with a communal sovereignty proposed by Wariboko (2014).

The last case is the End Time Disciples Ministries of Pastor Penuel Mnguni. Mnguni has a propensity to exercise his authority over the poor and marginalised congregants, especially when praying for them. Mnguni used his authority to feed his congregants with live snakes. When confronted about these issues, Mnguni said that he has the authority to command snakes to become more like chocolate. According to Qiki (2020:39), Mnguni said that he “has the authority to change everything into anything

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Contrasting an Individual Authority in South African Neo-Prophetic Churches: A Communal Sovereignty Approach

and it will obey". In addition, Mnguni, in his abuse of authority, seems to be misinterpreting texts such as Luke 10:19: "I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions, and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you." "Snake here for pastors like Mnguni is interpreted in the literal sense to refer to real snakes and the authority that can turn them into chocolate. Mnguni defended his action by referring to authority, which is the ability to change anything, including changing a snake into a chocolate. Moreover, preachers such as Mnguni misinterpret Mark 16:18: "They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover." Again, the serpents here are interpreted in the literal sense, which then motivates preachers like Mnguni to give live snakes to their followers. In another incident, according to Makhubu (2016:1):

Mnguni commanded both of the members to sleep, followed by moving the car over them. The man of God then commanded them to wake up while the car was on top of their bodies. He asked them if they felt any pain, and their response was 'We do not feel anything'. As the prophet of God spoke God's word, our master began performing it. This son of God on the floor was hit by a chair but felt no pain.

Therefore, the individual authority of Penuel Mnguni is used to undermine the authority of the local congregants in the End Times Disciples Ministries. In addition, this is illustrative of a manipulative authority, as scriptures are manipulated to suit the narrative of prophets like Mnguni in the perpetuation of abuse against the marginalised and the oppressed by feeding them snakes. This calls for an application of a different kind of sovereignty in neo-Prophetic churches that will address the abuse of religion and abuse of people's beliefs in the South African context.

Contrasting individual authority in the selected churches

In the individual authority, the prophet exercises their own power over their followers by utilising the biblical and God-talk rhetoric. In individual authority, prophets manipulate the scriptures to advance their own agenda in exercising authority over the congregants. Through the use of biblical text and God-talk rhetoric, the follower is disarmed of their own power to question the actions of the prophet within the context of individual authority. Ramantswana and Sebetseli (2021:8) explain that.

In prophetic churches, prophets occupy an interesting position – they do so to speak and function as intermediaries or spiritual brokers between God and the people, as they claim divine powers to heal, prophesy, and transfer divine blessings, but they also establish relationships in which the believers trust them and become vulnerable to them.

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Contrasting an Individual Authority in South African Neo-Prophetic Churches: A Communal Sovereignty Approach

This then becomes the causative factor for the performance of bizarre practices such as the eating of snakes, as discussed in the preceding section. The congregants are manipulated to believe that God is at work, while it is the individual authority of the prophet at work in manipulating unsuspecting followers. In communal sovereignty, the scriptures are read together with the understanding and sharing of power among both the prophets and the congregants. This is what happened in the early church of the Apostles in the Lukan-Acts, where there were interconnectedness and the reading of the biblical texts. In addition, the early church supported the sharing of power and resources with equal distribution to all the congregants who were in lack. Communal sovereignty is relevant in the interconnectedness of the saints, bible study, and sharing of resources in neo-Prophetic churches. In this approach, the follower has the same authority as the prophet. However, the only challenge is that some members and followers of the neo-prophetic churches are not aware of the communal sovereignty and always perceive their prophets as carrying absolute power. In the end, they feel obliged to accede to the manipulative prophecies of their prophets invoked by individual authority.

In the individual authority, male prophets in neo-prophetic churches exercise their masculinity to manipulate women into having sexual encounters with them. In the communal authority, women are also empowered to reject illegal sexual advances, as was the case with Timothy Omotoso. This approach can help deal with the sexual abuse challenges as it empowers women, such as Cheryl Zondi (a victim of Timothy Omotoso), to rise in power against the misuse of authority by the likes of Omotoso. Kgatle and Frahm (2022), for example, looked at how “Zondi exercised power in using a secular legal discourse to expose the physical, spiritual, and emotional abuse of a church leader”. Zondi is the epitome of how women can stand for themselves in demonstrating the sovereignty of women as opposed to the sovereignty of individual prophets like Omotoso. The sovereignty of women located within the broader context of communal sovereignty empowers them not to fold their arms but to reject forms of abuse when they manifest themselves in churches like Jesus Dominion International. In addition, the empowerment of women like Zondi is pivotal in communal sovereignty for the pursuit of justice among the oppressed, particularly in sexual abuse cases. Therefore, communal sovereignty not only supports the distribution of power but also the exercise of equal power for the pursuit of restorative justice. This is possible when individual authority exercised by the likes of Omotoso is challenged with the communal sovereignty in demonstrating that when women stand in solidarity with one another can overcome the atrocities that they face even within ecclesiastical contexts. In addition, women always organise themselves into various groups within the context of ecclesiastical interconnectedness. The proposition here is that these women's interconnectedness should lead to communal sovereignty that resists the sexual abuses in neo-prophetic churches.

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In the individual authority, pastors like Penuel Mnguni take advantage of the poor and the marginalised in communities and feed them snakes and other poisonous substances. In addition, in this approach, individuals like Penuel Mnguni utilize their charisma to demonstrate the influence and authority they have over their followers. This demonstrates the misuse of power through the manipulation of the congregants, who, as discussed previously, are sometimes unsuspecting and vulnerable. It is also marginalisation because in the End Times Disciples Ministries majority of members would be women, whilst the presiding pastor is male. This demonstrates the marginalisation of women within the neo-prophetic churches in South Africa. This also shows that women are not only marginalised in society but also in the churches by prophets who are supposed to protect them and demonstrate the love of Christ to them. The point made here is that the individual authority of these prophets is the rationale for the marginalisation and oppression of women in neo-prophetic churches. However, within the context of communal sovereignty, the marginalised are empowered to resist the oppression by the powerful, such as Mnguni. In communal sovereignty, the poor and marginalized are empowered to share in the same power and authority as the leaders in neo-Prophetic churches. In communal sovereignty, both the leader and the follower can exercise their gifts for the benefit of the organisation or the church. Therefore, in communal sovereignty, it is not only the prophet that is anointed, but the follower, too, is empowered and anointed by the Holy Spirit. The biblical texts that have been misinterpreted to manipulate the followers in the neo-prophetic churches are reinterpreted to give a new meaning of how power and anointing are released upon all the children of God, and not the prophets alone. Therefore, when biblical texts like Psalm 105:15 say that “touch not my anointed ones”, it refers to all the believers and not only prophets as the anointed ones.

Communal Sovereignty, Sovereign Lord, and Ubuntu in Pentecostalism

Most Pentecostals, particularly in classical Pentecostalism, hold that God is the one who holds the sovereign power above all other gods and human beings (Tsekpoe 2019, Banda 2019, Wariboko 2020). But Tsekpoe (2019) points out that it is very unfortunate that most prophets in neo-prophetic churches cannot recognise the supremacy and sovereignty of the Lord. The sovereignty of the Lord is very much opposed to the superhuman rhetoric in the individual authority of the prophets in neo-prophetic churches. It is very different from what Banda (2019) calls the impersonal, magical, and manipulative power of the prophets in neo-prophetic churches. Therefore, the authority of prophets in neo-prophetic churches cannot be considered supreme or absolute. The performance of miracles and other practices cannot be done at the expense of the sovereignty of God in the universe. This also means that the sovereignty of a state like South Africa cannot be above the sovereignty of the Lord. This is how Romans 13:1 can be understood in the articulation of the sovereignty of the state that is under the sovereignty of the Lord. Therefore, communal sovereignty is important in the understanding that the authority of all

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human beings is under the authority of God. But this does not in any way mean that the sovereign Lord is detached from the realities of human beings on earth. But rather to demonstrate that His sovereignty is released to all human beings on earth in a communal way as opposed to an individualistic way. The sovereignty of the Lord reaches to the broken world, the marginalised, and the oppressed through a communal sovereignty rather than individual authority. In addition, it is important to articulate that no one is above the sovereignty of the Lord. Human beings can only share in the authority given to them by God. But this authority is not to be used in lordship over each other but in the service of one another (Mark 10:45).

Communal sovereignty aligns with the ideas of an African philosophy of ubuntu of sharing, interconnectedness, and interdependence (Venter 2004, Swanson 2007, Lutz 2009, Mabovula 2011). Although this might not be the case in the hierarchical nature of authority in African traditional religions, where Chiefs and Kings have absolute authority, the Christian leaders are expected to embrace this communal sovereignty. Ubuntu is a philosophy where ideas of a community are supported over ideas of individualism. In Africa, it takes a village to raise a child means that no one is born in isolation but within a community and is part of that community. Hence, there is a sharing of resources, which is also done within the context of the neighbourhood. This is very much different from the Western culture of individualism. In the process of embracing Ubuntu and biblical principles of Christian leadership, such as humility, servanthood, teamwork, the leadership by exercising power and authority over others, as motivated by the ideas of individual authority, is not the way to go. In contrast to this individualistic authority, an African philosophy of ubuntu supports the sharing of power and resources in the same way the early church of the Apostles did. The ideas of equal distribution of power and authority are not only found in communal sovereignty but also in the African philosophy of Ubuntu. In addition, Ubuntu supports the ideas of human dignity and integrity more so among fellow human beings. The performance of some of the practices in neo-prophetic churches by prophets like Penuel Mnguni and Timothy Omotoso demonstrates a lack of integrity and dignity. Therefore, a call for the embracement of communal sovereignty is also a call for the embracement of dignity and integrity as found in the African philosophy of Ubuntu.

Ubuntu is not only about sharing and interconnectedness in African communal societies but is centred on “humanity” (Venter 2004, Swanson 2007, Lutz 2009, Mabovula 2011). In African languages, ubuntu is known as “*motho ke motho ka batho bangwe*”, which is translated as human beings exist because of others. This can further be interpreted as saying that “*Moruti ke moruti ka batho bangwe*,” which means that a pastor or prophet is because of other people. The main message is the idea of human existence because of fellow human beings, which alone is a call to place an important value on fellow human beings. In Ubuntu, a human being is defined within the context of other fellow human beings. Therefore,

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in affirming others, it is in essence affirming humanity. The exercise of authority within the ecclesiastical context, particularly neo-prophetic churches, should not lead to the dehumanisation of the congregants. The relevant question is, where is Ubuntu in the feeding of the snake to the congregants of the End Times Disciples Ministries? Where is the Ubuntu in the sexual abuse of young girls in the Jesus Dominion International? The reality is that these practices are actually a demonstration that somehow the South African society has lost the communal values found in the African philosophy of ubuntu. It is a demonstration that indeed prophets might be preaching the gospel of Christ, but doing so after losing their own values of sharing, interconnectedness, and humanity found in the philosophy of Ubuntu. Therefore, a call to embrace a communal sovereignty is actually a call to return to the very ideas of ubuntu that are supposed to be embraced by all Africans, whether in church or in society in general. In addition, it is a call to return to the very same ideas of a community as opposed to individualism. The embracement of individual authority by prophets in neo-Prophetic churches is a departure from the Africanness because Ubuntu teaches the idea of being in a community rather than standing alone in individualism.

However, Ubuntu is sometimes manipulated by African leaders, as argued by scholars such as Magezi (2017:111). In addition, Bediako (1995:231) argues that kings or chiefs do not rule with the consent of the people but with the authority of the ancestral spirits, the owners of the land and the people. However, in this article, the context is not necessarily kings and chiefs but rather the Christian leaders. The chiefs and kings might not exercise communal authority, but Christian leaders are expected to do so by serving others rather than lording it over them. The Christian leaders are expected more than chiefs and kings to follow the positive ideas of Ubuntu, as they have a better understanding of Christian leadership principles than traditional leaders. Therefore, the Christian leader is not expected to Lord it over followers as secular leaders may do, but rather to serve their followers in humility as Jesus Christ has done so (Mark 10:42-45). While Ubuntu can indeed be manipulated to suit the leader's agenda, this article proposes it as a communal philosophy to oppose individualistic authority. Therefore, both Ubuntu and Christian leadership principles can be synchronised as the quest to deal with individualistic authority and in the embrace of communal authority.

Conclusion

This article examines the concept of sovereignty within the Pentecostal movement, focusing specifically on neo-prophetic churches in South Africa. Traditionally, sovereignty has been studied in political science as the absolute authority of the state. In this article, however, communal sovereignty is contrasted with the authority of individual prophets in new prophetic churches, using the Enlightened Christian Gathering, Jesus Dominion International, and End Times Disciples Ministries as case studies.

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The article reviews literature to illustrate communal sovereignty as an approach where the community holds more authority than individual leaders. It then applies this concept to the selected neo-prophetic churches to challenge current malpractices. The study concludes that communal sovereignty enhances accountability of prophets to their followers, rather than granting them unchecked power. Additionally, it underscores that both prophets and church members are equal before God, since God alone possesses absolute authority. Therefore, sovereignty in the Pentecostal movement should be understood as rooted in the divine, not in individual prophets. The study also found that the idea of communal sovereignty is very closely linked to the African philosophy of Ubuntu in the promotion of ecclesiastical interconnectedness and humanity among neo-prophetic churches in South Africa. This study contributes significantly to the understanding of Pentecostal theology and mission by distinguishing communal sovereignty from individual authority. Future research may explore communal sovereignty not only in theological and mission contexts but also within political science, to address political abuses in South Africa and around the world.

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