



A Syntax of Religion and Fundamental Human Rights in the Emerging Christian Church in Nigeria

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Abstract. This study investigates the relationship between religious discourse and fundamental human rights in Nigeria's emerging Pentecostal and charismatic churches. Using the metaphor of "syntax" to describe the structured grammar of religious language, the research examines how sermons, rituals, and theological writings shape understandings of freedom, dignity, gender equality, sexuality, and authority. The study adopts a literature-based qualitative methodology, drawing on critical discourse analysis of published sermons, church statements, and existing scholarship. This approach highlights recurring patterns in Pentecostal teaching and situates them within Nigeria's constitutional framework and international human rights discourse. The synthesis of literature reveals that Pentecostal syntax consistently affirms empowerment through spiritual freedom and prosperity, offering hope and resilience in contexts of poverty and instability. However, these affirmations are framed conditionally, tying dignity and equality to obedience, faith, or traditional gender roles. Gender equality emerges as ambivalent: women are celebrated as indispensable but subordinated within patriarchal structures. The strongest conflict arises in relation to LGBTQ+ rights, where Pentecostal discourse aligns with cultural conservatism and national law to reject inclusivity. Freedom of expression is encouraged in evangelism and testimony but curtailed when directed toward church or political authority. The study concludes that Nigerian Pentecostalism does not reject human rights outright but reorganizes them within a theological order that empowers spiritually while limiting universality. By recognizing both the tensions and resources embedded in this syntax, scholars and advocates can foster dialogue that bridges religious conviction and the protection of human dignity.

Keywords: Religion, Human Rights, Nigerian Pentecostalism, Religious Discourse

1. Introduction

Christianity in Nigeria has undergone rapid and transformative growth since the early twentieth century, with Pentecostal and charismatic movements emerging as some of the most dynamic religious forces in the country. Scholars have consistently noted that Nigeria, often described as Africa's most populous nation, is not only demographically significant but also religiously vibrant, with Christianity and Islam competing for influence in public and private life (Pew Research Centre 14). In particular, the rise of Pentecostalism has been accompanied by the development of new theological emphases, including prosperity preaching, spiritual warfare, and radical expressions of faith in everyday life. These movements have profoundly shaped Nigerian religious identity and the moral imagination of millions of believers, while also raising critical questions about their engagement with broader issues of human rights, social justice, and democratic governance (Ukah 22; Marshall 76). Thus, an inquiry into the intersection of religious discourse and fundamental human rights is not only timely but necessary for understanding the evolving role of religion in Nigeria's modern public sphere.

At the heart of this inquiry is the idea of "syntax," understood here not in its strictly linguistic sense, but as a metaphor for the structural arrangement of ideas, beliefs, and practices that constitute the grammar of Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity in Nigeria. Religious syntax refers to the way sermons, scriptural interpretations, and theological constructs are ordered to produce particular meanings and social realities (Asad 38). This structure is neither arbitrary nor merely aesthetic: it shapes how believers understand their place in society, their duties toward others, and

their rights as individuals. By framing religion as a discursive system with its own internal logic, this study positions itself at the crossroads of discourse analysis, religious studies, and human rights scholarship. It asks how the syntax of Nigerian Christianity enables or constrains the articulation of fundamental rights, including gender equality, freedom of expression, and individual autonomy.

The Nigerian human rights context is especially complex because of its entanglement with both colonial legacies and contemporary global debates. Nigeria's constitution formally guarantees a wide range of rights, such as freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, as well as freedom of association and expression (Federal Republic of Nigeria, Constitution). Yet, the lived reality often reflects significant tension between legal provisions and cultural or religious interpretations of these rights. In many cases, churches—particularly those within the Pentecostal tradition—assert moral authority in ways that either supplement or undermine state protections of individual rights. For example, Pentecostal pastors often preach about spiritual freedom and divine empowerment but simultaneously discourage questioning pastoral authority or endorsing social reforms that challenge patriarchal norms (Adogame 191; Gifford 85). This contradiction situates the church as both an advocate for liberation and a potential obstacle to the realization of globally recognized human rights.

The significance of studying this religious-human rights nexus becomes even clearer when we consider Nigeria's pluralistic society, where Christianity, Islam, and indigenous traditions coexist and often compete for legitimacy. In such a context, human rights are not only legal instruments but also discursive battlegrounds where religious groups seek to assert moral dominance (Falola and Heaton 243). Pentecostal Christianity, with its emphasis on spiritual warfare and prosperity, tends to position itself as both a countercultural force resisting Western secularism and a modernizing agent that embraces technology, media, and global religious trends. This dual orientation complicates its relationship with human rights: on the one hand, it champions individual empowerment, but on the other, it enforces communal conformity and hierarchical structures that may suppress dissent. Examining the syntax of its discourse thus reveals the subtle mechanisms by which religious power shapes perceptions of justice and freedom.

Another important dimension of this research lies in its attention to gender. Nigerian Pentecostal churches often proclaim a theology of equality before God

while simultaneously re-inscribing patriarchal roles within both church and family life. Sermons frequently emphasize women's responsibility to submit to male authority, whether in marriage or in pastoral leadership, even as they celebrate women's participation in prayer groups, choirs, and evangelism (Oduyoye 54; Nwosu 113). This tension between affirmation and subordination reflects broader global debates about how religious traditions engage with human rights discourses around gender equality. The Nigerian case offers a particularly vivid illustration because of the size and visibility of its churches, many of which now wield international influence.

LGBTQ+ rights present another flashpoint where religious discourse and human rights collide. While international human rights frameworks increasingly recognize sexual orientation and gender identity as protected categories, Nigerian Pentecostalism tends to reject such inclusivity, framing LGBTQ+ identities as moral corruption or spiritual bondage (Amadi 312). This rhetoric not only influences public opinion but also legitimizes state policies that criminalize same-sex relationships, thereby reinforcing systemic exclusion. Here, the syntax of religious teaching operates as both theological conviction and social control, shaping not only what believers think but also how laws are enforced and contested.

Given these complexities, this study sets out to investigate the specific ways in which the syntax of religious discourse in the emerging Nigerian Christian church frames and reframes fundamental human rights. It seeks to answer the following research questions: How do Pentecostal and charismatic teachings structure believers' understanding of rights such as freedom, equality, and autonomy? In what ways do these teachings align with or contradict international human rights norms? And how do church leaders and members negotiate these tensions in everyday practice? By focusing on sermons, written texts, and interviews, the study employs a qualitative methodology that privileges lived experience and discursive nuance over abstract theorization.

Finally, the study's contribution lies not only in mapping the tensions between religion and human rights but also in suggesting pathways for dialogue. While it would be simplistic to either condemn Nigerian Pentecostalism as inherently oppressive or to romanticize it as purely liberatory, a more nuanced reading reveals spaces of negotiation where change is possible. Religious leaders, when engaged in constructive dialogue with human rights advocates, may find theological resources for affirming dignity, justice, and equality without abandoning their spiritual

convictions. Similarly, human rights practitioners, by recognizing the cultural and theological frameworks that shape religious communities, may avoid imposing foreign categories that provoke resistance. The task, therefore, is not to choose between religion and rights but to explore the syntax that makes their interaction possible in Nigeria's contested public sphere.

2. Conceptual Framework

The concept of "syntax" in this study functions as a metaphor for the structured logic and internal grammar of religious discourse. Just as syntax in linguistics governs the arrangement of words into coherent sentences, religious syntax governs the arrangement of theological claims, sermons, and rituals into systems of meaning that guide social practice. In Nigerian Pentecostalism, syntax appears in the patterned repetition of biblical themes—such as deliverance, prosperity, and submission—that shape congregants' worldviews. This framework allows scholars to analyse religion not merely as a collection of doctrines but as an ordered system of communication with material and political consequences (Fairclough 122). In other words, Pentecostal syntax is both expressive and performative: it conveys theological convictions while simultaneously producing particular social norms and hierarchies. Recognizing this structural quality enables researchers to examine how religious discourse frames concepts like freedom, dignity, and equality in ways that may align with or conflict with human rights discourses.

The theoretical foundation for this approach draws heavily on discourse analysis. Scholars like Michel Foucault and Talal Asad have demonstrated that discourse is never neutral but always implicated in power relations (Foucault 93; Asad 45). Religion, therefore, cannot be treated as a purely private or spiritual phenomenon but must be understood as a discursive practice that regulates behaviour, authorizes truth, and disciplines bodies. Nigerian Pentecostalism exemplifies this dynamic, as sermons often regulate not only spiritual conduct but also political, economic, and familial behaviour. The syntax of these sermons reflects a broader apparatus of power in which church leaders occupy interpretive authority while congregants internalize moral imperatives as divine commands. Thus, analysing the syntax of religion provides a way of mapping how power circulates within religious institutions and how this circulation interacts with the broader framework of fundamental human rights.

A second theoretical strand comes from the sociology of religion, particularly perspectives that highlight religion's role in shaping social norms and collective identity. Peter Berger's concept of the "sacred canopy"

suggests that religious worldviews provide comprehensive frameworks of meaning that legitimize social order (Berger 32). In the Nigerian context, Pentecostal churches construct a sacred canopy through narratives of spiritual warfare, divine prosperity, and eschatological hope, which in turn inform congregants' attitudes toward authority, gender roles, and civic responsibility. This canopy offers both reassurance and regulation: believers find security in divine promises while simultaneously accepting hierarchies that may restrict their rights. By interpreting Pentecostalism through this sociological lens, it becomes clear that the syntax of religion is not simply a set of words but a symbolic universe that informs how rights are imagined, claimed, or denied.

Human rights theory also provides essential conceptual grounding for this study. At its core, human rights discourse emphasizes universality, inalienability, and equality, positioning these rights as belonging to all individuals regardless of cultural or religious difference (Donnelly 56). Yet, critics of universalism have pointed out that rights discourse often emerges from Western liberal traditions, raising questions about its applicability in contexts such as Nigeria, where communal values and religious norms hold strong sway (Mutua 12). Pentecostal syntax often embodies this tension: while sermons frequently affirm the dignity of individuals as children of God, they also prescribe strict boundaries around acceptable gender roles, sexuality, and modes of dissent. Thus, the interaction between religious syntax and human rights is not merely oppositional but dialogical, with each shaping and contesting the other. The framework adopted here, therefore, acknowledges both the universality of rights and the cultural embeddedness of their interpretation.

The notion of hermeneutics is also central to understanding the syntax of Nigerian Christianity. Pentecostal churches rely heavily on biblical interpretation, often privileging literal readings that emphasize obedience, prosperity, and spiritual warfare. This hermeneutical approach structures the syntax of sermons, ensuring that rights and freedoms are interpreted through theological lenses rather than secular or legal categories (Ukpong 88). For instance, the biblical injunction that wives should submit to husbands is frequently cited as divine sanction for gender hierarchies, even when such interpretations clash with constitutional guarantees of equality. Hermeneutics thus operates as the interpretive grammar through which human rights are either affirmed or curtailed in Nigerian Pentecostal discourse. The conceptual framework of this study,

therefore, situates hermeneutics as a crucial mechanism in the interplay between theology and law.

Finally, the intersection of law, culture, and theology completes the conceptual framework. Nigeria's constitutional and legal framework provides protections for human rights, but cultural and religious systems often reinterpret or limit these protections in practice. The syntax of religion acts as a mediating force: it does not simply reject human rights but selectively reframes them in ways that reinforce existing power structures. For example, while Pentecostal churches may embrace the language of freedom, this freedom is frequently spiritualized—interpreted as liberation from sin or demonic oppression rather than as civic autonomy or political agency (Marshall 132). By examining this selective reframing, the study contributes to a broader understanding of how religious syntax translates abstract rights into lived realities within Nigerian society.

In sum, the conceptual framework of this study integrates discourse theory, sociology of religion, human rights theory, and hermeneutics to investigate how the syntax of Nigerian Pentecostalism shapes attitudes toward fundamental human rights. By treating religion as a structured discursive practice, the framework provides tools for analysing the tensions and negotiations between theological conviction and legal obligation. This approach does not presuppose that religion and human rights are inherently incompatible; rather, it highlights the ways in which their interaction is mediated through syntax—an interaction that is fraught with conflict yet ripe with potential for dialogue and reform.

3. Literature Review

The literature on Christianity and human rights in Africa is marked by ambivalence, reflecting both optimism about religion's role in promoting dignity and scepticism about its potential to reinforce oppression. Scholars such as Lamin Sanneh and John Mbiti have highlighted how Christianity in Africa has historically adapted to local cultures, creating hybrid traditions that blend biblical teaching with indigenous practices (Mbiti 87; Sanneh 114). At the same time, Christianity has often functioned as a colonial legacy that introduced foreign categories of morality and authority into African societies. This dual heritage complicates the discussion of human rights, which themselves are frequently critiqued as Western impositions. In Nigeria, the rapid expansion of Pentecostal and charismatic churches since the 1970s has intensified these dynamics by producing a

religious culture that is simultaneously globalized and deeply localized (Ukah 44). The literature suggests that any exploration of religion and human rights in Nigeria must reckon with this historical ambivalence.

Pentecostalism's influence in Nigeria has been particularly well documented in sociological and anthropological studies. Ruth Marshall's *Political Spiritualities* describes how Pentecostal churches have reshaped Nigeria's political and social order by framing everyday life as a battleground between divine and demonic forces (Marshall 133). Similarly, Asonzeh Ukah emphasizes the centrality of media, ritual, and organizational expansion in the growth of Nigerian Pentecostalism, noting that these churches often operate as transnational corporations with significant cultural power (Ukah 65). Scholars argue that Pentecostalism offers believers empowerment, especially in contexts of economic hardship, by promising prosperity, healing, and social mobility (Gifford 93). However, empowerment in this sense is often spiritualized, redirecting believers' energies toward personal breakthroughs rather than systemic reform. The literature underscores the tension between Pentecostalism's emancipatory rhetoric and its reinforcement of hierarchical structures, a tension that has direct implications for human rights discourse.

Gender has emerged as one of the most contested domains in the literature on religion and human rights in Africa. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, one of Africa's leading feminist theologians, critiques how African Christianity perpetuates patriarchal norms even while affirming women's spiritual gifts (Oduyoye 57). Nigerian Pentecostal churches provide a clear illustration of this contradiction: women are celebrated as prayer warriors, prophetesses, and financial contributors but are often excluded from senior leadership roles. Nkechi Nwosu highlights how sermons on marriage frequently reinforce female submission and male headship, positioning women as guardians of domestic virtue rather than autonomous agents (Nwosu 118). These interpretations clash with international human rights norms that affirm gender equality as a non-negotiable principle. The literature on gender therefore reveals how Pentecostal syntax simultaneously affirms and restricts women's rights, reflecting broader global debates on religion and feminism.

Sexuality, and particularly LGBTQ+ rights, has also attracted scholarly attention in discussions of African Christianity. Theologians such as Elias Bongmba and Chammah Kaunda argue that African churches, including Nigerian Pentecostal congregations, often frame homosexuality as foreign, un-African, and

incompatible with biblical teaching (Bongmba 42; Kaunda 73). This rhetoric aligns with state laws that criminalize same-sex relationships, creating a convergence between religious discourse and legal restriction. Amadi's research further demonstrates how Pentecostal sermons frequently conflate homosexuality with moral decay and spiritual warfare, thereby legitimizing social exclusion (Amadi 315). Scholars note that while such positions resonate with cultural conservatism in Nigeria, they also place churches in direct opposition to international human rights frameworks that protect sexual minorities. Thus, the literature points to sexuality as a key site of conflict between religious syntax and human rights discourse.

Beyond gender and sexuality, the literature also examines Pentecostalism's broader engagement with freedom of expression and individual autonomy. Paul Gifford argues that while Pentecostalism emphasizes spiritual freedom, it often discourages political dissent or critical questioning of pastoral authority (Gifford 97). Similarly, Adogame describes how Pentecostal leaders cultivate charismatic authority that commands obedience, thereby curtailing the autonomy of congregants (Adogame 195). Scholars observe that sermons often frame obedience to leaders as obedience to God, creating a religious syntax that prioritizes communal conformity over personal liberty. This stands in contrast to human rights frameworks, which prioritize individual freedom and the right to dissent. The literature thus identifies freedom of expression as another contested area where religious discourse collides with legal and constitutional protections.

Comparative studies provide further insight by situating Nigerian Pentecostalism within a global context. Allan Anderson and Philip Jenkins note that Pentecostal movements across Latin America, Asia, and Africa share common themes of healing, prosperity, and empowerment, but their engagement with human rights varies significantly depending on local contexts (Anderson 101; Jenkins 89). For example, some Latin American Pentecostal churches have supported democratization and human rights activism, while Nigerian Pentecostalism has tended to focus on prosperity and spiritual warfare. This comparative literature suggests that the syntax of Pentecostal discourse is highly contextual, shaped by local histories, economies, and political realities. Nigerian Pentecostalism, therefore, cannot be understood in isolation but must be placed within broader global patterns of charismatic Christianity.

Despite this rich body of literature, significant gaps remain. Few studies explicitly analyse Pentecostal discourse through the lens of syntax, that is, as a

structured system of meaning that orders both theological claims and social practices. Similarly, while there is extensive scholarship on Pentecostalism's political and cultural influence, less attention has been paid to its specific implications for fundamental human rights. The intersection of gender, sexuality, freedom of expression, and autonomy with religious syntax remains underexplored. This study seeks to address these gaps by offering a discourse-centred analysis of Nigerian Pentecostalism's engagement with human rights. By doing so, it contributes not only to African religious studies but also to global conversations on the complex relationship between religion and rights.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, literature-based methodology designed to analyze the intersection of Pentecostal discourse and human rights in Nigeria. Rather than conducting primary fieldwork, the research draws upon secondary sources such as published sermons, theological writings, church constitutions, government documents, and peer-reviewed scholarship. This approach is appropriate because the study is concerned with the syntax of discourse—the structured patterns through which religious language organizes meaning—rather than with quantifiable measures of religious practice. By focusing on texts already in circulation, the study examines how Pentecostal discourse is constructed, disseminated, and contested within Nigeria's broader socio-political landscape.

The primary method employed is critical discourse analysis (CDA). Following Norman Fairclough and Michel Foucault, discourse is understood as a system of knowledge that both reflects and produces power relations (Fairclough 122; Foucault 93). CDA allows for the identification of recurring metaphors, themes, and grammatical structures in sermons and church documents that frame ideas of freedom, dignity, and authority. For example, repeated images of captivity and deliverance signal a theological framing of freedom that differs from civic understandings of rights. By examining such patterns across texts, the study highlights how Pentecostal syntax affirms empowerment while simultaneously reinforcing hierarchical control.

This discourse-centred approach relies on published sermons and textual materials available through church websites, printed devotional guides, and recordings disseminated via television or social media. These sources are significant because Nigerian Pentecostal churches actively engage mass media to

expand their influence (Ukah 77). The widespread availability of such texts ensures that the analysis reflects discourses already shaping public imagination, rather than isolated local practices. In addition, scholarly literature on Nigerian Pentecostalism provides contextual grounding, allowing for comparisons across denominations and regions (Marshall 133; Gifford 93).

The methodology also involves a hermeneutical dimension, recognizing that biblical interpretation is central to Pentecostal syntax. Nigerian Pentecostal preachers frequently employ literal and selective readings of scripture, emphasizing prosperity, submission, and spiritual warfare (Ukpong 88). These interpretive strategies are analysed to show how theology reorganizes rights into categories legible within a religious worldview. For example, while the constitution guarantees freedom of expression, sermons may frame speech in terms of obedience or rebellion, thereby narrowing its meaning. Hermeneutics thus operates as a key lens for understanding the redefinition of rights within theological grammar.

Because this is a literature-based study, its data set is limited to textual and secondary sources, rather than interviews or participant observation. This design avoids the ethical complexities of fieldwork on sensitive topics such as sexuality and church authority. It also ensures that the analysis draws on discourses already in the public domain, making them appropriate for scholarly critique. However, the study acknowledges its limits: it cannot capture the diversity of individual experiences within Nigerian Pentecostalism or the private negotiations that believers may engage in regarding rights. The findings should therefore be understood as mapping dominant discursive patterns rather than providing ethnographic generalizations.

The strength of this approach lies in its ability to synthesize existing scholarship and discourse materials to provide a conceptual framework for future empirical studies. By analysing sermons, texts, and literature through discourse analysis and hermeneutics, the study demonstrates how Pentecostal syntax organizes rights consciousness in patterned ways. The limitation is that it does not include first-hand narratives from pastors or congregants, which would provide richer detail on how these discourses are received and reinterpreted. Future research could address this gap by combining discourse analysis with ethnographic methods such as interviews or participant observation.

In sum, the methodology is theoretical and interpretive, rooted in secondary data and discourse analysis. It highlights the syntax of Nigerian Pentecostalism as a structured grammar of meaning, offering insight into how religion reorganizes rights in both empowering and restrictive ways. This design provides a foundation for scholarly debate and future empirical inquiry, while ensuring that the analysis is transparent about its reliance on published and secondary sources.

5. Findings and Analysis

Because this study relies on secondary sources and discourse analysis rather than primary fieldwork, the “findings” are better understood as an interpretive synthesis. They draw from published sermons, church statements, theological writings, and existing scholarship on Nigerian Pentecostalism. The goal is not to present new ethnographic data but to highlight the recurring syntactical patterns in Pentecostal discourse and to analyse how these patterns intersect with international human rights frameworks.

Across the literature, five themes emerge consistently:

- Spiritual freedom framed as deliverance rather than civic autonomy;
- Prosperity teaching linking dignity to material success;
- Gender roles affirming empowerment yet reinforcing patriarchy;
- Rejection of LGBTQ+ identities framed as theological and cultural defence; and
- Expression encouraged in testimony but restricted in dissent against authority.

Each subsection below synthesizes scholarly findings and discourse analysis of sermons and texts, showing how Pentecostal syntax, both empowers and constrains human rights consciousness.

5.1 Spiritual Freedom vs. Civil Rights

Rather than drawing from interviews, this subsection highlights how scholars such as Ruth Marshall and Asonzeh Ukah show that Pentecostal discourse spiritualizes freedom, framing it as liberation from sin and demonic oppression (Marshall 147; Ukah 89). Sermons emphasize boldness in Christ but rarely link freedom to civic rights such as political participation or legal reform. Scholars note that this emphasis empowers believers personally but diverts attention from systemic injustice. The literature also suggests generational variation, with younger Christians more likely to connect spiritual empowerment with civic

responsibility (Kalu 215). Thus, the existing scholarship points to a syntax of freedom that is empowering yet limited in its civic application.

5.2 Prosperity Gospel and Human Dignity

Drawing on Paul Gifford, Asonzeh Ukah, and Ruth Marshall, the literature shows how prosperity theology affirms believers' dignity by rejecting poverty as God's will (Gifford 103; Ukah 92; Marshall 156). Sermons present prosperity as a covenantal entitlement, but this redefines dignity as conditional on faith and obedience. Scholars critique this framing for stigmatizing the poor while overlooking systemic inequality. At the same time, prosperity discourse can inspire education and entrepreneurship, aligning in part with human rights claims to economic well-being. The literature consistently highlights this ambivalence: prosperity discourse affirms dignity but narrows its universality.

5.3 Gender Equality and Patriarchal Teachings

Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Nkechi Nwosu, and other scholars document the gendered tensions in Nigerian Pentecostalism. Women are praised for their faith and contributions but excluded from senior leadership, with sermons reinforcing submission (Oduyoye 59; Nwosu 124). Rituals such as head coverings further inscribe hierarchy. Yet, the literature also shows that women's fellowships and ministries provide spaces for empowerment and entrepreneurship (Ukah 97). This dual pattern—affirmation within subordination—reflects what Oduyoye calls the “subordination of the indispensable” (66). Scholarship therefore reveals a syntax that both upholds patriarchy and generates openings for reinterpreting gender equality.

5.4 LGBTQ+ Issues and Church Resistance

The literature on sexuality, especially Bongmba, Amadi, and Kaunda, highlights the near-total rejection of LGBTQ+ rights in Nigerian Pentecostal discourse (Bongmba 45; Amadi 318; Kaunda 82). Sermons describe homosexuality as sinful and foreign, aligning with Nigeria's Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act (2014). This discourse combines theology and culture into a “moral nationalism” that defends tradition against perceived Western imposition (Bongmba 47). While most scholars note little room for inclusivity, some observe generational shifts, with younger Christians expressing discomfort with harsh rhetoric. The findings from secondary literature thus indicate deep resistance with faint possibilities for reinterpretation.

5.5 Freedom of Expression vs. Obedience to Authority

Scholars such as Adogame, Gifford, and Marshall show that Pentecostalism encourages bold testimony and evangelism but discourages dissent against authority (Adogame 205; Gifford 108; Marshall 159). Pastors are presented as divinely anointed, making critique appear as rebellion against God. This syntax limits expressive freedom within church and society, reinforcing hierarchical culture. However, literature also points to generational tensions: younger congregants, influenced by social media, increasingly call for open dialogue on gender, sexuality, and politics (Falola and Heaton 267). The secondary sources thus reveal a syntax that affirms expression within narrow boundaries but resists dissent.

6. Discussion

The review of scholarship on Nigerian Pentecostalism highlights how religious syntax organizes discourse on freedom, dignity, gender, sexuality, and authority. Rather than providing new empirical data, this study synthesizes existing analyses of sermons, church practices, and theological writings to show how Pentecostalism reframes human rights. The literature demonstrates that Pentecostal discourse affirms empowerment while often restricting universality, producing an ambivalent engagement with rights. As Talal Asad notes, discourses generate their own “conditions of possibility” (51). Nigerian Pentecostalism exemplifies this by affirming dignity and equality within faith, while redefining them in conditional and hierarchical ways.

The literature on spiritual freedom shows that Nigerian Pentecostalism consistently prioritizes deliverance from sin and spiritual oppression over civic or political autonomy (Marshall 161; Ukah 89). This focus empowers believers existentially but deflects attention from structural injustice. Yet, several studies suggest generational differences, with younger Christians sometimes connecting spiritual empowerment with civic accountability (Kalu 215). These insights indicate that while the dominant syntax spiritualizes freedom, it contains resources that could support civic engagement if reinterpreted.

Prosperity theology demonstrates similar tensions. Scholars such as Paul Gifford and Ruth Marshall argue that prosperity preaching affirms dignity by rejecting poverty as God's will, but it also ties flourishing to obedience and faith (Gifford 111; Marshall 156). This conditional framing stigmatizes the poor, yet it aligns in part with economic rights by portraying deprivation

as unjust. The literature suggests that prosperity rhetoric could be mobilized toward collective justice if reframed beyond individual success. This demonstrates how Pentecostal syntax both constrains and enables rights consciousness.

Gender remains one of the most ambivalent areas. Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Nkechi Nwosu show that women are indispensable to church life yet confined within patriarchal roles (Oduyoye 66; Nwosu 124). At the same time, studies highlight women's fellowships and ministries as spaces for empowerment, education, and entrepreneurship (Ukah 97). This supports Oduyoye's observation of the "subordination of the indispensable," where women's contributions are celebrated but their authority curtailed. The literature therefore points to both continuity and contestation, suggesting opportunities for internal reinterpretation of gender roles in light of equality.

On sexuality, the literature is nearly unanimous in documenting Pentecostal resistance to LGBTQ+ rights. Elias Bongmba and Victor Amadi note that sermons portray homosexuality as sinful and culturally alien, reinforcing Nigeria's Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act (Bongmba 45; Amadi 318). This alignment of theology, law, and culture produces what Bongmba calls "moral nationalism" (47). Yet, scholars such as Kaunda observe emerging cracks, as some younger believers emphasize compassion and tolerance (Kaunda 82). While change is limited, the literature suggests that sexuality remains a critical site of conflict between Pentecostal discourse and human rights.

Finally, studies of freedom of expression highlight Pentecostal ambivalence. Scholars show that boldness in testimony and evangelism is encouraged, but dissent against leadership is discouraged, equating critique with rebellion (Adogame 205; Gifford 108). This restricts expressive freedom and reinforces authoritarian structures. Yet, the literature also notes generational pressures for more open dialogue, particularly in urban and globally connected congregations (Falola and Heaton 267). This suggests that expressive freedom may become an evolving site of negotiation within Nigerian Pentecostalism.

Taken together, the literature reveals a Pentecostal syntax that affirms empowerment but conditions universality, reflecting both opportunities and limitations for human rights. For advocates, the challenge is to engage these discourses critically yet constructively, identifying theological resources—such as dignity, justice, and equality before God—that can resonate with rights frameworks. This approach

avoids dismissing religion as inherently regressive while affirming the universality of human dignity.

7. Conclusion

This study has synthesized existing literature to examine the syntax of Nigerian Pentecostal discourse and its implications for human rights. By treating sermons, rituals, and theological writings as structured grammars, the analysis highlighted how Pentecostalism affirms empowerment while simultaneously restricting universality. Freedom is spiritualized, dignity is tied to prosperity, and equality is proclaimed in faith but limited socially. These findings reflect what multiple scholars describe as the ambivalent role of Pentecostalism in shaping rights in Nigeria's pluralistic society (Marshall 133; Gifford 93; Ukah 65).

The review of scholarship suggests that Pentecostal discourse neither wholly rejects nor fully embraces human rights. Instead, it reorganizes them within a theological framework that empowers spiritually but restricts inclusivity. Gender and sexuality remain the most contentious areas, where patriarchal and heteronormative syntax clash with global norms. Yet, the literature also identifies spaces for contestation, particularly among women's fellowships and younger congregants. These findings suggest that Pentecostal syntax is dynamic, not static, and capable of evolution in response to social and generational change.

The contribution of this study lies in its discourse-centred approach. By conceptualizing Pentecostalism as syntax, it provides a framework for analysing how theology structures rights in patterned ways. This approach enriches African religious studies and contributes to global debates on religion and rights. For practitioners, the findings highlight the importance of culturally sensitive dialogue that recognizes religious logics while affirming human dignity.

Recommendations from the literature include incorporating human rights education into theological training, supporting internal reinterpretations of scripture, and fostering dialogue between church leaders and rights advocates. Future research should combine discourse analysis with empirical methods such as interviews and participant observation, to capture how congregants negotiate these tensions in everyday practice. Such studies would deepen understanding of the lived realities behind the discursive patterns identified here.

In conclusion, Nigerian Pentecostalism should not be viewed as either an adversary or a simple ally of

human rights. Rather, it is a complex interlocutor whose syntax affirms empowerment while conditioning universality. Engaging this syntax critically yet respectfully offers a pathway toward bridging spiritual convictions and human dignity. In a society where religion plays a central role in shaping values, such engagement is vital for building inclusive and just futures.

8. Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited by its reliance on secondary sources—published sermons, church texts, and existing scholarship—rather than new empirical data. As a literature-based discourse analysis, it highlights patterns in Nigerian Pentecostal syntax but cannot capture the full diversity of congregational experiences or the nuances of congregational interpretation. Without interviews, participant observation, or ethnographic fieldwork, the analysis remains at the level of textual and scholarly synthesis. This limits its ability to assess how congregants negotiate, resist, or reinterpret church teachings in everyday life.

Future research should address these gaps by combining discourse analysis with empirical methods. Fieldwork involving interviews with pastors, women's groups, and younger congregants could reveal how theological syntax is embodied, contested, and reinterpreted in lived practice. Comparative studies across denominations and regions would also enrich understanding of how local cultures shape the interaction between Pentecostal discourse and human rights. In addition, interdisciplinary approaches linking theology, law, and political science could provide a more comprehensive picture of how religious syntax influences Nigeria's democratic and legal institutions. Such research would complement this study's conceptual focus, deepening insight into both the limitations and transformative possibilities of Nigerian Pentecostalism in relation to fundamental human rights.

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