



Ministerial ethics and witchcraft in the African contexts: A theological and pastoral analysis

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Received 17 May 2026; Accepted 12 Jun 2026; Published 03 Aug 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.64171/JAES.6.4.124-128>

Abstract

This article examines the ethical challenges faced by Christian ministers addressing witchcraft, fear, and superstition, particularly in African contexts where such beliefs remain influential. Drawing on biblical and African theology and anthropological scholarship, the study argues that while Scripture affirms the reality of spiritual conflict, uncritical engagement with witchcraft narratives can reinforce fear, enable exploitation, and undermine the gospel. This study critically evaluates deliverance ministries and proposes an ethical framework grounded in biblical fidelity, pastoral accountability, and cultural sensitivity. It concludes that a responsible ministry must confront fear without legitimizing harmful beliefs and prioritizing human dignity, theological integrity and Christ-centered pastoral care.

Keywords: African theology, Deliverance ministry, Ministerial ethics, Pastoral care, Witchcraft, Superstition

1. Introduction

The intersection of ministerial ethics and beliefs about witchcraft presents a significant pastoral and theological challenge, particularly in African contexts where spiritual explanations for misfortune remain pervasive. While Christianity affirms the existence of spiritual realities, the persistence of fear, superstition, and culturally embedded interpretations of witchcraft raises critical ethical concerns for pastoral practice.

The Apostle Paul's rebuke in *Galatians 3:1* "Who has bewitched you?" illustrates the danger of spiritual deception and the responsibility of Christian leaders to preserve the integrity of the gospel. In its original context, Paul's concern was not literal witchcraft but theological distortion, as the Galatians were turning from justification by faith to legalism. This distinction is crucial because it frames "bewitchment" as deception rather than magic manipulation. However, in many African societies, witchcraft is often perceived as a tangible force capable of causing harm (Bond & Ciekawy, 2001) [1]. As John Mbiti noted, African worldviews frequently integrate spiritual causality into everyday life. Consequently, pastors are confronted with the dual challenge of addressing deeply rooted cultural beliefs while remaining faithful to biblical teaching.

1.1 Relevance of the study to theology

This study contributes to pastoral theology by addressing ministers' ethical responsibilities contexts shaped by fear and spiritual connection. It also engages systematic theology, particularly Christology and soteriology, by examining how beliefs about witchcraft may challenge the sufficiency of Christ's redemptive work. Furthermore, the study contributes to African theology by critically evaluating the interaction between Christian faith and culturally embedded worldviews.

In doing so, it advances theological reflection on how the gospel can be faithfully contextualized without compromising its core message.

1.2 The research gap

Although substantial scholarship exists on witchcraft in Africa (Bond & Ciekawy, 2001; Peter Geschiere, 1997) [1, 5] and on African Christianity (Kwame Bediako, 1995) [2], the ethical implications of pastoral responses to beliefs in witchcraft have received limited attention. Existing studies often prioritize anthropological analysis or theological affirmation without integrating ministerial ethics into practical pastoral frameworks. Although recent studies have highlighted the growing influence of deliverance and spiritual warfare in African Christianity (Luka, 2023; Kgatle, 2025) [9, 8], the ethical implications of these practices have received limited attention. As a result, there is insufficient guidance for pastors on how to respond to witchcraft in ways that avoid reinforcing fear, preventing exploitation, and upholding human dignity. This study addresses this gap by proposing an ethically grounded framework for PEC.

1.3 Research objectives

This article seeks to:

- The ethical challenges faced by Christian ministers in addressing witchcraft in African contexts are examined.
- Analyze biblical teachings on spiritual deception and deliverance.
- Evaluate anthropological perspectives on witchcraft.
- Ethical risks in deliverance ministries.
- Propose an ethical framework for pastoral practice.

1.4 Thesis statement

This article argues that the uncritical acceptance of witchcraft narratives within Christian ministry risks reinforcing fear-

based theology, enabling exploitation, and undermining the sufficiency of Christ's work.

2. Conceptual framework

Ministerial ethics

Ministerial Ethics encompasses the moral and professional standards that guide pastoral conduct, including integrity, accountability, transparency, and responsibility toward congregants. In African Pentecostal contexts, the commercialization of deliverance ministries has raised serious ethical concerns, as practices such as charging fees for exorcism or sensationalizing spiritual warfare risk undermining pastoral credibility and exploiting vulnerable believers (Kgatle, 2022) ^[7]. Ethical ministry requires pastors to resist such abuses and instead embody Christ-like service rooted in compassion and truth.

Christian identity

A Christian is defined as a follower of Jesus Christ whose life reflects His teachings and character (Acts 11:26). This identity emphasizes discipleship, faith in Christ's redemptive work, and ethical living. In contexts where witchcraft beliefs dominate, Christian identity calls ministers to affirm the sufficiency of Christ's victory over evil, guiding congregants away from fear-driven practices toward a faith-centered life.

Witchcraft

Witchcraft is commonly understood as the use of mystical or supernatural power to influence events that are often associated with harm or control. Anthropologically, it functions as a social explanatory system, offering communities a framework for understanding misfortune, illness, or relational conflict (Fouché, 2014) ^[4]. For pastors, the challenge lies in acknowledging these cultural realities without reinforcing fear or legitimizing harmful accusations, ensuring that ministry remains both biblically faithful and socially responsible.

Fear

Fear is a psychological response to perceived threat that shapes belief systems and behavior. Fear of curses, illness, or spiritual attack often drives individuals to seek deliverance ministries in African contexts. Fear, can be a powerful motivator, but it can also distort faith when left unaddressed. Ethical pastoral care must confront fear through biblical teaching, counseling, and reassurance of Christ's authority, replacing anxiety with confidence in God's sovereignty.

Superstition

Superstition refers to beliefs rooted in supernatural causation rather than theological or empirical grounding. In Christian communities, superstition can lead to misplaced trust in rituals, charms, or symbolic acts rather than reliance on Christ. Pastors must challenge superstition by promoting theological clarity and sound teaching, ensuring that faith is not reduced to ritualism but remains centered on the gospel.

Deliverance ministry

Deliverance ministry involves practices aimed at spiritual liberation, including exorcism and prayer against perceived

demonic influence. While rooted in biblical examples of Jesus casting out demons, its modern expressions in African Pentecostalism often raise ethical concerns when sensationalized or monetized. Responsible deliverance ministry must be grounded in the Bible, accountable to church oversight, and respectful of human dignity, avoiding practices that exploit fear or stigmatize individuals.

3. Biblical foundations

Scripture provides a consistent witness against sorcery, divination, and spiritual deception, underscoring the need for discernment in pastoral ministry. The Old Testament explicitly condemns practices such as witchcraft and divination (Deuteronomy 18:10-12), framing them as violations of covenantal fidelity to God. These prohibitions highlight that reliance on occult practices undermines trust in Yahweh's sovereignty and distorts the spiritual integrity of the community. In some African communities, for example individuals may consult traditional diviners during times of illness or financial crisis instead of seeking prayer, medical treatment, or communal support. Pastors addressing such situations must teach fear-driven reliance on occult practices should not replace dependence on God. The New Testament continues this emphasis but shifts in focus toward discernment and reliance on the Holy Spirit. In Acts 8:9-24, the account of Simon the Sorcerer illustrates the danger of attempting to manipulate spiritual power for personal gain, reminding ministers that true authority rests in God's Spirit rather than human ritual or control. A practical example can be seen in ministries where self-proclaimed prophets demand money in exchange for "special deliverance oils" or "prophetic protection" Such practices mirror Simon's attempt to commercialize spiritual authority and must be rejected as unethical.

Jesus' ministry included acts of deliverance (Mark 5:1-20), affirming the reality of spiritual conflict and demonstrating divine authority over demonic forces. However, the New Testament places greater weight on Christ's decisive victory over evil. Colossians 2:15 proclaims that Christ disarmed spiritual powers through the cross, establishing the theological foundation that evil forces are ultimately subject to His authority. In practical ministry, Pastors should encourage believers to trust in prayer, discipleship, and Christian community rather than living in constant fear of curses, ancestral spirits, or witchcraft attacks. For instance, instead of prescribing ritualistic acts such as sleeping with "anointed objects" under pillows, pastors should guide congregants toward scriptural assurance and spiritual maturity.

Paul's rebuke in Galatians 3:1, "Who has bewitched you?" further clarifies that deception, not magical manipulation, is the primary threat to the t. His concern was theological distortion, as the Galatians were turning from justification by faith to legalism. This distinction is critical because it reframes "bewitchment" as spiritual deception rather than literal witchcraft. A contemporary example may involve churches where members are taught that witches cause every setback, such as unemployment, infertility, or academic failure, rather

than considering economic, medical, or social realities. Such teaching can create fear and dependency instead of nurturing a mature faith in Christ.

Therefore, ethical ministry must prioritize truth, faith, and the sufficiency of Christ over fear-driven responses. Pastors are called to confront spiritual realities with confidence in Christ's authority, guiding congregants away from superstition and toward a faith that rests in the completed work of the cross. Ministers, safeguard both theological integrity and the dignity of believers by doing so, ensuring that pastoral care reflects the liberating power of the gospel.

4. Witchcraft in the African contexts

Anthropological scholarship demonstrates that beliefs about witchcraft serve multiple social functions, including explaining misfortune, regulating moral behavior, and addressing communal tensions (Bond & Ciekawy, 2001) ^[1]. Witchcraft operates as a cultural lens through which illness, poverty, or relational breakdowns are interpreted in many African societies, thereby shaping communal responses to crises. For example, communities may attribute these events to witchcraft rather than environmental, medical, or economic causes when a family repeatedly experiences death or crop failure. Such interpretations can deeply influence how communities respond to suffering.

Geschiere (1997) ^[5] highlights that witchcraft discourse often reflects deeper anxieties about power, inequality, and social change. In this sense, accusations of witchcraft may function as a means of negotiating social tensions, expressing fears about wealth disparities, or managing suspicion within communities. For instance, after the sudden death of a young relative, an older people widow living alone may be accused of witchcraft, particularly in contexts where vulnerable individuals are socially marginalized. Such accusations often reveal underlying tensions surrounding inheritance, jealousy, or social insecurity rather than concrete evidence of wrongdoing.

Kwame Bediako (1995) ^[2] argues that African Christianity must engage with these cultural realities without compromising the gospel. While witchcraft beliefs are culturally significant, they can lead to destructive consequences, including stigmatization, false accusations, and violence against alleged witches. In some regions, community members or self-styled prophets label children as witches or have abandoned or abused them. This creates an ethical dilemma for pastors: how to respect the lived experiences of congregants while resisting interpretations that perpetuate fear, injustice, or harm.

The challenge for ministers lies in balancing cultural sensitivity with theological fidelity. Ethical pastoral practice requires critical engagement rather than uncritical acceptance of witchcraft narratives. This means affirming the existential fears of congregants while redirecting them toward Christ's victory over evil. For example, if a church member believes that recurring nightmares are evidence of a spiritual attack, a pastor may pray with the individual while also encouraging counseling, medical evaluation, or family mediation where necessary. This approach recognizes both spiritual concerns

and human realities without reinforcing superstition. Pastors can help communities move from fear-driven responses to faith-centered resilience by doing so, ensuring that the ministry promotes human dignity and gospel integrity.

5. Ministerial ethics in confronting witchcraft

When addressing witchcraft, pastors face significant ethical challenges, particularly in contexts where fear and superstition are deeply embedded in cultural life. Ethical ministry requires a careful balance between biblical fidelity, pastoral responsibility, and cultural sensitivity.

Integrity

Integrity demands that pastors in deliverance ministry avoid sensationalism, exaggerated claims, or manipulative practices. Overstating the presence of witchcraft or dramatizing spiritual warfare can distort the gospel and exploit the fears of congregants. For example, some ministers publicly announce that "witches are present in the church" without evidence, which creates panic and suspicion among members. Instead, ethical ministry requires honesty, humility, and careful discernment. Ministers must ensure that their teaching reflects Christ's authority rather than personal ambition or spectacle.

Accountability

Ministry practices must remain aligned with Scripture and subject to church oversight. Deliverance ministries that operate independently or without theological scrutiny are at risk of drifting into abuse or doctrinal error. A practical example is when a pastor conducts private deliverance sessions without accountability, leading to manipulation or financial exploitation. Therefore, ethical leadership requires transparent structures, involvement of church elders, and adherence to denominational or theological guidelines.

Transparency

Transparency involves clear communication regarding the limits of pastoral authority and spiritual care. Pastors must avoid presenting themselves as possessing extraordinary powers or secret knowledge that can foster dependency and manipulation. For instance, some leaders claim to possess unique powers to identify witches within families, causing division and fear. Instead, ethical ministry should emphasize reliance on Christ and the Holy Spirit, clarifying that pastors are servants and guides rather than controllers of people's lives.

Respect for the law and human dignity

Respect for law and human dignity prohibits harmful practices such as coercion, public shaming, and exploitation. Accusations of witchcraft can lead to stigma, violence, and social exclusion, making it imperative that pastors reject practices that dehumanize individuals. For example, forcing accused persons to confess or undergo humiliating rituals violates both Christian ethics and human rights. In some African communities, alleged witches, especially women and children, have been physically assaulted or expelled from their homes. Instead, ethical ministry must uphold justice, compassion, and the inherent worth of every person.

Unethical practices, such as monetizing deliverance, reinforcing fear, or exploiting vulnerable believers, undermine both the gospel and pastoral credibility. Instead, ethical ministry must guide congregants toward faith in Christ, encouraging them to rely on His victory rather than ritualized interventions.

6. Fear and Superstition in Christian communications

Fear and superstition are the central drivers of witchcraft beliefs. Fear of curses, illness, or spiritual attack often leads individuals to seek deliverance ministries. However, superstition can distort the Christian faith by attributing power to rituals rather than to Christ. For example, some believers may refuse medical treatment because they assume every sickness is caused by witchcraft, while others rely excessively on “anointed water,” bracelets, or oils for protection.

Pastors must address these dynamics through the following:

- **Biblical teaching** on the authority of Christ. For instance, sermons on passages such as Colossians 2:15 can reassure believers that Christ has the ultimate authority over evil powers.
- **Pastoral counseling** that addresses emotional and psychological needs. A pastor counseling a grieving widow who fears a spiritual attack may help her process grief while offering prayer and emotional support.
- **Distinguishing spiritual concerns** from social or psychological issues. For example, without proper care and assessment, symptoms of depression or trauma should not automatically be interpreted as demonic possession.

Failure to ethically address fear can lead to spiritual manipulation and exploitation. Some pastors may exploit vulnerable people by demanding repeated payments for deliverance sessions or by convincing members that they are under constant spiritual attack. Therefore, ethical pastoral leadership requires replacing fear with faith and superstition with theological clarity.

7. Ethical guidelines for delivery ministries

Ethically responsible deliverance ministries should adhere to the following principles:

- a) Biblical grounding:** Practices must align with Scripture and Christ-centered theology. For example, deliverance prayers should focus on Christ’s authority rather than mystical rituals or secret formulas.
- b) Holistic care:** Ministry should address spiritual, psychological, and social dimensions. A church that assists someone believed to be spiritually oppressed may also provide counseling, medical referrals, and family support.
- c) Non-exploitation:** Ministers must avoid financial, emotional, or spiritual manipulation. Charging excessive fees for deliverance sessions or promises guaranteed miracles is unethical and exploitative.
- d) Accountability:** Deliverance ministries should operate under church leadership and oversight. For example, counseling sessions may involve trained pastoral teams rather than isolated individuals acting independently.

- e) Human dignity:** Ministries must reject stigmatization and harmful accusations. Children, widows, or vulnerable individuals should never be labeled as witches or publicly humiliated.

These guidelines ensure that DM reflects compassion, integrity, and theological soundness.

8. Challenges and Theological debate

Scholarly debates on witchcraft within African Christianity remain deeply contested, particularly regarding whether witchcraft should be understood as an objective spiritual reality or as a symbolic cultural construct. Anthropological scholars such as Peter Geschiere (1997) ^[5] argue that witchcraft functions primarily as a social and cultural mechanism for explaining misfortune, inequality, and relational tensions. In contrast, many African theologians, including John Mbiti (1990) ^[10], acknowledge that African worldviews often treat spiritual causality as a lived and experiential reality. This divergence highlights the fundamental tension between empirical interpretation and theological affirmation.

This tension is further reflected in differing approaches to deliverance ministry within contemporary Christian discourse. Some scholars affirm the theological legitimacy of deliverance practices as a continuation of biblical models of spiritual warfare, while others caution against their excesses and abuse potential. For instance, in some Pentecostal churches, all personal problems ranging from unemployment to marital conflict may be attributed to demonic activity, resulting in repeated deliverance rituals rather than practical intervention or counseling. Recent scholarship indicates that DM remains both influential and controversial, particularly in African Pentecostal contexts, where it is often associated with commercialization, emotional manipulation, and the reinforcement of fear-based belief systems (Kgatlé, 2022, 2025) ^[7, 8].

The pastoral need to respond to congregants’ lived experiences without uncritically validating harmful or unbiblical interpretations is a major challenge. On the one hand, dismissing as mere witchcraft beliefs superstition risks alienating believers whose experiences are shaped by deeply embedded cultural frameworks. For example, a pastor who mocks congregants’ fears of spiritual attack may unintentionally distance vulnerable believers from the church community. Uncritical acceptance of such beliefs can also perpetuate fear, stigmatization, and violence against individuals accused of witchcraft. As Kwame Bediako (1995) ^[2] suggests, African theology must engage cultural realities critically rather than uncritically assimilating them into Christian practice.

Furthermore, the rapid growth of Pentecostal and charismatic movements has intensified these debates, particularly regarding the authority and practice of deliverance ministries. While these movements often emphasize spiritual power and experiential faith, they may also create environments where sensationalism overshadows discernment. For example, viral social media videos showing dramatic exorcisms may attract public attention while also encouraging performance-centered

ministry rather than genuine pastoral care. This raises important ethical questions about pastoral authority, accountability, and the potential exploitation of vulnerable individuals seeking solutions to personal and social challenges. Extreme positions either sensationalizing witchcraft as an omnipresent threat or dismissing it entirely as superstition are both theologically and pastorally inadequate. Sensationalism risks elevating the power of evil in ways that undermine Christ's sufficiency, while outright dismissal fails to address many believers' existential fears and cultural realities. Therefore, ethical ministry requires a balanced and discerning approach that acknowledges the complexity of the issue while remaining firmly grounded in biblical truth.

Such an approach must prioritize the centrality of Christ's victory over evil (Colossians 2:15), ensuring that pastoral responses do not inadvertently reinforce fear or dependency on ritualized practices. It must also emphasize pastoral care that integrates theological teaching with psychological and social awareness, recognizing that many experiences attributed to witchcraft may also have natural or relational explanations. For example, without careful pastoral and professional evaluation, family conflicts, mental health struggles, or economic hardships should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of spiritual attacks. Ultimately, the ongoing theological debate underscores the need of ministerial ethics as a guiding framework. Pastors are called not only to interpret spiritual realities but also to safeguard their congregations' well-being. This requires discernment, humility, and a commitment to truth that resists both cultural pressure and theological distortion. Ministers can offer a form of pastoral leadership that is both contextually relevant and faithfully rooted in the gospel by navigating these tensions responsibly.

9. Conclusion

This study has shown that uncritical engagement with witchcraft narratives in African Christian ministry risks reinforcing fear, enabling exploitation, and undermining the sufficiency of Christ's redemptive work. While Scripture affirms the reality of spiritual conflict, pastoral ethics demand discernment, accountability, and cultural sensitivity. When detached from biblical grounding and human dignity, deliverance ministries can perpetuate harm rather than healing. Therefore, ethical pastoral practice must fear without legitimizing superstition, replacing manipulation with Christ-centered care and theological clarity.

10. Future directions

Future research should explore practical models of pastoral training that integrate biblical theology with psychological and anthropological insights to equip ministers to respond to fears related to witchcraft without exploitation. Comparative studies across African regions could highlight diverse cultural engagements with witchcraft and inform context-specific pastoral frameworks. Additionally, dialogue between theologians, anthropologists, and practitioners can foster interdisciplinary approaches that safeguard human dignity while affirming the transformative power of the gospel. Greater

emphasis on community education, accountability structures, and holistic pastoral care is essential for sustainable ministry in contexts shaped by fear and superstition.

11. Final thought

Ultimately, the ethical challenge of witchcraft in African Christianity is not merely about confronting superstition but also about safeguarding the integrity of the gospel and the dignity of believers. Ministers are called to embody Christ's victory over evil, guiding congregations away from fear-driven practices toward faith, truth, and freedom. By rooting pastoral care in biblical fidelity and ethical responsibility, the church can offer a culturally relevant and theologically sound witness that confronts fear with hope and superstition with the liberating power of Christ.

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