The Prosperity Gospel: A Critique of the Way the Bible is Used

by Femi Adeleye

Introduction

The 'prosperity gospel' which is also variously referred to as the 'health and wealth gospel', 'Name it, claim it gospel', or 'Gospel of greed' is one of the fastest growing emphasis within the contemporary Church. Initially prominent in Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches, it has now spread across various denominations and Church traditions. The gospel focuses primarily on material possessions, physical well-being and success in this life: which mostly includes abundant financial resources, good health, clothes, housing, cars, promotion at work, success in business as well as other endeavours of life. This gospel asserts that believers have the right to the blessings of health and wealth and that they can obtain these blessings through positive confessions of faith and the of 'sowing of seeds' through the faithful payments of tithes and offerings. The extent of material acquisition and well-being is often equated with God's approval. Although the Bible affirms that God cares enough to bless his people and provide for their needs- and although there are legitimate ways to work for such needs to be met- this gospel often makes the pursuit of material things and physical well-being ends in themselves. Scripture is always applied and sometimes mis-interpreted or manipulated to promote the main emphasis of the 'prosperity gospel'.

1. Some Early Proponents of the Emphasis:

Before getting into the hermeneutics of the 'gospel' it helps to examine some of those who promoted its major emphasis. The roots of the prosperity gospel is easily be traced back to the United States. There is no doubt that many positive things have originated from the United States of America including rich Christian heritage dating back to the 18th Century Revivals and the 20th Century Evangelical tradition. Nevertheless it is largely American televangelists that have given prominence to the pursuit of materialism and upward mobility through the 'prosperity gospel.' Many Americans will agree with that this gospel is nothing but the good old American Dream re-clothed in Biblical garments. According to Don McConnell, 'the doctrine of prosperity is a gross example of the church's cultural accommodation to the worldly values of American materialism.' Warren Wiersbe identifies the 'success gospel' as one that is perfectly suited to American society that 'worships health, wealth and happiness.' According to Gordon Fee,
called ‘wealth and health’ gospel – although it has a very little of the character of the gospel in it. In its more brazen forms...it simply says, “Serve God and get rich”...in its more respectable – but pernicious-forms it builds fifteen million-dollar crystal Cathedrals to the glory of affluent suburban Christianity.  

In his book, *Defeating the Dragons of the World*, Stephen D. Eyre rightly identifies this cultural trend that has invaded the church as the ‘dragon of materialism.’ Concerning its effects Eyre writes,

> The Dragon of Materialism leads us to become pre-occupied with the material side of life. All our time, energy and thoughts are focussed in the physical aspects of life. We became practical materialists. We know that there is more to life, but the way we live shows that we have adopted the creed of the Dragon of materialism, “Matter is all that matters.”

Whereas the average American, in all fairness, earns his prosperity through the sweat of hard work- with the exception of those who hit the lottery jackpot, the televangelists want instant wealth through the manipulation of other people. The prosperity gospel emerging out of its cultural context and empowered by the medium of television should not be seen as anything less than materialism that has become a dragon and idol that has enslaved its makers. Jim Bakker, founder of PTL ministry and Heritage USA whose empire collapsed in 1987 but has since repented, implied as much in an interview with *Charisma*. He admitted that PTL had become a tower of Babel. Furthermore, according to him, ‘I allowed the PTL ministry to grow in such a way that the buildings at Heritage USA became almost more important than the message of Jesus Christ. My vision was so important that I worked day and night to keep this monster alive.” From these roots, the prosperity has toady spread to virtually all parts of the world.

Among the prominent Americans whose prosperity gospel has influenced the church in Africa are Oral Roberts and his son Richard Roberts with their ‘seed-faith’ gospel. Then we have Kenneth and Gloria Copeland with their ‘hundredfold return’ heresy; John Avanzini who markets a super-rich Jesus as well as Frederick Price claims the reason he rides in a Rolls Royce is because he is following in Jesus’ steps. Then there are Morris Cerullo and Robert Tilton. They are mostly of the televangelist tradition. Other faith teachers closely associated with their tradition are Kenneth Hagin, Fred Price and Paul Couch. And more recently, countless others.

**Oral Roberts and his son Richard Roberts: The ‘Seed-faith’ Wagon:**

The greatest influence on the emergence of the prosperity gospel in Nigeria is Oral Roberts whose teaching was embraced and taught of Bishop Benson Idahosa – the undisputed father of prosperity gospel in Nigeria. Oral Robert’s seed-faith principle is based on a thought that became crystal clear to him one day in the early fifties. The thought is ‘whatever you can conceive, and believe, you can do’ According to Roberts,
I could feel my inner man begin to stir. I could feel myself standing up on the inside. I became excited as I began to see the meaning of the idea that God brought into my mind, whatever you can conceive, and believe, you can do! I saw God had first conceived the world and man. I saw He had believed. And what faith it was! God had believed in man enough to create him with the power to choose good and evil, to live positively or negatively, to believe or to doubt, to respond to God or to denounce Him.

From this very beginning, Roberts missed at least 2 things. First, he failed to see that he was not God as to conceive ‘whatever’. Secondly, Biblical faith is not about ‘conceiving whatever’; it is confidence in God. Yet it was that thought that convinced Roberts that ‘everything God does starts with a seed planted’. So he become convinced that ‘Only what you give can God multiply back. If you give nothing, and even if God were to multiply it, it would still be nothing’. Our tithes or offerings to God are therefore SEED-FAITH. Out of this, Oral Roberts built his doctrine of seed-faith, backing it with ‘While the earth remaineth, seed time and harvest and cold and heat, and summer and winter and day and night shall not cease’ (Gen. 8:22). We are to receive back from God only as much as we sown as seeds. Seed-faith is seed giving. To Roberts, our seed giving is multiplied and given back to us so that we have "meat" in our houses – or more than enough for our personal needs. From this, Oral Roberts developed his “Expect a Miracle” principle, which stresses that through seed-giving, all insurmountable problems, can be solved. God essentially becomes an insurance agent to whom one invests with expectations of returns.

It is in this way that Oral Roberts used the medium of the radio and T.V. to attract people to give to his ministry. Through his “Expect a Miracle” programme, Oral Roberts marketed his Seed-faith principle, marketed special handkerchiefs as ‘prayer cloths’ as well as ‘point of contact’ for miracle. Those in need of them of course have to send a donation. According to Peter Elvy in *Buying Time*, Oral Roberts also published a special edition of the Bible with a 259-page commentary. ‘It is not for sale. ‘God impressed me to send it as a gift to everyone who makes a seed-faith commitment of $120 for the ongoing work at the city of Faith Medical and Research Centre where medicine and prayer are combined for the healing of millions’

In Her book, *Ashes to God*, Patti Roberts likened her former father-in-law's tactics to Johann Tetzel's practice of selling indulgences. Unlike Tetzel who offered salvation in exchange for money, Oral Roberts appealed to people's needs through his seed-faith principle.

I happen to be resident in the United States at the peak of the televangelist scandals in the 1980s. In the states in Jan 1987, Oral Roberts told his followers that if he did not raise a total of 8 million dollars by March, God was going to take his life by the first of April. Both Christian and secular media carried this. He was eventually rescued from being taken home by God by a gambler. Oral Roberts is so carried away by his method of fund raising that he at times resort to threats. At a conference in 1992, Roberts was quoted to have uttered these words...
The Problem with Seed-faith Theology:

Even though Oral Roberts and others who follow his seed-faith doctrine will have us believe that God is obligated to repay a multiplied version of one's "investment", they have taken several things in the Bible for granted. There were several people in the Bible that God blessed and provided for, not because of any seed-faith giving they have offered to Him. What seed-faith did Abraham or Solomon offer God? God had certainly blessed Abraham and made him prosperous before God asked him to sacrifice Isaac. Solomon neither gave nor asked God for material wealth before God gave richer beyond measure.

The seed-faith bandwagon has failed to see that our giving to God is first and foremost an out of worship. We worship Him by offering our lives and resources to him as gifts with no strings attached. God is not an insurance agent who needs our seed-faith investments.

Furthermore Oral Roberts's use of Galatians 6:7 as basis for his seed-faith doctrine is completely out of context. He said, "You are a product of seed so am I. Even Jesus is called the seed of David. Jesus talked about an eternal law. "Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap (Galatians 6:7) You sow a seed, you reap a harvest. You give as seed, you receive it back multiplied many times".

First it was not Jesus giving an eternal law of giving. Nor does Paul's discussion on sowing and reaping here have anything to do with giving. Oral Robert should have read the very next verse to appreciate what Paul was talking about. It clearly says, "The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that sinful nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the spirit, from the spirit will reap eternal life" (Galatians 6:8)

Gloria and Kenneth Copeland: The 'Hundredfold Return' Teaching:

Outdoing Oral Roberts's seed-faith is the 'hundredfold' return heresy. This heresy is a distortion of Christ's promise to provide a 'hundredfold' return to those who leave behind everything for the kingdom of God. The leading exponents of this are Gloria and Kenneth Copeland. In her book, "God's will is Prosperity", Gloria Copeland writes, 

You give $1 for the Gospel's sake and $100 belongs to you; give $10 and receive $1,000; give $1,000 and receive $100,000. I know that you can multiply, but I want you to see in black and white how tremendous the hundredfold return is...Give one house and receive hundred houses or one house worth one hundred times as much. Give one airplane and receive one hundred times the value of the airplanes. Give one car and the return would furnish you with a lifetime of cars. In short, Mark 10:30 is a good deal.
Her husband, Kenneth Copeland believes in a spiritual law of prosperity. This law is universal and works for whoever understands it. Such a person must have faith in it, and applies it. It is a law set in motion by positive mental attitude and positive confession. The law of prosperity is related to Copeland’s “force of faith” about which he has also written a book, *Force of Faith*. To him, “it is this force of faith, which makes the laws of the spirit word function.” 17 It is this force of faith that makes Copeland believe that one can have anything he confesses. According to him

You can have what you say! In fact, what you are saying is exactly what you are getting now. If you are living in poverty and lack and want, change what you are saying. It will change what you have.... Discipline your vocabulary. Discipline everything you do, everything you say, and everything you think to agree with what God says does, what God says, and what God thinks. God will be obligated to meet your needs because of His Word.... If you stand firmly on this, your needs will be met. 18

The Copelands’ one hundred fold heresy is based on their literal interpretation of Mark 10:29-30; “I tell you the truth,” Jesus replied, “no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields- and with them, persecutions) and in the age to com, eternal life.” Yet they ignore the mention of persecutions and the warning in Mark 10:25, (“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God”) which cannot be interpreted in the same literal way. Like many other prosperity teachers, they build doctrines in texts taken out of context and manipulate them to suit their ends.

Writing about material prosperity, Gloria Copeland says,

Prosperity is yours! It is not something you have to strive to work toward. You have a Title deed to prosperity. Jesus bought and paid for your prosperity just like He bought and paid for your healing and your salvation. 19

John Avanzini and Morris Cerullo:

Building on the Copeland’s hundredfold heresy are John Avanzini and Morris Cerullo. In his book, *Christianity in Crises*, Hank Hanegraff writes of how the partnership between Cerullo and Avanzini launched them into the Hundred-fold heresy. According to him,

Cerullo summoned Avanzini to Aba, Nigeria. There in a hotel room, God supposedly appeared to Avanzini and said, “I’m gonna have signs and wonders follow your ministry”. After giving Avanzini a wordy discourse on fundraising techniques, God instructed him to take an offering for Cerullo. As God allegedly put it, “I want you to lay hands on that offering, and I want you to speak hundred
As it has happened so many times, the gullible Nigerian audience gave generously in expectation of hundred fold returns in cash, cars, houses etc. The giving got so much that Cerullo himself had to stop people from giving more. Cerullo and Avanzini, went back home much richer than they were before embarking on their trip.

Avanzini in his interpretation of Luke 9:58 claimed that when Jesus said ‘Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the son of man has no where to lay his head, what he really meant was “Foxes have holes in Samaria, birds of the air have nests in Samaria, but I don’t have any place to stay tonight in Samaria.” According to Avanzini “In those days there wasn’t a holiday inn on every corner. So Jesus was forced to go back home to his nice, big house in Jerusalem”.  

In this way, many other prosperity teachers have advanced their own upward mobility. The likes of Robert Tilton, Marilyn Hickey and others have made their riches but we shall not examine them at this point.

Both Don McConnell and Hank Hanegraaff has traced the roots of many of these prosperity and faith teachers to the metaphysical cults. According to McConnell,

The metaphysical cults, particularly New Thought and the Unity School of Christianity, were the first to propagate the idea that God will make rich all those who know “the laws of prosperity” which govern the universe. Through Kenyon, this cultic belief entered the faith movement and was expanded by Kenneth Hagin and the Faith teachers to a degree which even he himself would never have approved.

Ralph Waldo Trine, who was an associate of E.W. Kenyon, advocated the occult practice of visualisation as a means to prosperity. According to him,

Suggest prosperity to yourself. See yourself in a prosperous condition. Affirm that you will before long be in prosperous condition. Affirm it calmly and quietly but strongly and confidently. Believe it, believe it absolutely. Expect it – keep it continually watered with expectation. You thus make yourself a magnet to attract the things that you desire.
Hank Hanegraaff also says Kenyon’s life and ministry were ‘enormously influenced by such cults as Science of Mind, the Unity school of Christianity, Christian Science, and New Thought metaphysics.’ This is the background to the prosperity gospel, which has become so popular in many other parts of the world.

An African Case Study- David Oyedepo:

A leading promoter of the prosperity gospel is David O. Oyedepo. He has been a very good disciple of Oral Roberts, John Avanzini and Benson Idahosa. Combining all he has learnt from them with his own creativity, his Winners Chapel Enterprise is expanding beyond Nigeria to other parts of Africa. By his own admission he believes in “sweat-less success” and teaches his followers that “the knowledge and the practice of the truth make you a sweat-less winner.” His essential philosophy is that life is meant to be a smooth cruise, free of all struggles and full material wealth. “Not all winners sweat to win. Sweating is a curse. It symbolises struggles”. Oyedepo believes poverty is a curse and self-made. He uses Malachi 3:6-9 to establish this. According to him, ‘it comes largely as a result of a wilful act of disobedience to the law of abundance by the believers.’

Are we therefore to assume that all those who live in abject poverty in various parts of Africa are reaping the rewards of their wilful disobedience? Oyedepo says God has given him the mission to eradicate it. He believes his primary call and mission is to make people rich. According to him, God gave him the covenant hammer to break all chains of poverty “I took hold of it and declared ‘I can never be poor!’ That was not an empty confession, I knew what I was saying, and what had been delivered to me. It has never disappointed me once! Friend, it is time to begin to hunger and thirst for this same hammer to be delivered to you.”

I remember very clearly, in 1987, I was in the United States of America, attending a meeting when the Lord said to me, “Get down home quick and make my people rich”. They were very strong, compelling and powerful words. So I abandoned everything I was doing, I cancelled all engagements, and rushed down home immediately.

It may not be too clear how many people Oyedepo has made rich but there is no doubt he himself has become extremely rich. Oyedepo is an Architect turned preacher. He started his Winners Chapel with Living Faith Ministries in Kaduna and then moved to Lagos where his World Mission Centre was built for at least 400 million Naira ($5million US). His first Church building accommodated at least 8,000 per session. He used to run three major services on Sundays, which attracts at least 30,000 people. Today he has built the largest church in Africa (and probably in the world) that seats over 50,000 people at once. He has a multimillion Naira press called Dominion Publishing House. In addition to his fleet of expensive cars has a small jet, which he said he bought for the purpose of evangelism. Most of these were bought from regular tithes and offerings, which are strictly collected from his worshippers. They are made to believe that the more you give, the more God offers you in return.

Oyedepo believes in talking big about money and wealth. He has written at least 40 books and most of them are on material prosperity and good health. They include Covenant Wealth, Breaking Financial Hardship, Success Buttons, Born to Win, The Miracle Seed, Keys to...
Divine Health, Anointing for breakthrough and the Mystery of the Anointing Oil. Most of these encourage his followers on how to prosper materially and physically. In Breaking Financial Hardship he says,

Friend there is no place your mouth cannot take you to. When you talk mediocrity it will become your garment and you talk lack you will have it until you become lack yourself...If you want to have a living financial experience, speak life to your finances.  

Oyedepo has fully embraced Oral Roberts’ Seed-faith concept. Giving is investment in one's own future. He says tithing is divine insurance. “Tithing is your insurance cover against destruction in whatever form.” He assures his followers that if they do not pay their tithes, devouring rats would come on a mission of harassing them. ‘Frequent car breakdowns, losses, sickness and so on are all manifestations of the devourer.’

For Oyedepo, money is the answer to all things. It is a defence against being against being arrested for preaching the gospel. He says, “some preachers in Nigeria have been arrested over and over again for preaching in some places. But, some others have gone to preach in the same place and they gave them police security. Why? One has defence, while the other hasn’t. money answers all things. That is why God has designed wealth for his people so He can establish them in dominion.”

Oyedepo does not hide the sources of his convictions. In his books he frequently refers to the ‘successes’ and the teachings of his heroes. Apart from Oral Robert, he mentions Kenneth Copeland who has an airstrip where his jet lands every morning and has given out three jets. John Avanzini is also his hero. There is no doubt that with his combination of positive thinking and confession, he aspires to be as wealth as His American heroes are!

Like Avanzini, Oyedepo also markets a rich Jesus. His Jesus “has so much that He needed a treasure to keep His money. He ate whatever He wanted and whenever He desired it. He has in a place that commanded envy because John’s disciples, who went to see where he lived, never returned to their Master.” Beyond this, the sale of ‘olive oil’ which he believes is an anointed key to wealth and health, as well as “holy mantels” etc. are part of the ministry of the Winners Chapel.

What Oyedepo and several others like him have done is shift the focus of their followers from the true gospel. They have made the pursuit of health and wealth an end in itself and shifted from the true mission of Jesus Christ. With their marketing of the gospel as the short cut to the good things of life, it is not strange at all that their methods have mass appeal, especially in African countries with failing economies. It was in 1987 that, with the declining economy in Kenya, Winners Chapel gained ground in Nairobi. They have had similar growth in Tanzania and Uganda. Zimbabwe is not yet an open door because of its stable economy. At least until recently. With the present decline of the economy, the ground is fertile for Winners Chapel exploits.

**Deification of Objects:**
For instance, it is common for members of Living Faith (Winners Chapel) to deify objects: Handkerchiefs, the Bishop's mantles and the 'anointing oil' are believed to possess spiritual powers in themselves. The leader, David Oyedepo in one of his publications alleges that:

The anointing oil is not a chemical product. It is the Spirit of God mysteriously put in a bottle, mysteriously designed to communicate the power of God bodily. It is the power of God in your hand, in the person of the Holy Spirit, to humiliate Satan. It is the power of God placed in a tangible form in the hand of man, to make an open show of the devil.  

Many followers of Oyedepo believe this and see the oil (usually olive oil) as the solution to their problems. Believing that the anointing oil is powerful in itself many followers use it as a protective devise. For instance many anoint their television sets, cars and the four corners of their homes with it for protection against thieves. This teaching has spread rapidly from Nigeria to Sierra-Leone, Uganda and other parts of Africa. In 1996, I was in Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania, and was invited by some friends to listen to some strange doctrines being taught by some visiting Nigerians. I went into this fully packed Theatre at lunch hour and watched as the “men of God “ taught secrets of success and promotion, as well as victory from poverty and diseases, all based on the power of the anointing oil. One of the speakers suggested that one could draft his promotion letter, anoint it with oil, proclaim the word of faith and sneak the letter unto the boss's desk and the promotion is sure to come through.

Closely related to this is the belief that when black currant is put into water and prayed over by the bishop, it becomes the blood of Jesus.  This can be placed at strategic points in a house, particularly at doorposts and windows to act as protection over demonic attacks.  It is also used to deliver from oppression, poverty, sickness and so on.

White handkerchiefs, at times referred to as mantles that have been prayed over by the bishop are believed to be so powerful that they can meet all their needs.  Some members hang them on the entrance of their offices or shops to attract customers. Some on their door post to drive away demons.

2. The Hermeneutics of the ‘Prosperity Gospel’:

In various parts of the world the central part of the one or two hour worship service sued to be the proclamation of the Word. That is the moment for the preaching or the sermon in all solemnity. Today in many churches the centre piece is the ‘offering time’ and not a few churches have skilled and designated people to be masters of this significant ceremony. The popular saying is ‘Offering time is blessing time’ not least because for many, it is investment time. It is often regarded as sowing time which looks forward to significant returns. The Word itself has been severally twisted to back the centrality of offering time and in some churches there is a mini sermon to ‘urge’ the congregation to give. One would not worry so much if this took place just once during the service. However quite often there can be as many as five or six different collections taken in a single service. One cannot but feel a sense of the flock being fleeced bare.

I once asked my nephew why he had not gone to church on a Sunday. He answered by telling
me that, in response to his pastor's preaching, he had donated his Volkswagen car to his church, expecting God to replace it with a Mercedes Benz car. After some months when his miracle car did not materialise he thought God had disappointed him. He stopped going to Church. I told him that God had not disappointed him. Instead, he had been misled. My nephew had been attending a 'prosperity' preaching Church and had been 'arrested' by the offering time.

Scriptural Twisting:

From this writer's observation the most popular verse used in motivating or mobilizing the congregation to give is Luke 6:38, which says, "Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you." This verse is quoted with relish and often backed by a mini-sermon on the benefits of giving.

The verse is however often quoted out of context. Luke 6:38 is found in the context of Jesus' teaching on love and mercy and how we relate to and treat others. The full paragraph begins in v. 37 with "Judge not, and you shall not be judged: condemn not, and you shall not be condemned: forgive, and you shall be forgiven." Following in God's example, love and mercy should produce a hesitation in judging others, as believers realise that God would treat them in the way they have treated others. The passage is therefore first and foremost about relationships, not treating others or judging them in the way we do not want to be judged for in this regard, "with the same measure that we use, it will be measured back to us"

The text is neither about giving to God financially nor expecting returns for what we give. It has more to do with loving and forgiving as well as being of service without expecting anything in return. This has however been twisted to indicate that God will return in double or hundred-fold whatever one gives in offerings. It is common for several collections to be taken in a single service. Songs like "I am a millionaire", and "let the poor say I am rich" became popular in anticipation of God's reward with material blessings. Positive confession was encouraged for good health, wealth and other blessings.

Very few of those who use this passage as a basis for collecting offerings refer to the unusually strong words of the Lord Jesus on wealth in the same chapter. For example in Luke 6: 24-25 Jesus says "But woe unto you that are rich! For you have received your consolation. Woe unto you that are full! For you shall hunger. Woe unto you that laugh now! For you shall mourn and weep". Matthew 7:1-5 actually helps to throw more light on the Luke 6:36-39 text. Both passages focus on human relationships.

Some also use 3 John 2, which says "I pray that you may prosper in all things." as a mandate for the prosperity gospel. However, what does the Apostle means by prosperity here? A careful study of the meaning of this text as intended by the writer would reveal that the word used for prosper in English comes from the Greek word euodoo, which means "good road, route or journey". Hence what the writer actual says is "I want you to have a good and healthy lifelong journey". The words do not necessarily refer to riches or wealth. Why would John, a witness of the life of Christ say, 'above everything else, I want you to be rich or wealthy?'

The reference to abundant life in John 10:10 is also often used as a prop. However the term used for life here is zoe, a word indicating "life in the spirit and soul" rather than bios, which is used to refer to physical, material life. When read as intended, Jesus is saying "I want you to have an abundant life in spirit"; and not riches, cars, houses, designer wears etc. as is often
emphasised in the prosperity gospel preaching.

The hermeneutics of this gospel raises more questions than it answers. For instance, does it affirm and point people to the cross? Is the lifestyle of those who benefit from the gospel consistent with the ethos of the cross of Christ?

One may ask if there is anything wrong with material prosperity. Not necessarily. Very often material prosperity is related to physical and emotional well-being and this is largely God's will for most people. In the Old Testament, God blessed Abraham and several others and made them materially prosperous. God also gives the ability to produce wealth: Dt. 7:16-18.

> “He gave you manna to eat in the desert, something your fathers had never known, to humble and to test you so that in the end it might go well with you. 17 You may say to yourself, “My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.” 18 But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your forefathers, as it is today.”

We also serve a God who desires and promises to supply all our needs according to His riches. The challenge however is that many churches have not adequately addressed how we are to acquire material prosperity and to what extent. One would suggest that there are various approaches, which may include through hard work, “He that does not work should not eat...” through advance planning which include saving the rewards of hard work through investments and other good money growing options. Other ways may include short cuts such as stealing, gambling and speculating, or begging, borrowing. The church ought to be where adequate teaching is provided on matters like these. However this is not often the case as many churches only work hard at providing shortcuts like the seed faith principle, hundred-fold blessing, ‘pressed down, shaken together’ and the idea of ‘sweatless victory’, or ‘sweatless success’.

3. Some Shortcomings of the ‘Prosperity Gospel’:

3.1. Escape from Reality:

First, it offers an unhealthy escape from Reality. The quest for deliverance from present challenges has brought about almost a denial of reality. For instance when one has a headache it is considered unspiritual to say ‘I have a headache.’ It is considered more spiritual to deny that one has a headache and believe that one is healed. Rather than admit that one has a neck pain, it is considered better to “confess” that “I am strong” (“Let the weak say I am strong”). To admit otherwise is considered unspiritual. All things related to discomfort, pain, suffering, poverty and death are considered to be of the devil and therefore to be rejected. *The underlying theology is that Christians must not suffer,* or misreading Romans 8:28 to mean, “Only good things happen to those that are in Christ Jesus.” A very popular song common in groups and Churches that have embraced this theology is:

> “Me I no go suffer, I no go beg for bread,
Sung lustily in services and meetings, it is to say that since God is my father and mother, I will never suffer or beg for bread. In the African context of realities of pain and suffering, this gospel is very attractive. There are other ways to deal with poverty and other inconveniences. The Living Faith or Winners Chapel has a monthly foot washing service when the bishop does the washing of the members' feet. It is believed that poverty and problems are washed away. They are also delivered from oppression. As they deep their feet into the water it is also believed that they put on iron feet that will enable them walk on their mountains and high places. They also walk into prosperity and find favour.

3.2. Misinterpretation of purpose of 'Giving':

Secondly, it deliberately fails to see that all forms of giving to God, be it tithes or offerings should be an out of worship. Instead it teaches that tithing or giving to God is an investment. It also motivates people to give with wrong motives. Essentially, the motive of giving to God for the primary purpose of expecting special returns from God. The man who gives to God appears to be the one in charge. His measure of investment is expected to dictate God's level of reward. It suggests that man have the initiative and God the response. This contradicts the whole understanding of our salvation and worship being God's initiative and God's response.

Furthermore, this gospel suggests that we must have our rewards or inheritance here and now in material form. Ultimately all that matters is the material prosperity here and now. The pursuit of this is contrary to Biblical faith and blurs our vision and understanding of God. Stephen Eyre says,

Materialism blunts a living faith” A vibrant sense of the presence of God becomes dead orthodoxy. The reality of the Christian life becomes a shadow. Our experience of life in Christ becomes hollow. Our knowledge of God becomes empty. It can't see it, taste it, smell it or measure it, then we doubt that it's real, therefore, we come to doubt that God is real.

3.3 A Misunderstanding of Jesus:

Thirdly, those who teach this gospel seem to have misunderstood Jesus and His mission. The tendency is to distort the mission of Jesus from primarily coming to save us from our sins to coming to make us rich. While some preach that Jesus has come both to save people from their sin and make them rich, it is rare to hear preaching on repentance or salvation from sin in 'prosperity gospel' circles. Could it be that they are ignorant of all that Jesus had to say about wealth and prosperity? Was Jesus really as rich materially as these teachers would have us believe?

While Jesus not a destitute, we know from scripture that he was not as materially prosperous
as the 'health and wealth' teachers make him out to be. His home situation was as modest as can be. We know his parents did not have the means to avoid his being born in an animal manger. We also know that when his parents, Joseph and Mary went to the temple to dedicate him, all they could offers as offering was a pair of doves instead of a lamb and dove as required by the law. 41

We are also aware that in his ministry, Jesus often depended on the resources of other people because he did not have his. He taught from a borrowed boat, rode into Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey, ate the Passover meal with his disciples in a borrowed room and was buried in a borrowed tomb. If Jesus were as materially wealthy as we are made to believe, where and how is this reflected in his life and ministry? One thing is certain. Jesus did not preach or teach a prosperity gospel. All that Jesus taught about earthly possession come as warnings to us. He taught very clearly "Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses" (Luke 12:15). 42 Unlike our modern day preachers, Jesus warned against the deceitfulness of riches (Matthew 13:22). He in fact refers to it an 'unrighteousness mammon' (Luke 16:9) As an end in itself money has the tendency to compete for our loyalty that belongs to God. It has the tendency to become an idol that rules our lives. This is why Jesus warns against relating to money as we relate to God. "No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon." (Luke 16:13). To the Pharisees who loved money, Jesus warned, "What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight" (Luke 16:15) The 'health and wealth' gospel does not appear to have taken the warnings of Jesus seriously.

3.4. Lack of a Theology of Suffering:

The 'prosperity gospel' has no theology or Biblical explanation for challenges related to pain or anything related to suffering. There is so much of this in the world and they and they extends to all the people. For reasons best known to him, God has chosen not to protect his servants from the normal difficulties and problems of life. There are several examples in scripture including heroes of faith like Joseph, Moses, David, Jeremiah, Peter, Paul and several others. From generation to generation people of God have suffered injustice, discrimination, troubles, illnesses etc., not because they lack faith but because God allows them to go through such experiences. The fact is that followers of Jesus are not exempt from the common problems and troubles of life. Becoming so obsessive in denying or avoiding them can in fact be a lack of trust in God's sovereignty and loving kindness.

3.5. Issues of Lifestyle:

The lifestyle of those who teach this gospel does not transparently reflect Biblical standards. One of the requirements for leaders and ministers is that they be "not greedy for money" See Titus 1:7 and 1 Peter 5:2. Although Jesus told his disciples that "the worker deserves his wages" (Luke 10:7) he did not encourage covetousness or exploitation of people. The lifestyle of prosperity teachers is in sharp contrast with the life of early disciples like the Apostle Paul who said, "I have coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. Yes, you yourselves know that these hands have provided for my necessities, and for those who were with me. I have shown you in every way, by labouring like this, that you must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said 'it is more blessed to give than to receive" (Act 20:33-35)

Even from the Old Testament, which is often used by prosperity teachers, we have much to learn from the testimonies of Godly leaders as regards material possessions and integrity.
Abraham was careful not to covet other people's riches for his own prosperity. At the end of his service, Samuel gave an account of his stewardship by declaring before all Israel “Behold here I am: witness against me before the Lord, and before his anointed: whose ox have I taken? or whose ass have I taken? Or whom have I defrauded? Whom have I oppressed? Or of whose hand have I received any bribe to blind mine eyes therewith? And I will restore it to you”. (1 Samuel 12:3)

The response of the people was “You have not cheated or oppressed us”… “You have not taken anything from anyone’s hand” (vs.4).

We know from scriptures that very few people can handle prosperity. We know from the records in the Bible that King Solomon who was so prosperous eventually drifted away from God. He became prosperous and forgot God's words and requirement for Kings. He ended marrying foreign wives and accumulating concubines- (Summed in his having 300 wives and 700 concubines). These and other factors turned his heart away from God unto foreign Gods. His spiritual decline is summed up in 1 Kings 11, part of which says in vs. 4-6:

For it was so, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned his heart after other gods; and his heart was not loyal to the LORD his God, as was the heart of his father David. For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and after Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites. Solomon did evil in the sight of the LORD, and did not fully follow the LORD, as did his father David.

Today, men are not too different. There are still many who act like the rich fools in scripture- who accumulate, accumulate and lose perspective on what life is all about. Jesus says 'a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of what he has…’ The pursuit of riches without limits is dangerous- in the process, friendships, relationships, families and homes have been sacrificed. We often talk of victims of poverty but we also have victims of prosperity

3.6. Is the 'Prosperity Gospel' good news for the poor?:

Do prosperity preaching Churches really remember the poor? How do we help the Church to remember the poor in a context in which many do not see the promises of 'men of God' to them fulfilled? Paul in writing to the Church in Galatia says,

James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews. All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.

In another letter to the Church at Colossae, Paul writes,

So put to death the sinful, earthly things lurking within you. Have nothing to do with sexual sin, impurity, lust, and shameful desires. Don't be greedy for the good things of
One suggests that greed is as much an affliction of the rich as it is of the poor. It takes people who have renounced the greed for the good things in life to really remember the needs of the poor. Are there things the church can do more to focus on the need of the poor? How many churches are really creating opportunities of vocational training or other means of helping the poor? There are other issues related to this.

While the prosperity gospel often wears the mask of advocacy for the poor, it is hardly good news when in most situations, it is the shepherds fleecing the flock. In response to diverse schemes of manipulation, the poor who sow the seed are not the ones that get richer. It is leaders and pastors who wear better suits, drive better cars and acquire bigger homes.

There is a deep sense of injustice and immorality to all these when one considers the severe plight of the poor in many contexts where they are very vulnerable. Some of those who keep sowing to the prosperity gospel can hardly afford regular meals or other basic essentials like shelter or school fees for children. Why should any follower of Jesus support a gospel that tends to align much more with celebrity culture in depriving the poor of the dignity and respect they deserve? Rather than appreciate their endurance of living often in subhuman conditions or working to redeem or improve their situation, some preachers connive with popular culture to dangle unrealistic shortcuts to prosperity. While advocacy for the poor and poverty alleviation has become a multi-billion dollar business, the poor in many contexts can hardly be said to be benefitting. This is not only an affront to the poor but to God as well.

4. How then should we respond to this ‘gospel’?

It is important to recognise and take seriously the fact that the prosperity gospel is primarily about money and that it contradicts both the life of Christ and the purpose for which He died on the Cross. The gospel elevates money to compete for a space in our lives that only God deserves. If the love of money is the root of all evil, the love of material property, mansions, and other accumulations in the dragnet of money must follow closely after. We are increasingly defined, not by who or what we are but by what we have or own. In very easy ways- more subtle that we often think- any of these can become idols that dim our view of God and diminish our passion for Him.

The French theologian, Jacques Ellul, in his book, *Money and Power*, argues that ‘money is power, a spirit, a would-be God, a rival master.’ Furthermore he distinguishes between money and wealth. For him ‘wealth consists of those good things of God's creation that are meant for our enjoyment. Money is the world's way of amassing those things, hoarding them, assuring that you can have more tomorrow, dividing people according to its arbitrary rules. Money does not merely tempt, it engulfs. It spins its web around people, forcing them into its service.’ Even if we don't agree with Jacques Ellul, his position is not too different from that of Jesus who summarily concludes, “You cannot worship God and mammon.”

There are few people today who can speak as authoritatively as Jim Bakker on the prosperity gospel. In an Interview with *Charisma*, shortly after his release from jail, Jim Bakker admitted that he had been building a 1980 style tower of Babel to make a name for himself. His tower of Babel was a multimillion-dollar business that then had a $30 million payroll and more than
2,200 employees. Bakker has since repented and apologised for the PTL scandal. Far from what he used to be, Bakker who has written a 647-page book titled *I Was Wrong* now teaches about sacrifice and the cost of Discipleship. In the interview with *Charisma*, Bakker says

> While I was in prison, the Lord showed me He wanted me to study the words of Christ in the Bible. So I began to write out in longhand every word that Christ spoke. I spent two years doing this. I wanted to know Christ and everything He said. And as I began to absorb the teachings of Christ, it changed my life. Sometimes I would be moved to study 16 hours a day.

After his years of study what did Bakker discover about Jesus concerning wealth?

> While I studied Jesus' words, I couldn't find anywhere in the Bible where He said anything good about money. And this started to prick my heart. Luke 6:24 says, "Woe to you who are rich, Jesus talked about the "deceitfulness of riches" in Mark 4:19. Jesus told us not to lay up treasures on earth in Matthew 6:24. In Luke 12:15, He said: "Watch out, be on your guard against all kinds of greed. A man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."

Secondly, I suggest that we need to take the plight of the poor seriously enough to reject this gospel and work at better ways of meeting their needs than offering false shortcuts. We all should be concerned enough to feels a sense of pain to see a part of the church drifting away from sound doctrine in this way. Instead of working to alleviate the plight of the poor, this part not only consents to their marginalisation but also manipulates scriptures to do so. In this way some have turned the sacred space of the pulpit into a shrine of mammon worship. It is the injustice and idolatry of greed that made our Lord use such strong words against the rich. And it is certainly when sacred territory was profaned by the same idolatry that we see the only record of the Lord expressing his anger physically in the temple.

Thirdly, it is worth taking seriously the truth from Uncle John Stott that "Life, in fact, is a pilgrimage from one moment of nakedness to another. So we should travel light and live simply."

Endnotes


4 Stephen D. Eyre, *Defeating the Dragons of the-World Resisting the Seduction of false values*
5 Jim Bakker in an Interview with Charisma, (February 1997) p.48.


8 Ibid., p.11.

9 Ibid., p.13.

10 Ibid., p.30.

11 Ibid., p.31.


13 Patti Roberts with Sherry Androns Ashes of Gold (Waco, Texas: WORD Books, Publisher, USA 1983).


15 Oral Roberts, Miracle of Seed-Faith, p. 66.


19 Gloria Copeland, God's Will is Prosperity, p. 46.

20 Hank Hanegraaff, Christianity In Crisis, p. 200.

21 Ibid., p. 188.


23 Ibid., p. 174.
24 Hank Hanegraaff, *Christianity In Crisis*, p. 32.


28 Ibid., p. 51.

29 Ibid., p. 131.


32 Ibid., p. 34.

33 Ibid., p. 107.


35 I was in church recently in Lagos (September 21, 2008) where there were six different collections for various purposes including freedom from fear.


38 I have observed this in Gabriel Oduyemi's Bethel Chapel in Lagos as well as in other Churches.


40 Stephen D. Eyre, *Defeating the Dragons of the-World Resisting the Seduction of false values*, p. 28.


42 KJV.

43 See Genesis 14: 22-23.
This is a paper presented by the author at the 2014 Lausanne Global Consultation on Prosperity Theology, Poverty, and the Gospel. You may find a video version of this paper in the Content Library. The views and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the personal viewpoints of Lausanne Movement leaders or networks. For the official Lausanne Statement from this consultation, please see ‘The Atibaia Statement on Prosperity Theology’.

Femi B. Adeleye is currently initiating the Institute for Christian Impact - an initiative to nurture a new generation of leaders to impact Africa with Kingdom values. He also serves as Associate Director (Africa) for Langham Preaching. Before this, for three years he served as the Director of Church Partnerships for World Vision International, focusing on enhancing World Vision's partnerships with churches around the world. He is the author of Preachers of a Different Gospel, Let No Man Despise Your Youth and Partnering with the Global Church co-authored with Nikki Toyama-Szeto.
Can We Offer a Better Theology? Banking on the Kingdom
C. Rosalee Velloso Ewell
03 Oct 2015

Giving for a Return in the Prosperity Gospel and the New Testament
David J. Downs
03 Oct 2015

A Biblical Ethical Assessment of Prosperity Teaching and the Blessing Movement
Vinay Samuel
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Prosperity Theology: A (Largely) Sociological Assessment
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Some critics have been even sharper and more piercing in their critiques than this. For example, commenting on the negative impact of the prosperity gospel on mentally ill people on Culture Watch, Stuart Mackay (2009) described the gospel as a “damaging and wicked teaching” that “makes my blood boil with anger”. This is the typical approach to the Bible that proponents of the Prosperity Gospel unilaterally take. This is consistent with their motto: If the Bible says it, I believe it. In fact sources have it that Roberts offered to return any donation that did not lead to an equivalent unexpected payment (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prosperity_theology). The prosperity teaching — or prosperity gospel — is an aberrant doctrine, largely promoted by the Word-Faith movement. It is also a scam. The prosperity gospel is a scam.

2) The Gospel of Health: Isaiah 53 is used to justify blanket coverage for the physical healing of every Christian who has enough faith. “...it is the plan of our Father God in His great love and His great mercy that no believer should ever be sick, that every believer should live his life full span down here on earth and that every believer should finally just fall asleep in Jesus” (Hagin, Seven Things You Should Know About Divine Healing, p. 21). Hagin also denies having a headache for forty-five years, labelling such as “simply symptoms rather than any indication of a headache” (In the Name