

# A Different Gospel: A Critique of the Prosperity Gospel

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People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs (1 Timothy 6:9-10).

In the passage that we have just read, Paul warns his young prodigy, Timothy, as he begins his ministry as a pastor of the dangers of an inordinate love for money. It is the root of all kinds of evil, Paul says. It will result in foolish and harmful desires. It will bring people to ruin and destruction. It will cause them to wander from their faith. It will pierce them with much grief. The Bible calls an inordinate love for money and material possessions *greed* and *covetousness*, and roundly condemns it. But what if human greed is given some form of religious, theological or spiritual legitimization? What if covetousness is disguised and portrayed instead as reward for obedience to God, or as an answer to the prayer of faith? What if the godless materialism that the Bible warns about is sanctioned and given respectability by the clever twisting of certain texts from Scripture itself? What if our sinful insatiability for material wealth is disguised in the language of faith and divine blessing? What if wealth and prosperity are said to be the *rights* of every believer in Christ? And what if it is taught that unimaginable prosperity is guaranteed when the believer takes certain steps and follows certain laws that would unlock the treasuries of heaven, and that this is the will of God? What if Christianity is packaged and promoted as a religion that guarantees affluence, material wealth, success and health?

My topic this evening is the Prosperity Gospel. In July 2007, both *Christianity Today* and *The Christian Century* – two very different magazines representing very different theological persuasions – published articles on the prosperity gospel. The fact that an evangelical magazine and an ecumenical,

Protestant mainline magazine could both be interested in this movement shows how important it is, at least for American Christians. In a poll conducted by *Time* magazine in 2006, 17% of Christians in America surveyed said that they would consider themselves as part of the 'Prosperity Theology', while 61% believed that God wants people to be prosperous. One may say, 'Well that's America!' But according to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Centre in 2006 in the African continent, 9 out of 10 participants replied 'Yes' in answer to the question whether God would grant prosperity to all believers who have enough faith'. Stephen Hunt is therefore not off the mark when he notes in 1998 that the 'health and prosperity gospel' is 'one of the fastest growing religious movements on a global scale'.

What is the Prosperity Gospel? And how should we critique its teachings from the standpoint of the Bible and Christian theology? These are the questions I shall attempt to answer in this talk.

## ORIGINS AND PERSONALITIES

Before we examine some of the tenets of the Prosperity Gospel and offer our critique, we have to inquire, albeit very briefly, about the origins of this movement and its most significant proponents. The Prosperity Gospel is inextricably related to the post-war Pentecostal healing movement associated with Kenneth Hagin, who began his ministry in the early 1960s but whose influence was not felt until 1967. This movement is called the Faith movement because of its emphasis on the importance of faith in appropriating the blessings of healing and prosperity from God. In the mid-1960s, Hagin moved his ministry to Tulsa, Oklahoma where he began a daily 15-minute radio programme called 'Faith Seminar of the Air'. This programme was syndicated by some 180 radio stations in the U.S. and Canada.

In 1974, Hagin formed the Rhema Bible Training Centre in Tulsa, which was relocated to Broken Arrow in 1976. When it first started, the Centre enrolled only 58 students. But by the late 1980s, Rhema Bible Training Centre could boast of an enrolment of 1,800, and to have produced around 6,600 graduates. Hagin also started the magazine, *Word of Faith* which was sent to 190,000 homes. Each month about 20,000 of his teaching tapes were distributed and sold. By the late 1980s, Hagin's ministry had 229 salaried staff and real estate worth an estimate of US\$20 million. It is not surprising that *Charisma* magazine named Kenneth Hagin the 'Father of the Faith Movement'.

Many authors who investigate the movement, however, maintain that the real founder and father of the modern Faith Movement is Essek William Kenyon (1867-1948). He was not a televangelist because he lived before the age of television. He was a radio-evangelist who exercised a moderate influence in certain Christian circles. Kenyon was also a pastor and writer, and much of the material that became the substance of Word of Faith teaching came from Kenyon. That is why D. R. McConnell, who has done extensive research on the Faith Movement, could justifiably call Kenyon 'the true father of the modern faith movement'. This assessment has received support from others who have studied the movement. Hank Hanegraaff writes: Kenyon 'is the real father of the modern-day Word-Faith movement and that "Dad" Hagin merely popularised his material'. William DeArteaga, another writer who investigated the movement, concurred: 'The pioneer theologian and true father of the contemporary Word-Faith movement was E.W. Kenyon'.

Although Kenyon's connection with Pentecostalism is undisputed, what many do not realise is that he was greatly influenced by the theosophic cult called New Thought Metaphysics. There are strong indications in the writings of Kenyon that his thinking was also influenced by pseudo-Christian cults such as Religious Science, Christian Science, and the Unity School of Christianity. New Thought Metaphysics is often associated with Phineas Parkhurst Quimby (1802-1866). He taught that sickness and suffering ultimately have their origins in the mind, or more accurately, in incorrect thinking. Quimby therefore asserts that human beings could create their own reality by the sheer power of positive affirmation or confession. Thus, according to Quimby, if we visualise health and wealth and then affirm and confess them with our mouths, the intangible will become tangible, and that which we visualise and declare will become a reality. Kenyon adopted much of this teaching and simply 'baptised' them with Christian vocabulary, particularly with the use of the concept of faith. The power of the mind and the power of faith became synonymous for Kenyon. Thus, as New Thought writer Warren Evans put it, 'faith is the most intense of mental action'.

Kenneth Hagin drew liberally from Kenyon's teachings, making them his own. In his book, *A Different Gospel*, D. R. McConnell provides pages of evidence that Hagin blatantly plagiarised from Kenyon, reproducing Kenyon's work almost word for word as his own. Kenneth Hagin exercised a strong influence on Kenneth Copeland, who with his wife Gloria became the most successful 'evangelists' for the Prosperity Gospel. The Copelands became Christians two weeks apart from each other in 1962, and received the so-called 'baptism in the Holy Spirit'. At the beginning, they meandered for a while in their Christian life, until in 1967 they took a bold step and moved to Tulsa where Kenneth Copeland enrolled in Oral Roberts University. Because

Copeland was a pilot, he was assigned to be Oral Roberts' pilot and had the opportunity to accompany the evangelist to many of his healing services, from which Copeland testified he 'learned the ministry of praying for the sick'.

But it was only when they met Kenneth Hagin and sat at his feet that they had a life changing experience. According to Gloria, learning from Roberts was useful, but learning from Hagin was far more valuable. So, the Copelands devoted all their time to studying the materials authored by Hagin. Kenneth Copeland subsequently formed his own evangelistic association in 1968. In 1975, the Copelands expanded their ministry into radio and in 1979 into television and even started satellite productions in 1981. In addition, they conducted 15 three to six-day revival and teaching campaigns a year. While Gloria focused on healing, Kenneth's emphasis was on 'how believers' rights and privileges make it possible ... to live a victorious and successful life'. Together they publish a monthly newsletter that boasts a circulation of 700,000 copies.

Through their ministry, they helped another up-and-coming faith teacher, Jerry Savelle. When Savelle met Kenneth Copeland, he was financially broke and spiritually distraught. After meeting Kenneth Copeland, Saville found faith in God once again, founded a faith church in Kenya, and later served as an associate evangelist with the Kenneth Copeland ministries. Soon Saville became a popular prosperity preacher in his own right. Kenneth Copeland was extremely revered in some circles. Benny Hinn, the popular faith teacher issued this warning to those who dared to attack Kenneth Copeland: 'those who attack Kenneth Copeland are attacking the very presence of God!'

## **PROSPERITY TEACHING IN OUTLINE**

What are the main features of the Prosperity doctrine?

Prosperity teachers like Kenneth Copeland frequently appeal to cosmic spiritual laws that serve as the basis for their teaching concerning health and wealth. In his influential book, *Laws of Prosperity* Kenneth Copeland claims that 'there are laws governing everything in existence'. Just as there are laws governing the natural world, so there are laws governing the spiritual world. In fact, for Copeland, the spiritual laws were responsible for bringing about the natural laws. This at least suggests that spiritual laws have the power to change or manipulate natural laws. Copeland speaks about what he calls the 'force of faith'. He maintains that it is the laws of faith 'which makes the laws of the spirit world function'. This rule, which applies to everything in life,

holds true, according to Copeland, also for prosperity. Copeland then draws this conclusion that serves as the basis for every aspect of his teaching concerning prosperity: 'There are certain laws governing prosperity in God's Word. Faith causes them to function ... the success formulas in the Word of God produce results when used as directed'.

This formulaic, cause-and-effect approach is seen very clearly in the Copelands' teaching concerning the causal relationship between giving and prosperity. In Mark 10:29-30, Jesus is recorded as saying: 'I tell you the truth ... no-one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will not 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 come, eternal life'. Interpreting this passage literally, especially concerning wealth and possessions, Gloria Copeland says if we believe we will get \$1,000 for a contribution of \$10. She stresses that the rewards must be expected in our lifetime, underscoring the expression 'in the present age' in the Marcan passage. She writes: '[Jesus] did not say it would come in two weeks, but he said it would come in this life ... If we would exercise our faith before we leave this life *all* that return would come to us'. Kenneth Copeland's statement about investing in God is equally clear and provocative. In *Laws of Prosperity*, he encourages his readers to 'Invest heavily in God; the returns are a staggering 100 to 1! ... Every man who invests in the Gospel has the right to expect the staggering return of one hundredfold'.

The cosmic spiritual laws governing wealth serve the basic desire to be wealthy and healthy in the teachings of the Prosperity preachers. One very idiosyncratic piece of Bible interpretation by the Prosperity teachers concerns their use of 3 John 2. In this verse of John's letter, we read of John's prayer for Gaius to whom the letter was addressed: 'Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health, and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well'. In the King James Version, the final phrase in the verse is translated as 'prosper and be in good health'. The Copelands have made this verse the key to their ministry, and the basis for the health and wealth doctrine. On the basis of this verse (or more accurately, a particular interpretation of it), the Copelands and other Prosperity teachers give wealth a significant place in Christianity. Kenneth Copeland could write that if we know 'God's system of finance ... we can absolutely believe God for anything in the world and get it!' If a believer fails to get the prosperity God has set aside for him, it is not God's fault but his (the believer's). Therefore, Jerry Saville writes: 'If I am not prospering ... it is not God's fault, nor the fault of the Word of God – it is my fault'. The verse in 3 John, which is nothing more

than John's prayer for Gaius, has become the foundation for Prosperity doctrine.

Prosperity preachers often use God's promise of prosperity to Abraham as the premise for their emphasis on the divine blessing of prosperity. According to them, just as God has promised to prosper Abraham, so he has promised to liberate the Christian from all poverty and sickness. The connection between Abraham and Christians is based on their reading of Galatians 3, where Paul writes: 'If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise (Gal 3:29). In his book, *Redeemed from Poverty, Sickness, and Spiritual Death*, Hagin comments on this passage by making this bold assertion: 'Abraham's blessing is ours ... The first thing God promised Abraham was that he was going to make him rich'. Prosperity preachers like Kenneth and Gloria Copeland, and Jerry Savelle faithfully follow Kenneth Hagin's interpretation of this passage, focusing on God's promise to bless Abraham with material wealth. They then use the language of 'rights' to exhort believers to claim from God these blessings.

Christians must call to question both these claims. God's covenantal promise to Abraham centres on his spiritual blessing, not just his material blessings. Furthermore, as undeserving sinners saved by grace, the children of God can never use the language of 'rights' in relation to God.

To be fair to the Prosperity teachers, however, some of them have tried to keep selfish materialism in check by emphasising the need to bless others. For example, Gloria Copeland could write: 'Don't just believe God to meet your needs. Believe him for a surplus of prosperity so that you can help others. We here in America are a blessed people financially. We have been called to finance the gospel to the world'. Jerry Saville is also unequivocal in this: 'Do you know why God wants you rich? So, you can do more. The wealthier you become, the more responsible you are to God'.

Be that as it may, the general thrust of Prosperity teaching is that God has promised to bless his children materially with wealth and possessions. Those who exercise faith can unlock the treasure chests of heaven and receive the riches that God has promised Abraham. Health and prosperity are the *rights* of every believer. It is therefore unthinkable that Christians would not want to claim from God what is rightfully theirs.

## TWISTING SCRIPTURE

Having examined the broad teachings of the Prosperity Gospel, we are now ready to look at some of its more specific emphases and doctrines. There are many that we can discuss and critique, but for the purposes of this talk I have chosen only three. One of the most serious criticisms of the Prosperity teachers is that they often misinterpret and misapply Scriptures. In fact, this is the fundamental issue with the Health and Wealth Gospel: its idiosyncratic interpretations and appropriations of Scripture to substantiate and support its erroneous theology. So, the first aspect of the Prosperity Gospel that we will look at is its misuse of Scripture. Prosperity preachers often ‘support’ their statements with proof texts from the Bible, giving the impression that what they say is entirely biblical. Many sincere Christians who are not very grounded in Scripture and the doctrines of the Church could very easily be led to believe that the Prosperity Gospel is biblically sound.

It is interesting to note that the Faith teachers are aware that to interpret Scripture out of context is often to misunderstand its meaning. And this would result in the misapplication of Scripture. For instance, Charles Capps states: ‘If you take Scripture out of context, you can make the Bible say anything you want it to say ... The last and greatest of all deception is to take the Word out of context and distort it to make it say something different from the true meaning’. Kenneth Hagin also appears to agree with this sound principle of exegesis and hermeneutics when he writes: ‘It is foolish to take a text out of its setting and try to prove something with it’.

The problem is that they often do not abide by this sound principle of Bible interpretation themselves.

Let me cite just one example. In Mark 10:17-23, the story is told of a young man who ran up to Jesus and asked, ‘Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ Jesus cited a number of the commandments – do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, etc. The young man replied, ‘Teacher, all these I have kept since I was a boy’. Jesus then told this young man to sell everything that he has and give them to the poor and to follow him. The young man was distraught at this command, and was finally unable to obey it ‘because he had great wealth’. Understood correctly, this story presents an enormous challenge to Prosperity teaching because it underscores the entrapment of wealth. The story emphasizes that true discipleship requires the disciple to always relativize his attachment to material things in relation to his love of God, which must always come first.

Prosperity teachers like Kenneth Copeland have an ingenious way of getting around this problem, and making even a passage like this support their teaching. Kenneth Copeland maintained that when reflecting on this passage, ‘the Lord spoke to him revealing to him’ its true meaning. When he read in the story that the young man had faithfully kept the commandments, Copeland said ‘The Lord spoke to me and said, “See, this is why he was rich”’. In other words, the young man was rich because he had obeyed the commandments. But this is surely a clever sleight of hand. There is nothing in the passage to suggest that the young man was rich because of his obedience. This interpretation is offered simply to make every part of the story conform to Prosperity teaching.

But what about Jesus’ command to the young man to sell everything and give it to the poor? Copeland offers this explanation. Jesus commanded the young man to give all he has. If the young man had obeyed, he would have become even richer. The Lord would have multiplied the young man’s wealth a hundredfold and return it to him. Copeland writes: ‘This was the biggest financial deal that the young man has ever been offered, but he walked away from it because he didn’t know God’s system of finance’. Needless to say, this interpretation is ludicrous. It goes directly against the true meaning and intent of the story. Copeland’s interpretation has very little to say about the contrast between material wealth and the ‘treasure in heaven’ that the story makes. Neither does it have much to say about Jesus’ statement about how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven, which underscores the dangers of materialism.

This is one of the many examples of scripture being twisted to conform to the teachings of the Faith teachers.

## **HAVE FAITH IN FAITH**

The second doctrine that we will look at, albeit again very briefly, is the Prosperity teachers’ concept of faith. The prosperity teachers’ emphasis on faith is so distinct and prominent that they are also called faith teachers. On the surface, it is laudable to emphasize the importance of faith in the Christian life. But what is troubling is the way in which the Health and Wealth teachers understand faith. Another troubling aspect of their teaching has to do with the object of faith. In other words, who or what, according to these teachers, do we put our faith in? Let us begin with a very famous quotation from Kenneth Hagin, taken from his book *Having Faith in Your Faith*, which sold thousands of copies:

Did you ever stop to think about having faith in your own faith? Evidently God had faith in his faith, because he spoke words of faith and they came to pass ... In other words, having faith in your words is having faith in your faith. That's what you've got to learn to do to get things from God: Have faith in your faith.

This understanding of faith is antithetical to what the Bible means by faith. Firstly, Hagin compares our faith with God's faith in himself. He said, 'God had faith in his faith, because he spoke words of faith and they came to pass'. From where did Hagin get this idea? Hagin borrowed this teaching from Kenyon. In place of the customary translation of Mk 11:22, 'Have faith in God', Kenyon proposes that the passage should be translated as 'Have the faith of God'. The great Bible scholar C.E.B. Cranfield calls this 'a monstrosity of exegesis.' From this revised translation, Kenyon could conclude: 'We have God's faith produced in us by his living word, by his nature that is imparted in us'. Hagin took this up and developed it further. He makes the almost blasphemous argument that we have the kind of faith that brought the universe into being. In his book, *New Thresholds* Hagin writes: 'the kind of faith that spoke the universe into existence is dealt to our hearts'. That's how powerful our faith is. And that's why we must have faith in faith. The logic is simple: if we already possess the faith that God possesses in himself, the faith that brought the world into being, there is really no need to have faith in God. All that is needed is to have faith in that faith.

## **POSITIVE CONFESSION**

Secondly, from this premise, the Health and Wealth preachers teach the doctrine of positive confession. This teaching is found in the whole spectrum of charismatic teachers from Kenneth Hagin to Kenneth Copeland, and from Derek Prince to Benny Hinn. What is the doctrine of positive confession? We turn again to Kenyon, who has given us its most succinct and provocative definition. Kenyon defines positive confession simply as follows: 'What I confess, I possess'. A more elaborate description of positive confession comes from the pen of Kenneth Hagin. He describes confession as 'affirming something we believe ... testifying to something we know ... witnessing for a truth we have embraced'. On the surface, this looks like a sound Christian understanding of what it means to confess our faith. But when we look at the way in which Faith teachers apply their understanding of confession, we will discern some very grievous errors. Working on the principle set out by Kenyon – 'What I confess, I possess' – the Faith teachers maintain that we must always speak the positive, our confession must always be positive if we

are to be free from disease, from hardships and poverty. Thus, Kenyon could write:

It is what we confess with our lips that really dominates our inner being ... [People] confess their fear and they become more fearful. They confess their fear of disease and the disease grows under the confession. They confess their lack and they build up a sense of lack which gain supremacy over their lives.

This understanding of faith is not only erroneous; it is extremely dangerous! In 1980 Harvest House Published a book by Larry Parker entitled, *We Let Our Son Die*. The book tells the tragic story of how Larry Parker and his wife Lucky lost their son because of this understanding of faith that they received from a Faith teacher. They had invited a Faith teacher to pray for their son, Wesley, who had diabetes. Believing that Wesley was healed as the result of the prayer, and wanting to exercise their faith, the Parkers withheld insulin from their son. Even when Wesley grew very ill and fell into a diabetic coma, the Parkers would not bring Wesley to the hospital, believing that their son has been healed. Wesley died on August 23, 1973. But even after his death, the Parkers still believed in Wesley's healing. So instead of a funeral service, they held a 'resurrection service'. When the resurrection did not occur, the Parkers dismissed all those in the service who did not have enough faith. They held the body of their son for more than a year, believing that their 'faith' in his healing would ultimately be vindicated. The Parkers were arrested and convicted of child abuse and involuntary manslaughter. They were given a five-year probated sentence.

'Have faith in faith', 'positive confession' and 'creative faith' are concepts of faith found in the writings of Faith teachers who promote the Health and Wealth Gospel. This understanding of faith is totally antithetical to what the Bible means by faith. According to the Bible, the object of our faith is not our faith itself or the words that we speak and the confessions that we make. The object of our faith is the sovereign God who loves us and has called us to be his own. Faith is not a formula that when followed closely would set in motion a series of cause and effect. It is not a technique that would bring about the desired results when performed correctly. It is not a ritual that would activate certain cosmic laws that will bring about health and wealth.

This understanding of faith seriously distorts how the Bible describes our relationship with God. In the Bible, faith is trust in the God who has revealed himself as love. To have faith in God is to trust in his faithfulness towards us. It is to entrust our lives to him. Faith is not a means by which we manipulate God to grant us our wishes, whether they be health or wealth. God is not a

genii that can be summoned from his bottle to do our bidding and to pander to our superficial and selfish desires. Hebrews 11 defines faith and presents one example after another of how faith is embodied in the lives of God's children. Observe how alien, how contradictory the idea of faith espoused by the Faith teachers is from what is presented in that great chapter on faith in the New Testament. The prosperity teachers' concept of faith distorts reality. It makes God either subservient to our whims and demands or renders him redundant altogether.

The faith doctrine of the Prosperity teachers in fact promotes faith in man, not God. In Charles Farah's poignant and memorable words, Faith theology is in fact a form of 'charismatic humanism'. When Hagin and his followers exhort believers to have faith in their own faith, they are urging them to have faith in themselves. They have perverted the Christian understanding of faith, which is always theocentric (God-centred), to that which is anthropocentric (man-centred). To have faith in one's own faith is the ultimate expression of man's confidence in his unrestrained ability to meet his own needs and to make the impossible possible by the sheer positivism of his thinking and confessing. In the final analysis, this understanding of faith, when combined with the peculiar supernaturalism of the Faith teachers has to do with harnessing a form of occultic power that can change one's condition and circumstances. Whatever this power may be, it is not what the Bible means by putting our faith in God!

## **WEALTH AND DIVINE BLESSING**

The final aspect of the Prosperity doctrine that I would like to critique goes to the very heart of the movement: its idea of prosperity, and its connection with the cosmic laws that I talked about earlier, and divine blessing. I briefly drew your attention earlier to Kenneth and Gloria Copeland's interpretation and application of Mark 10 – invest \$1 and expect \$100 in return. Here is their teaching in full, and in their own words:

You give \$1 for the Gospel's sake and \$100 belongs to you; give \$10 and receive \$1000; give \$1000 and receive \$100,000. I know that you can multiply, but I want you to see it in black and white and see how tremendous the hundredfold return is ... Give one house and receive one hundred houses or one house worth one hundred times as much. Give one airplane and receive one hundred times the value of the airplane. Give one car and the return would furnish you a lifetime of cars. In short, Mark 10.30 is a very good deal.

This universal law of prosperity is activated through the use of mental visualisation and the power of positive confession. Long before Kenneth and Gloria Copeland presented their teaching, the same principle is found in the writings of the New Thought proponent, Ralph Waldo Trine (1866-1958). In his book *In Tune with the Infinite* Trine wrote: 'Suggest prosperity to yourself. See yourself in a prosperous condition. Affirm that you will before long be in a prosperous condition ... You thus make yourself a magnet to attract the things that you desire'. Trine talks about the occult power of ideas, which when implanted in our minds, will actualize material conditions. Thus, the ideas and the words we speak have creative powers to bring into being that which we desire. This thought is encapsulated in Kenneth Copeland's simple assertion: 'You can have what you say!' The positive confession that we discussed in relation to healing is applied to the acquisition of wealth, in the teachings of the Prosperity evangelists.

Furthermore, these laws of prosperity do not only work for believers. Because they are universal laws, they will work when they are properly applied – even by the non-believer! And because God has put these laws in place, God is in some sense compelled to grant prosperity to whoever operates by these laws. So Kenneth Hagin, when writing about the blessings of prosperity for the non-believer, says:

God didn't bless him [the non-believer] because he was a sinner. He received God's blessing because he honoured God. God has a certain law of prosperity and when you get into contact with that law and those rules, it just works for you – whoever you are. When you come into contact with God's laws, they work.

An entire lecture can be devoted to evaluate and critique this aspect of Prosperity doctrine alone. But in keeping with this broader assessment of Prosperity Gospel, I will very briefly comment on the inordinate emphasis that the Prosperity Gospel places on material wealth. The proponents of the Health and Wealth Gospel see prosperity as the *right* of the believer, and therefore it is irrational for believers not to claim it. The emphasis that the Prosperity Gospel puts on material wealth endorses the excessive materialism that already pervades our culture. The Gospel of Wealth is attractive precisely because it appeals to one of the most virulent aspect of fallen human nature: greed. The Prosperity Gospel fans our carnal greed for wealth and material goods.

Needless to say, the Prosperity Gospel presents a theology of material wealth that is profoundly antithetical to the teachings of the Bible. There can be no

doubt that in the Bible material wealth is one form of divine blessing. When God made a covenant with Abraham, he promised to bless Abraham and his offspring. And an aspect of the blessing is undoubtedly material. This comes across clearly in Deut 30:9: 'Then the Lord your God will make you prosperous in all the work of your hands and in the fruit of your womb, the young of your livestock and the crops of your land'. The blessing promised here unambiguously includes material wealth. But the Bible nowhere teaches that material wealth is the right of the believer. And the Bible nowhere encourages believers to pursue material wealth for its own sake. In fact, the Bible clearly discourages it. As we read at the very beginning of this paper, Paul says that the 'love of money is the root of all evil' (1 Timothy 6:10).

Prosperity teaching interprets material wealth as a sign of God's approval. This correlation is very dangerous, and again it goes against the comprehensive teaching of Scripture concerning wealth. For Scripture clearly states that the wicked can also be wealthy. In Psalm 73:12-13, we read:

This is what the wicked are like – always carefree, they increase in wealth. Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence.

The psalmist here speaks of the scandal of wealth. The wicked person who rebels against God is nevertheless wealthy, giving the appearance of being blessed by God. The righteous who has 'kept his heart pure' does not enjoy this blessing. Instead, he has to experience hardship and suffering because of his desire to please God and walk in his ways. This ambivalence that we find in Scripture concerning wealth and divine blessings exposes the error of the Prosperity doctrine's simplistic correlation between the two.

Furthermore, the Bible warns against the dangers of being too consumed by the desire for material wealth. It warns against a kind of materialism that is idolatrous. Nowhere is this emphasis made more explicitly than in Matthew 6:24, where money is personified and made into a sort of god: 'No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Mammon'. By personifying money, and by placing it next to God, Jesus is saying that money is not neutral. It is a kind of power. It has the capacity to influence and even to enslave. Money is not without spiritual significance.

But what is most troubling to me about Faith teaching concerning prosperity is the kind of spirituality it encourages and engenders. Even at a superficial level, the prosperity doctrine with its emphasis on wealth and material possessions may be said to subvert the demand of the cross for self-denial.

Prosperity teaching instead promotes an attitude of self-indulgence and even interprets that as being an expression of God's will for his children. In so doing, it hastily brushes aside one of the most profound requirements of Christian discipleship, namely, the willingness to deny oneself and to bear the weight of the cross. At another level, the materialism and narcissistic self-indulgence that prosperity doctrine promotes distorts and even perverts the Christian's relationship with God. God is no longer seen as the gracious Source from whom every blessing – spiritual as well as material – comes. He is now looked upon as the means by which the end of prosperity is attained. Divine blessings are no longer understood as the generous provision of the sovereign God. They become either the rights of the believer who can claim them at will, or the result of manipulating some universal spiritual law. Either way, the relationship between the believer and God is distorted to the point of perversion.

## CONCLUSION

Much more can be said about the theology of the Prosperity teachers. We could examine their understanding of God, of man, and of the work of Christ – all of which are theologically so problematic that it is impossible to consider them as falling within the framework of orthodoxy. But let me conclude this brief talk with a just few remarks. In his book on the Health and Wealth Gospel, the Pentecostal New Testament scholar Gordon Fee calls this teaching a disease. Using Fee's metaphor, we have examined in this brief talk the ways in which this disease has infected different tenets of the Christian faith – Scripture, the concept of faith in God, the idea of divine blessings.

But if this assessment is sound, we have to ask the next question: How can this 'disease' be cured? This is Gordon Fee's recommendation:

The best antidote to this disease, therefore, is a good healthy dose of biblical theology ... I would be so bold and prophetic as to declare that the only alternative to such a 'cure' is the awful judgement of God, which must begin first with the house of God.

The best way to counter bad theology is with sound theology. This challenges the Church to take the Bible and Christian theology very seriously. The fact that so many Christians are drawn towards Prosperity teaching points us to the serious theological illiteracy in our Churches and among Christians. The influence of the Prosperity Gospel therefore presents the Church with the challenge to continue to preach, without compromise and dilution, the true Gospel of Jesus Christ, and to form her members in her great theological and

liturgical traditions. It is only when Christians are deeply grounded in the teachings of the Church that they are able to discern truth from error, orthodoxy from heresy. And theological discernment is absolutely indispensable for the Church inhabiting an age where there are so many different philosophies, ideologies, theories and lifestyles that seek our attention and vie for our allegiance.

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