IX

Jan-Feb 2014

9Marks Journal

Biblical Thinking for Building Healthy Churches

PROSPERITY GOSPEL



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Editor’s Note



Jonathan Leeman

Here’s a prediction: as Western culture increasingly turns against Christianity, the prosperity gospel will keep growing, at least for a time.

It won’t be the only false teaching whose stock rises in a spiritually bearish market. Theological liberalism in some fangled form will always lurk in the shadows, ready to mug anyone who lets down their guard. But the prosperity gospel is a uniquely attractive stock in a materially acquisitive and entitlement-driven age, so expect its share price to keep rising on exchanges around the globe. This trade is hot! God wants to provide you with gabled double-front doors, leather interiors, satisfying sex, and an all-around better you. It’s like a wedding between a Wall Street shark and a self-help guru, all decked out in the paraphernalia of a Christian bookstore.

As with any pressurized system, the growing cultural opposition to the biblical faith will send Christians and spiritual seekers in search of a relief valve, some path of least resistance that lets the God-talk continue flowing through the pipes, while the tough demands of the faith disappear through a valve door. And here it's hard to think of a better path of least resistance than a message that promises health and wealth but is effectively post-biblical.

Prosperity is a different kind of sneaky than theological liberalism because it usually affirms the doctrines you affirm, at least with its lips. Liberalism appeals to the intellect, prosperity to the appetite. But it's like liberalism in two ways: it exploits the evangelical inclination toward an attractional model of ministry, which builds on common ground with the culture; and it enters church buildings and sermon manuscripts wearing Christian camouflage. It sneaks in softly, gently, not with the BLING BLING of the *Preachers of L.A.*, but with a nodding and sympathetic, "You want a healthy marriage? Jesus wants that, too." Which of course is true. Yet little by little, the Bible becomes a handbook to your best life. Church morphs into a therapy session. And God and his gospel exist for your sake, not you for his. Hello, Shadow Christianity.

Amidst external oppositions and internal temptations, I expect the broad center of evangelical churches to move in one of two directions in the coming decade: toward prosperity squishy or biblical solidity. The latter could mean another fundamentalist retreat, or it could mean learning how to

better balance our bridge-building instincts with biblical fidelity in everything from sermon scope to church structure.

The goal of this Journal is to increase awareness and educate evangelicals concerning the prosperity gospel for the sake of diagnosis and prevention. As a couple of the articles will suggest, this globally-popular American export exists on a spectrum between soft and hard, more evangelical and less. Indeed, you and I can probably find some of it in our own hearts, as one piece observes. This issue concludes with a meditation on biblical theology, because it's in the storyline of Scripture that we find the real antidote to all proof-texting reductionist gospels. The Bible is all about the glory of God in the face of Christ. Beholding him is the pathway to the truly blessed life.

The Rise of a Parallel, Post-Biblical Christianity



By Grant Retief

Eighty percent of South Africa is Christian, said the 2001 census. It is, from a statistician's vantage point, a "churched" nation. There have been missionaries for hundreds of years. My own denomination started services in Cape Town 1794.[1]

Yet numbers can be deceiving.

A churched nation is not the same thing as a "gospeled" nation, and the massive growth of the so-called prosperity gospel in South Africa suggests that my generation may be observing the rise of "parallel Christianity," a Christianity that is effectively post-Bible.

“CHRISTIANS” WHO DON’T KNOW THE GOSPEL

This claim isn’t based on statistics. I haven’t gathered those. I have gathered people. I have human beings who have attended the well-known bigger churches for years, and then somehow found their way into the church where I serve. Then, after attending for a little while, they tell us they are surprised to regularly hear in the preaching and the liturgy that they are sinners. It’s a new thought for them.

They tell us—tragically—that in our church they feel like they are hearing the gospel for the first time. They become anxious for their friends in their former churches. Then they even get angry at those churches. I understand.

CHRISTIAN-LIKE

Why refer to the prosperity gospel phenomenon as a “parallel, post-biblical Christianity”? When you stop to look inside these churches, you hear Christian-like things and you see Christian-like activities.

So there is preaching.

But often the preaching is just motivational speaking, waterless clouds blown by the wind that offer inspiration without information (Jude 12). Sermons aren't built on biblical theology, but employ an occasional verse to springboard toward the preacher's pre-chosen point. They don't point people to the biblical gospel of what Christ has done, but call them to the burdensome "gospel" of what they must do.

Surely, biblical preaching should be inspirational, but what I am speaking about here is the overplay of tugging the heart and a failure to engage the mind. People are confronted with suggestions and incentives, not the living Lord Jesus Christ through his ever-relevant word.

In such churches, there is talk of "sin," "grace," and "faith."

But these words are no longer used according to their biblical categories and context. Instead, their meanings are vaguely assumed, or are informed not by theology but psychology. For example, "sin" might be described as the failure to achieve your goals, not as rebellion against an Almighty God.

Once you have redefined sin, it's a short step to redefine salvation. Salvation is no longer the rescue from God's wrath by the wrath-absorbing, vicarious death of Jesus for the forgiveness of sin; it is the rescue from the temporal effects of sin. Jesus will rescue you from poverty, depression, mediocrity, and so on.

In short—and using the nine marks—these churches offer motivational talks, not biblical sermons; proof-texts, not biblical theology; applications of the gospel, not the gospel; moral improvement, not conversion; calls to social justice and giving, not evangelism; status in the community, not accountability-affording membership; flattery, not discipline; lessons in getting busy, not discipleship; professionalism, not leadership. (See also D. A. Horton's article, "The Nine Marks of a Prosperity Gospel Church.")

All this produces nice people instead of godly people. They don't come to read, mark, and learn the Scriptures, they come to learn self-help. They don't encounter God in his Word, they encounter themselves. The Bible is seldom more than a stage prop, and atmosphere takes the place of a real redeemed community, grappling with the loving and wounding word of God.

These churches, as I say, are post-biblical. Their "Christianity" is a parallel one.

A THEOLOGICAL AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC SPECTRUM

Might these descriptions not fit any number of evangelical seeker-sensitive churches? In fact, that's part of the problem.

Prosperity gospel churches vary considerably along the theological and socio-economic spectrum. My own city of Durban, like South Africa generally, offers three worlds in one. There are sophisticated middle class and wealthy suburban areas—historically white but with a growing Indian and African emerging middle class. There are high-density, high-crime peri-urban areas called "townships"—historically black, and far removed from the suburbs. And there are the abjectly poor, underserviced rural areas, where subsistence farming and unemployment dominate existence. As you move between these three worlds, you find different brands of prosperity gospel, ranging from a "lite" prosperity gospel in the seeker-sensitive business-driven churches in the middle class suburbs all the way over to a more blatantly heterodox Trinity Broadcasting Network and Benny Hinn prosperity in the poorer areas.

Prosperity-gospel lite offers fulfilling jobs and satisfying marriages for you and your children. Prosperity-gospel heavy promises that your cows will give milk and that your barren womb will open.

Whether in the lite or heavy versions, this parallel, post-biblical Christianity is spreading throughout South Africa. Superficially, it looks alive because it's vibrant and growing.

But the gospel is assumed, personal godliness is optional, and theological education is held in suspicion. I know that nothing, not even the gates of Hades, will prevail against Jesus' church in the end. But right now in South

Africa, in my worst moments, I sometimes feel that the true church's day is over.

ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM AND ANTI-AUTHORITARIANISM

The suburban church-scape in Durban City is perhaps the context I understand best, having ministered there for 17 years now. These middle class suburbs are marked by anti-intellectualism and anti-authoritarianism. People are functionally illiterate: they can read, but don't. Maybe it's our gorgeous weather?! Leisure, sport, and television have won the day in the city that positions itself for the domestic tourism market with the tag-line, "The playground of South Africa!"

Western South Africans have also learned to be suspicious of authority, establishment, and tradition. Under apartheid the Dutch Reformed Church was considered to be the theological lap dog of the apartheid government, providing the moral compass and theological justification for its policies. This brought massive shame on organized religion in the aftermath of apartheid, with the DRC all but falling apart. It is now far down the track of theological liberalism (at least in its training institutions).

The twin attitudes of anti-intellectualism and anti-authoritarianism in turn shape the kinds of churches that thrive in my city and around the nation.

While some of the larger charismatic churches aren't against formal training, they prefer to offer in-house classes, providing vague and historically unmoored home-branded theology.[2]

Others take the view that formal theological education is unnecessary, even harmful. Learning about God from books is essentially seen as unspiritual. A false distinction is made between the written word of God and the *prophetic* or *uttered* word of God—the *Rhema*. (Indeed, Rhema is the name of the country's biggest church in Johannesburg. Its name is taken from links with Kenneth Hagin Ministries and boasts a membership of over 40,000. Sadly, it has sold out to the prosperity gospel.)

Combine this pervasive anti-intellectualism with rabid anti-authoritarianism, and you have a churchscape dominated by independent charismatic churches. Their leaders are exceptionally gifted, invariably young and powerful motivators and predictably trendy. Yet I cannot think of one that I know of who has had any formal theological training.

A REVIVAL OF THE ANCIENT HERESIES?

As I've observed these trends, I have wondered if we are seeing the ancient heresies revived. Others have argued that aspects of the modern charismatic movement are essentially Gnostic in the movement's dualistic understanding of the world.[3]

Add to that a basic anthropology among prosperity gospel's leaders that is semi-Pelagian, and one understands why the former members of their congregations find that the sermonic emphasis on their sin is a new idea.

Perhaps there is a new form of Docetism here, too? If first-century Docetism was a Platonic embarrassment of the incarnation of Christ, there seems to be a tacit embarrassment of the written word of God as pedestrian, unspiritual, and intellectual. Hence these churches neglect publically reading and preaching God's Word.

GETTING THE DOCTRINE OF THE SON WRONG

It is my conviction that the greatest danger posed by these prosperity gospel churches is not only that they get the doctrine of the work of the Holy Spirit wrong, which they almost always do; they get the doctrine of the work of the Son wrong.

On any given Sunday in Durban in many churches, you will be tempted to believe that you can draw close to God in intimate relationship through an experience during the singing, rather than through the death of the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross. While I would be surprised if any of these leaders would explicitly say this, their gatherings create the impression that the cross is not the only way to friendship with God. Instead, you can be

ushered into relationship with God by the worship leader who effectively acts as a priest—one qualified to lead you into the presence of Almighty God.

Surely this is an implicit denial of Hebrews 9:24: “For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.”

TIME FOR A STATEMENT OF AFFIRMATIONS AND DENIALS?

At some point the evangelical churches in South Africa may need to state their *credo* in such a way that more clearly distances them from church leaders who deny the historic faith through these historic heresies.

Maybe that means calling together a council among reformed evangelical churches in South Africa in order to write a statement or a creed that doesn’t only affirm what we believe, but also denies what we don’t believe.

THE NEED FOR GOSPEL PREACHING CHURCHES

While a clear statement may help on a macro-level, it won't much impact ordinary South Africans. As I said earlier, the fact that South Africa is a churched nation doesn't mean it's a gospeled nation.

Thankfully, the solution to that problem is revealed to us in the New Testament. It is not macro-organizations or reformed evangelical denominations, as helpful as those may be. It is gospel-preaching local churches.

Our prayer then must be that God would raise up more churches where the clear gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ remains front and center—come what may! May he do that in South Africa, and may he do that in the world—as he has always done, and will continue to do long after we are gone!

1 REACH SA: Reformed Evangelical Anglican Church of South Africa—formerly The Church of England in SA. This is not to be confused with the larger liberal Anglican Church of SA.

2 I am grateful for this observation made by my assistant, Graham Heslop.

3 See for example Victor Kuligin, *Ten Things I Wish Jesus Never Said* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 22-23.

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Grant Retief is the rector of Christ Church Umhlanga just outside of Durbin, South Africa. He and his wife have three children.

Three Post-Prosperity Gospel Testimonies



Interviews by Grant Retief

Editor's Note: *Grant Retief, who serves as rector of Christ Church Umhlanga just outside of Durban, South Africa, sat down with three young Christians in his church who recently came out of prosperity gospel preaching churches and asked them all the same questions: "Tell me what you noticed when you started coming to our church. What was different from your prior experience? What did you hear that was new? What were some of the struggles at first?" Retief asked these three to comment on the gospel, the Bible, corporate worship, and lifestyle.*

Below you'll find their answers. These are firsthand accounts of the themes that come up in Retief's accompanying article, "The Rise of a Parallel, Post-Biblical Christianity." Rochelle and Chantal participated in a

prosperity church in Durban for 15 years; Nicola spent 11 years in a prosperity-tinged seeker-sensitive church.



ROCHELLE:

The first thing I noticed was that sin was spoken about a lot. In my previous church, sin was never talked about. For the first time I was told that I was a sinner.

While I was still straddling both churches, I was once rebuked by my previous pastor when I began talking about sin and judgment with people in our church. I was told to stop it, because it was too negative.

I grew up thinking that I gained salvation by my works. At our new church I heard for the first time that Christ had fulfilled all the law.

At first I was offended that my works counted for nothing and I couldn't contribute to my salvation. The fact that I couldn't contribute to my salvation was offensive. But after some time, it became liberating.

One of the leaders at the new church kept running after me, and I kept coming back. I realised that up to that point my whole Christian life had assumed the gospel. The cross was only ever preached at Easter. The gospel was seen as old news, and it was assumed that everyone knew it, understood it and believed it. The old church was only interested in a new word from God.

I felt so deceived. I used to cry. I felt betrayed. I realized they knew no better themselves.

My experience of the Bible was that it was often added to with "prophecies." The norm was to read the Bible without context and with immediate application. I've come to realise that the Bible is first about Jesus.

Corporate worship was all about the experience and feeling one had during the singing. It was a time of inviting the Holy Spirit to come into us. It was always very emotional.

Looking back I realise that there was a deficiency of godliness in the lives of the leaders of the church. This was seen particularly in the way the finances were handled. There was corruption, and money received was sometimes hidden from the congregation. If you did not tithe, you were approached by the leadership.

There was also sexual sin. The youth leader was dating a Christian girl, and sleeping with his other, non-Christian, girlfriend. This was reported to the head pastor, but nothing was done about. Three years later, he is still youth pastor.



CHANTAL:

Coming to this church was the first time I heard about the seriousness of sin. When I first came I was offended. Later, I'd go home liberated and grieved at the same time. Grace was completely new to me, and such a comfort. I realized it was most important to understand the gospel of *grace*. For the first time, justification and sanctification were explained to me.

At first I wondered why each and every sermon went back to Jesus. I now realize that it takes me back to my need for a saviour all the time, and that is what I need in order to change.

When I spoke to my previous pastor about some of the things taught at my new church, he said that the gospel was good for that context but not for his

context. He felt his people already knew the gospel and didn't need to hear it all the time. He felt there were other things that God was saying and doing in the world.

Looking at the leaders of my previous church, you'd think they were living godly lives because of their works-based religion. Externally it looked impressive. Yet sexual sin was common amongst the youth, and never disciplined. One young adult sinned sexually, followed by a long fast. He was working for his forgiveness.

The idea of praise and worship was the biggest thing in my previous church: music and the ecstatic gifts, tongues and prophecy. Services were sometimes four hours long, with two hours of singing. The songs always seemed to point to the individual, with a lot of "I" and almost no "Jesus" in the songs.

There was no systematic Bible teaching. The norm was quoting scriptures completely out of context. I don't know why I took my Bible. The Bible was seldom opened. It was just misquoted.



NICOLA:

In my previous church, lip-service was given to the importance of the Bible, but seldom was it preached or read systematically.

There was a strong emphasis on “what God is saying now” in visions and prophetic words that often undermined the context and application of Scripture.

There was an emphasis on training leaders with people skills rather than Bible teaching

Preaching was most often topical and called for behaviour modification. Since coming here, I have realised how little good Bible teaching I had received.

Leaders are cool, trendy, usually younger, very seeker-sensitive in their language. Often services had special lighting, highly polished worship bands, and words apparently from God were brought before and after the sermon. This diminished the emphasis on the sermon by adding to it.

There was a focus on the quality and quantity of worship to the extent that sometimes there was no sermon. Demonstrative worship was always encouraged and even instructed, with frequent altar calls and responses after the preaching.

In my previous church, people became leaders very quickly. And the leaders were elevated and are popular due to their personalities. They encouraged people to make decisions according to what God is saying in your heart rather than according to his Word.

Your members will let you in to some of their most private thoughts. You may discover that what they need is to believe in Christ—for the very first time.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Grant Retief is the rector of Christ Church Umhlanga just outside of Durbin, South Africa. He and his wife have three children.

A “Gospel” that Almost Killed Me



By Sean DeMars

I’m in a bathtub. I can’t get up. I feel like I’m about to die. Mercury poisoning.

The water in the tub has grown cold. Maybe that’s why I feel so cold. I’ve been marinating in my own soup stock for the past two hours. I’m floating in and out of consciousness. Whenever I can concentrate I begin to pray.

“Jesus, please, save me. Please, heal me. I repent, I put my whole heart into prayer right now, and I cast out any doubt or fear. I know you can heal me. Please heal me!”

My mom’s keys are rattling in the doorknob now, and I hear the door thud shut in the distance. I hear her purse sliding across the counter and her keys

landing next to it. I barely recognize her figure as she tries with all of her wiry might to pull me out of the tub. I spend the next two days in the hospital. My mom wants to know why I didn't let her know, why I didn't want to go to the hospital, why I didn't do something.

"Mom, Jesus is my doctor. I'm blessed, and I know that he would have healed me." This is me trying to live out what I think is true Christianity.

I had just gotten saved two months prior. I'm fresh out of jail and I'm walking around the projects where I used to stomp like a tiny teenage giant. I've got a bare back, a few tattoos, and a Bible in my hand. I'm just praying for the opportunity to share the Christ with someone.

I meet a man named Roger who invites me into his home. He buys me lunch and we spend all day talking about the Bible. This guy knows way more than me. I've never heard anyone spout off so many Scriptures in such rapid-fire succession. "This guy is legit..." I say under my breath.

Over the course of the next six months, this man indoctrinates me with the prosperity gospel. Just a few months earlier, I'd never even opened a Bible. I have no idea that I'm being given arsenic in my kool aid. I take it all. I believe it all. I know it's true. It has to be. It's all right here in Scripture. Look, she touched the hem of his garment and was healed. Look, Jesus couldn't heal them because they didn't have enough faith. Look, all throughout the Old Testament you see curses for sins, and blessings for

righteousness. Prosperity for the good, pain for the bad. It's so plain. So obvious.

But stuff isn't making sense. I'm still without a job. I can't pay my rent. My mom isn't getting saved, and I keep getting cold sores. None of these things should be happening. There must be sin hidden somewhere in my heart.

Now I have the flu, and I don't have any money to buy groceries. I just need to claim it. I just need to rebuke Satan and his lies, and believe that what I have proclaimed in the name of Jesus will surely come to pass. Maybe I'm not tithing enough. Time to double up. I'll get it back one hundred-fold. Maybe more. I just need to sow in faith.

But it's still not happening. "Roger, hey man, I don't understand. It seems like this stuff isn't working. What am I doing wrong?"

"Dude, I don't know exactly what it is, but I know the problem ain't with God or his Word. It's got to be something in your heart, or in your life. Let's pray about it."

Fast forward a year. I'm nineteen and married now. We're struggling hard. I can't pay the rent or the electricity bill, and I just lost another job. My wife wasn't saved when we met. She gets saved during the course of our friendship, and somewhere in there, she starts listening to me and taking in all of the "truth" I'm giving her. She does wonder, though, where the disconnect is. When the ATM receipt says we're negative forty dollars, I

rebuke myself, the ATM, and the receipt. I claim my blessing even in the face of this lie from Satan. I know that Jesus is looking down on me, proud of my strength in the midst of such persecution and adversity. “In the name of Jesus!”—I keep claiming what he’s promised me.

The prosperity gospel and word of faith movement are basically the same thing, but I’ve never heard anything about any of those things before. All of the good Bible-loving Baptists around me are afraid of me because I probably robbed their sons, stole their cars, or vandalized their church. Yet because of my powerful testimony, scores of churches invite me to come and share. I preach a false gospel every time I go. Not once does anyone ever sit me down and talk with me about the danger that my soul is in. Not a word. Not a peep. Not to my face, anyway. I now know that they waited respectfully until I left, and then talked amongst themselves about how sad it is to see such passion so misdirected.

All I know, the only thing I know, is that I love Jesus. He saved me. I was destroying myself and anyone who was unfortunate enough to be caught up in my gravitational pull. I was dying, and I was going to die twice. One night, on an empty road in the middle of nowhere, in a scene so strange it has to be true, Jesus saved me. He saved me from sin, and death, and hell. I want to spend the rest of my life serving Jesus with all of me. I think that this refuse called “gospel,” this message of prosperity and proclamation, is what I must do. So I obey. In my mind, this is what it means to be a Christian. This is all I’ve known. I think this is what God wants of me. So I

continue in white-knuckled obedience. I keep pressing, keep pushing. And one random day I join Myspace.

I like to argue on Myspace. I'm nineteen and I have a big mouth. The internet offers me a perfect avenue to express myself and condemn those who can't see the truth that I see, obey the law as well as I do, and lack the faith I radiate like a fiery sun. I'm perusing this wasteland one evening in Seattle, and an old man pops up on my QuickTime video player. He's really bringing the thunder. He's preaching on holiness like no one I've ever heard. I'm hooked. I go to the next video.

Amazing. I've never heard anyone preach like this. I go to the next one. It's says "John Piper: Prosperity Gospel Sermon Jam." I'm excited. He's going to really give the jolt I need to keep going.

But after the clip I'm furious. I close my computer. Another wolf. Another preacher who just has it so wrong. The video was the worst attack on my faith that I've ever seen or heard. I stop watching right after he says "this crap called gospel!" Unbelievable.

I carry on with my life, but I just can't help it. I keep going back to YouTube, and eventually I go to this website that has all of his teachings. I tell myself that I'm just going to read or listen to or watch his other stuff. I'll avoid the stuff I don't like; the stuff that's wrong. The other stuff is just too good, though. It's breathing life into my soul.

I don’t remember much about the night the truth took over. Most of the really painful events that we experience are deadened in our memories, right? Our brains are protecting us from the trauma of having to relive the pain over and over again. But this night, I’m crying. I’m devastated. I’ve been considering the possibility for months now, and it finally clicked about five minutes ago. Almost everything that I think I know about God, the Bible, the cross, and the gospel of Jesus Christ is wrong. Dead wrong. I feel it now, down in my bones, and it burns with the pain that only God can give.

Repentance begins. “Amber, baby, we need to talk. Everything I’ve ever taught you about Christ is wrong. Can you ever trust me again? Can we start over? Will you give me another chance?”

I feel like an adulterer. I begin undoing everything that needs to be undone. I failed as a husband, and by the grace of God I’m trying to fix it. I have no one and nothing. I don’t have any non-prosperity gospel friends, because I ditched them if they couldn’t get with the program. They were only holding me back and hurting my faith. That’s what I told myself. Now I’m alone. I do have the internet, though…

So I’m watching Paul Washer videos and spending hours on DesiringGod.org. I’ve never even heard the word “reformed,” and I can’t find one single book about the prosperity gospel. Not one that’s attacking it, anyway. That’s what I really want.

I'm hurt—badly. I don't trust anyone, and I'm angry at everyone—at Christians, anyway. Why didn't anyone tell me? How could I have been so blind? I'm angry at myself. I'm broken, but the Spirit is carrying me.

God did heal my mercury poisoning, but it wasn't because of my power to proclaim that healing into existence. And he accomplished a far greater rescue when he delivered me from the prosperity gospel. It's been nearly six years since the Lord saved me from myself and the damnable heresy that had ensnared me.

I'm writing this from Peru where my family and I are trying to reach a people group who do not have the gospel. I'm still picking up the pieces. I still have a hard time praying for healing, or prosperity and blessing, both of which are thoroughly biblical. I still feel my diaphragm twitch whenever someone says "In the name of Jesus." I know the truth now, and I try to walk in line with it every day. The white-knuckled discipline that I once devoted to the prosperity gospel, I now devote to trusting fully in the finished work of Christ and the grace that I breathe in to survive.

Here's the bottom line: I was a heretic. But Christ had saved me from my sin, and he saved me from my heresy too. When it comes to embracing the prosperity gospel, I doubt that you would have found anyone more dedicated or ruthless than me. I was the chosen one. But I was ensnared in a false gospel. And so is everyone else who is trusting in this "crap called gospel," to borrow a phrase from that old man's video.

Brothers, call it what it is. Pastors, call it what it is. Don't let even a hint of this junk live in your church. Preach against it, and preach a gospel that shines so bright and burns so hot that any other gospel that tries to approach it burns up upon entry. Don't treat this like an asymptomatic sniffle in an otherwise healthy body; treat it like the cancer that it is. Preach, teach, counsel, shepherd, and pray a clear and true gospel, and leave no room for anything less glorious or true.

If you meet someone who is lost in this false gospel, please, please, please love them and tell them the truth. Sit them down, buy them lunch, and open up your Bibles. Speak life. Be brave. Odds are, no one has ever loved them enough to tell them the truth about themselves. The truth is that they cannot be saved by a false gospel, and the prosperity gospel is certainly that.

Jesus saved me from the prosperity gospel, and he can save more. He will save more. How could he not?

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The Prosperity Gospel in My Own Heart



By David W. Jones

While I had been exposed to the prosperity gospel earlier in life, it was not until I began seminary that I thought seriously about it. I began to serve in local churches during my time as a student, and I was amazed to find so many people under my care consuming property gospel material via different forms of media. Moreover, many people seemed to view their relationship with God as a quid pro quo transaction. He was treated as a celestial sugar daddy who existed to make them healthy, wealthy, and happy on account of service rendered.

Early in my academic career, I published in a rather obscure theological journal an article entitled "The Bankruptcy of the Prosperity Gospel."[1] In it I attempted to synthesize my initial objections to prosperity theology, as

well as hopefully to give basic direction to those caught up in the prosperity gospel movement. To my surprise, I received immediate feedback about my short publication—both positive and negative. In fact I continue to receive more feedback about that piece than anything else I have written.

These two experiences prompted me to ask this question: why are evangelical Christians drawn to the prosperity gospel? And why does it resonate with so many people generally? After some reflection and investigation, the answer at which I arrived was surprising: the prosperity gospel resides in the heart of all men; the prosperity gospel is even in my own heart.

Imagine you're driving to church on a cold, rainy Sunday morning, and to your dismay you get a flat tire. What is your immediate thought? "God, really? I'm going to church. Isn't there some drug dealer or abusive husband you could have afflicted with a flat tire?" *That's the prosperity gospel.*

Or maybe you don't get that promotion at work, your child gets sick, or you're unfairly criticized at church. The result? You get mad at God because you were overlooked, troubled, or disparaged. *That's the prosperity gospel.*

The very thought that God owes us a relatively trouble-free life, and the anger we feel when God doesn't act the way we believe he is supposed to

act, betray a heart that expects God to prosper us because of our good works. *That's the prosperity gospel.*

It may be easy for you to spot the spiritual charlatans on television, selling their modern-day indulgences, proof-texting biblical passages, and promising us our best life now if we just have enough faith in faith. But don't forget that what makes the prosperity gospel so attractive is that it caters to the desires of the fallen human heart. It promises much while requiring little. It panders to the flesh.

While you may be mature enough to resist the systematized prosperity gospel of the movement's self-proclaimed purveyors, don't overlook the latent prosperity gospel that dwells within your own heart. The true gospel says, whatever may come our way, Jesus is enough.

Is he enough for you?

1 David W. Jones, "The Bankruptcy of the Prosperity Gospel: An Exercise in Biblical and Theological Ethics," Faith and Mission 16, no. 1 (Fall 1998): 79–87.

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A Softer Prosperity Gospel: More Common than You Think



By David Schrock

While evangelicals have traditionally decried the prosperity gospel in its "hard" form, there is a softer form of this teaching that is all too common among us.[1] Often undetected by Bible-believing Christians, it assumes the gospel and leads its adherents to focus on things like financial planning, diet and exercise, and strategies for self-improvement. In contrast to the hard prosperity gospel, which offers miraculous and immediate health and wealth, this softer, subtler variety challenges believers to break through to the blessed life by means of the latest pastor-prescribed technique.

Of course, matters of personal stewardship such as money, health, and leadership skills should be woven into a whole-Bible theology of Christian discipleship. The trouble comes when Christians, and especially pastors,

place greater emphasis on these secondary matters. What we choose to preach or listen to says much about what we value. And what I see among some evangelicals is a willingness to prioritize the lesser matters of the law over the weightier mercies of the gospel.

This is not a new concern. Others have described facets of this prosperity gospel under names like moralistic, therapeutic deism, Christless Christianity, and the commodification of Christianity.[2] In truth, all three descriptors overlap to describe a prosperity gospel that is easily missed, because it is seems reasonable to Christians who love God and the American Dream.

A SOFTER, SUBTLER PROSPERITY GOSPEL

For those with eyes to see, signs of soft prosperity are everywhere in evangelicalism. Christian radio offers a "positive, encouraging" experience, with innumerable songs beckoning listeners to be overcomers. Christian publishers market books that help Christians look better, feel more confident, and reach their maximum potential. Likewise, Jeremiah 29:11 and Philippians 4:13 continue to be championed as mantras by Christians who want to make an impact on the world.

But of course, these examples are only symptoms, and the solution is not to demonize Christian retailers. Rather, we all must learn to think more deeply

about the content of our faith and to refute the errant teachings of the soft prosperity gospel (Titus 1:9).

FIVE TRADEMARKS OF SOFT PROSPERITY

To aid in that discernment, let me outline five trademarks of soft prosperity, particularly as they show up in sermons and books.

1. Soft prosperity elevates "blessings" over the blessed God.

First, soft prosperity elevates "blessings" over the blessed God. When blessings are divorced from the triune God, compromise ensues. True blessedness resides in God alone, "the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords" (1 Tim. 6:15). By consequence, to seek God's blessing requires seeking him (Isa. 55:6-7; Matt. 6:33). Christ is the true treasure (Matt. 13:44-46), and any pursuit of blessing that makes God a means to another end is erroneous and idolatrous.

2. Soft prosperity detaches verses from the redemptive framework of the Bible.

Second, soft prosperity detaches verses from the redemptive framework of the Bible. When preachers present isolated verses as time-honored principles for claiming God's blessings, a counterfeit gospel results. Instead

of relating all blessings to Christ, they directly apply individual verses to people today.

Such a promise motivates the strong and extinguishes the weak. Unless a passage is rightly related to redemptive framework of the Bible, verses like Psalm 1:3 become treadmills on which earnest Christians tire themselves out. Genuine Christ-centered expositional preaching prevents this sort of textual manipulation, and guards against the gospel of soft prosperity.

More specifically, soft prosperity delights in the tangible promises of the Old Testament.[3] The error is often found in promising old covenant blessings to new covenant saints. Whenever we read the Old Testament, faithful interpreters must see how the promises first related to Israel in their historic and theocratic state; second, to Jesus who perfectly fulfilled the law (Matt. 5:17); and third, to us. Because we live under the new covenant, there will always be continuity and discontinuity between the Old Testament promise and its contemporary fulfillment. Preachers must learn how to interpret these ancient texts at the textual, epochal, and canonical levels.[4] Likewise, healthy churches must learn to see how every blessing is found in relationship to Jesus Christ, the mediator of the new covenant.

3. Soft prosperity diminishes the curse that Christ bore and the blessing of the Holy Spirit.

Third, soft prosperity diminishes the curse that Christ bore and the blessing of the Holy Spirit. In the Bible, blessedness is not an amorphous idea.

Deuteronomy 27-28 specifies the content of the Mosaic covenant's blessings and curses. Quoting these verses, soft prosperity preachers advertise divine blessings through greater obedience, but they ignore the fine print. Only one man has so perfectly obeyed God's so as to merit God's blessing (Heb. 10:5-10). And for Jesus' covenantal obedience, he was sentenced to death on a Roman cross, accursed for the sins of his people (Gal. 3:10-13).

Perhaps the greatest problem with the soft prosperity is the way it assumes the cross of Christ, instead of adoring the Blessed One who bore the wrath of God in our place (Gal. 3:13). Soft prosperity preachers speak often about what you can do to experience God's favor, but they rush past the cross, missing the fact that every spiritual gift has been secured for the believer by Jesus, who gives us his Spirit as the preeminent blessing (Gal. 3:14; Eph. 1:3). Although they don't deny the Romans Road, they are driving on another highway.

4. Soft prosperity relies on pastor-prescribed therapeutic techniques.

Fourth, soft prosperity relies on pastor-prescribed therapeutic techniques. By assuming the gospel, soft prosperity preachers fill the vacuum with a full plate of therapeutic techniques. With the language of Zion, they emphasize the good works of the believer. Although not explicitly denying salvation by grace through faith, pastors who repeatedly insist on life tips,

techniques, and strategies for saintly success undermine the faith once for all delivered to the saints.

5. Soft prosperity largely addresses first world, middle-class problems.

While the previous four trademarks could in many ways apply to hard or soft prosperity preaching, one striking difference remains. Whereas hard prosperity preaching invites followers to name it and claim it, soft prosperity preachers inspire the upwardly mobile to reach for their dreams. In the former, good health and a strong portfolio prove God's tangible salvation; in the latter, preachers proclaim a religion of therapeutic solutions. To quote only one of their teachers: "Do I believe in supernatural return on giving? Yes, sir! Do I believe God blesses tithes and offerings? Yes, I do. But why should we teach you to claim a car without teaching you about the car payment and interest rates on loans."[5] T. D. Jakes' message promises the same gold, through a different line of credit—superabundant faith mixed with well-ordered works. In short, this softer prosperity preaching appeals to first world, middle-class people who are too busy living to examine a message that reaffirms their natural aspirations for success. Tragically, "believers" who buy into this false gospel may remain ignorant of their greatest need—atonement for sin before a holy God—unless confronted with true gospel of Jesus Christ.

A BETTER THEOLOGY OF BLESSING

In the end, the tragedy of the soft prosperity gospel is the way it focuses so much on earthly improvements. By offering Christians their best life now, the eternal realities of heaven and hell are lost. This brings the very real possibility that many who hear the soft prosperity gospel are and will remain lost.

In response, Christians must learn to recognize the error of soft prosperity. And we—especially pastors—must prayerfully work to liberate others from it. First we must confess the ways that desires for earthly success have latched on to our own hearts. Second, we must present the biblical gospel, which far exceeds the offer of saintly success. We must extol the riches of the true gospel and trust that when God's sheep hear his call to repent of their sin and cling to Christ, they too will sell their soft prosperity and receive as a free gift the only treasure that counts—Jesus Christ, the only blessed king.

1 On the difference between hard and soft prosperity gospels, see Kate Bowler's revealing study, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 78.

2 In order, Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Michael Horton, Christless *Christianity: The Alternative Gospel of the American Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), esp. 65-100; Stephen J. Nichols, *Jesus Made in America: A Cultural History from the Puritans to The Passion of the Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), esp. 173-97.

3 See a list of such verses in Michael Schäfer's article, "The Prosperity Gospel and Biblical Theology."

4 For a helpful treatment of this approach, see Edmund Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1979).

5 Cited in Bowler, *Blessed*, 119.

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The Soil of the Prosperity Gospel



By Jonathan Baer

While the prosperity gospel comes packaged in a number of different forms—Word of Faith, Positive Confession, and so on—the core product is consistent. At its heart is the conviction that human words and faith shape reality. We are empowered to speak life into being, but regrettably few of us are aware of this great privilege. The reason we do not have the financial security, health, and success we want is that we do not call it forth and draw it unto ourselves. Beneath this claim rests a high anthropology, which regards human beings as fundamentally good and ultimately powerful.

One need not look far to see that this message has resonated with a massive audience, both in the United States and abroad. Joel Osteen, Creflo Dollar, Joyce Meyer, T.D. Jakes, Benny Hinn—the list of celebrity prosperity preachers is seemingly endless, with many of them broadcasting on TBN.

These preachers hawk their television ministries, books, podcasts, CDs, and retreats to hungry consumers eager to find out how they can maximize their potential to live a life of fullness and well-being, to "break out" of the desperation of broken dreams and dashed hopes (as Osteen's latest book instructs).

It is a tempting and intoxicating brew, appealing to basic human inclinations and culturally conditioned desires, offering a quick high but a nasty hangover. And it's extremely lucrative for its purveyors, since one of the principal ways to demonstrate faith is to sow financial seeds, which is to say, give gifts to prosperity preachers or purchase their products. The resulting fleets of luxury automobiles, massive homes, and Italian suits might strike critics as garish, but prosperity preachers retort with a smile that their lives and bank accounts merely verify the truth of their messages.

How did we get to a place where such a clearly debased form of Christianity holds sway with so many people?

ANCIENT SEED, MODERN SOIL

The prosperity gospel is the bitter harvest of an ancient seed planted in modern soil. This seed is as old as Adam and Eve and as enduring as humanity itself. From the Fall onward, human beings have sought to make gods of themselves, make idols of the good things in life, and domesticate

the true and living God so that we can (ostensibly) enlist him in our schemes of enrichment and aggrandizement.

The fertile soil, meanwhile, is composed of several features of modernity.

Modernity

Historians debate the periodization and meaning of the term "modernity," but most conclude that the human effort to radically enhance our control over all aspects of life has been central to the modern project. We see this in the scientific realm, where new methods and tools have produced enormous capacities to harness the powers of nature for good and ill. We see it in the political sphere, where our Enlightenment-inspired Founding Fathers declared it a *novus ordo seclorum*; as Thomas Paine proclaimed in *Common Sense*, "We have it in our power to begin the world over again." We see it in the technological realm, where handheld devices now provide common people with capacities unimaginable just decades ago.

But we also know that these promises come up short. Science produces medical cures but also eugenics. Political revolution produces democracy but also totalitarian tyranny and devastation. Technology produces the internet, which we proceed to fill with pornography, to say nothing of the ever more ingenious mechanisms human beings have devised to slaughter and terrorize one another.

Postmodernity

The nightmare horrors of the twentieth century produced backlashes against the hubris of modernity, resulting in a crisis of confidence and existential anxiety that has been called "postmodernity." If modernity asserted our collective capacity to improve the human race to the point of possible perfection through the application of our powers to the problems we faced, postmodernity has cast doubt on all "metanarratives" that would seek to guide our path. This has thrown the individual back upon himself in a world of fragmentation and incoherence.

But as many commentators have noted, postmodernity is not as "post" as its advocates would like to think. If it has jettisoned the grand vista of modernity, it has extracted the individual pictured therein. We no longer believe that human reason is a universal trait that, when applied correctly, can produce unanimity and guide us to first principles. But culturally, we still adhere to modernity's distrust of external authority and tradition. We may despair of collective advancement, but we are deeply committed to personal advancement through individual empowerment and liberation from constraints. The prosperity gospel finds a ready hearing in this setting.

Consumer Culture

This stark individualism has been fomented by many factors, not least the consumer culture that drives late modern capitalism. Given sufficient money, the consumer is sovereign, slaking his desires and improving his life. Or so the advertisers tell us.

The logic of consumer culture requires us to want ever more and to continue believing that those purchased products and services will make us better—sexier, healthier, happier. If enough of us call the bluff, the GDP stagnates and the whole enterprise goes up in smoke.

What consumer culture cannot tolerate is contentment, a sense that our provision is sufficient, that I have more than enough, even if what I have is far from perfect. Instead, it requires restlessness, endless striving, eternal competition and insecurity.

Capitalism

Yet with all its faults, capitalism has produced enormous wealth and improved standards of living, something readily overlooked by its critics. It works better than other existing options, even if it is a deeply problematic system. Particularly susceptible to its allure, and particularly vulnerable to its empty promises, are the upwardly mobile, the aspiring middle class, including immigrants and ethnic minorities. It is not accidental that this is the prime audience of American prosperity preachers.

Capitalism not only generates wealth but also raises expectations for material well-being. If he is debt-free and financially comfortable, why not me? If she has the creature comforts of life without the awful drudgery of a dead-end job, why not me?

Medical Advances

Likewise, advances in health care have raised expectations for our physical quality of life. Life as a "vale of tears" made more sense in a world of smallpox, tuberculosis, and cholera, without reliable analgesics. We live in a rare epidemiological epoch in the advanced world, such that barring accidents and unusual afflictions we can reasonably expect to reach old age.

But of course pain and misery endure, debilitating disease remains all too common, and this side of heaven our embodiment entails suffering. So prosperity preachers leverage our longing for purity, for redeemed bodies and minds that will no longer afflict us. If you have sufficient faith, it will be so.

Globalization

Globalization has enabled the prosperity message to spread abroad with alarming ease. As capitalism has conquered its competitors and as communications and transportation technologies and costs have improved, large markets have opened for prosperity preachers.

We might applaud the spread of Christianity in Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America, but it is daunting to recognize how much that marches under the Christian banner is in fact the prosperity gospel. Some of the most prominent churches and most recognizable leaders preach prosperity in poor countries, such as Edir Macedo, founder of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God in Brazil, and Enoch Adeboye of the Redeemed Christian Church of God in Nigeria. Unlike the aspiring working- and

middle-class Americans who watch Joel Osteen or Creflo Dollar on their flat-screen TVs, many Brazilian and Nigerian prosperity adherents can ill afford even the few dollars they give in the hope of reaping their own personal blessing.

WATERING THE SEED: PENTECOSTALISM AND THE CHARISMATIC MOVEMENT

Finally, if the ancient prosperity seed of pride, greed, and idolatry found fertile soil in modernity, it has been watered by Pentecostalism and the Charismatic movement. In their hunger for signs and wonders, early Pentecostals sought the presence and power of God in divine healing and other tangible blessings. In teaching healing in the atonement, parallel to a salvation offered to all and receivable by faith, early Pentecostals diminished the mystery of suffering and God's providential care. They taught that God willed all faithful Christians to be healthy, and Christ died that it would be so; believers simply had to receive it by faith. If healing didn't ensue, it was a clear sign that the believer had not exercised faith. This transferred power from a transcendent God who has his own purposes to human beings who desire to be healthy and prosperous.

This theology overlapped in key ways with the mental healing promoted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century New Thought movement. In particular, E. W. Kenyon harmonized Pentecostal and New Thought ideas,

and in the postwar era Kenneth Hagin embraced his theology and spread it to many of the leading figures in the movement in recent decades.

By no means do all Pentecostals and Charismatics support the prosperity gospel; indeed, at various times leaders and denominations have sought to distance themselves from it, sometimes quite vigorously. But their founding ethos and spiritual sensibilities have nurtured it, as has an ecclesiastical environment that rewards and scarcely checks independent spiritual entrepreneurs.

QUITE A LEGACY

Paul Crouch died of degenerative heart disease at the age of 79. Reports suggest he and his wife have thirteen luxury homes, private jets, and a $100,000 mobile home for Jan's dogs. He took none of it with him. Presumably he left his empire and wealth to Jan and their children. To far too many others he left a legacy of heresy, deceit, and heartbreak.

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Why Has the Prosperity Gospel Prospered?



By Miguel Núñez

Why has the prosperity gospel prospered? Anyone involved in ministry today is aware of how widespread this new teaching is. It has reached almost every nation. I was surprised to find it even in Cuba on one of my many trips to that Caribbean island.

WHY THIS HERESY? AND WHY NOW?

It would be easy to say that the spread of the prosperity gospel is simply the result of a lack of biblical knowledge, and certainly no one can deny that. The movement misinterprets Scripture, selectively uses biblical texts at the

expense of others, missing the balanced view of the whole counsel of God on health and wealth. And in an era when many teachers of the Word are not preaching expositionally, all kinds of heresies would arise.

But two questions remain: why this heresy? And why now? I would suggest that there are deep evil roots in people's hearts and strong secular ideas in the heart of our society—and even in the church—that serve as fertilizers for this harmful seed.

1. My way!

First, fallen creatures desire to be independent from God. If you think it through, the message of the old serpent was a version of the prosperity gospel. What could Satan offer to a couple that had been given the entire planet to use and to rule? Nothing! Well, nothing material. But the craftiest of all the beasts of the earth still had a card up his sleeve…spiritual prosperity: "You will be like God" (Gen. 3:5). Satan offered a way to improve their already-blessed condition, achievable independently of the Creator, so they could say "I did it my way."

Today, Satan offers material prosperity to fallen and destitute creatures: "You can be richer." And you can do it your way, right now. The initial disobedience of the first couple, and the subsequent disobedience of their descendants, seems to be a cry for independence of their Maker.

Satan knows well how to exploit this aspect of our humanity. He found Christ in the wilderness, after he had left behind his glory, his rights as the second person of the Trinity, and after he took on the weakness of the human flesh. In that condition, what did the old serpent offer him? "Riches, glory, power achievable your way, Jesus, and right here. You don't have to wait, you don't have to work for it, you don't have to suffer to obtain the kingdoms of this world, and you don't have to depend on your Father. Just worship me, Jesus!" The Son of God resisted, but mankind has bowed time and again to mammon. Fallen man thinks that money is the source of happiness, power, comfort and even health. Perhaps that's why Gordon Fee says that, "Indeed, the theology of this new 'gospel' seems far more to fit the American dream than it does the teaching of Him who had 'nowhere to lay His head.'"[1]

The hunger for independence (Gen. 3:1-7), the hunger for riches (Jos. 7:16-21), the hunger for immortality (Eccl. 3:11) and the impatience of the creature (1 Sam. 13:8-15) make man particularly susceptible to this kind of heretical gospel. As we can see, Satan's offers then and now are similar in content, but he is a master at changing the wrapping paper of his "gifts."

2. Narcissism and the Entitlement Culture

Having dealt with the nature of the human heart, let's deal with the heart of our generation. Narcissism is a term many use to describe people whose pursuit in life is the self-gratification to which they feel entitled. Indeed the

entire advertising industry is dominated by this sentiment: “you deserve the luxury of this car”; “Take care of yourself, because nobody else will”; “You deserve a resort vacation,” and hundreds of other similar phrases. If people are willing to believe such lies, imagine how they would feel when they hear a pastor preaching that God wants you to be rich and healthy, or that you should have your best life now. Members of the entitlement culture may conclude that even God believes that we deserve unconditional riches and health. So the believer doesn’t approach God with a humble and contrite heart, seeking his grace, but rather with a proud attitude, expecting well-deserved blessings.

There was a time when even the general population in the West believed in the providence of God to orchestrate history and even to provide for people. But this is not where the culture is today. We now feel that we should have what we want when we want it because it is my constitutional right to be happy. If the government can’t provide it, then others should. And if they can’t, then the God who created me should be that supplier. Some even get angry with God for not providing what they desire. Ravi Zacharias writes, “We are living at a time when G.K. Chesterton’s dictum has proven to be true. Meaninglessness does not come from being weary of pain, but meaninglessness comes from being weary of pleasure. We have exhausted ourselves in this indulgent culture”.[2]

3. Skepticism and Pragmatism

At the same time as this entitlement culture has sprung up, the postmodern movement of the past few decades produced a vacuum of truth, doing away with absolutes. In the absence of truth, people became more and more skeptical and therefore more pragmatic. Many preachers have embraced this mindset. Rather than calling us to follow Jesus as the truth, the way, and the life at whatever cost, they proclaim a pragmatic, "how to" gospel that tells us how to solve our problems, especially those related to finances and sickness.

When pragmatism invades the pulpit, exposition is pushed aside and biblical ignorance becomes its fruit. Now the sheep become more vulnerable to all kinds of lies. Pragmatism aims at man and his convenient life; exposition of the Word aims at God and his glory.

Read carefully what Joseph Haroutunian, a Presbyterian theologian of the recent past (1904-68), said: "Before, religion was God-centered. Before, whatever was not conducive to the Glory of God was infinitely evil; now that which is not conducive to the happiness of man is evil, unjust, and impossible to attribute to the Deity. Before, the good of man consisted ultimately in glorifying God; now the glory of God consists in the good of man."[3] Our society has become utilitarian at its core.

Now, in some ways this is not new, since there are no new sins under heaven. But the removal of certain restrains like shame, guilt, and duty from society has left the field open for these tendencies of the human heart to run

rampant. For a generation as self-centered and greedy as ours, the prosperity gospel is the right recipe.

When members of this society get converted, they need a total worldview transformation which only the gospel can accomplish. Unfortunately, many preachers have concluded that non-Christians today would not listen to the gospel of Christ with all of its demands. "Who would like to hear a message about the cost of discipleship?" they reason. "Who wants to hear about the fact that in this world you will have tribulation?" The real gospel has been substituted for one that would be most appropriate for our generation: a gospel of wealth, health, and happiness. And many people are buying the "gospel" these preachers are selling.

4. A Greater Distribution of Wealth

In 1999, Angus Maddison, professor emeritus at Groningen University, published an article titled, "Poor until 1820," in which he explained that "after the fall of the Roman Empire, the West entered a recession that lasted about a millennium. After the industrial revolution, due to mass production, per capita income began to grow steadily."[4] This is true even of the African continent, although to a lesser degree. As expected, a greater income created a greater demand. As production increased, so did the alternatives to satisfy people's taste and choices.

Without a doubt this fostered materialism. Again, marketing strategies were designed to sell products based on the satisfaction they would bring to the

consumer. Therefore the more I have, the happier I would be. But I need money to buy the products I select, and if it can be provided by God via the prosperity gospel, then I would not only be rich but also feel blessed. “Why not?” many would ask. After all, we are the children of the King and therefore we deserve to live as his princes. Anyone familiar with prosperity preaching will have heard this common line.

As Solomon could have testified, greater income does not always result in greater satisfaction, but only in the possession of more stuff. However, many people do not conclude that things can’t bring happiness. Instead, they see the problem as not having enough of whatever it is they want. Here is Solomon’s advice for those who are still *not* convinced:

> He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income; this also is vanity. When goods increase, they increase who eat them, and what advantage has their owner but to see them with his eyes? Sweet is the sleep of a laborer, whether he eats little or much, but the full stomach of the rich will not let him sleep. (Eccl. 5:10-12)

Imagine living in a very deprived neighborhood, watching rich people living very differently than you. The conclusion in the past was, “I need to work harder so that, one day, I could live that way.” Today, many would want the same dream, and they want it to come more easily. The greater

distribution of wealth has not produced a better work ethic, but simply a greater appetite for more.

5. The American Dream on Display

Every heresy is born somewhere. The prosperity gospel was born in America, and there is something in the history of this country that helped promote this movement. In his 1931 book *The Epic of America*, James Truslow Adams stated that the American dream is "that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement."[5] That national ethos created a prosperous nation.

Years ago people heard of the prosperity of America and wanted to come and see it just like the queen of Sheba wanted to see Solomon's kingdom (1 Kings 10). Today, you don't have to come to America to see it, you can just turn on your TV set no matter how remote and poor your place of residence. The TV show "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous" became very popular, not only in America, but also outside of the U. S., not just because of curiosity, but because it gave people the ability to dream for a moment.

Powerful countries export many goods, but they also export their beliefs and cultures. And in our day, we even export the gospel of truth and the gospel of deception at the same time and through the same channels. Since the USA is such an affluent nation, where everyone seems to prosper, any message that comes from there must be true, especially this message of

prosperity. That is the mindset of many in Latin America, and I suspect in many other places as well.

Unfortunately, when people watch television, they not only dream about having a lifestyle they cannot afford, but they become greedier. Greed is a quality of the heart that clouds the understanding and enslaves the will. When that mind is exposed to the prosperity gospel, it finds a fertile ground for that evil seed. Producers know the effect of the screen on people's lives, so they spend large sums of money to serve us images. Producers know that very well, consumers do not. If a church member adopts the same TV habits as the person in the street, in the end he might end up looking more like a pagan than Christian. This may help explain why even true believers have fallen prey to these false teachers.

WHETHER THEY HEAR OR REFUSE TO HEAR

The prosperity gospel is the result of the desires of a fallen heart, living in the midst of affluence, in a culture that claims "me first," that values comfort, material goods and choices, in search of the enjoyment of the life of the here and now. Once this non-gospel "gospel" was born, it was easily disseminated due to globalization. Every means of communication and transportation has been used to carry the good news and this bad news. Today we have to say not only that ideas have consequences, but also that

ideas travel quickly. We also need to remember that it is easier to disseminate a lie than to undo its damage.

To make things worse, all of this has been accompanied by a famine of the Word of God in the pulpit, and a lack of confidence in the Word to destroy the idols of the heart and to change the minds of the people. Instead, many have done what Aaron did in the desert: he gave the people what they wanted, a golden calf to worship.

So what are we to do? Preach the gospel "whether they hear or refuse to hear" (Ezek. 2:4), and trust the power of the word of God to do again and again what it has always done: convert the soul, enlighten the mind, break the yoke of sin and bring joy to the entire person.

1 Gordon D. Fee, *The Disease of the Health and Wealth Gospels* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2006), kindle edition, Loc 28.

2 Ravi Zacharias, "An Ancient Message, Through Modern Means to a Postmodern Mind," In *Telling the Truth*, edited by D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 28.

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4 Per Capita Income in World History, **http://www2.econ.iastate.edu/classes/econ355/choi/rankh.htm**; accessed Nov. 15, 2013.

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Why Is the Prosperity Gospel Attractive?



By Sugel Michelén

Being poor is a sin" (Robert Tilton).

"If we please God we will be rich" (Jerry Savelle).

"God wants his children to wear the best clothes…drive the best cars and have the best of everything; just ask for what we need" (Kenneth Hagin, Sr.).

These are some bewildering but common statements from "prosperity gospel" preachers. Their god is a sort of cosmic entrepreneur who can be used, by tithing and offering, to attain what really matters: a prosperous life in merely earthly terms.

“FROM SUCH PEOPLE TURN AWAY”

Paul compels us to stay away from “men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain” (1 Tim. 6:5). And in his second letter to Timothy he warns his son in the faith “that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, boasters, proud... lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!” (2 Tim. 3:1-5).

Peter also advises us that, just as there were false prophets among the people of God in the old covenant, “there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies…And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed. And in their greed they will exploit you with false words” (2 Pet. 2:1-3; cf. Jude 11-16).

Sadly, in spite of the Scriptures’ clear warnings, the prosperity gospel has a large and growing group of followers. This isn’t hard to understand, since the message appeals so directly to our native greed. Yet it is sad and bewildering that many people remain in the movement for a long time, even their whole life, since its preachers cannot fulfill their promises.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF THE PROSPERITY GOSPEL

Why is the prosperity gospel so attractive? How does it gain and retain followers? I recently spoke with a brother who was involved in the movement for 10 years, who shed some light on the psychology of the prosperity gospel.

1. An Easily Manipulated God

The prosperity gospel is attractive because it offers us an easily manipulated god. Despite the militant atheist attacks in recent decades, man cannot eliminate from his heart the idea of God, because God has left evidences of his presence in all of creation and has given man the capacity to understand the evidence (Rom. 1:18-21). What makes the prosperity gospel attractive for fallen man is that it seems to place God on his side, while eliminating the hindrance of his sanctity and sovereignty.

The god of these evangelists is not the one reveled in the Scriptures, whom we must approach on his terms. Instead, their god is a combination of Aladdin's lamp genie and Psychiatrist Almighty, who can be easily manipulated through offerings and "words of faith."

2. Guilt and Greed

Second, the prosperity gospel draws people in because it creates a cycle of guilt and greed. When the offers of riches or health take long to materialize, people blame themselves for their lack of faith, or for not being generous enough. This guilt, combined with the greed in their hearts, keeps them clinging to these evangelists' false promises, just like the gambler goes back to the casino again and again hoping that one day he will get lucky.

3. Religious Fear

These "evangelists" tend to instill religious fear in their followers so they don't dare to question the "Lord's anointed one." This hinders their listeners' capacity to objectively analyze the content of their message and the evident dichotomy between their lifestyle and what the Scriptures say about how a gospel minister should live (1 Cor. 4:9-13; 2 Cor. 4:7-11, 11:23-28).

4. Stewardship Brings Prosperity

Another factor that supports the spread of this false gospel is that some do experience a degree of financial prosperity, as a consequence of putting into practice general principles of good administration that they learn in these churches. This seems to confirm the truthfulness of the message which, in turn, increases the greed of their hearts because "He who loves money will not be satisfied with money" (Eccl. 5:10).

IMMUNIZATION INSTRUCTIONS

How can we immunize our listeners against this threat? I've got seven suggestions.

1. Teach them to read the Bible in its context. Prosperity preachers cite the Scriptures, especially the Old Testament, but overlook the general and immediate contexts of the texts they cite.

2. Clearly present the demands of the gospel (Mk. 1:14-15; Acts 2:38, 3:19, 26) and of true discipleship (Mk. 8:34-37; Lk. 14:25-33; Phil. 1:29).

3. Instill in them the spirit of the Bereans (Acts 17.11). It is one thing to respect pastoral authority (Heb. 13:17), but a very different thing to blindly follow a leader even when he walks away from the clear teachings of the Scriptures (Rom. 16:17-18; Phil. 3:17-19).

4. Preach the Bible's warnings against greed (Pr. 23:4-5; Lk. 12:15; 1Tim. 6:6-10, 17-19; Acts 13:5-6).

5. Teach them that God is good, wise, and sovereign in the dispensation of his gifts. Not all his children will be prosperous and healthy on this side of eternity, but all will experience the same paternal love and care, manifested in diverse ways for his glory and the good of our souls (Jn. 11:3; Phil. 2:25-30; 1 Tim. 5:23).

6. Teach them how to handle the tension of being a child of God living in a fallen world (Jn. 15:18-21; 17:14-16; Acts 11:13).

7. Above all, present Christ as the pearl of great price, who infinitely surpasses in value anything that this fleeting world may offer (Mt. 13:44-46; Phil. 3:7-8).

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Errors of the Prosperity Gospel



By David W. Jones

Over a century ago, speaking to the then-largest congregation in all Christendom, Charles Spurgeon said,

> I believe that it is anti-Christian and unholy for any Christian to live with the object of accumulating wealth. You will say, "Are we not to strive all we can to get all the money we can?" You may do so. I cannot doubt but what, in so doing, you may do service to the cause of God. But what I said was that to live *with the object* of accumulating wealth is anti-Christian.[1]

Over the years, however, the message being preached in some of the largest churches in the world has changed—indeed, a new gospel is being taught to many congregations today. This gospel has been ascribed many names, such

as the “name it and claim it” gospel, the “blab it and grab it” gospel, the “health and wealth” gospel, the “prosperity gospel,” and “positive confession theology.”

No matter what name is used, the essence of this new gospel is the same. Simply put, this egocentric “prosperity gospel” teaches that God wants believers to be physically healthy, materially wealthy, and personally happy. Listen to the words of Robert Tilton, one of the prosperity gospel’s best-known spokesmen: “I believe that it is the will of God for all to prosper because I see it in the Word, not because it has worked mightily for someone else. I do not put my eyes on men, but on God who gives me the power to get wealth.”[2] Teachers of the prosperity gospel encourage their followers to pray for and even demand material flourishing from God.

FIVE THEOLOGICAL ERRORS OF THE PROSPERITY GOSPEL

Recently, Russell Woodbridge and I wrote a book entitled *Health, Wealth, and Happiness* to examine the claims of prosperity gospel advocates.[3] While our book is too wide-ranging to summarize here, in this article I’d like to review five doctrines we cover in our book—doctrines on which prosperity gospel advocates err. By discerning these errors regarding key doctrines, I hope readers of this article will plainly see the dangers of the

prosperity gospel. The doctrines that I will cover are the Abrahamic covenant, the atonement, giving, faith, and prayer.

1. The Abrahamic covenant is a means to material entitlement.

The first error we'll consider is that the prosperity gospel views the Abrahamic covenant as a means to material entitlement.

The Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 12, 15, 17, 22) is one of the theological bases of the prosperity gospel. It is good that prosperity theologians recognize that much of Scripture is the record of the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant, but it is bad that they do not maintain an orthodox view of this covenant. They hold an incorrect view of the inception of the covenant; more significantly, they hold an erroneous view concerning the application of the covenant.

Edward Pousson best stated the prosperity view on the application of the Abrahamic covenant when he wrote, "Christians are Abraham's spiritual children and heirs to the blessings of faith.… This Abrahamic inheritance is unpacked *primarily in terms of material entitlements*."[4] In other words, the prosperity gospel teaches that the primary purpose of the Abrahamic covenant was for God to bless Abraham materially. Since believers are now Abraham's spiritual children, they have inherited these financial blessings.

Prosperity teacher Kenneth Copeland wrote, "Since God's Covenant has been established and prosperity is a provision of this covenant, you need to

realize that prosperity belongs to you now!"[5]

To support this claim, prosperity teachers appeal to Galatians 3:14, which refers to "the blessings of Abraham [that] might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus." It is interesting, however, that in their appeals to Gal. 3:14, prosperity teachers ignore the second half of the verse, which reads, "…that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith." In this verse Paul was clearly reminding the Galatians of the spiritual blessing of salvation, not the material blessing of wealth.

2. Jesus' atonement extends to the "sin" of material poverty.

A second theological error of the prosperity gospel is a faulty view of the atonement.

Theologian Ken Sarles writes that "the prosperity gospel claims that both physical healing and financial prosperity have been provided for in the Atonement."[6] This seems to be an accurate observation in light of Kenneth Copeland's comment that "the basic principle of the Christian life is to know that God put our sin, sickness, disease, sorrow, grief, *and poverty* on Jesus at Calvary."[7] This misunderstanding of the scope of the atonement stems from two errors that proponents of the prosperity gospel make.

First, many who hold to prosperity theology have a fundamental misconception of the life of Christ. For example, teacher John Avanzini proclaimed, "Jesus had a nice house, a big house,"[8] "Jesus was handling big

money,"[9] and he even "wore designer clothes."[10] It is easy to see how such a warped view of the life of Christ could lead to an equally warped misconception of the death of Christ.

A second error that leads to a faulty view of the atonement is a misinterpretation of 2 Corinthians 8:9, which reads, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that you through his poverty might become rich." While a shallow reading of this verse may lead one to believe Paul was teaching about an increase in material wealth, a contextual reading reveals Paul was actually teaching the exact opposite principle. Indeed, Paul was teaching the Corinthians that since Christ accomplished so much for them through the atonement, they should empty themselves of their riches in service of the Savior. This is why just five short verses later Paul would urge the Corinthians to give their wealth away to their needy brothers, writing "that now at this time your abundance may supply their lack" (2 Cor. 8:14).

3. Christians give in order to gain material compensation from God.

A third error of the prosperity gospel is that Christians should give in order to gain material compensation from God. One of the most striking characteristics of the prosperity theologians is their seeming fixation with the act of giving. Students of the prosperity gospel are urged to give generously and are confronted with such pious statements as, "True prosperity is the ability to use God's power to meet the needs of mankind in

any realm of life,"[11] and, "We have been called to finance the gospel to the world."[12] While these statements appear to be praiseworthy, this emphasis on giving is built on motives that are anything but philanthropic. The driving force behind this teaching on giving is what prosperity teacher Robert Tilton referred to as the "Law of Compensation." According to this law, which is purportedly based on Mark 10:30,[13] Christians need to give generously to others because when they do, God gives back more in return. This, in turn, leads to a cycle of ever-increasing prosperity.

As Gloria Copeland put it, "Give $10 and receive $1,000; give $1,000 and receive $100,000…in short, Mark 10:30 is a very good deal."[14] It is evident, then, that the prosperity gospel's doctrine of giving is built upon faulty motives. Whereas Jesus taught his disciples to "give, hoping for nothing in return" (Luke 10:35), prosperity theologians teach their disciples to give because they will get a great return.

4. Faith is a self-generated spiritual force that leads to prosperity.

A fourth error of prosperity theology is its teaching that faith is a self-generated spiritual force that leads to prosperity. Whereas orthodox Christianity understands faith to be trust in the person of Jesus Christ, prosperity teachers espouse quite a different doctrine. In his book The Laws of Prosperity, Kenneth Copeland writes, "Faith is a spiritual force, a spiritual energy, a spiritual power. It is this force of faith which makes the laws of the spirit world function….There are certain laws governing

prosperity revealed in God's Word. Faith causes them to function."[15] This is obviously a faulty, perhaps even heretical, understanding of faith.

According to prosperity theology, faith is not a God-granted, God-centered act of the will. Rather it is a humanly wrought spiritual force, directed at God. Indeed, any theology that views faith solely as a means to material gain rather than justification before God must be judged faulty and inadequate.

5. Prayer is a tool to force God to grant prosperity.

Finally, the prosperity gospel treats prayer as a tool to force God to grant prosperity. Prosperity gospel preachers often note that we "have not because we ask not" (Jas. 4:2). Advocates of the prosperity gospel encourage believers to pray for personal success in all areas of life. Creflo Dollar writes, "When we pray, believing that we have already received what we are praying, God has no choice but to make our prayers come to pass….It is a key to getting results as a Christian."[16]

Certainly prayers for personal blessing are not inherently wrong, but the prosperity gospel's overemphasis upon man turns prayer into a tool believers can use to force God to grant their desires.

Within prosperity theology, man—not God—becomes the focal point of prayer. Curiously, prosperity preachers often ignore the second half of James' teaching on prayer which reads, "You ask and do not receive,

because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions" (Jas. 4:3). God does not answer selfish requests that do not honor his name.

Certainly all our requests should be made known to God (cf. Phil. 4:6), but the prosperity gospel focuses so much upon man's desires that it may lead people to pray selfish, shallow, superficial prayers that do not bring God glory. Furthermore, when coupled with the prosperity doctrine of faith, this teaching may lead people to attempt to manipulate God to get what they want—a futile task. This is far removed from praying that God's will would be done.

A FALSE GOSPEL

In light of Scripture, the prosperity gospel is fundamentally flawed. At bottom, the prosperity gospel is actually a false gospel because of its faulty view of the relationship between God and man. Simply put, if the prosperity gospel is true, grace is obsolete, God is irrelevant, and man is the measure of all things. Whether they are talking about the Abrahamic covenant, the atonement, giving, faith, or prayer, prosperity teachers turn the relationship between God and man into a quid pro quo transaction. As James R. Goff noted, God is "reduced to a kind of 'cosmic bellhop' attending to the needs and desires of his creation."[17] This is a wholly inadequate and unbiblical view of the relationship between God and man.

1 Tom Carter, ed., *2,200 Quotations from the Writings of Charles H. Spurgeon* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), 216.

2 Robert Tilton, *God's Word about Prosperity* (Dallas, TX: Word of Faith Publications, 1983), 6.

3 David W. Jones and Russell S. Woodbridge, *Health, Wealth, and Happiness: Has the Prosperity Gospel Overshadowed the Gospel of Christ?* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2010).

4 Edward Pousson, *Spreading the Flame* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 158.

5 Kenneth Copeland, *The Laws of Prosperity* (Fort Worth, TX: Kenneth Copeland Publications, 1974), 51.

6 Ken L. Sarles, "A Theological Evaluation of the Prosperity Gospel," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 143 (Oct.-Dec. 1986): 339.

7 Kenneth Copeland, *The Troublemaker* (Fort Worth, TX: Kenneth Copeland Publications, 1996), 6.

8 John Avanzini, "Believer's Voice of Victory," program on TBN, 20 January 1991. Quoted in Hank Hanegraaff, *Christianity in Crisis* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1993), 381.

9 Idem, "Praise the Lord," program on TBN, 15 September 1988. Quoted in Hanegraaff, 381.

10 Avanzini, "Believer's Voice of Victory."

11 Kenneth Copeland, *The Laws of Prosperity*, 26.

12 Gloria Copeland, *God's Will is Prosperity* (Fort Worth, TX: Kenneth Copeland Publications, 1973), 45.

13 Other verses that the "Law of Compensation" is based upon include Eccl. 11:1, 2 Cor. 9:6, and Gal. 6:7.

14 Gloria Copeland, *God's Will*, 54.

15 Kenneth Copeland, *The Laws of Prosperity*, 19.

16 Creflo Dollar, "Prayer: Your Path to Success," March 2, 2009, **http://www.creflodollarministries.org/BibleStudy/Articles.aspx?id=329** (accessed on October 30, 2013).

17 James R. Goff, Jr., "The Faith That Claims," *Christianity Today*, vol. 34, February 1990, 21.

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Nine Marks of a Prosperity Gospel Church



By D.A. Horton

How do you assess a prosperity gospel church?

The first nine years of my walk with Christ were spent in such an environment, followed by two years in theological rehab, which prepared me for the next six years of pastoring in the urban context. What's become clear to me is that the nine marks of a healthy church provide a useful grid for assessing any church, including those that teach the prosperity gospel.

And what we find is that a prosperity gospel church is a purely anti-nine marks church.

Some of the examples in what follows are specific and may not identify with you the reader. Many however are universal and are propagated by preachers on the internet, radio, and television. Since the prosperity gospel movement is inter-denominational, the teachings expressed in this article are not to be associated with any one denomination within evangelical Christianity.

1. EXPOSITIONAL PREACHING

Preaching in prosperity gospel churches is far from expositional. Instead, the purpose of preaching is to motivate hearers to give financially, and you give to get. Preachers exploit the passages that deal with the sacrificial giving of tithes and offerings week in and week out. They instruct hearers to activate their faith by sowing a "faith seed," thereby taping into God's law of reciprocity and leading to their own financial breakthrough.

Isolated Old Testament passages are often used as examples of God's abundant reward for faith giving. One passage often used to manipulate hearers into giving more is Malachi 3:10. Prosperity preachers highlight two points from this passage. First, they tell hearers they are robbing God by not tithing. Second, they assure hearers that God wants them to test him by giving more, so that he can give them more.

But consider Malachi 3:10 in its proper context. The Israelites were robbing God by not giving enough food to the national storehouse that was used to feed the priests of Israel. So the priests were having to leave their priestly duties and take up farming to survive (see Neh. 13:10-13). God therefore exhorts Israel to test him by giving obediently. If they did, he would reward them as he did in the past (2 Chr. 31:7-10). The point of this entire passage concerns a historically specific episode in the life of Israel. Preaching it as a Christian sermon, however, requires more than transferring its commands and promises to Christians on a one-to-one basis. Yes, there are larger applications for the Christian concerning giving, but first one needs to account for the differences between old covenant and new, especially the nature of God's promises to Israel and the manner in which they are fulfilled for the Christian in Christ.

A healthy church uses preaching to communicate God's words to his people. It confronts the hearer with God's truth and leads to conviction, encouragement, clarity, and a call to action. It also centers every text around the gospel in order to show the hearer how central and necessary Jesus Christ is to the believer living in obedience to God's word. A healthy church will inform believers that the results of holy living will not necessarily be financial gain but rather godliness that honors our Lord.

2. BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

Prosperity gospel theology rests upon the foundational error that man shares a form of deity with God, such that our words carry the same creative power as God's words. Psalm 82:6, Proverbs 18:20-21, and Romans 4:17 are popular proof texts used to support this falsehood. It is often said that man is a "lower-case god" and possesses the power to demonstrate deity by speaking things into existence, creating and controlling our destiny with words, and even mandating a frustrated and limited God to act on our behalf for our benefit.

But none of these proof texts support these prosperity teachings. In Psalm 82:6, the Psalmist is crying out to God regarding the immoral judges who were governing the nation of Israel. God speaks directly to the erring judges by addressing them as "gods" to highlight the fact they were judging the nation in his place. They were to use his word as their standard of judgment. In the very next verse God reminds them they are not eternal beings. Instead they are mere men who have failed to live and judge righteously. This passage is not elevating man to a demigod status. Neither is it providing man with the ability to act with sovereign authority. Instead, the only true and living God is judging the immoral actions of these judges.

Proverbs 18:20-21 is a principle, not a promise, and it outlines two truths. The first is that our words do not dictate our destiny; rather, they display the conditions of our heart. Secondly, there are times when our words will cause us to endure consequences. This passage does not promise us the power to declare the length of our life. Neither does it pronounce God

powerlessness to save us if we curse ourselves to death, as some prosperity teachers have taught.

In Romans 4:17 Paul teaches that God justified Abraham and declared him the father of nations while Abraham was still childless. This passage has nothing to do with saints speaking into existence more money, job promotions, or even the salvation of lost loved ones. This passage is in fact championing the truth that God is the only one who can call things into existence.

A healthy church teaches its members sound doctrine that is rooted in Scriptures that are kept in context. Sound doctrine is healthy teaching that provides the hearer with the biblical nutrients needed to grow to maturity in Christ (2 Tim. 3:16-17). In order for a church to be healthy, they must teach the whole Bible, in the context of the whole Bible, and root all of their doctrinal convictions in the whole Bible, instead of pulling passages out of context (1 Tim. 1:5; Titus 2:1-10; 2 John 1-6).

3. THE GOSPEL

In many prosperity gospel churches the message of the gospel is identified with the material blessings of the Abrahamic covenant. Although Christ's perfect life, death, burial, and resurrection are proclaimed, and salvation through Christ alone is championed, many prosperity gospel preachers say

the evidence of a person's belief in the gospel is whether they receive the blessings promised to Abraham by God (Gen. 12-15).

I've found this teaching leading people to one of two conclusions. If someone has prosperity and health, they conclude that they are saved because they're enjoying the promises of Abraham. But if these blessings are not seen in the life of the believer, they don't have enough faith. They're in sin. They need to give more tithes. Or perhaps they have not fully trusted in Jesus Christ and need to become born again in order to receive the blessings of Abraham.

In contrast, healthy churches unashamedly proclaim the whole counsel of the biblical gospel. This includes the truth that we were created in God's image (Gen. 1:26-27), we once had open fellowship with God (Gen. 2:7-25), and yet because our first father Adam sinned all of humanity was separated both physically (Gen. 3:1-19) and spiritually (Rom. 5:12) from the holy and righteous God who created us. Since humanity has been separated from God because of sin, the penalty to atone for sin is the shedding of blood and death (Lev. 1:3-17). The beauty of the gospel is fact that Jesus Christ, who has eternally existed as God (John 1:1), became a man (John 1:14), lived a perfect life according to God's law (Heb. 7:26), and shed his blood while dying in the place of sinners (Mark 10:45 and 2 Peter 2:24). Jesus was buried in a tomb for three days (Matt. 27:57-66) and on the third day rose from the grave (Matt. 28:1-8). Now he calls all people

to repent of their sins and trust in him in order to be reconciled to God and receive eternal life (Jn. 3:16).

The biblical gospel does not promise that Christians will be wealthy and prosperous in this life in fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham. Instead, Christians are "blessed" in Abraham in that we receive the Spirit (Gal. 3:14), and we will receive not just land, but the entire new creation, in the age to come (Rom. 4:13, Rev. 21-22).

4. CONVERSION

Conversion in a prosperity gospel church involves an uneasy mix of opposites: easy-believism and salvation by works. Prosperity preachers are known to teach a sinner is "saved" when they finish reciting the "sinners prayer." After this simple salvation takes place, the new believer is to submit him or herself to the leadership and teachings of the church, tithe regularly, give offerings often, and strive to serve on a continual basis in ministry at the church. As long as a person does these things, he or she maintains salvation. But if one stops them for an elongated period of time, one can lose it. In order to advance this teaching, pastors have been known to use psychological and scriptural manipulation to get the members of the church to do various acts of service in the name of ministry to the Lord. Their service, he promises, will prevent them from "falling from grace" and losing their salvation.

Some prosperity gospel adherents burn out and become angry with their leaders. They begin to question the ministry's methods and refuse to comply with its demands. I've watched pastors who sensed they were losing control of this type of person respond by claiming that the member is in rebellion, causing division, and on a trajectory to lose their salvation unless they repent and begin serving again. In these cases 1 Samuel 15:23 was used as the proof text to point out the consequences of the person's actions and to dissuade others from following. But this verse speaks of King Saul's direct disobedience to a command of God, not a genuine believer who questions unbiblical teaching or church practices.

A healthy church lovingly teaches the biblical view of conversion. In the Bible we read that conversion takes place when the biblical gospel is preached (Rom. 1:16-17, 10:9-17) and the sinner repents of their sins and puts their trust in Jesus Christ (Acts 3:19; Rom. 3:21-26). Conversion happens when God the Holy Spirit causes the sinner who is dead in sin to become alive in Christ (John 3:3-8; Eph. 2:1-10). Biblical conversion puts the focus on repentance and belief in the work of Christ, not simply saying a prayer and serving to the point of exhaustion for fear of losing one's salvation.

5. EVANGELISM

Prosperity gospel churches often teach evangelism must be coupled with a demonstration of signs and wonders. When these two elements are combined it is said that sinners will repent and believe in Jesus. I've heard people say in pre-evangelistic times of prayer that sinners will not repent unless they see physical evidence of the supernatural work of God the Holy Spirit as listed in Mark 16:15-16.

Since the inclusion of this passage in the original and oldest most trusted manuscripts is disputed, it is unwise to build one's doctrinal stance on this passage alone. Further, mandating that people demonstrate the signs in this passage in order to be effective in evangelism is dangerous and manipulative.

Biblical evangelism is proclaiming the gospel and calling sinners to repentance. The gospel needs no upgrades, bells, or whistles in order to be effective (1 Cor. 15:1-4). The Bible is clear that the preached gospel is powerful to save sinners (Rom. 1:16, 10:17).

6. CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

Prosperity gospel churches often equate church membership with regular attendance, tithing, and service—with or without a formal commitment. People are often "grandfathered" into church membership if they do these things long enough. In one case I recall a person who attended the church

for over two decades, received the benefits of membership, yet never formally joined the church. They felt no need to since they gave financially and served weekly. I've watched people in such circumstances live in open sin and avoid church discipline.

A healthy church presents church membership as a blessing and mandate for the believer. The blessing is that the church affirms the believer's faith and builds the believer up in love (Eph. 4:11-16). The mandate is that Jesus requires Christians to submit to his authority by submitting to the church's authority. You're not truly a member of the body if you can simply detach at will.

7. CHURCH DISCIPLINE

I've witnessed church discipline in prosperity gospel churches land on one of two extremes. The first was an informal excommunication where the biblical protocol for church discipline was not followed (i.e., Matt. 18:15-17; 1 Cor. 5:1-13; 2 Cor. 2:6; 2 Thess. 3:6-15). The individuals said to be living in sin were "disfellowshipped" from the church in private only to be spoken of in public as those we were not have contact with because of their rebellion.

The second extreme was for leadership to completely ignore the sin of either another leader, popular member, or both. When this approach was

used, the leaders who knew the person's unrepentant habitual sin willfully refused to acknowledge and deal with it. Sadly, I witnessed leaders members who brought up the sin of other members with statements like, "God forgives and his love covers the multitudes of your sins," and "only God can judge them." In the case of sinning leaders remaining in ministry, it was said "the gifts of God come without repentance" a distortion of Romans 11:29. Prosperity preachers often use 1 Chronicles 16:22 ("Touch not my anointed ones, do my prophets no harm!") as a repellant for questions from members of their congregation. Sometimes prosperity gospel churches have been known to cover the sin of a leader by sending them on a sabbatical in place of practicing 1 Timothy 5:17-20.

Healthy churches embrace God's desire for a pure, holy church. As they help their people grow in Christlikeness, they will shine like stars in the world (Eph. 4:11-32; Phil. 2:1-18). Healthy churches understand that leaders are not exempt from temptation, lapses of judgment, and sin. Healthy churches then teach and follow the biblical prescription for church discipline, including discipline of leaders (1 Tim. 5:17-20).

8. DISCIPLESHIP

Discipleship in prosperity gospel churches often tends toward co-dependency with the pastor or another prominent church leader. The entry level of discipleship is known as the "armor-bearer" stage. An armor-bearer

in Scripture was a person who carried the weapons of their leader and protected them (1 Sam. 14:6-7 and 2 Sam. 18:15). But in prosperity gospel churches, armor-bearer has become an unofficial office. New converts who want to grow in their walk with God are placed in a cohort. This cohort is trained to serve the emotional, physical, and spiritual needs of the pastor or church leader. The pastor will often commission armor-bearers to engage in activities ranging from carrying his Bible to paying his bills, all in the name of "ministry." In some extreme cases I've counseled ex-armor-bearers who were instructed to give the pastor massages after he preached, and even sexual favors.

If an armor-bearer sticks around long enough, they can earn a promotion that comes with a title, licensure to preach, and even ordination. Most often, the pastor does this to pad the stats of his ministry as many of these ordained men (and sometimes women) sit on the sidelines cheering the pastor on while he preaches. I've known some pastors to boast in having dozens of ordained men sit under them for decades. Rarely are these ordained ministers sent out to plant churches, revitalize dying churches, or engage in vocational ministry overseas. Sadly, in one instance I counseled someone who sat under a pastor for over fifteen years as an ordained minister and was never once instructed about the biblical qualifications of an elder.

A healthy church disciples its people to depend more on Jesus, not a pastor or church leader. Believers grow by deepening their knowledge of Jesus (2

Pet. 3:18), and, by the power of the Spirit, imitating Jesus (1 Cor. 4:16, 11:1; Eph. 5:1). Biblical disciples produce more biblical disciples, not dependents (2 Tim. 2:2; Titus 2:1-8).

9. CHURCH LEADERSHIP

Prosperity gospel preachers often receive undying support from their members because the people live vicariously through their pastor. If the pastor's platform and bank account grow, the members of the flock celebrate as if the prosperity were their own. Some congregations want their pastor to have the newest top-of-the-line car, wear expensive name-brand clothing, and live in a large home in order that God's blessings would trickle down to them. I was once told, "If my pastor is living large, he's paving the way for me and my family to live large."

In many cases, the pastor is said to be God's voice to the congregation, and therefore has unquestioned authority. The leadership structure varies between a C.E.O. model and a monarchy. I've often seen others appointed as pastors or elders not based on biblical qualifications but because of their occupation and closeness to the pastor.

A healthy churches champions biblically qualified leaders. 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9 are passages that clearly lay out qualifications for the men who would lead God's church. The qualifications emphasize the man's

character, not his occupation or friendship with the pastor. Elders are to shepherd the flock, feed them with healthy doctrine, lead in humility, and defend them from false teachers.

SHEEP WITHOUT A SHEPHERD

There is unceasing grief in my heart for people who are under all or some of the teachings highlighted here. They are like the weary, scattered sheep without a shepherd on whom Jesus had compassion (Matt. 9:36). These precious souls of Jesus' day were being abused, distressed, and harassed by their leaders. They knew no other way of life since it was their own religious leaders who treated them this way. Jesus responded by telling his disciples to pray for the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.

The grief I share for the weary and scattered sheep of today drives me to do two things: pray for the Lord to send out laborers who will seek and serve these scattered sheep, and labor to lead a healthy church in order to reach the sheep in my city. I pray this article has helped kindle a fire in your heart for seeing healthy churches serving cities across the globe.

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Do You Know What Your Missionaries Actually Teach?!



By Sean DeMars

Stop sending prosperity-preaching missionaries to the jungles of Peru. They're killing the villages here. Your missionaries are spending tens of thousands of dollars, traveling across land and sea, invading and settling into new cultures, and it's all for nothing. They're doing more harm than good.

Your short-term and long-term missionaries are bringing death to Peru in the form of the prosperity gospel and word of faith teachings. Men and women are coming down here and telling these people that they're poor because of sin and doubt. They're telling the people to speak positive and claim success and health. These missionaries are telling people that they can

be rich and live like the patriarchs of the Bible, blessed by the hand of God because of their faith and unshakable holiness.

Do you know how these people are living? They're drinking river water that is forty percent mud and one hundred percent laden with parasites. They're living on bananas and roots. It's a two-day boat ride to the nearest doctor, and the great majority of these people can't afford boat tickets. Nor can they afford the doctor visit if they could manage to get there. These people have Bibles that they don't understand because many of them can't read, and they are isolated from anything that even remotely resembles theological training.

And here you are, Deacon of Missions, and you've just agreed to sponsor missionary "X." Have you talked with him about where he stands doctrinally? Does he believe the prosperity gospel? Is he sympathetic to it? Is he able to rightly divide the word of truth? Is he one approved by a local church that really believes in 2 Timothy 2:15? This person is about to travel the world to make a disciple. Do you know if that's going to be a good thing, or something to be mourned (Matt 23:15)?

This guy has a great slideshow presentation, a firm handshake, and he can hold the room like a professional. You decide to help him get to the jungles of Peru. As soon as his boots hit the ground he's doing a whole bunch of stuff that will look *great* in his newsletters. Toys for the kids. A new short-

term missions team is coming down every month. Buildings are being built, Bibles are being given away, and the slide show reel is growing every day.

Oh, by the way, he's preaching a false gospel. He's hurting people eternally. He's doing all kinds of cool, fun, and really Christian stuff for the few hundred people living in this village. But he's hurting them. In eternal perspective, he is guiding them along the path to nothing but pain and sadness. And he's able to do it because you send him a big fat check every month. You're responsible.

Of course, it's not all your fault, but you are responsible for what you do with your money. Stewardship is the word typically used here. You are accountable for the way you spend that money. You pool those resources, and you are using it to send a false prophet to the jungles of Peru. Or to the caves of Pakistan. Or to the deserts of western Africa.

America is exporting a false gospel that is putting people on the A Train to an eternity of suffering, and you are part of the problem. Stop it. Stop sending wolves in sheep's clothing. Stop supporting them. Exercise discernment. You've supported over two hundred missionaries in the last fourteen years? Great! But what if fifty of them have been ravaging the people you sent them to?

Of course, many churches are careful and discerning about which missionaries they support. I'm grateful for them and I pray God would raise up many more. If that's your church, pray that God would keep you

vigilant. And pray that your sister churches would have the courage and conviction to send prosperity-preaching missionaries to the bench instead of the field.

This isn't hypothetical. I've seen it. In my short time here in the jungles of Peru, I have seen case after case of "Who told this guy he could be a missionary?" I've seen the people hurt. I've seen the churches hurt. I've seen the smiles turn to frowns and the tears of joy turn into tears of pain. I've had to rebuke and fight to crowd out the false gospel with the true and beautiful one. I never imagined that our team's greatest struggle would be fighting to undo all the damage done by other missionaries.

To be honest, "Jesus never promised to make us rich, he promised us he would save us from our sin, and that's enough!" doesn't really have the same ring to it. It's hard to get people to rally around that after they've been sold a stadium worth of fool's gold.

Maybe you're sitting there with your arms crossed, feeling assured that I'm not talking to you. Your church is reformed. It's gotta be "those guys" who are responsible for this, right?

Wrong. It's not just mainline or Pentecostal or word-of-faith or evangellyfish churches that are responsible for this. It's reformed churches, too. To borrow something from one of my teammates: "That church is reformed, but many of their members feel just as comfortable listening to Joel Osteen as to John MacArthur." It's not just "them." Reformed churches

are allowing these teachings to exist within their own four walls, and they are also supporting missionaries who believe and teach such things.

Missions exists because we want to see people eternally happy in the presence of God forever. Let that be your guiding light. Are the people you support working for that? Are they going to help people be eternally happy in Christ? If not, let me encourage you to gently and humbly refuse to support them. Remember, your faithfulness to the Great Commission will not be measured by dollars spent, Bibles given, or hands raised at an altar call. The measure of faithfulness will be an eternal one.

The gospel is beautiful, brothers. It's the only hope any of us have. Please treat it that way. Love it, protect it, and guard it. And for the love of all things good and holy, please stop sending missionaries to my backyard if they don't.

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Money: An Instrument for Blessing, Not an Indicator of It



By John Onwuchekwa

I was in college. I was a young Christian. And I remember walking past my pastor's luxury car into the church office one day, and was greeted by a sign on the door that read, "We are no longer accepting requests for benevolence due to budgetary constraints."

It's not necessarily wrong for a pastor to own a luxury car. It's not necessarily right for a church to use all its discretionary money to care for the poor. But the juxtaposition of these two things in that moment caused me to start viewing the church through a different lens almost immediately, like when you buy a new car and then starting seeing that model everywhere.

Over the coming months I started noticing similar distortions throughout our church: in what it measured and evaluated (numerical growth, physical health, financial well-being); in what it celebrated (new cars for the pastor and his wife, new facilities); in what the church and its members did and did not spend our money on.

Here's one way to summarize the larger pattern: Money and stuff and outward things generally were treated as an indication of God's blessing. They weren't treated as an instrument for blessing others and doing gospel work. So we spent it on ourselves. Cash came into our cul-de-sac and didn't leave.

The church was its own little private kingdom. Ministers and up-and-comers were rewarded so long as they stayed "loyal" and supported the church. If someone tried to leave and start a new gospel work, the moral and financial support would stop. Missions and church planting and taking the gospel to the nations were seldom, if ever, mentioned.

If you haven't picked up the clues, I was part of church influenced by the prosperity gospel.

To understand how churches and Christians should view money, we should start with a biblical view of blessing. Listen to what Psalm 32 says is true blessing: "Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit."

The forgiveness of sins, as it's declared and discovered in the context of a church community, is the true indicator of God's blessing.

In other words, don't measure God's love and favor toward you by the money you have or think you should have. There are lots of rich people who are going to hell. Remember what Jesus said about the camel going through the eye of the needle?

You know he loves you and favors you because he's forgiven you! "But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8).

Money and resources, then, are instruments for propagating this message. Churches and Christians shouldn't be cul-de-sacs for cash. They should be thoroughfares for finance.

Don't be like the fool who only knew how to build bigger barns and horde what God had given him, thinking that it was his security. Spend what you have for the kingdom. Pay pastors to preach the gospel. Support other individuals, missionaries, and churches when they go out to do gospel work. Then ask God to give more so that you can spend that on kingdom purposes, too.

So forget about identifying the most blatant "prosperity gospel" offenders. What about you? Do you lead your church to view wealth as an indicator of blessing or an instrument for it?

Here are a few more questions to ask yourself:

- How does the church that I lead view and manage resources?
- What are the things that our congregation celebrates? (Chances are they learned it from you.)
- How long have we been "meaning" to increase our mission's budget? What things have we used our money for that have kept us from doing this?
- Why am I so concerned with how many people attend my church? Why is numerical growth so important, and why do I envy other pastors?
- Why do I hope that our budget increases this year? Why am I praying for God to provide more resources?

None of us are immune to faulty thinking on how to view the money that God gives us. Is money a blessing? In some ways, yes. But more than that, it's an instrument for pointing people to the real blessing—a knowledge of him!

No matter what name is used, the essence of this new gospel is the same. Simply put, this egocentric "prosperity gospel" teaches that God wants believers to be physically healthy, materially wealthy, and personally happy. Listen to the words of Robert Tilton, one of the prosperity gospel's best

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Prosperity Preaching: Deceitful and Deadly



By John Piper

When I read about prosperity-preaching churches, my response is: “If I were not on the inside of Christianity, I wouldn’t want in.” In other words, if this is the message of Jesus, no thank you.

Luring people to Christ to get rich is both deceitful and deadly. It’s deceitful because when Jesus himself called us, he said things like: “Any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:33). And it’s deadly because the desire to be rich plunges “people into ruin and destruction” (1 Tim. 6:9). So here is my plea to preachers of the gospel.

1. Don’t develop a philosophy of ministry that makes it harder for people to get into heaven.

Jesus said, “How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” His disciples were astonished, as many in the “prosperity” movement should be. So Jesus went on to raise their astonishment even higher by saying, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” They respond in disbelief: “Then who can be saved?” Jesus says, “With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God” (Mark 10:23-27).

My question for prosperity preachers is: Why would you want to develop a ministry focus that makes it harder for people to enter heaven?

2. Do not develop a philosophy of ministry that kindles suicidal desires in people.

Paul said, “There is great gain in godliness with contentment, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content.” But then he warned against the desire to be rich. And by implication, he warned against preachers who stir up the desire to be rich instead of helping people get rid of it. He warned, “Those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs” (1 Tim. 6:6-10).

So my question for prosperity preachers is: Why would you want to develop a ministry that encourages people to pierce themselves with many pangs and plunge themselves into ruin and destruction?

3. Do not develop a philosophy of ministry that encourages vulnerability to moth and rust.

Jesus warns against the effort to lay up treasures on earth. That is, he tells us to be givers, not keepers. "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal" (Matt. 6:19).

Yes, we all keep something. But given the built-in tendency toward greed in all of us, why would we take the focus off Jesus and turn it upside down?

4. Don't develop a philosophy of ministry that makes hard work a means of amassing wealth.

Paul said we should not steal. The alternative was hard work with our own hands. But the main purpose was not merely to hoard or even to have. The purpose was "to have to give." "Let him labor, working with his hands, that he may have to give to him who is in need" (Eph. 4:28). This is not a justification for being rich in order to give more. It is a call to make more and keep less so you can give more. There is no reason why a person who makes $200,000 should live any differently from the way a person who

makes $80,000 lives. Find a wartime lifestyle; cap your expenditures; then give the rest away.

Why would you want to encourage people to think that they should possess wealth in order to be a lavish giver? Why not encourage them to keep their lives more simple and be an even more lavish giver? Would that not add to their generosity a strong testimony that Christ, and not possessions, is their treasure?

5. Don't develop a philosophy of ministry that promotes less faith in the promises of God to be for us what money can't be.

The reason the writer to the Hebrews tells us to be content with what we have is that the opposite implies less faith in the promises of God. He says, "Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.' So we can confidently say, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?'" (Heb. 13:5-6).

If the Bible tells us that being content with what we have honors the promise of God never to forsake us, why would we want to teach people to want to be rich?

6. Don't develop a philosophy of ministry that contributes to your people being choked to death.

Jesus warns that the word of God, which is meant to give us life, can be choked off from any effectiveness by riches. He says it is like a seed that grows up among thorns that choke it to death: "They are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the…riches…of life, and their fruit does not mature" (Luke 8:14).

Why would we want to encourage people to pursue the very thing that Jesus warns will choke us to death?

7. Don't develop a philosophy of ministry that takes the seasoning out of the salt and puts the light under a basket.

What is it about Christians that makes them the salt of the earth and the light of the world? It is not wealth. The desire for wealth and the pursuit of wealth tastes and looks just like the world. It does not offer the world anything different from what it already believes in. The great tragedy of prosperity-preaching is that a person does not have to be spiritually awakened in order to embrace it; one needs only to be greedy. Getting rich in the name of Jesus is not the salt of the earth or the light of the world. In this, the world simply sees a reflection of itself. And if it works, they will buy it.

The context of Jesus' saying shows us what the salt and light are. They are the joyful willingness to suffering for Christ. Here is what Jesus said, "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for

your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. You are the salt of the earth….You are the light of the world" (Matt. 5:11-14).

What will make the world taste (the salt) and see (the light) of Christ in us is not that we love wealth the same way they do. Rather, it will be the willingness and the ability of Christians to love others through suffering, all the while rejoicing because their reward is in heaven with Jesus. This is inexplicable on human terms. This is supernatural. But to attract people with promises of prosperity is simply natural. It is not the message of Jesus. It is not what he died to achieve.

This article originally appeared at desiringGod.org and has been reprinted by permission.

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Evangelizing Prosperity Gospel Adherents



By Allen Duty

One clear winter morning, I was sitting at my favorite coffee shop reading the Scriptures and journaling. A man walking past my table noticed I was reading the Bible and began to engage me in conversation.

He shared that he was a member of a large church in our area (one that preaches the prosperity "gospel"), and that he believed the Bible was primarily a book about God's intentions to bless us.

I replied that the Bible is actually a book about who God is, who we are, and what God has done to reconcile us to himself. I began sharing the gospel, and noted that Christians were promised suffering as part of following Jesus.

He responded by saying that as long as we have faith, God will bless us and keep us from suffering. I referred to several verses where God promises that believers will suffer ordinary trials as well as specific persecution, at which point he put up his hands defensively and said, “I just don’t receive that for my life.”

My wife and I had recently suffered a miscarriage, and I felt compelled to share that with him. I explained that when we encounter trials like those, we can’t simply say, “I just don’t receive that for my life” and make them go away. I also shared the good news that Jesus has overcome the world, and that he promises never to leave us or forsake us in our trials—promises that comforted us in our suffering.

I believe my openness and the weightiness of my trial caught him off-guard, so he quickly expressed his condolences and excused himself from the conversation. But the whole experience left me wondering: how can we better prepare ourselves to evangelize those who believe the prosperity “gospel”?

WHY IS THIS SO HARD?

Sharing the gospel with people who have bought into the unbiblical message that Jesus died to make us healthy, wealthy, and successful is challenging for many reasons, but I believe two are primary.

1. The message of prosperity appeals to the flesh.

First, the message of prosperity appeals to the flesh. The prosperity "gospel" capitalizes on natural desires for health and wealth and promises what our sinful hearts desire. There is no call to repent of sin; there is no call to deny yourself, pick up your cross, and follow Jesus; there is no call to die (Mk. 10:34-35).

As a result, when we share the gospel with someone who has bought into the prosperity "gospel," we are calling him to forsake his belief in a message that appeals to the flesh in exchange for belief in a message that doesn't.

2. They use the same words we do, but with different meaning.

Second, prosperity "gospel" adherents use the same words we do, but with different meaning. For example, when I use the word *faith*, I mean a gift God has given me to believe that his Word is true and that his Son is the Christ (1 Cor. 2:14; Jn. 6:44, 65). When many prosperity "gospel" adherents use the word *faith*, they mean a tool we use to place God in our debt. Faith is simply the currency we use to get what we want from God.

As another example, when I use the word *gospel*, I mean the good news of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection (1 Cor. 15:1-4; Gal. 2:10-14). When many prosperity "gospel" adherents use the word *gospel*, they mean the "good news" that God desires us to be healthy, wealthy, and prosperous.

FIVE TIPS FOR EVANGELIZING PROSPERITY GOSPEL ADHERENTS

Paul is clear that all Christians, especially pastors, should do the work of evangelism, and that we should "be ready in season and out of season" (2 Tim. 4:1-5). How, then, can we evangelize those who believe in the prosperity "gospel"?

1. Humbly recognize that apart from the grace of God, we too would believe a false gospel.

Humbly recognize that apart from the grace of God, we too would believe a false gospel. If it's true that the prosperity "gospel" appeals to the flesh and we were born dead in sin (Eph. 2:1), then the grace of God is the only reason we recognize it as a false gospel. This should lead us to speak humbly with those who believe the lie of the prosperity "gospel."

2. Affirm what is true in the prosperity "gospel."

Let me be clear: the prosperity "gospel" is a counterfeit gospel. But the thing about counterfeits is that they have to look enough like the real thing in order to be believable. So affirm what is true in the prosperity gospel.

The prosperity "gospel" is based upon a theistic worldview. It correctly asserts that there are blessings from following Jesus—even in this lifetime

(Mk. 10:29-30). It is based upon a firm belief that God hears and answers prayer (Jas. 5:16), and it affirms the truth that God rewards faith (Mt. 9:29).

The prosperity "gospel" isn't completely devoid of truth, and to pretend otherwise is neither accurate nor helpful in evangelism.

3. Confront the lies and flaws of the prosperity "gospel."

Confront the lies and flaws of the prosperity "gospel." One dangerous lie of the prosperity "gospel" is that the quantity of your faith determines what you receive from God. However, the Bible is clear that it is the *object* of our faith, not the *amount* we have, that matters. If we have great faith in idols, they will not save us; if we have even small faith in Jesus, he will save us (Jn. 14:1-14).

A fatal flaw of the prosperity "gospel" is that it provides no help when suffering inevitably comes (Jn. 16:33). If we believe that our faith in God will exempt us from suffering, we will be forced to conclude that God lied to us, that he doesn't exist, or that we simply didn't have enough faith—none of which are true.

4. Hold out the hope of the biblical gospel.

Hold out the hope of the biblical gospel. The gospel tells us that we do not deserve good from God. We deserve to be eternally punished for our sin.

And yet God, who is rich in mercy, justifies us through faith in the person and work of Jesus.

Whether we receive many apparent blessings in this life or not, the good news is that through faith in Christ, our sin is forgiven and we have been adopted into God's family. That knowledge will keep us from idolizing good things or becoming unnecessarily discouraged when we don't receive good things in this life.

5. Live a generous life that shows our greatest joy is found in God, not in the material blessings God gives us.

Finally, live a generous life that shows our greatest joy is found in God, not in the material blessings God gives us. If we argue convincingly against the prosperity "gospel" from Scripture but then live to acquire and hoard money and possessions, we undo with our lives everything we may have accomplished with our lips.

When we live generous lives, giving out of the abundance God has given to us, we create opportunities to share the biblical gospel. Paul writes, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9).

Giving generously shows others that Christ is our greatest treasure, and that we value him and his work on our behalf above anything else God will ever

give to us.

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The Prosperity Gospel and Biblical Theology



By Michael Schäfer

Psalm 23 is the most loved passage in the Bible and therefore perhaps the most cherished piece of writing of all time. Its promises and encouragements are so clear that it hardly needs interpretation. At most, Bible teachers have had to remind believers that the shepherd Lord spoken of by the psalm is the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus laid down his life for his sheep and makes it possible for the psalm's promises to be fulfilled.

However, in the hands of those who teach the Bible for selfish gain, the opening verse promises that no believer should ever want for anything at all: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want."

On their interpretation, believers have access to the treasures of God, freeing them to have whatever they want. So name it and claim it!

TO GET, GIVE…ESPECIALLY TO THE TEACHER

But these teachers go further. Again misinterpreting Scripture, they explain that this promised abundance requires certain conditions to be realized. God's abundant sharing is based on the person's own generous giving, usually to the teacher! And here Scripture after Scripture is used:

> Give generously to him [the poor in the land] and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. (Deut. 15:10)
>
> Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine. (Prov. 3:9-10)
>
> One person gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty. A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed. (Prov. 11:24-25)

> The generous will themselves be blessed, for they share their food with the poor. (Prov. 22:9)
>
> "Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the Lord Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it." (Mal. 3:10)
>
> Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. As it is written: "They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor; their righteousness endures forever." Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. (2 Cor. 9:6-10)

It is clear why the prosperity gospel has taken such a foothold in the church. Not only is it fueled by the sinful greed of both teachers and hearers, it seems to be the clear teaching of God that giving results in receiving.

So how do we set about to combat this false teaching that is ravaging the church?

WICKED UNBELIEVER OR UNINFORMED BELIEVER?

In my own South African context, as no doubt elsewhere too, one must first consider whether the false teacher is teaching this way as a wicked unbeliever or as an uninformed believer.

Many prosperity teachers preach this way as the enemies of God. They do not have orthodox views of the Godhead, or teach that the way of salvation is through Christ alone. Those who fall into this category require our prayers and evangelistic witness. They are leading themselves and their followers to hell as they preach that which is no gospel at all.

But there is another very common group (in South Africa, at least): uninformed believers.

These uninformed preachers believe and teach the prosperity gospel more out of ignorance than wickedness. Their earnest desire is to uphold the Word of God, but their strict wooden reading of the Scriptures, uninformed by the rules of genre or a text's place in the larger biblical storyline, results in them drifting from the truth.

WHAT'S NEEDED: BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

What is it that this second group needs? They need to be taught biblical theology.

The phrase “biblical theology” can simply refer to theology that’s biblical. But I am using it here in a more technical sense to refer to a way of reading the Bible as one story, by one author, about one Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Biblical theology teaches us to read every passage of Scripture in light of the person and work of Christ (see, for example, Luke 24:27, 44-47; John 5:39).

The seemingly literal way of reading any given Scripture such as “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want” is seen by many to be the mark of true discipleship. But if such readings do not respect the rules of genre or place those texts within the larger biblical storyline, they will distort God’s Word. Such readings need to be lovingly exposed as an inadequate way to interpret the message the Bible.

A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF WEALTH AND PROSPERITY

For instance, what does the Bible teach about wealth and prosperity?

The opening chapters of the Bible clearly teach that, as Creator, God is the owner of all things (Ps. 89:11). All wealth therefore belongs to him (Ps.

50:10) and is to be used to rule the earth and bring glory to him through the worship of his Son and service to his people.

As the owner of all, God desires that we, his creatures and rulers on earth, desire relationship with him, rather than fixating on the things he created to serve us (Matt. 6:31-33). However, mankind has consistently worshipped created things rather than the Creator, and used material things for selfish purposes.

This has the been the norm throughout history, so it came as a huge surprise when God acted graciously towards Abram, promising him and the generations that followed a magnificent kingdom which he would bless materially, so that they could do what God intended for Adam: to rule over creation for the purpose of worshipping God and serving others, as well as being a light to the nations (Gen. 12:1-3, 15:1-18). The nations were meant to look at Israel and see them as a wise and blessed people, and then turn to their God for inclusion amongst his people (Deut. 4:1-8).

To prepare them to be this light, and to prepare them for life in the Promised Land, God gave his people the Law (Ex. 19-20), after which he promised that those who submitted to his rule would receive material blessing, while those who rejected his rule would face his curse, often described in terms of material poverty (Deut. 28:1-68).

However, despite that warning, the prophets were still required to preach words of warning to those who chose to pursue their own wealth rather than

being rich towards God (e.g., Isa. 5:8-10). Even after they suffered the punishment of exile for refusing complete allegiance to God, the people of God continued to choose their own comfort and pleasure over the glory of God (Hag. 1:4).

Throughout the Old Testament period the wisdom writers taught God's people that there was no wisdom in choosing anything over the Creator. Wisdom, based on the character of God, dictated that generosity would have positive outcomes in the giver's life, while self-centeredness would result in futility.

Only one man heeded the warning and had the wisdom to obey God's call to obedient submission. Jesus, despite Satan's temptations, lived in perfect obedience to the law of God (Matt. 4:1-11). As a result, he exercised perfect dominion over all creation as seen in his calming of storms (Matt. 8:23-27), healing of the sick (Matt. 8:14-17) and even by having dominion over death (Matt. 28:1-20).

Jesus' call to people was, and is, that we act wisely and obediently and submit to God's plan for our lives: repenting of sin and exercising faith in Jesus, God's revealed King. His death on the cross offers the forgiveness that self-centered humanity so desperately needs and his resurrection assures eternal life with him.

The New Testament writers echoed Jesus' teaching, who, by his perfect obedience had become Israel's wise man and prophet. They warned of the

love of money and urged God's people to pursue contentment and generosity for the sake of the growth of God's kingdom (1 Tim. 6:6-10, 17-19). Through their teaching, we know that those who gather around Jesus (the church) are promised God's daily care and provision (Phil. 4:19). But this promise of material provision and even blessing is not assured in the same way as it was with Israel, who revealed that material possessions were not an indication of their faithfulness or obedience. In fact, Jesus taught that he may lovingly call the church to suffer for his glory as a witness to a self-obsessed world, by displaying its desire to treasure him above all else (Matt. 5:3-12). For any believer, this suffering will be a joy, for he knows that Christ is his treasure, and that nothing can ever separate him from Christ (Rom. 8:35-39).

For the believer, eternity is the enjoyment of Christ his treasure, which even surpasses God's promise of great abundance and blessing being poured out on his people forever.

Any teaching that goes beyond this simple Bible overview, promising more prosperity than the Scriptures, needs to be corrected. Christ alone is our treasure. He is our blessing! Those who teach and those who listen must understand that no part of Scripture can be taken as contradictory to this overall message of the Scriptures, or offer a blessing other than Christ, or from a source other than Christ.

As a discipline, biblical theology forces one to ask questions of the text that are critical for every believer to come to terms with. “For whom was this text written? When was it written? Why was it written?” Only once those questions are answered should the teacher move from “them, there, then” to “us, here, now.”

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY THE GREATEST CORRECTIVE

The study of biblical theology—or simply: reading every text of the Bible in its context—is the greatest corrective to uninformed prosperity teaching.

It demands that we do not read the Bible selectively.

It demands that we submit every thought or idea we may have to the Word of God.

It demands that we recognize that the focal point of the Bible is Jesus’ rule and glory, rather than our own comfort and prosperity.

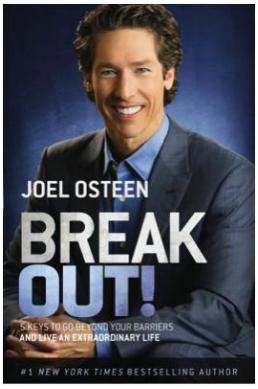
It demands that we consider who the intended, original audience was and what situation they found themselves in, before we move too quickly to ourselves in the twenty-first century.

And it demands that we consider the present in the promised light of eternity, not allowing our present light and momentary troubles to cloud the eternal weight of glory.

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Book Review: *Break Out!*



Reviewed by Bob Johnson

Joel Osteen, *Break Out! 5 Keys to Go Beyond Your Barriers and Live an Extraordinary Life*. FaithWords, 2013. 243 pages. $26.00

Detroit's freeways are framed by dozens of billboards featuring happy, young, successful people enjoying a night of games and entertainment at one of the city's casinos. The sleek, enticing images preach an alluring message: "Greatness awaits you in the casinos." "You were born to be lucky." On and on it goes. A closer look reveals the 1-800 number for Gambler's Anonymous. And if you ever went to a casino, you would find that the reality does not quite match the billboard.

For years, potential casino operators attempted to get gambling legalized in Detroit. On three different occasions, they got an initiative on the ballot, but there was one pastor in the city who stood in their way. He knew what gambling would do to this city. He organized and educated, and each time the initiative was defeated. Then this pastor had a serious heart attack, and the initiative for casinos in Detroit was back in play. This time, the organizers did not have the pesky pastor to contend with. But they did something else. On this fourth attempt, the organizers gathered a number of pastors from Detroit together and offered them stock in the casinos in exchange for their support from the pulpits. They were told to sell this idea to the people as something that will be good for the economy and will save our city. The pastors did, and on the fourth try, the initiative passed.

Today you can visit the casinos. Go to the slot machines and watch the glazed-over faces of old people whose reverse mortgages freed up some money so they could buy tokens for the slot machines. Hour after hour, they pull the one-armed bandit, awaiting the glory the billboards promise. Fear sets in. They think, “If I get up from the machine, the next person will come and win.” So they sit, hour after hour, until their clothes are soiled and their tokens are gone. Next month, after the social security check arrives, some of them will be on the first bus back to try again.

And in case you haven’t heard, Detroit is bankrupt.

The promises of the prosperity gospel are like the billboards of Detroit's casinos. It looks so good. It seems so appealing. One of its most influential voices is Joel Osteen, the pastor of Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas who recently released a new book called *Break Out!* If Disneyworld was a church, Joel Osteen would be the pastor. *Break Out!* is basically a combination of "When You Wish upon a Star" and "A Whole New World."

The problem is, Joel is a pastor, and his sermons and books are presented as truth, not fairy tales, and thousands of people really believe what he says. Some may be in our churches.

THE MAIN MESSAGE

Break Out! is a collection of twenty-five chapters (presumably sermons) organized into five sections. I could not discern much difference between the first four sections: (1) Believe Bigger; (2) Consider God, Not Circumstances; (3) Pray God-sized Prayers; 4) Keep the Right Perspective. The chapters basically follow the formula of stating the principle, supporting it with a story, inserting a vague reference to the Bible, and closing with a few more stories and exhortations.

Joel's message is clear: God helps those who help themselves. "Right now, something is looking for you. Something already has your name on it. As long as you're doing your best to honor God and you have a heart to help

others, an explosive blessing will find its way into your hands" (Ch. 4).[1] "If you stay on the high road and just keep being your best, you will see the hand of God at work in amazing ways" (Ch. 9). "But God is saying to you...If you only believe, I will turn the situation around. If you only believe, breakthroughs are headed your way. When you believe, the surpassing greatness of God's power is released" (Ch. 13) "When God sees you do your part, He will do His part" (Ch. 16).

Faith is the dream in your heart. "God did not create you to be average….He created you to do something amazing. He's put the seeds of greatness on the inside" (Ch. 25). But Osteen consistently portrays greatness as success in business, wealth, health, and overcoming addictions. Rarely, if ever, is "looking like Jesus" even mentioned.

If you listen carefully, Osteen is telling you that you can be your own Savior. Like the little engine that could, you can do it. You can do it. But the message of the Bible is that you cannot do it. That is why Christ came to this earth. He did what we could not do, dying on the cross to pay for your sins and rising from the grave to give you life if you repent and believe in him. If you keep telling people that they can do something they really can't, you are not helping people. You are putting them in bondage.

In the fifth section, "Don't Settle for Good Enough" there are some moments where Joel says some things that could have some value. The

problem is that they not only sit in a context of other errors but they blatantly contradict what he says earlier in the book.

THE MAIN PROBLEMS

The chief problem of this book is that Osteen centers life on achieving the American Dream—success, prosperity and health. But the Bible never presents the Christian life like this. Instead, our lives are centered upon Christ and the gospel. This chief problem is reflected in these other serious problems.

1. *Break Out!* constantly distorts the Bible at a basic, factual level.

First, *Break Out!* constantly distorts the Bible at a basic, factual level. In chapter 7, Osteen recounts the story of Moses leading the children of Israel out of Egypt, through the desert, in order to get to the Promised Land. He claims that when Moses became discouraged along the way, God asked him what he was holding in his hand. He goes on to tell the story of how Moses threw down his rod, which God turned into a snake. The problem is, this did not happen when Moses was leading the children of Israel out of Egypt, but in Exodus 4 when Moses was at the burning bush.

Also in chapter 7, Osteen retells the story of the lepers who went in search of food from the Syrians in 2 Kings 7. He claims that the Bible says (and he

puts this in quotes), “As they marched toward the enemy, God multiplied the sound of their footsteps and caused them to sound like a vast army.” The text simply does not say this. This twisting of the facts fits Joel’s point of believing in yourself and seeing God do amazing things. But how can you trust Osteen to interpret the text correctly if he cannot get the simple facts of the story right?

There’s plenty more of this, but one of the most egregious examples of twisting Scripture is in chapter 10. Osteen claims that when Job was in the midst of his adversity he said, “God, I know You have granted me favor.” He presents this as a bold declaration of faith in the favor of God upon his life in the midst of a trial. But in Job 10, Job is bitterly complaining to God. Yes, Job does say in verse 12 that, “You have granted me life and steadfast love, and your care has preserved my spirit.” But Job was talking about what God had previously done for him, only to now crush him and destroy him. Job was not declaring a word of faith, he was screaming out at the seeming injustice of God for giving him life and blessing, only to take it all away. In verses 18-19 Job says, “Why did you bring me out from the womb? Would that I had died before any eye had seen me and were as though I had not been, carried from the womb to the grave.” At that moment, Job was not exactly feeling the X-factor.

2. *Break Out!* is full of bad theology.

Second, *Break Out!* is full of bad theology. Osteen presents the stories in the Bible as being all about us, instead of about Christ. The great hope of the Bible is in what Christ has done, but in Break Out! the great hope is in all that we can do. If you speak it, it will happen. The still small voice in you is God giving you insider information (Ch. 10).

Additionally, problems are never in our hearts. Instead, our problems come from our failure to believe in ourselves (see Chs. 13 and 15). "You have the seeds of greatness on the inside" (Ch. 20). Fighting the good fight of faith is believing in yourself. Osteen claims in chapter 22 that "these present sufferings" that Paul speaks about in Romans 8:18 are not "accidents, tragedy, cancer, injustice or abuse." He offers no support for this claim, but just says it. According to Osteen, the good work that God is doing in your life and has promised to complete is seeing your visions of greatness come true. However, in the Bible, God's good work in us is progressively forming the character of Christ in the life of every one of his children.

Osteen's theology has no room for sin. In fact, in twenty five chapters, the word "sin" is not even mentioned. Therefore, you should not be surprised that "the cross" of Christ, "gospel," and "repent" are nowhere to be found either. At the very end of the book, Osteen does encourage his readers to pray a prayer of faith in order to establish a relationship with God through Christ. The prayer that he writes out does mention "sins" and does have the concept of repentance in it. The problem is that for twenty five chapters, we

are led to believe that all our problems either are outside of us or result from our failure to believe in our own greatness.

3. *Break Out!* is marked by blatant contradictions.

Third, *Break Out!* is marked by blatant contradictions. In chapter 12, "Remind God of What He Said," Osteen says that prayer is "Not nagging God, not begging God, but in faith going to God and reminding him over and over what He promised you." But a few lines later, he says "You have to be a pest when it comes to reminding God what he promised you." So, we are not supposed to be a nag, but we are supposed to be a pest?

In chapter 13, "Power of Believing," Osteen talks about all of the great things that will happen if you only believe. According to Osteen, God says, "If you only believe I will turn the situation around. If you only believe, breakthroughs are headed your way." But in chapter 24 Osteen claims that believing is not enough. You have to "put actions behind your faith." For example, "...when He sees you bypass the cookie jar because you've been believing you'll lose weight—that is when extraordinary things will happen." But then in chapter 25 Osteen claims that if we give up on a dream, that does not mean God gives up on it. In fact, "You will not go to your grave without seeing your dreams come to pass—even the secret petitions of your heart."

So let's get this straight. All we have to do is believe. Everything happens when you believe. Except that you have to put action to your belief. But,

don’t worry, if you stop believing, God won’t stop believing in you, and he will make it all happen anyway. So, does the “break out” happen because of my faith, my action, or neither, because God was going to do it anyway?

WHY THIS MATTERS

In *Break Out!*, God is not glorious in majesty; he is your personal genie and your voice inside. The real power belongs to you. When you speak, things happen. When you believe, things come true.

Osteen’s twisting of Scripture to encourage and inspire greatness comes at a great cost, the cost of truth. The truth is, I cannot be my best. If I cannot be my best, and therefore do my part, what hope can I have that God will do his part?

These present sufferings do include abuse, rape, terminal disease, tragedy, accidents, personal bankruptcy, miscarriages, corrupt officials, and being persecuted for the faith. Joel has no message of hope or comfort for people in these. His principles and exhortations create more laws and commands that are rooted in our determination, but have nothing to do with the gospel of grace. In the end, we are left to save ourselves from our unfulfilled dreams.

For the faithful pastor who does not have an audience the size of a stadium, or the believer who never makes it to CEO, Osteen's message of "hope" is actually one of condemnation. Either you do not dream enough or something is wrong with your faith.

While his message is popular because you are your own savior, it simply is not true. Pastor, some of your people may like what he has to say and may feel that he is a nice guy with a positive message in a negative world. The problem is, when we accept his horrible theology, our entire understanding of Scripture is warped.

Joel probably is America's pastor. Sadly, *Break Out!* pastors people to be narcissistic, biblically illiterate, and theologically confused. In other words, *Break Out!* tells you to suspend biblical discernment and enjoy your day at Disneyworld.

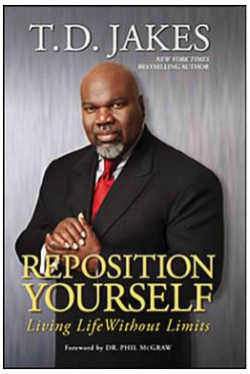
So just keep putting in your tokens. Keep believing and declaring that you have already won. The machine just hasn't realized it yet.

1 I read the book on my phone, so I'll provide chapter instead of page references.

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Book Review: *Reposition Yourself: Living Life Without Limits*



Reviewed by Steven Harris

T.D. Jakes, *Reposition Yourself: Living Life Without Limits*. Atria Books, 2007. 278 pages. $24.00

Dubbed "America's Best Preacher" by Time magazine, T.D. Jakes has become a household name and a revered spiritual authority among many professed Christians and, even recently, among some conservative evangelicals. He is the senior pastor of the 30,000-member Potter's House in Dallas, Texas: not just a church, but a "global humanitarian organization"

employing nearly 400 staff members. Additionally, the church boasts thousands of ministry volunteers—I used to be one.

In the fall of 2007, I began regularly attending the church as I pursued formal training at the nearby Dallas Theological Seminary. My stay at the church was short-lived. However, I did get to observe and experience many things that year, including the release of *Reposition Yourself: Living Life Without Limits*.

OVERVIEW

Jakes' thesis can be summed up in a common phrase he employs in the first chapter: "…God helps those who help themselves." His goal is to demonstrate that, with minor adjustments, one can take control of his or her destiny and attain what he calls "true prosperity" and "real success."

Jakes' writing style is as winsome as his oratorical flare. With many personal anecdotes, he appeals to the reader as one who genuinely desires to help by delving into the common lived- experiences of everyday people.

Reposition Yourself consists of fifteen chapters divided into three major sections: "The Sky's the Limit," "Beyond the Limits of Mediocrity," and "Beyond the Limits of Success." These sections could easily be titled, "Wanting Prosperity," "Pursuing Prosperity," and "Managing Prosperity,"

respectively. The first five chapters are aimed at animating the ambition of the reader by exploring the pathology of what Jakes calls an "addiction to apathy," and by championing the fight for a "better life." The second section of the book deals specifically with finances and the how-to's of success, while the final section devotes a couple chapters to women's issues before moving to the legacy of success.

CRITIQUE

Simply put, *Reposition Yourself* is a self-help book—and a dangerous one, at that. I render this critique in light of the book's own admission regarding Jakes' methodology: "Mixing both sacred and secular insights, he shares a unique blend of practical and pragmatic steps coupled with the sage wisdom of Scripture for which he is noted." While this approach might seem laudable, the resulting combination often yields erroneous conclusions. Two immediately come to mind.

A Wrong View of the Word

Reposition Yourself seems to suffer from an unhelpful view of the Word. While each chapter begins with a verse that is meant to serve as the biblical support for the teaching espoused, the reading of these verses tends to focus on man's pursuit of temporal success instead of Christ's offer of eternal salvation.

Here are just a couple of examples where Jakes seems to conflate these two focuses:

The focus verse for Chapter 1 is John 8:32 (NIV): “Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” The “truth” that Jakes wants the reader to discover is that apathy, mediocrity, and fear are roadblocks to a better life and desired success. However, it seems that the context of the eighth chapter of John reveals that Jesus is referring to saving truth, centering on a continued faith in Him that liberates from the bondage of sin.

Similarly, the focus verse for Chapter 2 is 1 Corinthians 9:26 (this time, KJV): “I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air.” Jakes goes on to suggest how we can “reposition ourselves for the victory that God intends for us,” and how we must “fight strategically for the prizes we long to enjoy” (27). Yet, the prize that Paul refers to in his letter to the Corinthians is the sharing in the blessings of the gospel with those whom he has gained through the preaching of said gospel.

Jakes goes on to present the story of Joseph as a paradigm for self-actualization. According to Jakes, “Joseph was bound by his circumstances. But he overcame them by using his gifts. He transcended from the mundane to the miraculous” (43). While Joseph’s faith is indeed highlighted in the story, it is clear that he ultimately attributes his triumph to the faithfulness and sovereignty of God (see Genesis 45:5; 50:20). And no self-help book is

complete without the how-to steps of loading one's slingshot in preparation for the slaying of the financial debt giant!

While some might defend these interpretive moves—given that Jakes is merely extracting principles of the text—he actually presupposes a particularly unhelpful view of Scripture: that the Bible is simply a roadmap to a better life. *Reposition Yourself* intimates that the word of God is about *your* dreams, *your* desires, and *your* goals. When, in fact, the Bible's primary subject is what God has accomplished in Christ by the power of the Spirit for the salvation of his people.

A Wrong View of the World

These word-view issues speak to a deeper worldview issue. While Jakes is prudent enough to avoid flagrant prosperity-gospel rhetoric—even warning against the desire for riches at times—he still equates success with things like a closed business deal, a house, and a Mercedes. Moreover, throughout the book he refers to such figures as Oprah and Sean "Diddy" Combs as examples of those living the successful life, worthy of imitation.

Perhaps the most telling statement Jakes makes is this: "There is nothing worse than reaching the end of your life and wondering what could have happened, or should've happened, but somehow didn't happen" (10). Here, Jakes is referring to lost opportunities and unmet goals. While these things may indeed cause a degree of grief, there is something worse, far worse. And while Jakes at time comes dangerously close to broaching the topic of

the gospel, he falls short of actually articulating what it is. He refers to Jesus as Savior and even mentions the need for a relationship with the Creator, but he pictures him as "the One who wants to comfort, heal, inspire, and motivate you to new heights" (21).

But one might ask, "Why are these distinctions important, anyway?"

They're important because the gospel is not that God simply wants to stimulate sinners. The good news that has been revealed in the Bible is that God saves sinners. The one true and living God has actively sought and secured the salvation of a sinful people in the sending and sacrificing of his eternal son, Jesus. In light of Christ's perfect life, substitutionary death, and vindicating resurrection, God commands everyone to repent and believe. He desires much more than your inspiration; above all, he is concerned about your salvation.

In light of Jakes' use of Scripture, it would appear that salvation guarantees favorable circumstances in this life. However, the Bible makes no such guarantees. In fact, what the Bible does guarantee for the follower of Jesus is tribulation (John 16:33), trial (James 1:2), and persecution (2 Tim. 3:12). And yet, the ultimate promise of the gospel far outweighs any of these temporal realities. In the words of the Apostle Paul, for the believer enduring such realities, "this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen" (2 Cor. 4:17-18). Thus, the

gospel-centered life—the truly "successful" Christian life—is a life lived in faith toward Christ, in view of the eternal hope. To say that what you drive is irrelevant would be an immense understatement.

A FINAL WORD

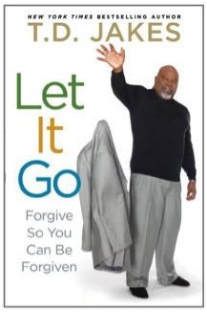
All self-help books are not bad, per se. Given the situation, it may be useful for a Christian to seek wisdom on health or finance (Oddly, Jakes encourages readers to possess three credit cards!). Moreover, there is nothing wrong with diligence in God-glorifying endeavors, whether business, education, career, or health. Yet, Christians must regard the concept of self-help biblically. While it might seem motivationally acceptable to believe that "God helps those who help themselves," it would be more accurate to say that "God helps those who acknowledge their helplessness." Even our most valiant efforts are subject to the sovereign will of God (Prov. 19:21). Contrary to the often recited declaration, we are not the captains of our fates, we are not the masters of our souls.

Readers of *Reposition Yourself* are told that God wants to be their accountability partner on their self-charted road to worldly success, and that He wants them to "have it all." These teachings are utterly false and, if taken to heart, might prove damningly so.

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Book Review: *Let It Go: Forgive So You Can Be Forgiven*



Reviewed by John Power

T.D. Jakes. *Let It Go: Forgive So You Can Be Forgiven*. 1st ed. New York: Atria Books, 2012. 256 pages. $25.00

Imagine yourself entering a Christian church for the first time. You're from a different religious background, curious about the teachings of Jesus. One of the first questions you might have to ask is: "Who is the guitar-wielding, distressed jeans-wearing, facial hair-sporting figure that appears before me on a larger-than-life Jumbotron, shrouded in stage fog and professional lighting, inviting me to sing along as he croons into a microphone?"

Welcome to Christianity. You have just met one of our most beloved (and caricatured!) personalities: the worship leader.

"As a general rule, whoever describes the person best wins the person—and whoever wins the person—gets the opportunity to impact the person." Ed Welch said that a few months ago on CCEF's blog.[1] It makes sense. It's a compelling concept. But it's also an alarming concept. What if someone with bad ideas is really good at describing people—their struggles, fears, and desires? Unfortunately, I'm afraid that's the case with megachurch pastor T.D. Jakes in his book *Let It Go*.

Jakes' book falls under the category of "Christian life," and you would probably find it in the "Self-Help" section of your local bookstore, Christian or not. It's a book of practical theology.

SUMMARY

Jakes uncovers his wide-ranging purpose early on: "My hope is that this book will help you gain insight into what prevents you from being the husband you want to be, the wife you long to be, the mother or father you know is inside you, the creative person you were born to be—the most successful version of you possible!" (4). But tension in relationships hinders that success (5). As does the failure of people to truly understand one another (12). Thus, says Jakes, we need to embrace the big idea of

forgiveness, of "letting go of the past and finding the grace to forgive" (18). Forgiveness is a "supernatural power that's unleashed when we *let it go*" (34, emphasis his). Such power is foundational for Jakes' entire outlook on life.

Jakes goes on to build on this sense of the importance of forgiveness. He points out the inevitability of conflict with others. "Offenses do come" (52), he writes. But "people refuse to let go of old issues, forgive their offenders, and move on" (57). Instead of such refusal, we need to be open and honest with others, willing to share what's on our minds (ch. 4). We should also see anger as a useful tool in getting past difficulties in our lives (ch. 5). Offenses against us should be "written off" like financial debt (ch. 6).

Jakes talks about the workplace, noting how important it is to use some basic strategies for facing conflict in that environment (ch. 7). Further, trust needs to be rebuilt after any conflict (ch. 8), just as we need to recover and move on with our lives (ch. 9). Like God the Father, we must extend the mercy of forgiveness to our offenders (ch. 10).

What's more, when people have a "basic, healthy love for themselves" (186), they will know how to forgive themselves (ch. 11), and then they can see offenses as opportunities to root out their deepest insecurities (ch. 12). Jakes also calls on the church to address the issues that keep it from being a place of spiritual life-support to broken people (ch. 13). He concludes with a final chapter and epilogue in which he seeks to motivate people to address

these issues with hope. He wants people to have confidence that they can indeed be successful in any of these endeavors.

THREE HARMFUL ASSUMPTIONS

A point-by-point analysis of Bishop Jakes' proposals, not to mention the myriad of details behind them, would go far beyond the scope of this review. And, unfortunately, those details abound with misleading and harmful teaching. Instead, I'd like to address some of his underlying assumptions.

First, Jakes assumes that personal success is paramount in life. This emphasis derives from prosperity gospel teaching. In the first chapter alone, I counted roughly twenty-five to thirty remarks similar to the one quoted above about becoming the "most successful version of you possible." The "successful you" focus steers the whole ship. One wonders how Bishop Jakes can reconcile this assumption with the Bible's emphasis on doing all to the glory of God (see 1 Cor. 10:31). He seems to have profoundly missed the foundational purpose of human existence. Whereas this "successful you focus" promotes profound self-centeredness, the gospel of Jesus Christ calls on each of us to look upward and outward, to the glory of God and the good of one's neighbor.

Second, Jakes assumes that humanity's main problem is something other than sin against a holy God. The only clear reference that I can find to sin against God is on page 118. Jakes calls sin "a debt we couldn't pay." But he offers no explanation for what that means. Instead, it seems that in context, the biblical language of debt simply fits his analogy of "writing off" offenses. Short of this example, I find no clear teaching on the nature of sin. "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God," writes Paul in Romans 3. Yet Jakes can write, "You're not a bad person. You're a good person with a loving heart" (12). Even though this is not Jakes' foundational doctrinal statement, it reflects a very low view of sin, a view that sadly plays out throughout the book. The Bible takes our sin way more seriously than this. So seriously, in fact, that the prophet Jeremiah labels our hearts as deceitful, beyond even our own full understanding (Jer. 17:9).

Finally, related to the last point, Bishop Jakes sidelines the gospel. And I use the word "sidelines" charitably. Nowhere in the book does he attempt to explain the gospel with any clarity. I can't even find a single use of the word gospel, though I could have missed it. My point is that the good news seems to be no news at all in this book. Chapter 10 includes a discussion of God's forgiveness, but it is woefully inadequate, even to the point of just assuming that each of his readers is a born-again believer. There's no discussion of the cost of forgiveness or how to receive it.

Yet we all must see that a holy God holds holy standards. “God is light, and in him is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). Left to ourselves we all defy those standards and we “walk in darkness” (1:6). Thus we need “an advocate with the Father” whom he has mercifully supplied in “Jesus Christ, the righteous” (2:1). Because of Jesus’ wrath-bearing death on the cross, all who cling to him have an incredible promise and hope: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1:9). The bad news of sin stings. But the good news of grace in Christ shocks our dead hearts into life. An entire book on forgiveness that fails to be explicit about the gospel fails to offer the only true hope there is.

CONCLUSION

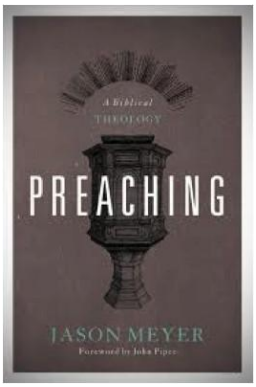
The multitudes are tuning in to T.D. Jakes. And when they turn up the volume, they hear a man describing them remarkably well. So they keep listening. But I sure wish they would change the station.

1 Ed Welch, “Describe a Person Well and You Win That Person,” CCEF Blog, July 26, 2013, accessed November 25, 2013, **http://www.ccef.org/blog/describe-person-well-and-you-win-person**.

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Book Review: *Preaching: A Biblical Theology*



Reviewed by Bobby Jamieson

Jason C. Meyer, *Preaching: A Biblical Theology*. Crossway, 2013. 368 pages. $22.99

I hate to say it, but my impression is that much—most?—of what goes by the name of expository preaching isn't actually expository preaching. More like expo-lite.

Expo-lite is a subtle variation on exposition, harder to spot than the standard alternatives. Topical preaching is obvious. "Textual" preaching—where the

text is more diving board than driving force—is a shade more subtle, though still plain enough. But what I'm calling expo-lite is well camouflaged. The sermon is on a biblical text, and usually the sermon series works through a biblical book. The preacher will read the text. Usually he'll explain it to some degree. But here's the catch: the point of the text still isn't the point of the sermon. The real meat of the sermon comes from somewhere else: the gospel versus religion, the emptiness of idols, how the gospel changes us, finding identity in Christ versus performance, and so on.

Don't get me wrong: many texts of the Bible talk about these things, and faithfully applying the Bible will lead you to address these things. But I hear a lot of preaching that means to be expositional, but instead filters the text through whatever tidy grid the pastor is most taken with at the time. If the sermon's a meal, the text is more spices than steak.

If anyone out there agrees with me that expo-lite preaching is a problem, you'll be glad to know I'm also bringing you a solution. In his recent book *Preaching: A Biblical Theology*, Jason Meyer—who recently succeeded John Piper as pastor for preaching and vision at Bethlehem Baptist church in Minneapolis—argues, "The way to preach an expository sermon is (1) to *share what* the point of the passage is, (2) to *show why* that point is the point from the passage, and (3) to *shepherd* the flock according to *where* the text leads when applied to the present circumstances of the congregation" (258).

Meyer's first point is a given in definitions of expository preaching, but his second and third aren't. His second point recognizes that preacher and people alike are under the authority of God's Word. So instead of saying "Trust my interpretation because I say so," preachers should show enough —and just enough—of their work to enable the congregation to see for themselves how the Word teaches what the preacher says it does (260, 263-65). In other words, an expository sermon doesn't just show people what's in the Word; it shows the people how to see what's in the Word.

Meyer is not arguing for an "everything but the kitchen sink" approach to exegesis in exposition. Instead, he guards against errors of both excess and defect when it comes to verifying your interpretation. His point is simply that the point of the passage should be not merely asserted but demonstrated.

Meyer's third point is that an expositional sermon should shepherd the congregation where the text leads them; that is, that it should explicitly apply the force of the text to the facts of the congregation's life. "If application is an afterthought, then a preacher has not yet learned to love both the text and the congregation" (265).

These two points, properly applied, work together to convert expo-lite into genuine exposition. If a sermon should not only say the point of a passage but show why it's the point of the passage, then preachers will have to do more than offer a few summary statements about the text before warming to

their well-worn Jesus-versus-religion theme. And if application is shepherding the flock to where the text leads them, it should be specific to the passage.

Of the book's five parts, part three, which I've just been quoting from, is the strongest. Meyer's argument in chapter 19 concerning the "why" of expository preaching is outstanding, full of sensitive exegesis and sound reasoning. Section four is also very strong, offering supporting rationales for expository preaching in light of the biblical doctrines of Scripture and sin, and concluding with a balanced treatment of topical preaching.

I'd recommend that every preacher and aspiring preacher read these two sections. They will instruct, edify, and challenge you. They will sharpen your conception of the task of preaching and, I trust, deepen your conviction of its importance.

Section one sketches a biblical theology of the ministry of the Word, using stewardship as its organizing theme. Section two explores paradigm shifts in the ministry of the Word throughout Scripture. Although it amounts to more than half the book, this section isn't crucial to the book's main argument, and Meyer says as much early on. For the sake of giving Meyer's excellent apologetic for exposition the widest possible hearing, I would've liked to see the material in sections three and four front-loaded.

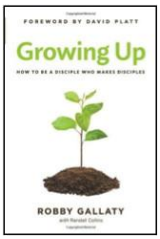
At the 9Marks at Southern conference on preaching, Mike Bullmore compared expository preaching to Jacob's wrestling match with God: the

blessing is in the losing. Yes, Jacob "prevailed" with God, but only because God let him—hence the dislocated hip. I pray that God would raise up a generation of preachers who let the text of Scripture wrestle them into submission every week, and who step into the pulpit with a limp.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Bobby Jamieson is assistant editor for 9Marks, a member of Third Avenue Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky, and the author of *Sound Doctrine: How a Church Grows in the Love and Holiness of God* (Crossway, 2013). You can follow him on Twitter.

Book Review: *Growing Up: How to Be a Disciple Who Makes Disciples*



Reviewed by Garrett Kell

Robby Gallaty, *Growing Up: How to Be a Disciple Who Makes Disciples*. CrossBooks, 2013. 248 pages. $9.48

Robby Gallaty is a personal friend of mine and a godly man who loves Jesus and wants others to love Jesus. His passion to help people live out the glorious Commission of our Lord is evident in his life and in this book. But friendship aside, I read his book *Growing Up* as a pastor looking for a good resource to challenge me and those I'm discipling. In fact, I read it with a few guys from my church (Tim, Dan, Luis) and spent an early Friday morning talking through things we liked about the book as well as things we felt were lacking.

OVERVIEW

We all agreed that Robby's personal touch and well-illustrated writing make for an easy read. Growing Up is a resource that is accessible for just about anyone, and each of us were able to read it in a few days. It is filled with quotable lines from both Robby and others.

Growing Up is organized in two sections. The first four chapters lay out our Lord's call to be disciples that make disciples. These chapters highlight Robby's personal transformation through discipleship, his recommendation to be in a discipleship group (aka "D-Group," 3-5 people committed to 12-18 months of weekly discipling meetings), and the call to train ourselves for godliness in the context of discipleship relationships.

The remaining six chapters give practical prescriptions that should mark the lives of growing disciples. These chapters follow the acrostic C.L.O.S.E.R., each letter representing a spiritual discipline that helps us develop a closer walk with Jesus.

THINGS WE LIKED

There are several things my reading group and I appreciated about the book.

This Book Is For Everybody

One of the strong points of this book is that Robby rightly highlights that everyone who follows Christ should be actively involved in helping others follow Christ. His shepherd's heart is evident as he addresses struggles that people from various backgrounds might face.

Whether you're a seasoned pastor, a new believer, a stay-at-home mom, or someone who sees no way you can be used by God, this book is written to help you be a more faithful disciple. Gallaty rightly says that no one has it all together and that anyone who is willing can be used by the Lord to carry out the Great Commission.

Don't You Dare Just Read This Book

The one thing this book is not designed to do is to be read and put on the shelf. Robby reminded our group of a personal trainer who, with each turn of the page, told us that the pages were to be read, engaged with, and implemented. The reader is exhorted to take notes, memorize key verses, and wrestle with thought-provoking questions that are stationed throughout the book. Tim said that Robby's writing was "no intellectual exercise, but more of a kick in the pants."

We appreciated that the book compelled us to respond with obedience to Jesus. One of the guys already had someone in mind he wanted to go

through the book with in hopes of helping them become a more faithful disciple of Christ.

Let's Get Practical

It is not uncommon for people to struggle with the "how to" of discipling. Many of us feel overwhelmed with not knowing how to help other people grow deeper in their relationship with Jesus. If you wonder "How do I 'do' discipleship?" this book will not leave you without answers.

Robby shows himself to be an instructor and prescriber of practical ideas. From cover to cover he gives concrete advice on how to form a discipleship group, ways to keep its members accountable, good suggestions for Bible reading strategies, challenges to be prayerful, and a slew of resources to use in discipling relationships.

The Call to Discipleship Is Needed

Above all, we felt that the call to be active in Great Commission ministry is a bell that needs to be rung again and again. We agree with Robby that many churches have sadly become complacent in Christ's call to be disciples that make disciples.

Each of the guys said that chapter 7, "Obey: Follow the Leader," was the one they were impacted by the most. In that chapter Robby emphasizes the need to follow Christ and "love Him supremely, above everyone and

everything else" (106). This book brings the Great Commission to the forefront of importance for the church at large, and there is no way that can be bad.

THINGS WE FELT WERE LACKING

There were also a few things my group felt that the book lacked.

Can We Look Up More?

In Robby's attempts to be practical, we were left with a feeling of us-centeredness. Robby's intent was to be practical and hands-on, but this would have only been enhanced by helping us marvel at our Master more throughout the book. Discipling is chiefly a pursuit of helping each other delight in and glorify God, but we didn't feel like our affections for Jesus were stirred as much as we desired them to be.

A New Set of Standards to Keep?

One of the drawbacks to Robby's practical approach is that at times he seems to over-prescribe what we must do. In the opening pages Robby says that for a discipling meeting "to fulfill its purpose and be profitable, each meeting must be focused on the disciple-building activities discussed throughout this book" (xxiii). While the plan in this book is good, we all

agreed that it was over-stepping to suggest that it was the only way to really be faithful to the Great Commission.

We also disagreed with the book's rejection of one-on-one meetings (48-50), particularly as we felt that the case was built on an argument from silence. In our church there are a variety of group sizes and we have found pros and cons in every group size. We, a group of four, found benefit in that size group, but we thought the book overstated its case when it referred to such a group approach as "the Master's model."

Another example of over-prescription occurred when Robby says, "If you are going to be a disciple of Christ, you must have a daily quiet time with God" (145). Now, is it beneficial to have daily devotions? Certainly. But essential? Certainly not.

In light of these examples, the book would have benefited from a section stating that our righteousness is rooted fully in Christ's work. We are not accepted by God because of our performance or our adherence to the good suggestions of *Growing Up*.

Where's the Church?

A conspicuous absence in the book was an emphasis on the discipling that happens in the local church. Though Robby loves the local church, this book seems to assume that people understand the church's importance. "D-Groups" can be a wonderful model of discipling, but they must be held in

submission to the discipling of the congregation as a whole. When the church gathers on the Lord's Day, they are being discipled as a community through the prayers, Scripture reading, preaching, and singing. It is this corporate discipleship that fuels and sustains the members as they scatter, including in their D-Groups.

Robby quoted Avery Willis as saying, "I really don't believe much discipling is done through preaching…discipleship is more relational, more one on one" (25). Robby goes on to clarify that he is not minimizing preaching, but I do think he sells the discipleship of Sunday gatherings short. We fully agree that "preaching alone will not produce disciples," but the feel of the book is that discipleship could happen without the church—which will ultimately short-circuit the good things that Robby teaches us in *Growing Up*.

For instance, Robby teaches that in D-Groups there should be complete confidentiality (41). While we certainly want to create a culture of trust and honoring each other, a confidentiality policy could ultimately undermine Jesus' instructions in Matthew 18:17 to "tell it to the church" if a member persists in unrepentant sin. The church in that text is not a D-Group, but the gathered congregation. Confidentiality in a D-Group must be held in submission to the good of the church as a whole.

This shortcoming in the book could have been helped by a chapter or section about building cultures of discipleship in which groups of people

gather to help one another live out what the congregation as a whole is learning.

BOTTOM LINE? THUMBS UP

Books are not meant to be read and accepted, they are meant to be interacted with. This was a really good book for us to interact with. We had a very lively discussion that I trust will bear good fruit in all of our discipling relationships. Each of us gave the “thumbs up” to recommend this book as a resource to people who want to learn more about discipleship and who need practical ideas about helping others grow up into spiritual maturity.

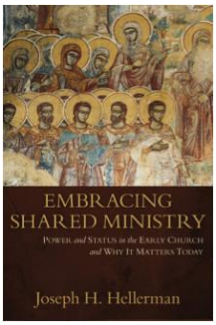
Anyone who does read the book might consider the above critiques that we hope will be addressed in a future edition or in one of the other forthcoming books in this series.

We leave you with the opening line of the book, “The Gospel came to you because it was going to someone else.” Go therefore and make disciples!

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Book Review: *Embracing Shared Ministry*



Reviewed by Kevin McFadden

Joseph H. Hellerman. Embracing *Shared Ministry: Power and Status in the Early Church and Why It Matters Today*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Ministry, 2013. 307 pages. $17.99

Joseph Hellerman writes *Embracing Shared Ministry* as a New Testament scholar and a seasoned pastor, seeking to apply the fruits of his scholarly activity to the problems of the church. In a 2005 monograph he argued that in Philippians Paul "intentionally subverts the social values of the dominant culture in the Roman colony at Philippi in order to create a radically

different relational environment among the Philippian Christians" (11). This current book is an attempt to apply his thesis to modern abuses of power in the church, reminding us of Paul's "cruciform vision for authentic spiritual leadership," that is, "other-centered leadership—leadership in the shape of the cross" (14–15). In particular, Hellerman argues that biblical leadership lies in a community of leaders who are in relationship with one another.

The final three chapters alone are worth the price of the book. Here Hellerman gives several case studies of abuses of power in the church (pastors lying to staff members, firing them when confronted with sin, and so on), and he ties these abuses to the centralizing of power in one man. He sees such abuses in the American church rooted especially in the business model of pastoral ministry and the solo senior pastor common in Baptist churches (much of his ministry experience has been among Conservative Baptist churches in California). He explains the "aha moment" when he discovered that Scripture teaches a plurality of elders in passages like Acts 14:23, Acts 20:17, Phil 1:1, Tit 1:5, 1 Pet 5:1, and Jas 5:14 (241). And he argues that "a key answer to the problem of authority abuse that plagues numbers of our congregations is a team of pastors who share their lives with one another, and whose oversight of God's people arises organically from the relational soil they enjoy as a leadership community of genuine brothers and sisters in Christ" (257).

The last chapter is my favorite part of the book. In it, Hellerman recounts his years of experience as one of the pastor-elders of Oceanside Christian

Fellowship. His description made me want to join that church. The pastor-elders at Oceanside Christian Fellowship develop consensus through community—through the relationships they've developed as they meet together, share their lives, and pray for each other and the church. They emphasize character, transparency, and real community among the leaders in order to gain the trust needed to lead the church. Hellerman insightfully observes that "Scripture turns repeatedly to the quality of our relationships—particularly with our fellow Christians—as the foremost evidence of genuine love for God" (John 13:35; 282). He advises students looking for their first pastoral job to ask, "*Does the senior pastor of this church have close friends in the congregation?*" (297). Wow—great question. Finally, Hellerman models his advice in that he is strikingly personal and transparent throughout this book.

But even though I agree with Hellerman's conclusions, I just don't think the almost 200 pages of socio-historical background of Philippi and exegesis of Philippians actually lead to these conclusions.

The first three chapters outline the culture of honor and self-promotion that permeated the first-century Roman world, and especially the culture of status in the first-century Roman colony of Philippi as seen in local inscriptions. These chapters are fascinating historically, and they are written in an engaging and popular style. I would suggest that a pastor preaching through Philippians consider reading them. But, like so many of these kinds of background studies, the application to exegesis seems to move beyond

hermeneutical illumination of Paul and into hermeneutical constraint of Paul's letter to the Philippians. This isn't the place to argue the details, but it's not clear to me that Paul is directly confronting the Roman culture of honor in either his description of Jesus' humility in Philippians 2:5–11 or his description of his own "reason for confidence in the flesh" in Philippians 3:5–6. Maybe. But maybe not.

More importantly, I think Hellerman's focus on the possible cultural context misses some the clearer literary context of Philippians. In other words, I think he fails to explain clearly Paul's theology and its implications for the church.

One point that he makes throughout the book is that for Paul, the example of Jesus' humility, his servant leadership, is not enough (e.g., 197, 290–91). Because of this, Paul offers an alternative social context by depicting the Philippians as a family in which honor is a group value (e.g., Paul uses the word "brothers" six times, refers to God as "Father," and speaks of Epaphroditus as a "brother"). After all, families don't complete for honor—they are on the same team. But it is nowhere clear in Philippians that Paul supplements the example of Jesus' humility with a new social structure. Rather, I think this line of thought arises more from Hellerman's experience. In fact, he opens up the chapter on the topic (Ch. 6: "When Jesus Is Not Enough") by recounting how a seminary professor who knew his theology, who knew that Jesus was a servant, still abused his power. Obviously, he concludes, Jesus' example is not enough, so he offers the

solution of viewing the church as a family. But this thesis is forced upon the text of Philippians.

In doing this, Hellerman fails to explain the deeper structure of Paul's theology of Philippians. It is true that the example of Jesus' humility in Philippians 2:5-11 is not enough. That's why Paul urges the Philippians to follow that example, to work out their salvation (the imperative; Phil. 2:12), *on the basis of God's work in the Philippians* (the indicative; Phil. 2:13). Paul is convinced that God has begun a good work in them and will complete it (Phil. 1:6), that they have received God's grace of faith in Christ and following Christ in his suffering (Phil. 1:29–30). Like Paul, they have believed in Christ for justification (Phil. 3:8–9), and now they must follow his sufferings in order to reach his resurrection (Phil. 3:10–11).

Jesus' example of humility is not enough to curb abuses of power in the church. But neither are social structures like having shared leadership or viewing the church as a family. The church and its leaders need Jesus' death to forgive us of our sin and present as righteous before God. We need to repent of our sin, believe in Jesus, and walk by his empowering Spirit in unity. Only by the power of God at work in us will we be able heed Paul's exhortation to follow Jesus' example of humility and pursue servant-leadership in the church.

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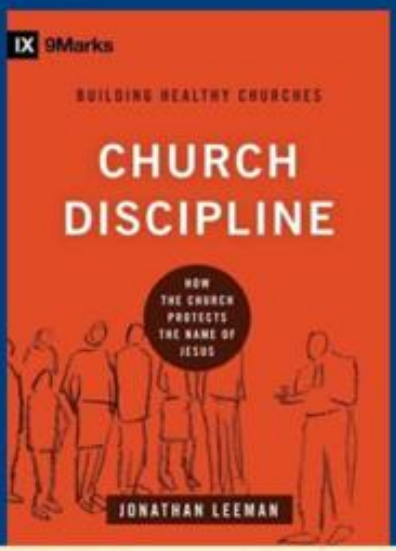
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January 2014

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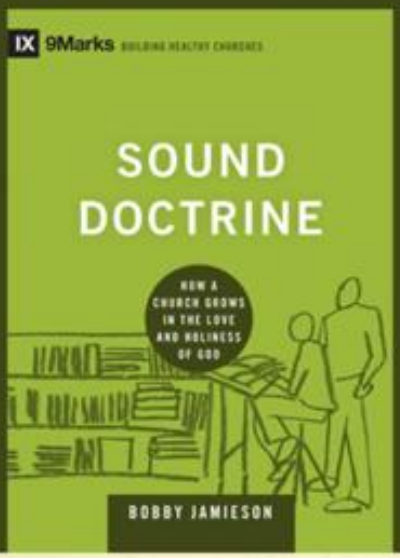


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