

## **A Theological Evaluation of the Utopian Image of Prosperity Gospel and the African Dilemma**

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**Abstract:** Prosperity gospel may be traced to the emergence of modern Pentecostalism which bestrides the world like a colossus; and Africa is one major continent where its influence is pervasive. Pentecostalism's emphasis on material prosperity may account for this. Many countries in Africa struggle under the huge burden of poverty which has made them susceptible to any ideology that could change the unsavory situation. Prosperity gospel promises to bridge the yawning chasm between the rich and the poor, thus creating a semblance of utopian community where all are beneficiaries of the material comforts of life through faith. Both the theology and hermeneutics of prosperity gospel are implicated as a faulty premise for a belief in material prosperity. Bible passages such as Mark 10:29,30 and 3 John 2, often cited to bolster prosperity gospel, bristle with difficulties. The interpretations of such passages are skewed to support material prosperity. In essence, while prosperity gospel feeds the greed of its peddlers it emasculates the spirituality of believers. The utopian image presented by prosperity gospel is a mirage; many believers are worse off materially because of a faith that lacks sound biblical basis.

**Keywords:** Africa, Pentecostalism, poverty, prosperity, spirituality, utopian image.

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### **I. Introduction**

Christianity began as a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. When it went to Athens, it became a philosophy. When it went to Rome, it became an organization. When it went to Europe, it became a culture. When it went to America, it became a business – Anonymous.

It is apparent that Christianity, from its inception, has morphed from one form to another as it percolates through diverse cultures and geographical entities. If it became business in America what is it in Africa, today? There is probably no religious phenomenon in contemporary time that is intensely debated, defended or pilloried as the emergence of prosperity gospel on the religious terrain [1]. For quite a number of its advocates prosperity gospel is seen as providing the plank with which members of the Christian church could be vaulted from the pit of poverty to the dizzying height of affluence.

Paul Gifford writes, “African Christians believe that success is determined by your faith” [2]. He notes that prosperity gospel preachers have moved beyond traditional Pentecostal practices of speaking in tongues, prophesying, and healing to the belief that God will provide – money, cars, houses, and even spouses – in response to the believer's faith – if not immediately, then soon.

The allure is strong and almost irresistible, particularly in Africa, given the unsavory economic realities of the average believer in the community of faith. Africa, to be sure, is a continent of contradictions. It is a land with so much promise, yet it is perceived as the scum of the earth. Communal conflicts, internecine wars, debilitating diseases and endemic corruption constitute a challenge that has put a lie to the rhetoric of successive governments. Worse, is the huge burden of poverty; many live below the poverty line. Of the ten countries in the world identified by the World Bank in 2014 as living in extreme poverty not less than five, including Nigeria, are in Africa [3]. This obviously paints a somber picture of the continent. Extreme poverty is a dire condition which has been defined as living below \$1.25 per day. Indeed the World Bank estimated that 112 million of 162 million Nigerian population are in that category [4]. The fact that Nigeria with her huge deposit of oil resources is also listed among the poverty-stricken nations presents a more depressing scenario in other less endowed nations on the Africa continent.

Against this background it would probably not be surprising if the promise to bridge the chasm between grinding poverty and scandalous opulence by apostles of prosperity gospel is taken with relish. Yet there are differing views as to whether prosperity gospel may properly be regarded as gospel. The thinking in some quarters is that prosperity gospel is a ruse, another clever ploy deployed by self-serving preachers to take advantage of the gullibility of religious people. This paper is designed to critically assess the claims of prosperity gospel through the prism of biblical theology. This task will be accomplished by first taking an

overview of the prosperity gospel. Secondly, it will seek to explore the theological self-understanding of prosperity gospel preachers, paying particular attention to the constituent elements of its theological stance. Finally, a re-assessment of prosperity theology will be done against the background of the utopian image it presents. Recognizing that the concept of prosperity may encompass bodily and spiritual prosperity the focus in this paper is financial or material prosperity.

## **II. Prosperity Gospel: An Overview**

The roots of modern expression of prosperity gospel may be traced to the emergence of Pentecostalism which bestrides the religious landscape like a colossus. One of the major continents of the world where the influence of Pentecostalism with its message of prosperity is widespread is Africa. Hunt notes that the “health and prosperity gospel” is “one of the fastest growing religious movements on a global scale” [5]. It has been “adopted as far afield as Scandinavia, Eastern Europe, Africa, India, Latin America and the Pacific rim of Southeast Asia” [6].

It may, however, be surprising that even though prosperity gospel is now, by and large, identified with Pentecostalism it has not always been so. The historical antecedents of Pentecostalism may be traced to the Holiness movement and the Wesleyan doctrines of sanctification in 1906 [7]. As noted by H. Cox it was characterized by African-American preachers with no theological formation and its first adherents were poor domestic servants, janitors and day workers who were both blacks and whites [8]. They, however, had the audacity to claim that “a new Pentecost was happening, the New Jerusalem was coming soon, and that they were its designated heralds and grateful first fruits [9]. Quite significantly, Pentecostalism may be seen as a revolt against the cold and tepid nature of traditional worship and a rejection of being conditioned by what is considered to be man-made creeds [10]. Equally worth noting is the fact that the basic motifs for desiring Pentecostal power were a strong yearning for the renewal of the church, the sanctification of individuals and the empowerment for service [11]. The experience of Charles Fox Parham (1873-1929), when he asked to be baptized in the Holy Spirit and to be able to speak in tongues, may serve as an example. He narrates:

After praising God for some time, I asked Him for the same blessing. He distinctly made it clear to me that He raised me up and trained me to declare this mighty truth to the world, and if I was willing to stand for it, with all the persecutions, hardships, trials, slanders, scandals that would entail, He would give me the blessing. And I said, ‘Lord I will, if You will just give me the blessing.’ Right then there came a slight twist in my throat, a glory fell over me and I began to worship God in the Swedish tongue, which later changed to other languages [12]. Modern Pentecostalism seems to have deferred markedly from these motifs by its strong emphasis on materialism.

Pentecostalism in Africa has been recognized as representing the fastest sector of Christianity. While it may appear monolithic, three strands are discernible; namely, Classical/Mission Pentecostal Churches, Indigenous/Independent Pentecostal Churches and New Pentecostals/Charismatic churches/Ministries. The growth of Pentecostalism generally and in Africa particularly has been connected to American capitalist mentality as it found fertile ground in the boom years of the 1960s and 1970s when “success through a positive mental attitude was the rule” and Pentecostalism was becoming increasingly tied to growth-oriented American commercialism. Gifford gave an insight into the rise of neo-Pentecostalism in Africa in the 1980s and the subsequent upsurge. According to him, by the 1990s it had become “undoubtedly the salient sector of African Christianity” [13]. According to statistics, in the year 2000, 20 percent of the populations of Zimbabwe, Tanzania and Malawi claimed membership to Pentecostal/charismatic Christianity in addition to 14 percent in Kenya, 11 percent in Nigeria, 10 percent in Ghana and Zambia, and significant populations in many more countries including the DRC, South Africa and Uganda [14]. There is also the phenomenon of mega-churches often centered on the personality cult of a charismatic leader, most of whom are highly educated. In both mien and mannerism they bear striking similarities to successful CEOs. For example, David Oyedepo’s Living World Outreach (“Winners Chapel”), a foremost Pentecostal and prosperity gospel advocate in Nigeria, held the Guinness record for the largest auditorium in the world in 2001 [15]. What seems to be no longer in doubt is that Pentecostalism penetrated into the heart of major cities and communities on the African continent providing new identities and a paradigm shift for African Christianity in line with charismatic aesthetics. This view has been re-enforced by Anderson who argues that in recent years, the greatest quantitative growth of Pentecostalism has been in sub-Saharan Africa, South East Asia, South Korea and especially in Latin America, where the growth has been so phenomenal that scholars are asking whether the whole continent is turning Pentecostal [16].

One notable aspect of neo-Pentecostalism is its emphasis on this-worldly approach to the gospel proclamation through televangelists. The theology that emerged from this approach is generally known as “prosperity gospel” or the gospel of “health and wealth.” It is a departure from the other-worldly approach adopted by mainline churches (Anglicans, Presbyterians, Methodists, etc) before the emergence of Pentecostalism. The concept of prosperity may lend itself to different interpretations if the theology behind its usage is not closely examined.

### III. Theology Of Prosperity Gospel

Folarin posits that the theology of the prosperity gospel contains elements that makes it fluid but its “teachings follow a general pattern” [17]. Coleman assessment of prosperity theology is germane. He says, it is a blend of “Pentecostal revivalism with elements of positive thinking” [18]. Faith is considered to be a vehicle for claiming every imaginable promise in the Holy Writ. It is also the medium through which the Holy Spirit is fully unleashed. In prosperity theology, much emphasis is placed on the spoken word (rhematology). It is believed that since God brought into existence all that there is through the spoken word ((cf. Gen 1; Ps 33:6; Heb 11:3; 2 Pet 3:5), the believer is able, by the sheer force of the spoken word, to bring into reality what is conceptualized in the mind. In other words, through faith the believer can make his thoughts and words to become actualized realities. Therefore “positive confessions” as opposed to the negative are considered a necessity to receiving divine favor [19]. The “force of faith” through positive confessions as a means to activate the positive power of God and confront the negative power of Satan has been highlighted by prosperity preachers [20]. Beckford also re-echoed the same idea to demonstrate the power of “positive confessions” in actualizing one’s desires [21]. Proponents of prosperity gospel believe that Christians can decide what they want, confess and claim it and presto it is theirs! What this means is that believers can obtain the longings of their hearts by naming and claiming them by faith. In essence, God is glorified when those who confess him are rich and happy in every conceivable way. Conversely, when his people are poor God’s name is dishonored. If they have enough faith God’s people can claim all the blessings promised Abraham, which encompass spiritual, physical and financial blessings (Gen 12:1-3; 13:14-17; 15:17-20;17:1-8; 22:15-18). These blessings are believed to apply to all believers. Failure to be rich is attributed to defective faith on the part of the believer which could be reversed by exercising the right type of faith and confessing positively.

Characteristic of many of these prosperity preaching churches is the concept of breakthroughs in diverse areas of life. This may include breakthroughs in the form of healing, finance, marital success, promotion in the workplace and other favors from God. To give these teachings a Biblical basis verses, such as found in Malachi 3, are elaborately expounded to build the case for life breakthroughs.

### IV. The Lure Of Prosperity Gospel

Research indicates that prosperity gospel has had some impact on evangelical churches, judging by many of their members that have been attracted to the prosperity preaching churches. Faith J. Lugazia probes into the drift from mainline churches to the prosperity gospel ministries by stating that it was occasioned by a convergence between the concerns of prosperity gospel and the African worldview [22]. The view is expressed that from time immemorial, Africans have had a longing for freedom from poverty, sickness and demon possession. These longings have found expression in their tales, stories, proverbs, prayers, sacrifices, and wishes. Unfortunately, the mainline churches failed to address these problems, while condemning the solution offered by traditional religions. Worse, some of the evangelical churches conceived the intense suffering of the poor in Africa as a mirage or at least played it down as though it was nothing to attract much attention. The case of apartheid South Africa may be cited. The evangelical denominations at that time shored up the fortunes of the rich by supporting them [23]. This was at the expense of the poor.

**Table 1: 15 African countries living below poverty line**

Rank	Country	Population below poverty line (%)
1	<u>Chad</u>	80
2	<u>Liberia</u>	80
3	<u>Congo, Democratic Republic of the</u>	71
4	<u>Sierra Leone</u>	70.2
5	<u>Nigeria</u>	70
6	<u>Swaziland</u>	69
7	<u>Zimbabwe</u>	68
8	<u>Burundi</u>	68
9	<u>Sao Tome and Principe</u>	66.2
10	<u>Niger</u>	63
11	<u>Zambia</u>	60.5
12	<u>Comoros</u>	60
13	<u>Senegal</u>	54
14	<u>Malawi</u>	53
15	<u>Mozambique</u>	52

Source: CIA World Factbook - January 1, 2014

The bar chart above clearly shows that poverty is a major challenge in Africa. As a result of the problems highlighted earlier, including poverty, Christians in traditional churches were left in a quandary. Indeed they were faced with three options. The first is to adopt fatalism as a life philosophy. This philosophical stance enjoins its advocates to simply resign themselves to fate. The second track is to adopt a syncretistic approach. This entails supplementing Christian faith with the traditional cult. For many in Africa this approach is popular and it has made it difficult to fully domesticate Christianity on the African soil. The third option, perhaps more popular in the present clime, is the migrating tendencies of church members to go to other churches where they believe their problems could easily be solved. Paul Gifford analysis of a new type of prosperity gospel that is flourishing in Ghana today and elsewhere on the African continent is insightful. It provides insight into the novel forms of Christian worship that are developing in Africa today [24].

What is unique about the churches surveyed is that none of them are the same. While some are easily recognizable as a part of the network of a global Pentecostal movement, with strong connections to the United States and Nigeria, others are built around a single charismatic pastor. But there is something that they share in common; that is, their dogmatic divergence from the more conservative “mainline” Presbyterian, Anglican, Catholic, and Methodist churches that emphasize salvation in the afterlife. Contrary to the “mainline” churches, these new movements focus on the here and now; their preachers claim to have the key to gaining divine favor for wealth and success. Gifford focuses on the most prominent pastors and their corresponding super-churches—what he calls the “premier division” players within the multidivisional Ghanaian church leagues [25]. Some of the big names that have been identified include Mensah Otabil of the Central Gospel Church, Nicolas Duncan-Williams of Action Chapel, Dag Heward Mills of the Worldwide Lighthouse International “Mega-Church,” Bishop Charles Agyin Asare of the World Miracle Bible Church and Bishop David Oyedepo of Nigeria’s Winner’s Chapel.

There is little to doubt that these men have become icons in Ghana and have spawned an industry of the gospel that uses radio, television, and print media to turn them into national celebrities. They are in great demand because they promise heavenly blessings in a variety of ways which includes new jobs, cars, houses, finding marriage partner and fruit of the womb. One major ministry focus is protection from the “curses of Satan”—misfortune, unemployment, poverty, and other impediments to success. Members are often made to believe that the blessings sought can only be realized when believers demonstrate their faith through generous donations to these churches. Gifford refers to this kind of prosperity logic as “share in Christ’s victory over sin, sickness and poverty” [26].

A popular strategy also adopted by many prosperity preachers to lure their congregations to give bountifully is to tell stories of wealth and prosperity from the Old Testament. Biblical figures like Abraham and King Solomon are favorite sermon themes. King Solomon, in particular, is lauded not for his wisdom but his wealth. Gifford explains that the purpose of these stories is to encourage people to give generously to the new churches, in the form of tithes as well as additional gifts. In a community where many live below the poverty line and the preaching of the gospel is skewed to pander to the greed of others prosperity gospel becomes really a lure. It is then easy to gloss over the “deceitfulness of riches” (Matt. 13:22; Mark 4:19, KJV) in order to enjoy the comforts that material possessions confer.

## **V. A Re-Assessment Of Prosperity Gospel**

A cursory look at the corpus of literature on prosperity gospel will immediately reveal the extent to which it has been lambasted by critical scholars. The angst against the movement is not centered so much on prosperity per se but on the method for propagating it. There seems to be too much emphasis on materialism and a total disregard to the testimony of the scriptures. The problem probably lies in the nature of biblical authority. Two areas, as pointed out by Sarles, where there has been major concerns on prosperity gospel are the extent of revelation and the method of interpretation [27]. Insightfully, Sarles comments: “Prosperity writers never challenge the verbal, plenary, inerrant inspiration of scripture. They accept the text of the Bible in all its particulars as revealed truth from God. The problem is not the inspiration of the text, but inspiration beyond the text [28]. Prosperity gospel preachers believe that special, verbal revelation is a continuum; that is, it did not terminate with the close of the New Testament canon but continues today. Because of this view of inspiration those in the vanguard of the prosperity gospel movement frequently buttress their teachings with claims of divine revelations, prophecies, dreams and visions. There is probably nothing wrong with this if they are not often put at par with or sometimes made to override the doctrines of God’s word.

Prosperity gospel proponents, however, present their experiences as though they share the same status with those of Old Testament prophets and New Testament apostles. As pointed out by Hunter, prosperity gospel leaders use phrases and sometimes expressions such as “The Lord spoke to me” which may imply a direct revelation of God’s will [29]. This is questionable because such assertions leave the hearers with the impression that the message is divine. Since their messages are made to bear the divine imprimatur it becomes difficult to subject them to the litmus test of the Scriptures.

Another area where prosperity gospel leaves much to be desired is its hermeneutics. As observed by Sarles, Bible verses are quoted indiscriminately without attention to grammatical indicators, semantic nuances, or literary and historical context [30]. When the rules of hermeneutics and exegesis are ignored it is often the case that the textual meaning of a biblical text is distorted. Prosperity preachers are wont to use a string of biblical texts to build up a theology of material prosperity. The plethora of texts commonly used includes Joshua 1: 8. God had told Joshua that he would make his way prosperous and that he would give him success. Reading this passage contextually would hardly warrant the interpretation super-imposed on it by prosperity gospel preachers. The promise given is military success, not financial. Mark 10:29-30 is also used to support the view of a hundredfold return in financial outlays.

A careful reading of the pericope will immediately reveal that Jesus was giving an orientation to his disciples on the task they would soon embark upon. It was a hazardous task, fraught with uncertainties. They would lose their homes and almost everything they had. But their needs would be met by fellow believers. This text has little or nothing to do with the promise of affluence as it is being applied by prosperity gospel preachers. The restoration in hundredfold hardly is not to be misconstrued as tantamount to a materialistic return of equivalent blessings. The absurdity of limiting the passage to a literal interpretation becomes apparent if the same rule is applied to the promise that God will give the person who gave up mother and father for the cause of the gospel other mothers and fathers. It would defy logical reasoning to believe that Jesus meant his statement literally. Obviously, Jesus was not referring to physical biological mothers or fathers. The most reasonable explanation suggests spiritual fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters. The blessings promised could however translate to physical restoration or spiritual or a combination of both. In some cases (maybe more often) the restorations may come only in the next life. It is tantamount to a wresting of the scriptures if the passage is used to promote prosperity gospel.

Finally, a very popular text often cited to leverage prosperity gospel is 3 John 2: "Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers" (NKJV). The Greek word, *eudoo*, translated "prosper" has little or nothing to do with financial wealth. It simply means to go well with someone. Perhaps a more accurate translation is rendered by the New International Version: "Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting well." The combination of the phrases "go well with you" and "good health" were known in antiquity to be the standard form of greeting in a personal letter [31]. It violates the text if what was meant to be a customary way of greeting – this time John goodwill message to Gaius – is construed to mean financial prosperity for all Christians of all ages. In all probability, John neither "intended that, nor could Gaius have so understood it...to argue from the text that God wills our financial prosperity is to abuse the text, not use it" [32].

It is pertinent to highlight how prosperity gospel may negatively affect the continent of Africa, today. The first point to note is that it undermines selfless giving. A careful reading of the Bible would indicate that offering should be given to God as an act of worship (Isa 43 :22- 24; Ps 116: 12-17) and not for selfish gain. This point is germane because it reflects on the motive of giving. Prosperity gospel teaches people to focus on getting, not giving. At its core it is a selfish and materialistic faith with a thin Christian veneer. It is true that God promises to reward those who give to him generously (2 Cor 9:6-11) but this should not be understood as putting God under the obligation to materially bless the giver. Divine largesse, like other blessings, is received by grace. The desire for prosperity must never be the motive of giving. This is in tandem with the view of Tozer who argues that it is dangerous to associate the workings of God with material prosperity [33]. Before one gives material gifts, they should first give themselves to the Lord (2 Cor. 8:5; Rom. 12:1) because God is more concerned with the giver than the gift. But prosperity gospel preachers give the impression that material prosperity is a measure of one's spirituality. As Grady perceptively observes, "When greed is preached from the pulpit, it spreads like a cancer in God's house"[34].

Secondly, prosperity gospel is a parody of true prosperity from the biblical perspective. Prevailing culture could sometimes negatively affect the gospel. That probably is the case with prosperity gospel; the preachers have imbibed the materialistic philosophy of this age, the belief that material prosperity is gain. It is a gospel shaped by the materialism of our contemporary culture which apparently negates clear Biblical teaching on the issue. Paul admonishes: "But godliness with contentment is great gain. For, we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap ... For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil" (1 Tim. 6 :6-10). In contrast to material prosperity, true prosperity in God's sight is the riches of faith. " ... God has chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom ... "(James 2:5). The overemphasis of prosperity gospel on material acquisition is often done at the expense of spiritual prosperity which leaves the believer more impoverished in faith.

Thirdly, prosperity gospel makes the poor to unnecessarily bear the weight of guilt. Though there is no inherent virtue in being poor it is equally wrong to regard poverty as a reflection of one's spiritual status. There is a serious implication when God's blessings are reduced to material gain: those who are not rich are either

guilty of sin or unbelief. In other words, if God's will is for everyone to be healthy and wealthy, then anyone who falls sick or remains poor is suffering from his own unbelief or disobedience. This places a terrible burden on the poor for it is unfair and unbiblical. It makes them victims of their unsavory circumstances.

Fourthly, prosperity gospel has been implicated to feed pride. A warped style of leadership is produced in an atmosphere redolent with greed. The burden for soul is not so much as important as having mega-churches. It creates opportunists who will want to exploit every situation to make gain.

Finally, it emasculates the formation of Christian character. A serious implication of prosperity gospel is that it leaves no room for brokenness and suffering. The cross and its symbol of denial are disregarded. The promise of instant success is a negation of biblical injunctions that require patience and endurance. It offers an illegal shortcut. All these negative impacts may not have helped the cause of Christianity, particularly in Africa, where endemic corruption has rendered the economy comatose.

## VI. Conclusion

Historically, the Christian church has always been ambivalent about the spiritual value of material wealth. In its public statements, if not always in practice, it has usually stood on the moral high ground, promoting a modest and sacrificial lifestyle while renouncing excessive wealth. But in the past couple of decades there has been a tectonic shift with the emergence of Pentecostalism and its concomitant emphasis on materialism. Despite all its claims to restoration and the utopian image it presents prosperity gospel has only succeeded in muzzling the witness of the Christian church because it is based on wrong-headed theology and faulty hermeneutical principles. It feeds on the greed of its peddlers, leaving their acolytes worse off, materially and spiritually. Many African countries are still hemorrhaging from a myriad of challenges, not least from a religious viewpoint that deifies the "mammon" of unrighteousness and panders to the greed of a few ecclesiastics who promote the commercialization of the gospel. The true gospel message engenders prosperity; but it is prosperity that is delivered on the platform of selfless service to God and humanity.

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