

Prosperity Teaching: A Theological Evaluation

by

Peter Young

The emergence and rise of prosperity teaching in Africa, and Nigeria in particular, has been viewed with some considerable concern by the established churches especially because it is perceived that many of those that are attracted to the teaching are coming from the membership of these churches.¹ There is a feeling that this teaching is flawed, but there has not been a response to it as it occurs in this context.

This essay aims to give a brief overview of the teaching and its claims before attempting a response to it.

An Overview of Prosperity Teaching

Both ideologically and sociologically the historical roots of the prosperity teaching are to be found in the United States of America in the decades since the mid-1960s. The prominent American teachers of prosperity include Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth and Gloria Copeland, Robert Tilton and John Osteen among others. These have in turn been influenced by the teachings of E. W. Kenyon, Norman Vincent Peale and Robert Schuller. The teaching also leans heavily on an outlook and hermeneutic of affluent and materialistic Middle-America.

¹ The teaching is variously referred to as Prosperity Theology, the Prosperity Gospel, Health and Wealth Gospel. They are all more or less interchangeable, although some are more derogatory in their tone than others. For the purposes of this paper the term "prosperity teaching" is used.

This teaching has been taken up by various indigenous African preachers, such a one being the late Archbishop Benson Idahosa of Benin City in Nigeria.² Prosperity teaching is now a prominent feature of many of the neo-Pentecostal churches and large evangelistic rallies in Nigeria.

In giving a theological summary of the prosperity teaching there are difficulties, partly because it does not present itself as a written theology but rather as a rhetorical and experiential teaching in which the appeal is as much tied to the language used and the personality of the proponent as to the theological content. Another factor that makes the enterprise difficult is that there is considerable variation between the proponents of the teaching on some of its details. There are however certain common elements found in the teaching and it is on those that this essay shall concentrate.

1. Foundational affirmations

The main element of the prosperity teaching is that all Christians have the right, and even the responsibility, to be prosperous in all areas of life. This most notably includes the areas of financial prosperity and prosperity in the realm of physical health and well being. Idahosa states this in the following way:

*No one in God's family was ever destined to exist in sickness, fear, ignorance, poverty, loneliness or mediocrity. God's abundant goodness will be enjoyed and utilised by those who discipline themselves, become decisive, bold, adventurous, believing, daring, risking and determined.*³

Similarly William F. Kumuyi of the Deeper Life Bible Church states:

*It is God's perfect will that a believer should enjoy perfect health, spiritual and material blessings, victory, promotion, peace, joy and satisfaction throughout his sojourn on earth. There are thousands of promises in the word of God that should make a believer remain blessed all the days of his life.*⁴

² B. Idahosa, *I Choose to Change: The Scriptural Way to Success and Prosperity* (Crowborough: Highland Books, 1987).

³ Idahosa, p. 14.

⁴ W.F. Kumuyi, *Curses and Cures* (Lagos: Zoe, 1990), p. 9. The Deeper Life movement seems to apply this teaching more to the area of health and healing however.

The corollary of this is that for a Christian to be in poverty or to be chronically ill is to be outside of God's will for their life, whether that be because of sin, ignorance or lack of sufficient faith. This teaching is obviously bound to give rise to serious pastoral and theological problems if it doesn't work and provide the prosperity it claims for the believer—because the fault is always with that believer and never with the theology.

2. Scriptural Basis

The authority for the teaching is sought from various proof texts, interpreted with the assumption that they all can stand alone as prescriptive statements without the need to refer to context or original intent.

One of the favourite texts of those propounding this teaching is 3 John 2 (KJV only!):

Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth.

From this it is claimed that it is clear that it is the wish of God for all believers that they should prosper in every way, so asserting that the argument is conclusively proven.

This text is supported by others such as Psalm 1 (esp. v. 3), the blessings and curses of Deuteronomy 28-30, Psalm 84:11, and many other isolated texts.

The basis for this is that the atonement effected by Christ not only includes deliverance from sin, but from poverty and sickness as well. The scriptures quoted to support this are Isaiah 53:4-5, Mark 8:16-17 and 2 Corinthians 8:9. So Idahosa can say,

*We are saved? From what to what? Death to life! Sin to righteousness! Darkness to light! Poverty to prosperity! Fear to faith! Failure to success! And more and more!*⁵

It is also argued that prosperity is an aspect of the atonement by referring to Galatians 3:13 and stating that the curse of the law is poverty, whether it be emotional, financial, physical or spiritual. The flaws in this exegesis should be obvious.

Prosperity teaching also espouses a form of covenant theology. The covenant of God with Abraham, which includes a promise of material prosperity, is seen as a conditional one,

⁵ Idahosa, p. 10.

dependent on obedience. Galatians 3:14a is then cited to show that God must also bestow this prosperity on the Christian.

This conditionality was of course made explicit through Moses and this element of the covenant was a prominent one (cf. Deuteronomy 28-30). These covenantal promises of prosperity are a part of the believer's benefits on the basis of Hebrews 8:6-12 and the fact that Christ has fulfilled the old covenant (Matt 5:17). Logic then leads to the statement:

...and you now that you are in Christ, stand before God as someone able to keep the covenant. The blessings of covenant keeping are therefore yours to claim.⁶

To maintain their position that material prosperity is the will of God for all here and now and to hold a belief in the perfection of Christ, there is of course a need to radically re-read the Biblical material on the poverty of the earthly Jesus. This is done and as a result we are told in an amazing piece of exegesis that Jesus was one of the richest people that ever lived! The evidence cited for this is that he was able to pay his taxes, feed hungry crowds and support the ministry of twelve others all by the exercise of faith. Furthermore, he wore the very best clothes that money could buy as is evidenced by the Roman soldiers gambling over his seamless garment at his crucifixion.

3. Faith and Positive Confession

Faith is the main condition given for receiving this abundance of material blessing, so it is important to understand what constitutes the substance of such faith. Teachers of the prosperity message stress that it is faith in God that he will keep his promises and act as he has said that he would that brings about a response from God to deliver prosperity in all areas of life. Not only will God act in response to this faith, but he is actually obliged to do so. Such considerations lead to prescriptive formulae as to how God will work. Since human faith has the power to effect change and bring about this prosperity, it can be regarded as a force in itself without reference to its object. This force is wielded not by God, but by the human believer.

This view of faith means that it is measurable by the material results it achieves and so easily leads to the possibility of grading Christians according to their material success. This in

⁶ S. Matthews, *Money Matters* (Bradford: Harvestime, 1987), p. 57.

These arguments are also set out in A. Anderson, "The Prosperity Message in the Eschatology of Some New Charismatic Churches", *Missionalia* 15 no.2 (Aug. 1987): 75-76.

turn introduces the concept of a superior class of believers who can and do effect this prosperity in their lives.

Another feature of the teaching on faith by the proponents of prosperity teaching (and the whole of the 'faith movement' for that matter) is their advocacy of what is called "positive confession".

Positive confession is a principle based on Mark 11:22-24, that is: what you say in faith is certain to come about. This leads to such popular slogans as "name it and claim it", "believe it and receive it" and "what you say is what you get". Idahosa quite openly states that this principle gives us power that is comparable to that of Jesus or God himself:

[referring to Mk 11:13-14] ...if the tree died because Jesus spoke and cursed it for not bearing fruit, then we as Christians must also speak and expect mighty big results. God speaks and expects results. And we are made in the image and likeness of Him.

[referring to Gen 1:1-2] It was not until God spoke that the things created began to fit into their respective places. Your visions and dreams of what you want to be will not materialise until you speak to them. Speak to your visions and dreams and bring them into fruition.⁷

To maintain this positive confession it is enjoined on the believer to act as though the benefit claimed has also been received even though the evidence may be entirely to the contrary. To do less is to display weakness of faith. The potential for disaster here, particularly in cases of serious illness, is obvious.

4. Giving and Receiving

Prosperity, it is emphasised, is not simply for its own sake. We are blessed materially in order that we might give (usually to the work of evangelism). The scriptures cited here include 2 Corinthians 9:8. This also works in reverse, making the cycle of prosperity complete: the more you give away, the more you receive. This finds scriptural support in such passages as Luke 6:38, 2 Corinthians 9:6, Ecclesiastes 11:1, and the like.

⁷ Idahosa, pp. 76-77.

In this way, then, giving is not seen as an end in itself, but also a potential avenue to the material enrichment of the giver. Some teachers are quite blatant in their advocacy of this as a motive for giving.

5. The Scope of Prosperity Teaching

As has been stated, the prosperity promised touches all areas of life. After citing Psalm 84:11, Idahosa asks,

What do you visualise when you read the words 'good thing'? A good car, good health, good job, good wife, good children? The Bible reveals that God will withhold none of these things from them that walk uprightly.⁸

In this respect, then, prosperity teaching affirms a holistic world view, emphasising that Christianity is not simply concerned with the spiritual realm.

Prosperity teaching understands the promise of material blessings to extend not merely to provision, but to an abundance that approaches luxury. John 10:10 is interpreted to be a promise that the Christian will have not only provision, but abundant provision. It is seen as fitting that a child of the King should enjoy the luxury that such a position implies.

6. Poverty and Sickness

If material prosperity is the will of God for all of his people which it is their responsibility to claim, then this necessarily means that poverty and sickness are not only evil in themselves, but those who exist in such situations are somehow in a state of sin. It is argued that the church has in the past been misled in affirming the value and dignity of poverty and suffering whereas in fact it can only lead to sin and tragedy. Similarly there is no truth seen in the assertion that prosperity promotes sinfulness and sinful attitudes (Idahosa cites the examples of Abraham, David and rich Christians to illustrate this point).⁹

In some variants of the teaching there is great emphasis on the activity of Satan and demons in the hindrance of prosperity, especially in the area of health. Hence the need to get rid of the demon before true prosperity can be experienced. Where this is perceived to be the

⁸ Idahosa, p. 33

⁹ Idahosa, p. 12.

case, the power to effect the change in the circumstances through the casting out of the evil spirit, according to the teaching, lies in the power of the individual's faith.

An Evangelical Response

In embarking on a response to this teaching it is important to acknowledge that not all of what prosperity teaches is to be denied. The gospel does apply to and should effect every area of our lives and not just be restricted to the spiritual realm. God's material and physical care and provision for his people are very real aspects of his love toward us. God can and does provide prosperity on all levels for his people (all good things come from him) but this is always in the context of his sovereignty. God does love the affluent as well as those who are poor, and even relative affluence does bring responsibilities to share that affluence.

That being said, it is clear that there are many aspects of the teaching to which a response is needed.

1. The Use of Scripture

The general approach of prosperity teaching to scripture and its interpretation has been to quote isolated proof texts and to treat them almost exclusively as propositional truths or promises. This, it is claimed, is in the interest of elucidating the plain meaning of the text. In practice, the words of various verses are applied to the modern world without recourse to such considerations as literary or historical context, the nature of the text or the original intent of such writings.

Responding to this methodology, Gordon Fee makes this important point:

*Let it be understood that the 'plain meaning' of the text is always the first rule, as well as the ultimate goal, of all valid interpretation. But 'plain meaning' has first of all to do with the author's original intent; it has to do with what would have been plain to those to whom the words were originally addressed.*¹⁰

This is strikingly seen in the interpretation of 3 John 2, one of the foundational texts of the movement as mentioned above. This verse is a part of the conventional letter writing formula of the day and part of a personal note of good wishes from the author to Gaius. It

¹⁰ G.D. Fee, "The 'Gospel' of Prosperity - an Alien Gospel", *Reformation Today* 82 (Nov.-Dec. 1984): 40.

cannot be seen as a propositional promise of God to all believers either in its original intent or in the way it is to be applied today.

Referring to Mark 10:29-30 Idahosa says that

any man or woman who reads these verses without prejudice will establish in plain language that the Lord promised temporal wealth.¹¹

Simply reading the verses in isolation from their context doesn't tell the whole story however. Idahosa conveniently forgets that this saying is set in the context of a discussion on the difficulty of the wealthy entering the Kingdom of God and neglects to comment on the promise of persecution that is a part of these verses. Jesus is not giving mathematical expression to the benefits of discipleship or talking about the ownership of property, but rather showing that in the family of believers there was to be the sharing of property etc. such that the disciples were compensated within that fellowship.

The other verses used (and especially those of the NT) can be shown to have been given similarly contextually and hermeneutically blinkered interpretations.

In its approach to the Old Testament we see that prosperity teaching not only uses the same hermeneutical principles, but seems to regard the content of the Old Testament as being much the same as that of the New Testament. There is no hint of the principle of interpreting the Old Testament in the light of the New.

The Old Testament undoubtedly does teach that God would bless his people in the land as they were obedient and faithful to him. This theology (which can be seen most markedly in the book of Deuteronomy and much of the wisdom literature) is qualified by the gospel and is counter-balanced even within the Old Testament itself. The book of Job for example challenges this simple equation of righteousness equals material and physical success; unrighteousness equals suffering. The message of the book is not that God restored Job's fortunes at the end, but rather that his friends' rigid application of the wisdom formula cannot be held with a sovereign God. The questions of Habakkuk on the suffering of the righteous are also left unanswered in the prosperity teaching.

¹¹ Idahosa, p. 108.

2. Eschatology

Given the theological roots of prosperity teaching, it is perhaps surprising on one level that more attention is not given by these teachers to the second coming and related teachings. On reflection however it is rather less surprising when one considers the basic eschatological stance that underpins the teaching. What is meant by the underlying eschatological stance is the assumption, whether explicitly stated or not, that all the benefits of the Kingdom of God can be enjoyed by all believers here and now. This assumption is expressed by Colin Urquart in his foreword to Idahosa's book when he says of Jesus' teaching,

*He came to establish God's heavenly Kingdom here on earth - and surely nobody can believe that heaven will be a place of poverty?*¹²

The tension that the New Testament teaches between the realised and the yet-to-be-realised aspects of the Kingdom is completely missing here, the emphasis solely resting on the former. Thus the parousia and the life of the world to come are robbed of their essential relevance and importance.

This emphasis on realised eschatology is especially evident in some of the teaching on healing and health. To teach that believers should not experience illness is to deny the reality of physical mortality. It ignores the fact that even the most wondrous of Jesus' healing miracles were temporary healings (i.e. even Lazarus died after the events of John 11). It, in effect, claims that the believer who has enough faith already possesses an indestructible resurrection body.

These eschatological assumptions would seem to be in direct conflict with the teaching of the New Testament in general and the argument by Paul in 1 Corinthians in particular. (It would be fascinating to see how 1 Cor. 4:8ff. would be dealt with by these teachers).

3. The Nature of God

One of the more disturbing aspects of the theology of prosperity teaching is what it says about the nature of God. God is effectively reduced to an object to be manipulated. The promises of God are seen as binding him so that, when the right procedures are followed, he is bound to produce the result desired. As has been mentioned it must not be denied that God can and does give prosperity to some, but in this teaching there is no room for the freedom and

¹² C. Urquart in Idahosa, p. 7.

sovereignty of God—everything depends on the actions of the individual. In this way it is very anthropocentric, although it is claimed that all is for God's glory.

The problem referred to here can likewise be expressed with reference to prosperity teaching's view of faith. Faith perceived as human achievement (Pelagianism) always carries the danger of pride and the displacement of glory that rightly belongs to God. Faith in God, as demonstrated by the positive confession that one practices, is almost reduced to the level of an incantation. To give almost sacral power to the words one utters and hence ascribe almost divine power to the individual human believer borders on idolatry.

4. Christology

The interpretation of the person of Jesus that is outlined above denies the reality of the incarnation and involves a watered down understanding of what he was doing in his earthly ministry. To view the miracles of Jesus as a limitless wealth-generating mechanism is not only to miss the whole point of the miracles in his message, but it means that Jesus never really shared our limitations and hence didn't really share our humanity either. The miracles were a sign of the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God in the person of Jesus. (Where such miracles continue to occur they continue to be such signs.) There is not any indication that they were intended or even interpreted by others as "God's way of looking after Jesus"—to do so gives deficient Christology.

It is by no means universally accepted that sickness and poverty are dealt with in the atonement, and in fact there are some major difficulties in claiming that there are. Chief among such difficulties is the fact that illness and material poverty are not moral categories and so cannot be seen as sinful in themselves. They therefore do not need atonement. It might rather be said that in the final consummation of the Kingdom of God these things will be finally done away with (they are an aspect of the general groaning of creation - Rom 8:22), but that in the meantime they are realities that people are to struggle with and against as a part of the fallen human condition.

5. The Problem of Pain and Poverty

While a full and comprehensive theodicy is beyond the scope of this essay, the flaws in the answer provided by prosperity teaching must be addressed.

In the teaching of the prosperity preachers, pain and poverty are always directly attributable to some sin or defect in the spiritual life of the individual involved. As has been alluded to, this is precisely the theology of the friends of Job, and the type of cause-and-effect-

wisdom that the book of Job seeks to address. The answer that that book gives is that God is sovereign and may work according to some other unexplained and unexplainable economy. What Fee has termed the rules of conventional wisdom simply are not Biblical, and he points out that they are refuted by Jesus himself in at least two instances (Luke 13:1-5; John 9:1-4).¹³

It must indeed be recognised that ignorance, sin and evil often can be the causes of pain and suffering. This not only occurs on an individual basis, but institutions and corporate bodies can, and often are, responsible. The Christian response to any pain and poverty must rather be rooted in the pain and poverty of Christ—the cross, and we are to act to alleviate these circumstances in love. This response to poverty and suffering is a long way removed from the motive of giving for the sake of receiving that pervades in prosperity teaching.

6. The Nature of Success and the Value of Money

Prosperity teaching raises several issues to do with the nature of success and the value of money, the first of which is the question: Is success as envisaged by these teachers that to which we are called? There is an assumption inherent in the discussion that "success" is a good thing to which to aspire. Idahosa never really defines what he means by the success that is promised in the title of his book, but the context in which it is discussed indicates that he equates it with temporal wealth and a large and growing personal ministry. While these may indeed be very pleasant things to have, it is questionable as to whether they are to be the goal of the Christian. Such an aspiration will necessarily lead to individualism and the loss of corporate vision of the purposes of God.

Another issue raised by the teaching is the value that one should place on money. It is again an inbuilt assumption in the prosperity message that wealth is a positive attribute and something to be desired. Fee makes the point well that for the people of God, money has neutral value.¹⁴ The concern for money and riches is one of the things from which Christ frees us (Matt 6:32). Paul states this same truth when he states that he has known contentment in all circumstances (Phil 4:10-13), and warns against striving after money (1 Tim 6:6-10).

Some Possible Lessons for the Church

It is obvious from the above that there are some lessons and correctives that this teaching and its appeal can offer the established churches. Not only is there a need for the churches to address some of the issues raised, but the widespread appeal of prosperity teaching

¹³ Fee, p. 41.

¹⁴ Fee, p. 42.

highlights deficiencies in the standard of teaching in the churches. It would seem that doubtful American theology is taking the place that should belong to good African theology.

1. A Theology of God's Good Gifts

As has been stated, it would be wrong to imply that God does not bless his people with good things. It is clear from the Scriptures that God wants us to enjoy life and to have it at the highest quality possible (John 10:10, etc.). There is no sin in either wealth or poverty *per se* (material possessions in themselves are neutral).

Having said that however, there are some observations to be made which can guard against the dangers seen in prosperity theology. Firstly, it is imperative that we maintain a theology of God's sovereignty that sees his promises as commitments that God can (and will) fulfill as he sees fit and never as tools to manipulate God into doing what we see fit.

In the second place we must not hold to too narrow a definition of "blessing". God's blessings are not restricted to material things and indeed those things are not the most important blessings we can desire (Matt 6:19-21; Luke 12:32-34). When seen in the context of the rest of the passage, the abundant life to which Jesus refers (in John 10:10 as cited above) is clearly the life of the *shalom* of God's presence which is partially experienced now, but which will be fully known in heaven.

Thirdly we must recognize that material possessions can very easily become a stumbling block and a hindrance to our spiritual health (Matt 6:24; 13:22; 19:24; 1 Tim 6:9,17; Heb 13:5). Although material possessions are neutral as we have stated, they can be used by the evil one to ensnare us. We therefore need to take these warnings from Scripture very seriously.

Fourthly, we are to recognize the reality that in fact many godly and righteous people have suffered and do suffer, both through material deprivation and physical affliction. This is in fact the testimony of Scripture, from Jesus to Paul to the heroes of faith as listed in Hebrews 11. The fact of their suffering in no way calls into question the holiness of their lives.

We therefore need to pray, as Jesus taught us, to ask for fulfillment of our needs, not our wants (Matt 6:11). The prayer of Proverbs 30:8b-9 and Paul's statement that "Godliness with contentment is great gain" (1 Tim 6:6) are both helpful attitudes to cultivate in our quest for godliness in this area.

2. The Lessons for Church Practice

In too many African churches the liturgy, hymnody and style of worship seems to cling to dated and incomprehensible Western patterns and practices. These have a tradition of use in many of the mission-founded churches especially, and may prove painful to part with, but they mean little to a large section of congregations and compare unfavourably to the experience offered by the proponents of prosperity teaching. The churches need to rise to this challenge and be imaginative in adapting the services to meet the needs of their people. God is alive and very active in the Church in Africa and his people need to acknowledge and celebrate that fact. It is a sad indictment on the mainline churches if people are having to move to the extremes of prosperity teaching to find a venue in which they can comfortably do so. There is no doubt that there is awareness of the activity of God throughout the churches but the shackles of the past too often hinder a proper response to that. It is tragic that Christians be drawn into questionable theology because they don't feel they can worship God meaningfully in places where theology is more solidly based.

There is a need for the church to preach a biblical message that does touch all areas of life, making the scriptures relevant to the real needs of everyday life in modern Africa and showing that God does act in the world today. In particular there must be practical and relevant teaching on the topics of wealth and poverty, pain and illness.

Above all there is a need for a sound grounding in biblical theology and the reading and teaching of Scripture in a way that brings out the whole of its message and rejects the proof-text approach to interpretation and theology.