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A Wesleyan Answer to the Prosperity Gospel

Credit

This presentation is the result of carefully researched sermons preached by eight (8) ordained ministers and laypersons of the *Wesleyan Church of Liberia*, including this presenter.¹ I am grateful to them.

Historical Context of the Prosperity Gospel

Up to the 1980s, the mentality of preachers and congregations in Mission-Established Churches/Denominations² such as the Wesleyan Church, preached and accepted, verbally and non-verbally, a *poverty* gospel, which caused many preachers and their families to live in *poverty* (preachers who belonged to the elite class were an exception: they owned businesses or worked in government and thus were not *poor*). Pastors who attempted preaching about increased offerings for increased pastoral support were judged as “worldly.” It seems that this mentality was held by congregations in other countries, until a few preachers like Evangelist Oral Roberts (United States of America), Bishop Benson Idohosa (Nigeria) and others began to preach and teach about God’s promise to make “something good” to happen to His people, including good physical health and economic wealth.

Description of the “Prosperity Gospel”

A careful examination of the “*Prosperity Gospel*” reveals that it is a “Distorted, Neo-Liberation **Theology**” that emphasizes physical-economic well-being (i.e. good, physical health and financial/material abundance), but in reality enriches the preachers rather than their scripturally ignorant congregations.

Unlike *Liberation Theology* proper that has sought to eliminate oppression and poverty “through a replacement of the economic and political structures... (which sees God as) the God of the oppressed...” (Nash 1984:iii, 10), “Prosperity Gospel” primarily *eliminates* the poverty of the preachers rather than their congregations’. This is observed from the vast contrasts between the abundant livelihood

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² Churches started by Western Missionaries.

Comment [JPT1]: Rev. Daniel B. McGee describes it as “a propaganda— a little truth wrapped around a lot of lies.”

of the preachers of the “Prosperity Gospel” and the meager earnings and possessions of their poor members (except members who are already well-to-do). Actually, these preachers cleverly twist selected scriptural texts out of their various contexts (i.e. passage, book, testament and whole Bible contexts), to deceive their scripturally ignorant audiences.

They declare automatic economic prosperity to their hearers because Jesus came purposefully to give them much “**abundant life**” (John 10:10b [“**I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly**”]), as well as that He “became poor so that they might become rich” (2Cor. 8:9 [“**For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was RICH, yet for your sakes He became POOR, so that you through His POVERTY might become RICH**”]NIV; emphases added).

I suppose that you would agree with me that the context of John 10, as well as the whole gospel, is about a Rich, spiritual life, rather than physical. For example, Jesus’ response to Judas Iscariot’s “concern” for the welfare of the poor was that “**You will ALWAYS have the POOR among you...**” (John 12:8)

Similarly, Paul was not promising an economic prosperity to the Corinthians. The immediately context reveals *extremely poor* believers giving out of their *extreme poverty* to meet the needs of their needy brethren (vv. 1-5). I am baffled that Jesus would die to make these Saints RICH, yet they were DEEP IN POVERTY. Or, was this promise meant for 20th and 21st Centuries Christians only? Even Paul was not rich that he was needless (Philippians 4:10-19).

In addition to these passages, “Prosperity Preachers” use texts such as Proverbs 11:24-26 to persuade their congregations to “sow seeds” in order that might reap returns— returns that are commensurate with the “seeds.” The text reads,

v.²⁴ One gives freely, yet grows all the richer; another withholds what he should give, and only suffers want. v.²⁵ Whoever brings blessing will be enriched, and one who waters will himself be watered. v.²⁶ The people curse him who holds back grain, but a blessing is on the head of him who sells it. (*English Standard Version*)

This text does not speak of “sowing seeds” to the pastors/preachers in order to reap equivalent rewards; instead, it speaks of stinginess (meanness), which results in poverty. The principle here is that the person who gives of himself/herself the more to others receives more, while the one who does not share with others “finds that others will not share with (him/her)” (Notes in the Wesley Study Bible). Even the NT text that mentions “sowing” of money or kinds (2Cor. 9:6-14) does not speak of “sowing

Comment [JPT2]: I.e. Acts 20:35 (“In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must *help the weak* and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, **‘it is more blessed to give than to receive’**”; ESV).

seed” to a preacher / pastor for equivalent returns. It is giving generously to share with the needy and to give thanks to God.

Comment [JPT3]: They use this passage to motivate their audiences to give huge amounts; for givers of \$10.00 will receive \$10; \$50.00 will give back \$50.00; \$1000.00 will give back \$1000.00.

Except for giving back to God what we have received from Him as a token of our appreciation for giving us what we have, the Bible commands and exhorts us to share with the needy/poor (Lev. 19:9, 10; 23:22; Deut. 24:19, 20; Ruth 2:1-21). Again, “Prosperity Preachers” take Proverbs 11:24-26 out of context!

Comment [JPT4]: Texts that acknowledge our belongings belonging to God ((1Chronicles 29:11d, 12a, 14; Psalms 24:1; 50:9-13; Haggai 2:8))

The Scripture seems to indicate that the only offering—mandatory offering, really— with the promise of multiplied returns is *tithing* (Mal. 3:10-12). This *tithing* was not, and is not, a “bargaining chip” with God to obtain His blessings; it was a mandatory offering. Furthermore, the context of this passage and our own experiences suggests that God’s blessings come in various forms, according to His *timing* and *prerogative*, rather than by manipulating God.

Comment [JPT5]: These texts speak of God’s law of ‘gleaning,’ whereby those with farms allowed the poor to join them during harvest time.

The Bible and Prosperity

The Christian Bible does speak of earthly wealth/possessions in several places. It features more than 200 occurrences of NT and OT words that mean “gain” (yitron), “possession” (‘ahuzzah) “property” (‘ahuzzah; qinyan) “profit” (yitron), “riches” (gadol; nekasim; ‘oser), “treasure” (matmon [OT]; thesaurus [NT]), “savings” (yitrah), and “wealth” (nekasim [OT]; ploutos [NT]).

Examples of successful or prosperous persons in the Bible:

- Abraham,
- Boaz,
- David,
- Esau,
- Job,
- Joseph,
- Solomon,

Two Categories of Persons Who Prospered in the Bible

1. **The Wicked**, Psalm 73:3-12; Jeremiah 12:1-3.

Six kinds of prosperity in Psalm 73:

1. They have no struggles, v. 4.

2. They have healthy bodies, v. 4.
3. They have strong bodies, v. 4.
4. They are burden free, v. 5.
5. They are not afflicted by problems as other people, v. 5.
6. They have abundance of water to spare, v. 10.

Let's note that "Prosperity" here is non-financial!

The first biblical object of prosperity is the Wicked. The second object is

2. **The Righteous**, Psalm 1:1-3:

^{Ps 1:1} Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. ^{Ps 1:2} But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. ^{Ps 1:3} He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.

Biblical Responsibilities of the Prosperous, Lev. 19:9, 10; 23:22; Deut. 24:19, 20. *Summary:* Those whom God blessed in Scripture were obliged to share with the poor.

OT

The Law of Gleaning was established by God (Lev. 19:9, 10; 23:22; Deut. 24:19, 20; cf. Ruth 2:1-21).

NT

1. Well-to-do believers helped the poor (Acts 2:44-47; 4:32-37)
2. Well-to-do believers were admonished to help the poor (James 2:14-17; 1John 3:17).
3. Extremely poor believers helped the poor (2Cor. 8:1-5).

Conclusion: A Wesleyan Response to the Prosperity Gospel

- The Bible teaches about "prosperity," but not as the "prosperity preachers" do.
- The Bible does NOT promise an automatic "prosperity" to everyone.
- The Bible's "prosperity" has a responsibility attached to it: to help the needy.
- Tithing or any offering to God is NOT a "bargaining chip" with God to obtain His blessings.

- The “*Prosperity Gospel*” being preached is a “Distorted, Neo-Liberation Theology,” craftily designed out of the Bible to enrich the preachers rather than their hearers. They are just like Satan, who distorted God’s Word to mislead Adam and Eve for his own gain (see Gen. 3:1-13).
- “Prosperity Preachers” are “deceivers...(who teach) for the sake of dishonest gain,” according to Paul (Titus 1:11).
- **“Prosperity Preachers” are just like Judas Iscariot— they are THIEVES who only care for themselves!**

In order for Wesleyans to deliver ourselves from fallen prey to this distorted “gospel,” we must apply the following antidotes:

Antidote to Falling Prey to “Prosperity” Preachers

- Study to know the Bible (2Tim. 3:16-17; cf. Matt. 4:1-11).
- Stop craving after earthly riches (Prov. 30:7-9; Luke 12:13-21; 1Tim. 6:6-10).
- Start craving after spiritual riches (Matt. 5:6; 6:19-34).
- Resolve to be content and patient with what we have presently (Philippians 4:10-13; 1Tim. 6:6-10; cf. Prov. 30:7-9).
- Learn skills and Work diligently to meet our needs (2Thess. 3:6-12; cf. Prov. 6:6-11).