

Errors of the Prosperity Gospel

By David W. Jones, December 5, 2013

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.

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- [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.