

54

A THEOLOGICAL EXAMINATION OF PROSPERITY GOSPEL VIS-A-VIS THE PLIGHT OF POVERTY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The research examined prosperity gospel preaching or teaching and its implications on the poor. It discussed its historical origin and noted that it was birthed in United States of America in the nineteenth century and now spreading in the Nigerian churches and society like wild fire. The information for the paper was derived from primary and secondary sources. However, the researcher showed that most scriptural references made in support of prosperity gospel are placed out of context, thus, giving a false impression and interpretation about what the Bible really teaches. The findings of the research indicated that, prosperity gospel in a way gives one a sense of hope, direction and reassurance that the life one lives can get better if one can only apply certain biblical principles correctly. Equally, it was observed that the prosperity preachers or teachers are quite correct in pointing believers to God and the wonderful promises made in his word in order to get their needs met. However, many of these preachers have turned the table of the gospel round for self or selfish advantages and thereby impoverishing their congregation the more rather than improving their lots. This in-turn has reduced the capacity of the people and thereby affected national developments in terms of socio- economic, psycho-spiritual and physical developments. The mind of many Nigerians has so much been corrupted to pursue wealth at the expense of the things of God which has eternal values. Hence, the research paper recommended that the focus of gospel preachers today should rather address soteriology of man.

Introduction

The paradox of lack in the midst of plenty has remained a social problem. We live in a country of both enormous wealth and widespread poverty. While the affluent minorities continue to acquire more and more wealth, millions are living below poverty line with very little hope for a decent life. This predicament has been fueled by the insensitive attitude of government to the needs and suffering of the poor masses. Good governance entails ruling with equity, providing basic social infrastructures for the citizens, ensuring security of lives and properties, economic and political stability, and equitable distribution of wealth. However, the reverse is the case in Nigeria. The rich are getting richer while the poor are getting poorer. Also, many Christians today are living in affluence giving little or no help to their poor and hungry neighbours. The poor constitutes a greater majority of the church, and the situation of poverty in contemporary Nigeria calls for the attention of well-meaning Nigerians and the church in particular for the emancipation of the poor.

Today we live in a materialistic and consumer society, where one is recognized by where he lives, the cloth he wears, the car he drives and how much he makes. It is therefore a very competitive society. Consequently, majority of the youth want to find a solution to their problems and therefore they seek solutions into the churches that preach prosperity gospel; a gospel that promises goodies and claiming to reverse situations. There is this constant rise of prosperity gospel preachers who continue to feast on the ignorance and gullibility of the people, capitalizing on their socio-economic condition to rob them of their money and faith. Taking a cursory look at the lifestyle of some today's acclaimed men of

God; their highly luxurious way of life is a brutal affront to the gospel of Jesus Christ. They lack every iota of modesty and simplicity. While some religious leaders worldwide serving humanity by providing spiritual and moral guidance to people across, others are becoming very rich through their churches as investment. The research is of concern as to why many of these churches and their leaders continue to flourish whereas the congregations suffer.

Prosperity as the New Fulcrum of Christian Preaching

Over the years, 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 message has been ascribed many names, such as the “name it and claim it” gospel, the “prosperity gospel”, the “health and wealth” gospel and “positive confession theology”. No matter what name is used, the essence of this message is the same. Simply put, this “prosperity gospel” teaches that God wants believers to be physically healthy, materially wealthy, and personally happy. God is contemptuous of prosperity preachers. He says: “They give useless medicine for my people’s grievous wounds, for they assure them all is well when that is not so at all” (Jeremiah 8: 10-11).

Observing the special programs and outreaches organized in the churches one will discover that the emphasis is not on righteousness or the kingdom of God. Instead, banners, posters, handbills and radio jingles proclaim “Unceasing Showers of Blessing”, “Twenty-four Hour Miracles”, or “Stupendous Breakthroughs”. Hosea dismisses this when he stated; “They assemble together for grain and new wine” (Hosea 7:14). Prosperity preachers tend to mislead Christians. Jesus does not promise us a rose garden in this life. Instead he tells his disciples: “In the world you shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer for I have overcome the world”. (John 16:33).

The Historical Background of Prosperity Gospel

Prosperity gospel according to Gifford (1994) is definitely a very recent phenomenon although it has gained considerable numbers of followers and propagators just in a matter of decades. How the movement came to be is still a controversial point of discussion, however, the majority of scholars are of the same opinion that the movement began in the USA. Initially the movement did not start as a purely Pentecostal or Charismatic division but altogether based on and borrowed from pagan religious concepts. For McConnell (1995), E.W. Kenyon along with Vincent Peale could be rightly termed the fathers of Prosperity gospel with their roots in Christian Science and New Thought. However, there has been some disagreement about where Kenyon got his influences. What is evident is that his influences did not stem from one source but several. That is, he was influenced by various emerging healing ministers of his time, the Pentecostal movement and the American metaphysical cults.

According to Fullergrad (2007), the genesis of prosperity preaching in Nigeria was in 1980s which saw the emergence of the preachers. In Nigeria, the father of prosperity gospel was Benson Idahosa. It was Elton, a Pentecostal missionary who introduced him to a Pentecostal teacher and Evangelist, Gordon Lindsay who was the founder of Christ for the nation Bible institute where Idahosa was a Bible student. The background of exponents of prosperity preaching also influenced them. Most of them came from poor families and had experienced hardship. In Nigeria, this phenomenon came on the backdrop of poverty, and as a reaction to the message of suffering propagated by the Orthodox churches. Hardship,

unemployment, hunger were the tonic that gave birth to it. Poverty was the order of the day after the end of civil war in 1970, hence, prosperity preaching and theology came as an antidote.

Pros and Cons of Prosperity Gospel

Jones (1998) notes that prosperity gospel has been received with mixed feelings among the Christian fraternity with some calling it a theologically bankrupt teaching that is basically anti-Christian, while others call it 'clearly deficient and at times, heretical teachings'. Some critics have been even sharper and more piercing in their critiques than this. For example, commenting on the negative impact of the prosperity gospel on mentally ill people, Mackay (2009) described the gospel as a "damaging and wicked teaching" that "makes my blood boil with anger". The list is long that displays negative comments about the Prosperity Gospel. Despite these negative comments, the teaching has its own fair share of positive criticism from quite a number of respectable theologians and Christian preachers alike. According to Walton (2009), for as long as the prosperity gospel aims at fighting poverty which, according to him is a barrier to living a full Christian life, then it remains a welcome gospel that must be propagated with vigor and along these lines Jakes rejects what he sees as the demonization of success. Hunt (2000) echoed the same sentiments and according to him the Prosperity Gospel is noteworthy, not only because of the scale of its success, but because of its distinctive teaching related to divinely-blessed 'health and wealth' which has enjoyed considerable acceptance in different parts of the world. Another prominent scholar, Gifford (1997) who is usually skeptical of bizarre theologies and potentially exploitative doctrines actually looked at the Prosperity Gospel in positive light and in his view a believer has a right to the blessings of health and wealth won by Christ, and he or she can obtain these blessings merely by a positive confession of faith. Poverty is not an option. If poverty comes, it comes as something undesirable and unwelcome. In our view, it is this dislike of poverty that has seen huge crowds of people being attracted to the prosperity gospel churches. It is reasonable to assume that the sheer numbers themselves of people that throng these churches are thumbs up to the Prosperity Gospel. Therefore, there is a paradoxical situation where on one hand the gospel is vehemently rejected and on the other hand zealously accepted.

Examining Scriptures Used in Promoting Prosperity Preaching

There are several key passages of Scripture used to advocate prosperity teaching. The researcher will not be able to interact with them all but will select a few popular ones. The passages used to advocate Prosperity gospel are many and (as noted earlier) the advocates of this theology can find a prosperity theme in almost any passage they choose. This is because their concept of prosperity seems to be the unifying theme of Scripture in their minds. The following texts are not in any specific order of importance but are separated into Old Testament and New Testament.

Old Testament Texts

Much of Prosperity gospel teachings are rooted in the Old Testament especially in God's promises to Abraham and the children of Israel. It has been pointed out that Prosperity gospel advocates do not follow any particular rule of interpretation except that which they invent to advocate their own views. This gives them apparent authority to make false or

misleading claims. One of the primary texts used is that of Abraham's wealth "Now Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold" (Gen. 13:2). The text is inter-used with that of Galatians 3:6-9. The argument is that since God blessed Abraham for his faith, all who believe in God are entitled to the same, and even more (material) blessing because of their covenant with God through Jesus Christ. Christians will have material blessing and will receive a double portion of that material blessing as well as spiritual blessings – especially that of eternal life because they believed in Jesus Christ and follow in the footsteps of Abraham. This kind of association of the concept of what blessing is mistreats the text. Moreover, Abraham's material blessing is nowhere said to be transferrable to those who believe in Jesus Christ.

Paul actually makes it clear that the blessing believers will receive as that of Abraham is justification and not material blessing. The concept of material blessing is beside the point to Paul's argument and purpose of writing to the Galatians, his central message is on salvation by grace through faith. Paul uses Abraham as the proto-type that all the nations will be justified purely by faith in Christ who is the subject of the promise. Thus it is then said that if one have believed in Christ, he/she is blessed with faithful Abraham, that is, we are justified not by works but by grace through faith in the finished work of Christ.

Deuteronomy 8:18 "You shall remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your fathers, as it is this day," is often used to advocate that God enables believers to obtain wealth because of His covenant established through Jesus Christ. Upon this passage, believers are encouraged to pursue wealth because wealth is good and is from the Lord. Moreover, such wealth is said to affirm the presence of God – establishing his covenant sworn especially through Abraham. But does this passage speak to the believers of today in a God-Israel relationship? The answer is no. The passage itself does not promise wealth to anyone but states that providence is of the Lord. In other words, if anyone were to become rich they should not to think that it is because of their smartness or hard work but that God has graciously provided (Deut. 8:17). In fact, it stands against the self-glorying attitude propagated by Prosperity gospel.

Hence, Israel was to remember that it was Yahweh alone who gave her the strength to acquire wealth. Moreover, every blessing she enjoyed was the result of his covenant with her and the outcome of his promise to her forefathers. This lesson for Israel has wide implications for all mankind. Wealth and prosperity can never be regarded as a natural right. They are the gift of God. Since the majority of people in the world lack wealth, those who are wealthy need to beware lest pride in their own achievements possess them and bring about their ruin.

The examples of the patriarchs are often used to justify the prosperity doctrine. That is, because God blessed Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, Solomon and Job with wealth, believers today are also entitled to live such lives. However, they fail to take into consideration that there were numbers of biological Israelites who never experienced any material wealth, although they were children of the covenant. Throughout the Old Testament, it was seen that God reminded the Israelites to care for the poor. The Law which God gave through Moses had numerous places which addressed how the poor were to be cared for (Deut. 15:11, Lev. 19:10; 25:25,35). This care was not to turn the poor into multi-millionaires but to give them hope that they would be able to gather sufficient food to feed themselves and their families and also have seed for the next sowing season so that they

might be able to produce food for themselves. Even the sacrificial system was given in such a way as to accommodate for the poor (Lev. 7:5). Even the mother of Christ was seen giving the sacrifice of a poor person (Luke 2:22-24). But Prosperity gospel advocates ignore such aspects and want to deal only with examples that appear to be grandiose and are by nature anomalies of life.

New Testament Texts

Considering the nature of the New Testament one might actually think that there would not be any passage that justifies a life of material wealth, in the way that the Old Testament describes for specific individuals. But Prosperity gospel advocates find prosperity in seemingly impossible passages. The prosperity message in the New Testament is primarily rooted in the understanding of the atoning work of Christ. That is, the redemptive work of Christ was not only to redeem mankind from sin but also from economic suffering or poverty. Oyedepo (2007) maintains that “when you were saved, you were redeemed from the plague of poverty, because your Father is very wealthy” (p.74).

Goroh (2009) denies that suffering might come from God and sees suffering as simply the work of the devil. He does not define what kind of suffering he is referring to and his wording is ambiguous but from the context of the book, he seems to mean that whatever is not good is not from God, for God only gives good gifts to his children. He argues, “Jesus suffered so that we do not have to suffer” (p.19). Surely, this is true as far as salvation is concerned. No one will have to pay for his or her own sins anymore because they can find justification with God by trusting in the finished work of Christ. However, it is an error of understanding to say that because Christ suffered on the cross that the believer does not have to suffer in this life. This sort of hermeneutics denies the reality of our daily lives which are filled with suffering of one sort or another.

None of the passages used by Prosperity gospel advocates in either testament advocates a theology of wealth for the believer. Although some do address issues of material wealth, they were not meant to be universal promises. While this is perhaps a good attempt to claim biblical promises, they do so by appealing to wrong passages. There is no passage in the New Covenant promising us material wealth because of our faith in Christ and where one will see such believers – it is an anomaly. The reality of economic shortcoming amongst believers cannot be swept under the carpet by appealing to passages of Scripture, which instead of addressing the issue of poverty are downplaying it and thus rob us of how we could be of a great blessing to the poor amongst us. Irresponsible hermeneutics overlook the reality of poverty and use the Bible to make it sound as if it does not exist or downplay its reality by appealing to false accusation such as “poverty exists because people are ignorant of certain principles of faith” or because they have not yet understood God’s Word in context. It is at best an escapist attitude from reality, especially when the concept of positive confession comes into play. Moreover, this escapism frees Prosperity gospel advocates from having to face the harsh realities of dealing with the problem of poverty.

Prosperity Gospel and the Plight of Poverty

Prosperity gospel does not have a unified objective concerning the plight of poverty. This could be because it is a system that borrows from many sources, such that it has not been clearly thought through how to fight poverty strategically and practically. Moreover, its theologians have not explored various biblical views on the subject of poverty in order to

make a well thought out advance in addressing it. Prosperity gospel derives many characteristics from liberation theology especially the reactionary spirit. The latter has undergone formal theological formation and has therefore been able to be accepted by many in mainstream churches in Nigeria. This is not to dismiss the positive activities carried out by Prosperity gospel when it is advocated that churches do things such as, building of universities, helping pay tuitions fees, buying school uniforms, providing meals and housing to disadvantaged people. However, there is a need for more tangible measures to assist the poor. Because poverty is a reality the poor experience everyday of their lives, optimism alone will not help nor can it help change their situation. These principles of faith as they are called are not helpful in practically addressing the plight to poverty. Instead, they play on people's emotions and make them feel good as if the way out of poverty is simply a matter of keeping to the prescribed steps. These steps in reality increase the burden of worry for Prosperity gospel followers such that if one of them fails to attain the said results they are to blame for not keeping "faithfully" to these prescriptions. This is because poverty has many dimensions encompassing income/expenditure/consumption, low human development, social exclusion, ill being, lack of capacity and function, relative deprivation, vulnerability, including uncertain livelihoods and lack of means to meet the basic needs. Considering the complex nature of poverty, the strategies applied to alleviate it need to be biblically sound, practical and realistic.

In their attempt to alleviate poverty through the prescription of certain principles, they might actually contribute to the furthering of poverty in the lives of their poor members and cause serious untold harm. This furthering of poverty and harm can be seen in at least three ways:

Psychological

Prosperity gospel creates two classes of Christians – those with sufficient faith and those with little or no faith. The first class reaps the benefits of God's promises of wealth the second class remains in poverty because of their faithlessness. As a result of this dichotomy the second group often ends up deeply disappointed with the blame of why they are not prospering. Moreover, they are overtaken by feelings of failure and guilt for not succeeding because the preacher has assured them that these principles ought to work for everyone. According to Williams (2001), the idea behind it is that if these principles are not working for them then they must have done something wrong. These sorts of psychological messages often lead to despair. Moreover, it demotivates people who are sincerely and eagerly working towards escaping the grip of poverty. These people tend to see themselves as second class Christians and perhaps not even Christians at all.

Material loss

Prosperity gospel teaches that with sufficient faith one can have whatever you desire. In fact the desire is already present, therefore to activate whatever it is that you need, one must demonstrate it through sowing financial seeds. The failure to sow these seeds would be considered to be great unbelief and the blessings will be withheld. Since there are promises of receiving a hundred-fold for one's giving, the natural drive of people for riches makes them give excessively. Even to the extent of obtaining bank loans with the expectation of reaping bumper financial harvests. When the desired or expected financial harvests do not

come, people end up very disappointed having accrued extra debts in the process or having lost large amounts of money sometimes even leading to bankruptcy.

It is sad that Prosperity gospel encourages its poor followers to sow financial seeds, which they cannot afford. Where they are able to access finances, it is often not enough for sustaining themselves and their families, yet prosperity preachers would say according to Goroh (2009), “anytime you have a need; then you need a seed, where there is no seed; no need will be met” (p.55). By so doing it is taking from the poor, even the very little they have to try to meet their most basic needs.

Surely there is no excuse as to why the poor should not give or share what they have with those who are less fortunate nor are they exempted from showing gratitude to God for His gifts to them. However, to employ principles of giving that exploits the poor is going against the warning of Scripture “do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart” (Zec. 7:10). That is, instead of promoting justice and mercy they use the Bible to further oppression and take from the poor.

Spiritual

The greatest damage this theology has caused is that of people losing their faith because of these disappointments. People do not just lose trust in the teachings of Prosperity gospel but lose their faith in the God of the Bible altogether. Numerous people, both Christians and non-Christians, have been so disappointed by the practices of Prosperity gospel that they now think it is God that has disappointed them. The above issues also raise serious moral concerns against Prosperity gospel advocates and its practices stand opposed to biblical standards of justice, love and mercy.

A Theological Examination

Having looked at various aspects in the previous pages it seems clear that Prosperity gospel owes its growth to an element of biblical truth. However, it has systematically distorted this truth and gone astray. Its reaction against the extreme theology of poverty which equated poverty with godliness, has led it to fall into the extreme, embellished with insatiable materialism and consumerism with the pendulum swinging off balance and crossing the biblical stipulations on issues of wealth and poverty. Moreover, there are serious ethical issues that arise as this teaching defies “God’s covenant by excluding the poor and the vulnerable” from experiencing the true meaning of the fullness of life. For if it was true that God’s will for the believer is wealth and health, where does this leave the poor believer? On this logic, the poor should then not be called Christians because they are evidently not living in the will of God.

Yet, in spite of obvious theological, biblical and ethical dangers Prosperity gospel poses, its advocates continue to think of anyone who opposes their theology as being pro-poverty. This refusal to listen to criticism, regardless of how biblically sound it may be, has led to them labeling their critics as those who believe that God desires poverty, sickness and suffering for the believer. Acknowledging that there are some positive elements within Prosperity gospel, does not exempt us from providing a critical theological examination of its practices. While certain sociologists of religion have come to see Prosperity gospel as a relevant approach in fighting poverty and bringing development. They fail to see that the

good works of any movement that claims to be Christian needs to be established on correct theology.

The very narrowing of the essence of Christianity to living a life of unlimited material abundance and physical wellbeing is a serious distortion of the Biblical message. Christian theology requires that Bible passages be treated with clear appeal to the entire canon of God's revelation and not merely a citation of favourite portions. Prosperity preachers not only tend towards reading and interpreting Bible passages without a focus on context but also introduce several dangerous assumptions in their approach to the Scriptures, consciously or unconsciously in the following ways;

Trivializing Human Suffering

It should be accepted that Prosperity gospel advocates acknowledge the reality of suffering, however, acknowledging the presence of suffering is rendered obsolete if unhelpful answers are provided that rely on quasi-magical-faith, positive confession, and sacrificial giving to escape poverty or suffering in general. Considering the Nigerian context in which poverty is high even in churches, it is important to acknowledge the reality of people's economic sufferings and provide a thorough and well-thought out theological response. Moreover, with proper theological structures in place ways of caring for the poor in their midst can be worked on that do not drive them further into the grip of poverty.

Probably the worse form of trivializing human suffering is that which happens when the Bible is used to foster ideas, which will in the end destroy people's trust in God. Various passages are used to promote the idea of prosperity which in fact do not support it. None of these verses promises that God will make us rich and prosperous in this world, yet they are some of the key passages used to advocate Prosperity gospel. When people take the passages to mean what the Prosperity gospel teachers say they mean, the chances of them facing disappointment increase. This theology dashes the hopes of people and fails to offer real answers to the issue of poverty. Propagating a theology that taunts the poor is inhuman and unchristian. The prescribed principles of Prosperity gospel, which are said to catapult the followers into wealth, are making light of the condition of the poor who work hard at keeping up with those principles but achieve nothing in the end, except disappointment and further suffering.

A Drift Towards Materialism

There is nothing wrong with having material things in this world and there is no biblical encouragement for Christians to become ascetical to the extent of demonizing wealth. Extreme asceticism leads to irrelevance to the world in which we live. The other extreme is Prosperity gospel's strong emphasis on materialism which encourages its members to accumulate as much as they can to prove God's goodness. This encouragement has made many people see Christianity as a means of obtaining the best of things this life has to offer. Prosperity gospel advocates encourage their followers to pursue the best cars, houses, clothes, food etc. This goes beyond addressing the problem of poverty; it paints an ideology of greed rather than need. Prosperity gospel advocates, like the modern materialists, fail to warn their members to crossing the line between God help me, and God make me rich, instead, they advocate materialism as if this line does not exist.

When the line of need has been crossed and the emphasis becomes that of greed, those involved have failed the biblical command of helping the poor. First, it deprives them

of contentment and secondly it corrupts Christian standards of living. The greatest concern that comes with this emphasis on material accumulation is spiritual. Instead of pursuing after Christ and finding satisfaction in Him, He is reduced or made less satisfying than material gain; therefore they see God simply as a Giver of gifts (wealth).

Neglect of the Poor

We have noted that although Prosperity gospel may at times portray a great concern for the poor, it actually does very little to really help the poor. Moreover, because of its presupposition that individual wealth comes by sacrificial giving, it takes advantage of the poor by asking them to give away that which they do not have. They give the little they have with the hope that they will receive back their money in multiples of thirties, seventies and hundreds. This kind of philosophy is a furthering of oppression and pushes people further down the grid of poverty. The early church dealt decisively with such situation by providing adequately for the poor in their midst through pooling together their resources, and sharing same according to their respective needs (Acts 2: 44-45). European missionaries on their part understood this principle; consequently, to effectively communicate the gospel to our forbearers, they first supplied their basic necessities. However in our today's churches, what is obtainable is quite different as Christians and the church no longer pay true attention to the needs of the poor in their midst. This is evidenced in the increasing number of the poor within the church. According to Ibeneme (2011) neglect of the poor are human creation, and are sometimes created out without its creator actually intending it, and when they are created, it is difficult to change it. Thus, unfaithful Christians at the top who gain from the neglect of the poor are the people who can effect a change. But they also resist any change due to their personal gains. Those at the bottom of the pyramids; the poor are however, the victims of this neglect, and have no power to bring about change.

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