

# RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION ? REVIEWING THE DISTORTED VALUES OF THE PROSPERITY GOSPEL MOVEMENT

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## **ABSTRACT: Religious Persecution ? Reviewing the Distorted Values of the Prosperity Gospel Movement.**

In this paper, “Religious Persecution? Reviewing the Distorted Values of the Prosperity Gospel Movement,” the author briefly discusses the origins of the prosperity message in the Christian tradition and some of the basic values of the movement. He also brings forth the aspect of persecution in relation to prosperity theology and after presenting a concise Bible based reply to the prosperity message he concludes that prosperity gospel does not live any room for persecution, because its teachings are anti-biblical and anti-factual.

**Keywords:** *Prosperity Gospel, Prosperity Theology, religious persecution, values.*

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The Prosperity Gospel is an umbrella concept for a collection of ideas, especially popular among charismatic groups in the evangelical movement, which argue for a strong tie between Christian faith and material, especially financial, success. It has a lengthy presence in North American<sup>1</sup> culture and a considerable impact in other parts of the world (Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe<sup>2</sup>). Though often considered a new Christian theological movement,<sup>3</sup> as Stickney correctly emphasizes, “there is nothing particularly

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1 See Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2013.

2 There is a “global spread of the gospel of prosperity.” Robert W. Hefner, “The Unexpected Modern – Gender, Piety, and Politics in the Global Pentecostal Surge” in *Global Pentecostalism in the 21st Century*, ed. Robert W. Hefner, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana, Indiana University Press, 2013, p. 22.

3 The beliefs associated with the Prosperity Gospel can be also traced in other world religions. Borup researches and speaks about ‘prosperity Buddhism’ acknowledging that

new about this theology”<sup>4</sup> and “one can trace the roots of prosperity gospel to the late nineteenth century.”<sup>5</sup>

## The Origins and Values of the Prosperity Gospel Movement

The Prosperity Gospel current is also called the Word-Faith movement. Other variants would be: word of faith, the faith movement, or name-it-and-claim-it. It promotes the belief that that Christians have, within themselves, the supernatural power to create a desired reality by speaking a word.<sup>6</sup> It also teaches that God desires material prosperity and blesses those he favors with material wealth. But as *Pyysiäinen* so pertinently points out, “the relationship between economy and theology can take different forms and ultimately must be decided by some non-religious and non-economical standards.”<sup>7</sup> This indicates that the Prosperity Gospel movement involves many aspects and is indeed a very complex issue.

As Roberts and Yamane explain, Gospel of Prosperity or Prosperity Theology “embraces financial affluence and consumerism, with a message that God wants you to be rich and to have all the things you want. This provides sacred permission to engage in lavish consumerism.”<sup>8</sup> More specific “Proponents of the prosperity gospel preach physical well-being that is measured by the amount of wealth an individual has. This includes good food, clothing, vehicles and houses. It should be noted that how someone

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the emphasis on prosperity is “typical for most religions, to varying degrees, where material requests are part of the religiosity.” Jørn Borup, “Prosperous Temple Buddhism and NRM Prosperity Buddhism” in *Buddhism and Business. Merit, Material Wealth, and Morality in the Global Market Economy*, ed. Trine Brox & Elizabeth Williams-Oerberg, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 2020, p. 62.

4 Ginger Stickney, “Godly Riches: The Nineteenth Century Roots of the Modern Prosperity Gospel” in *Religion and Class in America: Culture, History and Politics*, ed. Sean McCloud & William A. Mirola, Leiden, Boston, Brill, 2009, p. 159.

5 *Ibidem*.

6 J. K. Walker, *The Concise Guide to Today's Religions and Spirituality*, Eugene, Oregon, Harvest House, 1998, p. 347.

7 Ilkka Pyysiäinen, “Servants of Two Masters: Religion, Economy, and Cooperation” in *Religion, Economy, and Cooperation*, ed. Ilkka Pyysiäinen, Religion and Reason, Berlin, New York, De Gruyter, 2010, p. 22.

8 Keith A. Roberts & David Yamane, *Religion in Sociological Perspective*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition, Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC, Sage, 2012, p. 227.

acquires the wealth does not matter; people are normally told to believe that all the blessings are received by faith.”<sup>9</sup>

Though evidently unbiblical, this faith movement gives hope to many people, mostly the marginalized or the hopeless, yet its views are embraced very frequently by people from all social and economic backgrounds. This is evident in an article written by David Van Biema and Jeff Chu. In 2006 *Time* magazine ran a cover story under the title “Does God Want You to be rich?” As Roberts and Yamane observe, though Prosperity Theology emerged from the Pentecostal tradition, the poll taken for the *Time* story, written by Van Biema and Chu, showed that “the beliefs associated with it are more widespread”<sup>10</sup> as 17% of the Christians surveyed considered themselves part of the Prosperity Gospel movement, 61% were convinced that God wishes people to be prosperous, and 31% shared the view that if people give money to God, in return, God will bless them with more money.<sup>11</sup>

The roots of the Prosperity Theology are also found by some in Max Weber’s understanding of the relationship between Protestantism and Capitalism.<sup>12</sup> In his famous sociological work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, he stated that Protestants found “the comforting assurance that the unequal distribution of the goods of this world was a special dispensation of Divine Providence.”<sup>13</sup> Yet as Stow correctly observes that although based on the belief identified by Weber that acquisition of wealth is a sign of God’s favor, the prosperity gospel movement diverts from this tradition in two major aspects: “First, whereas the former sees wealth as a by-product of hard work, the prosperity gospel sees it as an unearned blessing. Second, while the Protestant ethic has traditionally eschewed ostentatious displays of wealth and the enjoyment of riches... the prosperity gospel promotes the values of consumerism and the idea that God wish-

9 Victor Chilenje, “The Challenges of Prosperity Gospel for Reformed/Presbyterian Churches in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” in *In Search of Health and Wealth. The Prosperity Gospel in African, Reformed Perspective*, ed. Hermen Kroesbergen, Eugene, Oregon, Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2014, p. 4.

10 Roberts & Yamane, *Religion in Sociological Perspective*, p. 227.

11 *Ibidem*.

12 “The link between grace and prosperity is also found in classical Calvinism...” Hefner, “The Unexpected Modern,” p. 22.

13 Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons, New York, Charles Scribner’s, 1958, p. 177.

es his followers to enjoy the success bestowed on them.”<sup>14</sup> Therefore the promoters and the adherents of the prosperity message have to “embody neoliberal ideas and values of entrepreneurialism, self-assertiveness and transactional spirituality.”<sup>15</sup>

## The Place of Persecution in the Prosperity Gospel Movement

In a certain chapter of one of his books Schirrmacher argues that Prosperity Theology is not consistent with the reality experienced by many Christians worldwide, which includes suffering and persecution because of their faith. He observes that “persecution is frequently accompanied by the deprivation of basic human needs such as food, clothing and housing (for example, 1 Cor. 4:11; 2 Cor. 6:5; 11:23-27; Phil. 4:12).”<sup>16</sup> There is also the danger of giving the poor false hope of financial blessing,<sup>17</sup> thus increasing even more the suffering they are already experiencing.

This is not altogether surprising due to the fact that prosperity theology is already twisting basic Christian values through an obvious “departure from the historic Christian message.”<sup>18</sup> It is important to note that prosperity theology “came from a particular way of reading the Bible to make it say what people wanted (an exegetical practice known as ‘proof texting’). The Bible thereby was rendered into a workable guidebook for financial and material breakthroughs.”<sup>19</sup> It also embraces capitalism and consumerism as core principles when facing the practicality of living a gen-

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14 Simon Stow, *American Mourning. Tragedy, Democracy, Resilience*, Cambridge. Cambridge University Press, 2017, p. 93.

15 Mark Alan Charles Jennings, “Great Risk for the Kingdom: Pentecostal-Charismatic Growth Churches, Pastorpreneurs, and Neoliberalism” in *Religion and Theology: Breakthroughs in Research and Practice*, Hershey, Pennsylvania, IGI Global, 2020, p. 165.

16 Thomas Schirrmacher, *The Persecution of Christians Concern Us All*, Studies in Religious Freedom, 2; Bonn, Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 2001, p. 81.

17 Rupen Das, “What the Majority World Is Saying about Mission Today” in *Evangelical Review of Theology*, 46.3/August 2022, p. 211.

18 David W. Jones, Russell S. Woodbridge, *Health, Wealth and Happiness – Has the Prosperity Gospel Overshadowed the Gospel of Christ?* Grand Rapids, Michigan, Kregel Publications, 2011, p. 18.

19 J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, “Communications, New Technologies and Innovation” in *The Oxford History of Protestant Dissenting Traditions – Volume V – The Twentieth Century: Themes and Variations in a Global Context*, ed. Mark P. Hutchinson, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 506.

uine Christian life which at times could mean lack of sustainable resources, lack of success and even suffering or persecution.

Asamoah-Gyadu stresses out that “one of the problems of the prosperity message is that faithful Christianity is assessed primarily on the basis of success. It therefore has a very weak theology of suffering, with hardly any pastoral message for Christians living in situations of persecution.”<sup>20</sup> Portraying a valiant Christian lifestyle the prosperity message “also neglects the New Testament warnings of the dangers of riches, and the rewards of suffering and persecution.”<sup>21</sup> Timms puts things into perspective in an even more practical manner, observing that persecution has no place in Prosperity Theology, for the simple reason that “persecution will threaten all material elements of our lives, and if those elements turn out to be our primary source of comfort and security, we’ll protect them by doing whatever is necessary to avoid rather than endure persecution.”<sup>22</sup>

## A Biblical Response to the Theology and Values of the Prosperity Gospel Movement

Like any false teaching the proponents of the Prosperity Gospel try to argue their beliefs misusing different Bible passages. Such an example of misusing the Bible would be the narrative of Genesis chapter 3. Anderson observes that “according to the prosperity-gospel view, when Jesus died, He died to redeem us from the curse of the law – and one of those curses was poverty, which results from the curse of the fall of Adam.”<sup>23</sup> Other Bible passages preferred by adherents of the Prosperity Gospel movement would be: 2 Corinthians 8:9, Galatians 3:13, 3 John 2, John

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20 J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, “Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa” in *Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa*, ed. Kenneth R. Ross, J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu and Todd M. Johnson, Edinburgh Companions to Global Christianity; Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2017, p. 36.

21 Allan H. Anderson, “African Pentecostalism and Prosperity: Continuity and Discontinuity” in *African Pentecostalism and World Christianity – Essays in Honor of J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu*, ed. Nimi Wariboko & Adeshina Afolayan, African Christian Studies Series, 18, Eugene, Oregon, Pickwick Publications, 2020, p. 260.

22 David Timms, *The Power of Blessings*, Minneapolis, Minnesota, Bethany House, 2010, p. 121.

23 Kerby Anderson, *Making the Most of Your Money in Tough Times*, Eugene, Oregon, Harvest House Publishers, 2009, p. 30.

10:10,<sup>24</sup> adding Matthew 25:14-30 or Malachi 3:10.<sup>25</sup> Certainly, all these passages are misinterpreted by those who preach and teach the Prosperity Gospel.

Approaching two of these examples, 3 John 2 and 2 Corinthians 8:9, would be revelatory to understand the manner in which the Prosperity Gospel proponents go astray from the actual meaning of the Bible text in its original context, far twisting the meaning intended by the author, in these cases apostle John and apostle Paul, and ignoring the significance of these passages for their original recipients.

The address in 3 John 2, “Beloved, I pray that in all respects you may prosper and be in good health, just as your soul prospers,” is actually a *salutatio*, specific for the epistolary genre of the New Testament and also very common for the opening section of a letter in the Greco-Roman context.<sup>26</sup> It is important to note that apostle John did not intend these words to be a promise or in any way a guarantee for Gaius, the recipient of the letter. Rather the apostle knew that Gaius was doing well spiritually, but could have been somewhat concerned for his physical health and expressed his sympathy through the means of the *salutatio*. According to the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, the understanding of 3 John 2 was related to the idea of perseverance, carrying on with good works.<sup>27</sup> This interpretation underlines the importance of Christian selfless activism.

The correct understanding, as Yarbrough explains, suggests that John prays or wishes that ‘in all respects’ (περὶ πάντων, *peri pantōn*, which literally means ‘concerning all things’) things will go well for Gaius and that he will be enjoy good health. Another observation would be that ‘go well’ or ‘prosper’ translates the infinitive form of εὐοδοῶ (*euodoō*), does not necessarily refer to material or financial prosperity.<sup>28</sup> John rather assumes that

24 *Ibidem*, p. 31.

25 Matthew Sharpe, “Name it and claim it. Prosperity Gospel and the Global Pentecostal reformation” in *Handbook of Research on Development and Religion*, ed. Matthew Clarke, Cheltenham / Northampton, Massachusetts, Edward Elgar, 2013, p. 165.

26 See Stanley K. Stowers, *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1989, p. 21.

27 Gerald Bray, editor, Thoms C. Oden, general editor, *James, 1-2 Peter, 1-3 John, Jude*, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament*; London, New York, Routledge, 2013, p. 240.

28 Robert W. Yarbrough, *1-3 John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids, Michigan, Baker Academic, 2008, p. 366.

things go well for Gaius in general terms regarding his life. In this respect a very useful consideration would be that “given the brief life spans and marginal medical care of antiquity, this would always be a point well taken.”<sup>29</sup> After proving that only beginning with the mid-twentieth century 3 John 2 received interpretations related to the idea of physical, financial and spiritual prosperity for all believers, he concludes the following: “To extend John’s wish for Gaius to refer to financial and material prosperity for all Christians of all times is totally foreign to the text. John neither intended that, nor could Gaius have so understood it. Thus it cannot be the ‘plain meaning’ of the text. We might rightly learn from this text to pray for our brothers and sisters that ‘all will go well with them,’ but to argue from the text that God wills our financial prosperity is to abuse the text, not use it.”<sup>30</sup>

The second passage brought into attention, “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9), underlines a terminology which again could resonate with the adherents of the Prosperity Gospel movement.

Even though this verse, extracted from its context, could suggest that God wishes prosperity and wealth for his believers, the literary context clearly suggests a different interpretation of the passage. Just a few verses before, in 2 Corinthians 8:2, the apostle is mentioning the churches in Macedonia and their state of extreme poverty. Even though these churches were not rich, they manifested a wealth of generosity and abundance of joy. Surprisingly, these Macedonian Christians did not need to be wealthy in order to give abundantly and they did not seem to expect something in return from God. So what would be the meaning of Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians 8:9?

Barnett is suggesting an interpretation based on the recurrent theme of grace. There is a link between the grace of God shown toward humankind and demonstrated in the saving work of Christ and the ‘gifts’ manifest within the congregation. In verse 7 Paul emphasizes the image of ‘overflow,’ intentionally referring to an ‘overflow’ of ‘grace[s]’ in regard to the gifts evi-

29 *Ibidem*.

30 *Ibidem*, 367. The same position is shared by John R. W. Stott who says: “At the same time, those who have recently developed the so-called ‘prosperity gospel’ (viz. that God means all his children to enjoy health and wealth in abundance) can find in this text only the flimsiest foundation for their position.” *The Letters of John*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, Volume 19, Downers Grove, Illinois, Inter Varsity Press, 2014.

dent within the Corinthian church. It seems that apostle Paul skilfully admonishes the Corinthians, because “in the present verse it occurs first as a present indicative (what is happening) among the Corinthians and the as a present subjunctive (what should happen). This verb is written to encourage and admonish the Corinthians. They *overflow* in other ‘graces’; let them overflow in this.”<sup>31</sup> Based on the good example of the Macedonian churches apostle Paul renews the invitation towards the Corinthians to also participate in the collection. So the context is emphasizing an invitation to participate in giving and not to expect wealth and prosperity.

By the use of the conjunction *gar*, verse 9 introduces an explanation for apostle Paul’s reasoning. As Seifrid correctly understands, the example of Christ’s self-giving is brought to the attention of the Corinthians, because they have experienced the knowledge of Christ’s grace.<sup>32</sup> When Paul refers to Christ’s wealth and poverty he is not referring to a sequence of states, but rather to simultaneous realities: “Christ’s wealth is present within his poverty.”<sup>33</sup> Also “the poverty of Christ should not be understood as a former state that has now been left behind. It is the very means by which Christ here and now communicates his reaches to the Corinthians.”<sup>34</sup> Paul is not referring to the actual poverty of Jesus’s family or his earthy life. Evidently he has in view both the incarnation and the cross of Christ as being crucial for the salvation of the believers. Seifrid concludes that “through the poverty of his incarnation, suffering, and death Christ confers the riches of salvation, life and righteousness.”<sup>35</sup> So the final emphasis is not on physical well-being, but rather on spiritual well-being. Such an understanding can be achieved by knowing God’s grace manifested through Jesus Christ.

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31 Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, Grand Rapids, Michigan / Cambridge, UK; William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997, p. 403.

32 Mark A. Seifrid, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, Grand Rapids, Michigan / Cambridge, UK, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014, p. 329.

33 *Ibidem*. Though, according to Ernest Best “Paul does not say precisely what he means by this, for he is not writing careful theology but stirring up the Corinthians to fresh efforts by reminding them of the wonder of the coming of Jesus to earth, of his amazing sacrifice in becoming human. The best commentary on this is Philippians 2:6-8.” *Second Corinthians*, Interpretation – A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, Louisville, Kentucky, Westminster John Knox Press, 2012, p. 80.

34 Seifrid, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians*, p. 329.

35 *Ibidem*, p. 331.



## Conclusion

The teachings of the Prosperity Gospel result in dangerous distortions of the true Gospel of Jesus Christ, and are a means to lead people astray from the grace of God. Prosperity theology is anti-biblical and anti-factual, based on a distorted exegesis and on a superficial theological reasoning. It is also safe to affirm that no Christian individual and no Christian group desires persecution for the simple fact that no one enjoys being discriminated or ostracized.<sup>36</sup> Sometimes suffering is an inevitable part of the Christian experience, but the prosperity message does not leave any real place for persecution because it is viewed as the sign of God's lack of favor. The prosperity message has the problem of assessing faithfulness on the basis of success. It therefore has a very weak theology of suffering, with very little pastoral message for Christians living under persecution.

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<sup>36</sup> Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, *Om-Demnitare-Libertate (Human-Dignity-Freedom)*, Cluj-Napoca, Editura Risoprint, 2019, p.201-215.

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