

PROSPERITY

by Allan Weatherall

The current trend in the Christian church which places an emphasis on material wealth and success as the sign of God's blessing has been likened by some critics as being a cancer in the body of Christ. Although the prosperity message is really nothing new, it does seem to have become more evident in Australian churches in recent years. Many believers feel a little uncomfortable about this trend, but often can't quite articulate why. And with such views being strongly expressed by high profile charismatic Christian leaders, many are reluctant, or maybe even afraid, to question or criticise.

In its most crude form it is known as 'name it and claim it' or 'blab it and grab it'. But its subtle variations are more effectively permeating the Church as high-profile charismatic personalities articulate and model the prosperity lifestyle.

You don't have to be Sherlock Holmes to trace the origins of this recent trend to the US, where advantageous tax laws for religious institutions and a healthy economy has been favourable soil for the growth of rich religion. The process of syncretism is now well advanced as the secular values of capitalism have merged with an affluent church to produce this hybrid consumer-oriented version of Christianity. Gone are the days of humility and self-denial; well-paid prosperity pastors wear expensive suites and drive expensive cars, regularly dine at expensive restaurants and stay in luxury hotels — and all this is viewed a sign of God's blessing and is celebrated by followers who similarly aspire to the external trappings of success. So pervasive has been the influence of these prosperity teachers and so appealing to the masses has been their message, that their teaching can be found right around the world.

What makes some false teaching so appealing to the masses is that it contains elements of truth. The proponents of prosperity teaching base their ideas on carefully selected Bible verses which speak of God's promise to provide. But they also often quote other verses out of context and apply contorted interpretations to justify their presuppositions. Their major focus is on faith and they strongly encourage their followers to show their

faith through giving (often to their "ministries") in the form of tithes and offerings.

Prosperity teaching also appeals to the flesh. Many believers dig deep into their pockets in the hope of a multiplied return, or simply feel obligated to support the church. It's not uncommon to hear prosperity teachers give prolonged appeals for money, teaching at great length on the principles of faith as applied to finances.

Definitions

Opposition to prosperity teaching need not dispute that the Bible contains promises that God will care for and meet our needs. Where much teaching on prosperity goes astray is not in the promise of prosperity itself, but in its basic definition. If we take biblical promises and apply modern western capitalist definition of prosperity, we are in danger of embracing a whole range of excesses and harmful influences. But it would appear that this is exactly what many prosperity teachers today have done.

It would be easy to point the finger and say that these false teachers are simply motivated by greed and impure motives. But in fairness, some confusion over prosperity may stem from the fact that we have biblical examples of Old Testament patriarchs who were apparently blessed with great material wealth. By contrast, in the New Testament we have Jesus and his followers who had few worldly goods and lived simply. These two extremes have led to some confusion and division in the church over the issue of money and the role it plays in our lives.

To make sense of all this we need a biblical definition

Analysis

Beliefs

of prosperity which explains some of these apparent contrasts. It's imperative that we avoid the temptation to listen only to those verses which appeal to us. We must be careful to listen to all of what all scripture says about prosperity and the dangers of wealth. To fail to do so is not only bad hermeneutics—such careless use of scripture will invariably result in damaged people as well.

What many prosperity teachers fail to realise is that the very concept of individualistic personal wealth, as we know it in the 20th century, has been nonexistent throughout most of human history. Today it is possible for even a moderately wealthy person to have their own house, hoard their individual possessions and bulging bank accounts, travel with freedom and independence and, having everything they need, live with minimal dependence on others. Due to technological labour-saving devices and readily available essential services, we can live like virtual kings and queens.

In our consumer society, security devices and insurance have replaced the need for guards and watchmen to protect our riches; washing machines and dishwashers have replaced household servants; cars and public transport have replaced camels and the staff needed to care for such livestock. Personal wealth and independence is the aspiration of many today—and yet this definition of prosperity is fundamentally at odds with scripture.

Consider Abraham for example. When God prospered Abraham he was also blessing Abraham's extended family and a host of servants and slaves who constituted his wider entourage. When Abraham was blessed, he was blessed to BE a blessing to all those around him who shared his life. Abraham's wealth was shared wealth, not personal wealth. Abraham's wealth also brought with it the responsibility to care for and protect and provide justice for all those who were part of his extended family. The same could be said of King David and Solomon. When the Bible speaks of blessing in the form of material wealth it addresses a culture in which the extended family was the norm, and in which the concept of separate and individual wealth was virtually nonexistent.

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The New Covenant

People have always been selfish — even in biblical times. But what is interesting is that when the Holy Spirit came on the day of Pentecost the resultant transformation attacked the very root of selfish individualism. People sold their possessions and gave to any who had need as the love of God compelled them to care for the whole community. Individual wealth became corporate or shared wealth.

This is one of the most powerful signs of the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God. The story of Ananias and Sapphira¹ is one sobering example of how seriously God views selfishness and dishonesty in the church. There are also numerous other verses in the New Testament which address the inherent dangers of wealth. Here are a few verses you probably won't hear prosperity teachers use:

Sell your possessions and give to the poor²

Perhaps you could argue that this is not a general directive, but at least it highlights that there are times when God requires us to make hard and sacrificial choices as we follow Christ. How many unneeded possessions do you have that would be better off being sold and the money given to someone in genuine need? (*And I don't mean the church building program!*)

Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness³

This is from Jesus' sermon on the Mount where He taught that we should not be concerned with the things on which “pagans centre their interest.” What does “seek first the Kingdom of God” mean to someone in business? What does “and His righteousness” mean to a used car salesman? Our priorities and our integrity are often the things which are most challenged when we venture into the commercial world.

Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have⁴

In a recent interview on ABC Radio a prominent leader of a Pentecostal denomination in Australia was asked to

comment on the statement that “the overwhelming emphasis of the Bible was on the danger of riches and that it's better to live simply.” I was astounded to hear this leader reply, “*That's a tragic view, it's a very tragic view... sadly its usually people who hold that view that actually take scripture out of context.*”

This is an example of how beguiling prosperity teaching can be. It actively encourages people (often young, poor and impressionable people) to ignore the clear reading of scripture and to aspire to pursue wealth as if doing so were virtuous—the exact opposite to many scriptural injunctions!

But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that...⁵

“...People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and have pierced themselves with many griefs. But you, man of God, flee all this...”

Give me neither poverty nor riches...⁶

“...But give me only my daily bread. Otherwise I may have too much and disown you and say, ‘Who is the Lord?’ Or, I may become poor and steal, and so dishonour the name of my God”

Though your riches increase...⁷

“...do not set your heart on them.”

Whoever trusts in his riches will fall...⁸

“...but the righteous will thrive like a green leaf.”

Cast but a glance at riches...⁹

“...and they are gone, for they will surely sprout wings and fly off to the sky like an eagle”

It is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven...¹⁰

Analysis

"Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God"

You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion...¹¹

Command them [the rich] to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share¹⁴

Woe to you who are rich...¹²

"...for you have already received your comfort"

Now listen you rich people, weep and wail...¹³

"...because of the misery that is coming upon you."

You say, "I am rich, I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing"¹⁵

"...But you do not realise that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked."

As you can see, it requires quite a bit of theological gymnastics to turn the general emphasis of scripture: *"It is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom..."* into a message that says, *"You need more money"* and *"God wants you to be rich."* Nevertheless, this is exactly what the prosperity teachers are doing. But should we be surprised? After all, in the Apostle Paul's letter to Timothy he spoke of, *"...men of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain."¹⁶*

None of these scriptures quoted assert that it's not legitimate to be involved in business. Nor do they convey the notion that poverty is somehow virtuous. But there is enough here to conclude that making the acquisition and accumulation of wealth one's primary focus — even the focus of one's faith — is a very spiritually dangerous thing to do. Prosperity teachers almost universally omit such pastoral warnings. Or if they do include any, their emphasis nevertheless tends to be in the direction of, "go for it" rather than "be careful."

Beliefs

The Dangers

As wealth increases we can all be subject to seductive influences which can potentially undermine our faith. We run the very real risk of losing a sense of practical dependence on God. We can become proud and deceived by a sense of self-sufficiency and we may not be wise enough to manage the temptations that come our way due to increased resources. Beyond the harm that too much affluence can do to us, wealth also brings with it increased power, responsibility and increased accountability to God. If we have the means to assist the poor, we are accountable to do so. Failure to respond to the needs of others will invariably affect our relationship with God.

Of course it is good and desirable to have resources to give... but it requires a level of maturity and consecration that is extremely rare in our time. The rich clearly have a sobering responsibility towards those that are poor. In an newspaper interview the British music legend, Sir Cliff Richard, was asked how much money he had. He replied, "Let me put it this way, I will probably never be a millionaire." But a long and very successful music career he has given Cliff, a committed Christian, the opportunity to be a millionaire many times over. Instead he generously gives to the poor and supports many worthy causes. He is one example of a believer who has heeded Jesus' call to *"...provide for yourselves purses that do not wear out..."*

Prosperity — Towards a Biblical Definition

Perhaps true prosperity could be defined as having food and shelter; wisdom and the knowledge of God; healthy relationships with friends and family; children who love and serve God; time to spend with/for God, others and yourself; freedom/opportunity and resources to use your God-given gifts and talents; protection and safety from enemies; enough money to pay your bills and the wisdom to live within your means; good health, inner peace, joy, etc. But anyone lacking these things is not necessarily lacking faith or not being blessed. But in this fallen world any of these good things can be snatched away from us. God sometimes allows us to periodically go through trials where

some (or even all) of these marks of prosperity can seem illusive. It is in such trials and tribulations—*"in all these things"¹⁷*—we are more than conquerors. Like precious gold, our faith is tested and refined by fire. The kind of faith that pleases God is at its most refined when we continue to trust God even when our circumstances seem to indicate that all blessings are gone.

Prosperity teachers would have us believe that faith will allow us to triumphantly ride a wave of economic success, while those who do not reach such splendid heights of plenty are somehow lacking. But such false teachers are themselves spiritually bankrupt. The richest and most generous people I have met have been subsistence farmers in Africa. They are invariably economically disadvantaged and humble, and yet they have an amazing ability to rejoice in the midst of their tribulation. It is no wonder that the scripture says, *"God has chosen those that are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised..."¹⁸*

This article is not an attempt to divide the church or to encourage people to move into camps of those who are "for" or "against" the prosperity message. It's an attempt to restore some biblical balance and to highlight the fact that today's church has a very, very big problem. If anyone is preaching a false message we clearly need to pray for them. When Bible teachers assert views that are clearly at odds with the clear reading of scripture then we can be sure that there is a spiritual deception at work. Such people are often oblivious to the extent of damage they are causing and need our prayers.

Bibliography

¹Acts 5:1-11; ²Luke 12:33; ³Matt 6:33; ⁴Heb 13:5

⁵1 Tim 6:8-11; ⁶Proverbs 30:8,9; ⁷Ps 62:10

⁸Prov 11:28; ⁹Prov 23:5; ¹⁰Matt 19:23,24;

¹¹2 Cor 9:11; ¹²Luke 6:24; ¹³James 5:1; ¹⁴1 Tim 6:18

¹⁵Rev 3:17; ¹⁶1 Tim 6:5; ¹⁷Rom 8:37; ¹⁸James 2:5

"...when the Holy Spirit came on the day of Pentecost the resultant transformation attacked the very root of selfish individualism."

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