

# Prosperity Revisited

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I am encouraged by the mix of responses and diversity of opinions that have been received since the publication of my article on the Prosperity Gospel in Africa. I have often pointed to the empowering nature of aspects of prosperity preaching that have been good for many within the African neo-Pentecostal tradition. In my almost twenty years of researching African Pentecostalism, I have heard testimonies of transformed lives that have been inspired by the message that our God is not a God of poverty and that every Christian—rich and poor—can do something about their life and circumstance by taking God's word seriously. In particular cases known to me, by merely stopping drinking and womanizing, young men have been able to save resources for constructive purposes. So material prosperity can result from being practical and deliberate about the choices one makes after coming to faith. In one case, after coming to Christ, the gentleman went back to school, he got a good job after that, and the material prosperity that has come his way could be attributed to his taking God and his new Pentecostal faith seriously.

Much of what I write about prosperity does not come from reading about it. They have come from actually sitting in different churches, listening carefully to what is being said, and the simplistic manner in which vulnerable Africans have been made to believe that materialism is godly. There is a difference between having one's material needs met and taking a materialistic orientation to life. In the teachings of Jesus Christ, materialism is always an obstacle to genuine faith. He calls it mammon! Western authors should be careful not to read African prosperity preaching through their own theological lenses. There are neo-Pentecostal churches in Ghana, as elsewhere in Africa that are doing well and helping the upwardly mobile youth of the continent to find meaning and purpose in life. The political leadership has been a failure in many of these countries if the example of Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation, is anything to go by. Unfortunately, some Pentecostal leaders in that country are following the failed political leadership in the acquisition of personal jets. One preacher said he needed it to be Lagos traffic as he travels around to take preaching appointments! When I heard that I wondered whether he had thought about those who have to come and listen to him talk about his jet.

But it is not every preacher who takes that sort of approach to the gospel. It is clear that God is doing something new through many of these new paradigm churches who have helped to rescue young people from the streets, drugs and other destructive habits in order that they may take sides with God and receive his blessing and prosperity. My criticisms are directed at those who very deliberately distort the Bible in order to give the impression that poverty is a curse and that everybody including the pastor must ride in a luxurious car and build an 18-bedroom house with swimming pools. These are happening in Ghana and I find it difficult to support a gospel that takes tithes and offerings from poor workers to fund the extravagant lifestyles of pastors and their families. I have lost count of the numbers of pastors whose wives now give birth in the USA so that their children would be citizens of that country and they preach about it as part of the signs of prosperity. It is in the attempt to justify those materialistic choices that Jesus is painted—in our own image—so that he looks like one who made similar choices to the ones that have been made by those who claim to represent him. One Associate Pastor who recently left one of the churches came to tell me that he did so because the General Overseer traveled to the USA and bought ten (10) designer suits each costing Three Thousand Dollars (\$3000).

I take a charismatic orientation to my own faith and scholarship but those who are unfamiliar with what is happening on the ground in Africa, as far as the prosperity mindset is concerned, may need to look a bit more closely. The fallout in all this has been the rise of healing camps and all-day prayer meetings all over the country in Ghana where people agonize before the Lord looking for explanations to their problems. After all, they have been told that if the promised prosperity is not

coming after fulfilling tithing obligations, then the problem is the result of witchcraft. In Africa, witchcraft is only effective if it comes from one's family. So in Ghana families have been destroyed because witchcraft allegations are often leveled against mothers and in-laws creating acrimony and enmity among people who should be living together in peace and harmony. So there are many fine and constructive preachers around but there are others who are exploiting the poor in the name of the God of prosperity and my reflections are directed at those false prophets. There is clearly an aspect of the ?Hophni and Phinehas? religion that I see all around and the prophets of God must speak against them.