

# Holistic Gospel Impact on Prosperity Gospel

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One characteristic of different cultures is that they can understand terms differently. I certainly consider the above terms (prosperity and holistic gospel) as a case in point. In my limited time in sub-Saharan Africa, I have found that to talk of prosperity gospel is to talk of a wonderful thing ? as surely prosperity can be nothing but good? Is there anyone who would not like to prosper or for others to prosper? Yet despite this, to many Western theologians (for various good reasons) the ?prosperity gospel? is a problem.

The holistic gospel, I have found, means to Westerners that good deeds and material help should go with preaching and church planting. To some in Africa it means that God is not only concerned with providing you with a place in heaven, but he also wants to provide healing and a ?good life? on earth. Hence more and more African churches emphasise healing and ?the good life?.

Those who take offence at the prosperity Gospel should take cognizance of the fact that in much of the poor world people follow the prosperity gospel because, in some way, it works. One reason that it ?works? is exactly because some Christian mission is done in what we call a ?holistic? way. You cannot have your cake and eat it. If the Western mission enterprise continues to practice ?holistic mission? and provide ?other help? alongside the gospel, surely the poor world will continue to have justification in believing the prosperity gospel?

This is not to say that the task of a missionary is only ever to ?talk?. Not at all. Being ?holistic? is very appropriate as a lifestyle. How that is to be expressed must depend in part on the ?culture? of the people being reached. For example, in my home community in Africa, love is expressed by attending funerals. The danger, I suggest, arises when the means of expressing ?love? practiced by a foreign missionary is dependent on access to or distribution of outside resources. Then what the foreigner does locals cannot easily imitate, can appear to be of ?divine origin?, and propagates unhealthy one-way dependency etc.

A worldview difference here needs to be recognised. Dualistic western worldviews easily put ?holistic gospel? into a separate compartment to ?prosperity gospel?. That is, holistic gospel people (I think I would be right in saying?) are not claiming that what they offer in addition to the gospel is ?direct from God?. Rather they are offering something in order to express their Christian love for others. Holistic people have trouble making such distinctions, and can give God the credit for whatever side-benefits come from mission efforts - e.g. build a house for a widow, provision of a scholarship, free clothes or food etc. etc. This results in a causative link between the presence of Westerners in the poor world, and the prosperity gospel.

In some parts of Africa, visitors are given a great deal of respect. People will go to great ends to make sure visitors are well looked after. This applies, in my experience, even more to visitors from the West. One reason for this is because of the anticipation that the ?Westerner? will provide some money or help. This can also result in competition for visitors, and at times jealous struggles between local communities. In some African languages a visitor who provides things that people want can be referred to as ?god?. Churches can be oriented to pleasing Westerners in a sense that seems to border on idolatry.

Missionaries sent with a lot of ?support? who can subsidise the ministries in which they engage set up avenues of ministry that the ?poor? cannot imitate. This can frustrate the ?poor?, disenfranchise them, and convince local pastors that the only way to ?compete? is to make a lot of money. This orients them towards the prosperity gospel. ?We wanted to run our church only with local resources? an African pastor told me recently, ?but we found that as a result people would go to other churches in order to get help. So we have joined the search for Western donors. Now if people come to our

church we can give them money for their problems, and more people come? he added.

Unfortunately ?holistic gospel? (as practiced from the West) helps to generate prosperity Gospel (as understood in some poorer parts of the world). The above and other things make me bring the suggestion, that a new ?branch? of mission is required, that sidesteps some of the above issues. That is ? that there is a need for some (foreign) missionaries who concentrate on spiritual ministry, and who avoid ministries that are dependent on their personal involvement in any provision of outside resources.

I have covered this concern in more detail in the article below, published in ERT (Evangelical Review of Theology. Volume 32. No. 3. July 2008. 257-270).

<http://www.jim-mission.org.uk/articles/critique-of-integral-mission.pdf>