

From "Calvary Road"™ to "Harvesters International"™: An African Perspective on the Cross and Gospel of Prosperity

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This essay reflects on aspects of the Gospel of Prosperity and how it is mediated through contemporary African Christianity. The teaching that, in addition to salvation, the Christ event also brings with it prosperity in health, wealth and general success is associated mainly with neo-Pentecostalism. These movements started burgeoning in Africa from the late 1970s and have been very successful in building mega-sized urban congregations that have proven very attractive to the upwardly mobile youth. Their innovative use of modern media technologies including extensive television and radio ministries means that African neo-Pentecostal teachings have become very popular. The rapid publication of books, which invariably contain sermons preached, contributes to put neo-Pentecostal teaching into public space. Wherever they are found, the emphasis on material success made possible through faith, positive confession, faithful tithing and gifts to the anointed of God who lead them, is an essential part of their teaching.

God is certainly a God of prosperity but definitely not a God of consumerist values and materialism. The materialistic orientation of the Gospel of Prosperity means that the triumphs, glory and honor of the Cross are emphasized to the neglect of its representation of pain and suffering. If triumph is always assured, Chris Green notes in a recent work, it becomes nearly impossible to handle failure, defeat and suffering(1). The theology of success and power expounded by the ministries under study here tends to neglect the experiences of those within the community whose testimonies do not necessarily reflect material abundance, if not extravagance. In this essay, I examine the prosperity aspects of African neo-Pentecostal Christianity in the light of Martin Luther's *theologia crucis* (2), which for him, was the essence of true theology. In an essay the Finnish Pentecostal theologian Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen writes that *theologia crucis* has emerged as the theme underlying all of Luther's theology. In this theology, Martin Luther, Kärkkäinen notes, attacks a false kind of thinking about God and man, "the theology of glory", by pointing to the decisive importance of the cross of Christ, where we meet the suffering God. *Theologia crucis* also introduces two opposite kinds of love: God's love that is directed towards bad, sinful men and women who are nothing in themselves and human love that always seeks its own best.

Martin Luther knew very well, according to Tom Smail, that the sinful hearts of men are always looking for ways to evade the cross, and in many ways neo-Pentecostal theology may have done that by promoting a theology of glory with sometimes very little to say to those who are weak and suffering or may be losing in life. At a recent church service in a Pentecostal church in Accra, Ghana, a Nigerian preacher informed the congregation that God had asked him to receive the day's offerings in USA dollars, for God was about to do something big in their lives. In their bid to promote this newly found theology of glory, some churches may even be straying into the sale of indulgences, something that Luther attacked vehemently in the process of reformation. In contrast to the charismatic theology of glory, Kärkkäinen explains, Luther's *theologia crucis* takes seriously God and human beings and their relationship held in tension in a world filled with sin and suffering. (3)

From "Calvary Road" to "Harvesters International"?

One of the factors that gave rise of neo-Pentecostalism in Ghana was the rise of evangelical youth musical groups like the Calvary Road Incorporated, Joyful Way Incorporated, New Creation and

Come Back [to Jesus] Incorporated. In the late 1980s, Calvary Road became a church and underwent a name change to Harvesters International. In a personal interview with some members of the group on what necessitated the change of name, their response was that 'Calvary' was a problematic word associated with agony, pain and suffering. In most African traditions, as we also encounter in Old Testament thought, names have a way of influencing life's circumstances. The members of Calvary Road had come to believe that the overall impact of the name Calvary on their members had not been very positive: 'our members were struggling too much in life', one member told me. So the name was changed to something more positive, 'Harvesters', so that members will continue to 'harvest' the good things that God has ordained for those who believe in him.

This explanation must not necessarily be taken to be the official explanation for the name change. Nevertheless it is important because generally one of the hindrances to prosperity, African traditions generally believe, is the negative effect that names have on people. In this particular instance, it looked like the Cross represented by the name 'Calvary' was being superannuated in favor of a name perceived to hold better promise. When they come to Christ, neo-Pentecostal prosperity preachers would teach, Christians harvest his promises in material and other blessings. We reflect on these teachings by interrogating the theology of prosperity as has been preached in Africa against the backdrop of the importance of the cross in the theology of Martin Luther. I will point out that precisely because of the reason given for the transition from Calvary Road Incorporated to Harvesters International, the Cross of Christ seems to receive little attention in the prosperity hermeneutic of the new Pentecostalism. This is not an African phenomenon as such. For instance, Tom Smail who is himself a neo-Pentecostal or charismatic Christian, notes that, the whole shape of neo-Pentecostal theology with its emphases on 'experience, glory and power' makes it difficult for the full meaning of the Cross or Calvary in Christian theology to be realized.

The Reformation and Religious Innovation in Africa

Allan H. Anderson, arguably one of the leading voices in the academic study of the global Pentecostal movement, has referred to 20th century African initiatives in Christianity as an 'African Reformation'. (4) Most of these movements belong to the Pentecostal and charismatic traditions, but Anderson's designation is still relevant because they share Martin Luther's call for a Christianity that emphasized the authority of the Word of God, the weightiness of sin, the graciousness of Christ, the vitality of faith and the spiritual nature of the church. (5) Martin Luther contrasted what he called *theologia crucis*, theology of the cross with *theologia gloriae*, the theology of glory. The theology of glory and power represented by the Gospel of Prosperity must be scrutinized in the light of that which Calvary represented, the Cross. In the African context within which I work, renewal movements have been described as movements of reformation in their own right, but they have developed a certain penchant and proclivity for things that reflect glory and power including seeing material things as reflective of God's favor. It might therefore be interesting to see how African neo-Pentecostal theology with its emphasis on success, promotion and prosperity responds to a theology of the Cross. The following testimony from the church of Nigerian prosperity preacher, Bishop David O. Oyedepo's 'Winners' Chapel is illustrative of the prosperity mindset we are dealing with here:

There was a time in my life when I was known as a failure, but God has turned my captivity around. It is just like a dream. Where a man fellowships really determines a lot of things about him. I had been born again six years before I joined this church, yet I was a failure, people were always coming to sympathize with me, but when I joined this church in 1995 everything changed. The only car my family had before then was stolen and getting a replacement appeared impossible. But to the glory of God in October 2000, He gave me a Mercedes Benz car. I have also been able to dedicate a new mansion God blessed me with to the glory of His name. To crown it all, another car was recently added to my family. I have every reason to celebrate the faithfulness of God. (6)

On the interface between a theology of the cross and a theology of glory, Tom Smail writes:

Much preaching and teaching in the renewal nowadays?;perhaps in contrast to its earlier beginnings?;consist more of testimonies to and anecdotes about the present-day works of the Spirit

than of expositions of the word of Scripture. ?Bolstered up by what has happened to us and by the testimonies of others, we can easily come to see ourselves as living in a world of supernatural power that leads us from triumph to triumph where the weak, desolate sufferer of Calvary has been left far behind or at any rate has ceased to dominate the scene. (7)

Speaking specifically to the African context, one of Africa?s foremost theologians, Kwesi A. Dickson, surmises that no matter what the cultural perspective might be, the matter of the death of Jesus Christ and its significance cannot be ignored. Christians everywhere, and from whatever cultural background, he notes, must react to the central belief of the cross of Christ. (8) At the heart of God?s revelation is the work and ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Cross is the means by which the divine agenda of salvation was executed. At the same time Pentecostals remind us that to be a Christian is not just to be a sinner justified by grace, not just to embark on the long process of sanctifying moral transformation into the likeness of Christ; it is also to be empowered by the Holy Spirit and endowed with his many and varied gifts for mission. That kind of message can be empowering especially if considered in the light of the manifesto of Jesus Christ as written in Luke 4:18,

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord?s favor.

I am a witness to the ways in which the neo-Pentecostal movement has, by its theology of empowerment, enabled many people to make sense out of their lives and improve their circumstances through commitment, hard work and moral change. Some have received healing, deliverance and graces that could have come only through the power of the Holy Spirit. Unfortunately, this theology of liberation has been presented by many in a one-sided fashion that overlooks the high and painful cost of discipleship, service and sacrifice that Jesus also spoke about. The result is that these success and promotion, well-being and empowerment, fruitfulness and breakthrough theologies, have become the dominant themes of African neo-Pentecostal Christianity. Such an emphasis finds fertile soil in Africa. This is partly because traditional religions constitute survival strategies that attempt, by whatever means possible, including cursing real and imaginary enemies, to exterminate obstacles to power and prosperity. It explains why, in my observation, prayers of vengeance have gradually become part of the prosperity mindset. The question that arises is how theologia crucis has been understood within the context of African neo-Pentecostalism with its emphasis on prosperity, success and triumphalism, which is partly informed by the instrumental purposes that religions serve in African traditions.

There is no doubting the fact that in the African context Pentecostalism has contributed to the growth of Christianity and to making Africa one of the major heartlands of global Christianity. In spite of its massive contribution to the modern reformation and renewal of the church, Tom Smail points out that the disproportionate neo-Pentecostal emphases on success and prosperity ?make it difficult to recognize the close and intimate relationship between the renewing and empowering work of the Spirit and the center of the gospel in the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus.? (9) We also learn from Green that a new paradigm is emerging even for Western Pentecostals that privileges personal empowering experience and interprets suffering as an infringement on ?rights? guaranteed by the ?blessing of God.? (10) Such a situation, Smail says, creates imbalances for neo-Pentecostal theology because as he notes ?we are indeed rejuvenated and empowered at Pentecost, but we are judged, corrected and matured at the Cross.? (11) For those Pentecostals who are now used to the prosperity or name-it-and-claim-it message, Kärkkäinen suggests it might be helpful to hear the following words from Martin Luther:

He, however, who has emptied himself through suffering no longer does works but knows that God works and does all things in him. For this reason, whether God does works or not, it is all the same to him. He neither boasts if he does good works, nor is he disturbed if God does not do good works through him. He knows that it is sufficient if he suffers and is brought low by the cross in order to be annihilated all the more. (12)

Martin Luther was concerned with how Christian theology arrived at its main ideas and he was clear that the primary source of Christian theology was not the scholastic tradition but the Bible. Parker explains the centrality of the 'Word of God' to Luther's theological ideas as follows:

The phrase 'the Word of God', or the 'Word' simply, is a key-phrase in Luther's thought. It meant to him, not just the Scriptures formally regarded as inspired but something wider; namely, the message and content of the Scriptures, that is, the gospel concerning the Lord Jesus Christ, which is the sum and substance of what God has to say to man. (13)

The gospel concerning Jesus Christ is a gospel of the cross, once a symbol of shame but now of hope and salvation. Each one however, is also called upon, in a spirit of self-denial, to take up his or her cross and follow the Lord. In response to why neo-Pentecostals have generally failed to develop a theologically and pastorally adequate understanding of suffering, Green refers to the movement's failure to begin with the experiences of Jesus 'as the epistemological groundwork and framework for their theological reflection'. (14) Jesus Christ is gracious and Luther stressed the point that the incarnation, lowly manhood, and patient suffering of the Son of God all prove that his attitude towards humankind is really one of overflowing love. That love is what sent Jesus Christ to the cross, and Luther was right in pointing to the cross and the humiliation, suffering and uncertainties associated with it as being at the heart of the Christian message.

The Cross as Stumbling Block

Since its adoption as the main symbol of the Christian faith and identity, the cross has been the source of many Christian debates and interpretations at both the popular and theological levels. So Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ and him crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength (I Corinthians 1:18-25).

The neo-Pentecostal over-emphasis on material prosperity, breakthroughs, power, health, wealth and success as indicators of God's favor, has the potential to undermine the central message of the Cross as demonstrating God's power or glory through weakness. At the beginning of the African neo-Pentecostal revival in the late 1970s, a lot of traditional Christian beliefs were turned upside down because they did not speak to glory and power. During the taking of wedding vows, for example, couples were taught to say 'for better for best' instead of the traditional 'for better and for worse'; they were asked to say 'for richer, for richest' instead of 'for richer, for poorer'. Names of neo-Pentecostal churches and ministries told the same story: Victory Bible Church; Conquerors Chapel International; Overcomers Ministries International; Winners' Chapel; and Holy Ghost Power Ministries International. The favored religious symbols are the eagle symbolizing power and achievement and the globe symbolizing the international orientation and influence of these ministries. It is not being suggested that the new churches should focus on poverty and self-demeaning terms and expressions because, after all, the death of Christ also symbolized victory for those who believe in him. What is of concern here is the over-emphasis on the themes of power and glory that makes those who go through pain and suffering feel they remain outside of God's grace, protection and care or are even under some kind of judgment for the non-fulfillment of Christian obligations, especially, the payment of tithes and offerings.

Luther and the Cross

These difficulties with the cross of Christ are not unique to African Pentecostalism but I argue that the African worldview in which religion is a survival strategy and in which faithful religiosity is rewarded

with abundance, prosperity and increase has, to some extent, influenced Pentecostal thought forms on the meaning of the cross in unique ways. Pentecostal scholar Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen begins his essay referred to earlier by quoting an important statement on the cross by Martin Luther:

Now it is not sufficient for anyone, and it does him no good to recognize God in his glory and majesty, unless he recognizes him in the humility and shame of the cross. (15)

Martin Luther's initial criticism of the disproportionate emphasis on the glory of the Christian faith began with the way in which the papacy taught nothing concerning the blessed saints of God "except to cover them with extravagant praise and laudation, and to praise them for exalted devotion and celestial joy." This he noted was done to the neglect of the fact that they had once been human beings on earth and had suffered and felt the adversities, misfortunes and frailties of men. In consequence, Luther further noted, they were "turned into idols and men have been taught to call upon them, instead of the Lord Jesus Christ, as intercessors, mediators and helpers in need, to the shameless blasphemy and denial of our blessed Savior and high-priest, Jesus Christ. (16)

Similarly, according to Luther, Mary as the mother of Jesus Christ is falsely imagined and exalted as if she had never suffered temptations, faltered or failed in reason. Contrary to human reason, Luther avers, God deals with his saints in manners that may be contrary to human reason and that "the more highly he endows them with grace and exalts and honors them, the deeper he thrusts them into sorrow and suffering, yea, even into dishonor, shame and desertion:

Human reason would undoubtedly teach and advise God not to permit his own Son to be shamefully and ignominiously dealt with as a murderer and malefactor, and allow his blood to be shed, but rather see to it that the angels should bear him on their hands, all kings and nobles fall at his feet and render him all honor. For human wisdom consists in this, that is neither sees, nor seeks, nor desires anything except that which is high and precious, and that which brings honor; and again, neither shuns nor flees from anything more readily than dishonor, contempt, suffering, misery, and the like. (17)

Martin Luther points out that God reverses this order which belongs to the human realm and deals with his own Son harshly through the cross in a way that goes against the grain of human thought. It is for the same reason that St. Paul refers to the way of the cross as being "the foolishness of God" according to Jewish and by extension human thought. In those thoughts a deliverer conquers by might and power rather than succumb to humiliation and death in a way reserved for common criminals. Thus the mind of Christ differs from the mind of men and women, for though he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped but he "emptied himself" and took on "the form of a servant" (Philippians 2). This is a step that even Peter failed to appreciate through his attempt to discourage Jesus from proceeding to Jerusalem where it seemed only arrest, humiliation, pain and death awaited him. Luther concludes that God permits afflictions to come upon his loved ones not necessarily from wrath or lack of grace "but from motives of great grace and mercy, in order to show us how, in all things he deals with us in a friendly and paternal manner and how faithfully he cares for his own and so guides them that their faith may be more and more exercised and become stronger and stronger". (18)

African Christianity and the Cross in Lutheran Thought

Pentecostal/charismatic Christianity, Kärkkäinen rightly points out, has (re)introduced to Christian spirituality an ideal of victorious Christian living, an intensive faith expectation, and emphasis on spiritual power overcoming life's problems. To that end, he explains, the Pentecostal/charismatic movement would lose something very crucial if they stopped talking about faith, healing, power and miracles, and for the neo-Pentecostal and charismatic Christians in particular, material prosperity through the principles of positive confession, faith and sowing and reaping. The downside of this overemphasis on physical success is also described by Kärkkäinen:

What has been much more problematic to Pentecostals/charismatics is the negative side of the

Christian life: disappointments when the healing did not come, agony when one faces the death of a loved one despite prayers of faith, the tragedy of financial breakdown, and so on. In fact, many Pentecostals and charismatics have been left with few options: either to deny experiences that seem to shatter one's faith, to blame oneself or other persons involved for the lack of faith, or to give up one's faith. Pentecostal preachers do not often tackle the problem of prayers unanswered or faith disappointed. Rarely does one find in Pentecostal/charismatic periodicals honest consideration of life situations where a prayer of faith was either not answered or was bluntly rejected. (19)

In African neo-Pentecostal churches and programs, the main indicators of God's approval are often luxurious cars, frequent trips abroad on first class tickets, palatial homes and not in a few cases, testimonies of good health without any hints of ill health. In the process of "healing and deliverance" aimed at releasing people from blockages to success and prosperity, individuals have also been encouraged to change their traditional African names because those names, it has often been discerned, carry negative connotations that follow people through life. African traditional names like "Bediako" meaning warrior, some teach, could lead to a person "warring" his or her way through life; "Abebrese" meaning agony, could translate into a life of pain and suffering; and in one case "Fraenyiwa", loss of eyesight, was supposed to have led to actual blindness in the bearer of that name. The theology of name change means that the story of Jacob's encounter with the angel at which his name was changed to Israel and the story of Jabez whose name meant "sorrow" but asked God for expansion to his territory, receive good mention in Pentecostal/charismatic preaching.

In one intriguing but sad case, a popular African charismatic church refused to be responsible for the funeral service of a Ghanaian member because he had passed away before the "biblically mandated" minimum age of seventy years promised in the Psalms. Interestingly, the deceased died during an armed robbery attack, and in African traditions, those who die such violent deaths are not classified and honored as ancestors. By refusing to take responsibility for the funeral of a member for that reason, the church concerned had actually unknowingly taken the same stance as traditional religions would, because in those traditions violent deaths are often associated with the breach of taboos and curses resulting from evil deeds. A key expression in this neo-Pentecostal theology of glory and of power is "dominion" which refers to a Spirit-led ability to be on top or win all the time. In the process, those whose circumstances do not speak to power, wealth, strength and victory and who need encouragement in the Lord, are left without testimonies.

Conclusion

Tom Smail concludes from observing the neo-Pentecostal overemphasis on power and success that "a spirit who diverts us from the cross into a triumphant world in which the cross does not hold sway, may turn out to be a very unholy spirit." (20) That may sound harsh, given the sometimes empowering nature of this gospel that encourages people to work hard in order to better their lives in contexts of poverty, squalor and deprivation. Nevertheless the shift from *theologia crucis* to *theologia gloriae* does not completely fit the purposes of God in Christ. To make up for the shortfalls, African neo-Pentecostals have generated a series of healing and deliverances rituals to take care of those demons perceived to be responsible for every lack of progress in life. This has itself led to a situation of deliverance-fix, in which some move from one healing camp to the other in search of the causes and therefore antidote, to whatever evil destinies perceived to be ahead of them.

Even Jesus Christ has been reinvented in some neo-Pentecostal theologies as one who not only wore designer robes but also rode on the most luxurious means of transport of his day into Jerusalem. In contrast to some of these teachings that undermine Luther's *theologia crucis*, we learn from Smail that there is a closer connection between the passion of Jesus and the coming of the Spirit that one may think. Jesus Christ was named as God's sacrificial lamb who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29-33) and yet it is in "going away" following his death on the cross that Jesus promises a new Comforter, the Spirit of truth who would be with the disciples forever. Thus he concludes that the Spirit is the Spirit of Calvary; the power by which he works is the same kind of power by which Jesus defeated the powers of evil by sharing our suffering and shouldering our sin on the cross. Again following the resurrection, it is the same crucified hands that are outstretched to

impart the presence of the Spirit.(21) Thus a genuinely Pentecostal theology of the Cross, Green avers, ?must explain how Jesus? death affects?the Spirit?s work in and through the Pentecostal community for the world?s sake, and it must do this in ways commensurate with the Pentecostal tradition?. (22)

In conclusion, Smail cautions that uncritical and unqualified use of power language could easily create the impression that every single struggle in life could very easily be prayed away or even that we can simply confess our way into success and prosperity. The Gospel of Christ can be very empowering because through the cross Christ defeated the powers of evil, but their influence is not taken away in every case as such. In some circumstances we are, through the cross, given grace so that we would be able to bear the difficult circumstances of life with dignity and thereby lead lives that testify to God?s goodness. Like St. Paul, God could sometimes say, ?my grace is sufficient for you and my strength is made perfect in weakness. If the example of St. Paul is anything to go by, then ?God?s purpose in such situations is not always to take us out of what is threatening to hurt or destroy us, but is sometimes rather to take us through it. Our ultimate victory comes not from escaping evil but from being given the ability to endure and bear it, the way that Jesus bore it on the cross, so that the death that was its ultimate destructive onslaught upon him became the way to his own Easter victory and to the world?s salvation?. (23)

© The Lausanne Movement 2010Chris E. Green, ?The Crucified God and the Groaning Spirit: Toward a Pentecostal Theologia Crucis in Conversation with Jürgen Moltman?, *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, 19, 1 (2010), 128.Editor?s note: Latin for ?theology of the cross.?Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, ?Theology of the Cross: A Stumbling Block to Pentecost/Charismatic Spirituality??, in Wonsuk Ma and Robert P. Menzies ed., *The Spirit and Spirituality: Essays in Honor of Russell P. Spittler* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 152-153.Allan H. Anderson, *African Reformation* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2000).James I. Packer, *Honoring the People of God* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster, 1999), 3-12.Cited in Marko Kuhn, *Prophetic Christianity in Western Kenya: Political, Cultural and Theological Aspects of African Independent Churches* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2008), 246.Tom Smail, ?The Spirit and the Cross: Towards a Theology of Renewal?, in Tom Smail, Andrew Walker and Nigel Wright ed., *Charismatic Renewal* (London: SPCK, 1995), 56-57.Kwesi A. Dickson, *Theology in Africa* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), 185.Tom Smail, ?The Spirit and the Cross?, 54.Green, ?Crucified God and Groaning Spirit?, 129.Smail, ?Theology of the Cross?, 54.Kärkkäinen, ?Theology of the Cross?, 158.Parker, *Honoring the People of God*, 5.Green, ?Crucified God and Groaning Spirit?, 129.Kärkkäinen, ?Theology of the Cross?, 150-163.John Nicholas Lenker ed. *Sermons of Martin Luther Volume 2: Sermons on Gospel Texts for Epiphany, Lent and Easter: ?The Cross and Severe Suffering?* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1906), 32.Luther, ?Cross and Severe Suffering?, 33.Luther, ?Cross and Severe Suffering?, 39.Kärkkäinen, ?Theology of the Cross?, 151.Smail, ?The Cross and the Spirit?, 58.Smail, ?The Cross and the Spirit?, 59.Green, ?Crucified God and the Groaning Spirit?, 130.Smail, ?The Cross and the Spirit?, 65.