

The Missional Argument for Prosperity

Author: Amos Yong

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Beside the mere for or against arguments are more nuanced positions vis-à-vis the prosperity gospel. The presupposition here is that wealth and prosperity are neutral and that it is, instead, "the love of money [that] is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains" (1 Tim. 6:10). In other words, being rich or affluent itself is not the problem since wealth and money can be utilized for good purposes. Most important among these uses are those related to the Christian and ecclesial work of mission and evangelization.

Part of the rationale here involves following in the footsteps of the ancient Israelites who, led by Moses, were instructed to "plunder the Egyptians" (Ex. 3:22). The riches of Egypt, representing the world, were thus understood to have been stored up for the people of God. In plundering their masters and escaping from Egypt, then, the people of God were launched on their own journey to the promise land. Historically, then, there has been a long tradition emphasizing the treasures of the world as being kept or stored for the benefit of God's people. At the same time, the resources of the world are not meant to be transferred to the people of God merely for the latter's enjoyment or enrichment. But if the elect of God were to put such treasures and possessions to work according to divine purposes, then such amassment would be justified. There is no better validation for the appropriation of wealth than for purposes related to the evangelization of the world.

Among the early Christians, for example, it has been observed those who were more affluent "would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds* to all, as any had need" (Acts 2:45), and that "as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold [to] the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need" (4:34-35). Wealthy followers of the messiah like Joseph, also known as Barnabas, became models of charity who gave of their personal possessions for the welfare of others. Part of the result of such generosity was that "day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved" (2:47). Such a missional model of the distribution of wealth for just and worthwhile causes is central to contemporary arguments that connect prosperity and the evangelistic task of the church.

In some circles, the plundering the wealth of the Egyptians is taken further to justify the evangelization of the Egyptians. The thinking here, in brief, is that the wealthy are only going to be engaged evangelistically by others who are also similarly wealthy. The principle involved is that of St. Paul, who wrote that, "I have become all things to all people, so that I might by any means save some" (1 Cor. 9:22b). So the wealthy need to be evangelized at least by those who are not impoverished. Put alternatively, the unconverted affluent will be unlikely to be convinced by the gospel that is witnessed to them by those who are not similarly prosperous. The possession of wealth, in other words, is defended as a necessary means to reach the well-to-do. The Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship International (FGBMFI) operates effectively as such a group, with a two fold mission: to connect business men for their mutual fellowship and discipleship, and to equip and empower them to evangelize their colleagues, peers, and friends.

Many of the members of the FGBMFI are quite mission-minded. While their lifestyles reflect their success, they are also rather committed to the task of world evangelization. If we focused on such a group and other similarly like-minded and more well-to-do people, it is not unlikely that many are motivated by more holistic visions of mission work. Thus they are often engaged in mission understood in terms of development or relief (non-governmental) organizations so that they are willing to channel their substantial wealth into projects of amelioration and improvement in countries in the majority world, or toward disaster aid. In short, advocates of prosperity who are also committed to the missionization and evangelization of the world will often invest into development or other related projects and in that sense, interface with the global economy not solely in terms of

consumption.