

The Prosperity Gospel: All That Glitters Is Not Gold

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Editor's Note: This Cape Town 2010 Advance Paper has been written by Daniel Bourdanne as an overview of the topic to be discussed at the Multiplex session on 'Poverty, Prosperity and the Gospel.' Responses to this paper through the Lausanne Global Conversation will be fed back to the author and others to help shape their final presentations at the Congress.(1)

The Gospel of prosperity and miraculous healing is doing well because it glitters. Right across the globe from the USA to Asia, from Latin America and Africa, promises of material wealth and health attract people. When facing the reality of a difficult existence, material poverty and hopelessness, who can remain indifferent to the attraction of prosperity, healing and personal well-being through faith? And indeed in some contexts, despairing people without hope have had their lives changed, because the Prosperity movement has given them practical reasons to see life differently by believing in themselves. This means that this 'gospel' can produce positive results and should not be brushed off lightly.

However, the popular success of this theology should not make us forget that all that glitters is not gold. Because the end does not justify the means. Whatever the apparent success of this theology, we must examine it in the light of Scripture. We need to do this just like the Berean Christians did when 'they studied the Scriptures to see if everything was correct' (Acts 17:11).

This is no easy task, because the Prosperity movement has no exact, systematic theological doctrine, and has no structured, logical system on which to build a chronological critique. This is popular, crowd theology that is taught in fiery sermons. Even the writings of those who teach it have this oral, emotional, crowd-pulling character. Internet also plays an important role in making it popular. However, I will attempt to examine some important theological points that emerge from the writings and preaching of some of the main protagonists of the Prosperity movement.

The view of human beings

According to Prosperity movement theology, humans have a spiritual nature that is like God's. So they believe that Christians can order things to happen, just like God does. For them, "humans are spiritual beings that have a soul housed in a body." What they mean by this is that 'the real interior self' is divine. So according to this theology, the difference between humans and God is not one of kind but of degree, and we are in fact 'little gods'. According to Hagin 'we live in a body, but we are spiritual beings'. Idahosa from Nigeria understands the image of God in humans as 'the little life that is part of Life itself: God'. The notion of the image of God is interpreted not analogically, but as directly equivalent. The image of God in Adam is a part of God himself, the part of the substance of God implanted in Adam at the time of creation. It follows that when Adam fell, the supernatural part of him died. God's solution for us as believers is that this 'dead spirit' becomes a 'living spirit' once again. If we are spiritual beings, according to Hagin, our spirit is either 'God's nature or Satan's nature'. Hagin writes: 'Adam gave Satan what God had given him; as a result Satan has legal dominion over humans and creation. Now, since the fall humanity has Satan's nature of death.' It is obvious that this theology is a sort of pantheism.

In his book *Connais ta position en Christ*, (Know your position in Christ) published in 1998, George Amoako, pastor of a church in Abidjan in Côte d'Ivoire, writes this about God's dialogue with Moses in Exodus 4: 'The prophetic lesson that God wants to get across to Moses is that after the Fall, authority changed hands. The divine authority given to humanity at creation left their hands and arrived in the hands of the devil (the serpent), but in Jesus Christ, this authority has been restored to its rightful owner.'

So what is salvation, then? According to Hagin, God needed to make a deal with Satan to regain the world for himself. He had to pay the ransom through Christ. This is the means by which the Christian can take on God's nature once again. So conversion restores the godly nature that humans lost. By sanctification we develop awareness of being a child of God, and know our position and our rights in Christ. Amoako writes: "This book has been written to bring revelation knowledge and prophetic knowledge to God's children so that they can be aware of their true position and their rights in Christ."

According to Hagin, "since receiving eternal life means having God's nature in us", so "spiritual death means having Satan's nature."

Is this approach Biblical?

According to Scripture, humans are not a divine spirit living in a physical body. Nowhere in the Bible are humans ever described in these terms. In the Bible, humans are an inseparable body-soul-spirit entity (1 Thes 5:23). There is no contradiction between body and spirit. The body made of dust is not the human being, and neither is the spirit breathed into that body. It is the combination of these things that makes a human "a living being" (Gen 2:7). Humans are dust and breath, body and spirit.

The idea that humans became creatures of Satan after the Fall is found nowhere in the Bible either. The biblical writers never attribute to Satan any power to create. God alone is Creator, and Satan has no power to create.

Was God's image in humans destroyed at the Fall? No! It was distorted. Distortion is not destruction. A distorted thing is not nothingness. A thing that is distorted is more like a warped arrow that misses its target. And that is exactly what sinning means, missing the target. Even after the Fall, humans remain moral beings, unlike animals and demons. Fallen humans are not demons, even if they can be inhabited by demons. They still have the image of God within them. They remain images of God, even if they are imperfect, distorted images compared with what they should be. Created by God to love without self-interest, humans remain loving beings; but separation from God by sin makes them love out of self-interest. Created to glorify God through their lives, their capacity for glorification is channelled elsewhere: they glorify themselves. They miss the target.

Hagin and others develop a conception of humans that makes them little gods. And this raises important theological, philosophical and ethical questions. If humankind was divine before creation, how could the Fall have been possible? Perhaps because of the body, some may answer. But the body is not the only part that died after the Fall. Prosperity movement theorists themselves talk of "the death of the spirit". But how can a divine spirit die? According to the Bible, spiritual death is an alienation of humans created in God's image, although being in his image does not mean that humans are deified. Humans are created in God's image, which means that their personality reflects God's personality analogically and not in a directly equivalent way. Humans and God do not have the same nature ontologically speaking. Humans do not have the same attributes as God. Whereas God can create from nothing, humans cannot. God is infinite, humans are finite beings. It was because humans were already influenced by their emotions before the Fall that they gave way to their emotions and fell.

Humans are neither God nor Satan. They are humans, with either a "new nature" or the "old nature". Even salvation in Jesus Christ does not deify them. They remain saved creatures. Special creatures, certainly, but not deified creatures.

Is Jesus a "righteous" sacrifice offered to Satan by God, as these people say? According to Hagin, Jesus needed to die "spiritually" and physically to save humans from their "Satanic nature" after the Fall. The "Satanic creation of Jesus" needed to go through torment in hell to pay a just ransom to Satan. It was in hell that "Jesus was born again". It is because he was born again in hell that he triumphed over Satan. Christ identified with us "legally", because his suffering in hell brought about God's justice for Satan. In the same way, all believers must identify "vitality" with Christ by taking

redemption on themselves through faith.

This non-Biblical theology introduces the need for a double death of Christ. It concludes logically that Christ's physical death is not sufficient for salvation. According to them, Jesus suffered a double death, both physical and spiritual, on the cross. This theology justifies these doctrines based on an interpretation of a passage in Isaiah 53:8-10. After his physical death on the cross, the devil took him to hell. And there he suffered spiritual death.

The Bible nowhere supports or suggests the idea of a new birth for Jesus in hell. Jesus did not die spiritually in hell. Neither does he have a satanic nature, as their doctrine claims. Quite the contrary, Jesus suffered in his flesh (1 Peter 4:1). It is in his body that he bore our sins on the cross (1 Peter 2:24). The notion of blood can be found throughout the Bible. There are so many elements referring to physical sacrifice that are well established in the Scriptures: the blood on the doorposts, the blood of the lamb, the blood of purification, etc. The Epistle to the Hebrews declares outright: "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death; that is, the devil; and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death." (Heb 2:14-15)

So it was on the cross that Jesus defeated the devil, not when he descended into hell. It is his precious blood that saves us. The physical death of Jesus is completely sufficient to save humankind. The Bible nowhere states that Christ was sacrificed to pay a just debt of any kind to the devil. Jesus' death is not the price to pay to Satan! In the Bible, Jesus' death is a sacrifice to God. It is not a sacrifice in a legal sense, that is, a repayment or a ransom. In the Scriptures, it is a sacrifice of love to a righteous and holy God to "satisfy his righteousness and holiness". Paul writes to the Ephesians: "Live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Eph 5:2). Christ gave himself as a ransom to God, not to Satan (1 Tim 2:5-6). God would be unjust if he paid any dues to Satan. This is because although Satan dominates, his authority is usurped. That which is usurped is illegal. Therefore, it would be unjust to pay a ransom to recover an illegal authority. In the context of his superior power, Almighty God could never pay a ransom, because a ransom is paid to recover conquered land when the payer is in a position of weakness, or at best when the forces are equal. Therefore paying a ransom to Satan would mean recognising God's weakness or that God and Satan were equally powerful. God owes absolutely nothing to Satan. There is no arrangement between God and Satan about the salvation of humans. The initiative for saving mankind is divine and not satanic. Salvation was brought about by substitution. This idea is found throughout Scripture. In the Old Testament, an animal is used for the substitution. The animal must be without fault (Lev 4:3, 23). John calls Jesus "The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." By his sinless life, Jesus is like the lamb offered to God as a fragrant offering. And this sacrifice appeases God's wrath.

Positive confession and faith

Is faith a formula that operates automatically when we use it? Hagin says it is. According to him and his followers, "the law of faith" is a universal principle that applies to everyone, believers and non-believers alike. It is an impersonal law like the law of gravity and other natural laws. Hagin writes: "Then the Lord Jesus Himself appeared to me [and said] 'if anybody, anywhere will take these four steps or put these four principles into operation, he will always receive whatever he wants from Me or from God the Father.'" No matter what your relationship is with Christ, apply the law of faith and you will have the results. It is a formula into which "everyone can put everything they want: health, a new job, a house, a car, everything you want"!

According to supporters of the Prosperity movement, faith is essential to God and his action. God is presented as a being of faith. "The word that brings forth and upholds creation is an act of faith." When people discover the spiritual laws established by God that cause the universe to function, they can make them function for their own purposes.

Where do we place God's sovereignty and his will in this approach? God is not an infinite spiritual

force or an infinite cosmic force that governs the world. God is a personal God who rules by his presence, his power and his will. God does not need to be subject to the principles of laws. He is not impersonal. He is not a predetermined God, not even by his own nature.

The attitude of humans that consists of demanding their rights, giving orders to God, trying to domesticate him by so-called spiritual formulas and techniques is, in my opinion, contrary to Biblical thought.

The claims of the Prosperity movement fall subtly into the trap of deism. In Scripture, faith, before being an action, is above all a relationship of trust in a sovereign and personal God. This God is present and acts, which implies that a created being cannot manipulate him.

It is easy to see that the principle of Hagin and his followers is close to traditional African rites, which insist on the right formula or gesture. Anyone working with African churches in which the Prosperity Gospel is preached will note the importance of ritual in prayers. A handkerchief is given in order to pass on apostolic authority, and candles, salt and other objects are used. Certain prayers have special rituals attached, for example placing a hand on the part of the body that hurts, complying with certain prohibitions, fasting etc. The leaders of this movement prescribe things similar to animistic rites. For example, people asking for blessings for the New Year are told "Now place your hands on this page and on your neck and sing this hymn which says: 'Jesus has conquered the world and has given us the victory, victory, victory, alleluia.' When you've finished singing the hymn, shout 'Amen' seven times to the glory of God who has lifted you up. Look at your right hand. Put it behind you. As you do it, say with me 'Holy Spirit, I've received my miracle'. Now bring your hand back in front of you as if you're ready to run forwards? I command God's blessings on you in 1992 and after, in the name of Jesus. It is yours.' (The Christian Mirror, p. 53)

During a prayer meeting in a church, the 'apostle' used a white handkerchief to pass on his authority to a woman who was going away on mission. The same day, people who had brought their tithe were asked to kneel in the pulpit. The leaders made them lift their envelopes to heaven so that the prophet could pray for the return of their tithe a hundred-fold.

The Bible does not encourage this sort of use of ritual. It is easy to fall into idolatry when these sorts of practice become the norm.

The real problem is in the very conception of faith. For the Prosperity movement, faith is optimism and idealism. Having faith boils down to positive thinking. And positive thinking is first and foremost believing in oneself. It is impregnating the subconscious with a desire to such an extent that it becomes spiritual energy. In his book *The Power of Positive Thinking*, (World's work 1953), Norman Vincent Peale says: "Start reading the New Testament...Select a dozen of the strongest statements about faith...Then memorize each one. Let these faith concepts drop into your conscious mind. Say them over and over again?They will sink?into your subconscious mind? This process will change you into a believer.? According to Peale, faith is a sort of 'spiritual power technique' that consists in 'faith, belief, positive thinking, faith in God, faith in others, faith in yourself, faith in life.' So he lumps together faith in God and self confidence, making no distinction between them. You have to believe in yourself to succeed in life. The problem with this sort of faith is that it is far removed from Biblical faith. Biblical faith is not self-deluding optimism, nor is it credulity or resignation. Biblical faith implies an object, faith in someone, and that someone is God. Biblical faith is trust in God and depending on God. It is based on God's attributes, particularly his fidelity. God is a personal being. This means that as well as being, he has intention and will. He wants to enter into relationships with his creatures. He acts according to this relation principle, not according to the principle of a universal force to be put into action. God is not our slave but our Sovereign, our Lord. He doesn't have to obey us, even if we have all the right formulas. Humans are the ones who must be subject to God, not the opposite. God grants whatever he wants to whoever he wants whenever he wants. No-one can impose anything whatsoever on him. So positive confession can be seen as humans manipulating other humans and God. We cannot manipulate God. 'Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him.' (Psa 115.3). '[God] works out everything in conformity with the purpose of

his will?. (Eph 1.11). God will not allow himself to be manipulated, not even by the formula ?In the name of Jesus?. Isn't there an element of taking God's name in vain in this doctrine? Isn't the third commandment (Ex 20.7, Lev 19.12, Deu 5.11) there to avoid this very sort of abuse of God's name? The practice of proclaiming the name of Jesus is like magic and divination that control people and things by their name. The name of Jesus isn't a magic formula. Using it only makes sense in a relationship of living with and depending on him. It was to his disciples that Jesus said: ?I will do whatever you ask in my name? (John 14.13). Jesus makes this promise in the context of a relationship with his disciples. In the same way, it is because of his relationship with his Father that Jesus can claim that the Father always answers him. We should also note that, despite his special relationship with the Father, Jesus is never pretentious in his prayers. He says ?Not my will, but yours.? Positive thinking knows nothing of this principle of humility that we find in the Scriptures. Positive thinking develops spiritual pride in the hearts of its adepts, and often an arrogance that goes against the life principles of a servant of God. We need to remember that God promises to supply our needs, and not to fulfil all our desires. Needs are things that are necessary and essential for our life and ministry. Desires or wants are often more like embroidery on clothing which is not always useful. We often confuse needs and wants. In certain cases, our wants are very far from our real needs. God can refuse to give us what we want, for our own safety, or to teach us something. If I want a Concorde plane to land in a village, even if I develop positive thinking, God will perhaps not grant me this.

Neither does God meet requests that are contrary to his Word. So we need to look carefully at each of our requests before we present them to God. Sometimes we make mistakes, and this scrutiny will show us our mistakes. In prayer, that relationship between God and us, we could come to a conclusion about something through positive thinking that could be dangerous if God refuses it, because we could get depressed and have serious doubts about our relationship with him. Most people who have believed in these doctrines have gone through this painful experience. Several of them have become depressed. Some have become psychotic. Others have questioned their faith, and have started to look for, and sometimes even invent, a sin in their lives to explain this unanswered prayer.

What about the Biblical concept of grace? The theology of positive thinking seems to suggest that everything must come from us by faith. When taken to its extremes, this suggests that by faith, people can control universal spiritual laws and the world around us. So anyone, even a non-believer, could simply apply these ?spiritual laws? to obtain everything they want. It seems to me that this notion does away with grace. Grace is at the heart of God's covenant with humans. Without grace, there is no salvation. Everything that we receive from God, even our faith, comes from God's grace and is the expression of this grace. The condition necessary for God to act in our lives is not faith, but grace. It is while we were still sinners that Christ worked in our lives by his Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who touched us and produced faith in Jesus Christ within us. So faith comes from the grace of God. Faith is the means by which the believer responds to God in obedience. And Christians who recognise the importance and the extent of grace live in a relationship of total dependence on God's will. They don't overestimate their own power. They recognise that all that they ask from God will only be received through the mercy and grace of God. Therefore another danger of the doctrine of positive confession is that it doesn't recognise grace. It presents humans as having all the power to do things. By sidestepping the importance of grace in the Christian life, positive thinking introduces the idea of a deification of humanity, which is contrary to Biblical teaching.

Humans remain God's created beings, and are incapable of creating from nothing. McConnell is right when he denounces the Prosperity movement as exalting created beings instead of God the creator. The concept of ?creative faith? denigrates the Trinity. In what sense? We know that God alone is Creator. And this prerogative is confirmed in the Trinity: the exclusive role of God the Father as the source of creation (Gen 1:1; Neh 9:5, 6; Psa 90:2; Isa 44.24; Jer 32:17); the exclusive role of the Son as the agent of creation (Jn 1:3; Col 1:16; Heb 1:2); and the exclusive role of the Holy Spirit in carrying out creation (Gen 1:2; Job 26:13; 33:4; Psa 104:30; Isa 40:12).

Humans produce, invent and make things using what God has already created. Creation ex nihilo is

God's exclusive prerogative. Saying that humans can create using 'creative faith' denigrates the Trinity.

The doctrine of divine healing

The Bible has many examples of healings. Some of them were carried out by Jesus, others by disciples during the apostolic period. God still heals people today. So divine healing is a modern reality. God continues to manifest his grace and his power to men and women by granting spectacular and less spectacular healings here and there.

But can we follow Prosperity theology when it teaches that everyone can be healed if they use their faith? This movement states that Jesus, by his wounds, took all our diseases upon himself (Isa 53). Some adepts reject all medical practice. Medicine is considered to be satanic. Disease comes from the devil, and so is spiritual and not physical. Using medicine is following the devil.

Thinking that God must heal all diseases is simply denying reality. Even when the Psalmist says that 'he heals all our diseases' (Psa 103.3), he doesn't say that God must heal all our diseases. And in fact at the beginning of the same verse he says 'He forgives all your sins'. Here the Psalmist is encouraging his whole being to praise the Lord for all his kindness, and so he lists all that God has done in his life. In the real world it is impossible not to see fervent Christians, full of faith and bearing the fruits of the Spirit in their lives, who are suffering badly in their health. They die, leaving behind families, ministries, brothers and sisters in the faith. This teaching also denies the content of the Bible. It gives many examples of the faithful who are ill and never healed. Paul himself had his 'thorn in the flesh'. He prayed for healing, but God told him 'My grace is sufficient for you' (2 Cor 12:7-9). Timothy had frequent health problems for which Paul's advice was to drink a little wine (1 Tim 5:23). Paul left Trophime sick in Milet (2 Tim 4.20). Epaphrodite had an illness that almost killed him (Phi 2:27). All three were men of faith. Paul was in no doubt about their faith. He recommended them strongly to the church leaders. Nonetheless, illness struck and ruined their lives. Sometimes believers had to live with their illness, like Timothy did. Paul certainly prayed for them, but they were not healed. Paul gave medicine to Timothy, wine, which is known to be good for digestion. Paul didn't use his gift of divine healing here, but advised medicine. It would be surprising to think that Timothy's problem had been caused by any sin in his life. Paul wouldn't have chosen Timothy to lead the church if that was the case. He was young, but despite his youth, Paul gave him responsibilities, certainly because of the undeniable qualities of his spiritual life.

Illness is one of the marks that Christians will continue to bear in their bodies. In denying sickness, the Prosperity movement rejects the important eschatological dimension of healing. Isaiah 53:4-5 says clearly that 'by his wounds we are healed'. However, we shouldn't forget that our salvation in Jesus Christ is 'already, but not yet'. We are saved and our lives are hidden with Christ in God, but we still live in a fallen world and still bear in ourselves the consequences of the Fall. Our bodies are not yet glorified. We are saved to live a life without sin, but we still sin, confess our sins and receive forgiveness on a daily basis.

Depending on how we look at it, we can all say that we experience sickness. Tiredness is a form of illness that is treated by sleep. Fatigue can lead to death. And we know that even the teachers of the Prosperity movement are worn out after heavy day of 'spiritual warfare'. Is that because they have sinned? The other illness common to all is ageing. Every human being goes through the ageing experience. Our cells wear out, shrink, lose their energy and die. Christians are just as affected by the ageing process. However, the New Testament proclaims that we have died with Christ and are raised up with him. So how come we continue to live with fatigue and ageing, that prove that our bodies are corruptible?

We are healed, but not yet. All creation is in this paradoxical reality of 'already but not yet'. 'The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed (?) but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.' (Romans 8:19-24).

We are saved in hope and we are waiting for the glorious manifestation of our salvation when the author of our healing returns. The healings performed by Jesus and his disciples, and those that happen today, are the firstfruits of the universal healing that will take place in all believers in Jesus in the last days. We really do live in the Kingdom of God, but the kingdom is ?already here, but not yet.?

The doctrine of revelation knowledge

The doctrine of revelation knowledge differs within the movement. Some teachers condemn the excesses and extremes that want to set ?revelation? above the Scriptures. In principle, the exponents of the Prosperity movement teach that knowledge by revelation is given as a fruit of personal study of the Scriptures (Hagin and Copeland). They admit that the Scriptures are the source of revelation, but in reality, the facts are rather different. Direct and private revelation received personally is placed on the same level as the Scriptures.

Can private revelation, even if it comes from the Holy Spirit, be on the same level as the Scriptures? Prosperity teachers differentiate between ?revelation knowledge? and ?sense knowledge? (Kenyon). ?Sense knowledge? is inferior, they say. It is limited. It cannot make it possible to know God. So we need to get beyond it and strive for ?revelation knowledge?, which alone is capable of ?satisfying man?s hunger for God.? It alone allows us to attain spiritual ?reality?. This ?revelation knowledge? is supernatural. It allows people to rise above the limits of their senses. It is in rising above our senses that we bring about our union with the unlimited. Humans must totally dominate their physical environment. So believers must learn to deny their physical senses and rise above them so as to walk in continual revelation. It is this transcendence that allows people to reach perfect knowledge of God in this life. According to this teaching, perfect knowledge of God is possible now, as long as people can reach ?revelation knowledge?. People?s spirits must open to this ?revelation knowledge?.

This doctrine leads to ranking Christians in a hierarchy. It is easy to distinguish between ?super Christians?, the ones who have received revelation knowledge, and the others, who are considered as less spiritual. In practice, this classification is frequently seen in assemblies that teach this theology. The super spiritual, sometimes called apostles, are venerated, and even deified. They are seen as ?man-gods? who are becoming gods through their knowledge. Other Christians are seen as becoming like them, as it were.

Conclusion

I have tried to run through some of the theological questions that need to be asked when we talk of the Prosperity movement, so that we are not tempted to ignore it all. I hope that these thoughts will inspire other deeper ones on this subject which remains one of the important theological questions of our time. However, we are invited to remain humble in our reflections, because within the churches that teach this theology, there are people who know the Lord, who love him and serve him with all their hearts. This article is based on my book *L?évangile de la prospérité, une menace pour l?Église africaine*, (The Prosperity Gospel, a threat for the African Church): PBA, 1999.

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