

A Statement on Prosperity Teaching

From the Lausanne Theology Working Group, Africa chapter at its consultations in Akropong, Ghana (8–9 October, 2008 and 1–4 September, 2009)

NOTE: This is a statement, offered as a discussion starter for further reflection (theological, ethical, pastoral and missiological, socio-political and economic) on the phenomenal rise of prosperity teaching around the world at large and Africa in particular. The points below are a digest of many points made in the course of the discussion of three papers at the Oct. 2008 and ten papers at the Sept 2009 consultations.

We define prosperity gospel as the teaching that believers have a right to the blessings of health and wealth and that they can obtain these blessings through positive confessions of faith and the “sowing of seeds” through the faithful payments of tithes and offerings. We recognize that prosperity teaching is a phenomenon that cuts across denominational barriers. Prosperity teaching can be found in varying degrees in mainstream Protestant, Pentecostal as well as Charismatic Churches. It is the phenomenon of prosperity teaching that is being addressed here not any particular denomination or tradition.

We further recognize that there are some dimensions of prosperity teaching that have roots in the Bible, and we affirm such elements of truth below. We do not wish to be exclusively negative, and we recognize the appalling social realities within which this teaching flourishes and the measure of hope it holds out to desperate people. However, while acknowledging such positive features, it is our overall view that the teachings of those who most vigorously promote the ‘prosperity gospel’ are false and gravely distorting of the Bible, that their practice is often unethical and unChristlike, and that the impact on many churches is pastorally damaging, spiritually unhealthy, and not only offers no lasting hope, but may even deflect people from the message and means of eternal salvation. In such dimensions, it can be soberly described as a false gospel.

We call for further reflection on these matters within the Christian Church, and request the Lausanne movement to be willing to make a very clear statement rejecting the excesses of prosperity teaching as incompatible with evangelical biblical Christianity.

1. We affirm the miraculous grace and power of God, and welcome the growth of churches and ministries that demonstrate them and that lead people to exercise expectant faith in the living God and his supernatural power. We believe in the power of the Holy Spirit.

However, we reject as unbiblical the notion that God’s miraculous power can be treated as automatic, or at the disposal of human techniques, or manipulated by human words, actions or rituals.

2. We affirm that there is a biblical vision of human prospering, and that the Bible includes material welfare (both health and wealth) within its teaching about the blessing of God. This needs further study and explanation across the whole Bible in both Testaments. We must not dichotomize the material and the spiritual in unbiblical dualism.

However, we reject the unbiblical notion that spiritual welfare can be measured in terms of material welfare, or that wealth is always a sign of God’s blessing (since it can be obtained by oppression, deceit or corruption), or that poverty or illness or early death, is always a sign of God’s curse, or lack of faith, or human curses (since the Bible explicitly denies that it is always so)

3. We affirm the biblical teaching on the importance of hard work, and the positive use of all the resources that God has given us—abilities, gifts, the earth, education, wisdom, skills, wealth, etc. And to the extent that some Prosperity teaching encourages these things, it can have a positive effect on people’s lives. We do not believe in an unbiblical asceticism that rejects such things, or an unbiblical fatalism that sees poverty as a fate that cannot be fought against.

However, we reject as dangerously contradictory to the sovereign grace of God, the notion that success in life is entirely due to our own striving, wrestling, negotiation, or cleverness. We reject those elements of Prosperity Teaching that are virtually identical to ‘positive thinking’ and other kinds of ‘self-help’ techniques.

We are also grieved to observe that Prosperity Teaching has stressed individual wealth and success, without the need for community accountability, and has thus actually damaged a traditional feature of African society, which was commitment to care within the extended family and wider social community.

4. We recognize that Prosperity Teaching flourishes in contexts of terrible poverty, and that for many people, it presents their only hope, in the face of constant frustration, the failure of politicians and NGOs, etc., for a better future, or even for a more bearable present. We are angry that such poverty persists and we affirm the Bible’s view that it also angers God and that it is not his will that people should live in abject poverty. We acknowledge and confess that in many situations the Church has lost its prophetic voice in the public arena.

However, we do not believe that Prosperity Teaching provides a helpful or biblical response to the poverty of the people among whom it flourishes. And we observe that much of this teaching has come from North American sources where people are not materially poor in the same way.

- a. **It vastly enriches those who preach it, but leaves multitudes no better off than before, with the added burden of disappointed hopes.**
- b. **While emphasizing various alleged spiritual or demonic causes of poverty, it gives little or no attention to those causes that are economic and political, including injustice, exploitation, unfair international trade practices, etc.**
- c. **It thus tends to victimize the poor by making them feel that their poverty is their own fault (which the Bible does not do), while failing to address and denounce those whose greed inflicts poverty on others (which the Bible does repeatedly).**

- d. **Some prosperity teaching is not really about helping the poor at all, and provides no sustainable answer to the real causes of poverty.**

5. We accept that some prosperity teachers sincerely seek to use the Bible in explaining and promoting their teachings.

However, we are distressed that much use of the Bible is seriously distorted, selective, and manipulative. We call for a more careful exegesis of texts, and a more holistic biblical hermeneutic, and we denounce the way that many texts are twisted out of context and used in ways that contradict some very plain Bible teaching.

And especially, we deplore the fact that in many churches where Prosperity Teaching is dominant, the Bible is rarely preached in any careful or explanatory way, and the way of salvation, including repentance from sin and saving faith in Christ for forgiveness of sin, and the hope of eternal life, is misrepresented and substituted with material wellbeing.

6. We rejoice in the phenomenal growth of the numbers of professing Christians in many countries where churches that have adopted prosperity teachings and practice are very popular.

However, numerical growth or mega-statistics may not necessarily demonstrate the truth of the message that accompanies it, or the belief system behind it. Popularity is no proof of truth; and people can be deceived in great numbers.

7. We are pleased to observe that many churches and leaders are critical and in some cases overtly renounce and cut the links with specific aspects of African primal or traditional religion and its practices, where these can be seen to be in conflict with the biblical revelation and worldview.

Yet it seems clear that there are many aspects of Prosperity Teaching that have their roots in that soil. We therefore wonder if much popular Christianity is a syncretised super-structure on an underlying worldview that has not been radically transformed by the biblical gospel. We also wonder whether the popularity and attraction of Prosperity Teaching is an indication of the failure of contextualization of the Gospel in Africa.

8. We observe that many people testify to the way Prosperity Teaching has in fact impacted their lives for the better—encouraging them to have greater faith, to seek to improve their education, or working lives. We rejoice in this. There is great power in such testimony, and we thank God when any of his children enjoy his blessing.

However, we observe equally that many people have been duped by such teaching into false faith and false expectations, and when these are not satisfied, they ‘give up on God’, or lose their faith altogether and leave the church. This is tragic, and must be very grievous to God.

9. We accept that many prosperity teachers mostly have their roots in evangelical churches and traditions, or were brought up under the influence of evangelical parachurch ministries.

But we deplore the clear evidence that many of them have in practice moved away from key and fundamental tenets of evangelical faith, including the authority and priority of the Bible as the Word of God, and the centrality of the cross of Christ.

10. We know that God sometimes puts leaders in positions of significant public fame and influence.

However, there are aspects of the lifestyle and behaviour of many preachers of Prosperity Teaching that we find deplorable, unethical, and frankly idolatrous (to the god of Mammon), and in some of these respects we may be called upon to identify and reject such things as the marks of false prophets, according to the standards of the Bible. These include:

- a. **Flamboyant and excessive wealth and extravagant lifestyles.**
- b. **Unethical and manipulative techniques.**
- c. **Constant emphasis on money, as if it were a supreme good—which is mammon.**
- d. **Replacing the traditional call to repentance and faith with a call to give money.**
- e. **Covetousness, which is idolatry.**
- f. **Living and behaving in ways that are utterly inconsistent with either the example of Jesus or the pattern of discipleship that he taught.**
- g. **Ignoring or contradicting the strong New Testament teaching on the dangers of wealth and the idolatrous sin of greed.**
- h. **Failure to preach the word of God in a way that feeds the flock of Christ.**
- i. **Failure to preach the whole gospel message of sin, repentance, faith and eternal hope.**
- j. **Failure to preach the whole counsel of God, but replacing it with what people want to hear.**
- k. **Replacing time for evangelism with fund raising events and appeals.**

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