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# Is the Prosperity Gospel the Gospel? The Prosperity and Productivity Gos- pels in African Christianity

Joshua Robert Barron

*We know that some versions of the Prosperity Gospel are off the rails, as this article colourfully documents. But the article goes on to commend the positive impact of some African variants that often go unnoticed.*

Prosperity preaching is prevalent throughout Africa, especially within neo-Pentecostal and neo-charismatic churches. This prosperity teaching is built on a particular interpretation of the biblical promises of abundant life in Christ. ‘I have come’, Jesus says, ‘so that they may have life, and may have it abundantly’ (John 10:10b NET). Most scholars read this as a reference ‘to eternal life, that is, the life of the coming age which ... begins in the present with a divine birth’<sup>1</sup>. Eternal life is often understood as merely an eschatological promise—something that will only be realized when Christ returns—and hope for life after death.

Although ‘if in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied’ (1 Cor 15:19 ESV), many keenly feel the obverse: if in Christ we have hope in the afterlife only and not also in the present life, we are truly in a pitiable position. However, abundant life in Christ does indeed begin in this life. Because Jesus is the source of life, the ‘life to the full’ which he promises in this verse ‘refers to everything from the kind of natural exuberance that is suggested by the wine at the Cana wedding to the suggestions in chaps. 5 and 6 [of John’s Gospel] of giving life to the dead’.<sup>2</sup> While ‘abundant life’ primarily refers to the quality of life in the Spirit and certainly includes spiritual blessings, it does not necessarily exclude material blessings.

Ordinary African Christians, and especially those whose life is full of economic uncertainty or health concerns, bring a particular set of questions to biblical texts. *If I will not give my child a snake for a fish or a stone for bread, then how much more must the Father delight to give good gifts to us his children? Does God desire to bless or to curse? Does God desire for us to die or to live?* Many African Pentecostals and

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<sup>1</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 811.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas L. Brodie, *The Gospel According to John: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 369.

charismatics have responded to the questions asked by holistic African worldviews by developing a theology of deliverance. Believing that God can deliver from sin, from demonic influence, from the curses of witchcraft, and from various illnesses and injuries, they are moved to ask: cannot God also deliver from poverty? Or, conversely, ‘If I can’t trust God for my money, why would I trust him with my salvation?’<sup>3</sup> Such questions have led many to embrace the Prosperity Gospel.

What is the Prosperity Gospel? The phrase ‘abundant life’, taken from John 10:10, is one of the cornerstones of Pentecostal theology in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>4</sup> Building on this verse and OT promises of covenantal blessings, at its most simple the Prosperity Gospel ‘portrays wealth and riches as a covenant and the fulfilment of the divine promise of God to his people’.<sup>5</sup> The words of 2 Corinthians 8:9 are taken literally in a material sense: ‘Jesus was rich but because of you he became poor, so that by his poverty, you may be rich.’<sup>6</sup> The Prosperity Gospel proclaims that ‘God wills spiritual and material prosperity for all believers’ as an appropriation of ‘the victory that Christ has won over sin, sickness, curses, poverty and setbacks in life’.<sup>7</sup> Influenced by the ‘health and wealth’ television preachers of North America, the Prosperity Gospel teaches that ‘a believer has a right to the blessings of health and wealth won by Christ, and he or she can obtain these blessings merely by a positive confession of faith.’<sup>8</sup> Because ‘whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully’ (2 Cor 9:6 ESV), ‘tithes and offerings become instruments of prosperity’<sup>9</sup>—especially, it seems, when given as a ‘seed of faith’ which serves to immediately enrich the prosperity preacher!

But is this teaching truly *gospel*? Or is it just another heresy? Most literature related to the Prosperity Gospel is by either wholehearted proponents (e.g. David Oyedepo of Nigeria and Nicholas Duncan-Williams of Ghana) or fierce opponents.<sup>10</sup> Moving beyond the Scylla of salesmanship and the Charybdis of polemics, this essay examines whether, and to what degree, the Prosperity Gospel might be orthodox, heretical or heterodox. Building on years of teaching pastors and elders in Africa

3 So Mike Murdock (b. 1946), an American ‘health and wealth’ preacher whose prosperity teachings—especially his development of the ‘seed giving’ idea first popularized by Oral Roberts (1918–2009)—have been particularly influential among African Pentecostal and charismatic churches. Quoted in Paul Gifford, *Ghana’s New Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalizing African Economy* (London: Hurst & Company, 2004), 68.

4 Martina Prosén, ‘Abundant Life—Holistic Soteriology as Motivation for Socio-Political Engagement: A Pentecostal and Missional Perspective’, in *The Routledge Handbook of African Theology*, ed. Elias Kifon Bongmba (New York: Routledge, 2020), 307.

5 Eric Z. M. Gbote and Selaelo T. Kgatla, ‘Prosperity Gospel: A Missiological Assessment’, *HTS Theologese Studies/Theological Studies* 70, no. 1 (2014): 1.

6 Abiola Mbamalu, “Prosperity a Part of the Atonement”: An Interpretation of 2 Corinthians 8:9’, *Verbum et Ecclesia* 36, no. 1 (2015): 3.

7 J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, “‘Born of Water and the Spirit’: Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity in Africa’, in *African Christianity: An African Story*, ed. Ogbu U. Kalu (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2007), 349.

8 Paul Gifford, *African Christianity: Its Public Role* (London: Hurst & Company, 1998), 39.

9 Paul Gifford, ‘Expecting Miracles: The Prosperity Gospel in Africa’, *Christian Century* 124, no. 14 (2007): 20.

10 E.g. Ebenezer Obadare, “‘Raising Righteous Billionaires’: The Prosperity Gospel Reconsidered’, *HTS Theologese Studies/Theological Studies* 72, no. 4 (2016): 1–8

(2000–2001 in South Africa and 2007 to the present in Kenya) and ongoing discussions with fellow academics, missionaries and African church leaders, I have adopted a methodology which combines the approaches of integrative and narrative literature review.

I start by briefly reviewing the biblical teachings on wealth and possessions. Next, I review the literature on prosperity teachings in African Christian contexts and critiques of the Prosperity Gospel. As part of this examination, this essay also explores an offshoot from this form of Christianity known as the ‘Productivity Gospel’. This term refers to doctrine and praxis that have arisen from within Pentecostal and charismatic settings in the Global South, with a focus on their African expressions.<sup>11</sup> In conclusion, I propose that the Productivity Gospel may offer helpful correctives both to the excesses of prosperity teachings and praxis and also to the limited scope of Western theologies which lack Africa’s holistic worldviews.

### The biblical voice on wealth and possessions

Scripture has much to say about wealth and possessions. While Scripture acknowledges the perpetual presence of poverty, ‘the Bible never views material poverty as good.’<sup>12</sup> Throughout the OT are repeated promises of material blessings and a motif that ‘the righteous prosper’, as Jonathan Bonk explains: ‘While it is true that some fail to prosper precisely because of their righteousness, there is a current of commonsense teaching in the Old Testament that promises tangible rewards to right-living people.’<sup>13</sup> The Promised Land is repeatedly called ‘a land flowing with milk and honey.’ One of the names of God is *Yahweh-Yireh* (less accurately rendered ‘Jehovah Jireh’), Yahweh-who-provides. This covenant promise of Deuteronomy 15:4–5 is striking:

There must, then, be no poor among you. For Yahweh will grant you his blessing in the country which Yahweh your God is giving you to possess as your heritage, only if you pay careful attention to the voice of Yahweh your God, by keeping and practising all these commandments which I am enjoining on you today. (NJB)

But just a few sentences later, the covenant people are told, ‘Of course, there will never cease to be poor people in the land’ (15:11). Proverbs 30:7–9 offers a prayer for balance:

Two things I ask of you; deny them not to me before I die: Remove far from me falsehood and lying; give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me, lest I be full and deny you and say, ‘Who is the Lord?’ or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God. (ESV)

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11 This Productivity Gospel should not be confused with what has been called the American gospel of productivity, which refers to the perceived superior efficiency of US manufacturing and industry in the years following World War II. See Nick Tiratsoo and Jim Tomlinson, ‘Exporting the “Gospel of Productivity”’: United States Technical Assistance and British Industry 1945–1960’, *Business History Review* 71, no. 1 (1997): 41–81.

12 Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1999), 242.

13 Jonathan J. Bonk, *Missions and Money: Affluence as a Missionary Problem ... Revisited*, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2015), 101.

This prayer acknowledges that ‘material possessions are a good gift from God meant for his people to enjoy’ and yet ‘are simultaneously one of the primary means of turning human hearts away from God’.<sup>14</sup> ‘Wealth and prosperity are inherently dangerous spiritually.’<sup>15</sup>

This ambivalence toward wealth continues in the NT. Jesus affirms that our Father will provide for our needs (Mt 6:25–33) but warns against trying to serve both God and the pursuit of wealth (v. 24). Of course, praying for provision for our material needs (Mt 6:11; Lk 11:3) is in no way to be equated with the greedy materialism of building ‘bigger barns’ to store hoarded wealth (Lk 12:16–21). Yet Paul could not have learned the secret of being content with plenty (Phil 4:12) if it were wrong to have plenty. Still, Paul has strong words for those who desire to be rich, castigating those who imagine ‘that godliness is a means of [material] gain’ as conceited and ignorant teachers of ‘a different gospel’ (1 Tim 6:3–5):

But godliness with contentment is great gain, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs. But as for you, O man of God, flee these things. (1 Tim 6:6–11a ESV)

Material ‘wealth’, Paul proceeds to explain in 6:17, is ‘so uncertain’ and we should rather put our ‘hope in God’. While prosperity preachers focus on those made wealthy like Abraham, Jacob, David and Solomon, Hebrews 11:36–39 commends those who by faith were imprisoned, murdered or destitute, and Hebrews 10:34 encourages those who had joyfully accepted the confiscation of their property. Whereas prosperity preachers treat the *kenosis* of Christ (Phil 2:5–8) as the source of physical riches, the NT does not present the ‘riches of salvation’ as either ‘exclusively or even chiefly material riches’.<sup>16</sup>

Historically, Christianity has continued this ambivalence regarding material wealth and its spiritual value. In public teaching, Christianity has typically renounced excessive wealth while seeking to promote lifestyles of modesty and sacrifice, though of course this has not always been carried out in practice.<sup>17</sup> The message of the Prosperity Gospel, as I will demonstrate below, is not as nuanced as these biblical and historical voices. It primarily emphasizes passages about blessings.

14 Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches*, 243–44.

15 Bonk, *Missions and Money*, 114.

16 Issiaka Coulibaly, ‘2 Corinthians’, in *Africa Bible Commentary*, ed. Tokunboh Adeyemo (Nairobi: Word Alive Publishers, 2006), 1407.

17 Efe M. Ehioghae and Joseph A. Olanrewaju, ‘A Theological Evaluation of the Utopian Image of Prosperity Gospel and the African Dilemma’, *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 20, no. 8, ver. II (2015): 74; see also Justo L. González, *Faith and Wealth: A History of Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance, and Use of Money* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002) and Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350–550 AD* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

## The prosperity message

What is the Prosperity Gospel emphasis in Christianity? The description given by Nigerian scholar Lawrence Nwankwo is worth citing at length. The central tenet of the Prosperity Gospel

is that God has met all the needs of human beings in the suffering and death of Jesus. Every Christian should therefore share in Jesus' victory over sin, death, sickness and poverty. Thus, it is the will of God for people to prosper or succeed in every area of life. Prosperity here includes health, wealth, wholeness. Some elements are strikingly new.

First is the focus on the resurrection and not on the cross; on the fruits of the suffering and death of Jesus rather than on Jesus' call for all to take up their cross and follow him.

Second is that material poverty is included in what Jesus redeemed humanity from. This means that life of prosperity and comfort is the vocation and destiny of Christians thanks to the Jesus event.

This life of blessedness starts here on earth and reaches consummation in the afterlife. What is needed to activate the divine blessing is faith. This has to be combined with the religious practice of tithing which, according to a particular interpretation of Malachi 3:10–12, is what is needed so that God opens the floodgates of heaven and rains down blessings. The blessings mentioned in the pericope of Malachi include protection against pestilence and increase in the fruitfulness of the land and the vine. This is translated into contemporary values such as cars, fat bank account, employment, fertility, visa to emigrate, and protection from witchcraft.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, if one has faith and demonstrates that faith through the practice of regular tithing (often accompanied by generous giving), the prosperity preachers proclaim, one is bound to prosper both spiritually and physically.

Does not Jesus tell us that he came that we might have life, and that in abundance? Jesus does not here refer to *bios*, mere biological life of the body, but *zoē*. And he did not say that he came that we might have this abundant life in the distant future after the judgement, or that abundant life is the reward for enduring suffering and hardship now. He rather speaks plainly in the present tense: we may have life even now, and that in abundance.

In addition to these biblical foundations, many proponents of the Prosperity Gospel consider prosperity to be part of the atonement.<sup>19</sup> Paul Gifford explains that, in this understanding of the gospel, all human needs have been met by God through the redemptive passion and death of Jesus because Christ's victory over death is extended to believers in the here and now as victory—not only over sin but also over poverty and sickness.<sup>20</sup> Thus, in prosperity churches, the victory we gain from the blood of Christ is not so much over sin and death but rather over the physical world

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18 Lawrence Nwankwo, 'Re-viewing the Prosperity Message in the Light of a Theology of Empowerment', paper presented at the 10th European Pentecostal Charismatic Research Association Conference (Leuven, Belgium, 2001), 1.

19 Mbamalu, 'Prosperity a Part of the Atonement', 1–8.

20 Gifford, *African Christianity*, 3.

in which we live.<sup>21</sup> Within this hermeneutic, Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones (Ezek 37:1–14) is understood to refer not only to spiritual resurrection and the future resurrection from the dead but also 'to the resurrection of dead finances, businesses, marriages here and now'.<sup>22</sup> This could not be more holistic, but the logic eventually becomes problematic: there is simply no room for theologies of suffering, poverty or martyrdom.

Theologians often discuss the tension between the *already* and the *not yet*. However, the Prosperity Gospel frequently insists that Christ's resurrection means that for believers 'all aspects of death that affect life on earth—poverty, sickness, barrenness, broken relationships'—have *already* been undone, resulting in victim-blaming and victim-shaming of any believer who is not experiencing all the marks of 'a victorious life' such as 'success, prosperity, health, and strong social ties'.<sup>23</sup> Any Christian who lacks such blessings, it is argued, clearly lacks faith or is immature or spiritually ignorant; once a Christian truly knows what blessings belong to her by faith, God is necessarily required and even forced to give those blessings. In the next section, I will examine the problems inherent in this theology.

Vhumani Magezi and Peter Manzanga, who show less sympathy to the Prosperity Gospel than Nwankwo, identify its tenets as faith (which 'is exercised in order to get things from God'); positive confession (on the grounds that 'the spoken word has the power to translate things into reality'); the seed-faith principle (sow big to reap big); and the deification of man as a 'little god'.<sup>24</sup> Each Christian is rightfully entitled to the blessings won by Christ; these blessings—both spiritual blessings and the material blessings of health and wealth—can be obtained by any believer who makes 'a positive confession of faith'.<sup>25</sup> This results in the 'name it and claim it' approach to material possessions, which promises 'unlimited levels of material prosperity' to those who 'have enough faith'.<sup>26</sup> Because God intends *shalom* for all Christians, including success, health and wealth, believers only need 'to claim these gifts as his or her right as a child of God because a true Christian will inevitably enjoy wealth and success'; the necessary corollary, of course, is that 'poverty and suffering'

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21 Paul Gifford and Trad Nogueira-Godsey, 'The Protestant Ethic and African Pentecostalism: A Case Study', *Journal for the Study of Religion* 24, no. 1 (2011): 14.

22 Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity*, 74.

23 Naomi Haynes, 'Affordances and Audiences: Finding the Difference Christianity Makes', *Current Anthropology* 55, no. 10 (2014): 359.

24 Vhumani Magezi and Peter Manzanga, 'Prosperity and Health Ministry as a Coping Mechanism in the Poverty and Suffering Context of Zimbabwe: A Pastoral Evaluation and Response', *In die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi* 50, no. 1 (2016): 4–5. By 'deification', Magezi and Manzanga are not referring to the patristic (and biblical) teaching of *theosis*, but rather to deification in the worst possible sense, the exaltation of humans which results in their being equated with God. And yet this over-identification of believers with God obviously touches something deep within African cultures. I propose that a re-exploration of the patristic development of *theosis* (particularly in the Greek and Syriac traditions) within the context of African cultures could prove fruitful for African expressions of Christianity while potentially avoiding the pitfalls and excesses of the Prosperity Gospel.

25 Akoko Robert Mbe, 'From Asceticism to a Gospel of Prosperity: The Case of Full Gospel Mission Cameroon', *Journal for the Study of Religion* 17, no. 2 (2004): 47–48.

26 Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches*, 25, citing Bruce Barron, *The Health and Wealth Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987).



are assumed to 'indicate sin, or at least an inadequate faith or understanding of God's law'.<sup>27</sup>

The 'seed of faith' is a material gift given to God—or to God's chosen representative, the soliciting prosperity teacher—as an act of 'sowing' which must result in a harvest, based on Luke 6:38. For evangelists of health and wealth, inviolable spiritual laws of cause and effect make prosperity inevitable as the reaping of bounty follows righteous sowing.<sup>28</sup> This teaching proclaims that 'faith leads to tithing, and tithing ignites prosperity. A gratified Almighty will respond by opening the windows of heaven, pouring out blessings so rich that believers will not have room to store them all.'<sup>29</sup> In orthodox forms of Christianity, spiritual transformation 'is mandatory for the born-again individuals'; the Prosperity Gospel promises that 'material prosperity' is 'the necessary aftermath' of that spiritual transformation.<sup>30</sup> Magezi and Manzanga note that it is difficult to distinguish between the praxis of Prosperity Gospel preachers who promote this seed faith principle and 'magicians'.<sup>31</sup>

According to Gifford, 'prosperity gospel preachers have moved beyond traditional Pentecostal practices of speaking in tongues, prophesying, and healing to the belief that God will provide money, cars, houses, and even spouses in response to the believer's faith—if not immediately, then soon.'<sup>32</sup> In short, the prosperity message

is taken to include prosperity in economic and material terms. It also involves prosperity in body, soul and spirit, which has to do with issues such as healing ability, peace of mind, victory over Satan, blessed children, protection and deliverance. According to the gospel, God has met all the needs of human beings in the suffering and death of Christ, and every Christian should now share the victory of Christ over sin, sickness and poverty.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, the major motif of the Prosperity Gospel is success and (financial) victory. Nicholas Duncan-Williams is an influential Pentecostal church leader in Ghana. One of his books is entitled *You Are Destined to Succeed!* Gifford lists some of its teachings: 'God never planned for [us] or any of mankind to have sickness, fear, inferiority, defeat, or failure. ... The Word of God is a tree of life that will produce riches, honor, promotion and joy.' Quoting American health and wealth televangelist Casey Treat, Duncan-Williams equates the image of God in which we were created with success: 'God is the most successful Being in the universe. He's the Only One who's never had to cut back, lay people off, take out a loan or a lease, and has never rented anything. God is successful.'<sup>34</sup>

27 Jane E. Soothill, *Gender, Social Change and Spiritual Power: Charismatic Christianity in Ghana* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 41.

28 Paul Gifford, 'Ghana's Charismatic Churches', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 24, no. 3 (1994): 243, 246.

29 Philip Jenkins, 'The Case for Prosperity', *Christian Century* 127, no. 24 (2010): 45.

30 Obadare, 'Raising Righteous Billionaires', 1.

31 Magezi and Manzanga, 'Prosperity and Health Ministry', 4.

32 Ehioghae and Olanrewaju, 'A Theological Evaluation', 69; citing Paul Gifford, "Ghana's New Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalizing African Economy," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 9, no. 3 (2006): 139–41.

33 Mbe, 'From Asceticism to a Gospel of Prosperity', 47.

34 Gifford, 'Ghana's Charismatic Churches', 243.

In Prosperity churches in Ghana, members sing songs with such lines as ‘The Lord can make your way prosperous’; ‘Jesus is the Winner Man’; and simply ‘I’m a winner.’<sup>35</sup> As with much of African Pentecostalism, the theme of Winners’ Chapel (aka Living Faith Church Worldwide) is ‘victorious living’<sup>36</sup> and ‘the stress is all on success’, with sermon titles like ‘Prosperity is my Identity’ and ‘Prosperity is my Heritage’.<sup>37</sup> According to Gifford, is not unusual to hear Bill Gates—a billionaire entrepreneur who epitomizes success—mentioned twice in a sermon and Jesus mentioned not at all as the focus of many growing Pentecostal congregations is material success and, as a result, a believer’s lack of success indicates that something must be wrong.<sup>38</sup>

### Critiques of the Prosperity Gospel

Prosperity theology chooses proof-texts so selectively that it often engages in eisegesis more than exegesis. It has little if any room for a theology of suffering and has nothing to say to those who are undergoing persecution or facing martyrdom. Ehioghae and Olanrewaju note that prosperity theology ‘emasculates the formation of Christian character. A serious implication of the prosperity gospel is that it leaves no room for brokenness and suffering.’<sup>39</sup> When confronted by the reality of persecution and martyrdom from the New Testament period up to today, proponents of the Prosperity Gospel have nothing to say. The Prosperity Gospel is not heard in areas like Sudan, South Sudan and Somalia where Christians have been subjected to severe persecution. In such areas, African believers have developed theologies that are strikingly different from the Prosperity Theology, such as the Dinka Theology of the Cross.<sup>40</sup>

Precisely because the Prosperity Gospel has no room for a theology of poverty or suffering, prosperity theology’s eisegesis suggests that the material impoverishment or sickness of believers is proof of their lack of faith, thereby placing the burden of responsibility for suffering on the sufferers. In Zimbabwean Pentecostalism, the doctrine of the Spirit of Poverty explicitly correlates a believer’s poverty or wealth with her spiritual condition.<sup>41</sup> If a believer is poor, it has nothing to do with structural injustice but can be due only to the demonic influences of his ancestral traditions and inherited spiritual bondage.<sup>42</sup> As Ehioghae and Olanrewaju explain, the

prosperity gospel makes the poor to unnecessarily bear the weight of guilt. Though there is no inherent virtue in being poor it is equally wrong to regard

35 Gifford, ‘Ghana’s Charismatic Churches’, 263.

36 Gifford and Nogueira-Godsey, ‘The Protestant Ethic and African Pentecostalism’, 13, 20–21.

37 Gifford, *Ghana’s New Christianity*, 57.

38 Gifford, ‘Expecting Miracles’, 20.

39 Ehioghae and Olanrewaju, ‘A Theological Evaluation’, 74; cf. Edwin Zulu, “‘Fipelwa na baYawehe’: A Critical Examination of Prosperity Theology in the Old Testament from a Zambian Perspective”, in *In Search of Health and Wealth: The Prosperity Gospel in African, Reformed Perspective*, ed. Hermen Kroesbergen (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 27.

40 See Marc R. Nikkel, ‘The Cross of Bor Dinka Christians: A Working Christology in Face of Displacement and Death’, *Studies in World Christianity* 1, no. 2 (1995): 160–85.

41 David Maxwell, “‘Delivered from the Spirit of Poverty?’: Pentecostalism, Prosperity and Modernity in Zimbabwe”, *Journal of Religion in Africa* 28, no. 3 (1998): 357.

42 Maxwell, ‘Delivered from the Spirit of Poverty?’ 358.

poverty as a reflection of one's spiritual status. There is a serious implication when God's blessings are reduced to material gain: those who are not rich are either guilty of sin or unbelief. In other words, if God's will is for everyone to be healthy and wealthy, then anyone who falls sick or remains poor is suffering from his own unbelief or disobedience. This places a terrible burden on the poor for it is unfair and unbiblical. It makes them victims of their unsavory circumstances.<sup>43</sup>

Instead of a message of hope, this places the weight of blame on those who are poor or sick or oppressed.

The Prosperity Gospel's 'seed of faith' teaching can further be characterized as a 'God is my ATM' theology. Although blessing can certainly be found within giving, the transactional giving taught by the Prosperity Gospel serves to undermine the sovereignty and power of God. Moreover, in such transactional forms of giving, disciples of the Prosperity Gospel can treat God as a commercial partner who is contractually obligated to meet the demands 'of those who have fulfilled their side of a bargain' through the payment of tithes and by giving bigger offerings.<sup>44</sup> Prosperity Gospel church leaders have often (with good reason!) been accused of lining their pockets at the expense of poor church members who remain poor—including grassroots-level pastors and evangelists.<sup>45</sup>

In addition to being ill-equipped to deal with suffering and persecution, the Prosperity Gospel tends to neglect both the cross and also the vocation of Christians to provide a prophetic voice.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, it often lacks any emphasis on deliverance from sin.<sup>47</sup> The Prosperity Gospel has been criticized for these reasons from within African Pentecostalism. In West Africa, 'Bishop Joseph Ojo, national secretary of the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria and pastor of Calvary Kingdom Church, says certain pastors have "invaded the pulpit but do not have the calling. Their god is their belly."' Ojo thinks that preaching prosperity is as distorted as preaching poverty. In East Africa, 'David Oginde, senior pastor of the 10,000-member Nairobi Pentecostal Church, believes he could triple his membership by promising wealth. "But if that is all I am teaching, then I have lost the message," he says. "The kingdom of God is built on the Cross, not on bread and butter."'"<sup>48</sup>

The focus of the Prosperity Gospel yields a human-centred religion in which faith is but a tool to manipulate God into giving blessings and has much in common with the cargo cults of Melanesia; it is a syncretistic but Christocentric movement with an ATM theology 'in which prophets promised the arrival of unending

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43 Ehioghae and Olanrewaju, 'A Theological Evaluation', 73–74.

44 J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *Contemporary Pentecostal Christianity: Interpretations from an African Context* (Oxford: Regnum, 2013), 99, 100.

45 Maxwell, 'Delivered from the Spirit of Poverty?' 367.

46 Nwankwo, 'Re-viewing the Prosperity Message', 2.

47 George O. Folarin, 'Contemporary State of the Prosperity Gospel in Nigeria', *Asia Journal of Theology* 21, no. 1 (2007): 74.

48 Joe Maxwell and Isaac Phiri, 'Gospel Riches: Africa's Rapid Embrace of Prosperity Pentecostalism Provokes Concern—and Hope', *Christianity Today* 51, no. 7 (2007): 28.

quantities of goods'.<sup>49</sup> Popular American prosperity preachers who are widely read or watched with approval in Africa seem utterly ignorant of biblical doctrine and offer a soteriology that is limited to 'name it and claim it'. Many proponents of the Prosperity Gospel run their congregations like a pyramid scheme, fleecing their flock. Rather than biblical exegesis, these preachers make their own experiences of success the focus and heart of their preaching.<sup>50</sup> David Oyedepo, the Nigerian founder and presiding bishop of Winners' Chapel, had as of 2011 an estimated net worth of US \$150 million, in a country whose average annual income that year was only \$1,875.<sup>51</sup> Given that 'in the Old Testament, wealth and prosperity are most frequently tangible symbols of brutality, disobedience, and endemic injustice, rather than signs of God's blessing as a reward for personal or national righteousness',<sup>52</sup> what are we to make of the obscene levels of wealth obtained by preachers like Kenneth Copeland and Oyedepo?

The Prosperity Gospel has been fairly criticized for serving to enrich its preachers from the sacrificial giving of members.<sup>53</sup> Seeing such abuse even at a vastly smaller scale, some African Christians suspicious of the Prosperity Gospel are reluctant to give to the church because, as several Kenyans have said to me, 'Why should I make the pastor's family fat?' In an even harsher indictment, 'Asonzeh Ukah identifies an instrumental usage of prosperity theology by founders of megachurches in order to "transform them into economic, financial and entrepreneurial empires which are completely controlled by their families." What he basically describes is a Pentecostal kleptocracy.'<sup>54</sup> Emmanuel Katongole notes that the abuses of the Prosperity Gospel 'and the pastors who extract tithes from their congregants in exchange for salvation' serve to 'keep many devout African Christians in poverty'.<sup>55</sup>

According to Gifford, the Prosperity Gospel persuades its adherents to benefit from current economic systems instead of prophetically evaluating them and calling for remedies to social ills.<sup>56</sup> This is precisely because it often 'promotes materialism,

49 Nwankwo, 'Re-viewing the Prosperity Message', 2, 5; Thomas van den End and Jan S. Aritonang, '1800–2005: a National Overview', in *A History of Christianity in Indonesia*, ed. Jan Sihar Aritonang and Karel Steenbrink (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 150.

50 J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, 'Anointing Through the Screen: Neo-Pentecostalism and Televised Christianity in Ghana', *Studies in World Christianity* 11, no. 1 (2005): 16.

51 Mfonobong Nsehe, 'The Five Richest Pastors in Nigeria', *Forbes*, 7 June 2011, <https://worlddea.org/yourls/47408>; 'Adjusted Net National Income Per Capita (Current US\$)—Nigeria', World Bank, <https://worlddea.org/yourls/47409>.

52 Bonk, *Missions and Money*, 120.

53 Lovemore Togarasei, 'The Pentecostal Gospel of Prosperity in African Contexts of Poverty: An Appraisal', *Exchange* 40, no. 4 (2011): 349.

54 Andreas Heuser, 'Charting African Prosperity Gospel Economies', *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 72, no. 1 (2016): 5. Heuser cites Asonzeh Ukah, 'Prophets for Profit: Pentecostal Authority and Fiscal Accountability among Nigerian Churches in South Africa', in *Alternative Voices: A Plurality Approach for Religious Studies*, ed. Afe Adogame, Magnus Echter and Oliver Freiberger (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 134–59.

55 Emmanuel Katongole, *Born from Lament: The Theology and Politics of Hope in Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 24, citing Dayo Olopade, *The Bright Continent: Breaking Rules and Making Change in Modern Africa* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), 77. Katongole 'agree[s] with her assessment of the prosperity gospel' but rebukes the 'typical secularist slight' with which 'she dismisses religion from serious consideration'.

56 See Maxwell, 'Delivered from the Spirit of Poverty?' 351.

sometimes of the kind that Jesus attacks in the Gospels', does not address difficult contextual realities, and can fail 'to provide pastoral care' for those who are struggling economically.<sup>57</sup> In addition to not providing a cogent theology of either poverty or suffering, it often 'blinds its proponents to the realities of sin as their desire for health-and-wealth prosperity becomes a consuming focus'.<sup>58</sup> Allan Boesak goes further, denouncing the 'prosperity gossellers' who exploit the poor, abusing their faith, 'with such scandalous skill' and asserting that 'the so-called prosperity gospel' actually 'usurps the language of the church' and 'overturn[s] the deepest meaning of the gospel (saying that wealth is a blessing no matter how it is created and accrued)'.<sup>59</sup>

So is the Prosperity Gospel a heresy? With all these problems, some Christians are convinced that it is. Clearly, some prosperity preaching is full of heretical elements. But what is a heresy? It is not simply a false teaching, but a false teaching based upon a kernel of truth. That kernel (just like, for example, the Arian heresy in the fourth century) is nurtured until it grows out of proportion with other balancing truths. I have already briefly touched on the truths upon which the Prosperity Gospel is based. The flaws I have mentioned come primarily from the lack of balance. No doubt, some of its proponents, though not all, are indeed either heretics or wolves in sheep's clothing. But the polemical approach of asking 'in what ways is this wrong?' is not the most helpful.

### **The Prosperity Gospel as inculturation, or 'how is God at work?'**

A more beneficial approach begins with two questions: (1) What cultural questions or problems does this theology or movement try to answer? (2) What is God doing through this movement? So what *is* God doing through the Prosperity Gospel? In the African context, it speaks into our holistic African worldview, allows believers an opportunity to escape from the culture of envy,<sup>60</sup> and thereby opens a door to hope.<sup>61</sup>

The Prosperity Gospel thrives in our holistic African worldview, which 'can be defined as a harmonious interaction between the physical and spiritual world ... between the visible and invisible worlds.'<sup>62</sup> 'The majority of Africans live in a cosmos that is spiritually charged: a cosmos in which the physical and the spiritual

57 Asamoah-Gyadu, *Contemporary Pentecostal Christianity*, 107.

58 Samuel Waje Kunhiyop, *African Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2019), 107.

59 Allan Aubrey Boesak, *Dare We Speak of Hope? Searching for a Language of Life in Faith and Politics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 63, 58–59.

60 I thank Mark Shaw, professor at the Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology, for this insight.

61 See the Lausanne Theology Working Group Statement on the Prosperity Gospel (2010), which notes, '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', as quoted in Magezi and Manzanga, 'Prosperity and Health Ministry', 5.

62 Charles A. Anyanwu, *The Relevance of Pentecostalism to the African Society: A Socio-religious Analysis* (Owerri, Nigeria: Greenleaf Global Enterprises, 2004), 38–39.

intersect.<sup>63</sup> In this milieu, to become a Christian within the context of the Prosperity Gospel assumes that the believer will obtain ‘power to overcome those forces that diminish life’, resulting in a realized eschatology in which material well-being in the here and now is the pinnacle of salvation.<sup>64</sup> The Prosperity Gospel acknowledges the interplay between the spiritual and the material, thereby avoiding dualistic heresies (e.g. Gnosticism, Manichaeism, the false dichotomy between the sacred and the secular) and also correcting the excesses of European Enlightenment thinking.

Ngong notes that in an act of inculturation, ‘African Christianity in general, and this neo-Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity in particular, have uncritically appropriated the salvific discourse of African Traditional Religions.’<sup>65</sup> In the worldview common to African traditional religions, realities in the material and spiritual worlds are interconnected, and activities in one influence events in the other.<sup>66</sup> African traditional religion values healing, prosperity and communication with the supernatural; in this context, prosperity preachers emphasize dreams in a way that resonates with African culture.<sup>67</sup> Maxwell observes that the prosperity form of Pentecostalism answers several questions that Zimbabwean culture is asking. It enables ‘ordinary Zimbabweans to face painful social and economic transitions’; it provides them with ‘a framework with which to respond to the pressures of modernisation’; for many ‘it offers guidelines for material success’ and hope for a better future and ‘a chance to increase their livelihoods’; for those on the edge of poverty, the ‘emphasis on renewing the family’ and protection from substance abuse and sexual promiscuity keeps them from slipping into destitution.<sup>68</sup> Thus, the Prosperity Gospel can speak into African cultures, offering answers to the questions being asked in this context.

While ‘traditional African values frown upon laziness’,<sup>69</sup> many Africans are trapped within a culture of envy that functions as systemic oppression, preventing individuals from attempting to improve their lot. Why should you be better than anyone else? Who do you think you are? What are you, the *bwana kubwa* (Kiswahili for ‘big man’)? But the Prosperity Gospel allows believers to attribute their improving prosperity to God’s blessing, which cannot be gainsaid. It thereby allows the opportunity to experience economic advancement. In and of themselves, traditional kinship and community ties are good, but such ties can often become tools of oppression. It can prove impossible to steward resources well, because as soon as you have gained something not immediately needed for today, someone will come and ask you for it, and you lack the cultural capacity to refuse, even when refusal is best

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63 David Tonghou Ngong, ‘Salvation and Materialism in African Theology’, *Studies in World Christianity* 15, no. 1 (2009): 2.

64 Ngong, ‘Salvation and Materialism’, 13–14.

65 Ngong, ‘Salvation and Materialism’, 1.

66 Soothill, *Gender, Social Change and Spiritual Power*, 10.

67 Maxwell and Phiri, ‘Gospel Riches’, 28.

68 Maxwell, ‘Delivered from the Spirit of Poverty?’ 359–70.

69 Isaac Boaheng, *Poverty, the Bible, and Africa: Contextual Foundations for Helping the Poor* (Carlisle, UK and Bukuru, Nigeria: HippoBooks, 2020), 40.

not only for your immediate family but for the community as a whole.<sup>70</sup> By replacing oppressive traditional kinship and community ties and their material obligations with those of just the nuclear family and the church, believers can be freed from community and familial financial demands (or even extortions), enabling them to achieve economic progress.<sup>71</sup>

The idea of moving from poverty to abundance and of being liberated from various forms of oppression—whether economic, social, or political—has given rise to theologies of empowerment, which have become an essential element of African Pentecostal theology because the gospel proclaims the possibility of restoration. Understood holistically, this includes both the physical and spiritual realms. Thus, as a believer experiences transformation, he or she experiences increasing shalom and abundance in both spiritual and physical terms.<sup>72</sup> So, then, the Prosperity Gospel is founded at least in part on biblical orthodoxy: the positive biblical views of material blessings explored above, Jesus’s statement that he came so that we might have abundant life, and a realized eschatology of Christus Victor theology (albeit with a greater focus on *already* than on *not yet*). Should followers of Jesus *not* live victoriously? Through a theology of empowerment, the Prosperity Gospel provides a way ‘to overcome the existential pathos of impotence and pessimism’.<sup>73</sup>

The Prosperity Gospel can speak into African cultures in a number of fruitful ways. Other cultural aspects of the Prosperity Gospel in Africa, however, are less healthy. Attempted manipulation of the object of worship—when God is treated like an ATM which is obligated to dispense cash whenever the right conditions are met—has much similarity with African traditional religions, where ‘the ancestors are manipulated by speaking the right words, performing the right rituals and acting appropriately.’<sup>74</sup> It is easy for believers to unduly exalt prosperity-peddling pastors as African ‘cultural history tells them to put stock in “Big Men”’.<sup>75</sup>

### The Productivity Gospel

Within the Prosperity Gospel, there have been at least two major streams. The first is a primarily orthodox theology which needs some correction or rebalancing in places. The second is heretical and deceitful practice, which has rightly been the subject of much critique. But a third stream has developed, the Productivity Gospel. At the risk of oversimplification, this can be described as the empowerment theology of the Prosperity Gospel combined with personal accountability and the Protestant work ethic. It has inherited Martin Luther’s understanding of vocation, the sanctity

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70 These points were repeated by several Maasai church elders at a seminar in Olepishet, Kenya in 2015. See also the discussion of how relational demands affect resource management in David E. Maranz, *African Friends and Money Matters: Observations from Africa*, 2nd ed. (Dallas: SIL International, 2015).

71 Maxwell, ‘Delivered from the Spirit of Poverty?’ 354. Kyama Mugambi, then assistant director of the Centre for World Christianity at Africa International University in Nairobi and editor of Africa Theological Network Press, and currently assistant professor of world Christianity at Yale Divinity School, shared several examples with me in a private conversation in September 2016.

72 Asamoah-Gyadu, ‘Born of Water and the Spirit’, 354–55.

73 Nwankwo, ‘Re-viewing the Prosperity Message’, 5.

74 Magezi and Manzanga, ‘Prosperity and Health Ministry’, 5.

75 Maxwell and Phiri, ‘Gospel Riches’, 27.

of work. Work hard and be rewarded.<sup>76</sup> This experience has been called ‘redemptive uplift’.<sup>77</sup> Whereas the Protestant work ethic is built on the ‘belief that work honors God’, the Prosperity Gospel is built on the ‘belief that God promises prosperity to the faithful’.<sup>78</sup> The Productivity Gospel combines these two themes and builds on the reality that frequently ‘success ... comes with the stability of a Christian life’ and can yield relative prosperity through ordinary sociological processes.<sup>79</sup>

While it is generally recognized that ‘prosperity theology contributes positively to the socioeconomic well-being of some of its followers and countries in general’, one of its obvious faults is that it ‘has the tendency of impoverishing some of its adherents, despite the economic progress it offers to others’.<sup>80</sup> Isaac Boaheng explains how this can happen:

As members are made to believe that their returns will be a hundred times their giving, some people give excessively. People may even go for bank loans to support their church with the hope of reaping a hundredfold. People may also donate just to prevent themselves from being considered as people of weak faith because their pastors teach that if one has faith and sows, they will receive material gain. Eventually when the expected return does not come, the person involved needs to pay the bank loan with other resources to be gathered. This may lead to falling into debt and bankruptcy. Furthermore, prosperity theology widens the economic gap between poor church members and their spiritual leader. We find these pastors having so much wealth in stock in churches where some members cannot afford three square meals a day.<sup>81</sup>

Preachers of the Productivity Gospel, however, have shown greater concern for their congregants. Viateur Habarurema lists three positive contributions of the Prosperity Gospel: ‘a genuine quest for the fullness of life promised by the Scriptures’, an ‘audacity to address real-life problems [and the] existential needs of people by drawing upon their traditions and biblical resources’, and ‘a reverential attitude to the

76 Although they use different terminology, see also Donald E. Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori, ‘Born in the Image of God: Democracy and Upward Mobility’, in their *Global Pentecostalism: The New Face of Christian Social Engagement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 160–83, which applies Max Weber’s Protestant work ethic theses to this form of the Prosperity Gospel. See also Tomas Sundnes Drønen, ‘Weber, Prosperity and the Protestant Ethic: Some Reflections on Pentecostalism and Economic Development’, *Svensk Missionstidskrift* (Swedish Missiological Themes) 100, no. 3 (2012): 321–35.

77 See Maxwell, ‘Delivered from the Spirit of Poverty?’ 354.

78 Mitchell J. Neubert, Kevin D. Dougherty, Jerry Z. Park and Jenna Griebel, ‘Beliefs about Faith and Work: Development and Validation of Honoring God and Prosperity Gospel Scales’, *Review of Religious Research* 56, no. 1 (2014): 141.

79 Wanjiru M. Gitau, *Megachurch Christianity Reconsidered: Millennials and Social Change in African Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 149.

80 Boaheng, *Poverty, the Bible, and Africa*, 120, citing Basilius M. Kasera, ‘The Biblical and Theological Examination of Prosperity Theology and Its Impact among the Poor in Namibia’ (MTh thesis, South African Theological Seminary, 2012), 119, <https://worldia.org/yourls/47410>.

81 Boaheng, *Poverty, the Bible, and Africa*, 120, citing J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *Sighs and Signs of the Spirit: Ghanaian Perspectives on Pentecostalism and Renewal in Africa* (Oxford: Regnum, 2015), 163–76.



Bible as God's Word'.<sup>82</sup> These first two contributions serve to gain a hearing for the gospel. Many economically challenged Africans have found that 'being a member of a church offers life-saving access to social networks of mutual aid and support, which teach essential survival skills [while] peer pressure helps believers avoid the snares of substance abuse'. This is perhaps especially true for rural Africans who have moved to urban settings.<sup>83</sup> According to my research, the offering of practical solutions to existential needs is fully realized in the context of the Productivity Gospel rather than in the flashy panhandlers of prosperity who have grown fat on their flock.

For the Productivity Gospel, success is not achieved simply by following laws nor by tithing legalistically, but through 'self-confidence, pride, determination, motivation, discipline, application, courage—and by skills and techniques' that the pastors take care to impart.<sup>84</sup> It has been observed that 'the prosperity gospel in an African context' offers 'a cogent formula for economic development'.<sup>85</sup> Moreover, 'it is apparent that the prosperity gospels also include teachings on spiritual prosperity, the prosperity of the individual so that he or she becomes a blessing to others, and the prosperity of the church in order to engage in the business of the kingdom'.<sup>86</sup> These observations, however, upon closer examination are more aptly applied specifically to the Productivity Gospel.

Pastors Ojo and Oginde, whose criticisms of the Prosperity Gospel I cited above, both recognize that many prosperity teachers do good—they 'inspire members to aim high, work hard, and avoid vices'—and that prosperity ministries engage in 'humanitarian work such as building schools and colleges, supplying food and medicine to the poor, and supporting HIV/AIDS prevention programs'.<sup>87</sup> The doctrines of a balanced and responsible Prosperity Gospel free of abuses, which I distinguish as the Productivity Gospel (though I retain the usage of others in the following quotations), 'have engendered social mobility for some' and provide for others 'a code of conduct which guards them from falling into poverty and destitution. For all they provide a pattern for coming to terms with, and benefitting from, modernities' dominant values and institutions.<sup>88</sup> The improved morality of Pentecostal men makes them better providers and protectors. Instead of spending their money on addictive substances and on other women, they now use those funds 'for purchase of consumer goods, education, and savings'.<sup>89</sup> Because the believers dress sharply and are hardworking and trustworthy, they have more and better opportunities for employment. In addition, within the Pentecostal churches, believers 'also benefit from the material

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82 Viateur Habarurema, *Christian Generosity According to 2 Corinthians 8–9: Its Exegesis, Reception, and Interpretation Today in Dialogue with the Prosperity Gospel in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Carlisle, UK: Langham Monographs, 2017), 260, 263, 266.

83 Jenkins, 'The Case for Prosperity', 45.

84 Gifford, 'Ghana's Charismatic Churches', 246.

85 Obadare, 'Raising Righteous Billionaires', 2.

86 Ben-Willie K. Golo, 'Africa's Poverty and its Neo-Pentecostal "Liberators": An Ecotheological Assessment of Africa's Prosperity Gospellers', *Pneuma* 35, no. 3 (2013): 375.

87 Maxwell and Phiri, 'Gospel Riches', 28.

88 Maxwell, 'Delivered from the Spirit of Poverty?' 351.

89 Maxwell, 'Delivered from the Spirit of Poverty?' 353.

support of the church community'.<sup>90</sup> Much like the church of the first three centuries, 'pentecostals ... care for the sick, orphans and widows, and often provide housing in an urban environment where it is scarce and expensive.'<sup>91</sup> In these ways, 'the prosperity gospel's holistic approach to life can contribute to poverty alleviation'<sup>92</sup> as well as to 'self-reliance, to self-worth, to dignity and to motivation to succeed'.<sup>93</sup> This is especially true because 'among many Africans, prosperity means having food on the table and affording the basic life needs.'<sup>94</sup> The practice of the Productivity Gospel thus does not bring fabulous riches to a few, but rather works to bring about greater *equity* (Paul's word in 2 Cor 8:14 is *isōtēs*) among believers.

By leveraging the Pentecostal prosperity 'teaching that God wants his children to live successful lives', the Productivity Gospel 'gives many Africans a positive mindset that they can make it in business through God, rather than by waiting for a Western donor to extend a helping hand'.<sup>95</sup> Mensa Otobil, senior pastor of the International Central Gospel Church in Accra, Ghana, is happy to be called a 'prosperity preacher', but Gifford suggests that label is misleading. Instead, Otobil's sermons tell believers not to ask God for money or other material possessions—'God will not give you money', he says—but to ask God for wisdom. 'Your God won't give you wealth', Otobil preaches, 'he gave you *power to create wealth*'.<sup>96</sup> In addition to his sermons, Otobil has explicitly developed a practical emphasis on empowerment for productivity in his *Four Laws of Productivity: God's Foundation for Living*.<sup>97</sup> His productivity teaching promotes 'empowerment of believers' perhaps precisely due to its insistence upon 'the ethics of responsibility'.<sup>98</sup> Togarasei notes that 'entrepreneurship teachings'—a crucial element of what I refer to as the Productivity Gospel—'have led a sizeable number of Pentecostals to start their own businesses, thus contributing to poverty alleviation through employment creation.'<sup>99</sup> The Productivity Gospel can thus teach 'an entrepreneurial spirit' by which 'Pentecostalism helps believers to discover the operative for wealth creation and financial intelligence'.<sup>100</sup> Similarly, Zulu notes that 'a holistic view of prosperity in the Zambian context could help people in

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90 Maxwell, 'Delivered from the Spirit of Poverty?' 354.

91 Maxwell, 'Delivered from the Spirit of Poverty?' 355.

92 Togarasei, 'The Pentecostal Gospel of Prosperity in African Contexts', 349.

93 Zulu, 'Fipelwa na baYaweh', 29.

94 Lovemore Togarasei, 'African Gospreneurship: Assessing the Possible Contribution of the Gospel of Prosperity to Entrepreneurship in Light of Jesus's Teaching on Earthly Possessions', in *In Search of Health and Wealth: The Prosperity Gospel in African, Reformed Perspective*, ed. Hermen Kroesbergen, 110–26 (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 119.

95 Togarasei, 'African Gospreneurship', 123.

96 Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity*, 120.

97 Habarurema, *Christian Generosity*, 290–91; Emmanuel Kwesi Amin, *Who Wants To Be a Millionaire? An Analysis of Prosperity Teaching in the Charismatic Ministries (Churches) in Ghana and Its Wider Impact* (Munster: LIT Verlag, 2021), 90, 214. There are two editions of Otobil's book, the first published by Vincom in Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1991 and the second by Pneuma Life Publishing in Lanham, Maryland in 2002.

98 Habarurema, *Christian Generosity*, 291.

99 Togarasei, 'African Gospreneurship', 122.

100 Togarasei, 'African Gospreneurship', 121.

the extreme poverty levels to start to view themselves positively and work towards liberating themselves from ... demeaning situations.<sup>101</sup>

If you are rewarded, Productivity Gospel pastors preach, use your reward to make opportunities for others. Are you a businessperson? Grow your business not just for self-enrichment but so that you can hire more employees, for we are blessed to be a blessing. In congregations of Winners' Chapel in Nairobi, congregants are asked, 'If you were unemployed, have you gotten a job? If you were an employee, have you become an employer? If you were an employer, have you increased the number of your employees?'<sup>102</sup> This is clearly no mere matter of selfishness and greed for gain but a desire to address systemic socio-economic injustice and bring blessing to others. Indeed, in all their congregations across Africa, 'Winners' Chapel strongly encourages and fosters entrepreneurship.<sup>103</sup> This type of exhortation is common within many Pentecostal congregations in Africa.<sup>104</sup>

There are two further things to note. First, this work is arguably done in obedience to Deuteronomy 15:11: 'Of course, there will never cease to be poor people in the country, and that is why I am giving you this command: Always be open handed with your brother, and with anyone in your country who is in need and poor' (NJB). Second, this is evidence of the accountability which is necessary to Christian discipleship. Togarasei has noted 'five ways by which the gospel contributes to poverty alleviation: encouraging entrepreneurship, employment creation, encouraging members to be generous, giving a positive mindset and encouraging a holistic approach to life'.<sup>105</sup> Proponents of the Productivity Gospel have turned away from the greed all too often exhibited by prosperity preachers and have actively adopted each of these five practices. The culture of congregations teaching the Productivity Gospel seems similar to the *koinonia* described in Acts—a total sharing that includes the material as well as the spiritual.<sup>106</sup>

Typical prosperity teaching within African Pentecostalism has 'generated ... more broadly an incredibly high sense and spirit of generosity, unparalleled in the history of the church in Africa' as the result of 'a call to stewardship, which means Christians must have a holistic sense of giving' generously.<sup>107</sup> This spirit of generosity is found in the pews of prosperity churches even when church leaders are fleecing their flocks. But whereas, in many Prosperity Gospel contexts, calls for stewardship are issued hypocritically and not practised by the preacher, in Productivity Gospel contexts this type of stewardship and generosity is modelled by the church leadership. Thus, the Productivity Gospel also offers a foundation upon which to build what Habarurema refers to as 'a theology of stewardship and giving' in African contexts.<sup>108</sup> Whereas the Prosperity Gospel can operate as an attempted 'manipulation

101 Zulu, 'Fipelwa na baYaweh', 27–28.

102 Kyama Mugambi, private conversation, September 2016. For a similar example, see Gifford, 'Expecting Miracles', 20.

103 Gifford and Nogueira-Godsey, 'The Protestant Ethic and African Pentecostalism', 20.

104 For Kenya and Ghana specifically, see Kyama M. Mugambi, *A Spirit of Revitalization: Urban Pentecostalism in Kenya* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2020).

105 Togarasei, 'The Pentecostal Gospel of Prosperity', 349–50.

106 González, *Faith and Wealth*, 83.

107 Asamoah-Gyadu, *Contemporary Pentecostal Christianity*, 94.

108 Habarurema, *Christian Generosity*, 284.

of a rather mechanical God',<sup>109</sup> the Productivity Gospel can more easily make room for expressions of gratitude through generosity. While many are convinced that 'one's wealth increases by hoarding one's possessions', Habarurema explains that prosperity preachers like Matthew Ashimolowo (a Nigerian serving as senior pastor of Kingsway International Christian Centre, a London megachurch) teach that actually 'blessings come by releasing what one possesses.'<sup>110</sup>

Commenting on the socio-economic realities of Africa, Ghanaian theologian John Samuel Pobeo observes:

Experience shows that in Africa the churches have, time and again, picked up the casualties of bad economic and political adventures. Such moves are easily swept from view under the rubric of social welfare activity or as part of the social responsibility of the churches. But at the end of the day, the churches' shouldering of these responsibilities has a theological rationale. For they are attempts by the church to model the gospel of hope in very difficult and trying circumstances and to shore up the fundamental concern of religion and theology for human-kind made in God's image and likeness.<sup>111</sup>

This has perhaps especially been true in the context of the Productivity Gospel.

### Conclusion

Clearly, 'a Jesus who is narrowly concerned about the saving of the soul for the future but neglects the holistic issues of life, including incumbent wellbeing, is not welcome in Africa.'<sup>112</sup> Both the Prosperity Gospel and the Productivity Gospel address the holistic concerns which are an intimate part of African worldviews. Evidence abounds that the 'health and wealth' emphases of the Prosperity Gospel can lead to heresy and corruption. But some of its core tenets are—even though acknowledgement of this fact may make some uncomfortable—biblical. When the Prosperity Gospel is used to manipulate and to support the self-aggrandizement and material enrichment of so-called pastors peddling their own personality cults rather than the good news of Jesus, this should be firmly rebuked and repudiated as heretical and anti-Christian. But on the other hand, those churches that teach and practice the Productivity Gospel have captured a biblical emphasis that speaks into the local cultures of Africa and provides a message of hope<sup>113</sup> to the people.

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109 Hermen Kroesbergen, 'The Prosperity Gospel: A Way to Reclaim Dignity?' in *In Search of Health and Wealth: The Prosperity Gospel in African, Reformed Perspective*, ed. Hermen Kroesbergen (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 82.

110 Habarurema, *Christian Generosity*, 287.

111 John Samuel Pobeo, *Giving Account of Faith and Hope in Africa* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017), 131.

112 Devison Telen Banda, 'Jesus the Healer', in *In Search of Health and Wealth: The Prosperity Gospel in African, Reformed Perspective*, ed. Hermen Kroesbergen (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 56.

113 This hints at what Katongole calls a 'grammar of hope' that is 'theologically rich' in *Born from Lament*, 264.