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THE PROSPERITY GOSPEL

An AJET Editorial

Recently the Editor visited a large, prospering church in one of the capital cities of Africa. This growing church of 6,000 members attracts Members of Parliament, bank managers and accountants, headmasters of secondary schools and thousands of youth.

That morning the pastor preached the Prosperity Gospel based on 1 Kings 17. The poor widow of Zarephath, about to eat her last remaining food before imminent starvation, was asked by the prophet Elijah to feed him first. When that poor widow in faith obeyed the prophet, God richly blessed her and saved her life with a jug of oil that never ran dry until the rains began to fall. Indeed, there was much truth in what this pastor preached – the need for faith and sacrificial giving by the poor who will then experience God's blessing and favour.

But heresy is never total error, rather a mixture of truth and error, an unbalanced emphasis and distortion of the truth. Though the advocates of the Prosperity Gospel may quote Scripture, they never balance these isolated Scripture references with the full teaching of Scripture on poverty and wealth. Upon reflection we suggest that there are four serious errors in the Prosperity Gospel.

1. *The Prosperity Gospel distorts the true purpose of giving.* Offerings should be given to God as an act of worship (Isa 43:22-24; Ps 116:12-17) and not for selfish gain. It is biblical truth that God promises to reward those who give to him generously (2 Cor 9:6-11). But the divine blessings reflect the gracious gift of God and not God's obligation of favour. The desire for prosperity must never be the motive of giving. Before one gives material gifts, he should first give himself to the Lord (2 Cor. 8:5; Rom. 12:1). God is more concerned with the giver than the gift. Though generous giving is a virtue in Scripture (2 Cor 8:1,2), one should give unto the Lord as an offering of thanksgiving (Ps 116:17). Never should one give with selfish ambition of material prosperity.

2. *The Prosperity Gospel distorts the biblical view of true prosperity.* Unfortunately, the preachers of the Prosperity Gospel have bought into the materialistic philosophy of this age, the belief that material prosperity is gain. It is a gospel shaped by the materialism of our contemporary culture. Biblical teaching is clear. "But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap...For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil" (1 Tim 6:6-10). In contrast to material prosperity, true prosperity in God's sight is the riches of faith. "...God has chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom..." (James 2:5).

3. *The Prosperity Gospel victimises the poor.* Since preachers reduce God's blessings to material gain, anyone who falls into financially hard times must be guilty of sin or unbelief. 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.

4. *The Prosperity Gospel distorts God's providential plan for his children.* Let us be honest. If we had our own choice, most of us would desire perfect health, long life, material prosperity and influential positions in the church and nation. Such desires are natural because our sinful human nature seeks our own personal gain, prominence and success. But God's plan is for his children to grow in grace. The proud, self centred human nature must be crucified and in God's providential plan this often entails trials of many kinds. "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything" (Ja 1:2-4).

What is urgently needed today is not the Prosperity Gospel but a biblical theology of poverty and riches. This issue of AJET makes a contribution to this urgent task for biblical and theological scholars.