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THE JAMAICA  
CHURCH AND THE  
THIRD GOSPEL

*By*

*David Pearson*

**PhD (Cand)**

**Professor Pearson is  
Academic Dean, the JTS**

The Gospel of Luke is a favourite for liberation minded interpreters because of the Evangelist's focus on the blessings of God on the outcast. A favourite statement often highlighted from the Gospel is drawn from Mary's Magnificat in Luke 1:46-56. Two verses of significance to our discussion are recorded below:

*He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty (vv. 52-53)*

Along with Mary's statement is Jesus' overview of his mission, seen in the context of his preaching in his home town of Nazareth, towards the very beginning of his public ministry. Having been handed the scroll of Isaiah, he quotes from the Prophet, and then indicates the significance and nature of his ministry (Luke 4:16-21) as possessing a focus on the outcast as a fulfilment of God's messianic plan. The passage reads:

*He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:*

*"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,  
because he has anointed me  
to preach good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim freedom 5*

*for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

*Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." (vv 16-21)*

When the rest of Luke's Gospel is read in light of these two passages, its content does seem to betray Luke's interest in portraying Jesus as the deliverer of people on the fringes. Indeed, Luke, more than any other of the Evangelists, has a great emphasis on Jesus as the deliverer of women, the poor, the indigent and the foreigner. The Evangelist is fond of showing Jesus' concern for those whom would have been considered to be undeserving of God's love and attention, in a culture obsessed with health and prosperity as indicators of God's rewards for his people's righteousness. And often, the concern is revealed by standing side by side in comparison, those deemed to be righteous and others who are outcasts; there are at least twelve such throughout the book. These comparative sketches often occur in confrontational encounters between Jesus and the righteous. And in every case, those deemed to be more righteous and deserving of God's love by the culture, are shown to lack the basics for truly receiving from the blessings of God. The confrontations finally end with the religious leaders turning Jesus over to the Roman authorities to be crucified on a charge of blasphemy (22:66-70).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This statement might be mistakenly understood to suggest that those considered "righteous" in the time of Jesus are always portrayed negatively in Luke. There are three occasions when the religiously righteous come in for commendation (implicitly or explicitly by the evangelist). The book begins with the classification of Zacharias as "righteous before God, blameless according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord (1:6), though in the passage he is chided for not believing the Angel of God about the fact that his wife would

It is the purpose of this paper to examine one passage (5:17-26) where the “reversal” of Mary’s Magnificat and Jesus’ focus on the outcast is clearly demonstrated. Our desire is to show that in reading the text (and others like it) as traditional Christian scholarship does, we downplay the importance of Jesus’ ministry to the outcast, often in light of other foci considered more important, but which might be peripheral to the passages intent. The paper also suggests that the continued haranguing of the Jamaican church’s lack of relevance to the community is born out of this mistaken way of reading the Gospel by the church, which stresses a need for right doctrine (orthodoxy) and downplays the importance of right action in society (orthopraxy). The work will not attempt to pit one against the other, but will insist that this is exactly what the church in large measure does in our context, nullifying or minimizing its impact on society.

#### **Translation (Luke 5:17-26)**

And so it was that on one of the days he was teaching and sitting there were Pharisees and teachers of the Law, having come from out of all the towns of Galilee, and Judea and Jerusalem. And the power of the Lord was on him for healing. And behold, men bearing upon a bed a man who was a cripple were seeking to carry him in and to lay him in front of Jesus. And not finding a way that they might carry him through the crowd they went upon the roof and let him down with the bed through the tiles, into the midst of the crowd and in front of Jesus. Seeing their faith Jesus said to

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conceive. At the end of the Gospel, Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the council, is described as “good and righteous” and did not agree with the “plan and action” of the religious to have Jesus crucified. In between these is Jairus, the ruler of the synagogue, who receives back his daughter from the dead because he chose to believe Jesus rather than obey the strictures of the Law of Moses, which forbade them being in the presence of the dead until the time of purification (8:49-56).

him, “Man, your sins have been forgiven.” And the Scribes and the Pharisees began to reason saying, “Who is this that is speaking blasphemies? Who is able to forgive sins except God only?” But Jesus, having known their reasoning, answered, saying to them. “Why are you reasoning in your hearts? Which is easier to say – ‘Your sins are forgiven’ or to say ‘Get up and walk?’ But in order that you might know that the son of man has authority on the earth to forgive sins,” he said to the paralytic, “I say to you, get up and take your bed and walk to your house.” And instantly, having stood up in front of them and having taken up the bed he was lying upon, he went away to his house glorifying God. And ecstasy took hold of them all and they glorified God, and they were filled with fear saying, “We have seen a paradoxical thing today.”

### **Exposition**

The spreading fame of Jesus is the backdrop to our passage, along with a growing measure of opposition to Jesus. In the previous chapter he is angrily rejected in the synagogue in his hometown, despite the fact that elsewhere his popularity was growing. But, as his popularity spread, so did the idea that Jesus performed miracles without consideration for the Laws of Moses. Luke 4:31-40 shows Jesus involved in a number of healing encounters on the Sabbath, first of a man with an unclean spirit, then Peter’s mother in law, and then many. Luke 6:6-11, shows the fury of the religious leaders when Jesus healed the man with the withered hand in the synagogue on the Sabbath. Additionally, in 5:12-16, Jesus heals a leper by touching him and making himself ceremonially unclean. The Leper then fails to fulfil the obligations of Moses by presenting his offering to the Priest as prescribed by Leviticus 14. At this early stage of his ministry, Jesus’ reputation is developing as a healer, but

one who has little concern for the Law, and the religious leaders are concerned. This may explain a peculiar phrase in the first line of our passage: it was just another day, yet coming to hear Jesus were “Pharisees and teachers of the Law from out of all the towns of Galilee, and Judea and Jerusalem (17).”

The make-up of this “party” demonstrates that this was not a regular meeting in which Jesus taught. Gooding<sup>2</sup> indicates that the term Doctors (teachers) of the Law *nomodidaskalo*“, used only thrice in the New testament, is a specialist term which shows that Luke here wants his readers to see that Judaism’s top experts of the Old Testament were present. Additionally, they had come with Pharisees from all over, including as far away as from Jerusalem, the religious headquarters so to speak. It seems obvious that they had come to test the veracity of any idea or action of Jesus, in terms of how it stood up against the Law of Moses. This apparently was an expedition for a first hand encounter with the unorthodox teachings of Jesus, a growing concern for men committed to guarding the truth. That they were sitting as Jesus taught has been variously understood, on the one hand that they had taken the posture of those being taught at the feet of a Rabbi, or on the other that they were sitting in judgement, more akin to people listening to test the authenticity of what was being said.<sup>3</sup> The happenings in the rest of the account lead one to believe the latter view.

As Jesus taught them, a peculiar incident happened; some men brought a paralytic friend on a small bed to place him before Jesus to be healed. But they could not get him through because of the crowd. Of interest is the identification of the crowd that blocked the way for the men to get to Jesus. A few indications in the passage

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<sup>2</sup> David Gooding, *According to Luke*, Leicester: IVP, 1987, p. 107

<sup>3</sup> Joel b. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997; p. 240

highlight the crowd's composition as the religious leaders identified at the beginning of the passage. For one, the plural article οἱ in verse 17 shows that these were the ones coming out from the entire countryside of Galilee, Judea and Jerusalem. Metzger<sup>4</sup> indicates that this difficult but correct reading has led copyists to alter the text to make it more acceptable:

“The difficulty of the reading supported by the overwhelming mass of witnesses (according to which the enemies of Jesus had come from every village of Galilee, Judea, and Jerusalem) prompted some copyists to omit οἱ/ altogether (κ\* 33) and others to replace it with δε (D it<sup>d. e</sup> syr<sup>8</sup>), so that it is the sick who have come from all parts to be healed.”

These were the men who crowded inside the building, and verse 19 states that they blocked the men with their paralyzed friend from getting in. It was the same crowd in whose midst the man was lowered in front of Jesus. That the crowd was on the inside, or perhaps more so on the inside than the outside, is also seen in the man's friends being able to reach the building to get to the roof. Thus, the religious in the story are blocking the path of the true seekers. But is this truly what Luke has in mind, or is such merely a “reading into” the passage? What comes next through the miracle of Jesus is revealing.

The passage indicates that when Jesus saw the faith of the men who took extreme measures to get their friend to him, he pronounced the man's sins forgiven. This created grave concerns among the religious men; they grumbled in their thoughts about Jesus' claim of authority to forgive sins, which to them was a clear sign of

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<sup>4</sup> Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary of the Greek New Testament* (2<sup>nd</sup>. Ed.), UBS, Stuttgart, 1994; p 114



blasphemy. “*Who is this that is speaking blasphemies? Who is able to forgive sins except God only?*” But Jesus sends them into a tail spin by identifying their thoughts, and demonstrating his authority to forgive sins on earth by healing the man, which apparently led to praise and glorification of God’s name among the religious. And this is where traditional scholarship usually locates the emphasis of the passage on the divine identity of Jesus. Miller<sup>5</sup> devotes much space of his brief discussion of this passage to explaining the significance of Jesus’ act to his self-identification, a stance supported by Gooding,<sup>6</sup> Green<sup>7</sup>, and Morris<sup>8</sup> (who also emphasizes the passage’s highlighting of the friends’ faith). Ellis<sup>9</sup> has a similar emphasis, though he also devotes significant space to the discussion on Jesus’ self identification as “the Son of man” (v. 24).

The scholars identified above are not incorrect in their interpretations, as much as they are incomplete in understanding the passage’s intent. Surely the account should have shown to Jesus’ audience the divine credentials of his ministry, and the importance of faith. But in light of Luke’s emphasis described earlier, his original readers would have seen his insistence on the danger of defending orthodoxy while neglecting orthopraxy: religiosity is an enemy to what God wants to do with people, especially those on the outside. And it is by comparing the religious with these “outsiders”

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<sup>5</sup> Donald G. Miller, *The Layman’s Bible Commentary*, John Knox Press, Atlanta, 1959; 71.

<sup>6</sup> David Gooding, *According to Luke*, Leicester: IVP, 1987, pp.108-109

<sup>7</sup> Joel b. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997; pp. 239-243

<sup>8</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to St. Luke*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974; pp. 116-117

<sup>9</sup> E. Earl Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke*, London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1974; pp 104-106

(who perhaps do not belong in this religious gathering) that Luke makes his point. This is revealed in two points of comparison in the passage.

καὶ δύναμις κυρίου ἦν εἰς τὸ ἰᾶσθαι αὐτόν. “And the power of the Lord was on him to heal (17).” Luke indicates that as Jesus was teaching God’s power was present for him to heal.<sup>10</sup> The Textus Receptus has the variant reading αὐτούς which changes the reading slightly to say that “...the power of the Lord was present for healing them”, making the healing of the paralytic man full of irony. The Lord wanted to heal the sick among the religious men, but they would not receive from him, and so an outsider comes and benefits from the power of God. As tempting as it is to accept this reading, it is to be rejected on the weight of the textual evidence that αὐτόν is to be understood as the subject of τὸ ἰᾶσθαι<sup>11</sup>, making the earlier identified translation more correct. But, the desired sentiment of the variant reading is not lost on the correct translation, though now it is a bit more distantly implied. The fact is that the passage clearly shows that Jesus’ healing desire was present before the paralytic showed up, and the paralytic’s arrival and benefit from the same power was an indication that what was necessary to put the power in action was faith. Thus, in contrasting the religious men and the paralytic Luke is showing that receiving from the hand of Jesus requires a commitment of faith. It is interesting to note that without this commitment two negative indicators naturally follow – the men not only miss out on benefiting from Jesus’ presence, but their apparent insistence on being there to “grill” Jesus makes them so oblivious to human need that they block the path of those who would come to receive from Jesus.

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<sup>10</sup> It is very interesting that Luke describes the power as being other than Jesus.’ The healing power is presented as the divine prerogative of God, and Jesus apparently uses it only at God’s prescribed times.

<sup>11</sup> Metzger, p 145

The second point of comparison appears at the very end of the passage in verses 25-26.

καὶ παραχρῆμα ἀναστὰς ἐνώπιον αὐτῶν ἄρας ἐφ’ ᾧ κατέκειτο ἀπῆλθεν εἰς τὸν οἶκον αὐτοῦ δοξάζων τὸν θεόν. καὶ ἔκστασις ἔλαβεν ἅπαντας καὶ ἐδόξαζον τὸν θεόν, καὶ ἐπλήσθησαν φόβου λέγοντες ὅτι εἶδομεν παράδοξα σήμερον.

“And instantly, having stood up in front of them and having taken up the bed he was lying upon, he went away to his house glorifying God. And ecstasy took hold of them all and they glorified God, and they were filled with fear saying, “We have seen a paradoxical thing today.”

The NIV translates v. 26 as follows: “Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God. They were filled with awe and said. ‘We have seen remarkable things today.’” This seems a rather odd way of presenting the passage, as it makes positive what is not shown that way in the original. The miraculous healing of the man stunned the religious men to the point of spontaneous praise - καὶ ἔκστασις ἔλαβεν ἅπαντας – “And ecstasy laid hold of them all.” They were not in control of their emotions when they saw the miracle unfold literally in front of them; they burst out in praise. But the last two phrases of the sentence show that this praise was of a different sort than that of the paralytic. Whereas he had responded to Jesus’ commanded instantly and left glorifying God (25), their response is characterized by φόβου<sup>12</sup> -“fear” (not the more positive

<sup>12</sup> Bauer, Arndt & Gingrich, A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979, p. 863. It is interesting to note that though the semantic range of this word does

“amazement” of the NIV), because they had seen παράδοξα<sup>13</sup>- “paradoxical things” (again not the “remarkable” things as suggested by the NIV). Unfortunately, the NIV gives the impression that it is the miracle that is uppermost in the mind of the religious guardians. The passage however makes it clear that it is the miracle’s impact on a hallowed belief that has them “perplexed.” The fact is that Jesus has just defied one of the central tenets of their belief system – “Only God can forgive so anyone who claims to forgive (other than God) must be blaspheming.” But Jesus had just publicly forgiven and healed the paralyzed man, right in their midst. Did this mean that Jesus had come with divine authority? If indeed this was so, then just maybe their opposition to him was also an opposition to God. But to admit such would be an admission that their religious heritage and what they were thinking about Jesus was at least in part incorrect. An extended quote from Barclay<sup>14</sup> explains the dilemma that the religious leaders found themselves in:

“The Scribes were the experts in the law who knew all these rules and regulations, and who deduced them from the law.

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include the idea of “reverence” or “respect” as seen in Philippians 2:12, BAG identifies the meaning in the Luke passage as more akin to “alarm, fright.” This no doubt comes from the context of the passage as Luke describes it.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 615. A similar point has to be made with the semantic range of παράδοξα, which includes the diverse understandings of “contrary to opinion, or expectation, strange, wonderful and remarkable.” This time, however, we have to disagree with BAG that the meaning in our passage is “wonderful things” given the behaviour of the religious leaders throughout the rest of the book. That they were thrown into confusion over their cherished understanding being overturned seems more akin that they would view the incident as “contrary to opinion or expectation” or indeed “strange.” And again, the rest of the Gospel seems to bear this out.

<sup>14</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, Edingburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1975; pp 60-61

The name Pharisee means “the Separated One”; and the Pharisees were those who had separated themselves from the ordinary people and ordinary life in order to keep the rules and regulations. Note two things. First, for the scribes and Pharisees these rules were a matter of life and death; to break one of them was deadly sin. Second, only people desperately in earnest would ever have tried to keep them, for they must have made life supremely uncomfortable. It was only the best people who would even make the attempt.

“Jesus had no use for rules and regulations like this. For him, the cry of human need superseded all such things. But to the scribes and Pharisees he was a law breaker, a bad man who broke the law and taught others to do the same.”

The rest of the book of Luke reveals several instances where the religious authorities clash with Jesus over his teachings.<sup>15</sup> The fact that there were so many religious leaders present from such a widespread region at this early stage of Jesus’ ministry, and that Luke shows their ongoing confrontations with Jesus throughout the gospel indicates that in this first incident the religious leaders neither received from him in faith nor responded to his healing of the paralytic with true praise. Luke used the crippled man and his friends for two points of comparison with the religious leaders, and in both the latter are found wanting. Again, this is not strange for

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<sup>15</sup> Donald Miller, p. 72, is one interpreter who understands the perplexing nature of the miracle on the religious leaders. He too asserts that their spontaneous praise should not be misunderstood, as their later attitude of rejecting Jesus message and ministry reveals.

Luke who has deliberately set out to show Jesus' preferential option, so to speak, for the outcast.<sup>16</sup>

### **The Passage and the Jamaican Church**

There are various indications that the Jamaican church has read and understood this passage without grasping its impact on her religiosity. If one were to take a mere cursory glance on the ideas which dominate many of our churches, we would see some of the attitudes/teachings consistent with that of the religious leaders in Luke 5:17-26. In the discussion that follows, three trends consistent with a vast number of Jamaican churches will be examined.

#### **1. The Message of Prosperity**

Though there exist the voices of local Christian thinkers warning against the dangers of flirting with prosperity theology, the phenomenon remains in many of our churches, especially the

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<sup>16</sup> And maybe we should add here that such a preferential option resides in Luke's mind, as a function of a human stance in the presence of God and not so much with some romantic notion of the "godliness of being poor and outcast." Elsewhere (cf. 18:1-29), Luke makes it clear that it is the dangers that come with being rich and respected, in terms of how this makes one think too highly of himself that is the real enemy of dependence on God. Apparently, in Luke's opinion at least, the poor and outcast have little to fall back on and so find faith easier.

Charismatic and Pentecostal, but also with a growing number of Evangelical churches. Rev. Roderick Reid<sup>17</sup> has scolded many pastors and churches for their continued insistence in preaching this “false gospel.” His position is that the obedience the Gospel requires is costly, demanding and involving submissive living, often in the midst of severe economic hardships. There is no promise from the Gospel that faithful adherents will suddenly find their financial realities much improved, merely because of their faith in Christ. But where has this message come from to dominate masses of Jamaican churches?

Canon Ernle Gordon<sup>18</sup> has shown that much of the message of the Jamaican church is an imposed and unbiblical spirituality. He argues that it is a form of cultural imperialism by the Government of the United States to quell the rise of the liberation movements within the Caribbean and Central America, since the early 1970’s. Through satellite broadcast, a kind of “feel good” Christianity is propounded that dulls people’s concern with present realities as they imbibe a puerile individualistic faith. The Canon shows that the number of U.S. brand fundamentalist churches have actually increased in Jamaica since the 1980’s; the same cannot be said of the mainline, traditional denominations, who by the suggestion of Gordon, preach a more Biblical message.

One cannot deny that these churches have grown in Jamaica in the period highlighted by Gordon. The access to cable television has also increased over this time, with many of the Gospel channels beaming preachers committed to the message of prosperity. Its main

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<sup>17</sup> Rev. Roderick Reid in a Sermon commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Hope United Church, on Sunday February 9, 2010 and reported in the Daily Gleaner the following day.

<sup>18</sup> Ernle Gordon, The Church and Religious Imperialism, in the Daily Observer, Wednesday, January 15, 2003. Cited from <http://www.jamaicaobserver.com/>, February 21, 2010

tenet suggests that Christians ought to inherit the blessings of Abraham, spiritual and material, because of their status as sons of Abraham<sup>19</sup>. This status by itself, however, will not gain the believer the prosperity that ought to be his, since he needs to activate such in his life by the “positive confession of faith”<sup>20</sup> and by “giving to the Lord.” The former actually “permits” God to work in the life of the believer, since he had first translated authority to the believer himself. God will not overstep the authority he has deferred. And it is when we “give to the Lord” that he activates the “multiplication” or “reciprocity”<sup>21</sup> principle, where he gives from ten to a hundred times what the believer gave to him in the first place.

The emphasis of this message is what we could get from God if we only had faith. Ill health and poor finances are sure signs of the enemies attack, and demons are often on the prowl to possess and block the blessings of God in our lives. This has often led to a great emphasis on fasting and prayer, and the manifestation of spiritual

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<sup>19</sup> David Jones, “The Bankruptcy of Prosperity Theology,” accessed from <http://bible.org/article/bankruptcy-prosperity-gospel-exercise-biblical-and-theological-ethics> states, February 21, 2010. In the footnotes of this article Jones states, regarding the use of the Abrahamic Covenant by Prosperity theologians, “This important covenant is mentioned numerous times in the writings of the prosperity teachers, i.e., Gloria Copeland, *God’s Willis Prosperity* (Fort Worth, TX: Kenneth Copeland Publications, 1973), 4-6; Kenneth Copeland, *The Laws of Prosperity* (Fort Worth, TX: Kenneth Copeland Publications, 1974), 51; idem, *Our Covenant with God* (Fort Worth, TX: Kenneth Copeland Publications, 1987), 10; Edward Pousson, *Spreading the Flame* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 158; and Kenneth Copeland, *The Troublemaker* (Fort Worth, TX: Kenneth Copeland Publications, n.d.), 6.”

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.watchman.org/rektop/posconf.htm>

<sup>21</sup> Pat Robertson, *The Secret of Financial Prosperity*, accessed from the 700 Club website, at [http://www.cbn.com/spirituallife/cbnteachingSheets/Pat\\_Perspective\\_financial\\_prosperity.aspx](http://www.cbn.com/spirituallife/cbnteachingSheets/Pat_Perspective_financial_prosperity.aspx), accessed February 21, 2010



gifts to show who we deem to be a new class of super-Christians. Powerful preachers are rewarded with large churches as a sign of their having arrived, and there is the growing practice of credentialing these faithful men with honorary doctorates and exalted titles (Bishop [instead of Pastor], Prophet, Apostle, and Super-Apostle). These men (usually but not exclusively) are waited upon by “Armour Bearers,” a growing second but elite class of believers who are next in line for the blessings. Yet, with all of this our ministry to those on the “outside” is still lacking. Again, the misplaced emphasis on reading a passage Luke 5:17-26 is seen. Like the religious leaders of Jesus’ day we have embraced an understanding of prosperity as the sign of God’s blessing. Inevitably then, our emphasis is on matters of our own holiness and rightness as defined by a flawed gospel, instead of that which is truly important to our Lord, the wellbeing of the outcast.

It is interesting to note that the prosperity message has a double indicator of the believers special status wrapped up in it. Not only is the prosperous believer a “believer,” but he is a “more faithful believer” since he has both believed and activated his faith through positive confessions and obedient giving. Indeed, such a Christian is among the elite as evinced by God’s reputed abundance in his life. But, like the religious leaders of Jesus’ day, the message of prosperity blinds the church to what God is doing with “outsiders.” By “outsiders” in this instance we speak of anyone who does not share a commitment to the prosperity ideal, be they Christian or not. But since faithfulness is often also viewed through church attendance, the bulk of outsiders will be truly “outsiders to the church”, or those not affiliated with it. As the faithful congregate around the proliferation of this flawed message, they breed a “spiritual elite” among themselves, who like the Pharisees naturally expect greater blessings from God. Perhaps it is the converse, however, that is more dastardly as we examine the flawed theology’s impact on the church in society. The vast majority of our

people are seen as “spiritual dwarfs” at best, and deserving of their poverty or failures because of their lack of faith.

## **2. Emphasis on Praise and Worship**

There is a second idea from the passage that we must examine in relation to the Jamaican church. It is the idea of the spontaneous praise offered by the religious leaders in light of Jesus revelation of his authority, but a praise that was not followed by true faith. As the “feel good” message of our churches increase, so has the greater emphasis on “Praise and Worship”. Though song singing has always been a part of the Jamaican church experience, the traditional “Chorus Leader” has given way to the “Praise Team.” The former was responsible for warming up believers at the start of meetings, or for filling the time until enough of the faithful came to worship. After the choruses the moderator was often heard to say “Let us begin our service with the singing of Hymn...” The point is that the chorus leader was but an appendage (at the beginning) for the more meaty part of the meeting, where more theologically sound hymns were sung in preparation for the delivery of the message. The Praise Team, however, has a different function. It leads the faithful in an uplifting, emotional experience of worship, a very integral part of the church’s ministry offering. And whereas the chorus time might have taken ten minutes, praise and worship in some churches last from anywhere between fifteen minutes and an hour. For many believers it has become the most important part of the church’s ministry. And perhaps we could say that many Pastors and church Boards do believe in its greater importance, seen in their commitment to spend more on instruments for worship than on ministry to the physical needs of people. The reality of this in many

of our churches has led Gordon to propound that, “(t)he music ministry has replaced the mission of Jesus.”<sup>22</sup>

This music ministry itself is often proof of the Jamaican church’s imbibing of a false and foreign spirituality that is seen in a flawed praise – it insists that praising God requires the words and music of the more spiritually elite foreigners. The average Evangelical church today trumpets its praise through the strains and strings of a North America. That which is local is often ridiculed as being at least inferior and at best demonic. The local believer is then expected to arrive at the idea that s/he only truly worships when this “correct” form of praise is the medium. But, is it not evident that this mentality leads to us blocking who we really are on the outside? In fact, like the paralytic, those who are struck with the malady that makes them insist on their culture as appropriate for praise are blocked by the religious from gaining entry. And we miss out on so much possibilities of influencing our people to true praise. We would do good to heed the advice of Smith<sup>23</sup> that we have to “devise ways of capturing the mood of people as it is expressed in their poetry, dance, music and drama.”

But let us take heed lest we miss perhaps the most important point about praise in our passage. Spontaneous praise means very little to the Lord if indeed it is not followed by a commitment to the demands of the gospel, especially as it reaches out to those in need. The paralytic’s praise is followed by immediate and heartfelt obedience, while that of the religious leaders, though spontaneous, does not lead to obedience. And it is not enough for our leaders to leave such involvement up to the goodwill of the people. The

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<sup>22</sup> Gordon, The Church and Religious Imperialism, in the Daily Observer, Wednesday, January 15, 2003. Cited from <http://www.jamaicaobserver.com/>, February 21, 2010

<sup>23</sup> Ashley Smith, Real Roots and Potted Plants, Williamsfield: Mandeville Publishers, 1984; p.47

church must demonstrate throughout its ministry that authentic praise for the things that God is doing, must be celebrated and replicated in the life of people, especially those on the outside. And therein lays the third concern from our passage, one that has repeatedly shown itself throughout our discussion: the church's lack of concern for the people on the outside.

### **3. Lack of Concern for Outsiders**

The very practical import of the passage under consideration, suggests that rightness with God is seen in how we treat those on the outside. But this very often goes unmentioned in our churches. Perhaps you will forgive a personal reflection here – in 2006 twelve students from a class I taught at the Jamaica Theological Seminary, “Teaching in the Church,” carried out a twelve week survey in their churches (no two students were from the same local church and there were about eight denominations represented in the class) to assess the teaching emphases in their “Divine Service” or “Family Bible Hour.” The assumption was that in these services preachers would emphasize what is most important to their churches’ understanding of their ministry responsibility. Of the one hundred (100) surveys returned only two (2) made mention of the churches’ responsibility to outsiders, other than to share the Gospel message with them. Instead the emphases were on such things as “faith”, “tithing”, “overcoming the enemy”, “the importance of praise,” and so on. The typical sermon did not even link these themes with caring for others.

Other indications show that the churches’ pet emphases betray a lack of fidelity to the teaching of the passage under examination. For example, there is an importance placed on church planting, seen

in the sheer number of churches existing in our island nation. Dick<sup>24</sup> has listed 2674 registered churches in 2004<sup>25</sup>, yet, our common experience is that with the exception of evangelistic crusades and occasional pulpit swaps, our churches have very little in a unified ministry, whether to believers or to the “outsiders” of our communities. Most of these churches refuse the call to ecumenism, insisting instead on their particular understanding of the details of the Gospel as making them in some way better representatives of the truth than others (in some cases “the only representatives of truth”). It is not uncommon to hear of pastors who “guard their pulpits” to ensure that whatever is preached there is in line with their churches’ official positions. How churches existing in this reality read Luke 5:17-26 without seeing the danger on its insistence on orthodoxy at the expense of orthopraxy defies understanding.

Of course, our churches respond to the criticism of their lack of significant involvement in the lives of the people of our community, by showing their growing commitment to social ministry. Over the last twenty years our churches’ involvement in community has grown much<sup>26</sup>. Church based clinics, basic schools, skills training centres and homework centres have basically continued and expanded the trend that shows that no other institution has done more for the social wellbeing of our people. Thus, it is the common response by church officials and thinkers that the continued attack

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<sup>24</sup> Devon Dick, “Rebellion to Riot: The Jamaican Church in Nation Building,” Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2002; pp. 137-199.

<sup>25</sup> Our common experience also suggests that our unregistered churches are of a greater number. If we conservatively assume that there are 5000 churches in Jamaica there would be an average of 357 per parish, often two or three existing on the same street. Yet, there is little felt impact of the ministry of these churches on our communities.

<sup>26</sup> *Daily Gleaner*, November 20 1991, 17.

on the church for its irrelevancy in society is as unfounded as it has always been. How then do they explain why so many of our people who benefit from our churches' ministries stay away and choose lifestyle options detrimental to themselves and community? Is it sufficient to merely explain it by people's selfishness? Or is another possible explanation for the churches' lack of impact?

The Jamaican church has unfortunately had a history that demonstrates its support more for middle class issues and values than for the poor of our community. Williams<sup>27</sup> shows that from the very beginning of the church in Caribbean freed society, the idea that the missionary was of a superior social class was prominent in the thinking of many. Dick<sup>28</sup> suggests that the support of that which ought to have benefited the poorest among us was never paramount in much of the church's thinking. The Moravian church distanced itself from the rebellious behaviour of people like Sam Sharpe and Paul Bogle. And our churches' insistence on preaching "to win souls" while ignoring the deplorable conditions in which they live is an indicator that their social wellbeing is not a priority. More important for many of our churches is that people dress and behave which still dominates much of our thinking. Very formal wear is still expected in many churches and the music of our culture is often excluded. In short, our churches communicate to our average citizen that s/he is not "good enough" to be a part of us.

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<sup>27</sup> Lewin Williams, *Caribbean Theology*, pp. 5-6

<sup>28</sup> Dick, p. 92

Errol Miller<sup>29</sup> calls into question the added value claim of the Jamaican church's contribution to secondary education between 1912 and 1943. He states:

“The structure of the educational provision which offered elementary education to the blacks and Indians and secondary education to the other ethnic groups was consistent with the power structure of the Crown Colony. The fact that during this period government subsidized the public education system and that the church schools were included to expand the system made no difference to the structure of the educational provision and its relationship to social stratification in the society.

The point is more aptly demonstrated when we speak of the churches' contribution to primary education, as very few of the people from our communities can afford the fees for their children to access church preparatory schools and the primary education deemed by many to be the most crucial plank on the rise up the educational ladder. At the tertiary level, outside of Teachers' Colleges and Theological Schools, our churches have not made a contribution, and even in these we offer very little in the way of scholarships and/or financial backing for the average student. Of course we offer invaluable ministry opportunities in clinics, and skills training centres, etc., but more often than not in ways that promote the wellbeing of people only so far no more. Our lack of significant funds is often a big hurdle here, but it is not the main one. We still pour millions of dollars in building mega church

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<sup>29</sup> Errol Miller, Contemporary issues in Jamaican education. In C Brock and

Donald (Eds), Education in Central America and the Caribbean, New York:

Routledge, 1990, p. 109

structures that often have very little practical use for community development. Additionally, they are more often than not built in a manner that promotes the congregation's responsibility to listen to the truths we have to offer, and where no differences, discussion or feedback is expected or welcome. And as an indication of our great resemblance to the religious leaders of Luke 5: 17-26, we make no way for the disabled to enter our sanctuaries or even to have a place catering to their unique needs. We very infrequently have facilities for the deaf, or ramps for the crippled. We make no provision for the blind as was demonstrated in one church that had been very happy in its newly installed multi-media projection system that beamed all the announcements on the screen, but without sound. The blind and the illiterate are left on the outside. Of course we are involved, but often in a way that suggests to the "little man," that he is of less value to us. The greater emphasis is left on the individual to make himself of such that he can better benefit from the ministry of the church, not that the church like Christ will reach out to him.

Yet, in a culture not dissimilar to ours, people flocked to Jesus. The paralytic's friends went through great pains to get him to Jesus. The rest of the Gospel of Luke shows all sorts of people of "despicable" character flocking to him. But they are not flocking to the Jamaican church. It is either that Jesus and/or his message is absent from our gathering, or we are doing a better job than the religious leaders of Jesus' day in keeping them out. Or perhaps it is a little bit of both.

### **Conclusion**

As we read the Gospel of Luke we must recapture the essence of Jesus' message that a demonstration of Godly ministry must be seen in our focus on the wellbeing of others, especially the outcast, than on our own sense of privilege and importance. Like the religious leaders of Luke's day the Church reads and theologizes in such a manner that protects self interest, inevitably blocking access to God's ministry, especially for those who most need it. Our involvement



in things religious is a greater indicator of our flawed Biblical reading than it is of our purity of doctrine. In fact, the doctrine we often defend demonstrates a misunderstanding of the very heart of God for people, who we inevitably exclude from the ministry of the church. Perhaps it is of little wonder then why few “outsiders” flock to our churches as they did to Jesus. Our reading of the Gospel seems to have locked Jesus on the outside of our churches, perhaps with those whom he has the greatest desire for.