

The Five Errors of the Prosperity Gospel

More than a century ago, speaking to the then-largest congregation in all Christendom, Charles Spurgeon said, “I believe that it is anti-Christian and unholy for any Christian to live with the object of accumulating wealth. You will say, ‘Are we not to strive all we can to get all the money we can?’ You may do so. I cannot doubt but what, in so doing, you may do service to the cause of God. But what I said was that to live with the object of accumulating wealth is anti-Christian.”

Over the years, however, the message being preached in some of the largest churches in the world has changed—indeed, a new gospel is being taught to many congregations today. This message has been ascribed many name, such as the “name it and claim it” gospel, the “blab it and grab it” gospel, the “health and wealth” gospel, the “prosperity gospel,” and “positive confession theology.”

No matter what name is used, the essence of this message is the same. Simply put, this “prosperity gospel” teaches that God wants believers to be physically healthy, materially wealthy, and personally happy. Listen to the words of Robert Tilton, one of its best-known spokesmen: “I believe that it is the will of God for all to prosper because I see it in the Word, not because it has worked mightily for someone else. I do not put my eyes on men, but on God who gives me the power to get wealth.” Teachers of the prosperity gospel encourage their followers to pray for and even demand material flourishing from God.

Five Theological Errors

Russell Woodbridge and I wrote a book titled *Health, Wealth, and Happiness: Has the Prosperity Gospel Overshadowed the Gospel of Christ?* (Kregel, 2010) to examine the claims of prosperity gospel advocates. While the book is too wide-ranging to summarize here, in this article I’d like to review five doctrines we cover in it—doctrines on which prosperity gospel advocates err. By discerning these errors regarding key doctrines, I hope you will plainly see the dangers of the prosperity gospel.

1. The Abrahamic covenant is a means to material entitlement.

The Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 12, 15, 17, 22) is one of the theological bases of the prosperity gospel. It’s good that prosperity theologians recognize much of Scripture is the record of the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant, but it’s bad that they don’t maintain an orthodox view of this covenant. They incorrectly view the inception of the covenant; more significantly, they erroneously view the application of the covenant.

In his book *Spreading the Flame* (Zondervan, 1992), Edward Pousson stated the prosperity view on the application of the Abrahamic covenant: “Christians are Abraham’s spiritual children and heirs to the blessings of faith. . . . This Abrahamic inheritance is unpacked primarily in terms of material entitlements.” In other words, the prosperity gospel teaches that the primary purpose of the Abrahamic covenant was for God to bless Abraham materially. Since believers are now Abraham’s spiritual children, we have inherited these financial blessings. As Kenneth Copeland wrote in his 1974 book *The Laws of Prosperity*, “Since God’s covenant has been established and prosperity is a provision of this covenant, you need to realize that prosperity belongs to you now!”

To support this claim, prosperity teachers appeal to Galatians 3:14, which refers to “the blessings of Abraham [that] come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus.” It’s interesting, however, that in their appeals to Galatians 3:14 these teachers ignore the second half of the verse: “that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.” Paul is clearly reminding the Galatians of the spiritual blessing of salvation, not the material blessing of wealth.

2. Jesus’s atonement extends to the “sin” of material poverty.

In his *Bibliotheca Sacra* article “A Theological Evaluation of the Prosperity Gospel,” theologian Ken Sarles observes how the prosperity gospel claims that “both physical healing and financial prosperity have been provided for in the atonement.” This seems to be an accurate observation in light of Copeland’s statement that “the basic principle of the Christian life is to know that God put our sin, sickness, disease, sorrow, grief, and poverty on Jesus at Calvary.” This misunderstanding of the scope of the atonement stems from two errors prosperity gospel proponents make.

First, many who espouse prosperity theology have a fundamental misconception of the life of Jesus. For example, teacher John Avanzini proclaimed on a TBN program, Jesus had “a nice house,” “a big house,” “Jesus was handling big money,” and he even “wore designer clothes.” It’s easy to see how such a warped view of the life of Christ could lead to an equally warped misconception of the death of Christ.

A second error that leads to a faulty view of the atonement is misinterpreting 2 Corinthians 8:9, which reads, “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that you through his poverty might become rich.” While a shallow reading of this verse may lead one to believe Paul was teaching about an increase in material wealth, a contextual reading reveals he was actually teaching the exact opposite principle. Indeed, Paul was teaching the Corinthians that since Christ accomplished so much for them through the atonement, they should empty themselves of their riches in service of the Savior. This is why just five short verses later Paul would urge the Corinthians to give their wealth away to

their needy brothers, writing “that now at this time your abundance may supply their lack” (2 Cor. 8:14).

3. Christians give in order to gain material compensation from God.

One of the most striking characteristics of the prosperity theologians is their seeming fixation on the act of giving. We are urged to give generously and are confronted with pious statements like, “True prosperity is the ability to use God’s power to meet the needs of mankind in any realm of life” and, “We have been called to finance the gospel to the world.” While such statements may appear praiseworthy, this emphasis on giving is built on motives that are anything but philanthropic. The driving force behind this teaching on giving is what prosperity teacher Robert Tilton referred to as the “Law of Compensation.” According to this law—purportedly based on Mark 10:30—Christians should give generously to others because when they do, God gives back more in return. This, in turn, leads to a cycle of ever-increasing prosperity.

As Gloria Copeland put it in her 2012 book, *God’s Will is Prosperity*, “Give \$10 and receive \$1,000; give \$1,000 and receive \$100,000. . . . In short, Mark 10:30 is a very good deal.” It’s evident, then, that the prosperity gospel’s doctrine of giving is built on faulty motives. Whereas Jesus taught his disciples to “give, hoping for nothing in return” (Luke 6:35), prosperity theologians teach their disciples to give because they will get a great return.

4. Faith is a self-generated spiritual force that leads to prosperity.

Whereas orthodox Christianity understands faith to be trust in the person of Jesus Christ, prosperity teachers espouse something quite different. “Faith is a spiritual force, a spiritual energy, a spiritual power. It is this force of faith which makes the laws of the spirit world function,” Copeland writes in *The Laws of Prosperity*. “There are certain laws governing prosperity revealed in God’s Word. Faith causes them to function.” This is obviously a faulty, perhaps even heretical, understanding of faith.

According to prosperity theology, faith is not a God-granted, God-centered act of the will. Rather, it is a humanly wrought spiritual force, directed at God. Indeed, any theology that views faith chiefly as a means to material gain rather than justification before God must be judged inadequate at best.

5. Prayer is a tool to force God to grant prosperity.

Prosperity gospel preachers often note we “have not because we ask not” (James 4:2). They encourage us to pray for personal success in all areas of life. As Creflo Dollar writes, “When we pray, believing that we have already received what we are praying, God has no choice but to make our prayers come to pass. . . . It is a key to getting results as a Christian.”

Prayers for personal blessing aren’t inherently wrong, of course, but the prosperity gospel’s overemphasis on man turns prayer into a tool believers can use to force God to grant their desires. Within prosperity theology, man—not God—becomes the focal point of prayer. Curiously, prosperity preachers often ignore the second half of James’s teaching on prayer: “You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions” (James. 4:3). God does not answer selfish requests that do not honor his name.

Certainly all our requests should be made known to God (e.g., Phil. 4:6), but the prosperity gospel focuses so much on man’s desires that it may lead people to pray selfish, shallow, superficial prayers that don’t bring God glory. Further, when coupled with the prosperity doctrine of faith, this teaching may lead people to attempt to manipulate God to get what they want—a futile task. This is far removed from praying “Your will be done.”

False Gospel

In light of Scripture, the prosperity gospel is fundamentally flawed. At bottom, it is a false gospel because of its faulty view of the relationship between God and man. Simply put, if the prosperity gospel is true, grace is obsolete, God is irrelevant, and man is the measure of all things. Whether they’re talking about the Abrahamic covenant, the atonement, giving, faith, or prayer, prosperity teachers turn the relationship between God and man into a quid pro quo transaction. As James Goff noted in a 1990 Christianity Today article, God is “reduced to a kind of ‘cosmic bellhop’ attending to the needs and desires of his creation.”

This is a wholly inadequate and unbiblical view of the relationship between God and man.