

The Heart of the Prosperity Gospel:

Self or the Savior?¹

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Abstract

This essay explores whether self or the Savior is at the heart of the prosperity gospel. An analysis and critique of its dogma indicates that it is predominantly anthropocentric, rather than Christocentric. This ego-focused outlook is likewise present in the health-and-wealth movement. One discovers that preachers of success are touting a religion of self in which people are the measure of all things. A detailed discussion of Ephesians 1:3-23 provides a needed biblical response. One learns that the Son, not self, is at the heart of the Father's plan of redemption. Also, it is in Christ alone that believers find forgiveness, hope, and wisdom. Only He is the meta-narrative of life, whether temporal or eternal in nature. Indeed, He is the sole reason for the existence of the church and the one who enables believers to complete their God-given work.

¹ The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

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1. An analysis and critique of the prosperity gospel dogma

In July 2007, both *Christianity Today* and *The Christian Century* printed articles on the prosperity gospel (Glifford 2007; Phiri & Maxwell 2007). The fact that both a theologically conservative, evangelical magazine (*Christianity Today*) and an ecumenical, mainline Protestant magazine (*The Christian Century*) covered the same topic around the same time suggests the editorial boards of these respective publications considered it to be an increasingly important subject. Indeed, as Hunt (2000:73) notes, the "health and prosperity gospel" is "one of the fastest growing religious movements on a global scale". It has been "adopted as far afield as Scandinavia, Eastern Europe, Africa, India, Latin America and the Pacific rim of Southeast Asia" (Hunt 1998:272).

The latter observation is confirmed by a *Time* magazine poll, which determined that in the U.S., "17% of Christians" who were surveyed "said they considered themselves" to be part of the "Prosperity Theology" movement (Van Biema & Chu 2006). Additionally, a "full 61% believed that God wants people to be prosperous". On the African continent, the Pew Research Center conducted a survey in 2006 in which individuals were asked whether God would "grant material prosperity to all believers who have enough faith" and whether "religious faith was 'very important to economic success'" (Phiri & Maxwell 2007). Roughly 9 out of 10 participants from Nigeria, South Africa, and Kenya said yes.

While the theology of the prosperity gospel is not monolithic, its "teachings follow a general pattern" (Folarin 2007:80). The movement's dogma blends "Pentecostal revivalism with elements of positive thinking" (Coleman 1993:355; cf. Sarles 1986:330). Adherents insist that faith is a supernatural force that believers use to get whatever form of personal success they want, including physical health and material wealth. Faith is also claimed to be the medium through which the full power of the Holy Spirit is unleashed. A theology of the spoken word (or rhematology) is the basis for these notions. There is an implicit confidence in the power of "positive confession" (Coleman 1993:356), in which faith enables what believers think and say to become actualized realities. Through the "force of faith" the "positive power (God) is 'activated', and the negative (Satan) is confronted and negated" (Hunt

1998:275; Hunt 2000:75; cf. Atkinson 2007:174, 184; Beckford 2001:14, 17; Hummel 1991:12–13; McConnell 1995:186; Sarles 1986:332).

Devotees reason that God has faith in the inherent, actualizing power of His faith. Correspondingly, at the dawn of time He used faith to conceptualize the universe and command it into existence (cf. Gen 1; Ps 33:6; Heb 11:3; 2 Pet 3:5). Likewise, it is inferred that believers can use faith to conceive ideas in their mind and speak them into existence. Similar reasoning lies behind the assertion that Jesus was wounded on the cross so that every Christian who has enough faith can enjoy complete physical healing (cf. Isa 53:5; Matt 8:17; 1 Pet 2:24). Not only are the reality of disease and sickness repudiated, but it is also maintained that God commands all faithful believers to experience perfect health (Beckford 2001:18-19; Coleman 1993:355-356; Folarin 2007:78, 83-84; Hummel 1991:13–14; Hunt 2000:73; Sarles 1986:331; cf. Jas 5:14-16).

The perspective of Scripture is quite different regarding the nature and significance of Jesus' sacrifice at Calvary. In Romans 3:25, Paul said that "God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement".³ The Greek noun *hilastērion*, which can also be rendered "propitiation" or "mercy seat" (Herrmann 1999:3:318-319), communicates the idea that the Son's work on the cross averted the Father's wrath against sinners. Jesus' sacrifice also provided the removal of personal guilt. Paul was making a parallel between the atoning sacrifices offered in the temple and Jesus' death on the cross. His sacrifice is the means by which salvation is accomplished for all who repent and believe (v. 24). In fact, the Greek noun *apolutrōsis*, which is translated "redemption", carries overtones of a "ransom payment" (Büchsel 1999:351-352). The term is adapted from its original use in the slave market. We were formerly enslaved to sin, but Jesus ransomed us by His death on the cross so that we could become His servants (cf. Green 1993:203-204; Mitton 1962:309-310; Morris 2001:113-114; Reid 1979:352).

According to proponents of the theology of success, Christians should decide what they want, believe it is theirs, and confess it to be true. Reputedly, they can obtain the longings of their heart by naming and claiming them by faith.

³ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from *Today's New International Version* (hereafter abbreviated, TNIV).

As a matter of fact, God is glorified when His people are rich and happy in every way. Christians are spurred on by the assurance that all the promises of spiritual, physical, and financial blessing God made to Abraham and his descendants likewise apply to all believers (Gen 12:1-3; 13:14-17; 15:17-20; 17:1-8; 22:15-18). Supposedly, God has already promised and granted them their deepest wishes (Beckford 2001:19; Folarin 2007:81-82; Hummel 1991:15-7; Sarles 1986:334-335).

Advocates of the prosperity gospel believe that since it is the will of God for believers to enjoy life to the fullest extent possible (cf. John 10:10), including financial prosperity and entrepreneurial success (cf. Deut 7:12-26; Josh 14:9; Ps 23:1-6; Mal 3:10; Mark 10:29-30; 3 John 3:2), living in poverty violates His will and dishonors His name. A lack of faith is labeled as one reason why Christians fail to be healed, enjoy abundant wealth, and so on. Moreover, it is reasoned that God never wants His people to suffer or be poor. Satan and sin, not God, are said to be the culprits behind every form of sickness, tragedy, and hardship that exists. Allegedly, the devil uses pseudo-symptoms of non-existent ailments to trick believers into imagining they are not feeling well and to entice them to think or say a negative confession (Folarin 2007:78-79, 87; Hunt 2000:74; McConnell 1995:186; cf. Atkinson 2007:174, 184).

Sarles (1986:347) observes that the gospel of affluence has robbed "human faith ... of its biblical foundation" and imposed on it "an entirely new meaning". It has become a "form of magic, with the spoken word" operating "as the incantation" (348). In contrast, Scripture teaches that faith is a belief in what God has revealed in His Word. It is a trusting commitment. An exercise of faith involves the whole person—the mind, emotions, and will. With the mind, one believes in God's existence and in the teaching of Scripture (Matt 22:37; 2 Thess 2:13). With the emotions, the sinner exercises a personal faith in Christ as the only one who can redeem from sin (Luke 24:32, 41; Rom 15:13). With the will, one surrenders to Christ and trusts Him as Lord and Savior (Acts 16:31; 1 John 5:1, 4-5). This faith helps us recognize that the one crucified on the cross and buried in a tomb was raised to life by the power of God. Faith helps us affirm that Jesus' resurrection life also opens the way for us to live eternally (cf. Blackman 1962:222; Bromiley 1982:270-271; Morris 1993:285; Packer 2001:431-432).

According to Hebrews 11:1, faith is being confident that what we hope for will actually occur. Also, it is being convinced about things we cannot see. At its core, faith is a matter of conviction. It is an assurance based on God's unchanging character. Popular opinion sees faith as irrational. Supposedly, it is believing something even when our mind tells us not to. In contrast, the biblical concept of faith includes both reason and experience. Such faith, however, is not limited to what we can see. It makes unseen spiritual realities perceivable, not by willing them into existence, but by a conviction that what God has said about them is true. Biblical faith is rooted in the knowledge of God (v. 6). Those who possess this faith believe that God is real and that He rewards those who truly want to know Him. Faith is so foundational to the Christian life that one cannot be in a relationship with the Lord apart from it.

2. An analysis and critique of the prosperity gospel movement

To some extent, the contemporary prosperity gospel movement traces its origins to the United States (Beckford 2001:15-16; Phiri & Maxwell 2007) and appeals to the "Western materialistic mindset" (Robison 2003). Perhaps Joel Osteen is the best known spokesperson today within American evangelicalism (Lioy 2007:1; Van Biema & Chu 2006). Byassee (2005) points out that Osteen's message is a continuation of what others before him have taught (such as Russell Conwell, Norman Vincent Peale, and Bruce Wilkinson): "just improve your attitude, keep your chin up, and God's blessings will rain down on you". Osteen urges people to "enlarge their vision" about the "good things" God supposedly wants to do for them and "expect people to go out of their way" to offer help. Osteen asserts that when people think "upbeat, self-confident" thoughts about themselves and "speak words of victory" over dire situations, happiness and abundance will result. Here one encounters an ideology of materialism that is "framed in a kind of Tony Robbins positivism" (Van Biema & Chu 2006).

The preceding observations are not intended to suggest that someone such as Osteen is "deliberately misleading or manipulating" his audience (Robison 2003). Also, to a certain extent, church leaders like Osteen attempt to preach a message that highlights both prosperity and salvation (Phiri & Maxwell 2007). Furthermore, as a result of prosperity gospel churches making large

contributions to "faith-based antipoverty" charities, the disadvantaged feel affirmed as members of God's spiritual family (Van Biema & Chu 2006).

In some cases, an "enterprise culture" (Hunt 2000:79) is fostered, one characterized by "dynamism" and "entrepreneurship" (Gifford 2007) and that results in the gradual transformation of economically blighted communities. In other cases, the promise of success that is preached "embraces all areas of life", especially when the stress is "on divine, not human, agency". To the marginalized of society, a renewed sense of hope emerges. The disenfranchised begin to see that God cares about their lives so much (Beckford 2001:13; Folarin 2007:89)—including their "education, finances, health care", and so on (Walsh 2007)—that He will pull them out of poverty (Hunt 2000:76).

The prosperity gospel movement is not confined to any one denomination of American Christianity, but has "swept beyond its Pentecostal base into more buttoned-down evangelical churches, and even into congregations in the more liberal Mainline" (Van Biema & Chu 2006; cf. McConnell 1995:188). Furthermore, the gospel of success is a racially diverse movement that mirrors "the contours of contemporary society" (Hunt 2000:74) and reflects "contemporary cultural values". As a result of linking "pockets of common (religious) culture across political boundaries" (Coleman 1993:355), it has migrated to such Third World locales as Asia, Latin America, and Africa (Gifford 2007; Hummel 1991:30).

According to Phiri & Maxwell (2007), U.S.-based religious media is a primary reason for the global extent of this influence (cf. Folarin 2007:71). Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN), based in Santa Ana, California, is one of the largest and most influential organizations. Bonnie Dolan, the director of Zambia's Center for Christian Missions, is quoted as saying that when people watch television, they "assume that TBN is American Christianity, and Americans know everything, so why not listen to it?" (Phiri & Maxwell 2007). This "prosperity teaching via the media" (perhaps epitomized by TBN) has also left its mark on Latino churches worldwide in a way that parallels African churches (Walsh 2007).

Phiri & Maxwell (2007) observe that in addition to such American "health-and-wealth preachers" as Kenneth Copeland and Kenneth Hagin Jr. (cf. Hunt 1998:272; McConnell 1995:183-184), TBN broadcasts "wall-to-wall peddlers of plenty" around the globe. By way of example, on the African continent, purveyors of success teach that "spoken words of faith create ... blessing" and that "material blessing is the gospel". Viewers are promised "abundant wealth, runaway professional success, and unassailable physical and emotional health" (Phiri & Maxwell 2007). In this brand of Christianity, "a believer is successful; if not, something is wrong" (Gifford 2007; cf. Van Biema & Chu 2006; Walsh 2007). Because affluence is said to be the Christians' God-given "right and inheritance", it is what they should "expect and demand" (Gifford 2007).

As a result of the "gospel of wealth" extending "tremendous promise to an economically deprived people", it has pierced "the heart of Africa's dynamic, growing church" (Phiri & Maxwell 2007). In contrast, the historic Christian message of sacrifice and suffering remains "unappealing". Walsh (2007) contends that an undue focus on a "prosperous Christ is troubling", for "once suffering rears its inevitable head in one's life, what kind of Christ is one left with?" The indigent, while struggling to survive in the arid soil of unrelenting deprivation, are bombarded with messages exhorting them to plant a seed of faith and believe that from it they will reap an unimaginable harvest of plenty (Folarin 2007:83; Robison 2003; Sarles 1986:333). Success preachers leverage the "biblical image of 'sowing and reaping'" to get parishoners to bring their "tithes and offerings", which in turn are proclaimed to be the "instruments of prosperity" (Gifford 2007).

Throughout many cities in Africa, bumper stickers on automobiles display such slogans as "With Jesus I Will Always Win" and "Your Success Is Determined by Your Faith" (Phiri & Maxwell 2007). Similarly, congregations flaunt such names as "Victory Bible Church", "Jesus Breakthrough Assembly", and "Triumphant Christian Centre" (Gifford 2007). Likewise, conventions advertise such titles as "Living a Life of Abundance", "Taking Your Territories", and "Stepping into Greatness". These health-and-wealth mantras play right into "traditional African values", which tend to "link material success and spiritual success" (Phiri & Maxwell 2007). Analogous circumstances often exist in Latino churches; but tragically, the "ideal life"

offered by preachers of success "rarely, if ever, changes the real-life picture" of "neighborhoods wracked by poverty, gang violence, substandard education, and pervasive drug and alcohol abuse" (Walsh 2007).

Among African congregations, there is a tendency to admire the "Big Man" (Phiri & Maxwell 2007). This is epitomized by "rich, powerful leaders such as prosperity preachers" who are "adorned with all the trappings of a successful tribal chief". People assume these religious superstars are "worth heeding" because of their "larger-than-life" success. This image is reinforced by these ministers claims to be the "Man of God" or the "Archbishop" (Gifford 2007). They heighten their elite, authoritative status by asserting that the written words of Scripture "have a performative or declarative use". According to Sarles (1986:337), a "highly subjective and arbitrary" approach is used for "interpreting the biblical text". Ministers who assert to be divinely commissioned apostles quote numerous passages of Scripture "without attention to grammatical indicators, semantic nuances, or literary and historical context" (cf. Hummel 1991:17). They also present themselves to be the Lord's anointed prophets through whom He fulfills the promises of the Bible in the lives of His people (Hunt 2000:82). Congregants are told that God is working through these egotistical leaders to give them "the blessings of Abraham, the power of Joseph, the authority of Moses, the sovereignty of David, the exploits of Elijah, and ... revival and restoration of Israel itself" (Gifford 2007).

From a sociological standpoint, one might regard the prosperity gospel as a "counter-movement" (Speck 2007:4) to more traditional forms of evangelism that teach about suffering for the cause of Christ (cf. Hunt 1998:273-274). Proponents of success herald a "unique and unorthodox interpretation" of Scripture that harmonizes with "some of the major attributes of contemporary culture" (Hunt 2000:84), which is "preoccupied with material prosperity and obsessed with concern for health" (Hummel 1991:28). While theologically conservative evangelicals tend to stress the blessings awaiting Christians in the future messianic kingdom, ministers of entrepreneurship redirect the spotlight on obtaining worldly abundance right now. This shift from the transcendent future to the workaday present is seen in a more pragmatic approach to life in which the needs of the individual attain foremost importance (Speck 2007:6-

7). In turn, the focus is taken off of "theocentric providence" and placed on "anthropocentric prosperity" (Sarles 1986:329).

Health-and-wealth preachers "unabashedly" borrow "religious imagery" from the "Judeo-Christian tradition" to advance their own ecclesiastical aims and aspirations (Speck 2007:9). In keeping with the postmodernist "societal order" in which we live (12), the prosperity gospel operates in a relativistic manner that "reflects the increasing inner secularisation of faith" (Hunt 2000:84) and the "irrationalism" now controlling "our entire culture" (Robbins 1978). For example, truth is not necessarily anchored to or verified by a particular sacred text. Instead, truth—not to mention ultimate reality itself—is deconstructed and reconstructed by prominent religious leaders and their followers. As prestige and authority become increasingly centralized, there is a comparable heightened potential that "those in power [will] impose their wishes upon the powerless", and manipulate people, resources, and circumstances to their own advantage (Speck 2007:10).

On one level, the health-and-wealth message being preached is regarded by "doctrinally traditional Christians" as "simplistic, possibly heretical and certainly embarrassing" (Van Biema & Chu 2006). On another level, it is considered by ecumenical, mainline Protestants as a "pagan gospel of acquisition", "self-help", and "self-improvement" (Bypassee 2005). On balance, it signifies a capitalistic obsession with "individual self-esteem, ambition, [and] confidence " (Gifford 2007). Expressed differently, the prosperity gospel is a consumer-centric religion of self in which people believe they are the measure of all things (Beckford 2001:18; Robison 2003). Like other forms of humanism, it is an "attitude or way of life centered on human interests or values" (Mish 2006). When people insist they are complete within themselves, it leads to a rejection of virtually every truth-claim about God and His existence. A Christ-centered ethical norm is jettisoned for a man-centered, materialistic one. Also, rather than look to Scripture for moral guidance, ethical standards are determined by one's own feelings and experiences (Lioy 2007:3).

3. The sovereignty and supremacy of the Messiah as Lord

In the previous section, the prosperity gospel was referred to as a religion of self. The implication of this anthropocentric orientation is that the individual sits on the throne (so to speak) of the movement and its dogma. An examination of Scripture, however, indicates that the emphasis should be entirely on the Messiah. His sovereignty and supremacy as Lord is supposed to dominate the theological landscape, establish the agenda for the church, and remain the foundation and focus of the Christian life.

To give prominence to anyone or anything else other than the Lord is idolatry, which violates the first commandment of the Decalogue. It says, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod 20:3; Deut 5:7). The Hebrew phrase is more literally translated "before my face" and can also be rendered "in my presence", "against me", or "in hostility toward me" (Lioy 2004:55). The implication is that God has "exclusively claimed" His people "as His own". Accordingly, He permits "no rivals—whether real or imagined—in His presence". For believers to tolerate any other circumstance results in a "hostile dynamic", one that goes "against God and His relationship" with them.

The New Testament builds on this theocentric orientation by revealing that everything is to be focused on the Messiah. Expressed differently, He is the "meta-narrative of life, whether temporal or eternal in nature" (Lioy 2007:253). Likewise, He is the key to understanding human identity, and the only one who has fully revealed the Father to humanity (John 1:18; 14:9). The same God who had partially revealed Himself in times past, now has disclosed Himself totally and ultimately in His Son (Heb 1:1). The Son gives full and final expression to all that was previously revealed (cf. Luke 24:44), and He does so in a way that is focused, clear, and relevant. Indeed, for our benefit, the Father has made the Son to be the quintessential essence of wisdom (1 Cor 1:30).

This Christocentric orientation is found in Ephesians 1:3-23. For that reason, a detailed discussion of these verses is undertaken to provide a biblical response to the consumer-centric religion of self represented by the prosperity gospel. Beginning with verse 3, Paul extolled the Father, in which the Greek adjective rendered "praise" (*eulogētos*) conveys the "idea of someone deserving

appreciation” and “honor” (Hoehner 2002:162). The apostle stated that unending adoration belongs to God for the spiritual blessings He has given believers “in Christ”. According to Snodgrass (1996:43), “the idea of being ‘in Christ’ is one of the most important components in Paul’s theology”. The Lord Jesus alone is the “source” and the “sphere” of the believers’ gifts of grace (Wood 1978:11:25). Here the apostle wove the “function of Christ as heavenly mediator into the praise of God as benefactor” (Perkins 2000:372).

God has blessed us—among a seemingly infinite variety of ways (cf. Abbott 1979:4-5)—by choosing us (vv. 4-6), redeeming us (vv. 7-8), and revealing His eternal plan of redemption to us (vv. 9-10). Lenski (1961:350) commented that the Son is “the central diamond around which all the lesser diamonds are set as rays”. While it is true that God sometimes blesses His people materially as well as spiritually, in verse 3 Paul chose to focus on cosmic blessings (cf. Hendriksen 1995:73-74; Lincoln 1990:20-21). This serves as a corrective to the undue emphasis health-and-wealth orators place on becoming rich. The eternal treasures believers have in Christ are certain, for they have been secured for us “in the heavenly realms”, that is, “the place where God dwells” (Hoehner 2002:275). These grace-gifts flow from God the Father, through God the Son, to us (O’Brien 1999:90).

“Blessed” renders the Greek verb *eulogeō*. It refers to an act of declaring (or wishing) favor and goodness upon others (Beyer 1999:754-755). In the Old Testament, important people blessed those with less power or influence. For example, the patriarchs declared God’s favor upon their children (Gen 49:1-28). Leaders frequently blessed their subordinates, especially when preparing to leave them (for instance, Moses and Joshua; Deut 31). The Lord’s people bless Him by showing gratitude and singing songs of praise (Ps 103:1-2). God also blesses His people through spiritual and physical enrichment. For example, He showers them with life and fruitfulness (Gen 1:22, 28). Of course, God’s foremost blessing is turning people from their wicked ways and pardoning their sins (Acts 3:25-26). The atoning sacrifice of Christ is the basis for the Lord’s favor and goodness to believers (Eph 1:3).

The first spiritual blessing Paul mentioned is that God, in His absolute and boundless love (cf. Hoehner 2002:182; Turaki 2006:1427), “chose us” (rendering the Greek verb *eklegomai*; v. 4) and “predestined us” (rendering the

Greek verb *proorizō*; v. 5). These terms, which serve to "give believers assurance of God's purpose for them" (Lincoln 1990:23), are parallel but have different shades of meaning. Just as God chose the Jewish nation to be His own and to receive the promised land as an inheritance, so He chose Christian believers to be His own people and to receive the inheritance of eternal life (cf. Schrenk 1999:4:144). It can "never perish, spoil or fade" (1 Pet. 1:4), for it is "kept in heaven" for us eternally.

There are at least two distinct views of what predestination means when it is discussed in Scripture (cf. Hoehner 2002:185-193; Schmidt 1999:5:456). Some think that people are so debased by sin that they are unable to respond to the offer of salvation made available in Christ. It is argued that those who believe have the ability to do so only because God previously chose them for redemption. In other words, the Lord gives them grace, and this enables them to believe the truth. Others think that God gives all people enough grace to accept the offer of salvation. This remains true even though many reject His grace. In this way, the Lord predestines some for redemption in the sense that He knows beforehand those who will choose to believe the truth of their own free will (cf. Erickson 1998:936-940; Grudem 1994:674-679; Spencer 2001:951). These two views suggest that "God's sovereign purposes work in paradoxical conjunction with human freedom" (Newman 1996:237).

God chose believers "to be holy and blameless in his sight" (Eph 1:4; cf. Col 1:22; 1 Thess 3:13). Hoehner (2002:178) explains that "since God has selected the believer to be his possession, the believer should reflect God's character" (cf. Turaki 2006:1426). To be "holy" (Eph 1:4) means to be distinctly different from the world so that God can use us for His purposes (cf. Wood 1978:24). Our holiness is the result of our having been chosen, not the reason we were chosen (cf. Peterson 2000:547; Ury 1996:343-344). To be "blameless" means to be free of the immoral and selfish lifestyle that marks people who are apart from God (cf. Hauck 1999:830-831).

God also predestined believers "for adoption to sonship" (v. 5; cf. Rom 8:15-23; Gal 4:4-7). Through Jesus Christ, God's Son, we become spiritual children of God. Under Roman law, adopted sons enjoyed the same privileges as natural sons (cf. Lincoln 1990:25; O'Brien 1999:102). Similarly, God reckons believers as His true children and as recipients of all the benefits that go with

that status (cf. Scott 1993:16). It is no wonder that believers give God praise for the wonderful grace He has poured out on them in His Son, whom He dearly loves (Eph 1:6).

Despite the magnificence of our having been chosen by God, this spiritual blessing is not the only one we receive. Paul also mentioned the blessing of redemption (vv. 7-8). Through redemption God makes His choosing effective in our lives. As noted earlier, the Greek noun translated "redemption" (*apolutrōsis*; v. 7) refers to a ransom. Because we were born with a sinful nature, God was not attracted to us due to any goodness He saw in us. Despite our sinful condition, He rescued us from our state of separation from His holiness. He did this by sending His Son to become the sacrifice for our sins. Robinson (1979:28) describes Jesus as being both "the ideal Man and the Image of God" (cf. Hendriksen 1995:102). By His shed blood, Christ ransomed us from slavery to sin and from the sentence of death under which we languished.

Closely related to redemption is "forgiveness". The Greek noun Paul used (*aphēsis*) had a variety of meanings including "to send off", "to release", "to give up", "to pardon", and "to hurl" (Bultmann 1999:1:509) The idea is that when we receive the effect of Jesus' redemption through faith, God releases us from the penalty of our sins and hurls our sin debt far away from us (cf. Snodgrass 1996:51). What the Father did for us through His Son was in harmony with the riches of His grace. Hoehner (2002:200-201) defines "grace" as "God's unmerited or undeserved favor", especially in His provision of "salvation for sinners through Christ's sacrificial death".

In addition to showering us with His unmerited favor, God has also lavished us "with all wisdom and understanding" (v. 8). Turaki (2006:1427) defines "wisdom" as "knowledge of the true reality of a situation", not just "superficial facts". Also, "understanding" refers to the "discernment required to distinguish between reality and falsehood". Before we believed, we did not have spiritual insight; but since coming to a knowledge of the truth, we can now see how things really are and can get an idea of how God wants us to live.

Another spiritual blessing Paul listed is our ability to know the "mystery of [God's] will" (v. 9). The Greek noun rendered "mystery" is *mustērion* and

generally denotes that which is hidden or secret (Bornkmann 1999:802-803). For the apostle, a "mystery" is a truth that was once hidden but has now been revealed through Christ (cf. Motyer 2001:803; O'Brien 1993:621-623; Thielman 1996:546-547). With the advent of Son, the divine secret is meant to be understood by all believers (cf. Rom 16:25-27; Col 1:25-27). The Lord made His will known to Paul "by revelation". This began on the road to Damascus when the apostle encountered the risen Messiah. At that time Christ charged Paul with taking the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15; 26:16-18).

Ephesians 1:10 states that God's eternal plan was to head up all things in Christ at the divinely appointed time. This includes everything "in heaven and on earth". Havener (1992:1190) explains that the Messiah is the "agent of God's plan of salvation to such a degree that despite the cosmic proportions of this plan, all is done 'in Christ'". The Greek verb translated "bring unity" (*anakephalaiomai*) can mean "to sum up" (Schlier 1999:681-682). In Paul's day, "when a column of figures" was tallied, the "total was placed" at the head of the column (Wood 1978:26). In a similar fashion, at the terminus of history all things "will be seen to add up to Christ". O'Brien (1999:112) clarifies that the Son is not just "the means, the instrument, or the functionary through whom" the Father effects His will. More importantly, the Son is "the focal point".

In 3:3, *mustērion* also refers to God's previously veiled plan for dealing with the righteous, in particular, that God's grace includes Gentiles as well as Jews (v. 6). According to the Father's redemptive plan, the time had arrived to disclose His compassion toward those Gentiles who became devoted followers of the Son. Indeed, God has bestowed upon believing Gentiles all the blessings enjoyed by saved Jews. Christ dwells in Gentile and Jewish believers, and both possess the same "hope of glory" (Col. 1:27).

In Ephesians 1:11, Paul noted that God causes all things to happen in accordance with "the purpose of his will". This included Jews such as Paul coming to faith in Christ. The language of Ephesians (particularly the first half) is richer and more effusive than the language in other letters by Paul. The apostle's style is demonstrated in this phrase: "the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will". The phrase contains an inclusive term ("everything") and several synonyms ("plan," "works out,"

"purpose," "will"). This style suits the apostle's subject of God's grand plan for believers, the church, and the universe.

The divine purpose was that the conversion of Jews to Christ would bring the Lord eternal praise (v. 12). Similarly, according to Romans 8:28, "in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose". The historical record is that the apostles and other Jews were the first to trust in Christ (cf. Wood 1978:26). Admittedly, the majority of Jews who were contemporaries of Paul rejected the Messiah. Nevertheless, a remnant of that generation of Jews formed the nucleus of the church. Through them, the gospel went out to the entire world. Those early Jewish believers were walking testimonies of God's glory.

With verse 13, Paul changed pronouns from "we" to "you" (plural). He was now specifically referring to the Ephesian believers (cf. Abbott 1979:21-22; Bock 1994:310; Snodgrass 1996:51). Although Jewish Christians had been chosen for their role in starting the church, this should not have made the Ephesians feel like outsiders. They, too, were included in Christ (cf. O'Brien 1999:118). Paul was stressing "to his readers" that "God's activity" does not occur "in a vacuum", but even includes the Gentiles (Best 1998:148). Jewish and non-Jewish believers form one united church, the cosmic body of Christ (cf. Turaki 2006:1427). Paul delineated the stages of development by which the Gentiles became "included in Christ". It is the same process through which anyone is born again. First, the Gentiles "heard the word of truth" when Paul or others proclaimed the gospel to them. They then "believed" the truth they heard. The result was their spiritual regeneration.

It is clarifying to note that "all three persons of the Trinity are involved with the believers' relationship with God" (Hoehner 2002:240; cf. Hendriksen 1995:91; Lenski 1961:364; Robinson 1979:19-20; Turaki 2006:1426). To be specific, the Father has blessed us because of our spiritual union with His Son. Further, the gift of the Spirit identifies us as God's spiritual children. Moreover, the Spirit is the believers' guarantee that they belong to the Father and that He will do for them what He has promised in His Son. The Spirit's abiding presence confirms that one's faith is genuine and that one's adoption into God's family is real. These are excellent reasons for us to give unending praise to God.

Paul explained that when his readers trusted in Christ, they were "marked ... with a seal" (v. 13), which is the Holy Spirit. Put another way, the Lord identified believers as His own by giving them the Spirit, whom He promised long ago (cf. Ezek 36:26-27; 37:14; Joel 2:28-30). Snodgrass (1996:46) observed that "the Spirit is the primary gift" of God and the "source of all the others". By calling the Spirit a seal, Paul may have raised a number of images in the minds of his readers. At that time, seals were fastened to merchandise being exported to specify the manufacturers' identity and safeguard the arrival of the items. Seals were also put on official papers to vouch for their authenticity. On occasion seals represented an agency in the government (cf. Ryken 1998:766). Any of these uses of seals might symbolize a part of the Holy Spirit's sanctifying and eternally preserving work in the lives of those who trust in Christ (cf. Woodcock 1998:139, 150).

The preceding remarks notwithstanding, for Paul, the Spirit is not only a seal but also a "deposit" (Eph 1:14; cf. 2 Cor 1:21-22). In the apostle's day, a deposit was a token initial payment to confirm to a seller that the remaining purchase price would be given (cf. Behm 1999:475; Best 1998:151-152). Lincoln (1990:41) clarifies that "the Spirit is seen as the power of the age to come given ahead of time in history". In the eschaton, believers will receive the full installment of eternal life from the riches of God's grace (cf. Hendriksen 1995:92). During the interim, the Spirit's presence in our lives assures us of coming glory. In truth, He is a "preview or foretaste" of our "future salvation" (Woodcock 1998:153). The Father's provision of the Spirit is to "the praise of his glory" (Eph. 1:14; cp. v. 12).

In verses 15 and 16, Paul told the Ephesians that he thanked God for their faith and love. Then in verses 17 through 19, the apostle mentioned the two spiritual blessings he was asking God to give them, and described what those blessings could do for them. Though Paul had founded the church at Ephesus, due to his imprisonment in Rome, he had not seen the believers there for several years (cf. Acts 28:30-31; Eph. 3:1). Nonetheless, even while under house arrest, he could receive mail and visitors. Through one or both of these means Paul had received good news about the Ephesians' spiritual health (1:15). Specifically, the apostle mentioned their faith "in the Lord Jesus" and their "love for all his people". It is no wonder Paul gave God thanks for the Ephesians (v. 16).

In addition to praying about the Ephesians, the apostle prayed for them. He wanted the Ephesians to have "the Spirit of wisdom and revelation" (v. 17), and he wanted "the eyes of [their] heart [to] be enlightened" (v. 18; cf. Col 1:9). These two requests amount to about the same result. Concerning the first, Paul wanted God to give the Ephesians heightened insight into spiritual truth. In all likelihood, the apostle was "not thinking of particular charismatic gifts that are possessed only by some members of the community" (Perkins 2000:381).

Paul's readers already had the Holy Spirit as a result of their faith in the Messiah; but the apostle prayed that the Spirit would give them additional wisdom and understanding concerning eternal matters (Eph 1:17). This request indicates that spiritual insight requires more than just intelligence or hard work or a method. It is a gift of God. Paul told his readers that wisdom and revelation by the Spirit could help them know God better. The implication is that spiritual insight is not an end in itself; rather, it is a means to deepen our relationship with the Lord (cf. Hoehner 2002:257-259).

Concerning the apostle's second request, Paul prayed for God to enlighten the eyes of the Ephesians' hearts (v. 18). In Jewish thinking, the heart was the center of faith and feeling, as well as the source from which words and actions spring (cf. Best 1998:165; Ryken 1998:368-369). Thus, Paul's request was for the Ephesians to have an inner awareness of God's truth. If the eyes of their hearts had better vision (metaphorically speaking), they could focus on the hope, riches, and power of God. The "hope to which he has called" us is eternal life with God. The "riches of his glorious inheritance in his people" most likely refers to believers' receiving citizenship in heaven. The "incomparably great power for us who believe" (v. 19) includes all the ways God freely and powerfully acts to achieve His purposes in our lives for His glory.

Knowledge of God's power was the third benefit of clear spiritual vision that Paul listed for the Ephesians. The apostle went on to describe that power as it was demonstrated in the Messiah's resurrection and exaltation (vv. 19-20). When the Son died on the cross, His enemies thought they had heard the last of Him, but they were incorrect (cf. Turaki 2006:1428). With the unstoppable force of God's power, Christ broke the barrier of death and rose immortal

from the grave (cf. Col 2:12; 1 Thess 1:10). Then, for 40 days the Redeemer ministered on earth to His followers (cf. Acts 1:3). After that, He ascended to heaven and assumed His place at God’s right hand (cf. Acts 1:9; 7:55-56; Rom 8:34; Col 3:1; Heb 1:3).

In Bible times, when a person of power and importance—such as a monarch—wanted to honor someone, the important person would let the individual to be honored take up a position at his right hand (cf. Lincoln 1990:61-62). Indeed, Scriptures often draw upon the cultural perception of the hand being a symbol of power and authority (cf. Exod 15:6, 12; 1 Kings 2:19; 1 Chron 6:39; Job 40:14; Pss 16:8, 11; 17:7; 18:35; Isa 41:20; Luke 1:66). Clearly, Paul meant that the Son received from the Father the highest honor and authority (cf. Denten 1962:561-562; Hess 1996:324). Penner (1983:12) maintains that the “enthronement of Christ at the Father’s right hand” is the “central and determining christological theme in Ephesians”. In point of fact, whatever the Father “has done and will do for the believer” is dependent on the “greatness of the power” He demonstrated when He “exalted Christ to ultimate lordship” (13). Additionally, “in raising and enthroning Christ, God raises and enthrones believers along with him” (Allen 1986:105; cf. Eph. 2:6-7).

Jesus’ authority extends over all spiritual beings (cf. Hoehner 2002:279; Robinson 1979:41). Paul was undoubtedly referring to these beings when he stated that the Messiah sovereignly reigns over all heavenly rulers, authorities, powers, and dominions (Eph 1:21; cf. Phil 2:9-11; Col 1:16). Speculation about spiritual beings was common among first-century Jewish and pagan religious leaders alike. Many of them came up with quite elaborate theories about these beings, arranging them in orders and assigning them powers (cf. Lincoln 1990:62-63). Of course, the apostle knew perfectly well that most (if not all) of these theories were incorrect. Even so, people believed them, and of course there really are angels. For that reason, Paul said, in effect, “Call spiritual beings by whatever name you wish, now and in the world to come. No creature stands as majestic in power as the Lord Jesus” (cf. Best 1998:173-175; O’Brien 1999:142).

The Messiah’s authority is not merely over spiritual creatures. It extends to every aspect of creation, including the “very structures of life, whether they be political, financial, biological, or historical” (Snodgrass 1996:75). Paul

expressed this truth by saying that "all things [are] under [Christ's] feet" (Eph 1:22; cp. Pss 8:6; 110:1) and that He is the "head over everything" (Eph. 1:22). Moreover, the apostle referred to the Son as the Head of the church, His spiritual body (vv. 22-23; cf. Col 1:18). New Testament scholars have taken different positions on what this means. According to one group of experts, Jesus is the Head of the church in the sense that He is the church's source and origin. In contrast, another group of experts thinks Christ is the Head of the church in the sense that He is its leader and authority. In all likelihood, both positions are equally true of the Son (cf. Kroeger 1993:375-377; McVay 1993:377-378; Rayburn 2001:537-538).

Paul declared that the Messiah is Head not only over the church but over everything. Indeed, His headship over all things is "for the church" (Eph 1:22). Expressed differently, Christ exerts His great power for the eternal benefit of the saints (cf. Allen 1986:104). This image emphasizes that the church is the locus of Jesus' earthly ministry. The image is used both of the church universal and of individual local congregations. Verse 23 says that the risen and exalted Lord is the "fullness of him who fills everything in every way" (cf. Col 1:19-20). Ephesians 1:23 is more literally rendered as either "who fills all in all" or "who is filled entirely". This phrase could be taken to mean that the omnipresent Messiah reigns supreme over every aspect of the entire universe. The phrase could also indicate that the presence and power of the Son is evident in every conceivable way in the church (Lenski 1961:404).

Both emphases imply that the risen and glorified Savior completely fills everything and fully completes His work in and through the church. As Snodgrass put it (1996:78), "Christ is the place where God's presence, power, and salvation are known, and the church draws from this fullness" (cf. Abbott 1979:34-38; Best 1998:183-191; Hendriksen 1995:103-106; Hoehner 2002:296-301; Robinson 1979:42-45; Wood 1978:31-32). From a pastoral standpoint, members of the faith community should "reflect the unity they have in Christ and walk in a manner that pleases the one who forgave them". Through their witness and work, they shine the light of the Son "in a world that lives by different standards". Regardless of how difficult remaining faithful to the Lord Jesus might seem at times, believers know that the Messiah is "committed to expressing His presence and character through them" (Bock 1994:308-309).

4. Conclusion

The title of this essay questions whether self or the Savior is at the heart of the prosperity gospel. An analysis and critique of its dogma indicates that it is predominately anthropocentric, rather than Christocentric, in its theological orientation. Adherents superstitiously treat faith as a magical force that can unleash the power of the Spirit to bring them health and wealth. Proponents of success operate as if it is their God-given entitlement to be rich and happy in every way possible. Also, those who take a dissenting view are labeled as being weak in faith and unwilling to claim God's promises for their life.

This "me"-centered outlook is also present in the prosperity gospel movement. While there are some potentially constructive aspects of it (as mentioned earlier in the essay), these are overshadowed by a crass emphasis on achieving personal success. Self-appointed church leaders manipulate Scripture to advance their own egotistical aims and aspirations. Also, they prey on the destitute in their local communities to build their ecclesiastical empires. In this scenario, the so-called "Man of God" is the king of his dominion. Indeed, the congregation he leads—including its people and resources—exist to do his bidding. It is hard to imagine a church setup that could be any more pagan and materialistic than this.

A detailed discussion of Ephesians 1:3-23 provides a needed biblical response to the consumer-centric religion of self represented by the prosperity gospel. We learn that the Father, through the Son, has given us every conceivable spiritual blessing—not because we are entitled to such, but because of God's grace. These blessings include being chosen, adopted, redeemed, and forgiven by the Lord. By making us the objects of His heavenly riches in Christ, the Father brings glory to Himself. In turn, our response is to offer Him unending praise.

The Son, not self, is at the heart of the Father's plan of redemption. It is in Christ that believers have hope, wisdom, and understanding. Likewise, it is in Christ that they receive the promised Holy Spirit as a guarantee of their eternal inheritance. It is because of the believers' faith in the Son that the Father is given thanks. The risen Messiah is the locus of God's power, the supreme ruler over all heavenly and earthly authorities, and the sovereign leader of the

church. The faith community originated with Christ, continues to exist because of Him, and completes its God-given work in and through the Son. In conclusion, the Lord Jesus is the meta-narrative of life, whether temporal or eternal in nature. For this reason, God alone receives adoration from His people.

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