

# Is the Prosperity Gospel, Gospel? An Examination of the Prosperity and Productivity Gospels in African Christianity

**Joshua Robert Barron**

*Association for Christian Theological Education in Africa*

## Abstract

The teaching of the Prosperity Gospel is widespread throughout African Christianity—especially within African Initiated/Independent Churches (AICs) and Pentecostal churches. For many, it is only a natural expression of biblical teachings on abundant life from the viewpoint of Africa's holistic worldviews. For others, it arises as an extension of the deliverance theology of Pentecostals. Why should God not deliver us not only from sin and sickness, but from poverty as well? Others look at what seem to be the clear abuses of certain well-known (and financially well-off) prosperity teachers and cry, *heresy!* But are African expressions of the Prosperity Gospel heretical? Or are they orthodox, or perhaps heterodox? Both Scripture and historical Christian tradition reflect an ambivalence toward material wealth, at times seeing it as a blessing and at times

as a danger. Reflecting on Scripture in the context of years of pastoral experience in Africa and recent discussions with scholars, missionaries, and local church leaders, this essay is built upon a hybrid methodology of integrative literature review and narrative literature review. After reviewing biblical teachings on wealth and possessions, it reviews the literature on the Prosperity Gospel in Africa and discovers that in some African contexts an adaptation of prosperity teachings, the Productivity Gospel, has arisen to address the same set of questions. Borrowing emphases from Prosperity theology on abundant life and Pentecostal theologies of empowerment, with the accountability of a Weberian work ethic in the context of a holistic African worldview, the Productivity Gospel provides a message of hope and an opportunity for a redemptive (and economic) uplift while avoiding problematic praxis.

## Keywords

prosperity gospel, productivity gospel, African worldviews, culture of envy, hope

## About the Author

Mr. Joshua Robert Barron has lived with his wife and family in Kenya since 2007, where they have served together as missionary curriculum developers and teachers, working primarily with Maasai churches. God has blessed them with six children. He has had previous missions experience in Papua New Guinea, India, and South Africa. He has been active in theological and ministerial education in South Africa, the USA, and Kenya, and served as a bible translation consultant for The Bible Society of Kenya for the recent revised and corrected Maa Bible translation. He is currently a Ph.D. student in World Christianity at Africa International University in Nairobi and has recently joined the staff of the Association for Christian Theological Education in Africa (ACTEA).

joshua.robert.barron@gmail.com

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<https://www.sats.ac.za/conspectus/>

This article: <https://www.sats.ac.za/prosperity-gospel-african-christianity>  
<https://doi.org/10.54725/conspectus.2022.1.6>



Bible-based. Christ-centred. Spirit-led.

## 1. Introduction

Prosperity preaching is prevalent throughout Africa, especially within neo-Pentecostal and neo-Charismatic churches. This prosperity teaching is built on a particular interpretation of the biblical promises of abundant life in Christ. “I have come,” Jesus says, “so that they may have life, and may have it abundantly” (John 10:10b NET). Most scholars read this as a reference “to eternal life, that is, the life of the coming age which...begins in the present with a divine birth” (Keener 2012, 811). Eternal life is often understood to be merely an eschatological promise—something that will only be realized when Christ returns—and hope for life after death. Although “if in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Cor 15:19 ESV), many keenly feel the obverse: if in Christ we have hope in the afterlife only and not also in the present life, we are truly in a pitiable position. However, abundant life in Christ does indeed begin in this life. Because Jesus is the source of life, the “life to the full” which he promises in this verse “refers to everything from the kind of natural exuberance that is suggested by the wine at the Cana wedding to the suggestions in chaps. 5 and 6 of giving life to the dead” (Brodie 1993, 369). While this primarily refers to the quality of life in the Spirit and certainly includes spiritual blessings, it does not necessarily exclude material blessings.

Ordinary African Christians, and especially those whose life is full of economic uncertainty or health concerns, bring a particular set of questions to biblical texts. *If I will not give my child a snake for a fish or a stone for bread, then how much more must the Father delight to give good gifts to us his children? Does God desire to bless or to curse? Does God desire for us to die or to live?* Many African Pentecostals and Charismatics have responded to the questions asked by holistic African worldviews by developing a theology of deliverance. Believing that God can deliver from sin, from demonic influence, from the curses of witchcraft, and from various illnesses and injuries, they

are moved to ask, *cannot God also deliver from poverty?* Or to start from the other side, “If I can’t trust God for my money, why would I trust him with my salvation?”<sup>1</sup> Obvious biblical answers to these questions have led many to embrace the Prosperity Gospel.

What is the Prosperity Gospel? The phrase “abundant life,” taken from John 10:10, is one of the cornerstones of Pentecostal theology in sub-Saharan Africa (Prosén 2020, 307). Building on this verse and OT promises of covenantal blessings, at its most simple the Prosperity Gospel “portrays wealth and riches as a covenant and the fulfilment of the divine promise of God to his people” (Gbote and Kgatla 2014, 1). The words of 2 Corinthians 8:9 are taken literally in a material sense by prosperity teachers: “Jesus was rich but because of you he became poor, so that by his poverty, you may be rich” (Mbamalu 2015, 3). The Prosperity Gospel proclaims that “God wills spiritual and material prosperity for all believers” as an appropriation of “the victory that Christ has won over sin, sickness, curses, poverty and setbacks in life” (Asamoah-Gyadu 2007, 349). Influenced by the “health and wealth” television preachers of North America, the Prosperity Gospel teaches that “a believer has a right to the blessings of health and wealth won by Christ, and he or she can obtain these blessings merely by a positive confession of faith” (Gifford 1998, 39). Because “whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully” (2 Cor 9:6 ESV), “tithes and offerings become instruments of prosperity” (Griffith 2007, 20)—especially, it seems, when given as a “seed of faith” which serves to immediately enrich the prosperity preacher!

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<sup>1</sup> So Mike Murdock (b. 1946), an American “Health and Wealth” preacher whose prosperity teachings—especially his development of the “seed giving” idea first popularized by Oral Roberts (1918–2009)—have been particularly influential among African Pentecostal and Charismatic churches. Quoted in Gifford (2004, 68).

But is this teaching truly *gospel*? Or is it just another heresy? Most literature related to the Prosperity Gospel is either written by wholehearted proponents (e.g., David Oyedepo of Nigeria and Duncan Williams of Ghana) or by fierce opponents (e.g., Obadare 2016). Moving beyond the Scylla of salesmanship and the Charybdis of polemics, this essay examines whether, and to what degree, the Prosperity Gospel might be orthodox, heretical, or heterodox. Building on years of teaching pastors and elders in Africa (2000–2001 in South Africa and 2007 to the present in Kenya), and ongoing discussions with fellow academics, missionaries, and African church leaders, I have adopted a methodology which combines the approaches of integrative literature review and narrative literature review. I start by briefly reviewing the biblical teachings on wealth and possessions. Next, I review the literature on prosperity teachings in African Christian contexts and critiques of the Prosperity Gospel. As part of this examination, this essay also explores an offshoot from this form of Christianity known as a “Productivity Gospel.” This Productivity Gospel refers to doctrine and praxis that has arisen from within Pentecostal and Charismatic settings in the Global South, with a focus on its African expressions.<sup>2</sup> In conclusion, I will propose that the Productivity Gospel may offer helpful correctives both to the excesses of Prosperity teachings and praxis and also to the limited scope of Western theologies which lack Africa’s holistic worldview.

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<sup>2</sup> As such, this “Productivity Gospel” should not be confused with what has been called the American “gospel” of productivity, which refers to the international politics and economics regarding the perceived superior efficiency of U.S. manufacturing and industry in the years following WW2 when the U.S. had an active interest in rebuilding Europe after the devastation of that war (e.g., see Tiratsoo and Tomlinson 1997).

## 2. The Biblical Voice on Wealth and Possessions

Scripture has much to say about wealth and possessions. Throughout the OT are repeated promises of material blessings. The Promised Land is repeatedly called “a land flowing with milk and honey.” One of the names of God is *Yahweh-Yireh* (less accurately rendered “Jehovah Jireh”), *Yahweh-who-provides*. This covenant promise of Deuteronomy 15:4–5 is striking:

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

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

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

This ambivalence toward wealth continues in the NT. Jesus affirms that our Father will provide our needs (Matt 6:25–33) but warns—in the previous verse—against trying to serve both God and the pursuit of wealth (v. 24). It is worth noting, of course, that praying for provision for our material needs (Matt 6:11; Luke 11:3) are in no way to be equated with the greedy materialism of building “bigger barns” to store hoarded wealth (Luke

12:16–21). Yet Paul could not have learned the secret of being content with plenty (Phil 4:12) if it were wrong to have plenty. Still, Paul has strong words for those who desire to be rich, castigating those who imagine “that godliness is a means of [material] gain” as conceited and ignorant teachers of “a different gospel” (1 Tim 6:3–5):

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

While prosperity preachers focus on those made wealthy like Abraham, Jacob, David, and Solomon, Hebrews 11:36–39 commends those who were by faith imprisoned, murdered, or destitute; and Hebrews 10:34 encourages those who had joyfully accepted the confiscation of their property. Whereas prosperity preachers treat the *kenosis* of Christ (Phil 2:5–8) as the source of physical riches, the NT does not present the “riches of salvation” as either “exclusively or even chiefly material riches” (Coulibaly 2006, 1407).

Historically, World Christianity has continued this ambivalence regarding material wealth and its spiritual value. In public teaching Christianity has typically renounced excessive wealth while seeking to promote lifestyles of modesty and sacrifice, though of course this has not

always been carried out in practice (Ehioghae and Olanrewaju 2015, 74; see also González 2002 and Brown 2012). The message of the Prosperity Gospel, as I will demonstrate below, is admittedly not as nuanced as these biblical and historical voices. It primarily emphasizes passages about blessings.

### 3. The Prosperity Message

What is the Prosperity Message emphasis in Christianity? The description given by Nigerian scholar Nwankwo (2001) is worth citing at length. The central tenet of the Prosperity Gospel

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

- First is the focus on the resurrection and not on the cross; on the fruits of the suffering and death of Jesus rather than on Jesus’ call for all to take up their cross and follow him.
- Second is that material poverty is included in what Jesus redeemed humanity from. This means that life of prosperity and comfort is the vocation and destiny of Christians thanks to the Jesus event.

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

as cars, fat bank account, employment, fertility, visa to emigrate, and protection from witchcraft. (Nwankwo 2001, 1)<sup>3</sup>

Thus, if one both has faith and demonstrates that faith through the practice of regular tithing (often accompanied by generous giving), the prosperity preachers proclaim, one is bound to prosper both spiritually and physically. Before moving to a critique of this message, it is worth noting its biblical basis on the power of the resurrection of Christ, the sufficiency of Christ's victory over sin and death for believers in the here and now, and the desire of God to bless God's children.

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

In addition to these biblical foundations, many proponents of the Prosperity Gospel consider prosperity to be part of the atonement (e.g., Mbamalu 2015). Paul Gifford (1998, 3) explains that, in this understanding of the gospel, all human needs have been met by God through the redemptive passion and death of Jesus because Christ's victory over death is extended to believers in the here and now as victory—not only over sin but also over poverty and sickness. Thus, in prosperity churches, the victory we gain from the blood of Christ is not so much victory over sin and death but rather victory over the physical world in which we live (Gifford and Nogueira-

Godsey 2011, 14). Within this hermeneutic, Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones is understood to refer not only to spiritual resurrection and the future resurrection from the dead but also “to the resurrection of dead finances, businesses, marriages here and now” (Gifford 2004, 74). This could not be more holistic, but the logic eventually becomes problematic: there is simply no room for theologies of suffering, poverty, or martyrdom.

Theologians often discuss the tension between the “already” and the “not yet.” However, the Prosperity Gospel frequently insists that Christ's resurrection means for believers “all aspects of death that affect life on earth—poverty, sickness, barrenness, broken relationships—have” *already* been undone (Haynes 2014, 359). This results in victim-blaming and victim-shaming of any believer who is not experiencing all the marks of “a victorious life” such as “success, prosperity, health, and strong social ties.” Any Christian who lacks such blessings, it is argued, clearly lacks faith, is immature, or spiritually ignorant; once a Christian truly knows what blessings belong to her by faith, God is necessarily required and even forced to give those blessings. In the next section, I will examine the problems inherent in this theology.

Magezi and Manzanga (2016, 4–5), who admittedly show less sympathy to the Prosperity Message than Nwankwo, identify the “tenets of the prosperity gospel” as:

- faith (which “is exercised in order to get things from God”)
- positive confession (on the grounds that “the spoken word has the power to translate things into reality”)

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<sup>3</sup> I have added the “bullet point” formatting for increased readability.

- the seed faith principle (sow big to reap big)
- the deification of man as a “little god.”<sup>4</sup>

Faith and positive confession simply mean that each Christian is rightfully entitled to the blessings won by Christ; these blessings—both spiritual blessings and the material blessings of health and wealth—can be obtained by any believer who makes “a positive confession of faith” (Mbe 2004, 47–48). This results in the “name it and claim it” approach to material possessions. Because God intends *shalom* for all Christians, including success, health, and wealth, believers only need “to claim these gifts as his or her right as a child of God because a true Christian will inevitably enjoy wealth and success”; the necessary corollary, of course, is that “poverty and suffering” are assumed to “indicate sin, or at least an inadequate faith or understanding of God’s law” (Soothill 2007, 41).

The “seed of faith” is a material gift given to God—or to God’s chosen representative, the soliciting prosperity teacher—as an act of “sowing” that must result in a harvest, based on Luke 6:38. For evangelists of health and wealth, inviolable spiritual laws of cause and effect make prosperity inevitable as the reaping of bounty follows righteous sowing (Gifford 1994, 243, 246). This teaching proclaims that “faith leads to tithing, and tithing ignites prosperity. A gratified Almighty will respond by opening the windows of heaven, pouring out blessings so rich that believers will

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<sup>4</sup> By “deification,” Magezi and Manzanga are not referring to the patristic (and biblical) teaching of *θέωσις* (theosis), but rather to deification in the worst of possible senses, the exaltation of humans which results in their being equated with God. And yet this over-identification of believers with God obviously touches something deep within African cultures. I propose that a re-exploration of the patristic development of theosis (particularly in the Greek and Syriac traditions) within the context of African cultures could prove fruitful for African Christianities while potentially avoiding the pitfalls and excesses of the Prosperity Gospel which so concern writers like Magezi and Manzanga.

not have room to store them all” (Jenkins 2010, 45). In orthodox forms of Christianity, spiritual transformation “is mandatory for the born-again individuals” (Obadare 2016, 1). The Prosperity Gospel promises that “material prosperity” is “the necessary aftermath” of that spiritual transformation (Obadare 2016, 1). Magezi and Manzanga (2016, 4) note that “it is difficult to distinguish between the praxis of Prosperity Gospel preachers who promote this *seed faith principle* and magicians.”

According to Gifford, “prosperity gospel preachers have moved beyond traditional Pentecostal practices of speaking in tongues, prophesying, and healing to the belief that God will provide money, cars, houses, and even spouses in response to the believer’s faith—if not immediately, then soon” (quoted in Ehioghae and Olanrewaju 2015, 69). In short, the prosperity message,

is taken to include prosperity in economic and material terms. It also involves prosperity in body, soul and spirit, which has to do with issues such as healing ability, peace of mind, victory over Satan, blessed children, protection and deliverance. According to the gospel, God has met all the needs of human beings in the suffering and death of Christ, and every Christian should now share the victory of Christ over sin, sickness and poverty. (Mbe 2004, 47)

Thus, the major motif of the Prosperity Gospel is success and (financial) victory. Duncan Williams is an influential Pentecostal church leader in Ghana. One of his books is entitled, *You are Destined to Succeed!* Gifford (1994, 243) lists some of its thematic teachings: “God never planned for (us) or any of mankind to have sickness, fear, inferiority, defeat, or failure.... The Word of God is a tree of life that will produce riches, honor, promotion and joy.” Quoting American health and wealth televangelist Casey Treat,

Williams equates the image of God in which we were created with success: “God is the most successful Being in the universe. He’s the Only One who’s never had to cut back, lay people off, take out a loan or a lease, and has never rented anything. God is successful” (quoted in Gifford 1994, 243).

In Prosperity churches in Ghana, members sing songs like: “The Lord can make your way prosperous”; “Jesus is the Winner Man”; and even simply “I’m a winner” (Gifford 1994, 263). As with much of African Pentecostalism, the theme of Winners’ Chapel (aka Living Faith Church Worldwide) is “victorious living” (Gifford and Nogueira-Godsey 2011, 13, 20–21)<sup>5</sup> and “the stress is all on success,” with sermon titles like “Prosperity is my Identity” and “Prosperity is my heritage” (Gifford 2004, 57). It is not unusual to hear Bill Gates—a billionaire entrepreneur who epitomizes success—mentioned twice in a sermon and Jesus mentioned not at all as the focus of many growing Pentecostal congregations is material success and, as a result, a believer’s lack of success indicates that something must be wrong (20).

#### **4. Critiques of the Prosperity Gospel**

The Prosperity Gospel is not without its flaws nor its critics. Prosperity theology chooses proof-texts so selectively that it often engages in eisegesis more frequently than exegesis. It has little if any room for a theology of suffering and has nothing to say to those who are undergoing persecution or facing martyrdom. Ehioghae and Olanrewaju (2015, 74; cf. Zulu 2014, 27) note that prosperity theology “emasculates the formation of Christian character. A serious implication of prosperity gospel is that it leaves no room for brokenness and suffering.” When confronted by the reality of

persecution and martyrdom from the New Testament period up until today, proponents of the Prosperity Gospel have nothing to say. It is telling that the Prosperity Gospel is not growing in areas like Sudan, South Sudan, and Somalia where Christians have been subjected to severe persecution. In such areas, African believers have developed theologies that are strikingly different from the Prosperity Theology, such as the Dinka Theology of the Cross (e.g., Nikkel 1995, 160–185).

Precisely because the Prosperity Gospel has no room for a theology of either poverty or of suffering, Prosperity Theology’s eisegesis can suggest that the material impoverishment or sickness of believers is proof of their lack of faith, thereby placing the burden of responsibility for suffering on the sufferers. In Zimbabwean Pentecostalism, the doctrine of the Spirit of Poverty explicitly correlates a believer’s poverty or wealth with her spiritual condition (Maxwell 1998, 357). If a believer is poor, it has nothing to do with structural injustice but can only be due to the demonic influences of his ancestral traditions and inherited spiritual bondage (358). As Ehioghae and Olanrewaju (2015, 73–74) explain,

[the] prosperity gospel makes the poor to unnecessarily bear the weight of guilt. Though there is no inherent virtue in being poor it is equally wrong to regard poverty as a reflection of one’s spiritual status. There is a serious implication when God’s blessings are reduced to material gain: those who are not rich are either guilty of sin or unbelief. In other words, if God’s will is for everyone to be healthy and wealthy, then anyone who falls sick or remains poor is suffering from his own unbelief or disobedience. This places a terrible burden on the poor for it is unfair and unbiblical. It makes them victims of their unsavory circumstances.

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<sup>5</sup> Winner’s Chapel is based in Nigeria under the leadership of founder David Oyedepo.

Instead of a message of hope, this places the weight of blame on those who are poor or sick or oppressed for their poverty or lack of health or oppression.

The Prosperity Gospel's "seed of faith" teaching can further be characterized as a "God is my ATM" theology. While blessing can certainly be found within giving, the transactional giving taught by the Prosperity Gospel serves to undermine the sovereignty and power of God (Asamoah-Gyadu 2013, 100). Moreover, in such transactional forms of giving, disciples of the Prosperity Gospel can treat God as a commercial partner who is contractually obligated to meet the demands "of those who have fulfilled their side of a bargain" through the payment of tithes and by giving bigger offerings (99). Prosperity Gospel church leaders have often (with reason!) been accused of lining their pockets at the expense of poor church members who remain poor—including grassroots-level pastors and evangelists (Maxwell 1998, 367).

In addition to being ill-equipped to deal with suffering and persecution, the Prosperity Gospel tends to neglect both the cross and also the vocation of Christians to provide a prophetic voice (Nwankwo 2001, 2). Concernedly, it often lacks any emphasis on "deliverance from sin" (Folarin 2007, 74). The Prosperity Gospel has been criticized for these reasons from within African Pentecostalism. In West Africa, "Bishop Joseph Ojo, national secretary of the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria and pastor of Calvary Kingdom Church, says certain pastors have 'invaded the pulpit but do not have the calling. Their god is their belly'" (Maxwell and Phiri 2007, 28). Ojo thinks that preaching prosperity is as distorted as preaching poverty. In East Africa, "David Oginde, senior pastor of the 10,000-member Nairobi Pentecostal Church, believes he could triple his membership by promising wealth. 'But if that is all I am teaching, then I have lost the message,' he says. 'The kingdom of God is built on the Cross, not on bread and butter'" (28).

The focus of the Prosperity Gospel yields a human-centered religion in which faith is but a tool to manipulate God into giving blessings (Nwankwo 2001, 2) and has much in common with the cargo cults of Melanesia (5). Popular preachers like Joel Osteen—an American who is widely read with approval in Africa—seem utterly ignorant of biblical doctrine and seem to have a soteriology that is limited to "name it and claim it." As a result, many proponents of the Prosperity Gospel run their congregations like a pyramid scheme, fleecing their flock. Rather than biblical exegesis, these preachers make their own experiences of success the focus and heart of their preaching (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005, 16). For this reason, the Prosperity Gospel has been fairly criticized for serving to enrich its preachers from the sacrificial giving of members (Togarasei 2011, 349). In an even harsher indictment, "Asonzeh Ukah identifies an instrumental usage of prosperity theology by founders of megachurches in order to 'transform them into economic, financial and entrepreneurial empires which are completely controlled by their families.' What he basically describes is a Pentecostal kleptocracy" (Heuser 2016, 5).<sup>6</sup>

According to Gifford, the advocacy of the Prosperity Gospel persuades its adherents to benefit from current economic systems instead of prophetically evaluating them and calling for remedies to social ills (see Maxwell 1998, 351). This is precisely because it often "promotes materialism, sometimes of the kind that Jesus attacks in the Gospels," does not address difficult contextual realities, and can fail "to provide pastoral care" for the those who are struggling economically (Asamoah-Gyadu 2013, 107). In addition to the inability of the Prosperity Gospel to provide a cogent theology of either poverty or suffering, it often "blinds its proponents to

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<sup>6</sup> Heuser cites Asonzeh Ukah (2013).

the realities of sin as their desire for health-and-wealth prosperity becomes a consuming focus” (Kunhiyop 2019, 107).

Asamoah-Gyadu (2013, 102) allows that the “general tenor of the teaching of the New Testament is that we give to God faithfully and trust him for his grace in life, knowing that if we sow sparingly, we reap sparingly and if we sow bountifully, we reap bountifully.” But he continues to emphasize—against certain Prosperity Gospel proponents—that this “is not a magical formula, because God’s hand cannot be twisted in our favor; to think otherwise is to challenge God’s sovereignty. The promises of God come true by his grace and we can only trust him to fulfill these promises through his own indescribable gift, Jesus Christ who is Lord and Savior.”

So, is the “Prosperity Gospel” a heresy? With all of these problems, some Christians are convinced that the Prosperity Gospel must indeed be the arch-heresy of our day. In the critique above, it is clear that some prosperity preaching is full of heretical elements. But what is a heresy? It is not simply a false teaching, but it is a false teaching which is based upon a kernel of truth. That kernel is nurtured until it grows out of proportion with other balancing truths.<sup>7</sup> I have already briefly touched on the truths upon which the Prosperity Gospel is based. The flaws I have mentioned come primarily from the lack of balance. No doubt some proponents of the Health and Wealth Gospel are indeed either heretics or wolves in sheep’s clothing, though this is certainly not true of all. But the polemical approach of asking “in what ways is this wrong?” is not the most helpful.

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<sup>7</sup> E.g., Arianism took the truth of the full humanity of Jesus and emphasized it to the exclusion of his divinity.

## **5. The Prosperity Gospel as Inculturation, or “How is God at Work?”**

A more beneficial approach begins with two questions: 1) What cultural questions or problems does this theology or movement try to answer? 2) What is God doing through this movement? So, what *is* God doing through the Prosperity Gospel? In the African context, it speaks into our holistic African worldview, allows believers an opportunity to escape from the culture of envy,<sup>8</sup> and thereby opens a door to hope.

The Prosperity Gospel thrives in our holistic African worldview which “can be defined as a harmonious interaction between the physical and spiritual world...between the visible and invisible worlds” (Anyanwu 2004, 38–39). Africans recognize that “the majority of Africans live in a cosmos that is spiritually charged: a cosmos in which the physical and the spiritual intersect” (Ngong 2009, 2). In this milieu, to become a Christian within the context of the Prosperity Gospel assumes that the believer will obtain “power to overcome those forces that diminish life” resulting in a realized eschatology in which material well-being in the here and now is the pinnacle of salvation (13–14). In that context, the Prosperity Gospel acknowledges the interplay between the spiritual and the material, thereby avoiding dualistic heresies (e.g., Gnosticisms, Manichaeism, the false dichotomy between the sacred and the secular) and also correcting the excesses of European Enlightenment thinking.

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<sup>8</sup> I owe this insight to Professor Mark Shaw, private comments, Nairobi Evangelical School of Evangelism, September 2016. See also the Lausanne Theology Working Group Statement on the Prosperity Gospel (2010), which notes “We recognize that Prosperity Teaching flourishes in contexts of terrible poverty; and that for many people it presents their only hope, in the face of constant frustration, the failure of politicians and NGOs, etc., for a better future, or even for a more bearable present.” Quoted in Magezi and Manzanga (2016, 5).

Ngong (2009, 1) notes that in an act of inculturation, “African Christianity in general, and this neo-Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity in particular, have uncritically appropriated the salvific discourse of African Traditional Religions.” In the worldview common to African traditional religions, realities in the material and spiritual worlds are interconnected and activities in one influences events in the other (Soothill 2007, 10). African traditional religion values healing and prosperity and communication with the supernatural; in this context, prosperity preachers emphasize dreams in a way that resonates with African culture (Maxwell and Phiri 2007, 28). Maxwell (1998, 359–370) observes that the Prosperity form of Pentecostalism answers several questions that Zimbabwean culture is asking: it enables “ordinary Zimbabweans to face painful social and economic transitions”; it provides them “a framework with which to respond to the pressures of modernisation”; for many “it offers guidelines for material success” and hope for a better future and “a chance to increase their livelihoods”; for those on the edge of poverty, the “emphasis on renewing the family” and protection from substance abuse and sexual promiscuity keeps them from slipping into destitution. Thus, the Prosperity Gospel is able to speak into African cultures, offering answers to the questions which are being asked in this context.

While “traditional African values frown upon laziness” (Boaheng 2020, loc. 942), many Africans are trapped within a culture of envy that functions as a systemic oppression, preventing individuals from attempting to improve their lot. Why should you be better than anyone else? Who do you think you are? What are you, the *bwana kubwa*?<sup>9</sup> But the Prosperity Gospel allows believers to attribute their improving prosperity to God’s blessing which cannot be gainsaid. It thereby allows for the opportunity

to experience economic advancement. By replacing traditional kinship and community ties with their material obligations with those of just the nuclear family and the extended family of Church, believers can be freed from community and familial financial demands (or even extortions), which enables individuals to achieve economic progress (354). The idea of moving from poverty—whether spiritual or material—to abundance and of being liberated from various forms of oppression—whether economic, social, or political—has given rise to theologies of empowerment. These theologies of empowerment are an essential element of African Pentecostal theology because the gospel proclaims the possibility of restoration. Understood holistically, this includes both the physical and spiritual realms. Thus, as a believer experiences transformation, he or she experiences increasing *shalom* and abundance in both spiritual and in physical terms (Asamoah-Gyadu 2007, 354–355). So, the Prosperity Gospel is founded, at least in part, on biblical orthodoxy. Through a theology of empowerment, the Prosperity Gospel provides a way “to overcome the existential pathos of impotence and pessimism” (Nwankwo 2001, 5).

These are a number of fruitful ways in which the Prosperity Gospel can speak into African cultures. Other cultural aspects of the Prosperity Gospel in Africa are less healthy. Manipulation of the object of worship—when God is treated like an ATM which is obligated to dispense cash whenever the right conditions are met—has much similarity with African Traditional Religions, when “the ancestors are manipulated by speaking the right words, performing the right rituals and acting appropriately” (Magezi and Manzanga 2016, 5). It is easy for believers to unduly exalt prosperity-peddling pastors as African “cultural history tells them to put stock in ‘Big Men’” (Maxwell and Phiri 2007, 27).

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<sup>9</sup> KiSwahili for “big man” or “big boss.”

## 6. Productivity Gospel

Within the Prosperity Gospel there have been at least two major streams. The first is a primarily orthodox theology which needs some correction or rebalancing in places. The second is heretical and deceitful practice; this latter has rightly been the subject of much critique. But a third stream has developed, the Productivity Gospel. At the risk of oversimplification, this can be described as the empowerment theology of the Prosperity Gospel combined with personal accountability and the Protestant work ethic. It has inherited Martin Luther's understanding of vocation, the sanctity of work. Work hard and be rewarded.<sup>10</sup> This expected and nurtured experience has been called "redemptive uplift" (Maxwell 1998, 354). Whereas the Protestant work ethic is built on the "belief that work honors God," the Prosperity Gospel is built on the "belief that God promises prosperity to the faithful" (Neubert et al. 2014, 141). The Productivity Gospel combines these two themes and builds on the reality that frequently there is a "success that comes with the stability of a Christian life" which can potentially yield relative prosperity through ordinary sociological processes (Gitau 2018, 149).

While it is generally recognized that "prosperity theology contributes positively to the socioeconomic well-being of some of its followers and countries in general" (Boaheng 2020, loc. 2569), one of its obvious faults is that it "has the tendency of impoverishing some of its adherents, despite the economic progress it offers to others" (loc. 2572). Preachers of the Productivity Gospel, however, have shown a greater concern for their congregants. Habarurema (2017, 260) lists three positive contributions of

the Prosperity Gospel: "a genuine quest for the fullness of life promised by the Scriptures," an "audacity to address real-life problems [and the] existential needs of people by drawing upon their traditions and biblical resources" (263), and "a reverential attitude to the Bible as God's Word" (266). These first two contributions serve to gain a hearing for the gospel. Many economically challenged Africans have found that "being a member of a church offers life-saving access to social networks of mutual aid and support, which teach essential survival skills [while] peer pressure helps believers avoid the snares of substance abuse"—this is perhaps especially true for rural Africans who have moved to urban settings (Jenkins 2010, 45). According to my research, the offering of practical solutions to existential needs is fully realized in the context of the Productivity Gospel rather than by the flashy panhandlers of prosperity who have grown fat on their flock.

For the Productivity Gospel, success is not achieved simply by following laws nor by tithing legalistically, but through "self-confidence, pride, determination, motivation, discipline, application, courage—and by skills and techniques" that the pastors take care to impart (Gifford 1994, 246). It has been observed that "the prosperity gospel in an African context" offers "a cogent formula for economic development" (Obadare 2016, 2). Moreover, "it is apparent that the prosperity gospels also include teachings on spiritual prosperity, the prosperity of the individual so that he or she becomes a blessing to others, and the prosperity of the church in order to engage in the business of the kingdom" (Golo 2013, 375). These observations, however, upon closer examination are more aptly applied specifically to the Productivity Gospel.

While I examined Ojo and Oginde's criticisms of the Prosperity Gospel above, they both recognize that many prosperity teachers do good—they "inspire members to aim high, work hard, and avoid vices"—and prosperity

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<sup>10</sup> Although they use different terminology, also see Miller and Yamamori (2007), which applies Max Weber's "protestant work ethic" theses to this form of the Prosperity Gospel. See also Drønen (2012).

ministries engage in humanitarian work such as building schools and colleges, supplying food and medicine to the poor, and supporting HIV/AIDS prevention programs” (Maxwell and Phiri 2007, 28). The doctrines of a balanced and responsible Prosperity Gospel free of abuses, which I distinguish as the Productivity Gospel (though I retain the usage of others in the following quotations), “have engendered social mobility for some” and provides for others “a code of conduct which guards them from falling into poverty and destitution. For all they provide a pattern for coming to terms with, and benefitting from, modernities’ dominant values and institutions” (Maxwell 1998, 351). The improved morality of Pentecostal men makes them into better providers and protectors. Instead of spending their money on addictive substances and on other women, they now use those funds “for purchase of consumer goods, education, and savings” (353). Because the believers dress sharply, are hardworking and trustworthy, they have more and better opportunities for employment. In addition to this, within the Pentecostal churches, believers “also benefit from the material support of the church community” (354). Much like the church of the first three centuries, “pentecostals...care for the sick, orphans and widows, and often provide housing in an urban environment where it is scarce and expensive” (355). In these ways, “the prosperity gospel’s holistic approach to life can contribute to poverty alleviation” (Togarasei 2011, 349) as well as “self-reliance, to self-worth, to dignity and to motivation to succeed” (Zulu 2014, 29). This is especially true because “among many Africans, prosperity means having food on the table and affording the basic life needs” (Togarasei 2014, 119). The practice of the Productivity Gospel thus does not bring fabulous riches to a few, but rather works to bring about greater equity (Paul’s word in 2 Cor 8:14 is *ἰσότης*) among believers.

By leveraging the Pentecostal prosperity “teaching that God wants his children to live successful lives,” the Productivity Gospel “gives many Africans

a positive mindset that they can make it in business through God, rather than by waiting for a Western donor to extend a helping hand” (Togarasei 2014, 123). Mensa Otabil, the Senior Pastor of the International Central Gospel Church in Accra, Ghana, is happy to be called a “prosperity preacher,” but Gifford suggests that label is misleading. Instead, Otabil’s sermons tell believers not to ask God for money or other material possessions—“God will not give you money,” he says—but to ask God for wisdom. “Your God won’t give you wealth,” Otabil preaches, “he gave you *power to create wealth*” (Gifford 2004, 120). In addition to his sermons, Otabil explicitly develops a practical emphasis on empowerment for productivity within his prosperity theology in his *Four Laws of Productivity: God’s Foundation for Living* (Habarurema 2017, 290–291; Anim 2021, 90, 214).<sup>11</sup> His productivity teaching promotes “empowerment of believers” perhaps precisely due to its insistence upon “the ethics of responsibility” (Habarurema 2017, 291). Togarasei (2014, 122) notes that “entrepreneurship teachings”—a crucial element of what I refer to as the Productivity Gospel—“have led a sizeable number of Pentecostals to start their own businesses, thus contributing to poverty alleviation through employment creation.” The Productivity Gospel can thus teach “an entrepreneurial spirit” by which “Pentecostalism helps believers to discover the operative for wealth creation and financial intelligence” (121). Similarly, Zulu (2014, 27–28) notes that “a holistic view of prosperity in the Zambian context could help people in the extreme poverty levels to start to view themselves positively and work towards liberating themselves from...demeaning situations.”

If you are rewarded, Productivity Gospel pastors preach, use your reward to make opportunities for others. Are you a businessperson? Grow

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<sup>11</sup> There are two editions of this book, the first published by Vincom in Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1991 and the second published by Pneuma Life Publishing in Lanham, Maryland in 2002.

your business not just for self-enrichment but so that you can hire more employees: we are blessed to be a blessing. In congregations of Winners' Chapel in Nairobi, for example, congregants are asked, "If you were unemployed, have you gotten a job? If you were an employee, have you become an employer? If you were an employer, have you increased the number of your employees?"<sup>12</sup> This is clearly no mere matter of selfishness and greed for gain but a desire to address systemic socio-economic injustice and to bring blessing to others. Indeed, in all of their congregations across Africa, "Winners' Chapel strongly encourages and fosters entrepreneurship" (Gifford and Nogueira-Godsey 2011, 20). This type of exhortation is common within many Pentecostal congregations in Africa (for Kenya and Ghana specifically, see Mugambi 2020).

There are two further things to note. The first is that this is arguably done in obedience to Deuteronomy 15:11, "Of course, there will never cease to be poor people in the country, and that is why I am giving you this command: Always be open handed with your brother, and with anyone in your country who is in need and poor" (NJB). Secondly, this is evidence of the accountability which is necessary to Christian discipleship. Togarasei (2011, 349–350) has noted "five ways by which the gospel contributes to poverty alleviation: encouraging entrepreneurship, employment creation, encouraging members to be generous, giving a positive mindset and encouraging a holistic approach to life." Proponents of the Productivity Gospel have turned away from the greed all too often exhibited by prosperity preachers, and actively adopted each of these five practices. The culture of congregations which teach the Productivity Gospel seems similar to the

*koinonia* described in Acts—"a total sharing that includes the material as well as the spiritual" (González 2002, 83).

Typical prosperity teaching within African Pentecostalism has "generated...more broadly an incredibly high sense and spirit of generosity, unparalleled in the history of the church in Africa" as the result of "a call to stewardship, which means Christians must have a holistic sense of giving" generously (Asamoah-Gyadu 2013, 94). Thus, the Productivity Gospel also offers a foundation upon which to build what Habarurema (2017, 284) refers to as "a theology of stewardship and giving" in African contexts. Whereas the Prosperity Gospel can operate as an attempted "manipulation of a rather mechanical God" (Kroesbergen 2014b, 82), the Productivity Gospel can more easily make room for expressions of gratitude through generosity. While many are convinced that "one's wealth increases by hoarding one's possessions," Habarurema (2017, 287) explains that prosperity preachers like Matthew Ashimolowo<sup>13</sup> teach that actually "blessings come by releasing what one possesses."

## 7. Conclusion

It is clear that "a Jesus who is narrowly concerned about the saving of the soul for the future but neglects the holistic issues of life, including incumbent wellbeing, is not welcome in Africa" (Banda 2014, 56). Both the Prosperity Gospel and the Productivity Gospel address the holistic concerns which are an intimate part of African worldviews. Evidence abounds that the "health and wealth" emphases of the Prosperity Gospel can lead to heresy and corruption. But some of its core tenets are—even though acknowledgement

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<sup>12</sup> According to Dr. Kyama Mugambi, Assistant Director of the Centre for World Christianity at Africa International University in Nairobi and Editor of Africa Theological Network Press, private conversation. For a similar example to this, see Gifford (2007, 20).

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<sup>13</sup> Ashimolowo is a Nigerian serving as senior pastor of Kingsway International Christian Centre, a megachurch in London.

of this fact may make some uncomfortable—biblical. When the Prosperity Gospel is used to manipulate and to support the self-aggrandizement and material enrichment of so-called pastors who are peddlers of their own personality cults rather than purveyors of the Good News about Jesus, this should be firmly rebuked and repudiated as heretical and anti-Christian. But, on the other hand, the prosperity churches—and especially those who teach and practice the Productivity Gospel—have captured a biblical emphasis that speaks into the local cultures of Africa and provides a message of hope to the people.

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