



PROSPERITY IDENTIFIED, DISSECTED, AND RECONFIGURED

Sarah Hinlicky Wilson

You might think it's the denial of the divinity of Christ. You might think it's a particular attitude toward authority or Scripture. You might think it's the wrong answer to one of the hot-button ethical issues. But none of these qualify as the single most widespread and popular of Christian heresies alive today. That unfortunate distinction goes to the prosperity gospel.

I wouldn't have thought so at first. To me, prosperity was always something out there and far away. What little I knew of it was too absurd to take seriously or consider a threat. God wants me to have a big fancy gold-plated Porsche? A silly notion at best. Not a single church or denomination of any historic age or theological gravitas endorses prosperity's claims; those reside only in the fevered imagination of delusional TV evangelists. Case dismissed.

However, it's the very unstructuredness of what its detractors call "the prosperity gospel" (or "health and wealth" or "name it and claim it") that makes it such a successful heresy—not to mention its alluring message. It is not bounded by structures but seeps like an ooze. Your parishioners are watching its TV shows, listening to its radio programs, reading its books, and friends with its followers. When they confess "I'm blessed," they may intend a lot more than you realize. Prosperity's proponents market themselves as good, sincere, Christian people: worse yet, as far as they know, they *are* good, sincere, Christian people, and many of their flock have accepted the prosperity gospel because it's simply *the* gospel as they've heard it.

A contemptuous dismissal doesn't address the problem within, nor does it aid the neighbor in need. Like it or not, we Lutherans too need to have some working knowledge of prosperity in order to cope with it and counter it. This essay is meant to be a first step in that direction, but if any of this resonates, by all means find and read these two excellent analyses: *A Different Gospel* by D. R. McConnell

and *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* by Kate Bowler.¹

Where Prosperity Came From

The seminal ideas of the prosperity gospel didn't start with television preachers but with marginally Christian nineteenth-century metaphysical cults. As the pioneer movement was conquering the land and peoples of North America, these cultists were attempting to conquer the realm of the spirit. In fact, perhaps in a strange backlash against rising industrialism, they asserted that the spirit was the *only* reality and matter a mere illusion.

Such is the origin of Christian Science (which denies the reality of the body and believes that all illness can be cured by pure mental effort), Transcendentalism (a unitarian philosophy that believed in the inherent goodness of human beings as opposed to corrupt society), and New Thought (a form of pantheism that claimed people were divine and could overcome all difficulties by right thinking). All of them believed in mind over matter. But spirit was not some kind of free-wheeling realm of creativity and discovery. By these movements' account, mind and spirit were as mechanistic as body and machine. They operated according to immutable laws. Crack the code behind the spiritual laws, and you could tame everything else according to your desires (today taught most alarmingly by Scientology).

Then, in the early twentieth century, along came E. W. Kenyon (1867–1948). He was well acquainted with New Thought and other forms of metaphysical mastery. In his estimation, all they needed extra was the blood of Christ. He made the necessary addition and began to teach that Jesus' death had overcome all negative things already in this life, including poverty and sickness. "Faith" was not hope for a better heavenly future but taking advantage

of the new spiritual law of victory in Christ. You weren't just to *hope* for something from God; you weren't just to *ask* for something from God; no, you had to *name* it and then you had to *claim* it—and as a result, it would be so. God was guaranteed to give it to you. As Kenyon put it in one of his many writings, “Christianity is a legal document.”² If you sign on, God owes you; that's faith. Faith is a tool and a force to be wielded. Its words create reality just like God's did in Genesis 1, because Christians are little gods and supermen-in-the-making. Accordingly, one of the preferred monikers of the movement is not “prosperity gospel” but “Word of Faith.”

A corollary of Kenyon's teaching on the spirit and its laws is that physical signs are deceitful, distractions from Satan sent to lead you astray. A true believer suffering from illness simply *asserts* her victory over illness and from then on disregards the symptoms, which are temptations, not truth. A true believer confesses that he *is* rich, and in due course it will be so. In fact, true believers avoid even *mentioning* negative things, because talking about them might make them come true. Done right, though, “the word of faith” always gives you what you want—and what you want is, of course, good. God doesn't want anybody to be sick or poor. So name your health, claim your wealth, and God will automatically grant it to you. If you don't get what you want, the problem is on your end, not God's. You probably didn't believe hard enough.

Kenyon didn't become a widespread influence in his own time. He operated at the margins of church life; many people have mistakenly assumed him to be a Pentecostal, though he avowedly was not. It wasn't until the second half of the twentieth century that Kenyon was rediscovered by other American evangelists such as Kenneth Hagin, T. L. Osborn, and Oral Roberts, who started popularizing Kenyon's thought through preaching tours and TV programs. Kenneth Copeland is the dean of such preach-

ers today, but there are plenty of other popular leaders such as Crefflo Dollar, Fred Price, and Benny Hinn. There are even Catholic versions of prosperity, such as the El Shaddai movement in the Philippines, which claims eight to ten million followers. In the U.S., the most egregious examples of what Bowler calls “hard prosperity”—the unabashedly materialistic version—seem to be waning, but “soft prosperity” lives on in the preaching of Joel Osteen and others, whose orientation is more of the self-esteem and personal-fulfillment type.³

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A word of caution is necessary at this point: prosperity has a very different impact depending on where it is preached and by whom. It is obviously repulsive when propounded by rich American preachers who extract life savings from naïve believers and then use the proceeds to buy, say, a \$23,000 toilet seat (as did evangelist Joyce Meyer). It is positively criminal when such preachers dissuade parents from giving their sick children the medicine necessary for survival, leading to an early and completely preventable death, as has happened far too often.

But prosperity is a popular message also in places that are not at all prosperous. It has a different texture when it is preached by and to people who are destitute, starving, and denied access to any medical care at all. In

such situations, there is often a fine line between legitimate divine healing and illegitimate promises of believer-induced healing. Likewise, the message of prosperity can have the effect of pulling a marginalized community together to support each other in creating the stable economic and social relationships that allow the entire group to rise out of its poverty.

Since readers of this journal are located mainly in well-off North America, however, we'll restrict our attention here to a purported Christianity that claims God's will for your life is to skyrocket you into the 1% and keep you there—as long as you believe hard enough, of course.

A Trinitarian Critique of Prosperity

As we can see at the origins of Kenyon's teaching, there is a very faulty understanding of “spirit” at work. “Spirit” is made to be the enemy and the opposite of “matter,” which is low, misleading, and unimportant. Such attitudes are very ancient; Christians have been fighting them in various forms since the earliest days of the church, whether in the form of Neoplatonism or Gnosticism or Manichaeism. By contrast, in the Nicene Creed we profess our faith in “the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life.” This same Spirit hovered over the waters at creation and called matter, earth, and living creatures into being (Genesis 1:2). This same Spirit raised up the crucified body of Jesus to new life (Romans 8:11): risen, transformed, but still a body, still matter, still something that could eat and drink and speak and even bear wounds. To be spiritual is not to be an enemy of the material.

And that therefore also means that we who live by the Spirit are called to be stewards of the material, not exploiters of it. The prosperity gospel proclaims infinite greed to be rewarded with infinite accumulation, for the material world is purely an object to be used. But the Holy Spirit created and sustained the world for the

glory of God and for the flourishing of all, not for humans at the expense of the earth or for some people at the expense of others.

The mention of the crucified and risen Savior leads us to another aspect of prosperity's false message. Prosperity preachers assert that Christ already did *all* of the suffering for us, thus believers should expect nothing but success and wholeness. This is an extreme misreading of Scripture, both of whose Testaments witness to the reality of suffering in the lives of the faithful. The Book of Job is the most sustained biblical protest against the idea that those who suffer must be unrighteous—and equally against the idea that righteousness is a guarantee of happiness. Jesus was a shocking savior precisely because of his suffering on the cross, and his earliest disciples and apostles shared the good news about this savior at great personal cost, even death. Martyrdoms have followed the faithful in all ages—and the last century has seen more Christian martyrdoms than any other period—but we understand them as testimonies to the faithfulness, not the failure, of God. The Epistles commend churches to be strong amidst persecution and trials, poverty and illness.

The most destructive thing the prosperity message does is convince people that if they have not received the healing or wealth they have claimed, it is *their* fault. Nor is there comfort for the bereaved: they can only assume that their loved ones failed and that's why the illness won. Prosperity preaching ultimately destroys the community. The wealthy are assumed to be the

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true believers while the poor must be doubters, so the strong are encouraged to cast off the weak in the name of holiness. Prosperity cannot endure the scandal of the cross. It cannot abide

Jesus, the crucified savior of the world.

To reject the crucified Son is also to reject the Father who sent him. It's perfectly understandable: human beings have always raged against their weakness and dependence, their vulnerability to suffering and death. Much religion now and throughout history is simply magic, an attempt to figure out the secret laws of the universe and exploit them for our own gain. Prosperity is twenty-first-century Christian magic. It wants control. It does not want a God who is Lord over all, Who may call us to suffering for the sake of the gospel, Who cannot be explained or predicted or bribed. Prosperity wants a God Who can be bought off with "faith" or with generous giving in hope of an even bigger return.

The Christian message does not take away the agony, frustration, or unanswered questions of human life. It doesn't promise victory or success right now. Instead, it declares that "the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Romans 8:18). Jesus' vindication came after his death on the cross, when he was raised from the dead by the Father: so shall it be for us. To be a Christian is to share in the death and resurrection of Christ, not to avoid death or to disdain the flesh that will be raised. In life and death and new life, the Father can be trusted to bring all things right.

*Can Anything Good
Come from Prosperity?*

Now it's time to ask the hard question: are we really so different?

Certainly we are much too sophisticated and well-educated to advocate a "hard prosperity" message. But are we so totally free of "soft prosperity"? Do we not all pray for blessings and hope for every good thing from God, from a happy family to a successful career to a comfortable life? Do we not assure each other that God wants us to flourish? Don't we tell people that God is on their side no matter what? Don't

we evangelize on the principle that knowing God makes for a better life? "Come and let the passions of your flesh be crucified" is not any church's slogan.

There's a reason for these empha-

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ses in our churches. To a limited extent, the prosperity message is right. Even Luther teaches that we are to turn to God in hope and prayer for every good thing, as we learn from the First Article of the Creed, for He is the source and sustainer of all. Endless misery, wrenching poverty, and crushing loneliness are not, after all, God's ultimate intention for any of us. Prosperity as it is preached in America is not a heresy because it is utterly and irreducibly wrong but because, like most heresies, it is one aspect of the Christian faith isolated from all the others and pushed to its absurd extreme.

In the Old Testament, prosperity is indeed promised, but—like all the promises of the law—it is promised conditionally. That condition is the keeping of the law and the covenant with God. For one example of many from Deuteronomy: "And because you listen to these rules and keep and do them, the LORD your God will keep with you the covenant and the steadfast love that He swore to your fathers. He will love you, bless you, and multiply you" (7:12–13). At the same time, the rules of the Torah and the prophets are preoccupied with the care of the poor, foreigners, the sick, and so on: "He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing" (10:18). In other words, from the Hebrew perspective, to seek one's own good *always and necessarily* entails seeking the good of the neighbor and stranger alike. Wealth without social justice is an abomination in the eyes

of the Lord. Prosperity preachers, by contrast, never stop to ask about the social, political, and ecological impact of the chosen few's astronomical wealth.

Sadly, the preaching of the divine law as a good in its own right is a fairly lost art among Lutherans and other mainline Christians nowadays. Many seem to prefer an ambulance-chasing message of band-aid grace after people have already ruined their lives (erroneously touted as “the theology of the cross”), instead of giving them the good order and structure that allows for human flourishing and leads to real freedom. That's as serious a heresy as shallow promises of prosperity indifferent to the demands of justice.

The corrective that we and they both need is not the “prosperity gospel” but the “prosperity law”: how the good law of God, in its personal as well as social application, is meant to foster human flourishing. Bonhoeffer is helpful here in his distinction between the ultimate (the justification of the sinner before God) and the penultimate (all matters of created existence). “Arbitrary destruction of the penultimate seriously harms the ultimate. When, for example, a human life is deprived of the conditions that are part of being human, the justification of such a life by grace and faith is at least seriously hindered, if not impossible... [I]t is necessary to care for the penultimate in order that the ultimate not be hindered by the penultimate's destruction.”⁴ People are drawn away from solid theologies, however beautifully and correctly expressed, when their personal lives are a mess and they need clear direction. Lutheran clergy shouldn't get in the business of micromanaging their congregants' lives, much less jumping on the latest scientific or popular bandwagon hawking the good life. But we shouldn't shy away from teaching the holy law that orders, directs,

and protects this penultimate life in anticipation of the next—and not just mine or yours, but the whole human family's.

Badly as we need this balance, there is one more biblical twist to take into account. The heartbreaking refrain of the Old Testament is that all of God's blessings showered upon Israel do not automatically result in Israel's fidelity to God. As long as we are sinners, prosperity can just as easily lead to wickedness and idolatry as to gratitude and righteousness. Again from Deuteronomy, a warning: “Take care lest you forget the LORD your God by not keeping His commandments and His rules and His statutes, which I command you today, lest, when you have eaten and are full and have built good houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks multiply and your silver and gold is multiplied and all that you have is multiplied, then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God, Who brought you out of the house of slavery” (8:11–14). Again, prosperity preachers rarely stop to ask whether wealth might be a curse rather than a blessing. Our heart's desire might turn out to be a punishment.

For His part, the Lord finds Himself in a real double-bind where prosperity is concerned. If He doesn't punish His people's evildoings by revoking the promised abundance, His holy law is made into a joke and the vulnerable suffer; if He does punish by taking it away, the nations infer that He isn't God after all and further blaspheme His name (see, for example, Ezekiel 36). As a result, and as countless Old Testament texts witness, prosperity and deprivation are visited upon Israel, and us, in a such a complex pattern—to say nothing of our own just or unjust attempts to control both of them—that simplistic assertions of either blessing or punishment can never be telling the whole story. Preaching must be more

nanced than most people will want to hear; still, we owe them nothing less than the truth. That means lifting up the whole biblical story, from the covenant of blessing with abundance to the pouring out of the cup of wrath upon wickedness, and the salvation of Jesus Christ always at the center.

Luther, as usual, gets it right, here in his summary of the Creed in the Large Catechism. God is the greatest gift in Himself. The other stuff is good and beneficial, but it can't compare to God's own self-giving. “[I]n all three articles God himself has revealed and opened to us the most profound depths of his fatherly heart and his pure, unutterable love. For this very purpose he created us, so that he might redeem us and make us holy, and, moreover, having granted and bestowed upon us everything in heaven and on earth, he has also given us his Son and his Holy Spirit, through whom he brings us to himself.”⁵ With such divine riches, there is no need to go chasing after false promises of prosperity, and every reason and resource to serve our neighbors in need! ✠

Notes

1. D. R. McConnell, *A Different Gospel*, updated ed. (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994). Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). These two books are the source of the historical overview provided here.

2. For excerpts of Kenyon, see Douglas Jacobsen, *A Reader in Pentecostal Theology: Voices from the First Generation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 124. McConnell also discusses Kenyon at length, along with Kenneth Hagin's unacknowledged plagiarism of Kenyon.

3. Bowler, 99, 125.

4. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 6 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 160. See the whole discussion of “Ultimate and Penultimate Things,” 146–170.

5. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 439.