

# Prosperity gospel: A missiological assessment

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The article attempts to establish that prosperity gospel is rooted in the faulty interpretation of several biblical passages. The prosperity gospel portrays wealth and riches as a covenant and the fulfilment of the divine promise of God to his people. The basic teaching of the prosperity gospel is that God wants believers to get rich or healthy, but he cannot bless them unless they first send money known as 'seed-faith' to their spiritual leader or pastor who tells them about the plan. This approach was popularised by the American televangelist Oral Roberts in Tulsa Oklahoma in the United States of America (USA). It has now spread to other parts of the world, including Africa. This article investigates the teaching of this theology whilst attempting to offer a biblical foundation of Christian giving for the work of God.

## Introduction

There is a maxim in the Krahn tradition<sup>1</sup> of Liberia in West Africa that says, '[t]o better evaluate a given situation as a standard of life one needs a premise', according to which the odd is evaluated. In other words, to meaningfully argue for or against a given situation, one needs to lay a premise upon which a study can be conducted. By using the concept of the maxim the authors find it easier to systematically evaluate the prosperity gospel from a missiological perspective within the framework of Lutheran doctrine of justification.

The question this article attempts to answer is: Does God base his blessings to church members solely on giving? It is a study that closely examines the prosperity gospel from a missiological perspective, a gospel that promises material wealth, health and happiness to faithful Christians who work hard in their ministries. To accomplish the objective of the study the biblical foundation of giving and prosperity were examined, the background, history and synonymous features of the prosperity gospel were evaluated.

Thus, grounded on the result obtained the authors attempt to establish that though God blesses humanity for obeying his command to give, it does not mean that giving is his prerequisite for blessing humankind. The claim that God wants everyone to be rich contradicts the Bible. For no one can instruct God on who to bless and who to curse, therefore the claim that the man of Rhema can decree blessing on humankind according to our giving power is unbiblical.

## Lutheran doctrine of justification

In the Lutheran doctrine of justification by faith (Anderson, Murphy & Burgess 1985:16) it is the belief that Christians are saved by the gracious will of God without merit. God bestows his saving grace upon humanity at no cost or price. It explains that the salvation of humankind comes purely from God for Christ's sake (Bosch 1991:216).

Hence the teaching of justification by faith is at the core of the Reformation rooted in the mandate Jesus gives the disciples to go on a mission and make more disciples (Mt 20:28). Having received the authority from heaven Jesus mandated his disciples to make more disciples. Ott, Strauss and Tennent (2010:35) observe that after the redemption through his death and resurrection, Jesus gives his disciples an explicit mandate to bring the gospel to the nations. Ott *et al.* (2010:96) explain that the gospel is a message of God's grace and freedom that proclaims what God has done and continues to do for humanity. Thus, any form of preaching that contradicts the original message of the gospel needs urgent attention. It is according to this introduction that the authors wish to bring to light that the message of the prosperity gospel is contrary to the teaching of justification by faith and the explanation of the gospel as Ott *et al.* (2010) put it is.

Biblical scholars have observed that there are indeed some passages in the Bible that teach about giving and prosperity. Some biblical injunctions on the subject of justification are highlighted

1.The Krahn of Liberia believe in evaluating a situation based on the existing platform as a premise.

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in this study. However, the primary aim of studying these passages is to discover the text that supports the claim that believers can earn God's blessing based on our giving power to the church, our pastor and the needy. According to Davidson (1993:51) the biblical concept of giving comes to light in the narrative of Cain and Abel in the book of Genesis chapter 4 when the two brothers offered unto God the first fruits of their earnings as a sign of thanksgiving and appreciation for the prosperity received for their livelihood as farmers. Other lessons on giving in the Old Testament are expressed in the books of Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Joshua and Jeremiah.

Westermann (1984:295) argues that in the Bible farmers ascribed the success of their hard labour to the gracious will of God, and thus, they reciprocated his love with appreciation. In the narrative of Genesis 4, God only finds favour with Abel's offering. In answering the essential question why God finds favour with Abel's offering Westermann (1984:296) argues that the pleasant description of Abel's gift as 'fat and firstborn' of his livestock is indicative that he highly reveres the Lord in his manner of giving. His heart was right with God and hence his sacrifice was accepted.

Though much was not said about Cain's gift Davidson (1993:52) implies that the rejection of his gift stemmed from the way in which he offered it to God. God looks at the motive and the way the offering is offered unto him: 'And Abel also brought an offering – fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock' (Gn 4:4). The passage can be explained that Abel's giving was carefully planned and done with a sincere heart and honesty. In this regard, Olford (2000:40) observes that Christians are called to give generously, with joy, as a fruit of the spirits within us. Abel gives to God with a joyous heart without any form of grumbling or precondition.

The Genesis passage draws out the biblical principles of giving which Christians can apply to their situations. It draws the attention to the fact that Christians should desire to give from the depth of their hearts in accordance with their means and earnings. Christians must have the desire and willingness to give in proportion to what the giver has given them, and of such the gifts will be acceptable to God. Forms of giving that follow the narrative of Cain and Abel in the Old Testament were, free will, charitable and mandated offering. This, according to scholars is what the Bible teaches and should be the manner in which believers should help the needy (Alcorn 1984:230). In summary, the Bible teaches believers to give as it is commanded by God, and that must be done cheerfully, with a pure heart, right motive, humble heart, sincerity, honesty and to the glory of the father (Alcorn 1984:230–238).

### Prosperity gospel defined

The definition of prosperity according to the *Oxford advanced learner's dictionary* (Turnbull 2010:2332) is the state of being successful, especially in the accumulation of wealth. The definition of prosperity in light of this study is the

'accumulation of wealth and good health based on one's good work or giving power to the church' (Coleman 2000). However, the question is raised, whether God limits this covenant of prosperity to just earthly riches? How can we reconcile this teaching that God wants everyone to be rich, to the observation of Bonk (1991:89) who notes that earthly prosperity is 'inherently dangerous' to our spirituality. Bonk's argument is meant to make a clear distinction between our human desire and God's purpose and will. In further explaining Bonk's argument, the purpose of God is that as a gracious and merciful father, he would provide for our needs.

The covenant of prosperity that was made with Adam at the time of creation was reiterated to Noah (Gn 6:9–17), Abraham (Gn 12:1–9) the prophets and the apostles. The Lord told Abraham that 'I will make you prosperous and make your name great, and all nations will be blessed through you' (Gn 22:17). The book of Genesis later recounted Abraham as a wealthy, prosperous and successful servant of God. The story noted that the success of Abraham was attributed to his obedience and his quest to do the will of God. The message of Joshua (Jos 1:8) to the Israelites also echoes that human prosperity is rooted in doing the will of God and that which is pleasing to God. According to Hamlin (1983:6–7) the prosperity professed by Joshua refers to the success of the humble servant who abides in the Lord. It can be argued that if Christians remain in the Lord in spite of their earthly hardship, they will surely succeed in overcoming impediments in their lives. Joshua's teaching makes it clear that the success of the Israelites depends on how they revere God in their day-to-day affairs. Hence it can be deduced from Hamlin's (1983:6–7) argument that Joshua told the Israelites that their success as children of God depended on how they applied the principles of God in their lives and lived by them. In the same way, the success of Abraham was due to his obedience and doing the will of God.

Joshua's message that Christians' prosperity is contingent on their willingness to live according to God's purpose was re-echoed by the prophet Jeremiah (Jr 29:11–13). The exhortation is meant to teach the people to wait patiently on the divine purpose of God (Nicholson 1975:46). The point is that despite the Christians' affliction God would deliver them and give them a better future.

Under the dispensation of grace, all forms of giving originate from God himself. Christians give to acknowledge God as their creator, gracious, merciful father and redeemer who first gave to us his only-begotten son (Jn 3:16–17) so that through him, the world can be saved. According to Lincoln (2005:154) the gift of God to humanity is an eternal one intended to rescue the perishing world. God the Creator loved his creation so much that he averted its destruction by sending the divine gift, his only-begotten son, so that the world can be saved through him. The underlining argument here is 'giving'. It portrays that all forms of giving started from God himself and the divine gift has saved the world. The 'divine gift' set the stage for the justification of humanity.

God demonstrated his love toward humankind whilst we were still sinners (Rm 6:23). Melancthon (1992:151) affirms that the righteousness of humankind is imputed on account of Christ. This is the demonstration of divine love.

Wicke (1992:177) on his part professes that giving is the means of expressing our humanity, trust, confidence and faith in our Creator. Another biblical passage which is imperative to this study is the narrative of the widow's mite. In addressing this passage and its significance Wicke (1992:178) states that the central idea is more than just giving. According to him, the passage is not just about giving, but the way the offering is offered. The widow gave her offering in a humble spirit, which expresses her faith and humility to God. It portrays that despite her poverty, she was trusting in God for survival regardless of what she might get in return. The widow's manner of giving contrasts that of the rich who boastfully express their wealth through an offering. Once again, Jesus draws our attention to the fact that he does not look at the value of the gift but the heart and motive of the giver.

Paul in some of his letters encourages the Christians of the early church to give generously from their hearts to charity and in support of the church in Jerusalem. Valleskey (1992:129) points out that the key word is 'giving generously'. This form of offering has no precondition before God. Paul urges the Christians of his time to give without any condition and strings attached, but with humility and sincerity. Relating this argument back to the scenario of the widow, Wicke (1992:177) professes that our gifts are only acceptable to God if they come from hearts filled with love and trust. So the act of giving generously portrays and highlights the attitude of the giver and not the gift itself. Our gifts and offering should illustrate our thankfulness and appreciation for his glorious gift.

Paul's letter describes the grace that God gave the Macedonian churches, that despite their poverty they gave willingly to support the ministry. Paul attributed the generosity of the Macedonians to the reconciliatory action of God, that is, his grace. He explains that God gave them the willingness to give the little they had in support of the ministry with joy and happiness, and without pride, motive or expecting any reward. Looking at the fact that the early church built its foundation on the basis of giving willingly and without expecting a reward, how then did some of the theologians of our time equate God's blessing to monetary giving? The question that comes to mind is: Why did the Macedonians give so generously when, in fact, they themselves were poor?

Paul intended to use the example of the Macedonians to encourage the Corinthians to follow suit. The Macedonians showed that spiritual maturity leads to material generosity. As the Bible is the ultimate of all Christian's doctrines, we

are to follow suit and note the central message of Paul and contextualise it to our situation that giving is the fruit of faith. From the above passage, Valleskey (1992:136) deduces that Paul taught the Corinthians to be sincere, loving and generous and demonstrate their faith by the way in which they live. In the text Paul uses the example of Jesus, who gave his life for humanity as the bedrock of all giving:

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes, he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich. (2 Cor 8:9)

Paul explains that though Jesus is God, he willingly gave up his heavenly throne to save us (Phlp 2:5-8). 'He became a curse for us so that we might escape the curse and be blessed instead (Galatians 3:13). Because of the willingness of Christ to give his life, we share in his heavenly riches' (Grace Communion International n.d.). With God paying the ultimate sacrifice in giving up his life for our justification, we too are expected to do the same by giving of our earthly riches for the things of God.

In Paul's farewell speech to the Ephesians, he addresses another important issue on giving. He endorses diligence amongst them and charitable giving. In the same way Morris (2004:106) observes in the book of Luke (3:11) that Christians are taught the virtues of loving each other by sharing with those who do not have. Another passage that is parallel to Paul's letter on giving to the needy is Luke (6:38).

## Give and be blessed – modern gospel teaching

Horton (1990:28) argues that the prosperity gospel is the modern gospel that is marketed to consumers and not proclaimed to penitent sinners. Concurrent with Horton's argument is Stott's (1984:226-227) observation that the movement preaches that God has empowered them to help believers get out of their liability and meet their financial needs. It is proclaimed that it is the will of God that people should prosper so they can give abundantly in spreading the gospel.

The prosperity gospel is another form of Pentecostalism which Ceser and Richard (2000:6) trace to the formation stage of the movement. Pentecostalism is sometimes referred to as faith gospel started on 312 Azusa Street by Seymour and Parham in 1901 and 1906 respectively. It was after Seymour was excommunicated from the Church of Nazarene for claiming that God has a third blessing for humanity, 'the baptism of the holy spirit'. Ceser and Richard further argue that the movement started due to the doctrinal differences that existed between the two pastors at the time due to their racial background. According to Seymour (in Hollenweger 1999:46-47) God empowered him to bridge the racial gap and integrate Christians of different races, white and black, as one.

In citing Harrell (1975:83–88, 1985:450–58), Horn (1989:6–7) believes that Oral Roberts is undoubtedly the Pentecostalist, who laid the foundation for the faith movement.<sup>2</sup> In his healing ministry, Roberts urges his followers to ‘release’ their faith in order to receive God’s healing. In Horn’s perception, Roberts is the first faith preacher who formalised the teaching of the movement by writing a book called *God’s formula for healing*. Similarly, Coleman (2000:40–47) concurred with Horn’s argument, and recounted the account of Barron, who stated that Oral Roberts discovered 3 John 2 ‘with its message that you will prosper and be in good health as your soul prospers’ (Barron 1987:62–63). Coleman further explains that Oral Roberts created a *blessing path* whereby he promised subscribers an incredible financial breakthrough within a year. Oral’s ‘seed faith concept’, claims that God replaced tithing with ‘the give and be blessed’ phenomenon. Coleman (2000:41–44) also argues that Oral Roberts professed that if one sowed it, then God would grow it. Jones and Woodbridge (2011:27) on their part argue that the movement originates from the ‘New thought movement’, in 1855. This movement professed that confession and positive thought could lead an individual to the realisation of his thoughts and dreams. They stated that the movement’s main philosophy was that through right thinking one’s belief may be brought into actualisation (Jones & Woodbridge 2011:27) or reality. The writers’ argument was that if Christians have positive thoughts about their lives and become optimistic about situations around them that could easily motivate them in bringing their dream into reality.

Asamoah (2005) on his part defines the prosperity movement as:

a Christian group that emphasises salvation in Christ as a transformative experience wrought by the Holy Spirit in which pneumatic phenomena, including speaking in tongues, prophesies, visions, healings, and miracle in general, are perceived as standing in historical continuity with the experience of the early church as found especially in the Acts of the Apostles, are sought, accepted values and encourage members as signifying the presence of God and experience of his Spirit. (pp. 11–12)

Concurrent with Asamoah’s definition is the view of Westerlund (2009:1) that the movement was primarily concerned with the working of the Holy Spirit and the practice of spiritual gifts. This means that the movement claimed to portray the traditional mode of worship and practice as exhibited by the early Christians.

The person who turned the healing ministry into a fundraising mechanism is A.A. Allen (Horn 1989:34–35; Harrell 1975:74f.). Horn argues that Allen viewed prosperity

<sup>2</sup>After he embraced prosperity doctrine, Oral Roberts’s best-known and most far-reaching brainchild was the Seed-Faith message. Roberts taught that money and material things donated to his organization were the seeds of prosperity and material blessings from God, and that God *promises* to multiply in miraculous ways whatever is given – and give many times more back to the donor. It was a simple, quasi-spiritual get-rich-quick scheme that appealed mainly to poor, disadvantaged, and desperate people. It generated untold millions for Roberts’s empire and was quickly adopted by a host of similarly-oriented Pentecostal and Charismatic media ministries. The Seed-Faith principle is the main cash-cow that built and has supported vast networks of televangelists who barter for their viewers’ money with fervent promises of “miracles” – and the miracles are invariably described in terms of material blessings, mainly money’ (MacArthur 2009).

not as part of God’s blessing to all believers, but as a charismatic gift given to him to bestow upon his followers. In citing Harrell (1975:200), Horn (1989:34) explains that Allen announced that he had received:

a new anointing and a new power to lay hands on the believers who gave \$100 toward the support of his outreach and bestow upon each of them the power to get wealth. (p. 34)

This history is significant because it traced how the fundraising practice in faith churches was an ongoing process from the past. Horn further pointed out that Allen taught believers that not all Christians had the gift to bestow ‘the power to get wealth’; he predicted that God would use other powerful Christians to bestow riches on believers.

Westerlund (2009:5) traced early Pentecostalism in Africa to its formation period in 1906. After the Azusa revival, missionaries were sent around the globe, noticeably, Brazil, Africa and other places. The first Pentecostal missionaries on the continent were sent to Liberia and later to South Africa in the same year. According to Westerlund, it is the effort of African preachers that spread the denomination on the continent.

Pentecostalism according to Westerlund (2009:1) is a renewal movement within Christianity that places special emphasis on a direct personal experience with God through the baptism of the Holy Spirit:

The term Pentecostal is derived from Pentecost, the Greek name for the Jewish Feast of Weeks that is related to the Passover of the Jews. For Christians, this event celebrates the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the followers of Jesus Christ, as described in the second chapter of the Book of Acts. (Coleman 2000:20–21)

In describing the theology of Pentecostalism Jenkins (2006:12) argues that the movement mostly emphasised a prophetic, inspired and mystical teaching, and often applied a prophetic exegesis to a scriptural text. To every part of scripture, the movement tends to attach prophetic meaning and interpretation. In this case, it is believed that to every phenomenon, there is a spiritual meaning and interpretation.

According to Jenkins (2006:90–93) this doctrine is grounded in the interpretation of biblical texts like Malachi, 2 John, Psalm 91, Galatians, Mark and many others. The Pentecostal movement views the Bible as a contract between God and humankind and that God would only deliver on his promises if humanity has faith in him. Confessing these promises to be true is perceived as an act of faith, which God will honour. According to this contract God promises to give prosperity to believers who live by pouring out their faith.

In order to gain the hearts and minds of the African society the Pentecostal movement tends to proclaim its message in the African setting. It tends to contextualise its message to suit the African audiences and in so doing, it integrates some elements of the African traditional religion. According to Pretorius *et al.* (1987:141) contextualisation is the application of the gospel in a specific context in order to make it relevant for that context.



Prior to the coming of Christianity to the continent, there existed an African traditional religion (Pretorius *et al.* 1987:115–123). In this religion, Africans mostly paid homage to their ancestors through the priest, diviner, healer and many others. Misfortune, disasters and all negativities in life are attributed to magical ‘forces’ (Pretorius *et al.* 1987:115–122). The African traditional religion was used as the tool for divination replacing the arsenal of traditional oracles (Jenkins 2006:37).

In the African traditional religion, to appease the wrath of the ‘Supreme Being’ or cleanse a person from evil attacks, an offering is required. These practices are still practiced widely today amongst the faith movements in which the Bible is regarded as a sacred object with inherent power that can defeat evil power and spirit. Jenkins (2006:35–37) points out that the African traditional religion draws a comparison between a biblical text and passages that talk about evil – these are sources of constant fear in the African societies.

The prosperity gospel preachers claim to have the ammunition and spiritual tools that can intervene to protect and deliver believers from these attacks (Jenkins 2006:37, 104–106). According to Jenkins (2006) these preachers often claim that:

the spirit and anointing of the Lord is upon them to preach the gospel to the poor, heal the broken hearted, restore the sight of the blind and set the captive free. (p.105)

He further argues that the claimed deliverance is often linked to ‘political and social liberation’, (Jenkins 2006:13). There are many contexts and factors that contribute to the proliferation or rapid growth of the prosperity gospel in Africa. Nevertheless, for the scope of the article, the study closely examined poverty, consumerism, utilitarianism and globalisation. Cultural factors constitute practices or the way of life of the African people that ‘give way’ to the rapid growth or expansion of the prosperity gospel movement on the continent. Whilst the social factors in this study refer to the facts and experiences of the African people that influenced the acceptance of the prosperity gospel on the large scale.

According to Gehman (1989:140) African traditional religion usually associates every phenomenon in the life of an individual with holiness that is something that only happens as the outcome of a particular choice or action. The religion holds the view that actions are right in as much as they tend to promote happiness, and considered wrong if their consequences bring about pain for erroneous doing (Gehman 1989:140–143). The ancestors of Africans usually punish members of the society for wrongdoing but reward them for their good deeds (Gehman 1989:152–154). That is, if an individual or community pleases the ‘Supreme Being’, wealth, happiness, health and the progress of the society is ensured. Vice versa, there are dire consequences if religious men or the community go against the will of the supernatural. This argument supports Guma and Milton’s (1997:65–67) observation that the blessings and happiness in human lives are not instantaneous but are the outcome

from choices and decisions. This religious idea of the African people has always taken its orientation from their ancestors. The ancestors kindle and direct the affairs of the people. It can be argued that this historical religion of the African people has helped to shape their perception about God.

This practice brings into focus the theory of utilitarianism, according to which happiness and pains are evoked by choice or action taken by human beings. According to Cavalier’s (n.d.) Utilitarianism Theory:

Utilitarianism is a normative ethical theory that places the locus of right and wrong solely on the outcomes (consequences) of choosing one action or policy over other actions or policies.

Against the background of this argument, it is easy to mark out the similarities between the practice of the African traditional religion and the prosperity gospel (Lausanne Theology Working Group 2008–2009). These religious practices pinned the blessing on humankind from the ‘Supreme Being’ in the performance of religious rites and choices. Humanity can only be blessed based on the merits of its actions or choices. An open invitation is extended daily to Africans to bring their fear and anxieties about witches, sorcerers, bad luck, poverty, illness and all kinds of misfortunes to the ‘Supreme Being’ (Mbiti 1975:55–56). These problems can only be solved if the believer performs the prescribed rites of either ‘sowing seed’ or offering sacrifice to the ancestors.

According to the prosperity gospel Christians who decide to give are sure of God’s blessings or happiness. Giving is depicted as a means of enjoying happiness. The merging or reconciliatory effect between these religions provides for the rapid growth of the prosperity gospel within the African context.

In this study poverty refers to the social hardship typified by the absence of social services and a poor standard of living (O’Connor 1991:1). In some cases, poverty can be attributed to the exclusion, deprivation, oppression, domination and alienation of certain individuals or groups (O’Connor 1991:6). Jenkins (2006) and Cowan Fellowship Church (n.d.) allude to this fact when they say:

In Africa, where a majority of the population lives on one dollar a day, churches promoting the practical benefits of religion such as preached by the prosperity gospel are normally full. (pp. 91, 95)

In some instances, the ineffectiveness of the state to provide basic services makes the prosperity theology seem as true liberation. The congregants and believers in the prosperity gospel movement look up to their spiritual leaders and the church as a ‘billow of hope’ (Coleman 2000:36).

Moreover, to interact and integrate its belief amongst the people the contemporary media are used as a mode of communication. The Christian Broadcasting Network by Pat Robertson (Coleman 2000:29), Tele-evangelical Healing by Oral Roberts, and Television Ministry by Jim Swaggart and Tammy Baker led the trans-national network of Christians, comprising of congregations, networks, fellowships, and

mega churches across the globe (Coleman 2000: 23). This global denominational affiliation has influenced the African Christian's way of worship and perception (Coleman 2000:13). For instance, some of the charismatic churches in Africa hold membership of the International Communion of Charismatic churches, the Charismatic Bible Ministries and the International Convention of faith ministry, making it easier for the African preachers to adopt the mode of worship from other parts of the world.

This argument is substantiated by Platt's (2010:10) observation that the prosperity gospel has its root in the American dream – a dream that pursues materialism as a fundamental source of happiness. Furthermore, the media theology also helps to disseminate its messages to the people across the globe. The media theology broadcasts its preaching, that God wants all Christians to be rich and live a wonderful and trouble-free life (Coleman 2000:56). The global affiliation also helps to boost the morale of local African preachers who enjoy the visibility of their presence in the media to enhance their prestige and authority by legitimising their claims and status as prophets sent by God to bestow blessings upon his people (Coleman 2000:58).

In the global context, they are portrayed or introduced to congregants as 'Men of God', who travel extensively to other parts of the world to preach, heal and perform miracles. 'The spiritual import here is that each of the pastors lay claim to the command in mission conferred by Christ during their calling into the ministry' (Coleman 2000:59). These arguments underscore the reasons why the prosperity gospel is undoubtedly embraced on the continent. African charismatic Christians believe their religious practices are in conformity with other denominations around the globe (Coleman 2000:35).

Another argument is the concept of consumerism. Consumerism in the broader sense refers to the preoccupation and inclination toward the buying of consumer goods and services, not as a necessity but for their fashion appeal. The term is a multi-meaning word but the study only focuses on the theological implication of the concept. From the theological perspective, it is regarded as an 'excessive, even pathological preoccupation with consumption' (Platt 2010:21); that is buyers are so obsessed with acquiring consumer goods at an unsatisfactory pace. In other words, consumers' tastes of consumption are very high. They have the taste of wanting every fashion and luxury now.

The obsession with created or material things causes an imbalance between the way humanity relates or understands God from the biblical standpoint to the human way of life. According to Alcorn (1984:65) scripture alludes to the pathologies that people who pursue wealth at the expense of Christian norms and teaching often fall into temptation and a trap that ruins their spiritual life. Alcorn (1984:54–55) further argues that wealth pervades scripture. He buttressed this argument by citing the following biblical examples. Achan's lust for wealth brought death to him, his family and

his men at war (cf. Jos 7); Delilah's betrayal of Samson to the Philistines for wealth, (Jdg 16), Solomon's mass accumulation of wealth led to social vices (Dt 17:16–17).

The going arguments bring into focus some general signs and features that are common to the prosperity gospel movement – these are characteristics one can easily recognise in almost all the prosperity gospel movements around the globe, they include spirituality, healing, prophecy, speaking in tongues, prayers and personal commitment to God, material prosperity and good health (Coleman 2000:28). In discussing the prosperity gospel or Pentecostalism in the global arena an attempt is made to construct an interpretation of what the movement believes to be spiritual or holy. The term spirituality in the prosperity gospel according to Land (2003:13) 'is an integration of beliefs and practices in the affections which are themselves evoked and expressed by those beliefs and practices.'

Land (2003:23) further explains that spirituality in Pentecostalism refers to righteousness, holiness and the power of God. To be regarded as a spiritual person one must live a life that is supernatural or extraordinary. The spiritual person in this case is a person who lives a life beyond reproach and is seen as a righteous and upright individual in the community. The marks of spirituality according to the prosperity gospel preachers involve fasting, speaking in tongues, raising of hands during worship services as an expression of emotional attitude as either joy, sorrow, and with the confidence of being comforted by the Holy Spirit.

Miraculous healing (Coleman 2000:23–68) also forms an integral part of the prosperity gospel. It is believed that through the working of the Holy Spirit God rewards the faithful with spiritual and physical healing. This form of healing encompasses all miraculous healing from physical illness, spiritual attack, social and political problems and economic empowerment through a spiritual provision of jobs (Jenkins 2006:13, 113–124). Asamoah (2005:13) asserts that most often members of this movement recount their healing experience in gathering to portray Christ as a saviour who listens to the plight of the faithful. Another term that is interchangeably used with healing in the prosperity gospel churches is deliverance. In this case, unforeseen circumstances that tend to hinder one's progress in life are linked to evil forces that lead to deliverance or healing. Explaining the concept of good and evil, Jenkins (2006:08) explains that in the African society, believers are made to believe that God would deliver them from all terror and heal them of all diseases.

Spiritual healing and deliverance according to him (Jenkins 2006:104) are based on the interpretation of the letter to the Ephesians:

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, the authorities, the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. (Eph 6:12)

Jenkins (2006:104) further stated that according to this passage – and many other passages in the Bible – believers are made to leave medical facilities in the event where there is a need for medical care with the fear that they will be portrayed as lacking in faith.

Other synonymous features of the prosperity gospel according to Asamoah (2005:10–12) are prophecy, revelation and vision. Faith preachers during church services or Christian gatherings habitually claim that they receive a special visitation, visions and supernatural revelation from God and that through the divine visitation God commands them to foretell the future to their audiences. Referring to Moyo's (2012) article, he narrated that the prophet in Zimbabwe prophesied to his audience, that the Lord would break all the boundaries of failures, sicknesses and all evil spirits. He would give you joy and happiness, and husbands and wives. Moyo (2012) further explains that the prophet sometimes addressed some of his audiences directly, saying that God would bring their suffering to an end, and reward their faithfulness with wealth, health and happiness.

The major element of these prophecies is the claim that if the audiences give their money to God by giving to the church, their prayer will be answered and their financial problems in the world of growing human needs will be solved. These prophecies tend to stimulate the minds of their hearers to give their hard-earned income to the prophet with the intention of being rewarded by God for their faithfulness like the person mentioned by Jones and Woodbridge (2011:13) who gave with the intention of being rewarded financially by God for her contribution. The person after that became delusory, angry and bitter when her prayer for financial breakthrough did not happen.

Testimony is another feature in which believers testify to the manifestation of God's power. During church services or in theological books, for example, in the story of Roche narrated by Muller (2000:2–6) believers relate their stories of how God answered their prayers in various forms, through their encounter with the Holy Spirit. Some testified of being healed, of finding a husband, of getting a better job, new houses, and so on. These blessings are attributed to the fact that the prophets prophesied during previous services for a successful material and spiritual life, and for complying with the prophet's call to sow a faithful seed (Moyo 2012). For instance Parkman (2009:115) narrated a story about how his prayer earned a financial blessing for someone he prayed for.

These testimonies are meant to sensitise other congregants not to take the prophecy of the prophet lightly as he or she is the true representation of God. For God speaks directly through his prophet, who has the power and authority from him to pronounce life and death and at the same time perform miracles amongst God's children. These testimonies are in the form of success stories. The congregants are given the platform to explain and compare their past life experience to all present. They portray that giving (Moyo 2012) as instructed by the prophet or man of God has enabled them

to progress and become successful. Some may even say that, 'I am no more barren', 'have a husband now', 'got a good job', 'bought a house' – all because when I gave, the Lord answered my prayers in return (Moyo 2012).

Similar to public confession is the speaking in tongues as a sign of being baptised with the Holy Spirit. Congregants or faithful children of God speak in tongues during church services. The act of speaking in tongues usually occurs in a prayer session during worship services. It is interpreted to mean that a faithful believer is receiving a vision and revelation from God. Biblical history in the Acts of the Apostle has it that when the Holy Spirit descended on the believers, they spoke in tongues. People who speak in tongues are seen to be the faithful children of God to whom he speaks (Hogues 2010:75–78). The study took a closer look at the mode of the calling of the preacher to the public ministry. It is believed that most prosperity preachers are called by the Holy Spirit.

Another aspect of this study that caught the attention of the author is the glamorous lifestyle of faith preachers. Jenkins (2006:93–97) describes the lifestyle of these prosperity gospel preachers as corrupt and lavish. He explicitly mentions that these men of God amass riches at the expense of the masses. To back his argument, he narrated a scenario in which a renowned prosperity gospel preacher, Matthew Ashimolowo, was accused of financial mismanagement and corruption. An internal investigation in Ashimolowo's church accused him of lavishly spending £120,000 for his birthday party and luxurious Mercedes car.

In relating the story of the African setting Jenkins mentions that these preachers live a luxurious life amongst the people whose 'world in which survival seems impossible due to poverty' (Jenkins 2006:99–103). Jenkins' story is an illustration that many Ashimolowos traverse the continent today with the claim of having the ability and spiritual ways to make the faithful rich. Another opinion that correlates Jenkins's views is the article of the Lausanne theology working group on the prosperity gospel (Lausanne Theology Working Group 2008–2009).

The Lausanne Theology Working Group (2008–2009)<sup>3</sup> describes the lifestyle of these preachers as flamboyant and extravagant. They believe that the lifestyles of these pastors are inconsistent with what they preach. The group also noted that the emphasis of these preachers is often on fundraising rather than on preaching the actual gospel. In citing Sahara Reporters Magazine Ekeke (2012) stated that Pastor Oyedepo and Pastor Chris of Nigeria had amassed \$150 million and \$30 respectively in a relatively short time through the ministry of the prosperity gospel. These rich pastors are far richer than their surroundings. They own properties at home and abroad worth millions of dollars, whilst some of their congregants barely make ends meet.

3. The Lausanne Theology Group African chapter made a study on the prosperity gospel and came out with a statement which was published in their report in September 2009.



Additionally, the prosperity gospel portrays faith as a medium or heavenly force through which a believer can bring success into reality. According to Coleman (2000:150) the movement regards faith as the supernatural force which believers can use to get whatever success they desire in their lives. It is the instrument which believers can use for self-actualisation or achieving their dreams. The movement proclaims that believers can experience the power of the Holy Spirit and the presence of the Divine through faith. Parkman (2009:114; cf. Pr 18:21) agrees with this idea that the tongue has a power over life and death. Therefore, Christians should always speak positive things about their lives. Parkman (2009:115) further stresses that life and death lies on the tongue. But with faith, Christians must always speak positive things about themselves, their lives and their surroundings.

The argument is that Christians are taught to believe that whatever they desire or long for in life can be achieved through faith. In propounding on the concept of faith, Hill (2007) writes that:

faith is the head chemist of the mind, when blended with the vibrations of thought, the subconscious mind instantly picks up the vibration, translates it into its spiritual equivalent and transmits it to infinite intelligence as in the case of prayer. (p. 40)

Arguing further he (Hill 2007:53–54) explains that faith can remove limitations and bring thoughts and desires into reality. According to him when faith is combined with positive thoughts and belief, it can lead an individual to tremendous riches.

## Summary

It is crystal clear from the ongoing arguments that interpretation of the gospel is essential in understanding the message as well as influences of the perceptions generated from hearing the gospel. Hesselgrave (1978:220) argues that the language and exposition of the gospel transforms an individual to generate a belief. He notes that the truth of God is revealed in the propositions of the Old and New Testament and must be understood in their historical and grammatical senses. He further observes that the Bible is not the product of holy men who intuited reality and attempted to convey some small measure of truth concerning ineffable experiences by means of inscrutable propositions.

Rather, the Bible is the product of interactions of human beings and God whose words were inbreathed, or inspired. Therefore, in citing Augustine, Hesselgrave argues that preachers must interpret and preach the gospel without altering its original message.

There are two things necessary to the treatment of scripture: A way of discovering (*modus inveniendi*) those things which are to be understood, and a way of expressing to others (*modus proferendi*) what we have learned. (Hesselgrave 1978:26)

It is believed that the preacher is the custodian of his flock who are the receptors of the message of Christ. For the preacher is called and ordained to confess in accuracy and humility the

message of scripture, by uncovering and recovering the main gospel of Christ (William 1981:17).

In the case of the prosperity gospel, attempts to establish that the 'encasing' of its message in the 'human context' has served as a fitting vehicle for its brand of communication on the continent (William 1981:17). It is construed that preachers use indigenous systems and situations in providing interpretations of the word of God. The 62% perception average mentioned in William's article, illustrates that the theology of prosperity is widely grounded and accepted on the continent. The perception average means that 62% of the studied population (William 1981:18) concurred with or fully accepted the teachings of faith gospel. This observation is corroborated by Jenkins's (2006:12) study that the Pentecostal movement has made about 350 million disciples for Christ worldwide. He stresses that the movement ranks as the largest Christian movement on the globe. Despite the prosperity gospel preachers' global headway, they ignore the hermeneutical and exegetical principles of communicating the message of Christ to the world (Lausanne Theology Working Group 2008–2009). According to Kaiser and Silva (1994:19) exegesis and hermeneutics are vital to the proclamation of the gospel. These principles require that a preacher needs to carefully and systematically study a passage in order to arrive at its intended interpretation and meaning.

Kaiser and Silva further argue that a preacher needs to look up the history, the context of the text and the grammar of a given text before applying it to the situation of the receptor or audiences, for the precise meaning (William 1981:17) of a text is usually influenced by its context. Similarly, to understand the events and messages of the Bible the context must be thoroughly analysed (Kraft 1978:86–87). The history of the text is also significant in preaching the gospel. It explains what happened at the time when the message was preached to the people. For the timing of the text also has a bearing on its meaning and purpose. Finally, the grammar of the text gives the message its exact meaning (Horton 1990:73–75).

However, prosperity preachers do not adhere to these ethics in preaching the gospel to the masses. Faith preachers' rejection of these core values leads to misinterpretation and manipulation of the gospel and gives it a different and wrong meaning. For instance, faith preachers use self-defined images and understanding in interpreting texts such as John 10:10, Malachi 3:10, Mark 11:24, Job 1:3–9, and others. Another hermeneutical and exegetical error of the prosperity gospel in the study is the definition ascribed to faith.

The movement claims that through the power of the mind, power of visualisation, and power of imagination Christians can bring into actualisation their own needs. Faith is considered a medium through which Christians can obtain the longing of their heart and mind by 'naming and claiming them by faith' (Horton 1990:70). The movement's definition of faith altered the true meaning of faith as 'things hoped for and certain of what one has not seen' (Archer 1957:71; cf. Heb 11:1). Scripture explains that faith is the undoubted belief



Christians have in the mysteries of God without seeking proof or evidence for the things of God. In this light, it can be argued further that Christians are saved by faith, live by faith and receive a righteousness of God by faith. Christians have access to the grace of God, stand firm in their belief, receive the promise of the Spirit by faith, and wait for the second coming of Christ – all by faith (Oetting 1970:56–57). Oetting shows that the theology of the early church is Christ centric rather than human defined.

In contrast, the prosperity gospel uses faith to decree health, wealth and happiness that depict faith as a matter of believing in created things rather than believing in God as the Saviour, the Lord and Liberator (Horton 1990:146). The concept of preaching the gospel from the economic perspective of needs and wants makes the human race focus on the greedy perception of consumerism (Winker 1994:44). Faith as things hoped for, points Christianity to the eternal things of assurance yet to come and refutes faith preachers' claim that it can be used as a medium of taking possession of one's wealth and happiness. The spiritualists' exposition of faith simply portrays idolatry as it points humanity to the worship of ungodly things (Horton 1990:146). Stott (1984:226; cf. Eph 1:3) also argues that during the Old Testament time God blessed humanity with material things not because they decreed them through faith but as a father having compassion on his children.

The aforementioned arguments demonstrated that Christians following the faith gospel see God from an economic perspective, rather than the Saviour, merciful father, and maker of all things. Contrasting the above perception Kolb (1993) explains the Christology of Jesus as a phenomenon about the works and person of Christ as stated in the Bible. He explains the personalities of Christ from his human and divine nature that coexist within him. Basing his argument on scripture Kolb accorded the following titles to Christ. The son of man – the son of the living God who came into the world to reconcile the world to God (cf. Mt 16:16). The Lord and God – a deity of Christ that points to him as God (Phlp 2:20). He expounded that Christ atoned the sin of the world, through his death and resurrection.

The Bible teaches that poverty, natural misfortune and destitution in the world are mysteries beyond human understanding. Though there are isolated cases in the Bible where God used Satan to tempt, for example, Job (Alcorn 1984:116; cf. Job 1:6–22) as a means of testing his faithfulness, this cannot be interpreted as that the suffering in the world comes from Satan. These perceptions concur with Elijah Rufus' experience in Liberia, West Africa in which case his mental illness was attributed to evil forces (Mawolo 2013). The religious person from whom he sought help advised him to declare spiritual warfare through fast and prayer against the demons that were tormenting him. Later, according to Mawolo (2013) after years of superstition Elijah was told by a medical practitioner that, in fact, his suffering was the result of a mental illness and not demons, 'having taken part in a lot of rituals and paid huge amounts of money to spiritualists, in the end he was cured by medical professionals.'

Contrary to the belief within the prosperity gospel that suffering, depression, illness and destitution originate from Satan, as they teach, humankind's suffering is not necessarily seen to be coming from Satan. Jesus Christ taught his disciples that the problems of suffering were not always comprehensible as he said: 'If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you ... If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also' (Jn 15:19–20). Suffering is not always as a result of human action or sin. It is also true with the notion of wealth. The notion that wealth comes from God and poverty comes from Satan is an extreme theology that contradicts Jesus' and Paul's teachings in Matthew 16:25 and 1 Timothy 6:10 that our lives are in the hands of God and the love of money leads many people abandoning their faith.

From the ongoing discussions, one can deduce that the prosperity gospel is the selling of blessings much like the priests of the 15th century who sold indulgences in the church (Olivier 2003:55). In assessing the prosperity gospel from a missiological perspective it is indicative, therefore, that the concept is not far from religious commerce. That is when a preacher or man of God, who modifies God's salvation, blessing and favour in exchange for a commodity, it can be said that the gospel has been commercialised. In short, the gospel is termed to be commercialised in the event where it is construed that God can only bless humanity as per a monetary donation (Olivier 2003:56, 82–83).

It can be deduced that the prosperity gospel is detrimental to the sound teachings of scripture, which state that salvation and the blessings of God are the gracious and merciful work of the Creator. According to Liroy (2007) a faith gospel purely contradicts the teaching that humanity is not saved by the merits of our own deeds but by faith through the death and resurrection of Christ. Liroy (2007) stresses that Paul addressed this issue to the Ephesians:

[f]or it is by grace you have been saved, through faith and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God. Not by works, so that no one can boast. (Eph 2:8–9)

It is in this regard that Werning (1975:1982–1983) argues that prosperity theology completely deviates from the core teaching of scripture and replaces it with human interpretation and understanding.

## Conclusion

From the discussion herein, the prosperity gospel refers to situations, persons and scenarios in which the gospel is preached in a fashion of material gain. However, despite the weaknesses of the prosperity gospel, we cannot question the authenticity of the message they preach, but we must continue to stand against their manner of interpreting and explaining the message to our fellow Christians. It is imperative therefore that the gospel is preached in its context, explained well, and the application of the message is in line with the actual text. Let us stand for the truth as it is stipulated in the Bible, which is the optimal of all doctrinal matters. The continual attempt

to manipulate the biblical doctrine of Christ by the prosperity gospel preachers has the potential to cause ineffectiveness and inefficiency to the fundamental teaching of the church.

In conclusion, we must be content with what we have and serve God without any condition. In this regard let us pay heed to Timothy's advice on the matter:

But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many grieves. (1 Tm 6:6–10)

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## Author's contributions

S.T.K. (University of Pretoria) was a project and study leader, E.Z.G. (University of Pretoria) was a researcher assistant and an MA student in the project.

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