

A Critique of Prosperity Theology in the Context of Ghanaian Christianity



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ABSTRACT

The economic situation in contemporary Ghana makes everyone yearn for economic progress. In Ghana, like many other parts of Africa, religion is responsible for providing the economic, spiritual, and health needs of its adherents. The predominantly Christian population in Ghana makes many people look up to Christianity to provide the road map to the country's success. In this regard, the prosperity theology/gospel is the most dominant approach to seeking health and wealth among Ghanaian Christians. Though very persuasive, prosperity theology prompts so much debate about its influence on the religious and socio-economic life of Christians and the society at large. On the one hand, it is considered as promoting unethical behaviour and failing to yield qualitative growth for the church. On the other hand, it is considered as attracting a large following to the Christian faith. The need to evaluate the impact of this type of teaching is an urgent theological and pastoral concern because it is the most appealing Christian approach to socio-economic breakthrough for contemporary Ghanaian Christians. This paper, therefore, sought to address the problem of the lack of a balanced assessment of the prosperity gospel and how its weaknesses can be addressed. The study is a literature-based research that gathered data from publications on the subject matter. Through a critical analysis and evaluation of the information gathered, the authors evaluated the overall impact of the prosperity theology on the holistic life (social, spiritual, economic and political) of its adherents and having noted some pitfalls, recommended how this popular theology can be refined. Apart from providing guidelines for addressing the challenges associated with the prosperity theology, the paper also has the potential of yielding ethical renewal for people to live responsibly as they work toward improving their socio-economic and spiritual lives.

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INTRODUCTION

Richard J. Foster profoundly asserts that one of the major prevailing perversions of the Christian faith promoted by the prosperity gospel is

...that one of the signs of God's blessing is the possession of money, and hence poverty therefore becomes a sign that demonstrates God's displeasure. This has been interpreted to mean a religion of prosperity and personal peace: crudely stated, "Love Jesus and get rich." A lot of believers and churches are soaked with constant knacks for blessedness, all the way from exact mathematical formulas (God will bless you sevenfold) to much more subtle but equally destructive forms.¹

Foster's assertion underscores the flirtation of prosperity preachers with the idol of mammon. He points to the flawed perspective that a person's worth depends on how much wealth he/she possesses. This kind of theology is very influential in Ghanaian Christianity today. Prosperity theology has contagiously spread through almost all

¹ Richard J. Foster, *Money, Sex & Power: The Spiritual Disciplines of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience* (Toronto: Hodder & Stoughton, 1985), 24-25.

denominations in Ghana including the conservative traditional denominations that used to criticize and condemn such inclinations in the past. However, the majority of today's advocates of this gospel belong to the Penteco-Charismatic churches that consider financial blessing, wealth and good health as God's essential ideals and desire for every believer.

In the heart of West Africa lies Ghana, a nation known for its rich cultural traditions, and deep-rooted religious fervor. Among the many themes in the religious sphere of Ghanaian society, one that has gained significant prominence in recent times is the infusion of prosperity theology into the Christian landscape. This theological teaching, characterized by its emphasis on financial success, material wealth, and health as divine blessings, has sparked spirited debates and ignited passionate devotion among Ghanaian Christians.

In this exploration, the research embarks on a journey to scrutinize the multifaceted phenomenon of prosperity theology within the unique context of Ghana. The aim of the paper is not to merely critique, but to engage in a thoughtful and nuanced analysis of how this theological framework has taken root, evolved and intersected with the spiritual lives of Ghanaians. By delving into the historical, cultural, and socio-economic factors, the research seeks to unravel the complexities surrounding prosperity theology's influence on Ghanaian Christians. The article sheds light on the theological interpretations, societal implications, and ethical considerations inherent in this popular theology. The research is literature-based and gathers data from books, journal articles, thesis/dissertation and other publications. The data collected were carefully and critically reviewed and analysed to achieve the purpose of the study.

Defining Prosperity Theology

The expression "prosperity gospel" has been defined as the "Christian worldviews that emphasize an earthly life of health, wealth, and happiness as the divine, inalienable right of all who have faith in God and live in obedience to His commands."² In the view of Paul Gifford prosperity gospel refers to the belief that God through Christ's suffering and death has met all the needs of human beings therefore Christians should now benefit from the victory of Christ over sin, sickness and poverty and have access to these blessings through profound confession of faith.³ Adherents to this theology believe that wealth is a clear signal of God's blessing and lack of faith in God brings the poor into the state of poverty.

Prosperity Gospel in Ghanaian Christianity

Emmanuel K. Anim observes that the churches that preach the prosperity gospel in Ghana are not themselves "the products of the American-type Prosperity Gospel."⁴ Ghanaian/African prosperity preachers have developed locally but have absorbed American-type theology through direct and indirect contact with American prosperity gospel preachers. Therefore, it is important to briefly consider the American root of prosperity theology. Ideologically and sociologically the historical foundation of the prosperity theology could be traced to Kenneth E. Hagin.⁵ While scholars are not unanimous as to whether Hagin formulated the theology himself or plagiarised it from others,⁶ there is consensus that he was the one who popularized what came to be termed the "Word-Faith" teachings. Hagin was born with a deformed heart, an incurable disease which worried him until he received a miraculous healing in August of 1934 at age seventeen.⁷ This miraculous healing and Hagin's association with Pentecostal leaders served as the impetus for the formulation and popularization of his Word-Faith theology which later metamorphosed into what is known today as the prosperity gospel.

From its American origin, prosperity theology spread to other parts of the world including Africa. Some prosperity gospel preachers whose ministries affect the religious landscape in Ghana include Archbishop Benson Idahosa of Benin City in Nigeria,⁸ David O. Oyedepo, "The Pastorprenuer"⁹ of Nigeria's Winners Chapel, and from Ghana, Nicolas Duncan-Williams of Action Chapel, converted Muslim Prophet Salifu of the Jesus Is Alive Evangelistic Ministry, Bishop Charles Agyin Asare of the Perez Chapel International, Mensah Otobil of the Central Gospel Church, among others.¹⁰ In some cases, these pastors preach sermons that have themes and ideas borrowed from their American counterparts. They preach thus: "Ours is not a poor God. He is a millionaire and he will make you all millionaires as I am;

² Stanley M. Burgess, *Encyclopedia of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity*, ed. Stanley M. Burgess (New York/London: Routledge, 2006), 393.

³ Paul Gifford, *African Christianity-Its Public Role* (London: Hurst and Company, 1998), 62.

⁴ Emmanuel K. Anim, "The Prosperity Gospel in Ghana and the Primal Imagination," *Pentvars Business Journal* 4, no. 2 (2010): 66-76, 67.

⁵ Dan McConnell, *The Promise of Health and Wealth* (Sevenoaks: Hodder & Stoughton, 1990). Other major proponents include Fred Price, Kenneth and Gloria Copeland, John Avanzini, Charles Capps and Benny Hinn.

⁶ Dan McConnell believes that Hagin plagiarised most of his ideas from E. W Kenyon. See McConnell, *The Promise of Health and Wealth*.

⁷ Kenneth E. Hagin, *The Believer's Authority*, Legacy Edition (Broken Arrow, OK: Faith Library Publications, 2009), xix.

⁸ Benson Idahosa, *I Choose to Change: The Scriptural Way to Success and Prosperity* (Crowborough: Highland Books, 1987).

⁹ Dominic Umoh, "Superstition and Syncretism: Setbacks to Authentic Christian Practice in Africa" *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention*, Vol. 2. Issue 7, (July 2013): 32-40, 38.

¹⁰ Paul Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 58.

on condition that you donate generously.”¹¹ If asked in which currency God is going to make their followers millionaires, they would talk of foreign currencies such as dollars, pounds, or euros rather than Ghanaian/African local currency. This makes the God of prosperity gospel preachers alien to the local people: He is an international God who cannot “be associated with local currencies that are worth nothing on the global market.”¹²

Nonetheless, Ghanaian/African prosperity gospel preachers sometimes show some level of innovation as they try to localize some of their ideas according to the particularities of their members. Oyedepo, for example, reverses a Western reading of the Scripture when he tells his congregation to be bold and aggressive, roar and shout in prayers to demand their desires by divine right like lions rather than being meek like sheep: “The boldness of my countenance is changed today. My sheep nature is changed to a lion nature.”¹³ Salifu is also noted for his reconceptualization of indigenous concepts of evil with new metaphors in the new gospel. He declares the spiritual battles between witches and water spirits as an ongoing war against Satan’s Air Force and Satan’s Navy.¹⁴ Like their American counterparts, these preachers proclaim that to be blessed rich, one has to make generous donations to these churches.

Major Teachings of Prosperity Theology

Prosperity theology focuses on four specific areas, namely: material salvation/prosperity, divine healing, “sowing seeds” of prosperity and positive confession of faith. Each of these is examined briefly below.

Material Salvation

Prosperity theology is characterised by its heavy emphasis on “material salvation.”¹⁵ The preachers of the prosperity theology desire the rigorous transformation of invisible faith into financial rewards. This movement contends that God wills the financial prosperity of every Christian. Accordingly, God’s favour on the faithful is calculated in terms of material possessions which includes personal achievements, financial assets and business success.¹⁶ Oyedepo, one of the pioneer preachers of the prosperity gospel in Nigeria whose ministry affects many people in Ghana, argues that believers cannot be poor because “God is not happy about seeing his children begging.”¹⁷

Thus, prosperity preachers consider poverty as something outside God’s divine will. To believe the gospel and live in poverty means not living in the intended will of God.¹⁸ Christians are, therefore, encouraged to do all they can to be healed completely from poverty for it is a kind of disease that is attributed to the work of the devil.¹⁹ With this mindset, prosperity preachers attribute poverty primarily to such supernatural causes as witches, demons, and generational curses, and only secondarily to such socio-economic factors as laziness, institutional failure, corruption and poor parenting.²⁰ One, therefore, needs spiritual empowerment to break the chains of poverty.

Prosperity preachers support the teaching on material salvation by arguing, for example, that God’s fulfilment of his promise to bless Abram materially (Gen. 12:1-3; 13:2) is available to all believers because all believers have been made heirs of the Abrahamic covenant (with its promise prosperity) through the atoning sacrifice on the cross (Gal. 3:13-14, 29).²¹ Otabil, therefore, contends that believers cannot be poor because they operate under the Abrahamic covenant.²² Gifford cited Otabil as asserting that divine blessing is proportional to one’s “deposit” (donation to the church or to a church leader).²³ He reveals the purpose of giving, saying, “People think that you should give so that the Church has money. No. The main purpose is that you enter into a Covenant with God so that he “will meet all your needs.”²⁴ Archbishop Nicholas Duncan-Williams opines that sicknesses, fear, retrogression, and inferiority are out of God’s plan for humankind.²⁵ He further argues that God’s word symbolizes the tree of life that bears the fruit of wealth,

¹¹ Umoh, “Prosperity Gospel and the Spirit of Capitalism,” 658.

¹² Umoh, “Prosperity Gospel and the Spirit of Capitalism,” 658-659.

¹³ Gifford, *Ghana’s New Christianity*, 59.

¹⁴ Gifford, *Ghana’s New Christianity*, 194.

¹⁵ Dominic Umoh, “Prosperity Gospel and the Spirit of Capitalism: The Nigerian Story,” *African Journal of Scientific Research* vol. 12, No. 1 (2013): 654-668, 658.

¹⁶ Castor Michael Goliama, “The Gospel of Prosperity in African Pentecostalism: A Theological and Pastoral Challenge to the Catholic Church—With Reference to the Archdiocese of Songea, Tanzania” (Unpublished Doctoral Thesis: University of Vienna, 2013), 143.

¹⁷ David O. Oyedepo, *Understanding Financial Prosperity* (Ikeja: Dominion Publishers, 1997), 7.

¹⁸ Kenneth Copeland, *Laws of Prosperity* (Texas: Kenneth Copeland Publications, 2012), 44.

¹⁹ Lovemore Togarasei, “The Pentecostal Gospel of Prosperity in African Contexts of Poverty: An Appraisal,” *Exchange*, Vol. 40 (2011): 336-350, 339ff.

²⁰ James Kwarteng-Yeboah, *A Re-appraisal of the Prosperity Gospel in African Neo-Pentecostalism: The Potency of “Multiple Modernities” Paradigm* (Unpublished Masters Thesis: Queen’s University, 2016), 45, 49.

²¹ Copeland, *Laws of Prosperity*, 44.

²² Mensah Otabil, *Beyond the Rivers of Ethiopia: A Biblical Revelation on God’s Purpose for the Black Race* (Accra: Altar International, 1992), 24.

²³ Otabil as cited in Gifford, *African Christianity*, 80.

²⁴ As cited in Gifford, 80.

²⁵ Nicholas Duncan-Williams, *You are Destined to Succeed* (Accra: Action Faith, 1990), 58.

dignity, progress and joy (Gen. 2:9; Rev. 22:2-3).²⁶ The point is that every believer has the right to economic success and must, therefore, enjoy material wealth. To enjoy the wealth contained in the Abrahamic covenant, one needs to sow seed.

Sowing Seeds of Prosperity

As noted earlier, advocates of the prosperity theology believe that wealth and riches constitute a covenant and the fulfilment of the divine promise of God to his people. However, God's blessing must be activated by sending money (known as "seed faith") to one's pastor or the church so that the pastor can guide the donor to appropriate this blessing. Given this understanding, prosperity preachers encourage their followers to donate huge sums of money to the church. Pastor Oyedepo teaches that giving in support of the work of God offers the giver the right to socio-economic empowerment.²⁷

The issue of tithing is given much attention by prosperity teachers. They encourage believers to follow Abraham's practice of paying a tithe to Melchizedek, the priest of God (Gen. 14). They also use Malachi 3:10ff and other texts to inspire their followers to pay their tithes in order to avoid God's wrath and enjoy his blessings. Bishop Dag Heward-Mills identifies tithing as the foundation of one's riches and so says, "When you do not pay your tithes, you harm your finances because you take away the foundations of your prosperity."²⁸ This assertion leads to the logical conclusion that hard work is less important than tithing when it comes to one's economic progress. Frederick M. Amevenku and Isaac Boaheng quote a Ghanaian US-based prosperity preacher as describing non-tithing members of his church as people who are "useless in the vineyard!"²⁹ In addition to threatening their followers with curses for not tithing "faithfully," some prosperity teachers attach salvific relevance to the practice of tithing. One of such pastors is Adejare Enoch Adeboye who writes that "Anybody who is not paying his or her tithe is not going to heaven. Some people have taught you that if you do not pay your tithes, God will not give you blessings. This is true, but a little more serious, you do not pay your tithes, and you do not go to heaven."³⁰

Prosperity preachers read a material literalism into Jesus' proclamation in John 10:10. For the prosperity gospel preachers, the abundant life that Jesus brought is characterized by material wealth. Prosperity preachers interpret the freedom that Jesus said will accompany believers having knowledge of the truth (John 8:31-32) as including freedom from poverty. This means that poverty is a form of bondage that every Christian must be released from. Prosperity preachers use Paul's metaphor of sowing and reaping in 2 Corinthians 9:6-11 (cf. Luke 6:38) to encourage their followers to sow (donate bountifully to the church) to reap God's blessing of material wealth. On this, Heward-Mills writes, "Prosperity in its basic form consists of someone sowing a seed and later harvesting the returns."³¹ This works because it is in line with the laws of divine reciprocity ("give and it will be given back unto you").³² The mathematical implication of one's giving is deducible from the following interpretative deduction by Copeland based on Mark 10:29-30: "You can give \$1 for the Gospel's sake and \$100 belongs to you; give \$10 and receive \$1000; give \$1000 and receive \$100,000."³³ Paul's assertion that Jesus became poor so that we may be rich (2 Cor. 8:9), James' encouragement to his audience that they should ask freely from God (James 4:2) and John's prayer for Gaius to prosper and be in health just as he has prospered spiritually (3 John 2) are other texts that are interpreted to adduce arguments to support the prosperity theology.

Faith Healing

The hermeneutical and pastoral tradition of prosperity teachers requires one's faith in Christ to yield a visible transformative and empowering effect on the believer's health. The argument is that Christ nailed all sickness to the cross; therefore, his victory on the cross has dealt with all sicknesses. However, one has to appropriate this therapeutic benefit of the atonement through faith in Christ.

Gloria Copeland marvelled that she "had been looking at finances and prosperity in a different way from other things, such as divine health . . . If a symptom of sickness came on my body, I would not stand for it . . . You should refuse lack just as quickly as you refuse sickness."³⁴ Kenneth E. Hagin claims that "it is God's plan, the demonstration of His love and mercy that believers should never fall sick, live long on earth and that every believer should have eternal

²⁶ Duncan-Williams, *You are Destined to Succeed*, 58.

²⁷ David O. Oyedepo, *Possessing your possession* (Lagos: Dominion Publishing House, 2007), 75.

²⁸ Dag Heward-Mills, *Why Non-Tithing Christians Become poor and How Tithing Christians Become Rich* (Wellington: Lux Verbi, 2009), 1.

²⁹ Frederick M. Amevenku and Isaac Boaheng, *Tithing in the Christian church* (Tema: Kabkork Publication Ltd, 2018), 26.

³⁰ Adejare Enoch Adeboye, *Behold He Cometh* (Lagos: Christ the Redeemer's Ministries, 2003), 44.

³¹ Heward-Mills, *Why Non-Tithing Christians*, 1.

³² Moses Kumi Asamoah, "Penteco/Charismatic Worldview of Prosperity Theology," *African Educational Research Journal* 1, no. 3 (2013): 198-208, 198.

³³ Copeland, *Laws of Prosperity*, 45.

³⁴ As cited in Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American prosperity Gospel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 78.

rest in Jesus.”³⁵ Hagin also denies having a headache for forty-five years, labeling such as “simply symptoms rather than any indication of a headache.”³⁶ In faith healing deliverance is achieved through healing prayers and exorcism rites for the ill and demonically possessed persons. Isaiah 53 and James 5:13-15 are among the common passages quoted by faith healers to support their healing practices.

Positive Confession of Faith

Prosperity gospel preachers teach that to “name it and claim it” or “to say something positive and have it materialized” one has to exercise a positive confession of faith.³⁷ The law of positive confession derives from the doctrine of *imago Dei* (the fact that God created humankind in his own image) and the charge that God gave to humankind to take dominion over the earth (Gen. 1:26-28). The dominion that God gave humankind gives them the power to speak to cause a change in their lives. It is argued that human beings have the power to create because they bear divine *imago* (image).³⁸ Positive confession is seen as the main means by which humans can exercise dominion over their own souls and the things around them. The statement “For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he”(Prov. 23:7 KJV) is used as to encourage people to think positively (in terms of good health and abundant wealth) so that these good things would manifest in their lives.

Prosperity preachers, therefore, encourage their followers to speak positive statements about their lives and expect these statements to change their lives miraculously.³⁹ In line with this thought, prosperity preachers encourage their followers to have positive self-images and think of themselves as winners, not losers, as the head and not the tail. Joel Osteen’s quote below underlines this fact: “God wants us to have healthy, positive self-images, to see ourselves as priceless treasures. He wants us to feel good about ourselves . . . God sees you as a champion . . . He regards you as a strong, courageous, successful, overcoming person.”⁴⁰ Positive confessions are also required to break the curses that bring poverty, illness and backwardness. Faith is, thus, seen as the power that drives materialized events and objects in the real world.

Prosperity preachers believe in the use of different kinds of prayer for different kinds of blessings. In every kind of prayer, one has to confess God’s promises in Scripture by faith and expect God to honour them. These promises are like a contract between God and the believer, whereby the believer needs to fulfil their part for God to fulfil his part. God, being honest and just, is always ready and willing to fulfil his part. What is left is for the believer to fulfil their part through positive confession of these promises.⁴¹ Jeremiah 29:11 is one of the texts that is often quoted in prayer or preaching to assure their followers, in difficult situations of God’s plan of breakthrough which can be enjoyed through positive confession. Also, prosperity preachers deduce interpretatively from Romans 10:8 that the words that one speaks can cause the person’s desire to materialize.⁴² Positive confession of faith is also based on Mark 11:22-24 which says whatever one professes in faith will be done (see also Matt. 21:21-22).

Factors that Make the Prosperity Theology Thrive in Ghana

Why does the Prosperity Gospel seem to anchor its roots easily in Ghana?⁴³ This section attempts to answer the above question by examining four key factors.

Economic Reasons

Prosperity theology appeals to many people because of economic reasons. The Lausanne Theology Working Group rightly observes that the prosperity gospels flourishes in the African context due to the high rate of poverty and the people rely on this doctrine as the only hope in the face of constant frustration, political failures etc., for a better future.⁴⁴ Prosperity gospel promises economic emancipation for all who would practice its principles. This promise strikes at the core of human needs in Ghana. Contemporary Ghana is encountering economic difficulties: There is a high rate of unemployment, the dependency ratio is high, the living standard is low, and many communities lack social amenities, among other. The country continues to rely on external support in the form of grants and loans to survive. As a

³⁵ Kenneth E. Hagin, *Seven things you should know about Divine healing* (Tulsa, Oklahoma: Faith Library 1979), 21.

³⁶ Hagin as cited in Bowler, *Blessed*, 163.

³⁷ Goliama, “The Gospel of Prosperity in African Pentecostalism,” 145.

³⁸ Asamoah, “Penteco/charismatic worldview of prosperity theology,” 199.

³⁹ Asamoah, “Penteco/charismatic worldview of prosperity theology,” 198.

⁴⁰ Joel Scott Osteen, *‘Live Your Best Life Now’: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential*. (Nashville: FaithWords, 2007), 57–58.

⁴¹ Asamoah, “Penteco/charismatic worldview of prosperity theology,” 199.

⁴² Goliama, “The Gospel of Prosperity in African Pentecostalism,” 145.

⁴³ Gleaned from Basilius M. Kasera, *The Biblical and Theological Examination of Prosperity Theology And Its Impact Among The Poor In Namibia* (Masters Thesis: South African Theological Seminary, 2012), 61ff.

⁴⁴ “Statement on Prosperity Gospel” by the Lausanne Theology Working Group, Africa chapter at its consultations in Akropong, Ghana, 8-9 October, 2008 and 1-4 September 2009.

predominantly Christian country most people look up to the Christian religion to provide the roadmap to economic freedom. This is where prosperity preachers come in with their messages of hope.

Oyedepo states that keeping to the covenant of God (referring to giving) gives the Christian financial mandate.⁴⁵ He goes on to write that the only way to acquire enduring wealth is sacrificial giving.⁴⁶ Andile Zulu submits, “The prosperity gospel succeeds by exploiting desperation caused by economic dysfunction and social instability.”⁴⁷ Zulu’s submission points to the fact that socio-economic factors are the main catalysts for the influx of prosperity theology in the public space. Zulu’s point is corroborated by Josephine Soboyejo who contends that “The micro and macro economies retrogression in many African nations enable some charismatic and neo-Pentecostal preachers to incorporate prosperity messages into sermons.”⁴⁸ He adds that people who feel helpless and succumb to the storms of life get relieved with a sense of hope upon hearing the prosperity message.⁴⁹

Consequently, followers are given the assurance that once they give generously their returns will be overwhelming. The promise of economic or financial freedom can be nothing but attractive. The prosperity theology in one way or the other gives hope to the believer that God will make his or her current situation. Due to the predicaments and backwardness that have lured underprivileged Ghanaians, the majority of them embrace the prosperity gospel which offers them hope of restoration. This current study believes that so far as poverty remains one of the biggest challenges in Ghana and the world at large, the populace will continue to rally behind the prosperity gospel because of its attractive ideology to the poor everywhere in the world. Once people are made to believe that donation to the church or a religious leader brings economic prosperity, the real cause of poverty is left unattended. Thus, the focus is shifted to the congregants who are made to believe that it only takes faith to banish poverty from their lives. This is done by severing “poverty from the economic systems and political orders which produced it.”⁵⁰

Emotional Reasons

The second reason for the high patronage of prosperity theology is that it appeals to emotion. Most prosperity preachers appeal to the emotions of their followers rather than their intellect. This is because emotionalism is very appealing as it touches at the very heart of the traditional religious roots of the Ghanaian. Since people are made to feel better emotionally, “they deduce that what they are busy with is true, for if it were wrong, they would not have felt good in the first place.”⁵¹ People jump, shout and do all sorts of gymnastics during church services in response to messages of prosperity. They get attracted to it because its emotional aspect makes them feel better. At the end people equate what is popular with what is authentic. One also has to note that the emotional aspect of prosperity theology draws from the traditional African religious thought and practice in which worshippers are made to feel emotionally good through the display and ministration of the traditional religious leader.

Spiritual Reasons

Most Ghanaians follow the prosperity gospel because of spiritual reasons. The religious and spiritual indigenous Ghanaians depend much on the power of the spoken word in shaping social relations. Africans believe that whenever a word is expressed either verbally or through gestures, it has the power to destroy or create. Likewise, the spirituality of the prosperity gospel “gives a sense of superiority because of its transcendental emphasis.”⁵² Prosperity teachings contend that the poor can achieve beyond natural circumstances as well as social and economic confinements, only if they can attain a certain level of spirituality.⁵³ It teaches that Christians have the assurance of total victory over all circumstances of life and wealth.

“The aspects of wealth, ceaseless victory and good living,” according to Kasera, “are emphasized in this spirituality not necessarily as things with which God will bless us, but as things for which we are entirely responsible to ensure that they happen.”⁵⁴ The spirituality proclaimed by prosperity teachers put human beings on the supernatural platform. Bishop Oyedepo made emphasis based on Psalm 82:6 that the text serves as the basis for the supernatural: where believers are no longer human, but superhuman. He stated that “if you are a son of God, so you are a god.”⁵⁵ The

⁴⁵ Oyedepo, *Possessing your possession*, 75.

⁴⁶ Oyedepo, *Possessing your possession*, 76.

⁴⁷ Andile Zulu, “Africa: Prosperity Gospel –Excusing Poverty and Its True Causes In Africa,” *allafrica.com*, June 4, 2023, <https://allafrica.com/stories/202201130282.html>.

⁴⁸ Josephine Olatomi Soboyejo, “Prosperity Gospel and Its Religious Impact on Sustainable Economic Development of African Nations,” *Open Access Library Journal* 3, no. 11 (2016): 1-13.

⁴⁹ Zulu, “Africa: Prosperity Gospel –Excusing Poverty and Its True Causes In Africa.”

⁵⁰ Zulu, “Africa: Prosperity Gospel –Excusing Poverty and Its True Causes In Africa.”

⁵¹ Kasera, “Prosperity Theology,” 65.

⁵² Kasera, “Prosperity Theology,” 66.

⁵³ Kasera, “Prosperity Theology,” 66.

⁵⁴ Kasera, “Prosperity Theology,” 67.

⁵⁵ As cited in Kasera, “Prosperity Theology,” 67.

preaching that emphasizes spiritual and physical elevation made by prosperity theologians makes the preachers and their teachings attractive to their followers, because adherents to this doctrine feel that they are on top of all circumstances of their lives.⁵⁶ They believe that there is no need to wait on God for long before having their demands met because they can change circumstances in their favor and demand of God their desires.

Health Reasons

Furthermore, the prosperity gospel scratches where it itches the African in terms of health needs. In Africa, the belief that sicknesses are caused by evil spirits and hence there is the need for divine intervention to cure is found in almost every community. In *African Charismatics*, J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu points out that African Christians expect healing to accompany their salvation experience: “healing and deliverance provide the ritual context for articulating a response to the inevitable shortfalls existing in the ‘redemptive uplift’ expected to accompany new life in Christ.”⁵⁷ This healing is expected to come by exercising one’s faith in the healing power of Jesus Christ. Asamoah-Gyadu refers to prosperity from the point of view of the charismatics as New Life accompanied by good health and material progress which are taken as signs of faithful Christianity and tokens of God’s favour.⁵⁸ This approach definitely seems to address the worries of Africans which include sorrow, barrenness, ill-health and other misfortunes. Therefore the dialectic between faith healing and illness in the conversion process is a major factor that has led to its success among Africans.

Having outlined the theology of prosperity in the context of Ghanaian Christianity, the paper proceeds to critique this popular doctrine to ascertain its effectiveness in addressing the existential needs of believers.

An Appraisal of the Prosperity Gospel

One cannot deny that some of the teachings of prosperity messages have some positive impact. Some of them are outlined briefly below.

Provision of Physical and Material Care

The real aspects of God’s love and care towards man are manifested in his provision of material and physical care. With regards to prosperity, the Bible gives so many instances of God making his faithful prosper. That prosperity preachers encourage their members to exercise great faith in the Lord is Biblically sound for the Bible tells believers to exercise faith in God (James 1:6; Heb. 11:6). Some prosperity churches also give scholarships to students and financial assistance to people to start their own businesses, thereby reducing the unemployment rate in the country.⁵⁹

Addressing health needs and promoting self-esteem

More so, prosperity preachers get it right when they say that healing comes from the Lord. In Ghana, the prosperity gospel has spoken for the downtrodden and has helped build people’s self-esteem and self-confidence. For example, Otabil’s prosperity preaching has helped many Ghanaians (Africans) to overcome their inferiority complex.⁶⁰ His prosperity messages ignite people’s self-esteem, self-confidence and respect for their black colour. He effectively shatters the impact of a popular Ghanaian proverb that says, “if on your way to church, you meet a white man, return home because you have met God.”⁶¹

Increasing the numerical strength of the church

In addition, the prosperity gospel has contributed to the rapid numerical growth of African Christianity. Its attraction is grounded in the great emphasis it places on pneumatological soteriology. Ghana and Africa at large have experienced tremendous increases in church membership and attendance to Christian activities largely due to the propagation of prosperity theology.⁶² Ghana is current a predominantly-Christian nation with 71.3% of its populace professing Christianity.⁶³ There are many Christian activities that go on in the country with enthusiasm to suggest that Christianity is well-embraced by Ghanaians. This does not, however, necessarily mean the Ghanaian public space is adequately influenced by the Christian religion.

⁵⁶ Kasera, “Prosperity Theology,” 67.

⁵⁷ J. K. Asamoah-Gyadu, *African Charismatics. Current Developments within Independent Indigenous Pentecostalism in Ghana* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 164.

⁵⁸ J. K. Asamoah-Gyadu. “Salvation in African Independent Churches and Charismatic Ministries in Ghana,” *Trinity Journal of Church and Theology* 2(2) (December 1992), 90

⁵⁹ Kwarteng-Yeboah, *A Re-appraisal of the Prosperity Gospel in African Neo-Pentecostalism*, 84.

⁶⁰ Gifford, *African Christianity -Its Public Role*, 239.

⁶¹ Gifford, *African Christianity-Its Public Role*, 239.

⁶² Bryn Donovan, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/prosperity-gospel>/accessed on June 10, 2023.

⁶³ Ghana Statistical Service (GSS), *PHC General Report Vol 3C, Background Characteristics* (Accra: GSS, 2021), 58.

The Negative Impact of Prosperity Theology

In spite of the positive impact of the prosperity theology among its followers, some aspects of this theology are not theologically and Biblically sound.

Weak/faulty hermeneutical foundation

Prosperity gospel suffers from a defective hermeneutic. Hermeneutics refers to “the study of the locus of meaning and the principles of interpreting texts.”⁶⁴ Almost all the troubles associated with prosperity preaching are rooted in the methodology employed in interpreting scriptures. In almost all cases, prosperity preachers quote isolated proof texts and treat them almost exclusively as propositional truths or promises without taking into consideration the historico-grammatical and socio-rhetorical contexts. Gordon D. Fee notes the hermeneutical unfaithfulness of such practices and then cautions people to desist from reading their cultural setting back into the biblical text as such practices end up distorting biblical author’s original intent.⁶⁵ Furthermore, Judith L. Hill argues that proponents of prosperity theology are either weak or unconcerned regarding the principles of interpretation and also have inadequate knowledge of Greek and Hebrew syntax.⁶⁶

A few examples will demonstrate the hermeneutical inaccuracy of prosperity theology. A contextual reading of Jeremiah 29:11 indicates that God is speaking to the Israelite nation of Judah here. This is God’s plan for the nation, not necessarily a personal promise that is directed to any one person per se. It is a “corporate” promise. Again, this promise is to be fulfilled seventy years later and not immediately as prosperity preachers want it applied. Also, a careful examination of the context of 2 Corinthians 8:9 indicates that the meaning of our riches, when we are redeemed, must be determined by the meaning of Christ’s riches before the incarnation, and not by the meaning of “rich” in any other context. Prosperity teaching based on this text cannot be accurate. Again, the passage in 3 John 2 is a prayer or a wish by John and not a divine promise of prosperity.

Promotion of negative work ethics

As prosperity gospel preachers promise wealth to donors, the need to work hard towards making a living becomes unnecessary to those who are able to give to the church.⁶⁷ In this regard, God is bound by his promise in the sense that whenever the right procedure is followed, he has to produce the right results. In this sense, everything depends on the action of the individual: “Once you make sacrifices God is obliged to bless you” and the amount to receive can even be predetermined. Prosperity gospel, therefore, makes prayer and giving to God almost like a business transaction, in the sense that one’s giving compels God to repay them.

Creation of psychological problems for adherents

The prosperity gospel has the potential of creating two classes of Christians. The first group consists of those with sufficient faith which enables them to reap the fruits of God’s promises of wealth while the second group are persons with little or no faith and remain in poverty because of their faithlessness.⁶⁸ This dichotomy leads to a situation whereby the second group becomes deeply disappointed and discouraged with the blame of why they are not prospering.

Moreover, because their pastors continually tell them that the principles of prosperity ought to work for everyone, they are usually overtaken by feelings of failure and guilt for not exercising appropriate faith to succeed.⁶⁹ Those who succeed feel proud as they tend to think that it is through their efforts that they have expressed faith in God to deserve His blessings. Eventually, these sorts of psychological messages demotivate people who are sincerely and eagerly working towards escaping the grip of poverty. The reason is simple: “If they are spiritually unacceptable to God and their faith is insufficient, why should they continue trying?”⁷⁰

Undermining God’s Sovereignty

Prosperity gospel preachers erroneously teach that pain and poverty are never the will of God but are always caused solely by sin or defect in the spiritual life of the people involved. As the book of Job points out, God is sovereign and may work according to some other unexplained and unexplainable way which includes making the righteous suffer—the issue of theodicy. Sometimes he elects his people to suffer for his purpose which sense must not be understood as the absence of prosperity. In Hebrews 11:36-40, some biblical saints are said to have faced challenges such as being flogged, chained, put in prison, stoned, sawed in two, put to death by the sword and so on. These believers obviously

⁶⁴ W. Randolph Tate, *Handbook for Biblical Interpretation*, second Edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2012), 194.

⁶⁵ Gordon D. Fee, “The ‘Gospel’ of Prosperity- an Alien Gospel,” *Reformation Today* 82 (Nov.-Dec. 1984), 40.

⁶⁶ Judith L. Hill, “Theology of Prosperity: A New Testament Perspective,” *Africa Journal of Theology*, 28 (1) (2009): 43-55, 4.

⁶⁷ Kasera, “Prosperity Theology,” 66.

⁶⁸ Kasera, “Prosperity Theology,” 118

⁶⁹ Kasera, “Prosperity Theology,” 118

⁷⁰ Kasera, “Prosperity Theology,” 118

experienced great financial need and privation not because of their lack of knowledge of the promises of God concerning prosperity or lacked faith to claim it because they are people who are commended for their faith.

Throughout his ministry, the Apostle Paul became poor and endured a lot of difficulties. He experienced both what it means to lack and to have in abundance (Phil. 4:11-13). He however boasted about his poverty and saw it as establishing his credibility as a servant of God (2 Cor. 6:3-10, see also 1 Cor. 4:8-16). Interestingly, Paul did get along in “need” and the change of circumstances as a result of exercising a special kind of “faith” but through learning to be “content” (1 Tim. 6:6-8; Phil. 4:11-13).

Jesus Christ himself was born and grew up in a poor family and he had nowhere to lay his head (Matt. 8:20; 17:24-27). No one will argue against the fact that Jesus was in harmony with God and had faith in obtaining wealth and material prosperity. Because prosperity gospel preachers do not teach that pain and suffering can be part of God’s plan, they end up not preparing their followers adequately to develop endurance through suffering and to take responsibility for their actions.⁷¹ No wonder their followers tend to look for quick ways of escaping economic hardship rather than enduring and working at it gradually.

Over-emphasis on this world

In essence and approach, the prosperity gospel is fully and solely this-worldly. Too much emphasis is placed on this world that prosperity teachers tend to ignore teachings about the Second Coming and related teachings. The prosperity theology contends that believers can enjoy all the benefits of God’s Kingdom here on earth.⁷² This is not what the Bible says. Though inaugurated by Jesus in the First Advent, the Kingdom will be established fully when Christ returns again (Luke 17:21-22; Matt. 6:10). New Testament scholarship has firmly established that the kingdom is both realised and the yet-to-be-realised. The fact that aspects of the Kingdom are completely missing here has been removed through the emphasis placed on the present dimension of the Kingdom. The teaching that there should be no sickness, or poverty cannot be true for this world of sin. The teaching that emphasises realised eschatology and teaches that believers should not experience illness denies the reality of physical mortality. Such eschatology is unbalanced. Mission churches presumably differ from prosperity gospel churches in the sense that historic missionary churches focus their teaching on the hopes for heavenly joys.

Promotion of anti-intellectualism

Prosperity theology is the ambivalent attitude towards knowledge, promotes anti-intellectualism and hence portrays Christianity as illogical. Kasera quotes Oyedepo as saying “God’s Word is not scientific, neither is it logical; God’s Word is divine.”⁷³ To say that God’s word is not logical means that it cannot be understood. Therefore, Oyedepo’s point is that “we are to approach Scripture without our thinking capabilities.”⁷⁴ Yet, Oyedepo calls on people to obey the Scriptures. Is it, not a contradiction to say that it is not logical and yet ask people to obey it? Reinhard Bonnke is also noted for propagating the same attitudes of anti-intellectualism and experientialism. Gifford also accuses Bonnke of removing critical thinking from theology and thus making the experience the ultimate judge is made the ultimate judge of spiritual truth by sentiments.⁷⁵ The truth is that most prosperity theologians frown upon serious academic work.

Kasera considers anti-intellectualism as the main reason why prosperity theology leads to emotionalism. He writes “[t]he emotional aspect [of prosperity theology] stems from the dominant anti-intellectualism.”⁷⁶ He further notes that, the prioritization of personal feelings and the pursuit of positive emotional states can lead individuals to set aside or downplay the significance of scriptural guidance. He states, “because people are made to feel good, they deduce that what they are busy with is true, for if it were wrong they would not have felt good in the first place. With this emotionalism at the centre of things, the Bible is easily set aside or de-emphasised. However, this opening up to good feelings paves the way for deception to creep in subtly.”⁷⁷ This shift creates a vulnerability to deception, as the focus on emotional well-being may overshadow critical evaluation and discernment.

Promotion of individualistic mindset

Prosperity theology promotes individualism, wherein each person is accountable for pursuing personal prosperity through the practice of “naming and claiming,” fosters selfishness and self-centeredness.⁷⁸ As material wealth is

⁷¹ Kasera, “Prosperity Theology,” 66.

⁷² Idahosa, *I Choose to Change*, 7.

⁷³ Kasera, “Prosperity Theology,” 64.

⁷⁴ Kasera, “Prosperity Theology,” 64.

⁷⁵ Kasera, “Prosperity Theology,” 64-65.

⁷⁶ Kasera, “Prosperity Theology,” 65.

⁷⁷ Kasera, “Prosperity Theology,” 65.

⁷⁸ Dodeye U. Williams, “Prosperity theology’: Poverty and implications for socio-economic development in Africa,” *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 78(1) (2022):1-8, 5 (Retrieved from a7818. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i1.7818>).

considered as the determinant of a person's worth, people tend to accumulate as much as they, even as they live in a community with many people suffering from abject poverty. Their motivation for giving is to have much more in return and so giving to others, if done, becomes a business transaction which benefits the giver more. This practice is contradictory to the biblical view that giving is a form of ministry rather than business transaction (cf. Deut. 15:7-11). From the biblical perspective, wealth comes with the responsibility of sharing with others and also to guard against finding in them a false sense of security (1 Tim. 6:17).

The African/Ghanaian communal sense of life supports the biblical teaching that wealth needs to benefit the entire community. The Ghanaian communal view about wealth is expressed in the saying "If there is a *sika peredwan* in a town, it belongs to the whole community." This community-centric approach to wealth and wellbeing is highlighted in the traditional greetings and responses of the Shona people in Zimbabwe. In the morning and at lunchtime, their exchange would typically go: "*Mangwani, marara sei?*" (Good morning, did you sleep well?), with the response being "*Ndarara, kana mararawo*" (I slept well, if you slept well). Similarly, inquiring about the day, they would ask, "*Marara sei?*" (How has your day been?), with the corresponding response being "*Ndarara, kana mararawo*" (My day has been good if your day has been good). These greetings, extended to both natives and strangers, stress the interconnectedness of all individuals and highlight that one person's challenges are shared by the community. This perspective aligns with John S. Mbiti's concept that "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am."⁷⁹ Thus, according to the African/Ghanaian worldview, an individual's life finds genuine meaning within the broader societal context. Unfortunately, prosperity preachers tend to promote individualistic mindset which weakens the communal ties that Ghanaians cherish and the Bible promotes.

Failure to fulfil claims

Prosperity gospel does not fulfil the claim that professing the biblical promise of wealth, makes one wealthy.⁸⁰ If it did, "we would consider the members of a prosperity movement and those who believe in prosperity teaching among those with higher incomes."⁸¹ The prosperity teachers are utterly succumbing to the issue of interrogating the structural injustice that is the cause of so much poverty in Ghana. Therefore, rather than providing any sustainable answer to the real causes of poverty and helping the poor to improve, the prosperity gospel usually pauperizes them more, hence widening the gap between the poor church member and the rich pastor. In reality, the prosperity messages are not adding appreciable value to their hearers, rather they are adding value and enriching the pockets of the preachers. The Lausanne Group maintained the following opinion: "... we do not believe that prosperity teaching provides a helpful or biblical response to the poverty of the people among whom it flourishes."⁸² What profit is it for the preacher to live in mansions and cruise in a private jet, admit their wards into the best schools abroad and own expensive schools where the average church member cannot afford to admit their children?

RECOMMENDATIONS/THEOLOGICAL DIRECTION

From the foregoing discussions, the following recommendations are given as the way forward. First, instead of reducing faith to a sort of magic "formulas," "laws," "steps," and "principles" and transforming it into a magic force on its own, or a power of conducive force which moves things, and changes circumstances, churches must teach their members to exercise their faith in trusting God to do his will, not the will of humans. The fact that faith does not place confidence in the force of "faith" or the power of "words", but in trusting in the worthiness of Christ and in God needs to be emphasized.

Second, instead of teaching that God's blessings can be bargained through donation, the church ought to teach that God blesses his people by grace as a fulfilment of his side of the covenant. He expects believers to fulfil their part, yet the fact that one fulfils his/her part of the covenant does not obligate (or entice) God to bless him/her. That is to say, although human effort is still required, prosperity preachers get it wrong when they preach that once someone becomes a believer, prosperity belongs to him/her by right. In this sense, one's donation should not aim at enticing God to bless him/her but rather to show gratitude to Him.

More so, in order to have a balanced view of the efficiency or usefulness of the prosperity gospel in Ghana, there is a need to go beyond its popularity. The fact that the prosperity gospel has a large following among Ghanaians/Africans and serves to populate the churches does not necessarily validate its efficiency or usefulness. Theologians must begin to question, for example, whether the magical interpretations of this doctrine are really helpful

⁷⁹ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy* second edition (Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1999), 106.

⁸⁰ B. A. Koch, "The prosperity gospel and economic prosperity: race, class, giving, and voting" (Unpublished Doctorate dissertation, Indiana University, 2009), 81.

⁸¹ Koch, "The prosperity gospel and economic prosperity," 81

⁸² "Statement on Prosperity Gospel" by the Lausanne Theology Working Group, Africa chapter at its consultations in Akropong, Ghana, 8-9 October, 2008 and 1-4 September 2009.

or needful to Ghanaians, even if those interpretations would add numbers to the church and expand Christianity.⁸³ In so doing the inadequacies of this pervasive but defective gospel will be brought to the fore to challenge its adherents to rethink their support for it.

CONCLUSION

From the discussion, Prosperity theology is based on four key ideas. First, healing is God's divine intention for humanity. Second, the redemptive work of Jesus on the cross did not only redeem man from sins but also offered deliverance from its penalties: namely, poverty, demonic interference, and sickness. Third, God has put the laws of faith in place through which believers could access the power of the cross. Fourth, not only should Christians confess their faith, but they must sow seeds in order to receive from God. The paper found some positive contributions of this model, including promoting a positive mindset, cultural transformation, and increased numerical strength of Ghanaian Christianity. Nonetheless, there are the following criticisms of prosperity theology. First, the biblical foundation upon which the theology is built is faulty, which implies that the Scripture is twisted to advance personal agenda. Second, as prosperity preachers promise wealth to donors, the need to work hard and strive towards a proven means of making a living becomes unnecessary to those who are able to give to the church. Third, prosperity preachers' attitude towards pain, suffering and poverty does not prepare converts to develop endurance through trials and to take responsibility for their actions. Fourth, in essence, and approach, the prosperity gospel is so much this-worldly that it tends to develop a defective eschatology. Fifth, most prosperity theologians have ambivalent attitudes towards knowledge, promote anti-intellectualism and hence portray Christianity as illogical. Sixth, in addressing the issue of poverty, prosperity theology does not live up to its claims. Instead of emphasizing prosperity, the church should preach holiness to cause her members to experience an ethical renewal that will enhance and encourage them to live responsibly under the sovereignty of God as they work toward improving their socio-economic and spiritual lives.

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⁸³ Goliama, "The Gospel of Prosperity in African Pentecostalism," 369.

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