

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

A Theological Evaluation of the Prosperity Gospel

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1

American evangelicals have always been known for their commitment to the evangel, the “good news.” But in recent years the content of this good news has been redefined in certain quarters of evangelicalism. Rather than glorifying the grace of God in salvation, this newly conceived gospel focuses on human potential for successful living, emphasizing health and wealth. This shift from theocentric providence to anthropocentric prosperity has been noted by Robert Johnston: “The God-intended shape of human life has become the overarching concern of evangelicals and ecumenicals alike.”¹

Advocates of the prosperity gospel claim that it is God’s will for every believer to be prosperous.² The implication is that a sick or poor believer is outside God’s will for his life. Not only is the nature of God’s will for believers on earth refashioned, but also an enormous load of guilt falls on followers of the movement who are terminally ill or financially handicapped.

Where did the gospel of affluence come from? What are its distinguishing features? To what extent is it theologically aberrant? The following discussion answers these pertinent questions.

The Emergence of the Prosperity Gospel

Prosperity theology is not a denomination, a tradition, or even a school of thought. It is a broadly based, variegated movement that overlaps both the charismatic and noncharismatic spectrums. It seems to be a blending of the positive thinking emphasis of

¹ Robert K. Johnston, “What is the New Shift in Theological Focus?” *Christianity Today*, February 3, 1984, p. 78.

² The following statements are representative: “The laws of prosperity will work in the life of any person who is obedient to His Word” (Gloria Copeland, *God’s Will Is Prosperity* [Fort Worth: KC Publications, 1978], p. 20). “Continually applying God’s laws of success ... will bring you into a position of success” (Robert Tilton, *God’s Laws of Success* [Dallas: Word of Faith Publications, 1983], p. 2). “Did God put ... silver, and gold here on earth for the devil and his bunch?... No! He put these things here for His people to enjoy. He wants us to have the best!” (Kenneth E. Hagin, *How to Turn Your Faith Loose* [Tulsa: Faith Library Publications, 1983], p. 15).

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

a Norman Vincent Peale or a Robert Schuller and the faith healing ministry of an Oral Roberts. It certainly has a charismatic flavoring to it but is by no means limited to Pentecostalism. The movement imbibes deeply from the existentialism of the present age, which places a premium on human experience.³ It also borrows heavily from the materialistic emphasis of affluent, suburban Christianity.⁴

Some of the prominent personalities of prosperity include Kenneth Hagin, pastor of the Rhema Bible Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma; Kenneth and Gloria Copeland, founders of Kenneth Copeland Ministries in Fort Worth, Texas; Bob and Marte Tilton, founding pastors of the Word of Faith Church, Farmers Branch, Texas;⁵ John Osteen, pastor of the Lakewood Church, Houston, Texas; Jerry Savelle, evangelist and former associate of Kenneth Copeland; Charles and Frances Hunter, faith healers and founders of the City of Light, Kingwood, Texas; and Charles Capps, an Oklahoma pastor.

The story of Robert Tilton is typical of the emergence of prosperity preachers. As an unbeliever he was involved with drugs and the occult, having been a devotee of Edgar Cayce for a brief time. He was converted to Christ through the witness of a group of charismatic young people. Soon afterward these same young people cast demons out of the Tilton home, where startling occultic phenomena had been occurring. At this stage Tilton was introduced to the Pentecostal understanding of Spirit baptism and “received the gift of tongues.” The result was God’s call to preach, to which he responded by becoming a traveling tent evangelist. During his days of itinerating he was introduced to prosperity thinking through the teaching of John Osteen and the writings of Kenneth Copeland and Kenneth Hagin. In the mid-1970s Tilton reportedly received a vision from God telling him to build a “Full Gospel” family church in Farmers Branch, Texas. The church began in March 1976 with seven people. Today the Word of Faith World Outreach Center has a membership of over 8,000 as well as a Christian academy, a Bible school, a daily television program, a seminar ministry, a publishing ministry, and a satellite network to 1,700 other churches in North America.⁶ Certainly Tilton has experienced prosperity of a sort, but it is still an open question whether this is biblical prosperity and whether this prosperity is designed for every believer in every society during every age.

³ John F. MacArthur, *The Charismatics: A Doctrinal Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), p. 67.

⁴ Gordon Fee, “The ‘Gospel’ of Prosperity—an Alien Gospel,” *Reformation Today* 82 (November/December 1984):39.

⁵ Farmers Branch is a suburb of Dallas, Texas.

⁶ The Tiltons’ autobiography can be found in *Dare to Be a Success: Birth of a Vision* (Dallas: Word of Faith Publications, 1985).

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

An Explanation of the Prosperity Gospel

Perhaps the major emphases of this movement can best be summarized by rewording the old adage about being healthy, wealthy, and wise. In this case the good news of the prosperity gospel is how to be healthy, wealthy, and demon-free.

HOW TO BE HEALTHY

3

The *provision* of healing, according to the prosperity gospel, is found in the Atonement. A trilogy of Scripture passages is used to support this notion.

The first is Isaiah 53:5: "By His scourging we are healed." This is interpreted to mean that Christ was the divine Substitute for all forms of physical illness, so that through the Cross healing is as readily available as forgiveness of sin. Matthew 8:16–17 presents Jesus' healing ministry as fulfilling what Isaiah the prophet had said (Isa. 53:4). The conclusion is drawn that since Jesus healed all who came to Him in His day (Matt. 8:16), He still does the same today. In the words of Dennis Bennett, "Everybody knows Jesus is tenderhearted, and would never want anyone to be sick."⁷ The third reference is 1 Peter 2:24, "By His wounds you were healed." At first glance this seems to teach that physical healing was provided through Christ's substitutionary sufferings.

Also Deuteronomy 28 is used to demonstrate that sickness is a curse of the Law. Then Galatians 3:13 is introduced to prove that Christ has redeemed believers from the curse of the Law, which in this view includes the curse of sickness.⁸

Underlying this contention, of course, is the assumption that it is never God's will for anyone to be sick. The following unambiguous assertion from Kenneth Hagin illustrates this point: "Don't ever tell anyone sickness is the will of God for us. It isn't! Healing and health are the will of God for mankind. If sickness were the will of God, heaven would be filled with sickness and disease."⁹ A number of biblical texts are marshaled in defense of this basic presupposition. The passages are drawn from the Pentateuch (Exod. 15:26; 23:25), the Psalms (103:3), Proverbs (4:20–22), the Prophets (Isa. 33:24; Jer. 30:17), the Gospels (Matt. 4:23; 10:1; Mark 16:16–18; Luke 6:17–19), and Acts (5:16; 10:38).¹⁰

⁷ Dennis Bennett, "Does God Want Everybody Healed?" *Christian Life*, January 1982, p. 52. Bennett received the baptism of the Spirit as an Episcopal rector in 1959 and became a spokesman in neo-Pentecostalism.

⁸ Kenneth E. Hagin, *Redeemed from Poverty, Sickness, and Death* (Tulsa: Faith Library Publications, 1983), pp. 11–14.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁰ For a discussion of these passages in support of faith healing see Herbert Mjorud, "How Healing Can Be Yours," *Christian Life*, September 1982, pp. 46–49.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

The *possession* of healing is through the exercise of faith. The approach to faith can best be understood by the phrases “name it and claim it” or “believe and receive.” In defense of its view of faith the prosperity movement has camped on Mark 11:23–24: “Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and cast into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says is going to happen, it shall be granted him. Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they shall be granted you.” These verses are interpreted in the most literal and unrestricted sense.

Faith is defined as speaking or confessing something with authority in the full expectation that what is spoken will happen. As the Hunters have expressed it: “TALK TO THE DISEASE! Speak with authority and then believe!... SAYING is a command to be healed! CONFESSING is believing for a future act or manifestation of the healing.... SAYING is giving authority to words, and CONFESSING is receiving the promise; both confessing and saying are calling into being something that does not exist at the present time.”¹¹

The same concept was succinctly put by Hagin: “*Faith’s confessions create reality.*”¹² Obviously those in the prosperity movement have a high view of human faith! The confession of faith, it is believed, will cure any disease or physical handicap, since healing is always the will of God and has been provided for in the Atonement. But what if the words are spoken and faith is exercised and healing does not take place?

The *problem* of not receiving what one is believing for is supposedly overcome by patience and persistence. The seriously ill are exhorted to persist in their confession and build up their faith to the level necessary to obtain the promised healing. Bennett has given the following counsel to those not immediately healed: “The reason we are so hesitant to imply that someone doesn’t have the faith to be healed is that we think we also imply that they don’t love Jesus, or that they don’t trust God. No, no! It just means they’re not yet open to receive the particular healing they need.... We need to continue to break through the barriers that keep us from receiving.”¹³

Bennett then gives an example from his own life. He has always had enough faith to overcome a head cold but not a chest cold. When he contracts a chest cold, it takes him longer to overcome it because he has to build his faith to a higher level.¹⁴ In other words

¹¹ Charles and Frances Hunter, *To Heal the Sick* (Kingwood, TX: Hunter Books, 1983), p. 64 (capitalization theirs).

¹² Hagin, *How to Turn Your Faith Loose*, p. 23 (italics his).

¹³ Bennett, “Does God Want Everybody Healed?” pp. 53–54.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

the more serious the malady, the greater the level of faith needed to overcome it, and likewise the longer the time needed to reach the necessary level of faith.

Charles Hunter gave this advice to would-be faith healers on the importance of persistence: "The first person I ever prayed for died! But that didn't keep me down. I thought, 'Well, surely I will get a better track record!' You cannot do any worse than that can you? That should not discourage you. You should just go on. I will have to admit, however, that it was a terrible shock to me when the first one died!"¹⁵ Those wishing to understand the thinking of prosperity preachers should observe that these preachers have anticipated some of the major objections to their system and have fashioned what they consider adequate responses to the objections.

5

HOW TO BE WEALTHY

The *purpose* of wealth is philanthropic. Each one is to give of his material benefits to help meet the needs of others. According to Kenneth Copeland, "True prosperity is the ability to use God's power to meet the needs of mankind in any realm of life."¹⁶ This benevolent use of resources rests on what is considered to be a divine, spiritual law, called by Tilton the law of compensation.¹⁷ The law is perfect and always in operation. "God's law that we should love our neighbor as we love ourselves is a perfect law. God set the law into motion, and it will always work for our good if we do it.... He designed the law to work wonders for us and to give us the greatest prosperity in our neighborhood."¹⁸

When one gives to others, whether money or something else, more will be given by God in return. Soon a prosperity cycle begins, in which one gives and receives more in return, allowing him to give even more, meaning he will receive yet more in return; and so the cycle continues.

Scriptural evidence is cited in support of the law of compensation, known also as the law of sowing and reaping: "Cast your bread on the surface of the waters, for you will find it after many days" (Eccles. 11:1). "He who sows sparingly shall also reap sparingly; and he who sows bountifully shall also reap bountifully" (2 Cor. 9:6). "Whatever a man sows, this he will also reap" (Gal. 6:7). An example of how this law supposedly works comes from Tilton's experience: "I started noticing good things showing up around me. I gave

¹⁵ Hunter, *To Heal the Sick*, p. 75.

¹⁶ Kenneth Copeland, *The Laws of Prosperity* (Fort Worth: Kenneth Copeland Publications, 1974), p. 26.

¹⁷ Tilton devotes a chapter to this law, detailing how it works, in *God's Laws of Success*.

¹⁸ Charles Hunter, *God's Conditions for Prosperity* (Kingwood, TX: Hunter Books, 1984), p. 39.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

away a pair of shoes, then I noticed three or four pairs came back. I kept giving watches away, then I noticed a very expensive Rolex watch jumped onto my wrist.”¹⁹

The *promise* of wealth, the basis for the whole prosperity movement, is seen in several Scripture passages interpreted from a prosperity vantage point. The clarion call to prosperity is Joshua 1:8, which refers to God’s promise to make Joshua’s way prosperous and give him good success. Further support is found in 2 Chronicles 20:20 (“Put your trust in His prophets and succeed”) and Nehemiah 2:20 (“The God of heaven will give us success”). Psalm 1:3 states that the righteous man will prosper in whatever he does, and Psalm 35:27 indicates that God takes pleasure in the prosperity of His servant. The most prominent New Testament verse on the subject is 3 John 2: “Beloved, I pray that in all respects you may prosper and be in good health, just as your soul prospers.” This verse is quoted repeatedly by prosperity adherents as declaring God’s will on the matter.²⁰

The *provision* of wealth centers on the application of the Abrahamic Covenant. The personal blessings God bestowed on Abraham by the covenant He made with him are extrapolated as benefits for believers today. According to Hagin, Abraham’s blessing was threefold: spiritual, physical, and also financial.²¹ Gloria Copeland delights in pointing out that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph all became extremely rich because of their relationship to the Abrahamic Covenant.²² Justification for applying Abraham’s promised prosperity to Christians today is sought in Galatians 3:14: “In order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles.” This blessing is thought to be financial as well as spiritual.

The blessings and cursings of the Mosaic Law recorded in Deuteronomy 28 are also related to the Abrahamic Covenant. “The blessing and the curse of the law were the results of God’s covenant with Abraham. The blessing included *everything* having to do with the physical, material and financial needs. Healing was included in the blessing. Success was included in the blessing. Prosperity was included in the blessing, exceeding financial blessing.”²³ In this view the Law of Moses was given so that Abraham’s descendants could possess the same degree of prosperity Abraham enjoyed.

Possession of the wealth provided through the Abrahamic Covenant is achieved by knowing, obeying, and believing. First there must be knowledge of the promise before the promise can be claimed. As one prosperity evangelist put it, “If a person doesn’t know

¹⁹ Tilton, *God’s Laws of Success*, p. 137.

²⁰ Copeland and Hagin both believe that 3 John 2 promises financial, physical, and spiritual prosperity.

²¹ Hagin, *How to Turn Your Faith Loose*, p. 14.

²² Copeland, *God’s Will Is Prosperity*, pp. 4–6.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 5 (italics hers).

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

it is God's will for him to prosper, it is highly improbable that he will prosper."²⁴ The believer who is unaware that prosperity is his is like the passenger on a cruise ship who ate only cheese and crackers because he did not know that meals were included in the price of the ticket.²⁵

Obedience is a second key to becoming prosperous. "If they hear and serve Him, they shall end their days in prosperity" (Job 36:11). One writer has summarized this aspect well: "If he doesn't obey the laws of God that produce prosperity, he will not be able to appropriate them.... Obedience is the *key to prosperity!* If we are willing to obey God's commands in every area of our lives, we will prosper. If we don't obey, we won't prosper. It's that simple."²⁶ Many in the prosperity movement view the Abrahamic Covenant as conditional. The conditions must be met before financial blessing can come. It has even been suggested that the Israelites could have freed themselves from Egyptian bondage long before Moses if they had known and kept God's covenant with Abraham.²⁷

The third element, faith, is exercised in the same way as in achieving divine health. Faith amounts to claiming authority over the financial resources already guaranteed by God. Here is a straightforward account of how this "faith" is put into action:

If you make up your mind ... that you are willing to live in divine prosperity and abundance, Satan cannot stop the flow of God's financial blessings. If you are willing and obedient ... divine prosperity will come to pass in your life. You have exercised your faith in the covenant that you have with God.... You begin to walk in divine prosperity with a decision to no longer allow Satan to put symptoms of lack on you.²⁸

No one need live in poverty. Wealth and riches are there for the asking—in faith. All that stands between a person and financial blessing is his decision to demand what he wants. To assure results, instructions are given on how to make the decision: "Make this quality decision concerning your prosperity: *God's blessing of prosperity belongs to me. I WILL receive it. The symptoms of lack have no right to operate against me.* Make this decision and you will begin to enjoy the financial blessing that has belonged to you once you became a believer in Jesus Christ."²⁹ Having decided to possess the wealth God has provided, a person naturally wonders just how wealthy he might expect to become.

²⁴ Jerry Savelle, "True Prosperity—What Is It?" *Christian Life*, July 1983, p. 47.

²⁵ Copeland, *The Laws of Prosperity*, p. 41.

²⁶ Savelle, "True Prosperity," pp. 47–48 (italics his).

²⁷ Copeland, *The Laws of Prosperity*, p. 50.

²⁸ Copeland, *God's Will Is Prosperity*, pp. 37–38.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 38 (italics hers).

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

The *prospects* of wealth, according to some prosperity leaders, are truly astounding. The hundredfold return of Mark 10:30 is claimed as the basis of God's financial dealings with His servants. "You give \$1 for the gospel's sake and \$100 belongs to you; give \$10 and receive \$1,000; give \$1,000 and receive \$100,000.... Give one house and receive one hundred houses or one house worth one hundred times as much.... In short, Mark 10:30 is a very good deal."³⁰

Of course the hundredfold return is not automatic. One must "believe it in." The "force of faith" must be continually exerted, and if the pressure of faith relaxes, the return will stop flowing in. Faith is the means of collecting the amount owed from the hundredfold return. Any portion not collected goes into "accounts receivable" in the "heavenly bank account" for withdrawal when faith has increased. According to Kenneth Copeland, "When a man makes deposits with God, he has a right to call upon these deposits and make withdrawals."³¹ No wonder the motto of the prosperity movement is, "You can have what you say!"

HOW TO BE DEMON-FREE

The *presence* of demonic activity in the lives of Christians is an important plank in the prosperity platform. It is assumed that manifestation of demonic opposition today is the same as it was in the first century a.d. The tendency is to attribute anything out of the ordinary or not readily explainable to the influence of demons. The Hunters provide a case in point: "When a doctor says there is no cure, our spiritual antennas pick up the fact that it is a spirit."³² They have concluded that *all* incurable diseases are caused by evil spirits. Demons inhabit not only people, but also homes, cars, and other mechanical devices. This produces great consternation for the believer who wants to experience blessings promised to him.

The *process* of casting out demons solves the believer's "demonic dilemma." Whenever a believer experiences demonic affliction, he is to claim 1 John 4:4, "Greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world." He is also to remember that Jesus has given him authority to cast out unclean spirits (Matt. 10:1). This gives the individual believer authority over the world of evil spirits. As Frances Hunter put it: "I believe no demon in this world has as much power as I do."³³

³⁰ Ibid., p. 48.

³¹ Copeland, *The Laws of Prosperity*, p. 92.

³² Hunter, *To Heal the Sick*, p. 143.

³³ Ibid., p. 136.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

In the *procedure* for casting out demons Satan is bound by the authority of Jesus so that he cannot render aid to his evil associates. Then the demon is addressed, commanded to name himself, and cast out. Since demons can do such things as planting seeds of disease and stopping the flow of financial wealth, the casting out of demons is necessary to insure continued health and prosperity.

An Evaluation of the Prosperity Gospel

The prosperity gospel is too recent a phenomenon and too varied to have anything approaching a systematic theology. However, for the sake of convenience the primary divisions of theology will be used in evaluating certain prominent ideas that undergird the movement.

BIBLIOLOGY

Perhaps the most fundamental issue to consider in the prosperity movement is the nature of authority. The two areas where the view of authority is seriously compromised are the extent of revelation and the method of interpretation.

Prosperity writers never challenge the verbal, plenary, inerrant inspiration of Scripture. They accept the text of the Bible in all its particulars as revealed truth from God. The problem is not the inspiration of the text, but inspiration *beyond* the text. According to those in the movement, special, verbal revelation did not cease with the closing of the New Testament canon but continues today. Leaders frequently support their teachings with revelations, prophecies, dreams, and visions. The implication is that they share the same status with Old Testament prophets and New Testament apostles as dispensers of progressively revealed truth. Many prophecies are recorded in quotation marks supported throughout with the phrase “thus saith the Lord.”³⁴ This introduces a canonical problem. If indeed these are newly revealed truths from God, then they ought to be added to the canon of Scripture and disseminated as widely as possible, since they would constitute divinely given moral imperatives on a par with Scripture. However, if these revelations are no more than wishful thinking of the overly zealous, then people heeding them are being led into serious error. Superficial comparison of these prophecies and visions with those in the Word of God quickly demonstrates that their source is all too human.

Prosperity hermeneutics also leaves much to be desired. The method of interpreting the biblical text is highly subjective and arbitrary. Bible verses are quoted in abundance

³⁴ For examples of recent “revelation” the reader is encouraged to read the 1961 vision concerning healing by Tommy Hicks quoted in Hunter, *To Heal the Sick*, pp. 8–16; and the 1978 prophecy of future financial prosperity given by Charles Capps in Copeland, *God’s Will Is Prosperity*, pp. 60–62.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

without attention to grammatical indicators, semantic nuances, or literary and historical context. The result is a set of ideas and principles based on distortion of textual meaning. One critic has analyzed the problem well.

The “plain meaning” of the text is always the first rule, as well as the ultimate goal of all valid interpretation. But “plain meaning” has first of all to do with the author’s original *intent*; it has to do with what would have been plain to those to whom the words were originally addressed. It does *not* have to do with how someone from a suburbanized white American culture of the late 20th century reads his own cultural setting back into the text through the frequently distorted prism of the language of the early 17th century.³⁵

In other words the procedure adopted by prosperity interpreters starts with their own American middle-class experience and then “baptizes” that experience with a handful of Bible verses that seem to substantiate what is claimed, when in reality those verses have been removed from their original context and misinterpreted.

Joshua 1:8. The context of God’s promise to Joshua that He would make his way prosperous and give him good success is military, not *financial*. It specifically relates to the conquest of the Promised Land by Israel as the outworking of the land promises given unconditionally in the Abrahamic Covenant. The Book of Joshua traces Joshua’s successes in conquering Canaan. Joshua was a general, not a banker; financial prosperity is simply not in view here.

Mark 10:29–30. The promise of the hundredfold return was also not monetary in nature. Jesus was preparing His disciples for their apostolic itinerate ministries in the midst of persecution. When the disciples lost their houses for the sake of the gospel, they would be given access to homes owned by fellow believers who would share with them as they moved from place to place preaching the gospel. Likewise when the disciples forsook their families for Jesus’ sake, they entered new associations in the family of God that were a hundred times as great. To give \$10 to the Lord’s work expecting that the Lord must give \$1,000 in return misses completely the context of the Mark passage.

3 John 2. This often quoted verse reads, “Beloved, I pray that in all respects you may prosper and be in good health, just as your soul prospers.” The term “prosper” does not refer to financial wealth but simply means “to go well with someone.” The New International Version renders the verse, “Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well.”

³⁵ Fee, “The ‘Gospel’ of Prosperity,” p. 40 (italics his).

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

This combination of wishing for “things to go well” and for the recipients’ “good health” was the standard form of greeting in a personal letter in antiquity. To extend John’s wish for Gaius to refer to financial and material prosperity for all Christians of all times is *totally foreign* to the text. John neither intended that, nor could Gaius have so understood it.... to argue from the text that God wills our financial prosperity is to abuse the text, not use it.³⁶

A standard salutation is forced by prosperity interpreters to carry far more weight than it can possibly bear.

CHRISTOLOGY

As already noted, the prosperity gospel claims that both physical healing and financial prosperity have been provided for in the Atonement. On the question of health, the passage noted earlier, Isaiah 53:4–5, does not support the notion that healing of all diseases is *guaranteed* in the Cross. Ridderbos has suggested that the healing mentioned in the passage refers to misery that results from sin. The healing then is accomplished in salvation when sin is forgiven.³⁷ Unger likewise considers the healing spiritual in nature, descriptive of the remission of sin.³⁸ The context of the passage, which consistently refers to transgression and iniquity, supports the interpretation that sin rather than illness is *primarily* in view.

It is true that Isaiah 53:4 addresses the healing of diseases, since it is legitimately used by Matthew in that sense. However, the context of the Matthew quotation demonstrates that he was not quoting Isaiah to prove healing in the Atonement. The quotation of the Isaiah passage in Matthew 8:17 does not mean that Christ’s death on the cross would guarantee freedom from sickness. Instead Matthew is highlighting the *pre-Cross* healing ministry of Jesus, which had a specific time-bound purpose to it and therefore was not included in His atoning work. That purpose was to substantiate His messianic claims to the nation Israel, not to establish a guaranteed health plan for all who have enough faith. It should also be remembered that sickness is either physical or psychological but not moral. It may indeed result from sin, but it does not bear the penal character of sin. Since illness is not sinful in itself, it does not need atonement.

The chief verse used to defend the notion that financial prosperity is provided for in the Atonement is 2 Corinthians 8:9, “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that

³⁶ Ibid. (*italics his*).

³⁷ J. Ridderbos, *Isaiah*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985), p. 478.

³⁸ Merrill E. Unger, *Unger’s Commentary on the Old Testament*, 2 vols., vol. 2: *Isaiah-Malachi* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1981), p. 1298.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich." If Paul was referring to material wealth, then he was promising the Corinthians something he himself did not possess. In 1 Corinthians 4:11 he reported that he and the other apostles were hungry, thirsty, poorly clothed, roughly treated, and homeless. He then exhorted the Corinthians to be imitators of him (1 Cor. 4:16)! Second Corinthians 8 indicates that spiritual rather than material prosperity was in Paul's mind. Paul mentioned the wealth of the Macedonians, but he defined it as the wealth of their liberality flowing out of their deep poverty (2 Cor. 8:2). He also discussed the abundance of the Corinthians themselves, but it was the abundance of their faith, knowledge, earnestness, and love, not their material abundance (2 Cor. 8:7). In 1 Corinthians Paul addressed specifically the attitude problem in the church concerning material riches:

The Corinthians were characterized by what has been called an "overrealized eschatology." "Now ye are full, now ye are rich, ye have reigned as kings without us" (1 Cor. 4:8a). These three blessings which will characterize the future messianic kingdom had already been claimed by the saints at Corinth for "the now." In doing so, Paul says, they claimed attainments that not even he could claim, "I would to God you did reign, that we also might reign with you" (1 Cor. 4:8b). Paul said the time of fullness, richness, and reigning had not yet arrived.³⁹

Apparently the Corinthian believers of the first century had anticipated basic tenets of the prosperity gospel. Undoubtedly if the apostle were alive today, contemporary prosperity preachers would receive the same satirical response.

If financial success had been guaranteed in Christ's work on the cross, one wonders why Paul told the Philippians that he had learned to be content even when going hungry (Phil. 4:11–12). One would expect Paul to have claimed by faith the financial resources necessary never again to be in need. Clearly the atoning work of Christ is of supreme importance in understanding salvation, but to suggest that the Atonement also provides health and wealth is to misunderstand its purpose.

THEOLOGY PROPER

The proponents of prosperity have gone astray concerning the doctrine of God in at least two particulars: the will of God and the sovereignty of God. The title of Gloria Copeland's book *God's Will Is Prosperity* expresses the sentiment of those in the movement. But has God decreed that every believer in every society in every generation will be financially successful? Neither the examples nor the statements of Scripture lend credence to such a concept. Clear examples of those who did not prosper while in the will of God appear in

³⁹ Jim Kinnebrew, "The Gospel of Affluence," *Mid-America Theological Journal* 9 (Fall 1985): 60.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

the great “hall of faith” in Hebrews 11. They were tortured, mocked, scourged, imprisoned, sawn in two, put to death with the sword, going about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated, wandering in deserts, mountains, caves, and holes in the ground. And even though they gained approval through their faith, they still did not receive what was promised (Heb. 11:36–39). This description of faithful ones who were in the will of God hardly comports with Tilton’s declaration, “Everything you touch should prosper.”⁴⁰

Jesus’ own life adds eloquent testimony that the will of God does not always include material success. He grew up in an impoverished family.⁴¹ During His years of travel, He told His disciples that He had nowhere to lay His head (Matt. 8:20). He had to perform a miracle in order to pay the two-drachma temple tax (Matt. 17:24–27). At His death the Roman soldiers cast lots for His clothing, His only earthly possession (Luke 23:34). He left behind no estate, having asked John the disciple to care for His mother (John 19:26–27). Yet even in view of these circumstances, no one would dare suggest that God the Son was out of harmony with the will of God the Father.

The two New Testament passages that specifically state the will of God for every believer define it in moral rather than economic terms. God’s will for believers is their sanctification and abstention from immorality (1 Thess. 4:3), as well as their giving thanks in everything (1 Thess. 5:18). The preceptive will of God as revealed in Scripture is far more concerned with who believers are than with what they have. Consequently less attention should be focused on outward circumstances and more on inward attitudes and character qualities. Perhaps the best biblical advice for prosperity advocates is Ephesians 5:17, “Do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.”

The sovereignty of God is also greatly undermined in the outworking of the prosperity gospel. Indeed what emerges is a new view of God. First, even God Himself has failed. “God hoped for things. He had a plan. He had desires. He hoped they would come to pass, but they failed.”⁴² In other words God was hoping that His dreams would be fulfilled for man in the Garden of Eden, but His plan failed as a result of the Fall and He had to go to “plan B.” Second, not only can God inspire man but man can inspire God. “When ... you start believing it, God starts believing it ... and things happen, praise God.”⁴³ Third, God is bound by His own laws, such as the law of compensation, and man becomes the initiator, forcing God to comply by holding up His end of the bargain. No

⁴⁰ Tilton, *God’s Laws of Success*, p. 28.

⁴¹ According to Luke 2:22–24 and Leviticus 12:8, the sacrifice Mary and Joseph offered when they presented the infant Jesus to the Lord was prescribed in the Mosaic Law for the poor of the land.

⁴² Tilton, *God’s Laws of Success*, p. 113.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

one has said it more pointedly than Tilton: "Success is here and readily available.... It is up to us to come and get it. If you are not a success, it is your fault, not God's." Then he adds, "You determine your level of success. You make the choice.... He has placed the ball in your court. It's your move."⁴⁴ This denies God's sovereign rule and also places a tremendous onus on the individual to act in God's stead by "getting the ball rolling." The simple presentation of this view of God is its own refutation. No matter how much success is gained through the prosperity gospel it cannot begin to make up for loss of the sovereign, majestic character of God.

ANTHROPOLOGY

In the prosperity scheme of things what God's sovereignty lacks human sovereignty supplies. Believers are considered to be "God-like creatures" and "supermen."⁴⁵ At the very least this is an unguarded way of referring to the believer's new nature and the indwelling of the Spirit. In reading the literature one suspects that the unguardedness is intentional. After all, a sufficient authority base has to be established for believers to perform the incredible feats of faith expected of them. The believer's authority is delegated by God Himself, and not even God will interfere with it: "God is not going to override your authority.... He has given you authority in the earth.... He will let you die sick if you choose to do so ... you have the authority to go ahead and die. God will not stop you."⁴⁶ The absurd conclusion of this view of human authority is that a believer should be able to live perpetually in health and presumably youthfulness, and never die! Is it not strange that none of the prosperity leaders themselves have yet exercised their authority to that extent?

Nonetheless these same leaders instruct others how to exercise their authority. Each Christian is considered a king in God's kingdom. This means he can decide what he wants and then decree it just as a monarch would. "A decree is a legal proclamation ... of one's will ... you decide something and then it can be backed up by law. In our case, it is a spiritual law. Sickness is illegal.... Sickness has to obey the king's decree, and because we have been given the power of attorney by Jesus, we have full authority to enforce our King's decree."⁴⁷

The obvious objection to this claim is that illness does not always leave and wealth does not always come, even when the decree has been issued. Prosperity preachers reply that the king's spiritual power and ability to enforce his decree by faith must develop over

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 28, 60.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 26, 28.

⁴⁶ Copeland, *God's Will Is Prosperity*, p. 72.

⁴⁷ Tilton, *Dare to Be a Success*, p. 131.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

time. Tilton gives the example of a couple earning \$200 a week who decided that they wanted a \$400,000 mansion. In a classic understatement he said, "I believe that they can have that house, but it's going to take a season."⁴⁸ The insidious danger in this way of thinking is that it appeals to the poor and the sick to put more faith in the ultimate fulfillment of their desires than in the Word of God.

In the prosperity movement man has become the ruler and God the servant. In its shift away from theocentrism the prosperity gospel has reached the deadend of anthropocentrism, the deification of humanity.⁴⁹ A striking illustration of deification at work can be found in the simple act of saying grace at mealtime. Tilton has said that he no longer thanks God for his food. Instead he takes on the divine prerogative of speaking to the food itself and pronouncing a blessing on it.⁵⁰

HAMARTIOLOGY

In the prosperity gospel little is said about the curse of the Fall, the noetic effects of sin, or man's constitutional depravity. True, confession of sin is encouraged for a believer to remain in fellowship with the Lord and remain in a position to receive physical or financial blessings. But the corruption of fallen human nature that remains even in the redeemed is totally ignored. By contrast the total freedom of the will is everywhere asserted, not only in salvation but also in claiming miracles leading to a healthy, wealthy lifestyle. The ability to decide what one wants and then to demand it from God goes beyond the most radical form of Pelagianism. Human sin has been replaced with human sovereignty.

The only sin given attention is doubt or unbelief that prevents the achievement of one's full potential. Doubting of any kind is anathema to the person seeking prosperity because it produces "the power of negative thinking." In the words of Tilton, "I feel sick. I look sick. I must be sick." When you agreed with those thoughts which are contrary to the Word of God it entered in."⁵¹ In other words negative thinking creates a negative reality.

Concern over the influence of doubt and negative thought on the believer's life does two things. First, it places an enormous burden on the believer to control his thoughts in order to achieve prosperity, a burden that is nowhere found in Scripture. Second, the emphasis

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 134.

⁴⁹ According to Kenneth Copeland the human will "is actually a godlike will because man has the right to choose his own eternal destiny. Only a god has that kind of choice!" (*The Laws of Prosperity*, p. 15).

⁵⁰ "Today I sat down to eat, and I spoke to my food. I said, 'I bless this food in the name of Jesus for the nourishment of my body.... And I receive this food blessed to the nourishment of my body, fit for a Son of God' " (Tilton, *God's Laws of Success*, p. 176).

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 200 (italics his).

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

on unbelief provides a ready escape hatch for the prosperity preacher and faith healer when their “miracles” do not come to pass. “As long as you hold on to a confession of weakness, sickness, and pain, you will still have these problems. You may search for some man of God to pray the prayer of faith for you, but it will be of no avail, because *your unbelief will destroy the effects of his faith.*”⁵²

In the same vein Gloria Copeland recounted the story of how she obtained an expensive diamond ring through exercising faith. She then concluded her story by saying, “The truth won’t work for you just because it works for me. The Word will work for *you* when it becomes a reality in *your* heart.”⁵³ In effect what is offered with the left hand (health and wealth) is taken back with the right hand (doubt and unbelief). Prosperity proponents offer untold riches to the faithful and at the same time offer a simple explanation whenever those riches do not materialize.

ANGELOLOGY

Without question the prosperity movement is characterized by an obsession with the demonic. The reality of God’s use of secondary means in the physical realm has been replaced with a sensational concept of demonic causation. A remarkable illustration of the extremes to which this view can go is found in Frances Hunter’s explanation of how demons cause cancer.

Let me show you how I understand the operation of a demon of cancer. He cannot get into your spirit if you are a Christian, but he can certainly come into and attack your body and your mind. A demon takes a look at a woman and says, “Wow, I think I will lay a little cancer on her. She looks like a real good victim.” So he jumps into her body (not her spirit) and before long the woman discovers that she has cancer of the breast....

The doctor says, “We will cut that cancer out.” The demon goes right along into the operating room, and probably sits there laughing at the doctor.... The minute the doctor inserts the knife, the demon says, “Whoops, here I go! I will go over to the other side.” Then I imagine he just sits there and laughs as the doctor operates, because the damage of the demon has been done on one side....

⁵² Hagin, *How to Turn Your Faith Loose*, p. 29 (italics his).

⁵³ Copeland, *God’s Will Is Prosperity*, p. 59 (italics hers).

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Three years later the woman goes back, and they find cancer on the other side. Why? Because the demon has not been cast out, and you can't cut a demon out in surgery.⁵⁴

This unwarranted supernaturalism goes well beyond biblical demonology and serves only to arouse the fear and frustration of the cancer patient by holding out the promise of a "quick fix." The prosperity movement seems to have reverted to a form of animism, which holds that evil spirits inhabit and control both animate and inanimate objects. Faith healers in the movement have more in common with witch doctors than medical doctors. Though it is true that demons are linked with certain illnesses in the New Testament, the demonology of the New Testament differs from the current preoccupation with demons in two ways. First, the cause of an effect should not be assumed without necessary and sufficient evidence. In the New Testament the demonic origin of disease was substantiated by the testimony of Christ and the Apostles, which is no longer available today. Second, no more causes for an effect should be assumed than sufficiently explain the effect.⁵⁵ For instance if a physical malady has a known physical cause it is unnecessary to posit demonic involvement.

The archenemy in the prosperity pantheon of demons is Satan himself. He is virtually omnipresent, as he is considered the ultimate cause of all poverty and sickness. However, even Satan is limited in his activities by the believer's authority. As Gloria Copeland has expressed it, "Satan can *only* do what you say.... He is bound by the law of God that says *you* can have whatsoever you say."⁵⁶ Satan can only work when the individual believer is ignorant of the Christian's authority to bind him. The ignorant convert can experience satanic control of his thoughts and words so that he will believe and speak what the devil wants to come to pass. By contrast, the believer armed with prosperity teaching will bind Satan so that he can speak into existence whatever he wants.

The biblical doctrine of Satan presents him as a far more crafty and subtle being than those in the prosperity movement admit. Since Satan is the great deceiver and the father of lies (John 8:44), he is probably promoting the prosperity caricature of his limitations. It is likely that those who believe they can demand financial success and that Satan is the only obstacle are themselves under satanic delusion. The prosperity belief that Satan can

⁵⁴ Hunter, *To Heal the Sick*, pp. 143–44.

⁵⁵ This approach is known as the principle of parsimony, the contemporary application of Occam's Razor, a law of logic developed by the 14th-century medieval scholastic William of Occam who said, "What can be explained with fewer assumptions is foolishly explained with more."

⁵⁶ Copeland, *God's Will Is Prosperity*, p. 106 (italics hers).

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

be easily bound actually gives the devil greater leverage and increases his opportunity to deceive.

Prosperity thinkers are as deceived about the role of angels as they are about Satan and the demons. They consider angelic obedience to be directed manward rather than Godward. Myriads of angels are supposedly standing at the beck and call of believers: "Your words put the angels to work on your behalf to bring to pass whatever you say.... The angels are waiting on your words.... They will not work without words."⁵⁷ Anticipating the fact that angelic activity may not always be manifest, the point is made that if one doubts then the angels stop working. Therefore the last words a person utters to the angels are the controlling factor. "Your last words either put the angels to work or force them to step back, bow their heads, and fold their hands. Your angels are waiting for you to give them words to bring to pass."⁵⁸

Scripture passages cited to support such a contention are mishandled. Perhaps the classic reference is Hebrews 1:14, which identifies angels as ministering spirits sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation. However, it is God in His sovereignty who sends angels to carry out what He has ordained for each life, not the individual who issues orders to angels as if he were in the place of God. Hebrews 1, which demonstrates Christ's superiority over the angels, argues against the prosperity interpretation of the verse.

Another favorite passage is Daniel 10:12, which refers to an angel telling Daniel, "Your words were heard, and I have come in response to your words." Here then is a clearcut case in which an angel responded to the words of a man. However, Daniel was no ordinary man. He was an important prophet who was given more revelation from God on the future of Israel than anyone else in the Old Testament. Angelic activity in the Bible usually revolved around prophetically significant events, of which this is certainly one. To place a Christian's desire for a new house or car on the same level with Daniel's apocalyptic revelations trivializes angelic ministry and dilutes the uniqueness of biblical prophecy. The angelology of these "prophets of profit," like the other divisions of theology studied thus far, rests more on wishful thinking than on accurate exegesis.

SOTERIOLOGY

In the area of soteriology a glaring oversight of prosperity theology is the failure to recognize the unconditional nature of the Abrahamic Covenant. God's covenant dealings with Abraham were not determined by the patriarch's obedience. Neither was the

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 88.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 91.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

application of the covenant to his descendants based on their obedience. Abram was a pagan who worshiped other gods when God called him from Ur (Josh. 24:2–3). His life serves as a lesson about the sovereign grace of God, who blesses whom He chooses, though His blessings are entirely unearned and undeserved.

If the personal blessings of Abraham in the unconditional covenant are applicable for all his descendants, then it would follow, according to the prosperity gospel, that all Abraham's descendants would be as financially blessed as Abraham. But this is clearly not the case. Therefore if Abraham's personal blessings are to be applied to all his descendants—a point that prosperity leaders insist on—the covenant must be understood as conditional in order to explain why all his descendants are not materially prosperous. But this solution to the dilemma will not work because of the undeniable fact that Abram was called by God while he was still an idolatrous pagan. The only other option is to deny that the personal blessings to Abraham are part of the covenant that applies to all his descendants. Obviously this solution is not well received by prosperity people because it eliminates their use of the Abrahamic Covenant in demanding their right to be as financially blessed as was Abraham. However, it is the only interpretation that fits the data of Scripture.

The biblical texts used by prosperity gospel adherents to defend the conditional nature of the covenant and the extension of personal blessings are taken out of context. The blessings and cursings enumerated in Deuteronomy 28 are indeed based on obedience to the Mosaic Law. But they were historically conditioned, having been fulfilled in the history of the nation Israel as recorded in the Old Testament. The blessings and cursings relative to the nation Israel living under the Law cannot be extended to New Testament saints. Otherwise grace is no longer grace. To affirm that the blessings and cursings of Deuteronomy 28 are operable for Christians argues against the overwhelming distinction between law and grace in the New Testament Epistles, particularly Paul's letters.

The other passage often mentioned in this connection is Galatians 3:14, which states that through Christ the blessing of Abraham may come to Gentiles. What is usually overlooked, however, is the remainder of the verse: "so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith." This signifies that the spiritual blessings given to Abraham, not his financial blessings, are communicated through Christ. Galatians 3 is discussing eternal, spiritual benefits, not temporary, material benefits.

Perhaps the most difficult concept in the prosperity gospel to understand is human faith. It has been divested of its biblical foundation and given an entirely new meaning. Faith is defined as a positive force. "Faith is a spiritual force, a spiritual energy, a spiritual power. It is this force of faith which makes the laws of the spirit world function.... There are certain laws governing prosperity revealed in God's Word. Faith causes them to

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

function. They will work when they are put to work, and they will stop working when the force of faith is stopped.”⁵⁹

According to this definition human faith has intrinsic value apart from its object. Faith becomes a power exerted by individuals. By contrast the Bible teaches that faith is a confident reliance on and trust in another. Instead of being something that is exerted, biblical faith constitutes a resting or repose. The value of faith is extrinsic, not intrinsic. The significance of faith is found in its object, namely, God.

Prosperity proponents explain how they think faith can act as a force: “Applied faith is applied power. When you begin to act on God’s Word, you are releasing the ability of God to work in your behalf.”⁶⁰ In other words the “force” of faith is that it “forces” God to work! God becomes man’s servant, waiting to do his bidding—if he has enough faith. When God acts apart from faith, it is considered an example of His grace. But when the “force of faith” is exerted, God is *required* to work.⁶¹ The basis of a believer’s relationship to God is turned upside down. Grace is removed and faith is redefined as a human work.

Faith has also been redefined in the peculiar relationship it sustains to the spoken word. Belief of the heart is tied to confession of the mouth to create a new reality. “You receive in this life just what you say with your mouth. The word in your mouth is your faith speaking. *The words you speak are what you believe.* Your words can be for you or against you. They bring you health or sickness. Your words decide whether you live in abundance or lack.”⁶²

In this perspective faith is a form of magic, with the spoken word as the incantation. The interior logic of prosperity thought argues that since man is a godlike creature, his words, when spoken in faith, have the same intrinsic creative power as God’s. But this concept of human speech is magical, not scriptural. It is true that the tongue is a powerful instrument for good or evil (James 3:5–10). But it is equally true that God completely transcends the human condition, so that any comparison between God and man is analogical only and can never be univocal.

Defense of the prosperity view of faith rests largely on Mark 11:23–24, in which Jesus told the disciples that they could move mountains if they believed without doubting. But this did not give the disciples a “blank check” to have whatever they wanted. Jesus was

⁵⁹ Copeland, *The Laws of Prosperity*, p. 19.

⁶⁰ Tilton, *God’s Laws of Success*, p. 62.

⁶¹ Tilton has commented, “There are times when God just heals someone who doesn’t have an ounce of faith.... That is called grace. Why does He do it? I don’t know.... But I can guarantee you this: He always will heal on faith” (ibid., p. 71).

⁶² Copeland, *God’s Will Is Prosperity*, p. 65 (italics hers).

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

speaking more specifically about what He will do at His Second Advent. One commentator has explained the sense of the passage this way:

The Dead Sea is visible from the Mount of Olives and it is appropriate to take the reference to “this mountain” quite literally. An allusion may be intended to Zech. 14:4. In the eschatological day described there the Mount of Olives is to be split in two and when the Lord assumes his kingship “the whole land shall be turned into a plain” (Zech. 14:10). The prayer in question is then specifically a Passover prayer for God to establish his reign.⁶³

Even if the referent cannot be narrowed to this extent, it is certain that Jesus was speaking hyperbolically to emphasize the greatness of God’s power. He was not asserting that the disciples would be able to do the impossible. Of course all prayer requests made by the disciples in faith must be in accord with the sovereign will of God (1 John 5:14–15). Thus the prosperity approach to faith cannot be based on Mark 11:23–24.

A corollary to faith is the quality of patience, which is also seen as an active force. “After you ... have said with your mouth what you desire, and have believed that you have received, be ready to exert the force of patience until your faith produces the answer.... When you learn to release the power of patience, you can receive anything from God that agrees with His Word.”⁶⁴ Patience then must be exerted along with faith to guarantee results. Patience could be defined as persistent faith, “keeping the pressure on” till God grants the petition. As Copeland has put it, “The power of patience is a working force.... The power of patience is necessary to undergird faith.... Faith and patience are the power twins. Together, they will produce every time.”⁶⁵ The critique of the prosperity understanding of faith also applies to patience. It is not a force or power to be exerted in order to get what one wants; it is a quality of endurance that waits on God.

The law of compensation, the bedrock of the prosperity movement, is the principle of sowing and reaping (Gal. 6:7; 2 Cor. 9:6). The law of compensation is certainly correct as a general guideline; what is sown will be reaped. But in the fallen world there is no guarantee of a *quid pro quo*, receiving one thing in return for another. The results of man’s sin on the one hand and God’s mercy on the other do not always follow the conventional principle of sowing and reaping. As Fee has pointed out, “Sometimes there seems to be no good reason why the wicked are ‘blessed’ while the good are not, or vice versa!...

⁶³ William L. Lane, *The Gospel according to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), p. 410.

⁶⁴ Copeland, *God’s Will Is Prosperity*, pp. 94–95.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Conventional wisdom, therefore, cannot be made a part of the Biblical view of poverty and prosperity."⁶⁶

When the general principle is made a specific demand, then it becomes illegitimate. This is especially true when the law of compensation is stretched into the "hundredfold return." In fact the subtle danger in expecting the law of compensation to work every time is that it will change the motivation for Christian service and giving. One begins to give in order to get something in return. Giving in order to get is definitely not the New Testament purpose for giving. Once again those supporting the prosperity gospel have taken a genuine biblical insight and distorted it beyond recognition in an attempt to make it support their extravagance.

Conclusion

Though a theological evaluation of the prosperity movement has been made, no reasons have yet been suggested, theological or otherwise, for the emergence and increasing popularity of the prosperity gospel. A tentative suggestion is that the *raison d'être* of the prosperity gospel is not so much an aberrant theological system as a complete neglect of theology altogether. In the last several decades American evangelicalism (at least in certain quarters) has been characterized by an increasingly antitheological stance. This attitude may now have culminated in the prosperity gospel. In contrast to this development, perhaps a countertrend should be established that once again emphasizes the glory of God in the grace of the gospel.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Fee, "The 'Gospel' of Prosperity," p. 41.

⁶⁷ Sarles, K. L. (1986). "A Theological Evaluation of the Prosperity Gospel," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 143, 329–350.