

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

The Bankruptcy of Prosperity Theology: An Unprofitable Gospel

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Are you having financial difficulties? Try this strategy to solve your problem. Simply declare to yourself, "Everything I touch prospers and succeeds" because "there is a miracle in your mouth."¹ According to prosperity theology, positive confessions and thinking are the keys to unlocking God's favor upon you is to exercise faith, change your thoughts and proclaim God's favor upon you blessings upon your life. If you practice this strategy consistently, then better days are ahead because, after all, God desires and even promises that His children will live a healthy and financially prosperous life.

This is the core message of what is known as the prosperity gospel. It is also referred to as the name-it-and-claim-it gospel, the health and wealth gospel, and the word of faith gospel. Some of the prominent prosperity preachers are Kenneth Copeland, T. D. Jakes, Joel Osteen, Frederick Price, Creflo Dollar, Kenneth Hagin, Jr. and Robert Tilton, to name a few. Although the prosperity gospel is not a new teaching, its influence is spreading beyond the confines of both the charismatic movement and Pentecostalism.

Its appeal crosses racial, gender, denominational and international boundaries.² Some of the largest churches in America, including the Potter's House (T. D. Jakes) and Lakewood Church (Joel Osteen), espouse prosperity theology.³ The largest church in the world (700,000), Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, Korea, teaches prosperity theology.⁴ The rapid rise of prosperity preachers has caught the media's attention. On September 18,

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¹ Joel Osteen, *Your Best Life Now* (Faith Words: New York, 2004), 125.

² Joe Maxwell and Isaac Phiri, "Gospel Riches," *Christianity Today* 51 no. 7 (Jul 2007): 22–29. According to the magazine, the prosperity gospel is taking root in the continent of Africa, particularly in Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa. In fact, on the continent of Africa, "prosperity-tinged Pentecostalism is growing faster not just than other strands of Christianity, but than all religious groups, including Islam."

³ According to *Outreach Magazine*, attendance at Lakewood Church is approximately 47,000, making it the largest church in America. The Potter's House has approximately 17,000, Creflo Dollar of World Changers Church International 15,000, and Fred Price of Crenshaw Christian Center 17,000. See the complete list at <http://www.outreachmagazine.com/library/webexclusives/out100fastestgrowinglist.asp> (accessed February 13, 2008).

⁴ The senior pastor is David Yonggi Cho, a prosperity teacher who emphasize "fourth dimensional power."

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2006, *Time* magazine's cover article was "Does God Want You to be Rich?" If one polls Christians, the answer is apparently yes. To the media's credit, they sense that there is something hypocritical about the prosperity gospel—wealthy preachers making promises to followers that do not materialize. The wealth does materialize, however, for the most popular prosperity teachers. They are multi-millionaires, and they believe that they deserve the wealth. It is, after all, a sign of God's favor upon their lives. With famous preachers flaunting their wealth, it is not surprising that the Senate Finance Committee is investigating six ministries, all of which promote prosperity theology, to ensure there has not been misuse of donations.⁵

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What are Christians to think of prosperity theology? In an attempt to answer this question and to alert Christians to the dangers of prosperity theology, this article will survey the history of prosperity theology, the doctrines of prominent prosperity teachers, the rise of preeminent prosperity teacher Joel Osteen, and then will critique prosperity theology through the lens of Scripture.

THE HISTORY OF PROSPERITY THEOLOGY

Although proponents of prosperity theology assert that the Scriptures shape their doctrines, history demonstrates that it is the confluence of New Thought metaphysics, positive thinking, and American individualism paraded as biblical truth. The Faith Movement propagated prosperity theology in the second-half of the 20th century.⁶ The history of the Faith Movement can be traced to Phineas Parkhurst Quimby (1802–1866), the intellectual father of New Thought. Quimby, a watchmaker by trade, focused upon philosophy of the mind and believed that the mind was distinct from the body. Since the mind affected the body, Quimby sought to assist the afflicted through various mind techniques including mesmerism, hypnotism, and positive thinking. Summarizing New Thought, Coleman states, "True reality was seen as being created on a spiritual level prior to its manifestation in physical realms."⁷ Quimby's teachings appear in other heretical movements such as Christian Science and the Unity School of Christianity.

⁵ The ministries are those of Kenneth Copeland, Creflo Dollar, Benny Hinn, Eddie Long, Joyce Meyer, and Randy and Paula White. Many of these leaders are known for their exorbitant lifestyles and personal perks.

⁶ The Faith movement is also known as Word of Faith movement or simply the Word-Faith movement.

⁷ Simon Coleman, *The Globalisation of Charismatic Christianity: Spreading the Gospel of Prosperity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 43. The principles of The International New Thought Alliance, founded in 1914, include "6. We affirm that we are all spiritual beings, dwelling in a spiritual universe that is governed by spiritual law, and that in alignment with spiritual law, we can heal, prosper, and harmonize. 7. We affirm that our mental states are carried forward into manifestation and become

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Quimby's teachings influenced E. W. Kenyon (1867–1948), an obscure evangelist and founder of Bethel Bible Institute, who synthesized New Thought metaphysics with current theological trends.⁸ Although Kenyon critiqued New Thought metaphysics, his writings demonstrate that, consciously or not, he incorporated New Thought teachings into his theological system, including a deistic view of God, a radical mind-body dualism, and deification of man.⁹ Kenyon's eclectic approach to his theology is the basis for the Faith Movement's most distinctive feature—speaking the right words to bring about a new reality.¹⁰ Allegedly, Kenyon even coined the popular phrase “What I confess, I possess.” While this feature is troublesome, Kenyon had more serious theological errors—he believed that Jesus' death on the cross did not purchase salvation.¹¹

In the early twentieth century, numerous books emerged that incorporated New Thought metaphysics with the aim of helping people achieve success and prosperity. A few examples are Ernest Holmes's *Creative Mind and Success*, Napoleon Hill's *Think and Grow Rich* and Wallace D. Wattles's *The Science of Getting Rich*, in which he opened with, “Whatever may be said in praise of poverty, the fact remains that it is not possible to live a really complete or successful life unless one is rich.”¹² In these non-Christian works, one discerns the primary features of prosperity theology; speaking the right words, invoking a universal law of success with our words, and faith in yourself. Many more examples of this type of secular thinking exist such as Charles Fillmore, the founder of the Unity School of Christianity and author of *Prosperity* and the more notable author, Norman Vincent Peale and his *Power of Positive Thinking*.

In this context, in the late 1940s, Oral Roberts burst onto the scene with his alleged ministry of healing and financial prosperity. While Roberts certainly captured national

our experience in daily living.” Other principles espouse the deification of man. Principles available at <http://www.newthoughtalliance.org/about.htm> (accessed January 24, 2008).

⁸ Milmon F. Harrison, *Righteous Riches: The Word of Faith Movement in Contemporary African American Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 6.

⁹ D. R. McConnell, *A Different Gospel: A Historical and Biblical Analysis of the Modern Faith Movement* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988), 45. McConnell provides convincing evidence of Kenyon's syncretism and the influence of metaphysics. Kenyon writes, “The Lord Jesus was not, however, a ‘one-of-a-kind.’ ‘Incarnation’ can be repeated in each and every one of us. Every man who has been ‘born again’ is an Incarnation.” He also writes, “The believer is as much of an Incarnation as was Jesus of Nazareth.” Kenyon, *The Father and His Family* (Lynwood, WA: Kenyon Gospel Publishing, 1981), 100, 118.

¹⁰ Harrison, 6. The idea that the mind creates reality emerges in its principal form from philosophical Idealism, a position held by German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831).

¹¹ It is beyond the scope of this article to document all of Kenyon's errors but McConnell provides ample documentation of Kenyon's reliance upon occultist thinking and doctrinal heresy. See Hank Hanegraaf, *Christianity in Crisis* (Eugene: Harvest House, 1993), 332.

¹² Wallace D. Wattles, *The Science of Getting Rich* (Holyoke: E. Towne, 1910), 9. The current best-seller, *The Secret*, by Rhonda Byrne is merely an updated version of Wattle's heresy.

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attention and spread prosperity theology, the late Kenneth E. Hagin (d. 2003) became the recognized father of the modern Faith Movement. In 1962, he established his own evangelistic ministry to propagate his doctrines. An Assemblies of God preacher, Hagin claimed to be an anointed prophet and teacher of faith. In several works, Hagin, like Roberts, claims to have had numerous personal visitations with Jesus for the purpose of new revelation to be taught to the church.¹³ In *How to Write Your Own Ticket with God*, Hagin recounts Jesus' personal appearance to him in which Jesus dictates the message, "Say It. Do it. Receive it. Tell it."¹⁴ This is standard practice to validate their teachings; prosperity preachers claim to have direct revelation from God or visions of Christ.

In 1988, McConnell, a member of the charismatic movement, linked Hagin's teachings, in part, directly to Kenyon. In fact, Hagin quotes Kenyon verbatim in some sermons and plagiarized Kenyon's work, *The Wonderful Name of Jesus*.¹⁵ Hagin repackaged Kenyon's teachings with Scripture and as McConnell notes, Hagin was impervious to criticism since he was a biblical scholar and a mystical seer who had divine encounters with Jesus.¹⁶ Hagin, influenced by Kenyon's New Thought philosophy, was not alone in promoting the Faith teachings. Numerous preachers copied Hagin's false doctrine and started their own ministries including his son, Kenneth Hagin, Jr., Kenneth Copeland, Fred Price, John Tilton, John Osteen, Benny Hinn, and Jerry Savelle.

While there is not a Faith denomination, there are important organizations that assist the Faith proponents' ministries.¹⁷ In 1973, Paul and Jan Crouch along with Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker founded the Trinity Broadcast Networking. According to its website, TBN is now the world's largest Christian television network. TBN serves as a platform for prosperity theology teachers to reach larger audiences. Rod Parsley, Creflo Dollar, Paula White, Kenneth Copeland, Jesse Duplantis and Kenneth Hagin, Jr. are some of the regular Faith teachers on TBN.¹⁸ In the 1980's, the Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Bakker financial and

¹³ McConnell, 57–76.

¹⁴ Kenneth E. Hagin, *How to Write Your Own Ticket with God* (Tulsa: Kenneth Hagin Ministries, 1979), 6–8. For a thorough discussion of Hagin's heretical theology, see Hanegraaf, 73–80.

¹⁵ McConnell, 6–12.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁷ Harrison, 14–17. In 1979, Doyle Harrison founded The International Convention of Faith Ministries to minister to those who are called to hold forth, contend for and propagate the word of faith worldwide. In 1985, Kenneth Hagin, Sr. started the Rhema Ministerial Association International, an organization that licenses and ordains graduates and equips ministers. Five years later, The Fellowship of Inner-City Word of Faith started and today has approximately 300 members.

TBN Trinity Broadcast Networking

TBN Trinity Broadcast Networking

¹⁸ TBN also airs conservative evangelical pastors as well, including David Jeremiah, James Merritt, Adrian Rogers and D. James Kennedy. See TBN's broadcast schedule for the week February 14th, 2008–February

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sex scandals shook the Faith Movement, but it recovered and today flourishes despite dubious origins. While modern prosperity preachers would deny that their message has roots in pagan philosophy and secular thinking, it most assuredly does. Furthermore, most of the key figures in the initial stages of the movement cannot even be considered orthodox Christians.

THE TEACHINGS OF PROSPERITY THEOLOGY

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Most Christians fail to realize that in addition to misunderstanding the true nature of the gospel, many preachers of the prosperity gospel hold to heretical views of God, Christ, and Man. Their views do not usually emerge in their popular writings but are nonetheless present and these errors have been well-documented.¹⁹ The danger in outlining the movement's theology is that every prosperity teacher then becomes guilty by association. While one cannot assume that every single prosperity teacher believes the same doctrine, there is a significant pattern of doctrinal deviation that must be addressed. In what follows, a brief survey will demonstrate that in fact, while the prosperity gospel is problematic, the more serious error is the underlying heretical views.

The Doctrine of God

Unknown to many Christians, several prominent members of the Faith Movement deny the biblical teaching of the Trinity. They reject the orthodox view that God is one yet also three persons, co-equal and co-eternal. Instead, they believe that God is one and appears as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit but not simultaneously. This is an ancient heresy known as modalism. One such example is T. D. Jakes who has been called America's Preacher and most influential black man in America. He is a member of the Oneness Pentecostal movement, a movement known for its unorthodox view of the Trinity. Jakes's church, The Potter's House in Dallas, Texas, believes that "there is one God, Creator of all things, infinitely perfect, and eternally existing in three manifestations: Father, Son and Holy Spirit."²⁰ This sounds orthodox but this position remains problematic.²¹ The

²⁰th, 2008 at http://www.tbn.org/watch/schedule_weekview.php?date=20080214 (accessed February 14, 2008).

¹⁹ For example, see John MacArthur, *Charismatic Chaos* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992); Hank Hanegraaf, *Christianity in Crisis* (Eugene: Harvest House, 1993); Michael Horton, ed., *The Agony of Deceit* (Chicago: Moody, 1990); Dave Hunt and T. A. McMahon, *The Seduction of Christianity* (Eugene: Harvest House, 1985).

²⁰ See their belief statement at <http://www.thepottershouse.org/v2/content/view/18/32/> (accessed January 23, 2008).

²¹ Jerry L. Buckner, "The Man, His Ministry, And His Movement: Concerns about the Teachings of T. D. Jakes," *Christian Research Journal*, 22, no. 2 (1999),

<http://www.equip.org/site/c.mu11LaMNjRE/b.2625875/k.B807/DI900.htm> (accessed January 23, 2008).

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term “manifestations” is typical of Oneness Pentecostal theology that denies that God eternally exists, simultaneously in three persons. Jakes has issued clarifications of the Trinity, but Pastor Lawrence Robinson, a close friend and on staff at The Potter’s House, confirmed that Jakes denies orthodox trinitarianism.²²

Kenneth Copeland, with whom Jakes has associated in the past, believes that God is a failure. He said, “I was shocked when I found out who the biggest failure in the Bible actually is ... The biggest one in the whole Bible is God ... Now, the reason you don’t think of God as a failure is He never said He’s a failure. And you’re not a failure till you say you’re one.”²³ In 1990, Benny Hinn made blasphemous claims under the guise of new revelation from the Holy Spirit, about each person of the Godhead being triune thus resulting in nine persons.²⁴ If prosperity teachers make such a fundamental error in basic doctrine, how can their prosperity gospel be trusted?

The Doctrine of Jesus Christ

Significant numbers of prosperity teachers also make fundamental errors in reference to Jesus. Kenneth Hagin, the father of the modern Faith Movement, does not understand the death of Christ on the cross as atonement for sin. He said, “He [Jesus] tasted spiritual death for every man. And His Spirit and inner man went to hell in my place. Can’t you see that? Physical death wouldn’t remove your sins. He’s tasted death for every man. He’s talking about tasting spiritual death.”²⁵ Frederick K. C. Price wrote, “Do you think the punishment for our sin was to die on a cross?... No, the punishment was to go into hell itself ...”²⁶ These representative statements reject the orthodox, biblical understanding of the atonement. The Scriptures teach that Jesus was made sin for us and was reconciling the world to God on the cross (2 Cor. 5:21). It is doubtful that Jesus even descended in hell. Salvation was in the atonement. It was not a cure for sickness or a removal of poverty as some teach.²⁷

Not only do some prosperity preachers promote heresy about the atonement, but they also teach falsehoods about Christ Himself. Prosperity teachers are on record as teaching that Jesus was not poor and neither were his disciples. Oral Roberts’s book, *How I Learned Jesus Was Not Poor* captures the message. Creflo Dollar, pastor of World Changers Church in College Park, GA, thinks that since the soldiers were gambling over Jesus’ robe, then

²² Ibid.

²³ Kenneth Copeland, “Praise-a-Thon” program on TBN (April 1988) as quoted in Hanegraaf, 125.

²⁴ Hanegraaf, 123–24.

²⁵ As quoted in Hanegraaf, 164.

²⁶ As quoted in McConnell, 120.

²⁷ See Ken L. Sarles, “A Theological Evaluation of the Prosperity Gospel,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 143 no. 572 (Oct–Dec 1986): 331–33 where he outlines the supposed promise of physical healing in the atonement.

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Jesus must have been wealthy to afford fine clothes. He concludes, “When you go to the Scriptures, there is no way you can conclude Jesus was poor.”²⁸ T. D. Jakes, whose personal fortune is estimated at 100 million dollars, has suggested that Jesus was rich since He had to support the Apostles.²⁹

Robert Tilton exemplifies the idea of the incompatibility of faith and poverty. He believes that being poor is a sin because God promises prosperity. Contrary to prosperity theology, the Bible consistently warns Christians about materialism and never portrays Jesus as wealthy.

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The Doctrine of Man

Prosperity theology inverts the relationship between the Creator and the creature. Man is now at the center of the universe and, therefore, God simply exists to meet all of man’s desires including good relationships, sound health, financial gains, etc. This type of gospel is man-centered and rather egotistical. Joel Osteen, in reference to being aware of God’s favor, says, “Consequently—and I say this humbly—I’ve come to expect to be treated differently. I’ve learned to expect people to want to help me. My attitude is this: I’m a child of the Most High God. My Father created the whole universe. He has crowned me with favor, therefore, I can expect preferential treatment. I can expect people to go out of their way to want to help me.”³⁰ Does this statement reflect Jesus’ teaching when He said, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many”?³¹ The biblical call to sacrifice, humility and suffering is notably absent in prosperity theology.

Perhaps this lack of emphasis is not surprising since numerous prosperity preachers think humans are divine gods. Paul Crouch infamously remarked on TBN, “I am a little god. Critics, be gone!”³² Kenneth Copeland said, “You don’t have a God in you, you are one.”³³ These ridiculous claims explain part of the reason why a man-centered gospel is so attractive to prosperity teachers. While the Bible does teach that we are made in the

²⁸ Martin C. Evans, “Gospel: Bringing in the Cash,” *Newsday*, November 11, 2006, <http://www.newsday.com/news/local/newyork/ny-lidoll1112,0,5446471.story?coll=ny-top-headlines> (accessed January 23, 2008).

²⁹ Libby Copeland, “With Gifts from God,” *Washington Post*, March 25, 2001, <http://www.trinityfi.org/press/tdjakes01.html> (accessed January 25, 2008).

³⁰ Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 38–39.

³¹ Mark 10:45; Matt 20:28 All quotations are from the New King James unless otherwise noted. TBN Trinity Broadcast Networking

³² Paul Crouch on “Praise the Lord” on TBN July 7, 1986.

³³ Kenneth Copeland, “The Force of Love” (Fort Worth: Kenneth Copeland Ministries, 1987) audiotape #02-0028 as quoted in Hanegraaf, 186.

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image of God (Gen 1:27) and we do partake of the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4), and it never teaches that we are God. There is only one God and the Scriptures declare, " 'You are My witnesses,' says the LORD, 'And My servant whom I have chosen, That you may know and believe Me, And understand that I am He. Before Me there was no God formed, Nor shall there be after Me. I, even I, am the LORD. And beside Me there is no savior' " (Isa. 43:10–11).

A typical verse used to support the deification of man is Psalm 82:6 which states, "I said, 'You are gods, And all of you are children of the Most High.' " What is not quoted is verse seven which reads, "But you shall die like men, And fall like one of the princes." Taking the verse in the entire context of Psalm 82 enables the reader to see that verse six refers to corrupt judges who presume to be gods in their positions, and God reminds them that they are mortal. Creflo Dollar in a sermon given January 21, 2001, entitled "Our Equality with God through Righteousness" allegedly said, based upon Psalm 82 that man is a god.³⁴

Unfortunately, this type of heresy is far too common among prosperity teachers. They tend to draw from the same well of theology, notably Kenneth E. Hagin and Kenneth Copeland, both of whom teach the deification of man. While there are other notable heresies in the Faith Movement, just these errors alone ought to give every evangelical Christian enough reason to avoid prosperity teaching. There are, however, some prosperity teachers known for their prosperity-lite brand of teaching, who although they may not subscribe to the above heresies, are still in error and dangerous. Joel Osteen is one such example.

THE TEACHINGS OF JOEL OSTEEN

Joel Osteen is the pastor of Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas, the largest church in America with a weekly attendance of approximately 40,000. Osteen assumed the leadership of Lakewood Church after the death of his father, John Osteen, and continues to experience tremendous growth in the church and notoriety in the media. In 2004, Joel Osteen released *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential*, and the book quickly ascended to the top New York Times Bestseller List and has since sold approximately four million copies. His sequel, *Become a Better You: 7 Keys to Improving Your Life Every Day*, published in 2007, is currently near the top of the New York Times Bestseller list.

³⁴ The author was unable to verify independently Dollar's statements since most of his messages from 2001 and 2002 have been removed from his website. The author did, however, watch a video of the sermon.

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Since becoming the senior pastor of Lakewood in 1999, the church has grown from approximately 8,000 to 40,000. Lakewood's services are televised on numerous television networks which reach nearly 200 million households per week and can be seen in 100 countries. In 2005, Lakewood moved into the former Compaq Center in Houston, and with a 90-million-dollar renovation, the arena was transformed into a 16,000 seat auditorium.

Osteen is the most visible and popular preacher in America and is considered to be a leader of evangelicals. He has appeared on numerous national programs such as 60 Minutes, Larry King Live and on the Fox News channel. While certainly Osteen appears genuine and sincere, despite his good intentions, his message is anything but harmless. This is not surprising, however, considering that he possesses no theological training. In what follows, it will be shown that Osteen misinterprets Scripture, misunderstands the gospel, and lacks theological conviction.

The Scriptures

Paul writes to Timothy, *"Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth"* (2 Tim. 2:15). A preacher must be competent to interpret Scripture with accuracy and integrity. Joel Osteen, on several occasions, demonstrates his incompetence. In *Your Best Life Now*, Osteen references the story of the lame man at the pool of Bethesda in John 5.³⁵ Osteen's retelling and interpretation are questionable. First, Osteen makes a factual error. He reverses the order of the events in the text. After paraphrasing Jesus' response to the man, Osteen then completes the story with his own conclusion. "When the man did what Jesus told him to do, he was miraculously healed."³⁶ Here is what the text actually says. The Apostle John writes, *"Jesus said to him, 'Arise, take up your pallet, and walk.' And immediately the man became well, and took up his pallet and began to walk"* (John 5:8-9). When Jesus spoke the man was healed instantly and then he stood up. Perhaps Osteen accidentally reversed the order of events, but his version reflects his theology—just obey and God will bless or heal you. Osteen's mistake actually detracts from the central person in the narrative—Jesus.

Second, Osteen allegorizes the meaning of the text and therefore proposes an illegitimate application of the passage. According to Osteen, the point of the story is, "If you're serious about being well, if you really want to be made physically and emotionally whole, you must get up and get moving with your life."³⁷ Is this the reason John recorded this event in the life of Jesus? In the larger context of the Gospel of John, which Osteen ignores,

³⁵ Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 143-52.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 149.

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John recorded the healing to display the power of Jesus, to demonstrate that Jesus was the Son of God, and to lead into the later discussion about the Sabbath and the divinity of Christ.³⁸

If this were the only example of questionable exegesis, one might concede that every pastor has engaged in the occasional hermeneutical blunder, but Osteen habitually justifies his message with suspicious interpretations of Scripture. In *Become A Better You*, Osteen emphasizes having confidence in yourself. He writes, "Start thinking, feeling, and speaking positively about yourself. The Scripture says, 'Our faith is made effectual when we acknowledge everything good in us' ... Our faith is most effective when we acknowledge the good things that are in us. Declare affirmations such as 'I have a bright future. I am gifted. I am talented. People like me. I have the favor of God.'"³⁹ Osteen supports his instruction to declare affirmations with Philemon 1:6 which reads, "*and I pray that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ's sake*" (Philemon 1:6 NAS). The point is not the subtle differences in the English translation, although Osteen's version does not exist in any standard Bible, but that he truncates the verse to fit his own presuppositions. The reader concludes that faith simply depends upon his or her ability to locate the good things inside defined as talents, gifts, and the future.

This is not the meaning of the passage. The Apostle Paul is preparing Philemon and the church to forgive Onesimus upon his return. Paul appeals to the entire community of faith to forgive Onesimus for his desertion. The good things probably refer to the believer's spiritual blessings and, in this instance, forgiveness of sin.⁴⁰ In short, Osteen's hermeneutical method is to locate a verse, isolate it, modify it and then print it. He cannot be trusted to faithfully and accurately teach the Word of God.⁴¹

The Power of Words

A consistent theme in prosperity theology is the proper use of words. Osteen writes, "Friend, there is a miracle in your mouth. If you want to change your world, start by changing your words.... If you'll learn how to speak the right words and keep the right attitude, God will turn that situation around."⁴² If you struggle, you boldly declare, " 'Everything I put my hands to prospers and succeeds!' Friend, when you make those kinds of bold declarations, all heaven comes to attention to back up God's Word."⁴³

³⁸ See D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 244.

³⁹ Osteen, *Become a Better You*, 129.

⁴⁰ Eph 1:3–14.

⁴¹ For another example of misinterpreting Scripture to support his teachings, see *Your Best Life Now*, 38.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 125.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 130.

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Osteen also instructs the reader to “use words to change your situation” because “with our words, we can prophesy our own future.”⁴⁴

In one of his action points, he suggests refreshing your self-image by speaking such words as “I am blessed; I am prosperous; I am healthy; I am continually growing wiser.”⁴⁵ If you can talk to yourself the right way, you will “rise higher and see God’s blessings and favor in a greater way.”⁴⁶ Osteen’s belief in the power of our words places man in control of his destiny and is simply reciting New Thought metaphysics. The Bible does not instruct believers to repeat phrases in order control their thoughts. The Bible does, however, encourage believers to trust God’s sovereignty, to meditate on His Word, and to use our speech to encourage people.

Redefining the Gospel

On literally the last page of *Your Best Life Now* Osteen writes, “Are you at peace with God? A void exists in every person’s heart that only God can fill ... Just say, “ ‘Lord Jesus, I repent of my sins. I ask You to come into my heart. I make You my Lord and Savior.’ ”⁴⁷ This is the invitation that he gives at the end of each broadcast, and Lakewood Church reports significant numbers of people being saved.⁴⁸ While commendable, the question is, “Saved from what?” From reading his books, one concludes that a person is saved from the possibility of a horrendous life, or more simply from himself, rather than from his sinful predicament.

Osteen explains in his latest book, “When we believe in God’s Son, Jesus Christ, and believe in ourselves, that’s when faith comes alive. When we believe we have what it takes, we focus on our possibilities.”⁴⁹ Contrary to Osteen’s belief, biblical faith is rejecting our self-righteous standard and recognizing that only Christ is the answer. Osteen’s focus on man’s possibilities contradicts Jesus’ statement, “Without me you can do nothing.”⁵⁰

In the chapter “Stop Listening to Accusing Voices,” Osteen talks extensively about people’s mistakes and how God views people. His position is that as long as you are doing your best and desiring to do what is right according to the Bible, God is pleased. You should “take the pressure off yourself; give yourself the right to have some

⁴⁴ Osteen, *Become A Better You*, 114.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁴⁷ Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 310. This invitation is after the footnotes. He expands the presentation slightly in *Become a Better You*.

⁴⁸ Lakewood also reports the number of people who received the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

⁴⁹ Osteen, *Become a Better You*, 129–30.

⁵⁰ John 15:5.

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weaknesses and not to perform perfectly 100 percent of the time.”⁵¹ According to Osteen, what is important is that God knows your heart and, if you give your best effort, God will approve. If you make a mistake, then repent and move on. Why? Because you want God’s favor; not because you have sinned against God! Osteen writes, “If you want to receive something good from God, come to Him humbly and with reverence, but come to him in boldness. ‘God, I’ve made mistakes, but I know You love me, and I’m asking for forgiveness; I’m receiving your mercy.’ Then go out expecting God’s blessings and favor.”⁵²

Osteen’s gospel is that Jesus died to save you from a terrible life. Absent from his preaching is a well-defined concept of original sin and its implications for each person. As J. C. Ryle once said, “Substitute anything for Christ, and the Gospel is totally spoiled!”⁵³ Absent from his gospel is a biblical explanation of the death of Christ for sin. In prosperity theology this makes sense—negative thoughts impact your ability to gain God’s favor so sin and the cross are omitted.

Redefining Man

Osteen holds an optimistic view of man’s goodness and abilities. In fact, Osteen believes that we have the DNA of Almighty God. Inside of us are seeds of greatness, and we are the seed of Almighty God. Since God paid the price for us, we are champions on the inside. How can we be assured of this fact? Osteen says that “it’s in your blood.”⁵⁴ Osteen believes that addictions and mind-sets get passed to the next generation literally through blood. If this is true, Osteen asks, “How much more can God’s blessings, favor, and good habits be passed down through our blood?”⁵⁵ Hopefully Osteen is not suggesting that man is divine but his language suggests it. His ideas parallel, in some respects, Gnostic beliefs about the divine spark in each person.

Ostensibly Osteen thinks that man changes by “thinking power thoughts.”⁵⁶ If you exercise your authority, you can defeat hereditary disease. Osteen himself declares every day “I will fulfill my destiny in good health.”⁵⁷ He believes that your actions are determinative for your descendants. He writes, “Get up every day and give it your best effort. If you will do that, not only will you rise higher and accomplish more, but God

⁵¹ Ibid., 89.

⁵² Ibid., 91.

⁵³ J. C. Ryle, “Evangelical Religion,” www.tracts.ukgo.com/john_charles_ryle.htm (accessed February 13, 2008).

⁵⁴ Osteen, *Become A Better You*, 35.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 61.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 43.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 45.

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has promised that your seed, your family line for up to a thousand generations, is going to have the blessings and the favor of God—all because of the life that you've lived."⁵⁸ This is a works-based righteousness that eliminates God's grace and makes claims about God that simply are not true. God never promised unconditional blessing and favor to your descendants. The basis of the blessing that God *has* promised is not your works but rather the life of Christ. It is true that you can and should influence your children and be an example, but ultimately, your children will make their own decisions in relation to Christ.

Theological Confusion

On national TV, Osteen on several occasions failed to articulate a clear view of the gospel. In a 60 Minutes interview aired in the fall of 2007, interviewer Byron Pitts perceptively comments, "To become a better you, you must be positive towards yourself, develop better relationships, embrace the place where you are. Not one mention of God in that. Not one mention of Jesus Christ in that." Osteen responds, "That's just my message. There is Scripture in there that backs it all up. But I feel like, Byron, I'm called to help people ... how do we work out the Christian life? How do we live it? And these are principles that can help you. I mean, there's a lot better people qualified to say, 'Here's a book that is going to explain the Scriptures to you.' I don't think that's my gifting,"⁵⁹ Byron Pitts's comment highlights a significant problem with Osteen's message—it is not centered on Christ and Osteen's answer reveals a second problem; Osteen is preaching his own message. It is ironic that Osteen claims that Scripture backs his ideas up (there are 66 references listed in the endnotes in *Become A Better You*), yet he would not write a book explaining Scripture because that is not his gifting.

In an interview with Osteen, Larry King asks why there are so few references to Scripture in *Your Best Life Now* until the back of the book. Osteen answers, "It doesn't do a whole lot of it. My message, I wanted to reach the mainstream. We've reached the church audience. So I just try to, what I do is just try to teach practical principles. I may not bring the Scripture in until the end of my sermon and I might feel bad about that. Here's the thought. I talked yesterday about living to give. That's what a life should be about. I brought in at the end about some of the Scriptures that talk about that. But the same

⁵⁸ Ibid., 69.

⁵⁹ CBS 60 Minutes, "Joel Osteen Answers His Critics," Transcript dated December 23, 2007. Program originally broadcast on Oct. 14, 2007, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/10/11/60minutes/main3358652.shtml> (accessed February 1, 2008).

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principal is in the book.”⁶⁰ The most popular preacher in America tacitly admits that Scripture does not play a central role in either his book or his sermons.

Osteen’s message of hope and lack of skill with the Scriptures emerged later in the Larry King interview. Larry King, wanting to know what happens to an unbeliever, asks, “What if you’re Jewish or Muslim, you don’t accept Christ at all?” Osteen responds vaguely, “You know, I’m very careful about saying who would and wouldn’t go to heaven. I don’t know.” King presses, “If you believe you have to believe in Christ? They’re wrong, aren’t they?” Unable to evade the question, Osteen responds, “Well, I don’t know if I believe they’re wrong. I believe here’s what the Bible teaches and from the Christian faith this is what I believe. But I just think that only God will judge a person’s heart. I spent a lot of time in India with my father. I don’t know all about their religion. But I know they love God. And I don’t know. I’ve seen their sincerity. So I don’t know. I know for me, and what the Bible teaches, I want to have a relationship with Jesus.” After the interview, Osteen received numerous emails and clarified his statements.

In December of 2007, Chris Wallace on Fox News Sunday asked Osteen, in reference to Mitt Romney, if Mormons are true Christians. Osteen responded, “Well, in my mind they are. Mitt Romney has said that he believes in Christ as his savior, and that’s what I believe, so, you know, I’m not the one to judge the little details of it. So I believe they are.” Wallace then asks, “So, for instance, when people start talking about Joseph Smith, the founder of the church, and the golden tablets in upstate New York, and God assumes the shape of a man, do you not get hung up in those theological issues?” Osteen answers, “I probably don’t get hung up in them because I haven’t really studied them or thought about them. And you know, I just try to let God be the judge of that. I mean, I don’t know. I certainly can’t say that I agree with everything that I’ve heard about it, but from what I’ve heard from Mitt, when he says that Christ is his savior, to me that’s a common bond.”⁶¹

If Mormons are genuine Christians, then just about anyone can be considered a Christian. Mormonism teaches that Jesus was a created spirit, Satan was his brother, and that all men were born as siblings to Jesus and Satan. Mormons reject the atonement for sin as well as the divinity of Christ. It is clear that from just these few interviews, Osteen is not a thoughtful theologian and does not place Scripture in the center of his message. Furthermore, Osteen distorts the true gospel message and thereby misleads his followers.

⁶⁰ CNN *Larry King Live* aired June 20, 2005. Transcript available at <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0506/20/lkl.01.html> (Accessed February 1, 2008).

⁶¹ *Fox News Sunday with Chris Wallace* aired December 23, 2007. Partial transcript available at <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,318054,00.html> (accessed January 30, 2008).

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A BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

While there are elements of truth in prosperity theology, these truths are not placed in their proper context within the larger scope of biblical teaching.⁶² No Christian denies that God does and can bless people with material riches. In the Old Testament, God blessed numerous patriarchs with wealth. God promised the nation of Israel that He would prosper them financially if they obeyed the voice of the Lord.⁶³ When the nation of Israel robbed God of tithes and offerings, God promised that he would provide rain and protect the crops from locusts if the people obeyed.⁶⁴

The Psalms repeatedly mention God blessing the righteous, His people and His inheritance. There are also requests from individuals for blessing from God.⁶⁵ God is the source of wealth, so bringing any request before God including finances and health is appropriate. Without question, God prospers individuals, heals the sick, and answers prayer and sometimes the answer to prayer does include tangible signs of prosperity. There are, however, several differences between biblical theology and prosperity theology. Some questions to consider are: Does God promise financial prosperity for every believer? Is prosperity a sign of spiritual success? Is material prosperity God's primary agenda for believers? Prosperity theology answers these questions in the affirmative.

Does God Promise Financial Prosperity for Every Believer?

If God promises financial blessing, health or good relationships for every believer, then the Bible contradicts itself. Jesus said that the poor would always exist and admonishes believers to assist the poor. The early church consisted of believers from different economic classes. The Apostle Paul prayed three times for his thorn in the flesh to be removed and God denied the request. Paul probably suffered from poor eyesight as well (Gal 6:11) and he did not have the best relationships with people; neither did Jesus. In fact, Jesus told His followers that they would be rejected by family and suffer persecution. By teaching that God promises material blessings for every believer, prosperity theology denies the sovereignty and will of God for each believer.

Prosperity preachers appeal to God's relationship to Abraham to support their case. Prosperity theology teaches that God's covenant with Abraham included financial blessing for all of Abraham's seed. Copeland summarizes this view well: "Since God's

⁶² Randy Alcorn, *Money, Possessions, and Eternity* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 2003), 75–90. The author is indebted to Alcorn's critique of the prosperity gospel.

⁶³ See Deut 28:1–12.

⁶⁴ Mal 3:7–12.

⁶⁵ Psalm 67 is one such example.

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Covenant has been established and prosperity is a provision of this Covenant, you need to realize that prosperity belongs to you *now!*... You *must* realize that it is God's will for you to prosper (*see* 3 John 2). This is available to you and, frankly, it could be stupid of you not to partake of it!"⁶⁶ The idea is that God made a contract with Abraham and when accessed by faith is passed on to Abraham's spiritual children in the form of material blessings. Joel Osteen is no exception. He writes, "I love the Scripture that says, 'If we belong to Christ, we are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.' That means we can all experience the blessings of Abraham. If you study Abraham's record, you'll discover that he was prosperous, healthy, and lived a long, productive life. Even though he didn't always make the best choices, he enjoyed God's blessings and favor."⁶⁷

The problem is that Galatians 3:13–14 makes it clear that Jesus Christ, our salvation, is the blessing of Abraham and the covenant was not conditional; it was everlasting and executed by God regardless of Abraham's obedience.⁶⁸ The spiritual blessing of salvation through faith is in view; not material blessings. No one denies that Abraham possessed earthly riches. But are those part of God's covenant with all men? Prosperity theology fails to take into account the *unique* covenantal arrangements between God and Israel and therefore generalizes that God must bless other nations and Christians in different eras.⁶⁹

Is Prosperity a Sign of Spiritual Success?

If prosperity is a sign of spiritual success, then God contradicts Himself. God permitted Satan to persecute Job, a faithful servant. In fact, Job's friends thought that he must have sinned greatly against God to deserve such severe punishment. They were wrong. Job proved himself to be innocent before God. In the New Testament, Jesus rejected the notion that financial success in life is necessarily indicative of spiritual maturity. His disciples correlated wealth to entrance into heaven. When Jesus told them that "it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven," they were "greatly astonished" because they thought that the wealthy must have special status with God.⁷⁰

The greater problem for prosperity theology, though, is that both believers and unbelievers accumulate wealth and live to be old. The wicked do prosper and therefore the Psalmist tells the believer not to worry because God is just. The wicked perish and

⁶⁶ Copeland, *The Laws of Prosperity* (Fort Worth, TX: Kenneth Copeland Publications, 1974), 51. Italics in original.

⁶⁷ Osteen, *Become a Better You*, 40.

⁶⁸ David Jones, "The Bankruptcy of the Prosperity Gospel," *Faith & Mission* 16 no. 1 (Fall 1988): 79–87.

⁶⁹ Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1999), 51.

⁷⁰ Matt 19:23–25.

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take nothing to the grave.⁷¹ In other words, health and wealth cannot be the standard of success because God allows the wicked to prosper in finances and health.

If physical prosperity is God's primary agenda, then it contradicts the numerous warnings about wealth. Jesus points out that wealth can be a hindrance to salvation. People trust in their possessions for their significance rather than God. Jesus said that a person cannot serve both God and money. Paul warns the wealthy not to be prideful about their possessions and not to trust in their uncertain riches. As Scripture notes, "*The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows*" (1 Tim. 6:10). Why would a preacher develop a philosophy of ministry that makes it hard to go to heaven and kindles suicidal desires?⁷²

According to Christ, spiritual maturity manifests itself in love for God and neighbor. Spiritual maturity is evidenced by displaying love, joy, peace, patience, kindness and faithfulness. Contrary to prosperity theology, the New Testament does not correlate wealth with spiritual success.

Is Material Prosperity God's Primary Agenda for Believers?

Prosperity theology emphasizes material riches for God's people. The problem, however, is that the New Testament views riches as being spiritual in nature. The Greek word *plouto*, often translated "rich" or "wealth," occurs thirty-two times in the New Testament. There is not one instance in which God promises material riches. There are, however, numerous instances of riches used in a derogatory way. The Bible describes riches as deceitful, uncertain and a cause of corruption. More often than not, riches refer to sources of spiritual blessings. For instance, Paul writes, "*In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace*" (Eph. 1:7). Paul preached the unsearchable riches of Christ and referred to the riches of God's glory.⁷³

God gives the believer something more valuable than material riches—he promises him divine power to live a godly life. Absent from that promise is health and wealth. In fact, one may contend that the opposite is promised. Jesus told his followers that the world would hate them. Paul informed Timothy that everyone who desires to live a godly life will be persecuted. God uses suffering in believers's lives to refine them, to develop

⁷¹ See Psalm 49.

⁷² John Piper, "Prosperity Preaching: Deceitful and Deadly," <http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/TasteAndSee/ByDate/2007/1993 Prosperity Preaching Deceitful and Deadly/> (accessed Feb 11, 2007).

⁷³ Other verses that refer to spiritual blessings are Rom 2:4; 11:33; Eph 2:7; 3:8; 3:16; Phil 4:19; Col. 1:27; 2:2.

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patience, and to make them more like Christ.⁷⁴ Unfortunately, the concept of suffering is neglected by prosperity preachers, even though the gospel centers upon Jesus' sufferings on the cross.

Prosperity proponents point out that material blessings are indeed part of the relationship. God desires that His children prosper now. Jesus did not merely promise future blessings. They appeal to verses such as Mark 10:29–30 and 3 John 1:2. In the Gospel of Mark, in response to Peter, Jesus said, *“Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My sake and the gospel’s, who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time—houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions—and in the age to come, eternal life.”* Extreme prosperity preachers teach that this verse promises a literal return of 100 times whatever one loses. If this is the case, then Jesus is a liar. When believers lose property, then God would be obligated to give them 100 pieces of property.

Most prosperity teachers avoid this faulty interpretation and instead use the verses to show that God promises material blessing in this life when one sacrifices. What is the hundredfold? The verse answers the question; houses, relatives, and lands *with persecutions*. When one leaves his current society for Christ, he or she will then be part of a new society comprised of believers, wherever they live. The key to this interpretation is located in Mark chapter three when Jesus addressed the question of genuine family. With Jesus' family outside the house, Jesus looked around the group and said, *“Here are My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of God is My brother and My sister and mother”* (Mark 3:34–35). The hundredfold refers to the new society of family which far exceeds the earthly family. The reality is that the believer's reward and justice will occur in heaven.

John writes to Gaius, *“Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers”* (3 John 1:2). Prosperity teachers believe that as one develops spiritually, one then gains access to material blessings. There are some fatal flaws in this interpretation. First, there is no indication that this is a universal promise. It is a common opening of an ancient letter between friends.⁷⁵ John's intent was to encourage his friend; not to teach doctrine in the introduction. Second, the word “prosper” literally means to “have a good journey” or “to go well with someone.”⁷⁶ This word “prosper” does not denote material blessings. The English Standard Version captures this sense. It reads, *“Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, as it goes well*

⁷⁴ Rom 5:3–5; Jas 1:2–4; 2 Cor 4:17.

⁷⁵ Jones, 16. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 147.

⁷⁶ I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 83.

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with your soul." Third, even if one assumes "prosper" in the materialistic sense, it is still a prayer or desire. There is no guarantee that the prayer will be answered in the affirmative.

The Bible teaches that God is sovereign and does not promise health and wealth for every believer. God's agenda is that all repent of sin and be reconciled to him. Furthermore, God tells believers that with wealth comes danger and believers are to expect hardship as soldiers of Jesus Christ. Prosperity theology twists Scripture to fit its agenda and accept the "blessing and prosperity" passages and neglects the "suffering and persecution" passages. This is disingenuous at best and at worst, deceitful.

Prosperity theology possesses numerous other errors such as placing faith in faith, distorting the gospel, and twisting the purpose of giving. Sadly, many followers of prosperity preachers become disillusioned with God when health and wealth do not appear. They give to ministries in order to get more wealth. They are led to believe that they did not have enough faith and thus God did not act accordingly. How many people will reject God due to these false teachings?

CONCLUSION

The prosperity gospel is gaining in popularity among evangelicals despite its pagan moorings and heretical teachings. Perhaps one reason for the rise, other than it appeals to man's pride, is that it is "not so much an aberrant theological system as a complete neglect of theology altogether."⁷⁷ The prosperity theology removes Christ and the cross to make the prosperity gospel more attractive. This is a false gospel and, sadly, too many Christians lack a spiritual discernment that, as Charles Spurgeon noted, distinguishes right from almost right. When Christians lack theological knowledge, they will be carried about by "every wind of doctrine" (Eph. 4:14).

Even a simple, theological evaluation, as this article has done, ought to leave no room for prosperity theology to flourish in the evangelical community. The prosperity gospel diminishes God's sovereignty, exalts man above God, misinterprets the atonement, neglects sin, ignores suffering and redefines faith. Ultimately, the prosperity gospel deceives people and drives them to pursue worldly success instead of the life that is found in Christ alone. The danger of prosperity theology is as Jesus said, "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?" (Mark 8:36).⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Ken L. Sarles, 350.

⁷⁸ Woodbridge, R. S. (2008). "The Bankruptcy of Prosperity Theology: An Unprofitable Gospel," *Theology for Ministry*, 3(1), 5–26.