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The Old Testament Promise of Material Blessings and the Contemporary Believer

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Can the OT be interpreted as advocating a prosperity gospel of wealth, health and success? Are such passages as Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 28 and Psalm 37 fairly understood as supporting a theology of affluence? Can we revise the proverb to say “Early to faith and early to obedience, makes a person healthy, wealthy and wise”? Regardless of anything else?

Such questions are being answered affirmatively by an increasingly large number of evangelicals and some positive thinkers. In fact the promise of wealth, health, and success is too tempting for many to resist. Unfortunately, this so-called “gospel of success” tries to appeal to biblical authority and examples. Prominent among the lists of alleged biblical proof-texts are a number of passages from the OT.

These challenges, apart from any other reasons are more than adequate to call the academic and believing community to express what is the OT case for the legitimate enjoyment of the material aspects of our culture. There is, of course, a theology of culture in the OT. It is grounded in our positive affirmation and God’s approbation of the created order. There is also a holistic approach to the spiritual and material aspects of reality.

The sad fact is that few have ventured into those portions of Scripture that call for a balanced approach to the questions of wealth, health, and success. Instead, success, and the determined quest for it alone, is spoiling America’s “worldly evangelicals.”¹

It is important that we first understand who the advocates of the prosperity gospel are and what it is that they are claiming. The prosperity gospel does not appear to belong to any particular denominational group or brand of theology; in fact, it is so broadly spread over the American scene that it defies any easy categorization theologically. At times it has the emphasis of the possibility or positive thinking of a Robert Schuller and a Norman Vincent Peale. At other times it appears to be the private preserve of faith-healing groups. But more than all of these it rests on our culture’s heavy involvement with an affluent suburban Christianity.

¹ Richard Quebedeaux, *The Worldly Evangelicals: Has Success Spoiled America’s Born Again Christians?* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1977).

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Some of the more visible personalities in this broadly based group include Kenneth Hagin, pastor of the Rhema Bible Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma; Kenneth and Gloria Copeland from Fort Worth, Texas; Charles Capps, a pastor from Oklahoma; Robert and Marte Tilton, co-pastors of the Word of Faith Church in Farmers Branch, Texas; and Charles and Frances Hunter, faith-healers and founders of the City of Light, Kingwood, Texas.² Lesser lights include: John Osteen, pastor of LaPewood Church in Houston, Texas; and Jerry Savelie, an evangelist and former associate of Kenneth Copeland.

Among the favorite OT texts of this group are these (all cited from AV):

They that seek the Lord shall not want any good thing.	Psalm 34:10
Let them shout for joy and be glad that favor my righteous cause; yea, let them say continually, let the Lord be magnified, which hath pleasure in the prosperity of his servant.	Psalm 35:27
I have been young, and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread.	Psalm 37:25
This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth: but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein, for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success.	Josh 1:8
If they obey and serve Him, they shall spend their days in prosperity, and their years in pleasures.	Job 36:11
If thou wilt diligently hearken to the voice of the LORD thy God, and wilt do that which is right in his sight, and wilt give ear to his commandments, and keep his statutes, I will put none of these diseases upon thee, which I have brought upon the Egyptians: I am the LORD that healeth thee.	Exod 15:26
Who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy diseases.	Psalm 103:3

² For some of the key bibliography, see Kenneth E. Hagin, *How to Turn your Faith Loose* (Tulsa: Faith Lib., 1983); Gloria Copeland, *God's Will Is Prosperity* (Tulsa: Harrison House, 1978); Kenneth Copeland, *The Laws of Prosperity* (Fort Worth: Kenneth Copeland Publish., 1974); Charles Capps, *The Tongue- A Creative Force* (Tulsa: Harrison House, 1976); Kenneth E. Hagin, *Redeemed From Poverty, Sickness, and Death* (Tulsa: Faith Library, 1983); Charles Hunter, *God's Condition for Prosperity* (Kingwood, Texas: Hunter, 1984); Jerry Savelie, "True Prosperity — What is it?" *Christian Life* 45 (1983–84) 47, 49.

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Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows; yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.

Isa 53:4–5

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In its most developed form, the gospel of prosperity asserts that God has set up certain laws and principles in his universe. Among these are his laws on wealth and health. What the believing child of God needs to do is to learn these principles from texts such as those we have just quoted from the King James version (a favorite translation with this group), and then to set these laws into motion by speaking them with our own mouths, for everything we say will come to pass! On this model, the spoken word (Greek ῥημα has a residual power within it that we only need utilize according to the principles that God vested in his world.

An alternative model focuses on Paul's triumphant note that "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law" (Gal 3:13). Curiously, we are assured that this curse is equated with the curses in Deut 28:15–68 (which embraces sickness, poverty, and death). What the redeemed person needs to realize is that with his or her personal salvation has come a release from all poverty, sickness, or even the second death!

But there is more. Not only were believers redeemed from the curse of the law, as defined above; they were also promised all the blessings of Abraham since we too are now Abraham's seed! Since God promised that he was going to make Abraham prosperous and rich, we too are going to enjoy the same benefits!

A third popular model appears to have revised its estimate of sin as defined biblically. For some of the advocates of this health, wealth, and prosperity theology, sin is "any act or thought that robs myself or another human being of his or her self esteem."³ In the new birth, a new positive self-esteem replaces the former negative, inferiority complex. With a new sense of self-esteem, individuals are now free to go for the stars: anything is now possible. God wants to see us succeed; that is why he has promised to crown our efforts with success.

In addition to these contemporary gospel of affluence evangelists, the charge has frequently been levelled against the OT that it too fosters a type of eudaemonism. Eudaemonism is that ethical position that stresses that goodness, happiness, and material rewards always come from satisfactory ethical actions. Rather than focusing on the

³ Robert Schuller, *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation* (Waco, TX: Word, 1982) 14.

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rightness of an ethical action, the charge made against the OT by some of its critics is that the OT gives as its main motive for many, if not most, ethical actions, a desire to achieve material prosperity and success. Such a charge, if true, would expose the OT to the accusation that it is governed more by utilitarian and pragmatic outcomes such as pleasure, wealth, and health, than it is governed by principles and the standard of the person and being of God. This is commonly referred to as “Deuteronomic theology” or the “retributive motive.” Any complete consideration of our topic must include a discussion of this charge as well for it would appear from this charge that the gospel of affluence and the OT ethic of eudaemonism are very much related; one turns it into a positive asset while the other finds it to be a negative blot on the OT’s record.

The Old Testament View Of Eudaemonism

The argument has been repeated so frequently that it now passes for fact: the motive for ethical action in the OT was the desire for material prosperity and the anxiety to escape disaster. But if that charge is true, how could an ethical theory that purports to come from God define ethical obligation solely by reference to personal well-being? Could such revelation assume that the ultimate motive for ethical behavior was merely self-interest, concern only for one’s well-being?

The Problem of Defining Eudaemonism

There are so many problems with such a materialistic motivation for ethics that one hardly knows which problem to tackle first. Perhaps it would be best to start with a definition of the word itself. The Greek word εὐδαιμονία is widely and generally rendered “welfare” (German *Wohlfahrt*), but welfare is not to be automatically regarded as identical with happiness. Even though some ethicists define happiness as a technical equivalent of welfare, this definition involves an unnatural divorce from the commonly accepted connotation that happiness bears in ordinary speech, i.e. pleasure as an essential, if not one of the predominate, ingredients of life. It would be more appropriate to call such a high emphasis on pleasure “hedonism.”

What ethical motivation does the OT advocate? One thing for sure, it did not advocate personal welfare above the welfare of the nation. The top motive for ethical decision featured what it meant to be a “holy people” of God, not a desire for personal prosperity or the desire personally to avoid disaster and suffering.

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The Nature of God

The starting point for understanding OT ethics is the nature of God. The norm for all ethical decision is nothing less than the character of God as it is expressed in his “holiness.” God is “wholly” distinct and, in that sense, is “set apart” from all that is common, profane, or contrary to his nature and character. This norm is set forth in Jer 9:23–24:

Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom
or the strong man boast of his strength
or the rich man boast of his riches,

but let him who boasts boast about this:
that he understands and knows me,
that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness,
justice and righteousness on earth,
for in these I delight.

To “know” God personally meant that a person would strive to do the good set forth in God’s character and being. Each individual was to be holy as the LORD was holy.

Holiness was so much a part of OT life that it was impossible to exclude anything from the potential sphere of its influence. The central challenge of life was “Be holy, because I [the LORD] am holy” (Lev 11:45). Hence, we perceive OT ethics to be deontological (from the Greek word δέον which stresses the “ought” or “binding” nature of the rightness of an action. What makes something “right,” then is not its results, but the specific command or character of God.)⁴

The case for holiness is to be found at three levels: 1) the explicit statements in the “Law of Holiness” (Leviticus 18–20); 2) the definition of holiness as a term that is practically equivalent to the complete “Godhead” in all his attributes as a standard for what is spiritual, moral, and ethical; and 3) the norm for what is the good, just, right, and appropriate standard of acting and being. It is this *imitatio Dei* that captures the mainspring of OT ethics, “Be holy, because, I, the LORD your God, am holy.”

⁴ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. “Holiness in Motive and Heart,” in *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983)235–44.

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The Case for Motives in OT Ethics

The first scholar who directed the world of biblical scholarship to the issue of motives in the OT was Berend Gemser. He defined motives as “grammatically subordinate sentences [or clauses] in which the motivation for a commandment is given.”⁵ Gemser arranged the contents of these clauses around four categories of motivation: 1) explanatory appeals to common sense of the hearer; 2) ethical appeals to conscience or ethical sentiments 3) religious and theological appeals grounded in the nature and will of God; and 4) historical appeals to God’s great acts in history on behalf of his people.

It is clear that OT morality is governed by more than mere outward acts; it is also concerned with internal motivation. Even though B.D. Eerdmans contested this point in 1903 when he asserted that “Old Testament ethics do not meddle with the inner thoughts of men,”⁶ Gemser responded by pointing to some thirty-six places where the Hebrew text linked ethical judgments with the inner thoughts and motivations of the heart.

Motivation in Proverbs

Few books have been assailed more frequently for suggesting a profit, success, or materialistic motivation for right action than the book of Proverbs. R.N. Gordon listed some 133 references in Proverbs where as one of six motivators to ethical behavior, material inducements or punishments were used to obtain compliance with the injunctions of the book. However in Gordon’s view the ultimate motive in Proverbs was *life*. Said Gordon

In a sense many of the other motives can be combined to make up *life*, when *life* is understood as a full, satisfying useful, integrated and enjoyable existence Many of the quotations which have hitherto been referred to as “utilitarian and eudaemonistic” and which are prompted by a desire for worldly and materialistic success and motivated by selfish ends, can be re-interpreted as part of a search for a wholeness in life in which these goals are necessary amongst others.⁷

⁵ Berend Gemser, “The Importance of the Motive Clause in Old Testament Law,” *VTSup* 1 (1953) 50–66; reprinted in *Adhuc Loquitur: Collected Essays by B. Gemser* (ed. A. van Selms and A. S. van der Woude; Pretoria Orientalia Series, 7; Leiden: Brill, 1968) 96–115. See also Rifat Sonsino, *Motive Clauses in Hebrew Law: Biblical Forms and Near Eastern Parallels* (Chico, California: Scholars, 1980) 65; and R. W. Uitti, “The Motive Clause in Old Testament Law” (Dissertation, Chicago Lutheran School of Theology, 1973) 6–8; and Henry John Postel, “The Form and Function of the Motive Clause in Proverbs 10–29” (Dissertation, University of Iowa, 1976) 22.

⁶ For a fuller discussion and complete bibliography, see Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, 7–10; 243–4.

⁷ R. N. Gordon, “Motivation in Proverbs,” *Biblical Theology* 25 (1975) 49–56.

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Since all of life is proclaimed as a “gift” material benefits were regarded as no greater inducement than was life itself. Nor were material blessings of life looked upon as being greater in value than the rewards of wisdom and life themselves.

It is a distinctively twentieth century obsession that fixes so singularly on the material aspects of life. The OT writers recommended that humans fix their eyes on “the fear of the LORD” as the beginning point for all greatness and wealth (see, e.g., Prov 1:7).

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This same fear of the LORD also taught Israel and Judah to focus on the group, the nation as a whole, rather than on a rugged individualism that we find so frequently in twentieth century western societies. It was in Israel’s corporate calling to be the people of God, a holy nation, a royal priesthood that the promises made in Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 28 and in many psalms find their locus. Not individual, but corporate blessing — the land, its productivity, its increase in the flocks and herds, and the wealth that accompanied it — constitutes “life” in these texts.

The Purpose of Material Blessings

Material blessings in the OT were used by God for various ends. First of all they were given that God might confirm his covenant promise to build a mighty nation. “But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth and so confirms his covenant which he swore to your forefathers as it is today” (Deut 8:18).

This covenant was not to be selfishly squandered; it was to be shared with the nations. Likewise, the blessings that were derived from that special relationship were in turn to be used as teaching tools — both in their positive and negative examples! “The LORD will send a blessing on your barns and on everything you put your hand to ... Then all the peoples on earth will see that you are called by the name of the LORD and they will fear you” (Deut 28:8, 10). But, “All these curses will come upon you. They will pursue you and overtake you until you are destroyed, because you did not obey the LORD your God... because you did not serve the LORD your God joyfully and gladly in the time of prosperity” (Deut 18:45, 47). Thus the material blessings were given to Israel to teach the other nations that it was God not the might of the Jews own hands that was producing the wealth they had garnered.

The Old Testament View Of The Prosperity Gospel

Is success, prosperity, wealth, and happiness guaranteed for all of God’s people today in the same way that God blessed some of the great worthies in OT times? Can we

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contemporary believers “corner the market” on success if we meet God’s conditions for doing so?

Things have certainly turned around since the early 1970s when the poorer a Christian seemed to be, the more spiritual he or she was. This remarkable reversal in the space of just one decade is related to new interpretations of several key conceptions: the divine power of words, the divine promise of wealth, the divine curse of poverty, the divine promise of healing, and the divine promise of Success.

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The Divine Power of Words

How does one enter into this experience of divine health, wealth, and success according to those who preach the gospel of prosperity? Counselling Kenneth E. Hagin, “In my vision, Jesus said, ‘Positive or negative, it is up to the individual. According to what the individual says that shall he receive.’”⁸ Now if we think that Kenneth Hagin might mean these words in some figurative way he is even more explicit in saying that “When you make a positive confession of faith it creates the reality.”⁹ The reason things work this way is supplied by Sid Roth: “Since words are the building blocks of creation, we must be very careful what we say. Words not only create, they can also destroy.”¹⁰

The same power of the “word” that, it is alleged, we find in Rom 10:9–10 — “if you confess with your mouth ‘Jesus is Lord’ ... you will be saved” — is said to apply to physical reality. According to this view, words are able to create their own fulfillment. Just as God’s faith-filled words spoke the universe into being, so our faith-filled words contain a similar inherent power. And it is this power which God chooses to recognize and use.

The Scriptures however, do not support such an exaggerated emphasis on a positive confession. It would appear to subordinate the sovereignty of God to human words. The effect of this would be to make God our servant and to render prayer unnecessary, since all that we spoke with our tongue by way of positive confession would become reality.

Hagin claimed that this truth came to him in a vision in 1953. But this vision must accord with Scripture for that is one of the tests given in Deuteronomy 13 and 18 for a false

⁸ Kenneth E. Hagin, *How to Write Your Own Ticket With God* (Tulsa: Rhema Bible Church, 1979) 8.

⁹ Kenneth E. Hagin, *Understanding Our Confession* (Tulsa: Rhema Bible Church, n.d.) 10. See the critique of Hagin in D. R. McConnell, *A Different Gospel: A Historical and Biblical Analysis of the Modern Faith Movement* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1988) 58–99.

¹⁰ Sid Roth, *Why God?* (Bethesda, Maryland: Messianic Vision, 1984) 3. The above three references were called to my attention by Jim Kennebrew, “The Gospel of Affluence,” *Mid-America Theological Journal* 9 (1985) 49–68.

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prophet. All attempts to invent new truth which goes beyond Scripture must be labelled for what they really are: heretical.

But what of the supposed power of words in biblical writings? According to a number of OT scholars, the spoken word in ancient Israel "... is never an empty sound but an operative reality whose action cannot be hindered once it has been pronounced ..."¹¹ These words are likened by these scholars to missiles with time-fuses, grenades buried in a plowed field, or bombs that have been shot into enemy territory, which remain dangerous and effective for a long time to come.¹²

Thiselton points out that almost all of these OT theologians go back to three classic studies: O. Grether, *Name und Wort Gottes im Alten Testament* (1934); L. Dürr, *Die Wertung des göttlichen Wortes im Alten Testament und im antiken Orient* (1938); and V. Hamp, *Der Begriff 'Wort' in den arammäischen Bibelübersetzungen* (1938).¹³ Eventually both OT and NT theologians took up this emphasis on the power of the spoken word.

The dynamic power of OT words was said to be illustrated in such passages as Jer 1:9–10 — "I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant" — Jer 23:29 — "Is not my word like fire declares the LORD and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?" — and Isa 55:10 — "So is the word that goes out of my mouth: it will not return to me empty but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it."

This emphasis is not restricted to the prophets or to mere poetic personification, argue prosperity advocates. The psalmist pictures the God of creation as saying "He spoke and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm" (Psalm 33:9), "He sent forth his word and healed them" (Psalm 107:20), "He rebuked the Red Sea and it dried up" (Psalm 106:9), "At your rebuke the waters fled, at the sound of your thunder they took to flight" (Psalm 104:7).

Even when the patriarch realizes that he has been tricked and has given his blessing to the wrong son Isaac laments "I have made [Jacob] lord over you [Esau] and have made all his relatives his servants and I have sustained him with grain and new wine. So what

¹¹ Edmond Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament* (New York: Harper, 1958) 127.

¹² These similies are quoted in the article which has been most helpful to me in responding to the charge in this section: Anthony C. Thiselton, "The Supposed Power of Words in Biblical Writings," 25 (1974) 283–99. Thiselton refers to Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (2 vols.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967) 2:69. Similar statements are quoted from Walther Zimmerli, Gerhard von Rad, G. A. F. Knight, and Otto Procksch.

¹³ Thiselton, "Supposed Power" 283–4; especially footnotes 1–8 on p. 283.

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can I possibly do for you, my son?" (Gen 27:37). Similarly Balaam tells Balak, "I have received a command to bless; [God] has blessed, and I cannot change it." (Num 23:20).

However, these texts do not constitute an adequate basis for placing some type of magical power in the words themselves. Such a mistaken reification (the act of treating something as existing from the Latin *res* "thing") commits at least four basic mistakes, argues Anthony Thiselton.¹⁴ For example, the fact that the Hebrew word דָּבָר can be translated both as "word" and "thing" does not mean that once a word is uttered it can become a thing which it is now impossible to push back into the mouth of the speaker! This is merely an example of polysemy (a diversity of meanings in the same word), a practice which appears in most languages. The causes for this phenomenon may be multiple, often arising more from historical accident than from some etymological basis. Thiselton illustrates his point by observing that just because "taste" in English, *gout* in French, *Geschmack* in German, and *gusto* in Italian all mean either "taste" in tasting food, or else "taste" in aesthetic appreciation, it does not follow that good taste in society is connected with taste in the dining room. Even more significantly, this argument breaks down because most of the words which exhibit this alleged phenomenon of power are power-laden not due to the nature of the words themselves, but because they are the words of God or of one of his prophets delivering his word. The authoritative one who delivers the words has power to effect what he says.

In the area of blessings and curses, a third mistake is committed, in Thiselton's judgment. It is not as if the words of blessing or curse as pronounced have power to do what they say in and of themselves; it is, rather, the fact that the appropriate person in the appropriate situation has spoken these words. A person without money, or a shipping company, possessing no influence, cannot go up to a great ship in a harbor and announce, "I name this ship *Queen Elizabeth III*." Those words have no effect and no power because they have been uttered by one who is the inappropriate person in an inappropriate situation, just as "I pronounce you husband and wife" has little force if the one pronouncing this "exercitive" has not been recognized by the state or some ecclesiastical body. The pronouncement is not automatically self-authenticating. True blessings and curses are actually prayers to God asking for God's gift to be bestowed. The words in themselves cannot be invested with a power as if they were separated from the source from which the result comes: viz, our LORD himself.

Thiselton's fourth and final objection to this alleged power of the word is that language is not polarized around a "dianoetic" (i.e., words are known by their νοῦς = "thought") view of words versus a "dynamic" view of words. Such a view of language is too

¹⁴ Thiselton, "Supposed Power" 289–99. Notice that the same argument for the power of the spoken word appears in Gary Smalley and John Trent, *The Blessing* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1986) 49–64.

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reductionistic and simplistic. Nothing is forcing us to choose between the view that says a word is only a vehicle for the purposes of intellectual self-expression and the view that says words appear as a material force.

Because of the strength of these four arguments, the view that there is some type of supposed power in the word as such must be abandoned. Blessings and curses were revokable; they are not controlled by humans apart from God. Neither the Hebrew בָּרַךְ nor the Greek ἔφημα or λόγος give any evidence for this thesis. Therefore, the simple uttering of the words of our mouths, be they words of a positive confession or words of a negative confession, cannot be linked with any type of magical power.

The Divine Promise of Wealth

The preoccupation of the gospel of affluence with material wealth is more of a sign of its sociological roots than of its biblical exegesis. In that regard, it runs counter to Paul's warning, "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world" (Rom 12:1).

Current teaching on the biblical view of wealth is confusing to say the least. On the one hand we are being told "The New Testament condemns not just improper attitudes toward wealth, but also the mere possession of undistributed wealth."¹⁵ On the other hand preachers like Brother Al and Reverend Ike urge us to "Serve God and get rich," for any who are living in poverty are living "a Satan-defeated life."

For Scripture, wealth in and of itself is not an evil, but a gift of God. Wealth is not an end in itself for which a person must give all of his or her energies to achieve, for that would be an idolizing of the things of this world. Neither can the ills that sometimes accompany affluence be avoided merely by the removal of all these things, for some are either naturally or voluntarily poor, but are proud of their poverty. Thus the same disease that afflicts some who idolize their possessions with a pride that replaces God himself is shared with those who haughtily "thank God" that they have nothing to do with any of the stuff of this world and want all to recognize them for this virtue which they hold as a badge of merit.

Few books of the Bible deal so fully with affluence and its problems as Deuteronomy. Moses warned that when the people were granted the gift of the good land into which the Lord their God was bringing them they might be tempted to forget the LORD (Deut 8:17, 18). The temptation would be to say that they had obtained all these good things by

¹⁵ Robert Sabath, "The Bible and the Poor," *Post-American* (February/March, 1974) 5. Contrast H. G. M. Williamson, "The Old Testament and the Material World," *EvQ* 57 (1985) 5–22.

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the works of their own hands [or, we could add, in the context of the gospel of affluence, by the positive confession of our mouths].

Deuteronomy 26 is especially significant in connecting Israel's obedience as a nation with God's spiritual and material blessings on that nation. Religion and the principles of economics were not separate realms, but they were bound together by the one and same Lord who promised that the nation would reap what it had sown.

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Behind all of the OT teaching on wealth was the principle that "The earth is the LORD's and everything in it" (Psalm 24:1). This meant that all things belonged to God and he alone was the disposer of all that exists. Men and women were merely managers and stewards of what God had entrusted to them. The living God would hold all managers of his goods, large or small, accountable to him for the way those goods were used and shared.

The mere possession of wealth was not in itself blameworthy or sinful; the problem lay in the use and in one's attitude toward what he or she possessed. Abraham was one of the great and wealthy men of antiquity; he had great possessions (Gen 13:2, 6). Isaac, his son, had such wealth that he was the envy of the whole Philistine nation (Gen 26:12–14). Likewise, Jacob (Gen 28:13–15; 32:10), Job (Job 1:3; 42:10), and Solomon (I Kings 3:13) enjoyed the same lap of luxury.

While the OT prophets had much to say about wealth, they neither condemned wealth nor exalted poverty as a moral ideal. But like everything else in this world, great wealth could be abused — and it was.

This is not to say that the OT was free of poverty or want. Neither did the writers of the OT miss the fact that great wealth may result from unrighteous practices. Not all who deserve to be punished for the way they got their wealth, or the way they failed to use it as good stewards of the grace of God, immediately receive the swift divine judgment they and their misdeeds so richly deserved (e.g., Psalm 10). Yet, it is the person who fears the LORD, delights in his commandments, and is generous with the poor who has riches in his house (Psalm 112).

In Proverbs, wealth and the ability to gain riches are gifts that come from God, but not without human industriousness and labor (Prov 13:4; 14:23). Proverbs does emphasize the moral restraints that God has placed on gaining wealth. It is not to be achieved through deceit (Prov 21:6), or by using false balances (Prov 20:10), or by shifting boundary markers (Prov 22:28), or through oppression (23:10–11). Such wealth will prove to be a snare of death to those who touch it and a will-o'-the-wisp (Prov 21:6).

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What is wrong, then, with the gospel of affluence theology? It is simply this: while wealth can be a blessing from God, it must not be overvalued. It cannot be made the sign of God's approval or the ultimate object of a believer's trust (Prov 11:28). When believers are arranging their values, they must remember that wisdom is more precious than jewels; nothing we could desire could compare with it (Prov 3:15)¹⁶.

Thus it would appear that a legitimate concept of wealth and possessions has been taken and hyped up to an exaggerated position without retaining the balance that it receives in its biblical context. The dangerous part of the logic of the affluent gospel preachers is their assumption that if we are in God's will, we will be prosperous, no matter what! That is a heretical idea without Scriptural foundation. This is not to say that poverty equals spirituality.¹⁷ It does not!

Recently an attempt has been made to equate "the rich" in Proverbs with the oppressor. This is done by incorrectly assuming that Proverbs 22:2 and 29:13 are parallel passages.

The rich and the poor meet together,
The LORD is the maker of them all. (22:2)

The poor and the oppressor meet together,
the LORD gives sight to the eyes of both of them. (29:13, my translation)

G. W. Wittenberg¹⁸ assumed that since the verbs, "meet together" were the same in both proverbs and since both mentioned "the poor," then "the oppressor" of the second proverb must have replaced "the rich" of the previous proverb. Thus, according to Wittenberg, wealth was a desirable asset and a blessing so long as it was connected with the agriculturalist. But a change came in the book of Proverbs when a money economy (implied in those proverbs in the book which treat wealth from a negative point of view) was introduced along with the merchant class! Money acquired through commerce, trade and other financial transactions, it was inferred, would dissipate rapidly. While this contrast between the agriculturalist and the merchant is not always clearly expressed in

¹⁶ For more discussion on this topic, see Reginald H. Fuller, "The Old Testament Background [of Wealth in the Bible]," *Christianity and the Affluent Society* (by Reginald H. Fuller and Brian K. Rice; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966) 11–22; John Jefferson Davis, *Your Wealth in God's World* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1984) 12–25.

¹⁷ See the perceptive insights of Dennis W. Roberts, "Christian Prosperity: Is it Really God's Will for You?" *Logos Journal* 10 (1980) 42–6. Also, Gordon A. Chutter, "'Riches and Poverty' in the Book of Proverbs," *Crux* 18 (1982) 23–8.

¹⁸ G. W. Wittenberg, "The Situational Context of Statements Concerning Poverty and Wealth in the Book of Proverbs," *Scriptura* 21 (1987) 1–23. Also G. W. Wittenberg, "The Message of the Old Testament Prophets During the Eighth Century BC Concerning Affluence and Poverty," *Affluence and Poverty and the Word of God* (ed., K. Nurnberger, Durban: Lutheran Publishing House, 1978) 141–52.

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Proverbs, allowed Wittenberg, it can be deduced because of the substituted word “oppressor” where once “rich” had stood in an earlier proverb.

Years ago Milton Terry advised biblical exegetes to determine in every case whether the passages adduced as parallels were really parallel. He warned that there were many similarities of sentiment which were not actually parallel. Said he:

Proverbs xxii,2, and xxix, 13, are usually taken as parallels, but a close inspection will show that though there is a marked similarity of sentiment, there is no essential identity or real parallelism ...Here the *man of oppressions* is not necessarily a rich man; nor is *enlightener of the eyes* an equivalent of *maker* in xxii,2. Hence, all that can be properly said of these two passages is, that they are similar in sentiment, but not strictly parallel or identical in sense.¹⁹

Thus we cannot follow Wittenberg in his reassigning the Proverbs to older and latter materials and in his reevaluation of poverty and wealth. There is no evidence that the Israelite authors reacted against the Canaanite commercial practices of their day and thus reacted against all forms of wealth because of this bad experience.

The importance of grasping the biblical concept of prosperity and how it has been distorted today can hardly be overemphasized. For example, David Harrell assures us that the doctrine of prosperity has come to be “the most important new idea of the charismatic revival,” a teaching which has “almost supplanted the earlier emphasis on healing,”²⁰ Even though the Faith Movement did not originate this emphasis (McConnell has given abundant evidence that E.W. Kenyon is the real father of this emphasis²¹), it has gained some of its most vigorous exponents in this group in recent years. Their exorbitant claims for material prosperity have become one of the main reasons for the fantastic growth of the movement.

According to McConnell, the teachings of these aberrant faith teachers fall into two types: 1) an “*egocentric* teaching on prosperity”, which promises prosperity from God for those who support the evangelist’s ministry; and 2) a “*cosmic* teaching on prosperity,” which centers on the alleged universal principles of material blessing that God has set in the universe.²²

¹⁹ Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.) 223.

²⁰ David Harrell, *All Things Are Possible: The Healing and Charismatic Revivals in Modern America* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1975) 229.

²¹ McConnell, *A Different Gospel* 3–56.

²² McConnell, *A Different Gospel* 171.

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The personality cult of the leaders of the health, wealth and prosperity syndrome is a fairly well recognized phenomenon today. What is less well known is the claim that God has established certain laws governing prosperity in his word that function as certainly as such physical laws in the universe as gravity. However, in the case of the laws of prosperity, it is our faith that causes these laws to function. Thus some refer to the “seed of faith” while others prefer to hawk “success formulas.” These so-called laws are set in motion by a positive mental attitude and a positive confession. One need only to say “whatever their li'l Ol' heart desires” and it will happen! This is because of the alleged power of the word, a concept we have already found to be without any scriptural basis.

Not only does this concept verge on the use of occult powers, it openly espouses such! Ralph Waldo Trine, E. W. Kenyon's classmate, taught: “This is the law of prosperity ... To hold yourself in this attitude of mind is to set into operation subtle, silent and irresistible forces that will sooner or later actualize in material form that which is today merely an idea. But ideas have occult power, and... are seeds that actualize material conditions.”²³ While most faith teachers would reject the use of the occult, they must, as McConnell warned “*come to grips with the fact that those who began the practices of positive mental attitude and positive confession attributed their ability to acquire riches to psychic and occultic powers.*”²⁴

It is fairly easy to show from a NT point of view how the Faith Theology is a distorted view of “need.” Prosperity teachers tend to equate “your Father knows what you need before you ask” (Matt 6:8) with “everything our Li'l ol' heart wants.” But Jesus only pointed to three needs: food, drink, and clothing (Matt 6:8–32). Paul advised, “If we have food and clothing, with these we shall be content” (1 Tim 6:8).

But the OT presents a somewhat more difficult case since many tend to grab at a phrase, clause or sentence here or there without taking the trouble to isolate the context in which it was given. Especially vulnerable are the Proverbs. This book, however, “is no ‘how-to-do-it’ manual; it is a program of character-building, which is the devoted occupation of a lifetime. It is not meant for the casual tourist...”²⁵ Wealth may be one of God's blessings, but it is only one. There are inherent dangers to possessing wealth, and security or divine approval must not be unilaterally linked with it. So far as Proverbs is concerned, the primary agenda in life is to attain wisdom and to live in the fear of the Lord. That goal supersedes all others.

²³ Ralph Waldo Trine, *In Tune With the Infinite* (New York: Bob-Merrill Co., 1970) 138.

²⁴ McConnell, *A Different Gospel* 173–4 (italics his).

²⁵ Chutter, “Riches and Poverty” 23–4.

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The Divine Curse of Poverty

All too quickly do prosperity gospel preachers link Paul's statement in Gal 3:13 — "Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law" — with the curses mentioned in Deut 28:15–68 — which include sickness, poverty, and death.

Once again we are being told that we have parallel passages when we do not have anything of the sort. Paul's concern was with a right standing before God. The curse we were redeemed from was the eternal death to which our sins were leading us until the Messiah came and took the penalty of death, which our sins had earned, and hung upon a tree for us (an act, which in itself showed the person so treated to be himself accursed [Deut 21:22–23]). But this is an entirely different matter from Israel's failure to keep the moral law of God as a nation and for which it exposed itself to the increasingly more devastating judgments of God. These judgments were evidences that God still loved that nation and that he wanted it to return to him. But in no way were they the start of God's final judgment for individual failure to believe on him as one's redeemer. Only those who had already accepted the Man of Promise who was to come could be expected to live in the nation as one who obeyed the voice of God.

The book of Proverbs traces a realistic picture of the poor. Unfortunately, poverty earns very few friends (Prov 19:4). Even one's own relatives shun the poor (Prov 19:7), with the further galling state of affairs in which the rich rule over the poor (Prov 22:7). The cry of the poor falls on deaf ears (Prov 18:23) and they are often the prey of all sorts of murderous hoodlums (Prov 30:14).

There are some practical pieces of advice, however. Solomon does not claim that those who are in the grip of poverty are there because of the grip of sin on their lives or because they have not "named it and claimed it [riches]." Some have gotten into the clutches of poverty through lazy hands (Prov 10:4; 12:24), ignoring correction and discipline (Prov 11:18; 13:18), stinginess and withholding aid to those in need (Prov 11:24; 22:16; 28:22), sleeping too much (10:5; 20:13; 24:33), wickedness (11:25), gluttony and drunkenness (23:20–21), and concealing sin (28:13). But to be fair, there are others who are poor who have not deserved what has happened to them. It is only because of the providential will of God that these people are poor (Prov 20:12; 22:2; 29:13). The poor are not to be judged (Prov 24:23; 28:21), exploited (Prov 22:22, 23; 28:3) or mocked (Prov 17:5). Instead, those who are not poor are to speak up in behalf of the poor (Prov 31:8, 9) and defend their rights.

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Scripture gives no aid to the view that poverty is in all its forms a result of the judgment of God and an evidence that the persons so afflicted are outside the will of God. Such a universal categorization is a caricature of the biblical position.²⁶

The Divine Promise of Healing

The assumption of advocates of the “Health and Wealth Gospel” is that it is never the will of God for anyone ever to be sick. Healing comes through the exercise of faith. One must only “name it and claim it,” or “believe it and receive it.”

Believers under the influence of this “Gospel” are taught to talk to the disease. The mere commanding the disease with authority to be gone is sufficient to effect the healing itself.

When questioned about a biblical basis for such action, the assumed power of words will be reintroduced or such OT passages as Isaiah 53 and Deuteronomy 28. Since we have already dealt with the alleged power of words at some length and the inappropriateness of contending that Gal 3:13 has cancelled out the curse of sickness threatened in Deuteronomy 28, we should focus on the OT texts which are said to provide the promise of healing and the prospect of perpetual health.

Psalm 103:3 promises, “He forgives all my sins and heals all my diseases.” But the psalmist uses a word for “diseases” that appears only three times in the entire OT. In both Deut 29:22 and 2 Chron 21:19, it refers to distress that God sends as a judgment for sin. This is not to say that all sickness is retributive and the direct result of personal sin in one’s life, for this is to argue the same way as Job’s three “friends” — a procedure which brought the stern rebuke of God at the close of the book (Job 42:7). But it is to say that Psalm 103:3 cannot be used to claim that God heals all diseases.

The most frequently quoted passage, however, is Isa 53:4, 5.

Surely he took up our infirmities
and carried our sorrows,

yet we considered him stricken by God,
smitten by him, and afflicted.

²⁶ Kenneth S. Kantzer, “The Cut-rate Grace of a Health and Wealth Gospel,” *Christianity Today* (June 14, 1985) 14–5. Cf, however, Kenneth E. Hagin, *Redeemed From Poverty, Sickness and Death* (2nd ed.; Tulsa: Rhema Bible Church, 1983) 11–23. Note also the discussion of Gerhard F. Hasel, “Health and Healing in the OT,” *Andrews Univer. Semin. Studies* 21 (1983) 191–202.

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But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;

the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,
and by his wounds we are healed.

As if to clinch the argument, Matthew cites this passage after a series of healings (8:16, 17) saying that it happened so that what Isaiah the prophet spoke might be fulfilled.

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However, the points that need to be demonstrated are these. Even if our LORD did perform a series of healing ministries as a fulfillment of what was spoken by Isaiah, was this more than a foretaste of the total restoration that was to come when our LORD returned the second time in all his glory? In other words, can it be shown that what was inaugurated during the earthly ministry of our Lord was meant to be continued in the absence of our Lord? We think not. Not everything that was won by our Lord in his atonement was fully realized immediately, for as Rom 8:20–22 observes, the whole creation is waiting for its release and final redemption at the second coming of our Lord.

If the redemption won for us on the cross by our Lord also provided full and complete release from all diseases from the first day we believed forward, how would death or even the slightest trace of debilitating disease have any effect over a Christian? To concede the point on the slightest appearance of disease or death would be to throw in doubt the whole case on which our salvation rested.

We conclude that there is healing in the atonement; we only contest how and when it is fully applicable. We think that believers will be finally delivered from the dread of disease only when our Lord has put all enemies under his feet, even death itself at the conclusion of the millennium (I Cor 15:25–26).²⁷

The Divine Promise of Success

The main passage which is leaned on for support of this promise is Josh 1:8. Surely prosperity and success are offered in this text, but what kind of success and to whom is it offered?

The promise given to Joshua was the continuation of the Abra-hamic Covenant in which Israel was to inherit the land. The success was military, not specifically financial. The condition was the observance of the law of God.

²⁷ John Jefferson Davis, "Poverty, Justice, Compassion, and Personal Responsibility," *Your Wealth* 26–37.

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The Psalmist David likewise spoke of many benefits as coming from obeying the law of God, but he never listed material prosperity as one of them. God did promise wisdom, discernment, peace, insight, comfort, encouragement, and the like, but there was never an encouragement to delight in the law of the LORD in order to get rich or to obtain more possessions.

It is true, of course, that there are spiritual principles that are to be derived from texts like Josh 1:8, but these must be in the same area as the abstract principle that stands behind the OT illustration being offered in the context under consideration. To do otherwise would be to lapse into spiritualization and crude allegorizing of the text, devices that have proven to be most harmful to the Church in the past. In this case, the principle would seem to be the centrality of the word of God in the life of the community. The success that will come from adherence to that word begins in the spiritual realm and then moves out to those areas featured in the Covenant under discussion in this passage.

Conclusion

The message of health, wealth, and prosperity theologians is a bogus gospel. It cannot command the support of Scripture or of the believing community's previous experience of the work of the Holy Spirit.

In fact, it falls most tragically on the very texts and theological principles it wishes to establish. There is no basis for a so-called power of the word apart from the only One who can fill that word with power, our Lord Jesus himself.

Neither can we affirm that the "curse" from which we have been redeemed (Gal 3:13) are the "curses" (note the change to the plural) of Deuteronomy 28. The context of Galatians is soteriological whereas the context of Deuteronomy is national and experiential. The curses that Moses mentions were to be visited upon Israel as a judgment from God on those who claimed to be his own children. Nowhere does Scripture argue that all illness is the result of specific sin. And even if it did, that is not what Deuteronomy 28 is talking about.

We do believe in the power of the word of God; but not the power of our own words. We do believe in the blessing of possessions and wealth as a gift that may come in the providence of God; but not in talking them into existence as an act of self-will. We do believe in healing as a gift from God; sickness, however, is not always a sign that a person is out of the will of God and the use of medicine and doctors is not a sign of a lack of faith in God's ability directly to intervene apart from secondary agencies. And we do believe that God promised to carry out every aspect of his pledge to Abraham and David; but

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this does not mean that believers have a carte blanche and an automatic guarantee of success for whatever they attempt under any and all conditions.

The prosperity gospel is a cultural captive of our affluent, success-crazy society. We recommend that we return to God's standards for success, prosperity, health, and wealth. There are pieces of the truth in most of the claims made by those who espouse one aspect or another in the affluent gospel, but like most heresy, the false parts are accepted in the name of the small kernel of biblical truth found in each claim. What is needed is less proof-texting over random passages taken from here and there in the Scriptures. Instead, we need to develop large teaching passages on each of these themes and see what Scripture teaches in its wholeness, rather than in just an assortment of bits and pieces quoted randomly from texts with authoritative assurances that that is what the texts mean in these contexts. We need more teaching from the word on this subject, not less. And a large part of the teaching on this subject will be found in that part of the canon where contemporary Christians and pastors are the weakest and most negligent in their preaching, viz., the Old Testament.²⁸

¹ *The Trinity Journal* 9:2 (Fall 1988), pp. 171-189.