

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Why Has the Prosperity Gospel Prospered?

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Why has the prosperity gospel prospered? Anyone involved in ministry today is aware of how widespread this new teaching is. It has reached almost every nation. I was surprised to find it even in Cuba on one of my many trips to that Caribbean island.

WHY THIS HERESY? AND WHY NOW?

It would be easy to say that the spread of the prosperity gospel is simply the result of a lack of biblical knowledge, and certainly no one can deny that. The movement misinterprets Scripture, selectively uses biblical texts at the expense of others, missing the balanced view of the whole counsel of God on health and wealth. And in an era when many teachers of the Word are not preaching expositively, all kinds of heresies would arise.

But two questions remain: why this heresy? And why now? I would suggest that there are deep evil roots in people's hearts and strong secular ideas in the heart of our society—and even in the church—that serve as fertilizers for this harmful seed.

1. My way!

First, fallen creatures desire to be independent from God. If you think it through, the message of the old serpent was a version of the prosperity gospel. What could Satan offer to a couple that had been given the entire planet to use and to rule? Nothing! Well, nothing material. But the craftiest of all the beasts of the earth still had a card up his sleeve ... spiritual prosperity: "You will be like God" (Gen. 3:5). Satan offered a way to improve their already-blessed condition, achievable independently of the Creator, so they could say "I did it my way."

Today, Satan offers material prosperity to fallen and destitute creatures: "You can be richer." And you can do it your way, right now. The initial disobedience of the first

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couple, and the subsequent disobedience of their descendants, seems to be a cry for independence of their Maker.

Satan knows well how to exploit this aspect of our humanity. He found Christ in the wilderness, after he had left behind his glory, his rights as the second person of the Trinity, and after he took on the weakness of the human flesh. In that condition, what did the old serpent offer him? “Riches, glory, power achievable your way, Jesus, and right here. You don’t have to wait, you don’t have to work for it, you don’t have to suffer to obtain the kingdoms of this world, and you don’t have to depend on your Father. Just worship me, Jesus!” The Son of God resisted, but mankind has bowed time and again to mammon. Fallen man thinks that money is the source of happiness, power, comfort and even health. Perhaps that’s why Gordon Fee says that, “Indeed, the theology of this new ‘gospel’ seems far more to fit the American dream than it does the teaching of Him who had ‘nowhere to lay His head.’ ”¹

The hunger for independence (Gen. 3:1–7), the hunger for riches (Jos. 7:16–21), the hunger for immortality (Eccl. 3:11) and the impatience of the creature (1 Sam. 13:8–15) make man particularly susceptible to this kind of heretical gospel. As we can see, Satan’s offers then and now are similar in content, but he is a master at changing the wrapping paper of his “gifts.”

2. Narcissism and the Entitlement Culture

Having dealt with the nature of the human heart, let’s deal with the heart of our generation. Narcissism is a term many use to describe people whose pursuit in life is the self-gratification to which they feel entitled. Indeed the entire advertising industry is dominated by this sentiment: “you deserve the luxury of this car”; “Take care of yourself, because nobody else will”; “You deserve a resort vacation,” and hundreds of other similar phrases. If people are willing to believe such lies, imagine how they would feel when they hear a pastor preaching that God wants you to be rich and healthy, or that you should have your best life now. Members of the entitlement culture may conclude that even God believes that we deserve unconditional riches and health. So the believer doesn’t approach God with a humble and contrite heart, seeking his grace, but rather with a proud attitude, expecting well-deserved blessings.

There was a time when even the general population in the West believed in the providence of God to orchestrate history and even to provide for people. But this is not where the culture is today. We now feel that we should have what we want when we

¹ Gordon D. Fee, *The Disease of the Health and Wealth Gospels* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2006), kindle edition, Loc 28.

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want it because it is my constitutional right to be happy. If the government can't provide it, then others should. And if they can't, then the God who created me should be that supplier. Some even get angry with God for not providing what they desire. Ravi Zacharias writes, "We are living at a time when G. K. Chesterton's dictum has proven to be true. Meaninglessness does not come from being weary of pain, but meaninglessness comes from being weary of pleasure. We have exhausted ourselves in this indulgent culture".²

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3. Skepticism and Pragmatism

At the same time as this entitlement culture has sprung up, the postmodern movement of the past few decades produced a vacuum of truth, doing away with absolutes. In the absence of truth, people became more and more skeptical and therefore more pragmatic. Many preachers have embraced this mindset. Rather than calling us to follow Jesus as the truth, the way, and the life at whatever cost, they proclaim a pragmatic, "how to" gospel that tells us how to solve our problems, especially those related to finances and sickness.

When pragmatism invades the pulpit, exposition is pushed aside and biblical ignorance becomes its fruit. Now the sheep become more vulnerable to all kinds of lies. Pragmatism aims at man and his convenient life; exposition of the Word aims at God and his glory.

Read carefully what Joseph Haroutunian, a Presbyterian theologian of the recent past (1904–68), said: "Before, religion was God-centered. Before, whatever was not conducive to the Glory of God was infinitely evil; now that which is not conducive to the happiness of man is evil, unjust, and impossible to attribute to the Deity. Before, the good of man consisted ultimately in glorifying God; now the glory of God consists in the good of man."³ Our society has become utilitarian at its core.

Now, in some ways this is not new, since there are no new sins under heaven. But the removal of certain restraints like shame, guilt, and duty from society has left the field open for these tendencies of the human heart to run rampant. For a generation as self-centered and greedy as ours, the prosperity gospel is the right recipe.

When members of this society get converted, they need a total worldview transformation which only the gospel can accomplish. Unfortunately, many preachers have concluded that non-Christians today would not listen to the gospel of Christ with all of its demands. "Who would like to hear a message about the cost of discipleship?" they reason. "Who

² Ravi Zacharias, "An Ancient Message, Through Modern Means to a Postmodern Mind," In *Telling the Truth*, edited by D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 28.

³ Quoted by Erwin Lutzer in *10 Lies about God and the Truth that Shatter Deception*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2009), 8.

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wants to hear about the fact that in this world you will have tribulation?" The real gospel has been substituted for one that would be most appropriate for our generation: a gospel of wealth, health, and happiness. And many people are buying the "gospel" these preachers are selling.

4. A Greater Distribution of Wealth

In 1999, Angus Maddison, professor emeritus at Groningen University, published an article titled, "Poor until 1820," in which he explained that "after the fall of the Roman Empire, the West entered a recession that lasted about a millennium. After the industrial revolution, due to mass production, per capita income began to grow steadily."⁴ This is true even of the African continent, although to a lesser degree. As expected, a greater income created a greater demand. As production increased, so did the alternatives to satisfy people's taste and choices.

Without a doubt this fostered materialism. Again, marketing strategies were designed to sell products based on the satisfaction they would bring to the consumer. Therefore the more I have, the happier I would be. But I need money to buy the products I select, and if it can be provided by God via the prosperity gospel, then I would not only be rich but also feel blessed. "Why not?" many would ask. After all, we are the children of the King and therefore we deserve to live as his princes. Anyone familiar with prosperity preaching will have heard this common line.

As Solomon could have testified, greater income does not always result in greater satisfaction, but only in the possession of more stuff. However, many people do not conclude that things can't bring happiness. Instead, they see the problem as not having enough of whatever it is they want. Here is Solomon's advice for those who are still *not* convinced:

He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income; this also is vanity. When goods increase, they increase who eat them, and what advantage has their owner but to see them with his eyes? Sweet is the sleep of a laborer, whether he eats little or much, but the full stomach of the rich will not let him sleep. (Eccl. 5:10–12)

Imagine living in a very deprived neighborhood, watching rich people living very differently than you. The conclusion in the past was, "I need to work harder so that, one day, I could live that way." Today, many would want the same dream, and they want it

⁴ Per Capita Income in World History, <http://www2.econ.iastate.edu/classes/econ355/choi/rankh.htm>; accessed Nov. 15, 2013.

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to come more easily. The greater distribution of wealth has not produced a better work ethic, but simply a greater appetite for more.

5. The American Dream on Display

Every heresy is born somewhere. The prosperity gospel was born in America, and there is something in the history of this country that helped promote this movement. In his 1931 book *The Epic of America*, James Truslow Adams stated that the American dream is “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement.”⁵ That national ethos created a prosperous nation.

Years ago people heard of the prosperity of America and wanted to come and see it just like the queen of Sheba wanted to see Solomon’s kingdom (1 Kings 10). Today, you don’t have to come to America to see it, you can just turn on your TV set no matter how remote and poor your place of residence. The TV show “Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous” became very popular, not only in America, but also outside of the U. S., not just because of curiosity, but because it gave people the ability to dream for a moment.

Powerful countries export many goods, but they also export their beliefs and cultures. And in our day, we even export the gospel of truth and the gospel of deception at the same time and through the same channels. Since the USA is such an affluent nation, where everyone seems to prosper, any message that comes from there must be true, especially this message of prosperity. That is the mindset of many in Latin America, and I suspect in many other places as well.

Unfortunately, when people watch television, they not only dream about having a lifestyle they cannot afford, but they become greedier. Greed is a quality of the heart that clouds the understanding and enslaves the will. When that mind is exposed to the prosperity gospel, it finds a fertile ground for that evil seed. Producers know the effect of the screen on people’s lives, so they spend large sums of money to serve us images. Producers know that very well, consumers do not. If a church member adopts the same TV habits as the person in the street, in the end he might end up looking more like a pagan than Christian. This may help explain why even true believers have fallen prey to these false teachers.

⁵ The American Dream; Library of Congress, (<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/lessons/american-dream/students/thedream.html>), accessed November 15, 2013.

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WHETHER THEY HEAR OR REFUSE TO HEAR

The prosperity gospel is the result of the desires of a fallen heart, living in the midst of affluence, in a culture that claims “me first,” that values comfort, material goods and choices, in search of the enjoyment of the life of the here and now. Once this non-gospel “gospel” was born, it was easily disseminated due to globalization. Every means of communication and transportation has been used to carry the good news and this bad news. Today we have to say not only that ideas have consequences, but also that ideas travel quickly. We also need to remember that it is easier to disseminate a lie than to undo its damage.

To make things worse, all of this has been accompanied by a famine of the Word of God in the pulpit, and a lack of confidence in the Word to destroy the idols of the heart and to change the minds of the people. Instead, many have done what Aaron did in the desert: he gave the people what they wanted, a golden calf to worship.

So what are we to do? Preach the gospel “whether they hear or refuse to hear” (Ezek. 2:4), and trust the power of the word of God to do again and again what it has always done: convert the soul, enlighten the mind, break the yoke of sin and bring joy to the entire person.⁶

⁶ Núñez, M. (2014). “Why Has the Prosperity Gospel Prospered?” *9Marks Journal*, 26–29.