

## **Factoring Aristotelian Golden-Mid to the Debate on 'Relevance of Prosperity Theology' in the Nigerian Context**

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### **Abstract**

*A critical interaction with works written by prosperity preachers and works written on prosperity preaching by its critics shows that two extremes exist in regard to the relevance of prosperity theology in Nigeria. On the one hand, the prosperity preachers have been arguing that their theology is the most relevant and that poverty of any kind should not be found among the Christians. On the other hand, some of the critics of prosperity preachers have argued that prosperity preaching is not in any way relevant and that Christians' message should not center on prosperity. This shows the two extremes. While this debate has attracted significant scholarly attention since the past decades, no attempt has been made at resolving the ends. Prosperity preaching may have its own shortcomings but this work argues that there are positive things that can be drawn from it for Christians in Nigeria, also, the critics of prosperity theology have their extremities but there are good points in their line of arguments. Therefore, this work, using Aristotelian Golden Mean hypothesis as its theoretical framework, attempted a detailed examination of these two views with the aim of bring them into a 'mid-point.' This work is concluded by showing how Prosperity theology could be reframed so as to make it relevant in Nigeria context.*

**Keywords:** Prosperity Theology, Nigeria, Africa, Christian Theology, Preaching

## I. Introduction

A critical observation of the works written on Prosperity theology and ‘non-prosperity theology’ reveals that the two are extremes. While Prosperity theologians capitalized on physical well-being of man at the expense of spiritual well-being, the non-prosperity theologians capitalized extremely on spiritual well-being at the expense of physical well-being. But there is a need to balance these two views. Physical well-being canvassed by prosperity theologians is good, but it should also factor the spiritual aspect of well-being to its content. Also, the otherworldly aspect of salvation canvassed by non-prosperity theologians is good but it should also factor the issue of physical well-being into its content. There is therefore a need to look for a way to balance the two extremes. The researcher opines that there are advantages or good things in both sides of the extremes, and that the two sides can be strengthened if they are balanced.

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to examine the two sides of the spectrum, and seek how they can be balanced using Aristotelian golden mean as the theoretical frame work.

## II. Definition of Terms

### Prosperity Theology

In the attempt to provide a definition to Prosperity Theology, the researcher would like to explore the various definitions of prosperity given by those who advocate it by taking one or two definitions from their camp. Going along this route will allow us to deduce the meaning of prosperity from the “horses’ own mouths.” in so doing we will have an inclusive definition. Kenneth and Gloria Copeland define prosperity as success or “gain in anything good or desirable.” While that definition may hold true to some degree in its general usage, the Copelands throughout their book limit the meaning of prosperity to redemption “from sickness, poverty, lack and the entire curse.”<sup>92</sup> Oyedepo’s view of prosperity theology sounds plausible as it seems to point out that Christ’s death had the entire human concern at heart. Moreover, that the whole incarnation of the Son of God actually proves that God has great concern over his creation – the human race. This is definitely

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<sup>92</sup> Copeland K 1974. *The laws of prosperity*. Fort Worth, USA: Kenneth Copeland Publications, 12.

something positive if we look at it from that angle. The fact that God gave his Son and came to live in the form of man amongst men surely serves as evidence of the great concern of the Creator. This is an admirable reality to note that the incarnation has both a material care and a spiritual care for the human race.<sup>93</sup>

### Non-Prosperity Theology

This, as used in this paper, is the opposite of the prosperity theology. It is used to refer to the view that there should not be emphasis on prosperity and that prosperity theology is not relevant in Nigeria.

### *Is prosperity teaching a “theology”?*

This work refers to prosperity teaching as a theology, however, this definition needs to be qualified. There are various kinds of Christian theologies, especially under the brand of Liberation Theology, for example, Black Theology, Ethiopian Theology, Feminist Theology, Ecological Theology to and others. All of these theologies see liberation as a key concept in the Bible, and take it that one can formulate the entire gospel, or at least important aspects of it, in terms of the concept of liberation. Simply speaking, Prosperity Theology may be categorized under Liberation theology as its emphasis is on liberation from poverty, sickness and suffering, and it also emanated from American society.

What makes a specific view to be referred to as a theology? This is a difficult question to answer. It is much easier to label a view a theology but to qualify it is not that easy. Most of the scholarly works that deal with theology do not explain what makes a theology a theology. To think if Prosperity teaching can be termed ‘theology,’ one needs to look at the definition of ‘theology.’ Theology is defined as a reflection on the person of God and his relations to man.

The above is a general explanation of the discipline of theology. Thus, it is the reflection of how Christians can apply their faith to everyday life. This reflection can be subjective, highly academic or philosophical. In this

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<sup>93</sup> Oyedepo, D.O. 2005. *Understanding Financial Prosperity*, Lagos: Dominion Publishing House, 23.

reflection, the reflector should consider the subject concerned under the scrutiny of Scripture. On this basis Prosperity Theology is surely a reflection of those who belong mainly to the faith movement concerning issues of wealth, health and success. This reflection or prosperity theology is raised by the social context of the people and although the Bible is used to propagate this sort of theology, there appears to be a great measure of subjectivity and hermeneutical dissension. This is the reason why Prosperity theology is often tagged ‘a bad theology’ by the non-prosperity preachers and some scholars even think that there is nothing good in Prosperity theology. This situation has resulted into two extremes.

### **III. Theoretical Framework (Aristotelian Golden Mean)**

Aristotle develops the doctrine of the mean in the course of his discussion of *arête*, excellence or virtue. The Aristotelian golden mean holds that a moral man should always stand at moderate of two extremes, at one end is excess, and at the other is deficiency. There must be a moderate position between these two extremes. The doctrine of mean is a central concept in Aristotle’s virtue ethics. Virtue is the mean between two extremes of excess and deficiency. To Aristotle, this mean is an ‘intermediate relative to us.’<sup>94</sup> Within the scholarly literature, the doctrine of the mean has been subjected to wide-ranging interpretations. The diversity of interpretation is largely due to the ambiguity that Aristotle himself noticed in his fourth book on Nicomachean ethics.

Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean is introduced in Book II of the Nicomachean ethics by way of medical analogy. According to him when we eat too much or too little, we destroy our health. Excellence of character, like strength and health is destroyed by excess and deficiency but preserved by what is ‘intermediate.’ Aristotle’s father was a physician, and medical concept and examples played an important and widely-recognized role in the philosophizing of Aristotle’s day.<sup>95</sup> In his days, health was seen or believed to be in balance of powers, in a mixture so constituted that none of its constituent elements eclipsed the other.<sup>96</sup> Proper virtue, therefore, is

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<sup>94</sup>Kraut, R. 2006. *The Blackwell guide to Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, Kindle edition, Retrieved from amazon.com. February 27, 2016

<sup>95</sup> Aristotle’s Doctrine of the Mean, [www.plosin.com/work/AristotleMean.html](http://www.plosin.com/work/AristotleMean.html)  
Accessed: March 02, 2016

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

subtraction of what is excess, addition of what is wanting. Aristotle imports this way of thinking into his account of ethical excellence. For example, to Aristotle, what is courageous falls between the two extremes; over-confidence and timidity. The same is true of temperance; what is temperate lies in a mean between the extremes of excessive enjoyment of sensual pleasures and deficient enjoyment of such pleasures. In his books II, III and IV of Nicomachean ethics, he gives many illustration on his doctrine of mean- that every virtue lies between two correlative faults or vices or ends. Each of us in trying to act must make adjustment for different crosswinds.<sup>97</sup>

Two core aspects of the Aristotle's golden mean can be identified. First, virtue is produced and preserved by avoiding extremes. Second, each virtue is a mean between two ends, one excess and one deficiency. According to the doctrine of mean, virtuous person act in a way that lies in a mean between extremes, as when a person of courage, when faced with danger, chooses to take the course of action that is neither cowardly nor foolhardy. But such a state of moderate mean does not come naturally, instead, it requires habitual training and rational control of one's feeling and balanced disposition. The doctrine of mean holds that there is a unity of virtue, that is, it is impossible for two virtues to conflict with each other. According to Aristotle, this mean could be determined by practical wisdom.<sup>98</sup>

In this paper, the researcher identifies two extremes about the issue of prosperity among the Christians. Some people believe that to prosper is anti-Christian while others believe that every Christian must be prosperous. The researcher sees the need to engage these two extremes in the light of Aristotelian golden mean.

#### **IV. The two Extremes**

- a. The extreme view that Prosperity theology is of no relevance in Nigeria

According to Dada, one of the factors that gave impetus to the growth of prosperity preaching in Nigeria is undue emphasis on the otherworldly aspect of faith in the older Mission churches. The missionary-founders of the older churches in Nigeria preached a salvation that is limited to soul and

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<sup>97</sup> Bernard Williams, 1985. *Ethics and Limits of Philosophy*, London: 36.

<sup>98</sup> J.O Urmson, 1973. "Aristotle's Doctrine of the Mean," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 10 (3), 223-230.

has nothing to do with the body. The implication of this is that the bodily needs of the members were not met.<sup>99</sup> Up till today, this stand on the meaning, extent and content of salvation is still held in some pockets of Christians in Nigeria. Those who hold this view often argue that prosperity theology is totally wrong and should not be heard among the Christians and that one of the signs of knowing a genuine Christian is poverty and austerity. Scholars such as Femi Adeleye,<sup>100</sup> Abamfo Atiemo,<sup>101</sup> Sarle,<sup>102</sup> Ayantayo, Dada, Fatokun, Hank Hanegraaff,<sup>103</sup> McConnell,<sup>104</sup> Peter Young,<sup>105</sup> and others, are of this opinion. Some of the points of arguments used by these people are discussed in the following paragraphs.

### Spiritual Effects

By spiritual effects, the critics of prosperity theology imply, the damage the health and wealth gospel has caused the church in Nigeria spiritually and how it has affected our national development. As earlier highlighted, the life-style of a genuine child of God should be a great catalyst for positive change anywhere he finds himself. But the content of the sort of gospel preached by the “Faith” preachers has played down the importance of holy living in the life of believers. The best way to attract unbelievers to Jesus is through our behaviour and not through wealth campaign.”<sup>106</sup> It is argued that

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<sup>99</sup>Dada, O. A. 2004. “Prosperity Gospel in Nigerian context: A Medium of Social Transformation or an Impetus for Delusion.” *ORITA* 36: 96-105.

<sup>100</sup>Femi Adeleye, 2014. “The Prosperity Gospel: A Critique of the way the Bible is used,” *Lausanne Global Consultation on Prosperity Theology, Poverty and the Gospel*, available at <https://www.lausanne.org>

<sup>101</sup>Abamfo Atiemo, 1995. “Deliverance in Charismaic Churches in Ghana,” *Trinity Journal of Church and Theology*, 4:2, 46-47

<sup>102</sup>K.I. Sarles, "A Theological Evaluation of the Prosperity Gospel", *Bibliotheca Sacra* 143 (Oct.-Dec. 1986) 347-348

<sup>103</sup>Hanegraaff H 1993. What's wrong with the faith movement (part one): E. W. Kenyon and the twelve apostles of another gospel. *Christian Research Journal* 15(3):1-8.

<sup>104</sup>McConnell DR 1995. *A different gospel* (2nd ed.). Peabody, USA: Hendrickson Publishers.

<sup>105</sup>Young, P.R. 1996. “Prosperity Teaching in an African Context,” *African Journal of Evangelical Theology*, 15:1

<sup>106</sup>George E. Swazy, 1978. *The Church as Evangelist: Making Evangelism a Priority of Local Congregation*, New York: Harper and Row, 32.

Christians' religious mood canvassed by the prosperity theologians is social instead of spiritual. Prosperity theology is said to make people to carry out religious activities after the model of the modern advertiser.<sup>107</sup> Prosperity preachers are said to have been perverted by the teachings of the faith movement. Christian successes are now being judged by the type of car one rides and the numbers of cars one possesses, the type of house one stays and the kinds of clothing we wear. Being poor is now seen as an effect of sin. Most Christians today are lacking spiritually today in Nigeria. They have a wrong concept of God and that of themselves.

Those who hold this view also opined that the unquenchable want of money by most of our political leaders cannot be divorced from this. The truth is, if all those who claim to be Christians are genuinely one, our Nation would be better for it. But the reverse is the case in Nigeria. The spiritual leaders who are supposed to show the road are themselves guilty of the same sin. It is believed that prosperity theology contradicts the Lord's rebuke on the rich. It is argued that God clearly warns against the danger of riches. Therefore, prosperity theology is totally evil.<sup>108</sup>

Nigerian prosperity theology is said to be evil because it puts property as a priority ahead of righteousness. It is obvious that any theology that places property ahead of righteousness is a satanic bait and should be avoided. It is argued that the Nigerian prosperity theology is evil because it does not emphasize that gain must be at the expense of righteousness, nor at the expense of human souls or pleasing God. Nigerian prosperity gospel is also said to be evil because it does not teach commitment to the members. Commitment is said to be a scarce word in the lexicon of prosperity theology, therefore it should be tagged evil and rejected by all

#### Social Effects

Sociology is the study of history, development, organization, and problems of people living together as a social group.<sup>109</sup> It is a social science. Sociology is therefore the way we relate with other human beings and the

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid

<sup>108</sup> [www.nairaland.com](http://www.nairaland.com)- Eight Reasons why Nigerian Prosperity Gospel is Evil. Accessed: March 02, 2016

<sup>109</sup> A. W. Tozer, 2002. "The First Obligation of the Church," *Herald of His coming*, January 2002, 4.

given society we found ourselves. To divorce sociology from Religion is an impossible task. But the question often ask by the critics of prosperity theology is what way has the Health and Wealth gospel helped in the realization of the aforementioned truth. To be precise, in what way has the prosperity message assisted to make Christianity a relevant religion to our society? Those in this camp opined that as good as these social contributions are, it is a curse if it had no spiritual values to the people and the nation. This of course is what health and wealth is guilty of.

Perhaps that is why the health and wealth gospel has been referred to as the “Social gospel.” Social gospel came within liberalism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a tendency to replace the gospel of regeneration with an emphasis upon transformation of society through alteration of its structures.<sup>110</sup> The prosperity notion, accordingly, does not value good conduct, behaviors, and good relationship with others. This perhaps may account for the crimes and other social problems we have in Nigeria today.<sup>111</sup> The Nigerian situation is that, the rich are becoming richer, while the poor growing poorer by the day. Regrettably, the fact remains that the concern for the poor, a major biblical theme, has not received adequate attention by the Prosperity-preaching churches.<sup>112</sup> The basic reason for this, according to Nebechukwu is that, “Poverty has so far lacked the material as distinct from the spiritual interpretation in Christian faith and piety.”<sup>113</sup> The Christian value of fellowshiping with one another and sharing wealth with others as practiced in the early church<sup>114</sup> is almost becoming a history in the church today. All these and more are the effects of Health and Wealth gospel on Christian and Nigeria as a nation today. Due to these factors, prosperity theology is said to have no relevance in Nigerian situation.

Another sociological defect that has been associated with the prosperity theology is its insistence of individualism. Prosperity theology is tagged evil because it gives more emphasis on acquisition ten times more than

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<sup>110</sup> Augustine U. Nebechukwu, 1990. “Solidarity with the Poor: Christian Response to Poverty” *African Theological Journal*, Vol. 19, No. 2, 98.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid

<sup>112</sup> Ibid

<sup>113</sup> Millard, J.S. 1975. *The Psychology and Christian Maturity*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 12.

<sup>114</sup> Acts 4:32-37.



distribution, and thereby promoting individualism. According to Ayantayo J.K, Prosperity theology makes people to be concerned about themselves than others. Stepping on other people's toe in the self- pursuance of prosperity.<sup>115</sup> The slogan of prosperity teaching, accordingly, is the 'survival of the smartest.' The theology of prosperity is said to promote selfhood and egocentrism. Therefore, it should be tagged evil and rejected by all

Another point leveled against prosperity preaching is the legitimizations of crime in the country. The incessant pursuit for material wealth as taught by the prosperity theologians is said to be promoting people's engagement in criminal activities. According to S Ikekwun, prosperity theology promotes the orientation of making it either by crook or by hook. All the people want is wealth at all cost.<sup>116</sup> Some leaders of the prosperity- teaching churches are reported to have allegedly supporting their members who engage in corrupt activities provided they have their own fair share of the booty.

#### The Lust for Materialism

Prosperity theology is also said to be evil because it heightens the lust for materialism. As stated by G. Steiner in book titled '*Business and Society*,' philosophy of materialism derives some to be oriented exclusively to monetary reward. The quest and lust for materialism is aided by the exposure to prosperity teaching.<sup>117</sup> Ayantayo, J.K. argues that the lust for materialism has affected the religious moral values such as honesty, truthfulness, co-operation and contentment. It has elevated the 'Get Rich Quick Syndrome' in the mind and mentality of Nigerians especially the young ones.<sup>118</sup>

#### Commercialization of Religion

Another point raised in opposition to relevance of prosperity theology is the fact that prosperity theology promotes commercialization of religion. According to F.K Obiora, the commercialization of Christianity has led to

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<sup>115</sup> Ayantayo, J.K. 2010. "Prosperity gospel and Social Morality: A Critique," *Creativity and Change in Nigerian Christianity*. David Ogungbile and Akintunde Akinade (eds.), Nigeria: Malthouse Press Limited, 210.

<sup>116</sup> S. Ikekwun, 1994. "The Police, Crime and Nation," *Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies*, Vol XXVI, no. 1-2, 95.

<sup>117</sup> G. Steiner, 1978. *Bussiness and Society*, New York: Random House, 226-227.

<sup>118</sup> Ayantayo, J.K. 2010. "Prosperity gospel and Social Morality: A Critique," 208.

corruption, immorality and other forms of indiscipline in churches today. The church which was supposed to be a house of God has become den of robber, a place for mischief makers, cheat and immoral acts.<sup>119</sup> This line of thinking avers that prosperity theology has turned church to money-making ventures and almost every religious activity such as clapping, fasting and praying, dancing, devotion and other liturgical activities have been monetized. On this note, prosperity theology is said to be totally evil.

#### Institutionalization of Falsehood, laziness and idleness

Also, it said that prosperity theology institutionalizes falsehood, laziness and idleness. Prosperity theologians are said to be employing falsehood method and exaggeration to impress their followers. They manipulate testimonies, and many a time they claim to have inspiration from the Holy Spirit, but their behaviours and contents of the message they said they received from God is not consistent with the Bible. Apart from these, it said that prosperity theology also encourages idleness or laziness among their adherents by teaching them that wealth does not come by hard work but divine favour.<sup>120</sup>

#### Psychological Effects

Another point used by the critics of Prosperity theology is that it negatively affects the way people think. Most Nigerians now, especially young people believe they have to be rich by all means. According to Folarin, the very problem of message as advocated by David Oyedepo and others is that “it is that their gospel defines poverty as sin.”<sup>121</sup> According to Folarin, two points sum up this definition: It is exclusively financial, and it neglects the spiritual well-being of the people. This conception has greatly affected the church on the sort of Christian it now produces. Besides, another way the health and wealth gospel has affected people’s psychology is the way members run from their original denomination to theirs. Folarin, for instance gave the effect of this on the evangelical churches in Nigeria, with specific interest in the Nigerian Baptist Convention (NBC) and Evangelical Church of West Africa (ECWA). According to him, an interview was recently conducted in

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<sup>119</sup> F.K Obiora, 1998. *The Divine Deceit: Business in Religion*, Enugu: Optimal Publishers, 73.

<sup>120</sup> Ayantayo, J.K. 2010. “Prosperity gospel and Social Morality: A Critique,” 209.

<sup>121</sup>G.O. Folarin, 2014. “The Prosperity Gospel in Nigeria: A Re-Examination of the Concept, Its Impact and Evaluation,” [www://http:cybersource.org.](http://www://http:cybersource.org.), 1.

the Nigerian Baptist Convention and ECWA and 63.27% and 75% respondents respectively agreed to be losing some members to the Faith Movement Denominations in Nigeria.<sup>122</sup>

#### Hermeneutics-related defects

The view that prosperity theology has no relevance also holds that the hermeneutics of Prosperity theology raises more questions than it answers. It is argued that most of the biblical texts used by Prosperity theologians are taken out of the context.<sup>123</sup> One example of scholars who have explicitly opposed or criticized the prosperity theology, according to Basilius Kasera, is Thomas Schirmmacher.<sup>124</sup> Schirmmacher in his work “*The Persecution of Christians Concerns Us All*” dedicates a chapter in which he argues that Prosperity Theology does not match the reality of the persecution and suffering faced by the wider Christian community around the globe. He sees this as a theology that ignores problems, denies suffering and the instructions of Christ. He further, writes that presenting only a gospel in which there is no place for suffering or hardship, “robs the believer of several elemental applications and results of his faith.” Schirmmacher’s view seems to be the general perspective of those who oppose Prosperity Theology. These opponents believe that “it is a fallacy to equate Christianity with health, wealth, success and smooth sailing.”<sup>125</sup>

In sum, this line of thinking concludes that Prosperity Theology is a theology that appeals to the “Western materialistic mindset and that Prosperity Theology is a cultic and heretic movement that systematically subverts the true Christian message. While the stand discussed in this

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<sup>122</sup>Ibid

<sup>123</sup>Dan McConnell, 1990. *The Promise of Health and Wealth*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 183.

<sup>124</sup>Schirmmacher T 2001. *The persecution of Christians concerns us all: towards a theology of martyrdom*. Bonn, Germany: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft (Culture and Science Publications).

<sup>125</sup>Basilius M. Kasara, 2012. “The Biblical and Theological Examination of Prosperity Theology and Its Impact among the Poor in Namibia,” *A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Master of Theology*, South African Theological Seminary, 140.

section represents an extreme stand, the view discussed below represents the other side of the spectrum.

b. The extreme view that the only relevant theology is the Prosperity theology

The second view holds that prosperity preaching has a lot of relevance in Nigerian situation and even beyond. For example, Archbishop Benson Idahosa, Bishop Wale Oke, George Adegboye, Kenneth Copeland, Creflo Dollar, David Oyedepo and Chris Oyakilome are preachers who believe that Christian must be wealthy and healthy. It is not only their ministries which are wealthy; they have also attained personal wealth running into millions of US dollars. They then use their personal wealth and that of their ministries as proto-types upon which all believers should claim riches.<sup>126</sup> This group believes that the will of God for all Christians is to flourish in all areas of life. These proponents believe that those opposed to Prosperity Theology do so just to preserve their traditional theology and practices.<sup>127</sup>

According to this group, teaching Prosperity Theology means having a holistic approach to man's needs including his material wellbeing. Moreover, those who oppose this theology are believed to be opposing the move of the Holy Spirit, just like the first century Pharisees did. Creflo Dollar is reported to have argued in his book titled '*Total Life Prosperity*' that when God is with you, you are bound to prosper and prosperity is a sign of God's presence abiding with you, that is, God being with you equals prosperity or total victory and mastery over circumstances of life. Therefore, to oppose Prosperity Theology is an indication of an un-renewed mind and allowing carnal ways of thinking to obdurate God's blessings. Not only is it a lack of a renewed mind to oppose Prosperity Theology but it is also going against God's will, for Oyedepo writes that God wants believers to prosper and He also gives them the power to obtain wealth, and "God has a covenant with you. Avanzini argued that if you understand God and His Word, and if

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<sup>126</sup>Basilus M. Kasara, 2012. "The Biblical and Theological Examination of Prosperity Theology and Its Impact among the Poor in Namibia," *A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Master of Theology*, South African Theological Seminary, 138.

<sup>127</sup>Copeland K 1974. *The laws of prosperity*. Fort Worth, USA: Kenneth Copeland Publications.

your life is one that abides in His will, then the Lord has a covenant of blessing for your life.”<sup>128</sup>

David Oyedepo<sup>129</sup> argues in his book *Possessing Your Possession* that as part of God’s covenant, believers ought to prosper. This covenant is sealed by the death of Christ, that all who believe in the message of the gospel will along with the salvation of their souls obtain all good things in this world including wealth, health and total success. Thus, considering that God is a good God, only good things should happen to His children – referring to wealth, health and success. It is perhaps with this concept of goodness in mind that Avanzini<sup>130</sup> writes in *The Wealth of the World* that because of the unchanging nature of God (using Heb. 11:8), He will give the wealth of the wicked to the godly so they will rule the earth in the last days. These proponents stretch their argument further, that the said prosperity can only be realized on the condition that people believe in Jesus Christ. Further, they are to exercise undoubting trust in God’s promises of prosperity, meditate upon God’s Word, believe and trust unquestioningly in their “man of God,” live holy lives, and practice regular giving especially in financial forms. In addition they are to avoid speaking negative words and thinking negative thoughts, and consider things such as poverty, sickness etc as mere symptoms and focus on their inheritance of prosperity.<sup>131</sup> Some of the text used to justify this theology are Mark 10, 3 John 2, Genesis 12, Psalm 8, and several others

## V. The Proposed middle view: Balancing the two extremes

In embarking on a response to this teaching it is important to acknowledge that not all of what prosperity teaches is to be denied. This paper argues that those who promote Prosperity Theology have quite similar doctrinal stands to the majority of the Evangelical community. Therefore, regardless of this offshoot of Pentecostalism and having adopted non-Christian ideas – we

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<sup>128</sup> Avanzini J 1989. *Powerful principles of increase*. Tulsa, USA: Harrison House.

<sup>129</sup> Oyedepo, D. O 2007. *Possessing your possession*. Lagos, Nigeria: Dominion Publishing House. 63-65

<sup>130</sup> Avazini, J. 1989. *Wealth of the world: the proven wealth transfer system*. Tulsa, USA: Harrison House, Inc. 69-86.

<sup>131</sup> Oyakilome C 2008 (Dec). *Rhapsody of realities. Grace: the power for promotion*. LoveWorld Publishing.

have no logical reason to dismiss this as something that has nothing to do with Christianity because it does not originate from some non-Christian tradition. I am of the opinion that there are some of the positive things in Prosperity Theology and that it may also be a wakeup call to the evangelical churches especially on issues of faith, and practical aspect of living faith, and social concerns. Though Prosperity theology has some areas that should be improved and reshaped but one needs to proceed with caution in drawing conclusions. There are areas where Prosperity theology could be seen as 'make up' for some deficient aspect of Christian theology in Nigeria and in Africa. Dada, in his paper, avers that "the basic thesis of prosperity gospel in Nigeria emerged as response to the debilitating social conditions."<sup>132</sup> Following Professor S.O. Abogunrin,<sup>133</sup> Dada observed that the inadequate effort given to social lives of Christians in Nigeria by the older churches gave way for the rise and growth of prosperity in Nigeria.<sup>134</sup> Therefore, looking at the concern of the Prosperity theology is Nigeria, the area of lack or inadequate attention in the older churches is being taken care of. In this light, the work argues that contrary to what the critics of prosperity theology think, there are some advantageous benefit that can be derived from prosperity theology in African context. Only that there is a need for 'balancing' in prosperity theology- applying the 'Aristotelian golden mean.'

On the other hand, there are a lot of values in the argument advanced by the critics of the prosperity theology. The points raised against prosperity theology are viable. The fact that much attention is not given to spiritual salvation in prosperity theology is a concern. Material or bodily prosperity, if not tamed, is capable of leading one to hell. The fundamental aim of Jesus' mission is to rescue human race from spiritual and eternal damnation not from financial poverty. But just like there is lack of attention on spiritual salvation in prosperity teaching, there is also lack of attention on existential issues in the older churches. The attempt for a balanced view is

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<sup>132</sup> Dada, O. A. 2004. "Prosperity Gospel in Nigerian context: A Medium of Social Transformation or an Impetus for Delusion." *ORITA* 36, 96.

<sup>133</sup> S.O. Abogunrin, 1986. "The Total Advocacy of Christ in African Context," *Ogbomosho Journal of Theology*, January, 1986, 14. Abogunrin, in this article, opined that while the salvation preached by the older missionaries in Nigeria is good, it is limited to concern of the 'other world' while the concern for the 'body' is extremely left behind.

<sup>134</sup> Dada, O. A. 2004. "Prosperity Gospel in Nigerian context: A Medium of Social Transformation or an Impetus for Delusion." *ORITA* 36, 100.

commendable and essential to avoid acclimatizing to the extreme view to such an extent that we throw away even the good and true part of other theologies. From experience, we know that humans are prone to go to extremes. However, we should realize that “too much sound deafens us; too much light dazzles us; too great [a] distance or proximity hinders our view.”

Therefore, I believe that for there to be a balanced view on prosperity theology, there are some things that have to be done on it. Prosperity theology has positive concern which the church in Nigeria at present may be ignoring and at the same time, prosperity theology needs to be revisited in order to be socially relevant. The next section deals with how prosperity theology can be reshaped to make it a biblically-correct theology and to make it devoid of the allegation leveled against it by the non-prosperity theologians.

## **VI. Reshaping Prosperity Theology for Maximum Balancing**

That being said, the following are the areas where prosperity theology can be revisited.

### **a. The Use of Scripture**

The general approach of prosperity teaching to Scripture and its interpretation has been to quote isolated proof texts and to treat them almost exclusively as propositional truths or promises. This, it is claimed, is in the interest of elucidating the plain meaning of the text. In practice the words of various verses are applied to the modern world without recourse to such considerations as literary or historical context, the nature of the text or the original intent of such writings. Some verses of the scripture used (and especially those of the New Testament) can be shown to have been given similarly contextually and hermeneutically blinkered interpretations.<sup>135</sup> Therefore, there is a need for prosperity theologians to critically revise their use of scripture. For example, the habit of taking text out of its context should be avoided. If they want to teach prosperity, they should biblical texts that actually teach prosperity and they should not force prosperity colour on every part of the scripture.

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<sup>135</sup> G. D. Fee, 1984. "The 'Gospel' of Prosperity- an Alien Gospel," *Reformation Today* 82 (Nov.-Dec. 1984), 40.

## **b. Eschatology**

Given the theological roots of prosperity teaching, it is perhaps surprising on one level that more attention is not given by these teachers to the second coming and related teachings. On reflection however it is rather less surprising when one considers the basic eschatological stance that underpins the teaching.<sup>136</sup> What is meant by the underlying eschatological stance is the assumption, whether explicitly stated or not, that all the benefits of the Kingdom of God can be enjoyed by all believers here and now. The tension that the New Testament teaches between the realized and the yet-to-be-realized aspects of the Kingdom is completely missing in prosperity theology, the emphasis solely rising on the former. Thus the *parousia* and the life of the world to come are robbed of their essential relevance and importance. This emphasis on realized eschatology is especially evident in some of the teaching on healing and health. To teach that believers should not experience illness is to deny the reality of physical mortality. The prosperity theologians should reshape their theology and let there be balance between their emphasis on 'here' and 'hereafter' in their theology. Members should be taught to know that not all benefit of Christian faith will be enjoyed here, some are meant for 'hereafter.'

## **c. The Nature of God**

One of the more disturbing aspects of the theology of prosperity teaching is what it says about the nature of God. God is effectively reduced to an object to be manipulated. The promises of God are seen as binding him, so that, when the right procedures are followed, he is bound to produce the result desired. As has been mentioned, it must not be denied that God can and does give prosperity to some, but in this teaching there is no room for the freedom and sovereignty of God. Everything depends on the actions of the individual. In this way it is very anthropocentric, although it is claimed that all is for God's glory. The problem referred to here can likewise be expressed with reference to prosperity teaching's view of faith. Faith perceived as human achievement (Pelagianism) always carries that danger of pride and the displacement of glory that rightly belongs to God. Faith in

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<sup>136</sup> Young, P.R. 1996. "Prosperity Teaching in an African Context," *African Journal of Evangelical Theology*, 15:1, 10.



God, as demonstrated by the positive confession that one practices, is almost reduced to the level of an incarnation. To give almost sacral power to the words one utters and hence ascribe almost divine power to the individual human believer borders on idolatry. Therefore, the prosperity theologians should try to set limit between the potency on the Word of God and 'positive confessions' of ordinary man. God should not be seen as a toll that can be controlled using the words of man.

#### **d. Christology**

The interpretation of the person of Jesus that is taught in prosperity theology denies the reality of the incarnation and involves a watered down understanding of what he was doing in his earthly ministry. To view the miracles of Jesus as a limitless wealth-generating mechanism is not only to miss the whole point of the miracles in his message, but it means that Jesus never really shared our limitations and hence didn't really share our humanity either. The miracles were a sign of the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God in the person of Jesus. (Where such miracles continue to occur they continue to be such signs). There is not any indication that they were intended or even interpreted by others as "God's way of looking after Jesus" - to do so gives deficient Christology.

The ministry of Jesus as conceived by the prosperity theologians should be revisited to include Him as 'the Priest, King, and Prophets.' The holistic understanding of Jesus' mission and ministry should be understood holistically.

#### **e. The Problem of Pain and Poverty**

While a full and comprehensive theodicy is beyond the scope of this article, there are flaws in the solution proffered for evils of pain and poverty in prosperity theology, and needs to be revisited. In the teaching of the prosperity preachers, pain and poverty are always directly attributable to some sin or defect in the spiritual life of the individual involved. As had been alluded to this is precisely the theology of the friends of Job, and the type of cause-and-effect-wisdom that the book of Job seeks to address. The answer that that book gives is that God is sovereign and may work

according to some other unexplained and unexplainable economy.<sup>137</sup> The understanding of causes and solution to pain as understood in prosperity theology, therefore needs to be re-thought in the light of biblical standpoints. Sin may not be the only cause of pain, some pain and distress may be to glorify the Lord himself.

#### **f. The Nature of Success and the Value of Money**

Prosperity teaching raises several issues that have to do with the nature of success and the value of money. There is an assumption inherent in the discussion that "success" is a good thing to which to aspire. Idahosa never really defines what he means by the success that is promised in the title of his book, but the context in which it is discussed indicates that he equates it with temporal wealth and a large and growing personal ministry. While these may indeed be very pleasant things to have, it is questionable as to whether they are to be the goal of the Christian. Such an aspiration will necessarily lead to individualism and the loss of corporate vision of the purposes of God.<sup>138</sup> Another issue raised by the teaching is the value that one should place on money. It is again an in-built assumption in the prosperity message that wealth is a positive attribute and something to be desired. While these concerns are good for Christians, Jesus' teaching on balancing spiritual life with material life, and Pauline teaching on commitment should be factored into the Prosperity theology's understanding of success and value of money.

In sum, the researcher believes that if prosperity theologians consider the points raised in this place, there will be balancing from the extreme stands of the theology. But not only prosperity theology needs to be balanced. The non-prosperity theology also needs to be balancing and there are areas where it has to learn from prosperity theology. This is the concern of the next section.

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<sup>137</sup>Young, P.R. 1996. "Prosperity Teaching in an African Context," *African Journal of Evangelical Theology*, 15:1, 12.

<sup>138</sup> T. Mofokeng, "The Prosperity Message and Black Theology", *Missionalia* 15

## **VII. Areas Where non-Prosperity Theologians can Learn from Prosperity Theology**

It is obvious from the above that there are some lessons and correctives that prosperity teaching and its appeal can offer the established churches. Not only is there a need for the churches to address some of the issues raised, but the widespread appeal of prosperity teaching highlights deficiencies in the standard of teaching in the churches. It would seem that doubtful American theology is taking the place that should belong to good African Christian theology, that is, the prosperity theology, which supposedly originated in America, is capable of making some relevant impact on the Christian theology practiced in Africa. In too many African churches the liturgy, hymnody and style of worship seems to cling to outdated, foreign, and incomprehensible Western patterns and practices. These have a tradition of use in many of the mission-founded churches especially. This has made the worship in some older churches to be cold, unappealing and not relevant. These can be corrected by learning from the experience offered by the proponents of prosperity teaching.

The non-prosperity teaching churches need to rise to this challenge and be imaginative in adapting the services to meet the needs of their people. God is alive and very active in the Church in Africa and his people need to acknowledge and celebrate that fact. It is a sad indictment the mainline churches if people are to move to the extremes of prosperity teaching to find a venue in which they can comfortably do so. There is no doubt that there is awareness of the activity of God throughout the churches but the shackles of the past too often hinder a proper response to that. It is tragic that Christians be drawn into questionable theology because they do not feel they can worship God meaningfully in places where theology is more solidly based. Therefore, the non-prosperity theology should rise to the challenge and make their theology relevant to the existential issues in Nigeria.

## **VIII. Conclusion**

Above all there is a need for a sound grounding in biblical theology and the reading and teaching of Scripture in a way that brings out the whole of its message and rejects the proof-text approach to interpretation and theology.

Both prosperity theology and non-prosperity theology have what they can teach one another. Balancing the two extremes of both prosperity theology and non-prosperity theology can be very useful to the church in Nigeria. In my opinion, the whole issue on prosperity theology borders on the interpretation and application of the Bible.

This paper has observed the extremes of the two identifiable theologies, their basic line of arguments and how they can be balanced to the 'golden mean' using Aristotelian golden mean as the theoretical framework.

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