

## **Prosperity Gospel: A Watershed of the Gospel of Christ**

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### **Abstract**

Prosperity gospel is a fast-growing movement gaining influences among many Christians as it has become an appealing doctrine to many. It places premium on physical health and material wealth as a right for every believer in God. It teaches that inasmuch as a believer remains faithful to God in giving generously to his servant (preacher), maintain a positive thinking pattern and confession and exhibits confidence in applying faith, wealth and health would not be far from reach. Prosperity gospel preachers often use the bible drawing proofs from both the Old Testaments and New Testament to substantiate their teachings thereby gaining the audience of many Christians. However, it distorts biblical truth through misinterpretation of texts thereby shortchanging the gospel of Christ for a gospel of acquiring wealth other than a relationship with God. It also reduces the church to a business enterprise where money multiplications are exercised in seed sowing and reaping in many folds. It increases the rate of poverty of the masses with only the preachers getting rich and does not teach care for the poor. This paper concludes that it is a watershed of the gospel of Christ.

**Keywords:** Prosperity gospel, material wealth, physical health, commercialization, materialism.

## **Introduction**

Amidst several doctrines upheld by the church, prosperity gospel has been integrated and becoming a fast growing movement bearing roots in Pentecostalism. Prosperity gospel advances the efficacy in positive thinking (think and become), positive confession (name it and claim it), self help and mind-cure in bid to ensure wealth and health in this lifetime. It is the doctrine that emphasizes on divine prospects for devotees to be prosperous; particularly in the area of finance. Adherents of this doctrine believe that God wants people to be wealthy because it is a pivotal sign of God's blessings and that poverty is a sign of lack of faith. This showcases that the cause of poverty is the fault of the poor themselves. Adherents also believe that prosperity is compensation for prayers and for giving beyond the limit of tithe to one's church, televangelists or other religious related causes. Goroh (2009: 41) attests that "poverty here is considered to be the result of a lack of faith, lack of giving, a lack of knowledge, or negative confession (speech) and thinking".

Prosperity gospel is a doctrine that has received a vast welcome by many individuals and this has led to a day to day quest for a consumer-centric society and materialism; where one is recognized by where he lives, what he wears, the car he drives, what he eats and how much he makes... drifting the attention of people from the gospel of Christ to material gains. This widespread consumer centered gospel plunges into the heart of its hearers and adherents making them develop an obsession for material things which may be sought through different means whether legal or illegal route. The danger therein the illegal route breed various vices in the society. Beyond the effects of prosperity gospel in the society, it creates a serious doctrinal and ethical problem for the church. The ideal church is such that should be doctrinally sound so that everyone can lead moral and spiritual lives according to the precepts laid down for Christian living. Prosperity gospel in bid to find theological basis for propagation distorts biblical truths. Proponents of prosperity gospel advocate that through faith one can claim wealth and health. They claim that wealth

and health are a reward and compensation for faithfulness in serving God. This suffices to say that poverty is traceable to two deductibles either an individual did not faithfully serve God or God is not faithful in rewarding his faithful devotees. The prosperity gospel has a way of trivializing the poor which does not solve the problem of poverty that the prosperity gospel seeks to alleviate.

Prosperity preachers are another challenge of prosperity gospel. It is important to also state that “prosperity preachers (Health-and-wealth preachers) “unabashedly” borrow “religious imagery” from the “Judeo-Christian tradition” to advance their own ecclesiastical aims and aspirations (Speck 2007:9). As much as esteem and influence turn out to be increasingly centralized, it is feasible to have “those in power (will) impose their wishes upon the powerless”, and manipulate people, resources, and circumstances to their own advantage (Speck 2007:10). This has lend credibility to the assertion that “religion is an opium” given to people in order to exploit them. The pastors of such churches use the desperation of church members to get rich in a way. Usually members are brainwashed by the church leader who tells them to submit the little they have been able to earn as “sowing of seeds” and in turn God will enrich them. Klassen (2009: 133) “avers that prosperity gospel preachers often take particular interest in specifically blessing the money being donated above their heads or hands to receive blessings.” This has led to poorer congregation and richer pastors. These pastors establish universities and other business enterprises to make more money for themselves such that even the members that contributed immensely to such projects cannot patronize the enterprise.

However, on a different expression, “prosperity gospel is a consumer-centric religion of self in which people believe they are the measure of all things” (Beckford 2001:18). Prosperity gospel begins to breed contentions when people are motivated that they are sufficient in themselves... this is because it gravitates towards the rejection of virtually every truth-claim about God and His existence. In this wise,

a Christ-centric ethical model is thrown overboard or shortchanged with a man centered and materialistic quest.

### **Prosperity Gospel: Conceptual Clarification**

The prosperity gospel is not a monolithic theological system, so, any attempt to define it, may be taking a risk of deforming or reducing it to bare bones. This does not mean that it cannot be defined. Kasera (2012) avers that an attempt to conceptualize prosperity gospel must put into focus the definition given to it by its advocates. In his (2012: 24) words, "...going along this route will allow us to deduce the meaning of prosperity gospel from the "horses' own mouths" rather than just drawing the meaning from the conclusions of their opponents."

In light of the above, a Namibian based prosperity gospel preacher Goroh (2009:36) who has been greatly influenced by the teachings of the Copelands and the late Kenneth Hagin, writes, "...If you are a believer, abundant life is your birthright. The seed of the righteous are not meant to beg bread but to enjoy plenty...You are supposed to enjoy the best. Life is not supposed to be lived in crises when Christ is living in you. You are supposed to live an abundant life even during the season of famine." Which by implication means that a person's Christianity is questionable if he/she is poor or experiencing ill-being. In similitude, Nigerian based prosperity preachers has not been silent in lending their voices as to what they perceive prosperity gospel means. Commenting on 2 Corinthians 8:9 Oyedepo (2006:74) writes that "Redemption is a cure for poverty, as it gives you access to the cure for poverty. When you were saved, you were redeemed from the plague of poverty, because your Father is very wealthy" advancing that the evidence of salvation is the liberation from economic poverty.

In contrast, Horton (1990:28) argues that the prosperity gospel is the modern gospel that is marketed to consumers and not proclaimed to penitent sinners. Folarin (2006: 82) corroborates also that "salvation from sin and concern for spiritual growth is not an element that is

emphasized by preachers of the prosperity gospel.” Leveraging on the perception of Greg Gilbert, (2010: 19) the gospel of Christ:

...is the proclamation that Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah, is the one, true, and only Lord of the world... the gospel is the proclamation of Jesus, in [two] senses. It is the proclamation announced by Jesus; the arrival of God’s realm of possibility (his “kingdom”) in the midst of human structures of possibility. But it is also the proclamation about Jesus; the good news that in dying and rising, Jesus has made the kingdom he proclaimed available to us.

Jones and Russell (2011) contend that the prosperity gospel is a ‘poor theology’ because of its inconsistencies with the gospel of Jesus and propose that the central message of the gospel should be Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Ukoma, Nnachi and Oji (2016: 151) further corroborates that the “gospel of prosperity is a materialistic Christian belief and a doctrine taught in some Christian groups that God will grant wishes to the faithful, especially those wishes involving material wealth by their prayers and inducement on God.”

However, prosperity gospel has not had a sole reaction since its inception some individuals label it as theological bankrupt gospel; emphasizing that it is against Christianity and some others regard it as a blasphemous doctrine. Exclusively, on one hand, Van Biema and Chu (2006) reports that prosperity gospel is regarded by doctrinally traditional Christians as simplistic, certainly embarrassing and possibly heretical. On another hand Bypasssee (2005) posits that prosperity gospel is considered by the ecumenical mainline Protestants as a “pagan gospel of acquisition”, “self help” and “self improvement”. Gifford (2007) then concludes that prosperity gospel is a capitalist obsession with individual self esteem, aspiration and buoyancy.

More also, proponents of prosperity gospel tend to contend that the gospel is a replicate of the Protestant Ethic advanced by Max Webber in his popular essay *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Lending credence that the doctrine is potent in modernizing work ethic which they suppose is a catalyst for socio-economic transformation. In this light, critics render it an impetus for delusion. Placing Weber's protestant ethics as an analytical framework, Gifford (2004: 197) argues that Pentecostalism's overemphasis on the miraculous and low valuation of work counters the modern work ethic needed for Ghana "to join the modern world economy".

Bearing in mind that the theology of prosperity gospel is not monolithic, it's "teachings follow a general pattern" (Folarin 2007:80). It ceases to be a rigid doctrine as Koch (2014: 1) affirms that "it is a flexible theology that is well suited to be adapted to varying social locations, particularly in a society like the United States that is radically individualistic". The dogma of the movement only blends with "Pentecostal revivalism with elements of positive thinking" (Coleman 1993:355). With this, faith is regarded as the substance and supernatural force adherents use to claim physical health and material wealth. In their thoughts, faith is the medium through the power of God to make riches is accessed. Through the "force of faith" the "positive power (God) is 'activated', and the negative (Satan) is confronted and negated" (Hunt 1998:275). Gifford (1992: 39) thus summarizes the prosperity gospel from two major standpoints "we do not have to do anything: prosperity has been won for us by Christ and is our right. All we have to do is claim it by faith. Another aspect of its teaching is giving to God first, and if we give, to the extent that we give, God will reimburse us abundantly."

## **Historical Background of Prosperity Gospel**

As a matter of origin, Mitchem (2007: 52) proposes that prosperity gospel “stems from multiple historical and theological streams’ most scholars agree that its roots are in the nineteenth-century New Thought movement and it focuses on the unity between divinity and humanity, the world conceptualized through thoughts, and the power of those thoughts to create.” Since prosperity gospel is deficient of denominational parameters which suffice for the difficulty in definition and delineation. Regardless of this perceived difficulties, the crux of prosperity gospel is alluded in well being and riches. According to Mitchem (2007: 55) “Prosperity gospel is understood as having three main tenets: divine healing, material prosperity, and positive confession.” However, the pedigree and growth of prosperity gospel are extensive and tousled. Any attempt(s) employed to understand its scope, success, influence and diversity will demand a cursory historical background.

Prosperity gospel has become a phenomenon that has gained considerably substantial numbers of supporters and propagators for some decades now. However, there are perplexities concerning how it came to be as it is still a contentious spot of discussion. The historical and ideological roots of Prosperity Theology are complex and disputed, reflecting the controversial nature of its adherents’ claims (Coleman 2004). Scholars from various epochs are of the consensus that Prosperity gospel movement started in the USA, following the influence of Pentecostal revivalism, particularly through the activities of the North American healing movement of the 1940s and 1950s (Gifford 1990, MacArthur 1992, Piper 2010) but their assertion has not excluded the origin(s) of the prosperity gospel from being a highly debated issue among scholars. While scholars like Gifford (1990: 373) traces the inception of prosperity gospel to American roots, some others like Matthew Ojo (1996: 106) opines that the gospel in Africa is original to the African soil.

This research does not intend to probe into the arguments concerning the historical origins but maintains a soft landing that regardless of where it originally originated from, prosperity gospel exists and its tentacles have spread across the world making it gain a global recognition. Hunt (2000:73) notes that prosperity gospel is “one of the fastest growing religious movements on a global scale”. It has been “adopted as far afield as Scandinavia, Eastern Europe, Africa, India, Latin America and the Pacific rim of Southeast Asia” (Hunt 1998:272). In view of this, Bowler (2010: 28) traces that “this type of mental magic (prosperity gospel) surged in the late nineteenth century, accompanying confidence about the progress and potential perfectibility of the human race. The era after the Civil War, often known as the Gilded Age, witnessed a flood of religious ideals that bathed the period with hearty individualism and a bold pragmatism.” Stephanie (2007:55) corroborates that “Prosperity Gospel’s current form, however, developed in the 1950s amidst postwar optimism and healing revivals within the Pentecostal tradition” According to Coleman (2004):

Important figures in this post-War revival, such as William Branham, Oral Roberts, A.A. Allen and T.L. Osborn, promoted a prosperity message that eventually encompassed both physical and financial aspects of the believer’s life. Some of these preachers were later able to become high-profile participants within the burgeoning revival of independent charismatic ministries that marked the latter decades of the twentieth century.

However, the era that prosperity gospel began to gain influence over many, “self-mastery became an art and occupation, as people sought to consolidate the era’s advances with improvements to their own lives” (Bowler 2010: 28). In the thought of Anderson (2014:65) “E.W. Kenyon’s theological legacy helped in shaping the prosperity gospel in 20th century America.” The American type prosperity gospel came into sight in times referred by the New Testament



scholar, Dan Liroy (2007: 4) as “the days when living standards were visibly increasing ... and success through a positive mental attitude” was the article of faith. It was in “an economy of superabundance where the craving for material rewards became a fatal addiction for which there was no cure” (Bonk 2006: 18). This was a season when “desire obtained a legitimate and constructive force that should [always] find fulfilment, when expressed in faith” (Stalsett 2006: 203). Over time, “the doctrine turned an axial moment with the globalization of Pentecostal Christianity” (Coleman 2000: 49). This accounts for the increased living standards in the US in the years 1960s and 70s.

However, prosperity gospel emerged and thrived in Africa in situations of poverty (Togarasei 2011), in the midst of struggling economies (Gifford 2004). This is because prosperity gospel unveils incredible promises to an economically underprivileged people. It pierced into the heart of the Africans causing it to be a fast growing movement. Anderson (2014:66) attests that “one of the earliest promoters of the prosperity gospel in Africa was the late Nigerian Archbishop, Benson Idahosa.” In no distant while, prosperity gospel gained the attention of other Nigerian preachers.

### **Scriptures used to Endorse Prosperity Gospel**

#### **Old Testament Texts**

A great deal of prosperity gospel teachings are entrenched in the Old Testament especially portions that talk about God’s promises to the patriarchs most importantly God’s promises to Abraham and the children of Israel. One of their prominent texts is Deuteronomy 8:18 “You shall remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your fathers, as it is this day.” This is usually interpreted to affirm that the presence poverty is the absence of God. Poverty in this wise is said to be a plague to those who have forgotten God. Since the text reads that the people of Israel should remember God who is the giver

of riches. The implication this text have on their listeners is that anyone who is poor has not maintained a perpetual relationship with God and has not acknowledged his presence. This suffices to say that no one who remembers God become poor because upon remembrance of God is the principle of reciprocation of wealth.

Another leading text used to propagate the prosperity gospel is that of Abraham's wealth as recorded in Genesis 13:2 "Now Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold." This text is usually inter-used with Galatians 3:6-9. The argument put forward from these two texts is that God blessed Abraham for his faith in Him and believing his promises then in the same vein God will do the same to all who believe in Him and even more because of their covenant with God through Jesus Christ. This suffices to say that if one believes in God he will reap material blessings just like Abraham and if one believe in Jesus Christ, he will receive a double portion of that material blessing and as well as spiritual blessings – eternal life. Whereas Paul in Galatians 3:6-9 that is often quoted to support this ideology makes it clear that in its right context that the blessing believers will receive as that of Abraham is justification and not material blessings as propagated by prosperity preachers.

Besides Abraham, other patriarchs are often used to validate the prosperity teaching this include, Isaac, Jacob, Solomon and Job. Prosperity preachers teach that believe in God by the Patriarchs was what made them wealthy which accounts that all believers in God is expected to be wealthy. While on a soft note, it is true that believers in God should assume some level of successes, prosperity preachers often fail to take into consideration that despite the promises of God to Abraham and the people of Israel, throughout the Old Testament, God was constantly reminding them to care for the poor (Deut. 15:11). Substantial portion in the Mosaic Law suffices how the poor should be taken care for (Lev. 19:10; 25:25, 35). Even the sacrificial system was given in such a way that accommodates the poor (Lev. 7:5).

### **New Testament Texts**

In the New Testament, the prosperity gospel is entrenched in the understanding of the atoning work of Christ. Advocates of prosperity gospel lay emphasis that the redemptive work of Christ is not limited to redeeming man from sin and death but also from poverty. Oyedepo (2007:74) without mincing words has always proclaimed that “redemption is a cure for poverty, as it gives you access to the cure for poverty. When you were saved, you were redeemed from the plague of poverty, because your Father is very wealthy.” In similitude, there is a general misunderstanding and misapplication of Christ’s work on the cross. Instead of seeing the beauty of the suffering of Christ, which was meant to save mankind from sin and its wages, proponents of prosperity gospel have turned this into a platform for advocating their preconceived economic agenda. This is why Hesselgrave (1978:26) argued that “preachers must interpret and preach the gospel without altering its original message. There are two things necessary to the treatment of scripture: A way of discovering (*modus inveniendi*) those things which are to be understood, and a way of expressing to others (*modus proferendi*) what we have learned.”

For instance, Goroh (2009:92) expresses that “You have to use your tongue to declare what you want before it is done for you.” He continues that “whatever trouble you may be in today can change through what comes out of your mouth. Do not undermine the power of your words... your tongue is the key to the door of your destiny.” He uses John 16:24 “Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full,” to advocate his view of positive confession. Oyedepo (2007:193) emphasizes on Gal. 3:13-14 to say that “You must be redeemed by Christ in order to connect with the prosperity delivered to Abraham.” If one subjects his thought to a critical analysis it bears witness with his other claims that “salvation is the gateway to a world of covenant abundance” (Oyedepo, 2007:194) which suffices to say that, once you are saved, you are wealthy. Quets that such statements plunge to one’s mind is

that is it true for the majority of the Christians in the world? Should doubt be casted on the validity of the salvation of those who claimed to be saved but are also poor?

This research however, does not denigrate the atoning work of Christ on the cross and does not in any way advance a proposition that there are no texts that refer to human wealth in the scriptures. What this paper seeks to point out is that the texts used by the prosperity preachers are often times the wrongly interpreted ones which taint the integrity of the scripture in the face of real life experiences. Kasera (2012:115) comments that:

Irresponsible hermeneutics overlook the reality of poverty and use the Bible to make it sound as if it does not exist or downplay its reality by appealing to false accusation such as “poverty exists because people are ignorant of certain principles of faith” or because they have not yet understood God’s Word in context. It is at best an escapist attitude from reality, especially when the concept of positive confession comes into play. Moreover, this escapism frees prosperity gospel advocates from having to face the harsh realities of dealing with the problem of poverty.

### **Prosperity Gospel and the Dilemma of Poverty**

Advocates of prosperity teachings promotes the gospel in attempt that they intend to use it as a poverty alleviation scheme for their members more the fact that it is God’s will for believer’s in him to be wealthy. It is therefore important to examine the practical solutions that prosperity gospel offer to the plight of poverty and do these preachers have a unified objective concerning the plight of poverty. It is also expedient to underscore what it means to be poor and what the state of poverty really is. According to Amarachi, Ama and Oji (2016: 147):

Poverty is the state of one who lacks a usual or socially acceptable amount of money (debility due to malnutrition or lack of fertility) or material possessions, or renunciation as a member of a religious order of the right as an individual to own property. Poverty may cover a range from extreme want of necessities to an absence of material comforts (the extreme *poverty* of the slum dwellers)... while being poor in general terms could be defined as one who lacks material possessions, or characterized by poverty or less than adequate resources to depend on.

However, biblically being poor is seen from two perspectives... the first is one who is lacking spiritual virtues – “poor in the spirit” (Matthew 5:3) and secondly the lack of material possessions – “the poor will always be with you” (Matthew 26:11) which warranted the command to “give to the poor” (Mark 10:211). While the former requires spiritual touch, the latter simply implies that poverty is a natural phenomenal continuum. It is in the case of the latter that prosperity gospel preachers focus their teachings on. While they seem sincere in mending the state of poverty to being wealthy, they engage several measures to force their way and their adherents out of poverty... even if it means misinterpreting the scriptures. This could be because it is a system that borrows from many sources, such that it has not been clearly thought through how to fight poverty strategically and practically.

When prosperity preachers engage the subject of poverty, they do not conceive it or address the problem seriously from the scripture. This, speculatively, could be the reasons why they often resolve to ultra-optimism which in real sense does not seem to serve any positive purpose. This optimism is usually exemplified in the way they motivate people to become millionaires within a short, specified time. Though they motivate their members to begin small-scale projects or business but many of these practical attempts are overshadowed by their unrealistic optimism. For instance, Oyedepo (2007) inspires his

readers the position in which Christ place them makes them susceptible to a life of comfort... he thus admonishes them to engage in businesses or other forms of exchanging services and more often, these business engagement ideas are overshadowed by the statements of miraculous breakthroughs that will come simply because one is a Christian. He writes, “The Bible says Jesus has raised you up, and made you sit together with Him in heavenly places. As an ambassador of heaven here on earth, you are to enjoy heavenly supplies and provisions, thereby, granting you immunity from lack and want” (Oyedepo 2007:40).

The kind of optimism prosperity gospel offers to tackle the issue of poverty is fundamentally based on reductionist principles. What this means is that, their proponents suggest multiple several principles and laws upon which if practiced will result in wealth or actuate people from the state of poverty into wealth. These laws come in various forms ranging from person to persons. While one cannot deny some positive ends from these motivational laws and principles they do not practically address the plight of poverty – they are rather best known as principles of faith. These motivations play on people’s emotions and make them feel fine with the thought that the way of poverty is simply a quest of keeping to the prescribed steps.

This effect comes to limelight when in reality there is an increase in worry when such attempt fails to attain the expected result when engaged by prosperity gospel adherents. In this wise, preachers often blame followers for not faithfully keeping to the prescription that is why the desired result was not attained. This is because this principles do not put into consideration that poverty “has many dimensions encompassing income/expenditure/consumption, low human development, social exclusion, ill being, lack of capacity and function, relative deprivation, vulnerability, including uncertain livelihoods and lack of means to meet the basic needs” (NPC 2007:8). Considering the complex nature of poverty, the strategies applied to alleviate it need to be biblically sound, practical and realistic.

## **Theological and Ethical Liquidation of Prosperity Gospel**

Commenting on the need to theologically and ethically examine the prosperity gospel, Samuel Kunhiyop (2008:138) writes that “we must examine the biblical material, for it is the starting point for meaningful Christian discussion.” Haven surveyed the various scriptural texts used by the advocates of prosperity gospel, it is observed that it “owes its growth to an element of biblical truth however, it has systematically distorted this truth and gone astray” (Basilius, 2012: 120). “Its reaction against the extreme theology of poverty which equated poverty with godliness, has led it to fall into the other extreme of a Faustian covenant, embellished with insatiable materialism and consumerism” (Boesak, Weusmann and Amjad-Ali 2010:46).

Theologically, prosperity gospel distorts God’s character. The bible presents God as a loving Being regardless of man’s flaws and inadequacies but prosperity preachers ignore God’s character advancing that it is the level of one’s faithfulness that opens one to levels of blessings from God. Prosperity preachers are apt in presenting a god caricaturized by nepotism and financial bargains with his followers. God is seen in this wise as one who accept money under the condition of multiplying it in return. Coleman (2000:41–44) also argues that “Oral Roberts professed that if one sowed it, then God would grow it.” This is why Horton (1990:28) argues that the prosperity gospel is the modern gospel that is marketed to consumers and not proclaimed to penitent sinners. Ethically, prosperity preachers in disguise seem to lead their listeners to an “altruistic life” through financial sacrifices and seed sowing. But such “altruistic” intention is absolutely neutralized by the receiving of these so called seeds by the same preachers who are enriching themselves. In a technical sense, what they showcase is an “egocentric life” not an “altruistic life”. In response to their egocentric motivation, their members end up paying generous tithes and offerings, with the hope that the more they give, the greater the multiplied financial return they will receive. Liroy (2007: 60) thus, concludes on prosperity gospel that “an analysis and

critique of its dogma indicates that it is predominately anthropocentric, rather than Christocentric, in its theological orientation.

### **Heretical nature of Prosperity Gospel**

There are severe tensions that come along with the prosperity gospel; the bulk of all is that the prosperity gospel; has been built upon faulty biblical interpretation. Kasera (2012: 109-110) comments that:

This method of interpretation, however, is problematic and destructive as it bends Scripture to fit contexts it is not addressing. These interpretations are consonant with deconstructionism and pluralism. In the former Scripture is made to mean whatever the interpreter thinks it means, and in the latter every interpretation is acceptable and does not require any evaluation.

It has been observed that some prosperity preachers engage the presentation of the gospel from a business perspective and a market strategy wherein the material gain for services held and programs organized is the ultimate concern other than the original business of God's saving of souls. Such churches do not or seldom preach the gospel of salvation, rather their messages all encamp around money and financial liberations. The influence engulfed the church (generic) such that virtually all texts in the scriptures can be interpreted in the light of wealth and capitalism.

Most times, prosperity messages are often accompanied by prophetic declarations which aim at psyching up the believers and siphoning the money in their pockets. In this wise, altar calls are rarely seen or observed in the church except the call was for the purpose of donations... this is because the preaching of the cross has become obsolete. Oratory has now become a gross advantage to every preacher as the ability to play on words is proportionally to raising funds. In this wise, some preachers are specialized for fund raising



and are hired on percentage for their ability to raise money and not souls. Biblical texts are often misused and quotations are interpreted out of contexts. According to Sarles (1986), the methods of interpreting the biblical text by prosperity teachers is highly subjective and arbitrary. Scriptural texts are used without paying attention to grammatical indicators, semantic nuances, or literary and historical context. McConnell (1995) points out that:

...any new religious movement [within Protestantism] must bear the scrutiny of two criteria: biblical fidelity and historical orthodoxy. Regrettably, the Positive Confession movement fails on both counts. Its Biblical basis is found only in the peculiar interpretations of its own leaders, not in generally accepted Christian theology.

The unbiblical nature of their teaching is their lack of understanding concerning the biblical texts they use to justify their claims. The bible is a compendium of many books with different interpretive principles peculiar to each book. D.A. Carson (1996a:189) writes that:

Scripture boasts many communicative acts: history, letters, proverbs, wisdom utterances, warnings, songs, questions, discourse, diatribes, gematria, apocalyptic, legal codes, moral exhortation, threats, promises, commands, laments... Some of these are recognized and recognizable genres others are admittedly genres, but with very fuzzy borders. Some are genres found within several other genres. And genres have their own interpretive 'rules,' learned by observation and practice.

With the evident complexities in the nature and make-up of the scriptures and its interpretation, in order to be able make these differences of the Bible's mixed genres it demands a trained mind and

does not come by naturally. It is expedient to be aware of the various genres because:

...it will provide the needed correction to propositional and metaphorical theology alike: the Bible does not merely give us atomistic propositions about God, nor free-floating metaphors, but ways of processing and organizing propositions and metaphors into meaningful wholes. The forms of biblical literature are the bridge between canon and concept we seek (Vanhoozer quoted in Carson 1996a:190).

It is no gainsaying to affirm that it is the deficiency in understanding of the biblical genres and other hermeneutical practices is the causal origin of the unbiblical nature of the prosperity gospel. This is because in the examination of the texts used to advocate the doctrine, it is noted that the prosperity gospel seem to thrive on poor exegesis which in this case is not simply rooted in the failure to recognize the various genres of Scripture but is also a system that exercises a selective “use of evidence that other evidence has been illegitimately excluded ... this tendency to select only part of the evidence, prematurely construct a grid, and so filter the rest of the evidence through the grid that it is robbed of any [biblical] substance” (Carson 1989:98-99).

### **Trivializing the Poor**

The trivialization of poverty is another major challenge plaguing the prosperity gospel. In the attempt to address the issue of poverty biblically, prosperity advocates fail to recognize the various methods of communication God has provided in Scripture. The Bible teaches that poverty, natural misfortune and destitution in the world are mysteries beyond human understanding. This is why Kunhiyop (2008:138) advises that “in dealing with the poverty problem however, we need to critically examine the various approaches of dealing with poverty before making recommendations for addressing

it.” This is not say that prosperity preachers do not acknowledge the reality of poverty however, their acknowledgment of the presence of poverty is rendered watershed and obsolete if response given are unhelpful in that they rely on quasi-magical-faith, positive confession and sacrificial giving as escape route from poverty.

More challenging is the fact that the structure of their doctrine does not place premium on caring for the poor which is commanded in the scriptures rather they collect from the poor in the name of seed sowing which drives them further into the grip of poverty. This trivialization does not only affect people economically but spiritually, because when the bible is used to foster ideas, when it does not work, it will destroy people’s trust in God. The prosperity gospel dashes the hopes of people and still does not offer the libration it proposes to the menace of poverty. More intriguing is that the propagation of a theology that taunts the poor is inhuman and unchristian.

### **Slide towards Materialism**

It is expedient to state that this research is not anyway saying it is wrong possess material things in this world and there is no biblical justification for a Christian to become ascetical to the extent of demonizing wealth this is because extreme asceticism will lead to irrelevance in the world. The challenge that prosperity gospel poses is its strong emphasis on materialism which motivates members to strive for accumulation of wealth as that is a proof of God’s goodness. In response to this motivation, Christians are made to start to chasing exotic cars and pursuing things in life insofar it possess elements of happiness and relaxation. The definition of success has thus been termed to be the amount of things acquired and the level of one’s net-worth. In this wise, the gospel goes beyond addressing poverty to implanting the ideology of greed rather than need. Piper (2010: 25) opines that:

The great tragedy of prosperity preaching is that a person does not have to be spiritually awakened in

order to embrace it; one needs only to be greedy. Getting rich in the name of Jesus is not the salt of the earth or the light of the world. In this, the world simply sees a reflection of itself. And if they are 'converted' to this, they have not been truly converted but only put a new name on an old life.

The implications of putting emphasis on greed other than need limit the fulfillment of the biblical command of helping the poor, contentment and corrupts Christian standards of living. Teachings as this, paints a wrong image of the person of Christ in that he is reduced to just a means through which wealth is accumulated which in turns makes Christianity a means of gaining health, wealth and prosperity. It makes Christ susceptible to being mocked since he is seen as one who satisfies Christians "even when there is no health, wealth and prosperity" (Piper 2010:31).

### **Commercialization**

The term commercialization is a cognate of commerce which means the idea of managing a business with the aim of making profit. Commercialization in this wise does not mean that the church auditorium are now stores or warehouses and shops where articles of trade are displayed and marketed. The idea that this paper seeks to advance here is that the church has become a platform in similitude to the market place harboring different types of persons and winds of doctrines are displayed with the aim of making money and not making souls for eternity. Amarachi, Ama and Oji (2016: 153) that:

Many preachers today rather see in Christ an avenue of making money and acquiring wealth. In the case of the Church, commercialization simply means to run church meetings and programmes with the view of making money or garnering material substances in the name of giving to God hence every meeting must end in offerings and seeds of faith.

With the assertions presented above it is glaring that the church has become so commercialized to the extent that people who attend such churches will only be gullibly used to raise financial empires for the preachers with no hope of eternal life. Confusing practices and doctrines are therefore on the increase in the churches. These strange practices and doctrines are steadily robbing off on the true gospel and the spiritual standard of what used to be the hope of the hopeless leading back into Karl Marx's definition of religion as the opium of the masses. This gospel is what Amarachi, Ama and Oji (2016: 153) term "worrisome as it calls for a theological address to moderate this good aspect of the gospel that is being beclouded by materialism." He further unveils that "the underlining intent and content of this type of propagation is all about personal wealth acquisition but in the name of God... to the extent that the church has become so commercialized such that committee meetings snowball into fund raisings almost always" (Amarachi, Ama and Oji 2016: 153).

### **Conclusion**

While prosperity gospel has gained the attention of many adherents because of its promises of breakthrough in wealth and health through positive confessions, exercise of faith, faithfulness in giving and confidence using various biblical texts to substantiate its doctrines. This paper proposes that there is provision for the meeting of the needs of every believer in God and there are scriptures that beckon Christians to call and trust God for their needs and sufficiency both in health, wealth and otherwise. The challenge then with prosperity gospel is the modus operandi employed to achieve prosperity and the damages it causes to the body of Christ. This paper thus, concludes that prosperity gospel is a watershed gospel of Christ based on the following faults:

1. It is built on heresy and emphasizes on man's sufficiency: Its teachings are built on misinterpreted scriptural texts which taint the integrity of the scriptures and God when such promises are not met as supposed. This is because overtime

too much confidence is placed on self and the power of individual's will to enforce his/her desires through faith and a must honor that must come from God to actualize the desired.

2. It lacks a biblical understanding of poverty: Prosperity gospel does not put in thought the biblical standpoint on poverty and care for the poor...which by implication casts doubt on the authenticity of its objective to alleviate people from poverty into material wealth and physical health. This is because being poor is seen as a lack of cordial relationship with God whereas, the poor are in the heart of God as exemplified in His commandments for people to care for them.
3. It is often used by its preachers as a means to enrich themselves: the gospel has become a means of siphoning material gains by its preachers from their members through psyching of "sowing and reaping".
4. It does not emphasize on the gospel truth of Christ which is saving mankind from damnation and mending the broken relationship between man and God, such that coming to this consciousness have eternal rewards. Prosperity gospel does not have the transformational power to convert a sinner and save his soul from death.

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