

Global Challenges Facing Christianity: "The Health & Wealth" or "Prosperity" Gospel

J. C. Whytock

This article is a synopsis of part two of a seminar presented at the recent World Reformed Fellowship General Assembly in Jakarta in August, 2019. Fergus Macdonald was the moderator for this seminar; John MacClean of Christ College, Australia led the first part of this seminar on facing global challenges with a spirit of prayer. I led the second part as a case study of one such global challenge, namely the health and wealth or prosperity Gospel (see: <https://freechurch.org/news/storming-seas-world-reformed-fellowship-report>)

Definition

What is the "prosperity gospel"? This teaching views financial wealth and physical well-being as evidence of God's pleasure with the faith of believers. The Christian life is viewed as a contract between God and His people: if people have enough faith, then God will bless them and bring them prosperity and health. There are variants within this teaching, but basically that is it in a nut shell.

Streams

Though there are several strains or tributaries, a broad evaluation of the movement reveals six separate streams. The first emerged out of the old holiness stream and can be traced back to the late 19th century centring upon healing. Not all in this stream have fully embraced the modern phenomena, but there is a historic root here. The second stream comes from Mind Power Teaching and is rooted in the teaching of E.W. Kenyon; here evangelical theology mixes with mind power thinking. The third stream is rooted in utilitarian and pragmatic thought. We see it manifested in our cultural captivity to consumerism. The fourth stream is post-World War Two Pentecostalism; this once marginalized group of Christians began to focus on prosperity, blessing and contractual theology. The movement centred on many healing evangelists. The fifth stream is the Word of Faith stream of the 1970s. The sixth stream is from the majority world and is a syncretism of Christianity, African Traditional Religion and/or Asian Shaminism. Variants on all of the above also can be found with a "soft prosperity Gospel" approach – evangelicals who don't even know they are dabbling with prosperity gospel teachings.

Characteristics

General characteristics have emerged from the prosperity gospel movement: such as, the language of empowerment, a stress upon Christ's work as healer and liberator from financial bondage, the abundant life, giving and being blessed materially, positive thinking, releasing your potential, pyramidal church governance, and now soft prosperity. We should also note with thanksgiving that there are some within this movement who are emerging out of such teaching and embracing a more historic evangelical theology and ministerial model.

Scriptures

The scriptures are at the heart of this movement but with a high selectivity. The constant scriptural emphasis is upon the Abrahamic covenant as a means to physical blessing; the prayer of 3 John 2 is a constant and many other scriptures - from the prayer of Jabez in 1 Chronicles 4:10 to Deut 30:2-9 and Mark 10:30. The issue here is a mis-use of scripture or, to state it more accurately, a failure to follow the rules of proper interpretation. Further scriptures which need to be studied are Mark 10:17-24 and the rich young ruler, Luke 9:57-60, and the prayer of Proverbs 30:7, to mention just a few examples of how to apply a fuller interpretation to the concept of the blessings of God.

Challenges

The Prosperity Gospel has many challenges for the evangelical and Reformed community and these challenges centre upon the following: a de-emphasis upon the classical understanding of Christ's atoning work; a materialistic idolatry; and a lack of *solā scriptura* thinking and a replacement with an human authoritarian model; a failure to grasp the principle of the analogy of faith when it comes to interpreting scripture; both cultural and pagan syncretistic challenges; a return to a medieval indulgence type of religious life; a failure to acknowledge the sovereignty of God and His will; and a failure to see that scripture speaks both positively and negatively.

Response

The key to responding to the false teaching of the prosperity gospel is for the Church to return to rigorous discipleship models of spiritual life and nurture in preaching, bible study, family devotions and personal spiritual formation. Our response must also impact the theological curriculum of theological colleges and seminaries whereby future Christian leaders are trained to identify and respond to this modern false teaching in its various forms whether in Africa, Asia, or Europe. Like most egregious and unbalanced Christian teachings, this particular false teaching can be found in past ages. Just as our forefathers identified errors or unbalanced teachings before us, so in our contemporary global context, this is one such challenge that many will be required to face today.

A couple of helpful books on this subject are Kate Bowler's, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (2014) and Costi Hinn, *God, Greed, and the (Prosperity) Gospel* (2019).