

INTRODUCTION

I am aware that this kind of teaching is not the usual fare for many Christians, and certainly not what you usually hear from the pulpit. It is not going to provide the kind of upbeat, encouraging and faith building boost to the week ahead to which you have become accustomed. It is not meant to.

There are times when we need to take a sober look at what is happening in the Christian Community and test ourselves to see whether beliefs and practices beyond the Gospel mandate have crept into our thinking and practice. Stocktaking is never as much fun as the bumper sale but it is just as necessary for the overall health of a business.

In Israel the biblical prophets called the community back to Torah – and often their call to return was aimed at the religious segment of their society.

In the New Testament Paul tells Timothy (1 Tim 4:1-2)

*In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge:
Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season;
correct, rebuke and encourage - with great patience and careful instruction.
For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine.
Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them
a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.
They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.
But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship,
do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.*

Notice that the “Word” that Timothy was to preach, when it was well received and when it was not, consists of correction, rebuke and encouragement.

As far as I am able, I intend to be faithful to this charge.

Should we be talking about people who are not here to defend themselves?

This is a legitimate concern. As you are well aware, we are not in the habit of writing off or vilifying people with whom we do not agree. Neither is it my intention to begin doing so now. When a preacher preaches a sermon, writes a book or makes a television programme, all of which his/her audience are unable to respond to in the moment, there is a tacit acceptance that what has been preached, written or produced will go through a process of critical evaluation – I guess the rule for preachers is – if you can’t take the heat stay out of the kitchen!

The Biblical mandate to test or discern is what should drive this process.

1 Corinthians 14:29

Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment. (NASB)

The NIV softens the verse -

*Two or three prophets should speak,
and the others should weigh carefully what is said.*

The Greek word translated “judge” or “weigh carefully” is the word **διακρίνω** - *diakrino*; which means to distinguish, to judge, to decide. If a person has a prophetic ministry they must be willing to submit themselves to the judgment of the community in terms of the veracity of their prophetic word. I would suggest preaching and teaching are subject to the same evaluative process. You should not believe something just because I have said it – even though you know me well. Your responsibility does not end there. You must judge – weigh carefully, what has been said against the whole counsel of Scripture (not an isolated verse) to see whether the message preached is indeed the authentic Word of God. We will get back to this issue when I talk about the “*cult of the celebrity leader*”.

Finally, by way of introduction, *is this kind of preaching just negative?*

I hope to demonstrate that it is not. There is a place for the negative - *Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.* (Romans 12:9) I want to help you to discern the difference between truth and error so that you will have greater confidence in truth so that you can live by it. I want to recommend three books that I believe give a balanced and valid appraisal of the "Health and Wealth Gospel." They are all written by people whose research is well informed and whose integrity is above question.

This first book is entitled "*The Disease of the Health and Wealth Gospel*" by Gordon D. Fee. Gordon Fee is Professor Emeritus of New Testament Studies at Regent College, Vancouver, British Columbia, and he is an ordained minister of the Assemblies of God. Considered to be one of the foremost experts in textual criticism of the New Testament of the Bible, Dr. Fee was a member of the editorial board that composed both the New International Version (NIV).

The second book is a series of articles edited by Douglas Moo entitled "*The Gospel and Contemporary Perspectives*". Douglas Moo is Professor of New Testament and director of the PhD in Theological Studies programme at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

The third book is probably the most intriguing of all, not least because it comes from a doctoral thesis written at Oral Roberts University – a university established by the Health and Wealth movement. The book is "A Different Gospel" by Dan R. McConnell. Dan McConnell is currently pastor of the Crossroads International Church in Amsterdam.

THE 'GOSPEL' OF PROSPERITY

The respected American New Testament scholar, Gordon Fee, begins his talk on this subject by saying, "*American Christianity is rapidly being infected by an insidious disease, the so called wealth and health Gospel—although it has very little of the character of Gospel in it.*

In its more brazen forms (Brother Al, Reverend Ike, etc.) it simply says, "Serve God and get rich (or be healthy)." In its more respectable, but more pernicious forms, it builds 15-million-dollar crystal cathedrals to the glory of affluent suburban Christianity."

Why such strong words from such a respected man of God and Bible teacher?

It is because the theology behind the gospel of prosperity seems to fit the proverbial American Dream much better than it fits the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In other words this is a cultural adaptation or transformation of the gospel which has distorted it.

Now there are a lot of good things about the American dream just as there are a lot of good things about the dream of the New South Africa. As good as both these dreams are - they are not the gospel.

If the message of the gospel of prosperity had stayed in America as an effort by some American Christians to justify a lifestyle of wealth and plenty we probably would have left it to the American Church to sort out. But this gospel has been exported to Africa and that makes it our business and our responsibility.

Understanding the character of False Teaching

The word that is used for false teaching in the New Testament is 'heresy' which refers to opinions or doctrinal errors which create parties or groups that cause division in the Christian community. Of the heresies mentioned in the New Testament, the most prominent are: Gnosticism (**Col. 2:8-23**) and Docetism (**1 John. 4:2-3; 2 John. 7**).

A feature of many heresies or false teachings is not that they are devoid of truth but rather that they over-emphasise one truth at the expense of another. Docetism is a good example of this. Docetism comes from a Greek word meaning 'to seem'. Docetists believed that the Son of God only seemed to live and die in the flesh. He was fully God so He could not be a real human being – he only seemed to be. Yet this is not true.

He is simultaneously fully God, Fully man and Fully the Messiah.

The important point to grasp from this example is that false teaching is seldom all bad, or completely wrong. There will be good and true things taught but the problem is that, at a particular point, the truth is either taken to an extreme or taught to the exclusion of other truth. So some of the teaching by the personalities who teach the prosperity gospel will be spot on. They will often hold to orthodox beliefs about Jesus, the Holy Spirit, God the Father and many other themes that will be familiar to you.

What is the Gospel of Prosperity?

The prosperity gospel preachers are quite right to point Christians to God and the promises of His word in order to get their needs met. The Bible does promise that under normal circumstances God is both aware of, and will meet every legitimate need of the disciple. The question is, are we able to tell the difference between legitimate needs, and the wants and desires of our consumer culture. When you look at the kind of life led by Jesus and Paul their standards were very different from ours. Paul tells us what his living standard was; **1 Timothy 6:8-11**

8 But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.

9 People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction.

10 For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

11 But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness.

The basic message of the Prosperity Gospel is that it is God's will for all His Children (sometimes referred to as "King's kids") to be financially prosperous and to have an advantage over others (who are not Kings kids) in this present world. According to Dan McConnell ("A Different Gospel"), for the most part, these teachings fall into one of two types.

First, there is the **egocentric** teaching on prosperity. This type of teaching promises success and prosperity from God to those who give to the evangelist's ministry. It is egocentric because it centers on the personality of the evangelist and the welfare of his/her ministry.

If you are in the habit of watching **TBN** you will have seen this scenario played out over and over again. Every year TBN raises more than \$120 million from its viewers and continues to tell these viewers that they are "*robbing God*" if they are not giving to the network. Unfortunately, because many of TBN's financial statements have not been made public, and so there are no external checks and balances on how its viewers' donations are being spent.

At the present time the ministries of Paula White, Joyce Meyer, Creflo Dollar, Eddie Long, Kenneth Copeland and Benny Hinn are under investigation by Senator Charles Grassley, of the US Senate Finance Committee. So even if this does not concern you particularly - there are some people who are very concerned about what they perceive to be an unregulated excess at the expense of some of the poorest and most desperate people in society.

Of course some of you may be feeling let down by some of these personalities because you have benefited for a teaching they have given. I know that this is difficult I have had the same experience myself with bible teachers from elsewhere. But it is part of our growth as Christians and a reminder that we are to put our faith in God alone.

Second, there is the **cosmic** teaching on prosperity. This type of teaching promises success and prosperity from God to those who know the spiritual laws of the universe that govern financial prosperity. It is *cosmic* because it centers on the universal principles of prosperity that God has set up in the cosmos. An example of this is "*seed-faith teaching*".

This Word-Faith doctrine claims that to receive anything at all from God, one must first donate money, known as a 'seed-faith' offering. You reap what you sow, so the claim goes. In this case you must send your money to - usually a televangelist, some of whom promise a 'hundred-fold return.'

There are very few teachers and preachers on Trinity Broadcasting Network who do not accept and teach the **Giving and Receiving** doctrine. Originally created by Oral Roberts as the "**Seed Faith**" doctrine, **Giving and Receiving** is the doctrine that is the major presentation of the TBN Broadcasting Network, because it is a doctrine that is necessary for the operation of that broadcasting network and the ministries associated with it.

When asked about her wealthy lifestyle **Joyce Meyer** seemed unapologetic for her accumulated wealth. As she blatantly acknowledged: "If you stay in your faith, you are going to get paid. I am living now in my reward."

(John W. Whitehead - Report November 28, 2007)

Taken to its logical conclusion
- if this teaching really worked as advertised,
the televangelists would be sending *you* money.

According to Gordon Fee the basic problem with the cult of prosperity, "lies right at the point which the evangelists themselves consider to be their strength – the interpretation of Scripture." The major fault with their interpretation is the basic conclusion which is reaffirmed over and over again, "God wills the financial prosperity of every one of His Children, and therefore for a Christian to be in poverty is outside of God's intended will; it is to be living a Satan-defeated life."

Now of course you may be in poverty because of an addiction or some habitual irresponsibility with regard to spending. However, there are many Christians, most Christians if the truth be told, who are poor compared to those of us gathered in this church tonight. Many of them are faithful servants of God who through no fault of their own have not had the opportunity to amass wealth, to own a car or a house, or to gain an advanced education. Gordon Fee is right to say that the basic problem with the prosperity gospel is the misinterpretation of Scripture.

For example, the "basic Scripture text" of the prosperity movement is **3 John 2**, in the King James Version: "*Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth.*" Of this text Kenneth Copeland says, "John writes that we *should* prosper and be in health" But is this what the text *actually* says? Not really! In the first place, the Greek word εὐδοῶ - euodoō translated "prosper" in the KJV means "to go well with someone," (cf. 3 John 2 in the GNB, NEB, NCV, RSV, NIV, ESV etc.). This combination of wishing for "things to go well" and for the recipient's "good health" was the *standard* form of greeting in a personal letter in antiquity.²

To extend John's wish for Gaius to refer to financial and material prosperity for all Christians of all times is *totally foreign* to the text. John neither intended that, nor could Gaius have so understood it. Thus it cannot be the "plain meaning" of the text.

It should be noted further that "abundant life" in **John 10:10**, the second important text of this movement, also has nothing to do with material abundance. "Life" or "eternal life" in John's Gospel is the equivalent of the "Kingdom of God" in the Synoptics (Matthew, Mark and Luke). It literally means the "life of the Age to Come." It is the life that God has in and of Himself; and it is his gift to believers in the present age.³ The Greek word **περισσός** *perrisos*, translated "more abundantly" in the KJV, means simply that believers are to enjoy this gift of life to the full" (NIV). Material abundance is not implied either in

the word "life" or "to the full." Furthermore, such an idea is totally foreign to the context of John 10, as well as to the whole of the teaching of Jesus.

The *cause and effect* of Conventional wisdom.

To this unjustified use of Scripture the prosperity gospel adds conventional wisdom. Conventional wisdom says that for every effect there must be a direct cause. For every evil there is a direct cause. The *cosmic* teaching on prosperity promises success and prosperity from God to those who know the spiritual laws of the universe that govern financial prosperity. It is *cosmic* because it centers on the supposed universal principles of prosperity that God has set up in the cosmos.

The following quotation from Kenneth Copeland is typical of this cosmic view of prosperity taught in the Faith movement.

We must understand that there are laws governing every single thing in existence. Nothing is by accident. There are laws of the world of the spirit and there are laws of the world of the natural. . . . We need to realize that the spiritual world and its laws are more powerful than the physical world and its laws. Spiritual laws gave birth to physical laws. The world and the physical forces governing it were created by the power of faith—a spiritual force.... It is this force of faith which makes the laws of the spirit world function. . . .

This same rule is true in prosperity. There are certain laws governing prosperity in God's Word. Faith causes them to function.... The success formulas in the Word of God produce results when used as directed.²

Of course we know that the spiritual world and the physical world are not separate. All the teaching that I have done from a Hebraic perspective in past has established the unity of the physical and the spiritual. This should not be mistaken for the error that is being taught here. God Almighty and your relationship with Him are not controlled by a formula, a magic prayer, a special name or anything else. It is a relationship and relationships, earthly or divine, do not work that way.

One more example of a "success formula" is the Copelands' principle of giving based on **Mk. 10:30** known as "the hundredfold return."

²⁹ Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or farms, for My sake and for the gospel's sake,

³⁰ but that he will receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms, along with persecutions; and in the age to come, eternal life.

Gloria Copeland explains this so-called spiritual law.

You give \$1 for the Gospel's sake and \$100 belongs to you; give \$10 and receive \$1000; give \$1000 and receive \$100,000. I know that you can multiply, but I want you to see it in black and white and see how tremendous the hundredfold return is. . . . Give one house and receive one hundred houses or one house worth one hundred times as much. Give one airplane and receive one hundred times the value of the airplane. Give one car and the return would furnish you a lifetime of cars. In short, **Mark 10:30** is a very good deal.³

This "very good deal" is claimed to be a universal spiritual law. It is claimed to work for anybody and everybody who knows it, as do all of the other laws of prosperity.

What is wrong with this teaching?

Well **first** of all, it is "self-centred" not "God-centred". You give for what *you* can get in return – that's why she calls it a "good deal". Yet Jesus said of the people who only followed him for what they could get... **John 6:26-27**, "Jesus answered, 'I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate

the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. "

Second, it turns God into your slave or Ginie that at your command or use of the formula God has to obey this cosmic law and serve you.

This view of life is demonstrated in the Bible.

("Who sinned this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?") **John 9:2.**

Job's comforters had the same direct cause and effect view of the world and, as the Book of Job adequately displays, they are wrong.

Rabbi Harold Kushner (*"When Bad things Happen to Good People"*) says this about a cause and effect view of the world,

... The idea that God gives people what they deserve, that our misdeeds cause our misfortune, is a neat and attractive solution to the problem of evil at several levels, but it has a number of serious limitations.....it teaches people to blame themselves. It creates guilt even where there is no basis for guilt. It makes people hate God, even as it makes them hate themselves. And most disturbing of all, it does not even fit the facts.

If life were just a matter of putting into practice some cosmic laws of prosperity the list of those who failed to do so should be at best disturbing at worst devastating.

The Heroes of the Faith Hebrews 11:37-39

37 They were stoned ; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated--

38 the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

39 These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised.

The Apostle Paul

His life in general 2 Cor 11:24-28

24 Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one.

25 Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea,

26 I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers.

27 I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.

28 Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.

His Health in particular 2 Cor 12:8-10

8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.

9 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.

10 That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Jesus

He was a Refugee Matt 2:13-15

Now when they had gone, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared^ to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up! Take the Child and His mother and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is going to search for the Child to destroy Him."

So Joseph got up and took the Child and His mother while it was still night, and left for Egypt.

He remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "OUT OF EGYPT I CALLED MY SON."

He was supported by Charity Luke 8:3

Joanna the wife of Cuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them [Jesus and His disciples] out of their own means.

He was Homeless Luke 9:58

And Jesus said to him, "The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head."

He was Poor 2 Cor 8

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich.

So what is the authentic Gospel?

- If you have submitted yourself to God you are a child of God and loved with an eternal love.
- Being a follower of Jesus in this world will bring you enormous blessing but it will also cost you everything.
- While you are a child of God you are simultaneously a voluntary servant.
- You may never be wealthy and you do not have a guarantee that you will always be healthy but no matter what your circumstance the Lord will always be your anchor.
- You will battle with temptation and sometimes the going will be tough but these things will be used by God to strengthen you.
- You are not immune from suffering and when you suffer you are not being judged or punished because God will be with you - as countless Christians who have traveled the same road before you have discovered.
- Finally, if you are given great wealth in this life your responsibility before God and toward your fellow human beings will be greater others – be sure to be faithful.