

THE PROSPERITY GOSPEL



"One of the greatest dangers for the Church in the 21st Century will be religion without the Holy Ghost, Christianity without Christ, forgiveness without repentance, salvation without regeneration, heaven without hell." - William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, who lived in the last century.

One of the chief points of discussion amongst leaders from around the globe who met at the Lausanne Conference in Cape Town in 2010, to discuss how further to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ, was the increased destruction that is being sown amongst people on the Continent of Africa (especially those who are unsuspecting, impoverished and needy) as a result of the preaching of the 'prosperity gospel'.

In the last few decades this new 'gospel' has developed, advocating prosperity, good health and success as the only will of God at all times for all Christians. In other words, all sickness, failure or lack (be it financial or otherwise), is a direct result of a lack of faith (in God) or are from the hand of the devil.

This false teaching rests on false theology: The premise of the 'prosperity gospel' is that I am at the centre with my needs. God does my bidding to ensure that all goes well for me. In this context God must always hear my prayers and do everything that I ask for which is in His Word, according to my interpretation of it. Now, we are assured that God loves us with an unending love and wants to bless us (body, soul (mind) and spirit) (1 Thessalonians 5:23-25).

Where does the problem lie?

The problem largely lies in what is not preached. Because the 'prosperity gospel' takes the blessings, favour and care that God would bestow on us out of context of the whole canon of Scripture, the teaching is flawed and one-sided.

The focus of the 'prosperity gospel' rests almost entirely on healing the sick, success and wealth. Hardly ever is a life of spiritual abundance mentioned (Romans 5:17). Equally neglected is the warning about sin's destructive power, and the call to confess, repent and daily take up our cross – dying to self as we follow Christ. There is practically no focus on the expectation of a life hereafter and the second coming of Christ (1 Peter 1:13). Repentance and being born again are also not given much attention, and neither is the idea of self-sacrifice (1 John 3:16). Very little attention is paid to evangelism or reaching those unreached by the Gospel (Acts 13:47). The responsibility of the Church towards the social need of people, social injustice and the poor receives minimal focus (Matthew 25:39-44).

This type of 'gospel' is anchored in the worldly needs of people, focusing exclusively on our life here on earth. Prosperity is seen as a sign of God's favour and we deserve to be happy, prosperous, successful and healthy. It encourages stinginess and self-centredness. There is no contentment in this 'gospel'; the attention is purely on profit here and now – the expectation of more happiness, success and prosperity (Philippians 3:18-19).

That which is not preached is that because of sin everybody will die. Sooner or later, death comes to all – and then comes judgement (Hebrews 9:27). The reality of death, pain, war, persecution, disasters, etc. is ignored. The truth is that God can and does heal, but there are also times when He chooses not to. There is not enough wealth in circulation for us each to be millionaires; it is not possible for each one of us to own private jets, holiday homes, two cars, etc. If we were all millionaires and the owners of our own empires, who would do the menial work (cleaning toilets, removing refuse, construction, delivering the post, etc.)?

The true Gospel

In Hebrews 11:33-38 we read both sides of the true Gospel of Jesus Christ, and both sides are a reality in the Kingdom of God. On the one hand we read: *...through faith [they] subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to fight the armies of the aliens. Women received their dead raised to life again.*

Then, on the other hand: *Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. Still others had trial of mocking and scourging, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented – of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in the deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us.*

Usually, both sides of the Gospel are true in our lives also: Sometimes there is victory and prosperity and life is good; other times there is suffering, lack, resistance, persecution and self-sacrifice (Galatians 6:17). The early Church fathers spoke of the suffering Church and the triumphant Church – both are true simultaneously. The Bible is clear that pain, suffering and persecution are an unavoidable part of the life of the Church, and thus every believer's life (2 Corinthians 8:2). God is our Father, and He cares for His children physically and spiritually. Although He does not walk the same path with each one of us, we can all trust Him for the path that we find ourselves on (Psalm 33:15).

Paul wrote that he was content whether he had little or had plenty. A Christian is in the first instance a follower of Christ, a messenger of the fact that we are freed from the power of sin and are reconciled to God through the power of Jesus' blood, shed on the Cross. Our message, as those who believe in Christ, stretches much further than health, wealth and happiness (Romans 14:17). It is a message both for our life here on earth and for our life hereafter (1 Corinthians 9:25).

During Jesus' time on earth, He did not have a home to call His own (Luke 9:58). Nor was there anything to indicate that He was 'successful'. His commission was purely to do the will of the Father (John 5:19). He healed the sick, raised people from the dead, and multiplied bread, and yet we read that *"He was despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him... Yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted."* (Isaiah 53:3-4).

Danger for the Church

The 'prosperity gospel' holds great danger for the Church today. It grieves the Holy Spirit, because the search is not for a holy life full of the power of the Holy Spirit, so that we can do the work of God here on earth – taking the gospel to the unsaved and caring for those in need. Rather, the 'prosperity gospel' preaches a delighting in oneself, stinginess and satisfying the lust of the flesh; a complete contrast to the life Jesus led (Hebrews 12:2). It makes a mockery of the cross and the persecution that we as believers and Christ's Church must endure if we are to be His followers, by esteeming the work accomplished on the Cross of less importance than the indulgence of self. It makes false promises and the lives of many believers have been severely affected and even destroyed as a result of believing them. When the promises do not materialise, Jesus Himself is rejected out of disappointment and disillusionment. This superficial and warped 'gospel' also causes those who do not believe to turn their backs on Christ and the message of His true Gospel.

Bonhoeffer said: *"Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the Cross, grace without Jesus Christ."*

Let us be watchful, for the times in which we live are evil.