

OVERRUN BY THE GOSPEL OF PROSPERITY?

By Bernhard Udelhoven

June 2011

A large Sunday gathering of the Charismatic Renewal in a Lusaka Parish. After singing and praising God, the guest preacher — a young man, dressed smartly in a suit — is introduced to the group and greeted with much applause. His teaching connects well with the audience, who affirm nearly every sentence with an enthusiastic “Yes!” He gives his lesson the title “Restoration”:

Before I start, I have to lay the foundation. You cannot build a building without a foundation. We are made in the image of God. God created us to see us happy, to see us prosper, to see us reign, to see us in authority. God is Spirit, and we are Spirit. But Adam chose to follow the Devil. He submitted to the authority of the Devil. Now the reward of the Devil is sickness and death. Ever since our lives have been blocked. We have not been the people whom God wanted us to be.

[The pitch of the voice goes up, and sweat pours down the preacher's face]. Now if something is wrong, someone has to put it right. This is what is called “restoration”. And Jesus said: “I have come that they have life” (John 10:10). Life to the full. Not a life of sickness and misery. Not a life of confusion. But life to the full. And he has paid the price in full. “By his stripes you are healed” (Is 53:5). Me, I believe what the Bible says: By his stripes I am healed! As believer I accept that the reality of healing has already been settled in heaven: it is mine, and the person who is born-again has a right to healing and a right to prosperity and a right to a good marriage, a right that comes from God to those who live by faith. *[much applause]*

Now so many Christians still walk on earth in darkness. They don't know how to access the power of prosperity. They have resigned themselves to misery. They complain silently to their God, because no one has told them how to be reborn. It is like a person who has no light in the house. You need an electrician. You need someone who knows. It took me a long time to study the Bible. The Bible tells us what to do. God cannot do anything in your life, unless you give him permission. Unless you allow him to step in. As there are laws of nature, there are also laws of the spiritual world — but you have to use them in the right way. God has blessed the people of faith to achieve the promises that are contained in the Bible. God's actions are limited only by lack of faith. So many Christians go to church and yet they don't claim what belongs to them. They walk out as empty as they walked in.

Sickness is an attempt by the Devil to rob you of your divine right to total health. It is a sign that Satan still has dominion. Blockage in business is a sign that the Devil still



has entry-points in your life. Our God is a God of success, not a God of failure. We are heirs of a rich God, not a poor God. Where God's authority is accepted, God gives only perfect gifts. Life to the full. Jesus paid the price. Complete healing of spirit, complete healing of soul, and complete healing of the body is included in the covenant and is available here and now to those who believe. The Bible says you have to confess. You have to say it loudly. You have to believe what you say. The word spoken in faith must be fulfilled! Tell your neighbour: "Confess and believe what the Bible says!" Believe without doubt. Believe without looking back. This year is the year of break-through.

God blesses your finances. God blesses your business. God blesses your marriage.
[much applause]

Me, I cannot be sick. You can put me to the test. I was born-again 12 years ago. And I have never been sick since. And I will never be sick! *[much applause]*. Life to the full is life to the full. If you are sick it is not life to the full. Life minus prosperity is not life to the full. God gives only perfect gifts. You can put God's word to the test. Abraham believed and God blessed him.

Today I want that when you go out of here, that you know: God meets you at the point of your needs. Tell your neighbour: God meets you at the point of your needs. "The God who gave me teeth ... *[will also give me something to chew!]*" *[more applause]*. The only barrier for God's actions in your life is lack of faith. God told me that great things are about to come today. Today you can choose: Choose life or choose death. The choice is yours! *[The enthusiastic applause lasts long, and the preacher is congratulated by the leaders of the group.]*

The success of the Prosperity Gospel in Africa

The preacher speaks with conviction. No hint of doubt in his voice. And he looks healthy and prosperous. A visible sign that the message works! He connects with people's expectations, ambitions and emotions.

The Gospel of Prosperity is based on the teaching that believers have a divine right to the blessings of health and wealth, and that they can obtain these blessings through positive confession and through "sowing the seed" (tithing) as a clear sign of faith. This gospel has spread through spectacular televised mass-healings and through big mass-events (crusades), which go beyond any particular denomination, and it has been taken up for preaching by endless numbers of new churches. Beyond the newer Pentecostal churches, this "gospel" is influencing mainstream Christianity — Evangelical, Protestant and Catholic alike, sometimes through the front-door ("if you don't preach this then people go somewhere else") or otherwise through the backdoor — as grassroots initiatives — of prayer-groups, cell



meetings or house churches, where “prophets” teach and preach away from the supervising eyes and ears of authorities, often with large audiences.

The success of this gospel has been a revolution marked not so much by mainstream Pentecostal or Evangelical thought (in fact it is most severely criticised in its excesses by mainstream Evangelical circles), but by a branch of it, the *Word of Faith Movement*, which has its roots in the “New Thought Movement” and the theology of Essek William Kenyon (Bethel Bible Institute), which in the United States and beyond really became popular through televangelism and mass crusades of people like Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth Copeland, Benny Hinn, Creflo Dollar, Joyce Meyer, and many others.

African “mega-prophets” like T.B. Joshua, David Oyedepo, or — closer to home — Philip Banda popularised the movement in Africa, giving daily examples and testimonies that it works. “I can make it, as an African!” Its success maybe shows that it connects spiritually and emotionally with deep layers of African spiritualities: God intends people to prosper, be healthy and leave a better life to their children and offspring (blessings). But evil spiritual powers bring destruction, misfortune, confusion and sickness. God is more powerful than the destructive powers. If you follow on the path laid out by God, and do the right thing, then the destructive powers in your life will be overcome. You will prosper, because God’s plan cannot fail.

Spiritual blessings have also a material aspect through which they are reflected. The strong emotional response of many people with this gospel in a way also shows a strong rejection of a dualism between spiritual riches versus material riches. The Prosperity Gospel gives hope to people, not only for heaven, but also for this life: “I can make it! It is possible! If I have faith and do thing right, I will succeed and leave a future for my family.” The right things consist of expressions of faith (for example, tithing, fasting, sacrifices of prayers). The Prosperity Gospel also resonates with the belief in the power of the spoken word. If you truly believe and declare what you believe it will manifest itself. “Confess — and possess!”

While the promises of miracles and instant healings find resonance among many afflicted and terminally sick, the Prosperity Gospel has its driving force mainly within the young, emerging urban and Christian middle class — people who are confidently moving toward a Western style of life, who experience many insecurities (understood as spiritual forces), yet can’t look any longer to the traditional answers of their fathers. The Gospel of health and success puts in a nutshell some very simple principles that give a firm born-again Christian identity with the sure hope of tapping into supernatural powers that will bring their lives and aspirations to success before God and before people (hope, self-confidence and positive thinking). And for many it works! It links up with the hopes of the young for a better future,



and for a family life that is no longer marked by the scourges of poverty. For many in the upwards-moving social classes this has become non-negotiable.

Behind the scenes

Joyce is a middle-aged business woman, a widow, renting a small grocery shop near a popular market in Lusaka. She is active in the Catholic Church, and has been for many years a leading figure in a team of intercessors in the Charismatic Renewal. Many people also call on her for prayers for deliverance and healing. She is known as a calm and balanced person, eager to bring in her talents within the Catholic Church. One day each week she dedicates to fasting, and she prays many hours with her team of intercessors with all her heart and soul. From her small income she pays tithes to the church in a generous and punctual manner.

A perfect example of a happy Christian life? No. After many years, Joyce is becoming more and more convinced that something is seriously wrong with her. Her life does not progress. In her family there are many quarrels. She would like to remarry, but Mr Right never shows up. While she listens enthusiastically to many testimonies of people whom God granted a breakthrough in health, family life and finances, her own prayers are still left unanswered, in spite of tithing, fasting and prayers.

After the initial enthusiasm of having received a very sure way of gaining access to the hidden powers of God (“have faith” and “name it and claim it”), Joyce today experiences forms of alienation. At first she thought she had a lack of faith. All hints of doubt or criticism needed to be dispelled. “They come from the Devil.” All is well — she just had to believe harder.

She “upgraded” her fasting-days to “total fasting”, meaning she would not even drink water. “Prayer of intercession is a spiritual warfare. Sometimes I nearly collapsed during the prayers, since we are standing for hours without sitting down”. But slowly she came to realise that there must be a spiritual cause for her unsatisfying life-situation: a spiritual husband (a demon), who is blocking her blessings, who prevents men from being attracted to her or from maintaining a relationship, a demon who brings confusion into her family and business life. She has attended many novenas and overnight prayers with the honest prayer-request for break-through and deliverance — which never seemed to materialise. While she believes that she is loved by God, she feels that she has no real access to “life to the full” and that the world of God’s blessings is meant for other people. She is a firm believer, and yet instead of enjoying the presence of God, she sees herself more intimately tied up with the presence of demonic spiritual forces, called in by the jealousies of other people and



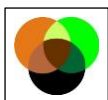
family members, which keep blocking her success. She has been fed on the words that “God meets you at the point of your needs”, and that the road of blessings leads to happiness and prosperity. Instead, the world of demons has imprinted itself on her life as the ultimate outcome. She blamed herself and demons, but never questioned the teaching that shaped her worldview and expectations where God is found only on the path to prosperity and success.

Prosperity in Catholic life

Catholic life has much to do with lifting people out of poverty, providing health-care, education, and working for justice and peace. Catholic social teaching seeks to secure the conditions for general prosperity to flourish. Pentecostal churches have made another contribution, which has at times been neglected in Catholic life: the giving of self-confidence, positive thinking, and a basic trust in oneself: “It is possible! If I live an honest life along Biblical lines, I can make it! God will be with me! Before God’s eyes, my life will be a success!” Such thinking is not foreign to Catholic thought, nor is the aversion toward the scourges of poverty.

Prosperity by itself is not the point of contention with Catholic or mainstream theology. Problematic is the identification of “life to the full” with a “life of prosperity”, pinning God down to act on our terms, to meet us at the point of our (perceived) needs. Problematic is the automatic connection between my faith and my earthly success. I seek first the Kingdom of God, but do it in view of the “everything else” that will then also be given unto me (what conversion is needed for God’s blessings in success, business and happy marriages?) Problematic finally is the absence of the cross.

The Gospel of Prosperity has roots in parts of the Bible: for example the book of Deuteronomy, and many Psalms. Other parts of the Bible clearly challenge the idea that righteous and God-fearing people always prosper (Job). Most of the prophets, including those who preached prosperity as a consequence of the covenant, had to experience that God’s closeness is seen rarely in prosperity, and more often in rejection, suffering, difficult marriages, and early deaths. Abraham himself, one of the standard examples put forward by the Prosperity Gospel (Abraham as the inventor of tithing...) was tested for his readiness to surrender and give beloved Isaac away: To move from the gifts of the giver to the giver of gifts. Moses who proclaimed to his people the land of prosperity where milk and honey flow was not allowed to enter in himself. But he had experienced something better: to know and speak with God as a friend speaks to a friend — life with the giver rather than life with the gifts.



Christians across the divide believe that Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament promises — including the promises of prosperity — in a new dimension: a share in divine life, and that Christian life should be marked with the hope of living “life to the full”. But great differences are found in the understanding of what this “life to the full” means and where one sets the focus and nuances.

Dialogue with the Prosperity Gospel

Before stressing the differences between Catholic and prosperity theology, there are important elements which we hold in common. These elements need to be stressed:

- that God is angered by the appalling conditions of poverty
- that poverty can lead people to despair — and often does — and that it breeds many vices that lead people away from God.
- that true prophets are moved by the poverty of people and try to show a way out
- that God’s message should not be abused to preach a dualism of “spiritual riches”, but that material rewards are also part of the prayer for “daily bread” and of an understanding of blessings
- that miracles happen when people meet in faith and surrender their lives to the Gospel
- that my life will be a success in the eyes of God when I entrust my life to living the Gospel.

Differences are shown in the following chart. The Prosperity Gospel is preached in many shades. The left side shows tendencies that are popular in Zambia and that have found an open home also in some Catholic charismatic circles — not always all of the points, but many of them. The right side takes up the same issues from a mainstream Catholic angle. Not all opposites are strictly incompatible with each other (though some are) — but they show that the tendency of focus goes into very different directions.

| Popular prosperity theology focus | Catholic focus |
|--|---|
| Life to the full “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10) | |
| “Life to the full” is found in a life lived in health, good relationships, and general prosperity, as | “Life to the full” refers to life lived with the giver more than to life lived with the gifts. As such it |



| Popular prosperity theology focus | Catholic focus |
|--|--|
| part of the covenant. When you live with the giver, you also live with the gifts. | belongs also (and even very specifically) to the poor, the outcast, the mourners who lost their loved ones, who cannot claim life any longer in terms of the standards of this world. "Life to the full" also focuses on the Christian communities, where joys and sorrows are shared. |
| Focuses on the rewards promised for following Jesus. "... you will gain a hundredfold in this life, and eternal life in the world to come." | Focuses on the demands of Jesus for gaining life. "if you want to follow me ..." |
| Life to the full is a gift from God that is given to people of faith through the spiritual aspect of my existence (God's blessings ...) which determines and commands the economic, material, social and all other aspects of life. | Life to the full is a gift from God that is given to people of faith. At the same time it does not just come by itself but depends on my efforts, on all my strength, on all levels. It is found in the aspect of "doing" more than in the aspect of "receiving". |
| Is oriented towards the future, forward-looking, and sees true Christian life as a life of increased blessings manifested in progress: the future is better than the present. "However much you suffer at present, you cannot count the blessings that God bestows on you tomorrow, in all aspects of life". | Is oriented towards the present moment, the "now", the "today", a call for trust that leads beyond myself and the standards of this world. The future is uncertain. The key to life is not dependent on my future economic standing. The promise of future fulfilment of "life to the full" refers especially to eternal life. |
| God is most glorified in me when I am most satisfied in him — in the midst of prosperity. | God is most glorified in me when I am most satisfied in him — also in the midst of loss. |
| Shows itself in the fulfilment of my needs. | Shows itself in the ability to live my life for others, grow in true compassion and allow myself to be moved by it. |
| Prosperity here on earth shows the divine grace and blessings at work in my life. | Prosperity, good health, a good husband/wife/children are worthy gifts to be sought and to pray for. They can be sign-posts on the way to "life to the full". But they are neither its measurement nor its condition. |
| <p style="text-align: center;">Our needs</p> <p style="text-align: center;">"God will meet all your needs according to the glorious riches in Jesus Christ" (Phil 4:19)</p> | |
| "Our God is a rich and generous God, not a poor God. He is not only able, but also willing, to meet all your needs in every area of your life." | Look at the life of Jesus Christ and dwell on it to see what his glorious riches are about. |
| Our needs for marriage, for food, for children, for prosperity, for health, for a job are the stepping stones for God to come in. | While our needs are precious to God and can be pointers, "life to the full" starts with an attitude of surrender, including what I desire. It starts |



| Popular prosperity theology focus | Catholic focus |
|---|---|
| | where my eyes open for the needs of others. My own needs and desires are often transformed in the process. |
| Poverty & misfortune “He has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind...” (Luke 4:18) | |
| Personal experiences of poverty, misfortune and sickness are signs that Christ’s covenant is not yet fully effective in my life, that there are spiritual blockages, or demons, or curses, or a general lack of faith. | Personal experiences of poverty, misfortune and sickness don’t alienate me from the Kingdom, since the meaning of life does not depend on my resources nor on the standards of this world. Life can be mine also in poverty and mourning. Even when the gifts are withdrawn, God’s full glory can shine through suffering and weakness. |
| “Jesus redeemed us from the curse of the law — sickness, poverty and death. Health and wealth belong to the believer.” | To the believers belongs a life lived with God. We receive this life in earthen vessels, subject to suffering, sickness, decay and loss. They point towards our hope for eternal life. |
| “Sickness comes from Satan not from God. With God there is no sickness. That God can use suffering or sickness for something good is a deception of Satan who wants to keep us in the trap of poverty.” | Suffering/sickness are not sought, yet when they come they can make us open for the values of the Kingdom. They can also help us to be united with Christ in his sufferings. Suffering is part of a mystery for which there is no easy answer. |
| Healing & miracles “Your faith has healed you” (Mt 9:22) | |
| Total healing of the body is part of the covenant. Bodily health is the fruit that shows that the authority of the Devil is broken and God’s life can come to fulfilment in the person. Jesus brings physical healing for those who accept him, reform their lives, ask Jesus for healing, and have faith that this healing will materialise. | Great healing powers are set free by God in the presence of faith, of prayer, of surrender, of reconciliation, of forgiveness and of believing the good news. But not all sicknesses are healed always. Health is not the measurement for life. |
| Supernatural powers, miracles and “life to the full” are manifested especially in total healing (including HIV, cancer, diabetes), in breakthrough in finances and marriage, and in personal success. | Supernatural powers, miracles, and “life to the full” are manifested especially in the ability to have compassion, live life for others, experience God’s peace in the present moment even in the worst circumstances, and live in true fellowship. |
| The cross & resurrection “By his wounds you have been healed” (1 Peter 2:24) | |
| We are a people not of the cross but of the | We are people of the resurrection through the |



| Popular prosperity theology focus | Catholic focus |
|--|--|
| resurrection. | cross. |
| Jesus has paid the price on the cross. It is done. He died so that we can live. Our penalty has been paid. We don't need to suffer to add anything to what Christ has done. Suffering (however heroic) does not contribute to God's glory but diminishes it. | Jesus has paid the price on the cross. The church is united with him in his cross and resurrection and a Christian who suffers for others is united with Jesus. The church prays for healing of the sick and works for the alleviation of suffering, but without denying that it can have meaning on the road to life. She also encourages the sufferer to unite him/herself with Jesus on the cross for the sanctification of the church. |
| Jesus is risen. He is no longer at the cross. "For too long we have preached a religion of the cross. The cross is a sign of defeat. The resurrection is a sign of success. It is time to move on and preach a religion of glory." | Jesus is risen. Yet he is also suffering in all those who suffer. We can't move away from the cross — since it is right there in our midst. |
| "We should leave the cross behind and move on to claim life." | We take up our cross every day, mark ourselves with it, a sign of surrender, of self-denial, of life lived for others. Not apart from this cross, but through this cross, we claim life. We do so in the joy of Easter where the burden becomes light. |

Challenges

The Gospel of Prosperity answers to the needs and hopes of a young, emerging urban middle class, in a country plagued by the scourges of poverty. As such one cannot ignore the need to engage with this "gospel" in a more systematic way. The Prosperity Gospel comes in many shades — not all forms are extreme. It is possible, for example, to integrate its positive appreciation of our human needs and desires into a holistic faith, where neither the cross nor the life to come are removed from their central place, and where the values of the Kingdom are not compromised with the values of this world.

However, one should not overlook that this "gospel" is often preached and believed in an extreme form, and left to itself the Gospel of Prosperity easily overshadows the values of the Kingdom or even points away from them. It blesses the rich, and indirectly curses the poor, since the only true road to God is paved by prosperity. Also, other important points of theological differences with Catholic doctrine (not mentioned in the chart) should be raised and analysed: for example, the understanding of Christian life in the world, of how to read and interpret the Bible, of the church, of sin, and redemption, or of the working of the Holy Spirit.



The prosperity gospel has come to shape the Christian worldview of many Catholics and has found a welcome home in some charismatic circles — mostly in mild forms, but sometimes also in strong forms, where its main tenants have become “non-negotiable”. Beyond theological disputes, one cannot overlook that many people have been fed on hopes of instant healing, break-through and prosperity in the name of the Christian faith, but have failed to secure these blessings for themselves. For them God no longer has a voice in poverty and sickness, except on a fast-track out. Others have gone further still and thrown away their medicines and medication as a sign of “true faith”. Good news?