

# Blessed Are the Rich and Prosperous For Theirs Is the Kingdom of the World: The Kenyan Challenge

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## Abstract

Any study on Prosperity Gospel is not only contemporary and significant in its nature but, it is also controversial and affects large populations of people. This makes research on this important area interesting and worthwhile. This article investigates the rapid growth of the prosperity church in Africa and Kenya in particular, the role of the Prosperity Gospel clergy in their churches, the impact of Prosperity Gospel on its adherents, their preachers on Christian spirituality and the negative impact of Prosperity Gospel on the growth of Christianity. In actualizing the findings of this research, the following questions were posed: Have Prosperity Gospel churches grown from preaching Prosperity Gospel? Has the clergy of Prosperity Gospel benefitted from it? How have adherents of Prosperity Gospel advanced in health and wealth promotion? Has Christian spirituality suffered any consequences as a result of preaching Prosperity Gospel? In this article, article literature search, questionnaires and oral interviews were to collect data from a cross section of the targeted population. Ten senior Prosperity Gospel preachers were interviewed; Questionnaires were administered to two hundred followers of these churches, while fifty students who were not necessarily members of the targeted churches were randomly selected from the University of Nairobi.

**Key Words:** *Pentecostalism, Faith teaching, Prosperity Gospel, poverty and Christian spirituality*

## 1.1. Meaning and origin of Prosperity Gospel

Prosperity according to the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary is the state of being successful, especially in the accumulation of wealth (Gbote & Kgatla, 2014).

Prosperity Gospel, which often times is called prosperity theology, the health and wealth gospel or the gospel of success is a Christian religious doctrine that states that, financial blessing is the will of God for Christians, and that faith, positive speech and donations to Christian ministries will always increase one's material wealth (Asamoah, 2013). O'Donovan (2000) refers to prosperity theology as a form of false teaching that has gained a large following in Africa today. This is the teaching that God does not want any of his children to be poor or to lack anything they might desire.

Though its origins lay in the late nineteenth century, the Prosperity Gospel took root in the Pentecostal revival of the post-World War II years and reached maturity by the late 1970s as a robust pan denominational movement, garnering a national platform and a network of churches, ministries, publications, and media outlets (Bowler, 2010). The roots of prosperity theology with all its manifestation are to be found in the teachings of Kenneth Hagan of Rhema Bible Institute in Tulsa, Oklahoma (Asamoah, 2003). Pentsil, the foremost Bible teacher of the Church of Pentecost taught that 'God's will is to prosper His children (Phil. 4:19, 3 Jn 2), but this is contingent to the following factors: Obeying God's word (Deut. 38:1-2), Faithful Tithing (Mal. 3:8-10 Luke 6:38), Giving (Acts 20:35), Prayer (Phi. 4:6-7), Working hard (2 Thes.3:10-12), Partnership with God (1 Cor.3:9).

The 'Faith Movement', which is another name for Prosperity Gospel, arose in a context of Christianity that has lost much of her original message and practice. This Movement is dangerous because it emanates from the loins of historic orthodox Christianity (Wilhelmsson, 2000).

Bowler (2010) posits that, Prosperity Gospel ministers taken together operate as a major force in American religion, generating millions of followers and financial donations. Modern Pentecostalism, according to Akoko (2002) has embraced a gospel of accumulation, which sees the ways of the 'world' no longer as the ways of sin. It encourages 'believers' to accumulate what they have, here on earth. This difference in economic message is the major distinction between classical and modern Pentecostalism.

The covenant of prosperity that was made by Adam at the time of creation was reiterated to Noah (Gn 6: 9-17), Abraham (Gen 12: 1-9), the prophets and the apostles (Gbote *et al*, 2014). In these teachings God promises his people material blessings.

## 1.2. Prosperity Gospel in Africa and Kenya today

Churches have been growing rapidly in many parts of Africa, yet sub-Saharan Africa is the only region in the world where poverty increased in the past 25 years. Prosperity Gospel in Africa is mixed with occultism (Grady,

2014) where the *juju* priest has been replaced by a pastor who drives a Mercedes-Benz. The people who follow these charlatans are reminded that their promised windfall won't materialize unless they give large donations. Prosperity Gospel teaches people to focus on getting, not giving. This is why it is a selfish and materialistic faith with a thin Christian veneer because; church members are continually urged to sow financial seed to reap bigger rewards. In Africa, crusades and conferences are hosted which are dedicated at collecting offerings in order to generate wealth. Preachers even boast about how much they spent on buying their suits, shoes, necklaces and watches. To them, spirituality is measured by whether they have a big house or first-class ticket. But, when greed is preached from the pulpit, it spreads like a cancer in God's house. It is this voracious atmosphere in prosperity churches that has produced a crude style of leadership where these clergy plant churches, not to receive lost souls but, to reap from their adherents. The successful prosperity preacher is most dangerous because, he or she can convince the unsuspecting congregation that, Jesus died to give you and me a Lexus. The prosperity message is a poor imitation of the true gospel because; it leaves no room for brokenness, suffering, humility or delay. Instead, it offers an illegal shortcut that. Jesus calls us to deny ourselves and follow Him. Prosperity preaching calls upon its members to negate the spiritual gains to be accrued by following Jesus and instead focus on the imminent materialistic lust.

Prosperity Gospel keeps people in poverty. In Kenya for example, prosperity preaching has encouraged pastors and leaders to follow the same corrupt pattern. And as a result, God's people have been financially exploited. The church in Africa thus, urgently needs to return to biblical Christianity because many followers are merely nominal Christians who are plagued with, false miracle workers, modern-day Pharisees and false teaching of many kinds (O'Donovan, 2000). Anim, E.K (2010) which are the main attributes of the Prosperity Gospel. The Prosperity Gospel has grown beyond its roots in America to fertile ground in Africa and has affected indigenous conception of African Religions with regard to prosperity. Gathogo (2011) posits that, a visit to some Pentecostal churches in the cities of Nairobi and Mombasa, Kenya, such as Mombasa Pentecostal Churches (MPC), Deliverance Church of Kenya (DCK), Jesus is Alive Ministries (JIAM), Jesus Celebration Centre (JCC - Mombasa), Neno Evangelism Ministries, The Happy Churches, Faith Evangelistic Ministries, Jubilee Christian Centre (JCC - Nairobi), Jesus Is The Answer Ministries (CITAM) and the Winners Chapel International Ministries, among others, show similarities in style and content.

The Christian church is large and too important to ignore, this is why what happens in the church affects many people across the world. The church has been at the fore front of revolution and development throughout the ages. This is why, in Africa the contemporary research on Christianity focuses on mainly inculturation and Prosperity Gospel. It is essential that Christians need to understand and minimize the controversies that this subject arouses. There are those who support and some who even negate the material and health gains that both the clergy and their faithful have accrued as discussed below.

### **1.3. Financial benefits of Prosperity Gospel Churches**

The construction of the World Dome Church by Dollar is an example of the miracle-working power of God and remains a mode of debt freedom that ministries all over the world should emulate (Bowler 2010). This magnificent church building garnered national attention as the fresh face of America's prosperity movement. But, the extent to which the church prospers financially, determines its ability to engage in various outreaches and soul winning programmes. In other words, lack of funds can repress the church's evangelistic activities and successes. Churches that are poor do not, make any headway and the same applies to individual Christians who are poor. This is why, the main stream churches like, the Roman Catholic Church, Methodist, Anglican, The Presbyterian, Church of Pentecost, International Central Gospel Church and some others are not only prosperous but, have also been able to build schools, universities, hospitals and other related social amenities (Asamoah,2013).

The teachings of Prosperity Gospel hurt the poor because, many people have followed church leaders, given all they possessed, and received nothing in return. They have remained wounded or bitter when the reality of their checkbooks fail to match promises made in God's name (Bullock,2009). But, the Bible teaches believers to give as it is commanded by God, and that must be done cheerfully, with a pure heart, right motive, humble heart, sincerity, honesty and to the glory of the Father (Gbote *et al*, 2014). The lifestyle of Prosperity preachers is corrupt and lavish because, they amass riches at the expense of the masses.

The clergy measure blessings by the number of houses, cars, money, children, good wife and good health without any attention to a spiritual blessing.

Most believers would like their preachers to live well, yet they silently criticize how they are exploited by being expected to offer generous donations. The media has even acknowledged that, renowned televangelists own enormous assets which are reminiscent of probable greed and corruption. In Africa today, the Prosperity Gospel church does not only cover all aspects of human existence and development, but is indeed the endeared right of

all Christians. God will meet you in the standard phrase, 'at the point of your need', In practice however, success refers primarily to the financial prosperity (Withrow L.R., 2007).

#### **1.4. Prosperity Gospel and Christian spirituality**

In the traditional African society, Gbote et al, (2014) reckons that, an individual or community that pleases the 'Supreme Being' is assured of wealth, happiness, health and general progress in the society. But, there are dire consequences if religious people or the entire community goes against the will of the supernatural. Much of evangelical Christians do not believe in God's immediate intervention. Dispensational and much of Reformed theology has relegated the numerous texts promising the miraculous to the apostolic age.

Pentecostalism according to Wilhelmson (2000) resonated with metaphysical religion, a connection that proved electric providing a familiar narrative of sin, repentance and salvation, sealed with Jesus' death and resurrection. New Thought in contrast persisted as a religion of utility (Bowler, 2010). One of the precursors of the New age Pentecostal Christianity at Azusa Street Centennial in Los Angeles, Frederick Price commented that Faith, is an important indicator for a Christian. Wilhelmson (2000) further posits that, although Faith teachers, have overemphasized health, wealth and prosperity, nevertheless they have provided hope for Christians who often are told to 'grin and bear it'. But, the bible clearly teaches self-denial, sacrifice and suffering are characteristics of the follower of Christ (Lk 5: 1-11, 27-28; 9: 23-26, 57-62; 14: 25-35; 18: 18-30) and asserts that contentment is 'great gain' (Php 4: 11-13), this is not the whole story. God wants us to believe in Him for blessings which may include health, wealth and prosperity. This is why the Prosperity Gospel has had a strong hold on some segments of American culture.

It was observed that, 17 percent of Christians considered themselves part of such a movement, while 61 percent believed that God wants people to be prosperous. 31 percent of Pentecostals in America—agreed that if you give your money to God, God will bless you with more money. Of the four biggest mega churches in the country, three—Joel Osteen's Lakewood in Houston; T.D. Jakes' Potter's House in south Dallas; and Creflo Dollar's World Changers near Atlanta—are Prosperity Gospel churches ( Olsen, 2006).

#### **1.5. The Three Stages Auguste Comte's Theory**

In an attempt to explain the phenomenon of Prosperity Gospel today we examine the Law of Three Stages by Auguste Comte which vividly portrays positivist stage. First, the Theological Stage refers to explanation of personified deities. This stage goes through Fetishism (inanimate objects having living spirits in them), Polytheism (different gods), and Monotheism (belief in one God).The second stage is Metaphysical which encompasses the concept of God as an abstract being. It discards the thinking of God as being concrete. The third is Positivist stage which is scientific in nature and explains the importance of observation, experiment and comparison. Today, people attempt to establish cause and effect relationship which is an intellectual way of looking at the world. The last stage exemplifies the interaction between theory and practice which is an extension of the relationship between the orthodox form of Christianity and the Prosperity Gospel teaching which is the concern of this article.

#### **1.6. Discussion of Research findings**

In order to contextualize our research findings, 50 students from the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, University of Nairobi were randomly sampled. Those who were selected had some sound knowledge of Prosperity Gospel issues. A questionnaire was designed that comprised closed and open-ended questions based on the nature and content of Prosperity Gospel. The questionnaire was also distributed to 200 adherents of the Prosperity Gospel Churches in Nairobi and Mombasa, who were requested to comment on how they had benefited from the Prosperity Gospel. From the analysis made from the feedback, the following conclusions were derived.

67.5% of the adherents said they had a better self concept courtesy of the Prosperity Gospel. A meager 1% thought the gospel did not have any impact. Marital status and Family life were other aspects that scored highly as areas of prosperity for the adherents of these churches. From this analysis, good health and spirituality scored averagely for the adherents while, the areas which scored comparatively low included wealth accumulation, healing and Promotion.

In order to supplement the information derived from the questionnaires, interviews were conducted to establish the teachings and impact of the Prosperity Gospel in Africa and Kenya in particular. It was established that, many of the Prosperity Gospel churches had several attributes in common. Most had established huge and beautiful edifices costing millions of Kenya shillings. The Winners Chapel in Nairobi for example has a 15,000 seating capacity auditorium with modern top of the art facilities and is the biggest in Eastern Africa. Other Prosperity Gospel churches have bought or acquired huge parcels of land and expensive buildings in strategic areas in and around city centres which are in most cases easily accessible by followers.

Besides the construction of churches, Prosperity Gospel preachers have established children's homes, schools, tertiary institutions, health clinics and other service provisions. Some have even ventured into mainstream businesses, like operating bookshops where they sell both religious and secular literature. There are a few that have joined the lucrative matatu business. There is hardly any prosperity church that is without a formidable presence in the media. For example, CITAM owns Hope FM. It is also reckoned that all leading Bishops are televangelists who compete for space and membership in the open arena for airwave subscription. The Prosperity Gospel churches have penetrated far and deep establishing branches and creating networks even in the most remote areas of the country and overseas.

A close scrutiny of the Prosperity Gospel preachers reveals striking similarities among them. They are highly decorated and flamboyant and indeed, boisterous in their style and demeanour, fond of expensive, imported clothes and gadgets, coiffure and meticulous in their approach. They adore self styled titles, real and imagined before their names. They live in palatial homes, drive high class and top of the art vehicles, are very successful and arouse hopefulness to their adherents.

Prosperity Gospel preachers arouse the follower's faith, through their messages, music and dance which often hypnotizes them. The typical spiritual aspects of the Prosperity Gospel are not significant to the followers. There is least emphasis on the biblical teaching of suffering; instead, emphasis is laid on health and wealth acquisition.

### 1.5. Conclusion

Prosperity Gospel is a movement and development that cannot go back and anyone wishing it away will meet stiff resistance from the followers. It has contextualized religion and made it relevant and fitting to the poor. Prosperity is more than wealth and health. It is nurturing faith and hopefulness to its followers. This is why; the adherents of Prosperity Gospel churches view their preachers positively. The fervent and devout followers are evidence of its impact and popularity. Of course there is an element of exploitation, in these institutions but it is not robbery by violence. But, the Christian fraternity needs to create theories and methodologies to counter the powerful Prosperity Gospel revolution.

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