

## **The Prosperity Gospel: An Investigation Into Its Pros And Cons With Examples Drawn From Zimbabwe**

by

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The 'prosperity gospel' is known by various terms each implying a different set of meanings and characteristics of the gospel. It is sometimes referred to as the 'health and wealth gospel' or the 'prosperity theology'. Both the latter terms bring out certain features of the gospel which we shall discuss in detail below. From the three terms have we identified above there are those that refer to it as 'gospel', but others would have problems with identifying it with 'good news' and would simply refer to it as a 'theology'. We agree with those that look at it as a 'doctrine' implying that it is a teaching that is derived from the Bible and that emphasizes a particular view, orientation or ideology held firmly by a particular group of Christians. Those that look at it as a form of 'theology' do agree with our view point in that they see it as a set of teachings that are systematically derived from the Bible and systematically communicated to a carefully selected audience. Certainly those that look at it as 'gospel' look at the prosperity teachings as 'good news' that empowers the Christian in some way. Therefore, we may define the term 'prosperity gospel' as a set of Christian doctrinal teachings whose basic import or claim is that right from the beginning, it has always been God's will to bless the Christians financially and that this is so is there in the Bible for all to see. According to the prosperity doctrine the financial blessing is grasped through positive steps of faith. This is why the 'gospel' and those who adhere to it have often been viewed in terms of a movement also known in various terms as the Positive Confession Movement or the Word of Faith Movement (See Hank Hanegraaff, 1993 and 2009).

However, this kind of teaching has been received with mixed feelings among the Christian fraternity with some calling it a theologically bankrupt teaching that is basically anti-Christian (David Jones, 1998); while others call it "clearly deficient - and at times, heretical - teachings" (Bill Muehlenberg, 2009). Some critics have been even sharper and more piercing in their critiques than this. For example, commenting on the negative impact of the prosperity gospel on mentally ill people on Culture Watch, Stuart Mackay (2009) described the gospel as a "damaging and wicked teaching" that "makes my blood boil with anger". The list is long that displays negative comments about the Prosperity Gospel.

Despite these negative comments, the teaching has its own fair share of positive criticism from quite a number of respectable theologians and Christian preachers alike. For example, a well-known and respectable preacher, T.D. Jakes argued strongly for the propagation of the prosperity gospel. According to him, for as long as the prosperity gospel aims at fighting poverty which, according to him is a barrier to living a full Christian life, then it remains a welcome gospel that must be propagated with vigor and along these lines Jakes rejects what he sees as the demonization of success (See J. Walton, 2009:109). He is not alone

in this thinking. According to B. Koch (2009:v) the Prosperity Gospel is a fairly flexible theology that is well-suited to be adapted to varying social locations, particularly in a society like the United States that is radically individualistic. Earlier, Stephen Hunt (2000:331) echoed the same sentiments and according to him the Faith (Prosperity) Gospel is noteworthy, not only because of the scale of its success, but because of its distinctive teaching related to divinely-blessed 'health and wealth' which has enjoyed considerable acceptance in different parts of the world. Another prominent scholar who is usually sceptical of bizarre theologies and potentially exploitative doctrines actually looked at the Prosperity Gospel in positive light and in his view a believer has a right to the blessings of health and wealth won by Christ, and he or she can obtain these blessings merely by a positive confession of faith (P. Gifford, 1997).

A number of respondents interviewed argued that whichever way we look at it they would never like to be poor. Poverty is not an option. If poverty comes, it comes as something undesirable and unwelcome. In our view, it is this dislike of poverty that has seen huge crowds of people being attracted to the prosperity gospel churches. It is reasonable to assume that the

sheer numbers themselves of people that throng these churches are thumbs up to the Prosperity Gospel.

Therefore, we have a paradoxical situation where on one hand the gospel is vehemently rejected and on the other hand zealously accepted. The questions that we need to ask are:

1. Exactly what is the Prosperity Gospel? What are its basic tenets and what does it stand for?
2. What are its *pros*<sup>1</sup>? What is the biblical basis for it? Is it entirely wicked and or bankrupt? Does it not have its *pros*? If it empowers the Christian, is it not beneficial? What benefits can we reap from it?
3. What are its *cons*<sup>2</sup>? What is it that has infuriated so many Christians to the extent of labelling it 'evil'? Does the 'wickedness' lie with the 'gospel' itself or it lies elsewhere with something else?
4. Therefore, is it not possible to rehabilitate the 'gospel' in a way that rids it of its *cons* and remain with the *pros*?

This presentation seeks to probe these and other questions that are yet to be asked in a bid to look at what it is that is good or bad about the prosperity gospel in a bid to arrive at means to reap benefits from this paradoxical phenomenon.

#### THE POSSIBLE HISTORICAL ORIGINS AND BASIC TENETS OF THE PROSPERITY GOSPEL

##### Possible Historical Origins And Brief Historical Development Of The Prosperity Gospel Movement

It is not very easy to locate the historical origins of an idea or movement. What we talk about here are the recorded historical origins of the prosperity gospel and the movements associated with it in America and elsewhere outside America where there have been records. In America the historical origins of the prosperity gospel are associated with the Healing Revivals of the 1950s (See D.E. Harrell, 1975). However, the origins of its theology are traced back to the New Thought movement. During their deliverance and healing services in the 1940/s and 1950's Pentecostal evangelists delivered sermons and, or, teachings in which they emphasized what has come to be known as 'the laws of faith' or 'the laws of divine reciprocity' that find expression in such biblical texts as Matthew 7:7ff and Luke 6:38 respectively:

Ask and it shall be given unto you; seek and you shall find; knock and it shall be opened for you. For everyone that asks shall receive; and he that seeks shall find; and to him that knocks it shall be opened. (Matthew 7:7f)

Give and it shall be given back unto you; a good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom.

For with the same measure ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again. (Luke 6:38) ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prosperity\\_theology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prosperity_theology)).

While there are some figures who came earlier than Oral Roberts, for example, E.W. Kenyon who perhaps was one of the earliest figures known to have preached the prosperity gospel in the late 1890's, it was Oral Roberts who, in our opinion, directly developed the laws of faith and the law of divine reciprocity and expanded them into a doctrine that forms the basis of the contemporary prosperity gospel.

Oral Roberts developed his prosperity theology directly from the verse in Luke that we cite above around 1947 in which he codified 'the laws of faith' in the form of a "blessing pact" or covenant in which God would return donations "seven fold", promising that donors would receive back from unexpected sources the money they donated to him ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prosperity\\_theology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prosperity_theology)). His was a literal interpretation of the New Testament. This is the typical approach to the Bible that proponents of the Prosperity Gospel unilaterally take. This is consistent with their motto: If the Bible says it, I believe it. In fact sources have it that Roberts offered to return any donation that did not lead to an equivalent unexpected payment ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prosperity\\_theology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prosperity_theology)). In the 1970s, Roberts' blessing pact took a new twist as it became known as the "seed faith" covenant in which donations were seen as a form of "seed" which would grow in value and be returned to the donor by God in a miraculous way ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prosperity\\_theology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prosperity_theology)).

So, the 'seed faith' doctrine that was becoming popular recently in Zimbabwe is not a new phenomenon at all; it is a mere fulfillment of the famous adage that what goes around turns around, history repeats itself.

It needs to be noted that in this 'blessing/seed faith pact' donations were specifically from donors to Oral Roberts and never the other way round. This needs to be tied in with a key characteristic of churches that specialize in the Prosperity Gospel. One source correctly observed that churches, in which the prosperity gospel is taught, are often non-denominational, independent, are usually directed by a sole pastor or leader and usually reject the Presbyterian system or a system like it that requires a pastor to be accountable to a body of elders or a similar body of church leaders (Simon Coleman, 2000:8). We get into a detailed analysis of these key features of churches and, or, movements that preach the prosperity gospel later in our analysis.

1 We are taking the word to mean both 'positive attributes of something' and 'advantages of something'.

2 Again we are taking this word to mean both 'negative attributes of something' and 'disadvantages of something'.

Other proponents of the Prosperity Gospel who helped to develop and propagate it are A.A. Allen (1950's), T.L. Osborn and W. Branham (1960's), K. Hagin (1970's), J. Bakker (1980's), J. Osteen, B. Wilkinson and popular preachers in the likes of K. Copeland, Creflo Dollar, B. Hinn, Bishop E. Long, J. Meyer and P. White (late 90's, 2000 to date).

Of interest to us, because of recently reported effects of the Prosperity Gospel teaching in Zimbabwe, is A. A. Allen who in 1953 published *The Secret to Scriptural Financial Success*, a book rooted basically in the prosperity ideology (R.G. Robins, 2010:85). Of interest is Allen's promotion of 'miracle prayer cloths' that he anointed with 'miracle oil' (R.G. Robins, 2010:85). Recently in Zimbabwe, one prominent prophet taught about these miracle prayer cloths and devotees went around rubbing these miracle prayer cloths on cars of their desire, with the belief that they would miraculously own them. He also taught that through faith, financial problems could be solved and would give a testimony in which he had a miraculous experience when God supernaturally changed one-dollar bills into twenty-dollar bills to allow him to pay his debts (D.E. Harrell, 1975:74). Again in Zimbabwe a popular news paper carried an article in which a devotee from a Prosperity Gospel sermon went straight into a big supermarket with tree leaves she believed would be converted into dollar notes.

Already without giving more details, we notice some of the *cons* of this kind of Gospel. Later we get into a detailed analysis of the *pros* and *cons* of the prosperity gospel and these two examples shall be analyzed in detail.

With the advent of televangelism in the 1960s, proponents of the prosperity gospel formed a syndicate with Oral Roberts leading the way, developing a weekly programme that became the most watched religious show in the United States and by 1968, television had substituted the tent meeting in Oral Roberts' ministry ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prosperity\\_theology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prosperity_theology)). The utilization of televangelism continued right into the 1980s, with the prosperity gospel being popularized by prominent televangelists like Kenneth Hagin, Jim Bakker, Robert Tilton and Benny Hinn (R.G. Robins, 2010:129). From the 1990's to date the Prosperity Gospel was popularized by the televangelists we have cited earlier (For more detail on how the prosperity gospel preachers did so, see S. Coleman, 2007). Coleman examines the process by which Charismatic Christianity turned the Christian movement into a globalised faith through electronic media such as television, videos and the Internet. These media were incorporated into Christian worship and that made services lively. During these live services the prosperity gospel was preached and the more popular the services became the more rapidly the Prosperity Gospel was spread.

It would introduce a lacuna in the historical development of the prosperity gospel movement if we fail to mention Bruce Wilkinson's *The prayer of Jabez*, millions of copies of which, according to one scholar Philip Jenkins (2006:91), were sold in America and surroundings alone. The influence of this prayer that invited Christians to seek prosperity cannot be underestimated. Data we gathered through participant observation shows that the prayer was cited and imitated over the past two years in numerous sermons of young Zimbabwean pastors, even from those usually non-charismatic mainstream churches like the United Methodist Church (UMC). It was not uncommon in UMC revivals and conventions to come across the popular statement associated with the prayer: 'Enlarge my territory.' This one would be heard in sermons and even in prayers, be they opening prayers at the revivals themselves or during intercession sessions. The phrase: 'Enlarge my territory' was almost equivalent to 'Prosper me' or 'Give me wealth.'

Therefore, the history and development of the gospel of prosperity and the movement itself bear testimony to the widespread acceptance of the prosperity gospel or theology especially from among those experiencing relative deprivation (J. Robbins, 2010:170). So, right from the onset, we may assert that one of the *pros* of the prosperity gospel is that it is quite attractive. As we argue later below, there is no doubt about it that the proponents of such a gospel in Zimbabwe has become a crowd puller even though the tenacity and malleability of the pulling factor(s) still needs to be tested over time.

#### THE BASIC TENETS OF THE PROSPERITY GOSPEL AND THE PROSPERITY GOSPEL MOVEMENT

We have categorized the basic tenets of the prosperity Gospel Movement under fewer than four sub-headings as we show below only for purposes of analysis, otherwise most of what we say may fall under any of the headings isolated below. For example, it is not very easy to separate belief and practice and thus it is not possible to separate theology, biblical interpretation and practice of faith. However, what we have done below helps us to partition our discussion in a way that is easy to analyze the various aspects of the Prosperity Gospel Movement clearly.

#### The 'Ecclesiology' Of The Prosperity Gospel Churches

It is not quite easy to discern whether or not the Prosperity Gospel 'churches' can be said to possess an ecclesiology, but there is need to say something about what they perceive of their gatherings so as to provide a critique of the pros and cons of the Prosperity Gospel Movement. A socio-political analysis of the Prosperity Gospel 'churches' has shown that all of them, at least in their infancy, are non- or as they often claim, interdenominational as well as independent

although some have also utilized their 'social capital' to form networks (S. Coleman, 2000:30). We take particular note of S. Coleman's (2000:40) two-tier observation that first, Prosperity Gospel churches typically reject Presbyterian polity (or governance) especially the idea that a pastor should be accountable to elders; and second, that it is common for pastors of prosperity churches to be the highest organizational authority figure. A lot can be said about this kind of 'ecclesiology' but what we have said here suffices as a summary of the nature of the Prosperity Gospel groupings.

#### **The Basic Prosperity Gospel Theology**

It would not be a justifiable position as we see from the history to view the theology of Prosperity Gospel as homogeneous, but basically the Prosperity Gospel proponents agree in principle on the following basic theological standpoints:

- a) That Christians are entitled to well-being that is both spiritual and physical.
- b) Probably based on Genesis 1 that Christians have been given dominion over creation an exploitation of which must make them prosper (S. Hunt, 2000:332).
- c) It is interesting how the proponents of the Prosperity Gospel relate confession and dominion, let alone, prosperity. Coleman (2000:28) notes that according to Prosperity Gospel theology, positive confession allows Christians to exercise dominion over their souls and material objects around them.
- d) Similarly, redemption and, or, atonement is equated to the alleviation of sickness, poverty, and spiritual corruption (S. Hunt, 2000:333).
- e) It is not a surprise that poverty and illness are cast as curses which can be broken by faith (C. G. Brown, 2011:152).
- f) Contrastingly, wealth and wellbeing are interpreted in prosperity theology as a blessing from God, obtained through a spiritual law of positive confession and visualization (J.M. Wilson, 2007:141) and as Coleman (2000:28) and this process is often taught in almost mechanical terms whose results can be worked out mathematically using given formulae. Coleman (2000:333) gives examples of televangelists like Kenneth Copeland, while Journalists like David van Biema and Jeff Chu correctly described Word of Faith pastor Creflo Dollar's teachings about prosperity along the same lines ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prosperity\\_theology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prosperity_theology)).
- g) Overall, according to Prosperity Gospel theology the Bible is a faith contract between God and his devotees; God on one hand is faithful and just and so believers on the other hand must fulfill their end of the contract to receive God's promises ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prosperity\\_theology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prosperity_theology)).
- h) In the contract, faith and positive confession are key to unlock God's promises (J. Walton, 2009:93).

#### **Their 'Exegesis' Of The Bible**

We put here 'exegesis' in quotation marks because it is not immediately clear whether we can safely refer to their reading of the Scripture as exegesis. We even shudder to call it 'interpretation'. Theirs is a literal interpretation of the text which some scholars describe as non-traditional interpretation of Bible verses (for example, S. Hunt, 2000:333). P. Jenkins, 2006:92) notes that in this 'non-traditional interpretation of the biblical text, the Book of Malachi often being given special attention with Malachi 3:10 being the most popular citation. Frequently quoted verses include: Matthew 25:14-30; John 10:10; Philippians 4:19 and 3 John 2 ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prosperity\\_theology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prosperity_theology)).

#### **Practices**

Giving, especially tithing as a form of giving, takes centre stage in Prosperity churches. Services have been observed to be long as they commonly include two sermons, one with special emphasis on giving and prosperity in more cases than one zeroing in on biblical references to tithing after which there is an explicit call to an offering session. M.J. Klassen (2009) says a lot in his two chapters 13 and 15, but we are interested in his sharp analysis of the Word of Faith Movement in chapter 13 of his book especially his correct observation regarding the treatment given to cash donations. Klassen (2009:133) observes that Prosperity Gospel church leaders often take particular interest in specifically blessing the money being donated; some have even been reported to instruct worshipers to hold their donations above their heads during the prayer. The Zimbabwean counterparts are known to do this as well. The second sermon, usually on another topic, follows the offering session and if what we observe from the Zimbabwean examples is anything to go by, it focuses on physical wellbeing and during this second sermon is a miracles and exorcisms galore. Following a typically Deuteronomic theology the poor are thus regarded as accursed by God. Following an argument he pursues earlier in his doctoral thesis S. Clifton (2009:199) concludes that Prosperity Gospel churches have a reputation for manipulating givers not for the sake of the poor, but for the sake of the prosperous image of the church itself and thus, alienating the poor (see S. Clifton, 2005:260).

Besides giving and wellbeing, devotees in Prosperity Gospel churches, in their everyday practice of faith have a tendency to speak positive statements about aspects of their lives that they wish to see improved and as C.G. Brown (2011:88) notes, these statements, are meant to be positive confessions that will miraculously change aspects of people's lives if spoken with faith. From our Zimbabwean examples, dress must be immaculate and hair done in a particular style that shows not only style or fashion



but class. Therefore, as J. Walton (2009:109) argues Prosperity Gospel churches also encourage people to “live without limits” and cultivate optimism about their lives.

While there have been efforts towards the promotion of what S. Clifton (2009:199) refers to as a theology of empowerment and human flourishing with the goal of releasing people from a “welfare” or “victim” mentality and even financial responsibility, this encouragement towards extravagance militates against these efforts. Kate Bowler, an expert in prosperity theology after studying Prosperity Gospel empowerment workshops argues that though they contain some sound advice the seminars often emphasize the purchase of expensive possessions leading to the extravagance we talk about above ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prosperity\\_theology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prosperity_theology)). In the United States this is reported to have caused serious problems. Hanna Rosin a national correspondent of *The Atlantic*, argues that prosperity theology contributed to the housing bubble that caused the late-2000s financial crisis. She maintains that home ownership was heavily emphasized in prosperity churches, causing a reliance on divine financial intervention that led to unwise choices ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prosperity\\_theology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prosperity_theology)).

#### **CRITIQUE OF THE PROSPERITY GOSPEL AND THE PROSPERITY GOSPEL MOVEMENT**

Our critique of the Prosperity Gospel Movement is based on our knowledge of the Bible, especially the New Testament, and distinct Wesleyan prerogatives drawn from our background as Methodist. The rationale for the latter as criteria for evaluating the Prosperity Gospel movement is the historical fact that scholars generally agree to, in principle, that John Wesley is the father of all Pentecostalism in which case, most of these movements are offshoots from that Pentecostalism albeit via Evangelicalism.

#### **Positive Traits Of The Prosperity Gospel Movement**

We agree with many who argue that when we look at the basic import of the Prosperity Gospel per se, it is difficult to find anything wrong with it. For example, T. D. Jakes is correct when he sees poverty as a barrier to living a Christian life in favour of prosperity, suggesting that it is easier to make a positive impact on society when one is affluent and rejecting what he sees as the demonization of success (See J. Walton, 2009:109). From the point of view of sociology, it is known that wealth and success in general contribute towards a high social status. An analysis of group dynamics also shows that people in general tend to listen more to, and tend to congregate more around, the affluent than ordinary lowly members of society.

In any case, both the Old Testament and the New Testament give testimony to this fact that it is difficult to control and to lead while in dire poverty. The first direct command to the human being in Genesis 1:26ff to ‘have dominion over creation’ is based on the wisdom appended onto it and that is to ‘be fruitful and multiply’. In the New Testament, we see the Church spreading with the aid of affluent members of society, the likes of Gaius who owned a plaza and in whose house the Church congregated. There is no question about it that the Church like any social institution requires financial resources.

It is a given fact that in the 2000s, churches teaching prosperity theology saw significant growth in the Third World (P. Jenkins, 2011:99). While according to P. Jenkins (2006:95) poor citizens of impoverished countries often find the doctrine appealing because of their economic powerlessness and the doctrine’s emphasis on miracles, in Zimbabwe the Gospel has attracted even those who are economically up as they seek to secure further and enhance their wealth. While according to K.L. Wiegele (2005:7) Western Africa, particularly Nigeria has seen explosive growth and in the Philippines, the El Shaddai movement, part of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, has spread prosperity theology outside Protestant Christianity. Therefore, there is something in this Prosperity Gospel that we cannot ignore.

However, we have quite some disturbing events especially in Zimbabwe with people believing that tree leaves can be converted into money. An able-bodied woman, well in her senses had the audacity to fill a whole trolley with groceries in a respectable supermarket and even approach the till operator knowing fully well that she had no money, but tree leaves in her purse gathered on the basis of ‘faith’ (or presumption) garnered at a session where the Prosperity Gospel was preached. Recently at another session where the Prosperity Gospel was preached people were given the impression that they can have ‘miracle money’ in their pockets. These are clear indicators that somewhere somehow there is something wrong.

Therefore, there is need to look at the whole phenomenon of the Prosperity Gospel critically in a bid to arrive at its cons.

#### **Summary Outline Of Negative Traits Of The Prosperity Gospel Movement**

We draw what we think are the negative traits of the phenomenon of the Prosperity Gospel from the areas we outlined above as basic tenets of the Prosperity Gospel Movement. The cons of the Prosperity Gospel Movement from:

1. The proponents’ very disturbing manipulative ecclesiology;

2. The proponents' literalistic interpretation of the Bible and, therefore, careless theology;
3. Their interpretation of the New Testament especially their warped concept of miracles.

These are not the only negative traits of the Prosperity Gospel movement. We have isolated these three because in our view the rest of the other negative traits stem from here. We discuss each one of them below in brief and in the process we look at distinctive Wesleyan prerogatives in a bid to show what could be a Methodist critique of the phenomenon.

#### **Ecclesiology**

As we noted above, when they begin and develop, Prosperity Gospel churches claim to be non- or inter-denominational. We consider this as a deliberate starting point. Congregations do not start and grow overnight, besides it is not very easy to start preaching to the un-churched. As the congregation grows again it is deliberate to emphasise the independence of the church and to develop it at least as a vague and amorphous organisation without any discernible system. From the point of view of group dynamics, the founder remains the main focus and a myth is created around him or her until they become untouchable. It is understandable if the leaders look at Presbyterian polity (or governance) especially the idea that a pastor should be accountable to elders, with disdain; they want to remain as the highest authority figures at the helm of their respective organizations. S. Posner and J. Conason's critique of this kind of ecclesiology cannot be anymore poignant. They maintain that prosperity teachers cultivate authoritarian organizations and that leaders attempt to control the lives of adherents by claiming divinely bestowed authority (S. Posner and J. Conason, 2008:61). In other words, we see this as a deliberate attempt at shunning any system of control and an ecclesiology that leaves the Church in the hands of only the Lord Jesus Christ who is its founder anyway.

In his theory of what makes the evangelistic enterprise effective J. Wesley emphasised three key drivers of an effective evangelistic enterprise namely:

1. The local church
2. Academia
3. Connectional structures (K.L. Carder, 1994:81)

Wesley gave his reasons why these three must converge in the proclamation of the Gospel. Amidst the many important things he said there is an emphasis on reason and accountability we need to highlight here. For Wesley people must belong to a local church and must operate within the bounds of a local church because first and foremost the local church gives the evangelistic enterprise the necessary pietism. It is at the local church that we grow and develop our piety. However, the other reason why the local church is important is that not only does it give the evangelist the necessary moral support, but also provides the necessary structures for report back and accountability on the part of the evangelist. So, there is very little free-

play on the part of the evangelist to do things on their own without being held accountable. This is biblical. Great evangelists like Paul belonged to and reported to the church at Ephesus. So, what the Prosperity Gospel church founders do to maintain independence and promote the theology of non-denominationalism especially at the infancy stage of growth, deliberate calculated moves to avoid control by their mother churches. Note that nobody just comes from nowhere as a born-again, mature Christian and forms a church. These founders of Prosperity Gospel churches break away from their mother churches usually in the pretext of pursuing some kind of ministry and then later develop into a fully grown church.

Wesley also argued that the evangelistic enterprise requires academia for it to be effective as this provides the evangelistic enterprise with the necessary intellect. Finally, the proclamation of the Gospel requires connectional structures as this provides the necessary institutionalism. Otherwise, evangelism without the academia is merely pietism without intellect while evangelism without the local church is merely pietism without substance. Both are consolidated by connectional structures that provide the necessary institutional tools for accountability.

#### **Interpretation Of The Bible**

This is the area where most problems originate. Faith or what we come to believe as Christians and inquiry are inseparable (D.L. Migliore, 2004:1) and we must continue to be self-conscious about the way we ask questions and finally arrive at what we eventually believe in (D.L. Migliore, 2004:16). Elsewhere we argue that sound and appropriate methods of biblical interpretation result in sound doctrine and acceptable Christian Theology (D. Bishau, 2013:6). Therefore, theology must develop from sound methods of interpreting the Bible.

From the brief historical survey of the possible origins and development of the Prosperity Gospel movement above we notice that not much care was given to this aspect of the theological enterprise. Or, as we suspect, it was deliberate on the part of the proponents of the Prosperity Gospel and eventual founders of the Prosperity Gospel churches to adopt the dogmatic approach to the Bible. The description of the method we get from R.P. Martin (1979:220) is precise and needs no expansion. The dogmatic approach according to R.P. Martin is an approach where the meaning of the text is broken down into key terms, phrases or isolated verses that are lined up as proof-texts to validate a particular dogma; in this kind of interpretation the interpreter begins with a set of dogmatic positions and then gets into the Bible to find proof for the positions. The key terms, phrases or isolated verses are lined up as probative evidence for the dogma without any due respect for the historical context, literary form or theological purpose of the

verses because they are suitable to prove a point and not because of their meaning within the larger context of the chapter.

This takes us into the whole debate regarding the appropriateness of synchronic approaches to the Bible to derive sound Christian theological positions. We state our position after a detailed discussion of the pros and cons of synchronic and diachronic methods of interpreting the Bible in detail elsewhere (See D. Bishau, 2010:74ff). Our basic misgiving with the dogmatic approach is that we will have as many meanings of the text as we have interpreters of the Bible if people are at liberty to read into the text their own meanings that ignore the author's meaning and intent. What we see with Prosperity Gospel preachers are already established dogmatic positions that are then supported by biblical texts that originally had nothing to do with the dogmas being propelled by the preachers. They stand way apart from authorial intent. So, basically what the Prosperity Gospel preachers are doing is to snatch verses from the Bible and run with them, but not only do they run with them they also run with them to the sea and dive!

It is interesting to note that in this regard, the Prosperity Gospel preachers take a curious diversion from the kind of hermeneutics advocated for by the generality of Evangelicals. It needs to be stressed that attempts to emphasise the applicability of the text to the special circumstances of the reader are not new. They started earlier in the history of the interpretation of the Bible with the so called 'New Hermeneutic' and in contemporary biblical studies such attempts are the basic concern of such approaches to the Bible like the Reader Response criticism of the Bible. What is curious with the Prosperity Gospel preachers is that they have embraced the kind of approach to the Bible that originally as Evangelicals they vehemently opposed. The opposition comes out sharply in the 1990's as we see the emergence of several pieces of literature critically reflecting on the perceived impact of the New Hermeneutic on Evangelical dogma (see for example, E.E. Johnson, 1990; R.B. Zuck, 1991; W.R. Tate, 1991; G.R. Osborne, 1991; R. McQuilkin, 1992; and recently, B.A. Shearly, 1997 and 2002; and R.L. Thomas, 2002). The Evangelical stance is represented in B.A. Shearly's conclusion that the message determined from the Bible through historical critical methods (what he is calling the gramatico-historical critical method in his paper) must define, confine, and control application (B.A. Shearly, 1997:15). Therefore, justifiable theology must be derived from the Bible by means that not only respect, but proceed from authorial intent.

It is in this respect that in our view the contemporary Prosperity Gospel preachers differ with their progenitors like John Wesley. John Wesley's exegesis of the Bible produced for him a work ethic that has been an inspiration for Methodists all over. According to Wesley's ethic when a person becomes a Christian

it is inevitable that one becomes industrious, trustworthy and prosperous because these are attributes that one derives directly from the Gospel of Jesus Christ (<http://www.goodreads.com>). This appears to be a sharp critique and, or, contrast to the concept of 'miracle money' that is associated with Prosperity Gospel preachers in Zimbabwe today where adherents just miraculously find themselves in possession of huge sums of money they never worked for. His views about money and wealth in general are summarized in his famous sermon that has often been called John Wesley's Trilateral based on Luke 16:9 (Keith Drury, 1997). In this sermon he points out three things about money. First, for Wesley there is nothing wrong with acquiring wealth. He argues that Christians must gain all they can and it is in this regard that they have much in common with non-believers; Christians must meet non-believers in their own ground, being industrious, working in a cleverly manner and make lots of money. In fact, John Wesley was one of the highest earning preachers of his time earning an average of \$1.4 million per annum from his industry (Keith Drury, 1997). So, his first principle was: earn all you can. The second principle was to be careful with spending.

He warned against extravagance which perhaps he associated with Epicurean philosophy. He warned against expensive food and like Jesus he called for simplicity. So, his second principle was: save all you can. It is with Wesley's third principle where we see sharp contrast with the principles of contemporary Prosperity Gospel preachers. According to Wesley, when you have earned all you can and saved all you can, then give all you can. In fact, for him this is the primary motivation for amassing wealth that we see emanating from the Gospels. John Wesley gathered in order to give. The giving according to Wesley had to be planned. First, you give to yourself all you need for basics. Then second give to your family and employees their fair share and I Timothy 5:8 was a key verse for him. Third, give to the household of faith and last give to all in need. It is interesting to note that John Wesley walked his talk; he lived his word. Sources say that he lived on 2% of his approximately \$1.4 million and tithed 98% of it (Keith Drury, 1997) following the plan above. We are not sure how many of our contemporary Prosperity Gospel preachers are willing to live by these principles.

Therefore, for Wesley, acquiring wealth should not be an end in itself. We get wealthy in order to give. In one of his notable quotes Wesley remarks that, 'If a man when he gets all he can and saves all he can but does not give all he can, then I have more hope in Judas Iscariot than that man.'

We are not surprised if the majority of Prosperity Gospel preachers deliberately or otherwise divert from this position because such an approach does not suit their purpose of lining up biblical texts as

probative evidence for their own precooked dogmas that seemingly benefit them materially. In fact, these Prosperity Gospel preachers often interpret the Bible in such a way that the theology drawn from it creates a 'parent ego' in the prosperity Gospel preacher and a 'child ego' in the devotee with the result that the latter feels totally depended on the former. Such a transaction becomes a breeding ground for the exploitation of the devotee by the preacher. Our point is vindicated as we look at the Prosperity Gospel preachers' interpretation of miracles below.

#### **Interpretation Of Miracles**

By questioning the Prosperity Gospel preachers' understanding and probably use of miracles we do not necessarily belong to the category of contemporary critics who according to R.E. Brown (2004:133) dismiss out rightly the historicity even the possibility of the miraculous. We agree with the reasoning of R.H. Gundry (1981:123) that we do not understand miracles from the perspective of the contemporary scientific mind that often objects to the supernatural, rather we take it that if there has been a God who acted in history by revealing himself through his Son Jesus Christ, how else may we expect him to act except supernaturally. Miracles are possible and do happen. However, we question both the interpretation of them and their use in pointing to something else which is neither the Kingdom of God nor the cross of the Son of God, especially the glory that he demonstrates through victory over death on the cross and his eventual vindication as the Son of God (Messiah). Any reading of the New Testament that does not arrive at such conclusion regarding the symbolic meaning of the miracles is most likely wacky and warped!

A brief historical critical interpretation of the miracle stories in the Gospels is necessary to vindicate our judgement here. Elsewhere we treat the subject of miracles in detail; here it suffices to give a brief synopsis of the miracles in the Gospels in a bid to use conclusions from that synopsis as criteria to understand and critically reflect on the interpretation and use of miracles in Prosperity Gospel churches in general. For purposes of a quick synopsis, we contrast the Gospel of John on one, the hand and the synoptic Gospels on the other hand as has been the traditional approach to the four Gospels in the history of their interpretation in scholarly circles.

John portrays Jesus as one beholding divine glory, δόξα, and, therefore, John's presentation of Jesus' discourses and mighty deeds is unique. The synoptic gospels present portray Jesus as performing miracles in order to make visible to the people the breakthrough of the Kingdom of God so that they can come to believe (J.A. du Rand, 1993:7). This is what he refers to in say, Luke ... "if the blind can see, the dumb can here and the lame can walk then the Kingdom of God is in your midst." Therefore, in the synoptic gospels Jesus' miracles are mighty deeds, δυνάμεις, pointing

to the Kingdom of God, whereas in John miraculous signs, σημεῖα, pointing to the Jesus' glory coming out of victory from the cross at Calvary. This is why he concludes his very first sign (miracle) in John with commentary: "destroy this temple and in three days I shall build it again" pointing to his death on the cross and resurrection (glorious victory over death) in three days. The use of 'shall' there as in Hebrew denotes the imperative. So, Jesus did not perform miracles as ends in themselves. There were many blind, dumb and lame people in Palestine during his time, but he did not heal them all. At times he would refuse to perform the miracles even on demand by either his disciples or the onlookers because such demanded miracles did not fit into any of his purposes. Jesus' miracles according to the synoptic gospels were pointers to the kingdom of God and according to John, signs pointing to the cross of Jesus Christ and his victory over death that vindicated him as Messiah. In John they make known Jesus' identity as Messiah, the Son of God (J.A. du Rand, 1993:8). It is interesting that almost all the gospel writers refer to the imagery of the wedding feast, even though John combines it with the tradition of Jesus' first miracle. Even with this imagery, the synoptics use it to point to the Kingdom of God (see for example, Matthew 22<sup>1-14</sup>; 25:1-13 and Luke:36) while John uses it to point to the cross and Jesus' glory and vindication as Messiah, the Son of God sent into the world. The comments by John are quite significant for this kind of Christology the gospel is putting forth: "his disciples believed in him," and "He manifested his glory." For a detailed analysis of this first sign see Leon Morris (1971:174-186). We agree with John Drane (1999) who does not see the meaning and purpose of the miracles in John as any different from the synoptics. If the miracles are signs pointing to the cross of Jesus Christ and to him as Messiah then they are pointing to the Kingdom of God! Note that Drane devotes two whole chapters, chapters 8 and 9 (J. Drane, 1999 :139-166), both with titles that make clear his understanding of the relationship between the miracles of Jesus and the Kingdom of God: Signs of the Kingdom (chapter 8) and The Kingdom of God in Action (chapter 9). It is interesting to note that this has been a dominant interpretation of the miracles throughout the history of the interpretation of the Gospels. We only trace it back to the earliest scholar in our references, that is Allen Richardson (1941). Such an interpretation comes out clearly in his chapter 3 where he releases a very profound statement connecting Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God, his miracles and Jewish prophecy or to be precise the Jewish apocalyptic tradition:

It is not a matter of surprise that the preaching of the Kingdom of God should have been met with a demand for "signs." The Jewish apocalyptic tradition had taught that the End would be heralded by certain premonitory signs of a supernatural character (A. Richardson, 1941:45).



Therefore, whatever is happening within the Prosperity Gospel churches can be judged as theologically valid on the basis of whether or not the purpose of such acts of wonder is to point to the Kingdom of God. Some of the respondents who attend these gatherings openly acknowledge that they attend to have their problems solved not necessarily to have faith in Jesus Christ. Others actually end up venerating the Prosperity Gospel preacher. In one of the services attended, devotees actually bowed down, hands clasped together as if in prayer, as the 'apostle' or 'prophet' (as they called the Prosperity Gospel preacher) passed by to the stage with his entourage of 'body guards'.

#### CONCLUSION

What do we make of all this? An analysis of the definition of the Prosperity Gospel shows that there is nothing intrinsically sinister about the gospel itself. Its basic tenets and what it is said to stand for show that the Prosperity Gospel has its foundations in the Bible; there is no doubt that it is biblically based and what it promises, nobody can refuse to accept. Nobody wants to be poor and nobody wants ill health and if taken positively there is no doubt that it can be an ideological basis for industry and an overall economic policy that empowers the Christian (see what the Protestant ethic did to develop America). However, it seems the gospel has been and is being manipulated to suit other people's selfish ends. Therefore, whatever is 'evil' and 'wicked' about it probably lies somewhere else, probably with the vehicle (in its totality) bringing the gospel to the recipients rather than with the gospel itself.

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