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(127A) THE PROSPERITY GOSPEL IN AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY

Lovemore Togarasei

Introduction

One major characteristic of African Christianity of late is the prominence of the ‘prosperity gospel’. Although this gospel was initially associated with Pentecostal churches, with the ‘pentecostalisation’¹ of African Christianity, this gospel is now found even in some mainline and evangelical churches, in one form or another. But what is this gospel of prosperity? What is its history and what are its major tenets? How has it been received in Africa by both its followers and critics? This article addresses these questions. It is based on various works that have been published on the subject of the prosperity gospel in the past few years.

The Prosperity Gospel: Definition

The prosperity gospel is known by a number of names: ‘dominion theology’,² ‘faith gospel’,³ ‘faith formula theology’,⁴ ‘name it and claim it’, or ‘health and wealth gospel’.⁵ Basically, the teaching of this gospel is that God wants believers to prosper physically, materially and spiritually. Thus, according to this gospel, getting rich is seen as God’s will and an outward manifestation of his blessings. One only needs to have faith in God through Jesus and blessings will follow. Several scriptures are cited in support of the gospel of prosperity (Deuteronomy 8:18; Malachi 3:10; John 10:10).

A Brief History of the Prosperity Gospel

The roots of the prosperity gospel can be traced back to American prosperity preachers such as E.W. Kenyon, Oral Roberts, William Branham and Kenneth Copeland. Sufficient work has been done in tracing this history (Gifford 1998 and Chilenje 2013). Suffice it to say that, by the 1960s, the prosperity gospel had become a major feature on the American Christian landscape. This gospel came to Africa through American evangelists and through African Pentecostals trained in American Bible schools. For example, the Fire Convention conference was held in Harare, Zimbabwe, in 1986, and several prosperity preachers from America and Europe spread the prosperity gospel there. African preachers who had accepted the prosperity gospel also helped spread it through establishing Bible colleges that emphasized this gospel. Examples are the All Nations’ Bible Seminary of Benson Idahosa in Nigeria, and Africa Multination for Christ College (AMFCC) of Ezekiel Guti in Zimbabwe. We also need to highlight the role played by

¹ ‘Pentecostalisation’ here means adopting Pentecostal-like characteristics with Pentecostalism marked by the centrality of the Holy Spirit manifested in signs like speaking in tongues.

² A. Corten and R. Marshal-Fratani, ‘Introduction’, in *Between Babel to Pentecost: Transnational Pentecostalism in Africa and Latin America*, eds. A. Corten and R. Marshal-Fratani (London: Hurst and Company, 2001): 5.

³ Paul Gifford, *African Christianity: Its Public Role* (London: Hurst and Company, 1998), 62.

⁴ J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *African Charismatics: Current Developments with Independent Indigenous Pentecostalism in Ghana* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 203.

⁵ Adré Droogers, ‘Globalisation and Pentecostal Success’, in *Between Babel and Pentecost: Transnational Pentecostalism in Africa and Latin America*, eds. Adré Droogers and Ruth Marshall-Fratani (London: C. Hurst and Co., 2001), 41-61.

books, pamphlets and other publications by prosperity preachers, in spreading the prosperity gospel in Africa.

The Major Tenets of this Gospel

The prosperity gospel emphasizes that God has good plans for every individual. God did not intend human beings to suffer and so prepared only good for them. All that is required of individuals is to have faith in God through Jesus Christ, a faith that unlocks the entrance to all the good prepared for them by God. Thus, the prosperity gospel does not despise wealth. God did not create human beings to be poor. The Old Testament provides proof texts for this gospel. For example, a favourite text on wealth is Deuteronomy 8:18, 'You shall remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth...' (RSV). The prosperity gospel also has a political theology of its own. Advocates of the prosperity gospel believe that, if Africa is to prosper, it needs God-fearing leaders. Thus, as a God-fearing born-again leader, the late President of Zambia, Frederick Chiluba, declared the country a Christian nation in 1991, stating, 'Since Zambia had entered into a covenant with God, the nation would be blessed to the point where it would stop borrowing from others and become a lender of resources instead.'⁶ The prosperity gospel discourages borrowing, arguing that since God owns all that is in the world, believers can claim this ownership too and should therefore not owe anyone.

These tenets are emphasised by nearly all prosperity gospel preachers in Africa.⁷ The prosperity gospel in African Christianity teaches Africans optimism, underlining the fact that God has great plans for the continent. All that the continent has to do is to surrender in faith to God, to obey God's commands – and prosperity will follow. Tithing is central to the unlocking of God's blessings in prosperity gospel theology, as well as other forms of offering to God.

Prosperity Gospel Attractions in Africa

Despite some negative appraisals, this type of gospel continues to attract many followers. What could be the attractions? A number of reasons could be given.

Pentecostal churches that promote the prosperity gospel became popular in Africa in the 1990s. This was the time when the Bretton Woods institutions were promoting economic structural adjustment policies in many African countries. The failure of these policies left a number of African countries impoverished, with many companies retrenching workers. It can be argued that people lost confidence in socio-economic policies and the ability of governments to improve their lives. In the midst of this came the prosperity churches offering divine solutions in the name of the prosperity gospel. Integrating the gospel with the African belief that human events are controlled by spiritual powers, the charismatic churches found a number of followers. The prosperity gospel resonated with the traditional African anthropology that emphasises those in right relationships with God and that the ancestors are blessed with abundant life, physically, materially and spiritually. Prosperity gospel preachers therefore offered a Christian version of the traditional African understanding of prosperity and well-being.

⁶ Simon Coleman, *The Globalisation of Charismatic Christianity: Spreading the Gospel of Prosperity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000): 33.

⁷ Nimi Wariboko, 'Pentecostal Paradigms of National Economic Prosperity in Africa', in *Pentecostalism and Prosperity: The Socio-Economics of the Global Charismatic Movement*, eds. Katherine Attanasi and Amos Yong (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 35-62; Lovemore Togarasei, 'The 'Birth' of a Prophet: Andrew Wutawunashe's Break from the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe', *Exchange: Journal of Missiological and Ecumenical Research* 35, no. 2, (2006): 215-225.

Traditional African religion has rituals for honouring ancestors. Among the Shona people of Zimbabwe, families (or tribes) conduct libations that are meant to seek or maintain divine (ancestral) favours and blessings. In such rituals, the ancestors are symbolically given food and drink to the accompaniment of praise poetry, on the understanding that, when honoured, ancestors will bless the families and individuals with health and wealth. Asonzeh Ukah also observes the use of praise poetry among the Yoruba of Nigeria in a bid to seek divine favours.⁸ As Nimi Wariboko says, ‘Favors from the gods in (African) traditional societies are not limited to the care of souls, but they also include blessings of fecundity, riches and a long and healthy life.’⁹ Wariboko goes on to say that the western binary approach of separating the spiritual from the material, making God concerned with the spiritual only, is not in line with traditional African beliefs. Thus the prosperity gospel concurs with the African belief that a good standing with God results in material and physical blessings.

The gospel of prosperity also found fertile ground in Africa because of the poverty and suffering that people experience. A number of African governments have failed to supply people with the basics of life, including health care, food and water. The gospel of prosperity then came, promising a miraculous supply of these needs. In fact, the gospel of prosperity thrives in contexts of poverty. In these contexts, prosperity should not be thought of only in terms of money and material abundance. This is true for a few of the rich Pentecostals, but for the majority of African Pentecostals, prosperity refers to the ability to afford the basics of life: to live a healthy life, to afford basic food, to be able to send children to school and to live in happy marriages. When they talk about prosperity, the majority of African Pentecostals talk about having *sadza /palichi/ nshima/ ugali* (staple food) on the table.

Debates on the Prosperity Gospel in African Christianity

The prosperity gospel raises debates as to whether or not it is biblical, contributing to the social and economic development of its followers, influenced by an American understanding of the gospel, or in line with indigenous notions of prosperity.

Those who think it is biblical base their arguments on several Biblical texts. For example, Old Testament stories of the success and prosperity of Abraham are used together with New Testament texts like 3 John 2 (‘Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in good health, just as your soul prospers’, NKJV). However, those against the prosperity gospel also find many texts in the Bible to support their position. For example, they find in Jesus and Paul lives of simplicity, quite contrary to what prosperity preachers teach.

As to whether the gospel contributes to the social and economic development of believers, again, there are different voices. There are those who believe that the prosperity gospel (with its emphasis on offerings and tithes as the ingredients for success) is bent on milking believers’ hard earnings for the benefit of the pastors. But there are also many, especially the followers of this gospel, who think that the prosperity gospel is good for individual and social development. Even among scholars, a growing number think the gospel of prosperity contributes to Africa’s social and economic development.¹⁰

⁸ Asonzeh Ukah, *A New Paradigm of Pentecostal Power: A Study of the Redeemed Christian Church of God in Nigeria* (Trenton: World Press, 2008): 34.

⁹ Wariboko, ‘Pentecostal Paradigms of National Economic Prosperity in Africa’, 41.

¹⁰ See for, example, Lovemore Togarasei, ‘The Pentecostal Gospel of Prosperity in African Contexts of Poverty’, *Exchange: Journal of Missiological and Ecumenical Research* Vol. 40. Issue 2, (2011): 336-350 and The Centre for Development and Enterprise South Africa, ‘Under the Radar: Pentecostalism in South Africa and its Potential Social and Economic Role’, in *Pentecostalism and Prosperity: The Socio-Economics of the Global Charismatic Movement*, eds. Katherine Attanasi and Amos Yong (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 63-85.

Concerning its origins in Africa, Paul Gifford believes the prosperity gospel is mainly influenced by the USA, and serves to comfort those who are already wealthy, by describing wealth as a sign of divine grace.¹¹ He therefore does not see the contribution of the gospel to the social development of the majority of the people in Africa. While it cannot be denied that the prosperity gospel was influenced by American evangelists, it is important to note its local appropriation. Rosalind Hackett has cautioned Pentecostalism scholars against over-emphasising the external influence on African Pentecostalism.¹² She notes that indigenous beliefs and practices also play a role in shaping Pentecostalism in Africa. This is very true of the gospel of prosperity. It fits in well with the traditional African emphasis on health and prosperity. African indigenous religion emphasizes that, when one's relations with the ancestors are good, then one's health and economic prosperity are assured.

Conclusion

We should end by pointing out that the prosperity gospel raises different reactions from different people on the continent. Be that as it may, its promise of wealth and health in contexts of poverty and limited health facilities gives hope and a positive mindset to Africans. It encourages believers to develop entrepreneurial skills for survival in contexts that offer very limited formal opportunities for one's sustenance. It is clear that the Bible does not celebrate poverty, and therefore to describe this gospel as unbiblical is rather unfortunate. Lastly, there are also prosperity preachers who have taken it to the extreme, especially for personal gain, and this should be condemned.

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¹¹ Gifford, *African Christianity*.

¹² Rosalind Hackett, 'The Prosperity Gospel in West Africa', in *Religion and the Transformation of Capitalism*, ed. R. Roberts (London: Routledge, 1995), 199-214.

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