

SPIRITUAL DEVIATIONS

The “Gospel” of Prosperity

Over the last twenty to thirty years there has been an increasing promotion of the notion that it is a Christian’s divine birthright to be materially prosperous. This outward prosperity is ranked as a New Testament bequest, and even more, as an element of the eternal redemption which Christ accomplished on the cross. It may rankle some advocates of this prosperity to hear their teaching labeled as a “gospel.” They rarely, if ever, refer to it as a prosperity gospel. However, in elevating financial prosperity as one of the accomplishments and goals of the precious redemption of Christ, they are following the pattern of the Judaizers in Galatians. Although the Judaizers preached the work of Christ, they appended a foreign element to their gospel, the requirement of circumcision, compelling Paul to brand their teaching as “a different gospel” and “another gospel” (1:6-7). Similarly, the addition of the promise of material wealth to the work of Christ on the cross is in the principle of “another gospel,” the gospel of prosperity.

Our Covenant of Prosperity, henceforth *Covenant*, by Markus Bishop, for example, informs its readers that “Financial prosperity has to be seen for what it scripturally and actually is: a part of your redemption, which Jesus died and paid for” (18); “you have a right to divine prosperity...prosperity is the will of God for your life” (16). Even more audaciously Kenneth E. Hagin’s *Biblical Keys to Financial Prosperity*, henceforth *Financial*, distorts Galatians 3:13-14: “Believe His Word that says we are redeemed from the curse of poverty” (30). *Covenant* echoes this perversion of the redemptive work of Christ:

He became poor in order to suffer and purchase this redemption for you, redeeming you from the curse of the Law, which included poverty. You can even say it this way: “Jesus redeemed me from poverty so that the blessing of Abraham might come upon me.” (20)

Prayer, Power, and Prosperity, henceforth *Prayer*, by Mark Brazee, unabashedly proclaims, “Prosperity is a redemptive blessing” (89). These quotations surely exemplify a linkage of prosperity with the redemptive work of Christ.

Misapplying the Bible

“Prosperity” peddlers ignore the fundamental shift inaugurated by the Lord Jesus in the new covenant, a shift from

the outward and physical realm to the inward and spiritual (see John 4:21, 23-24). Most of them gravitate to Old Testament verses such as Deuteronomy 8:7-9, which describes the good land into which God brought His people. *Prepare to Prosper*, henceforth *Prepare*, by Joyce Meyer, says, “The Word of God clearly teaches that God desires for us to live in the ‘land of plenty’” (8). *Prepare* wrongly transfers the outward, physical blessings of God’s Old Testament people to the New Testament believers and interprets material plenitude as “the best God has provided for them through Jesus Christ” and “the abundant life” promised by Christ to His believers (8).

Prepare makes the same mistake in its misapplication of Isaiah 55:11, which says that the Lord’s word “will prosper in the matter to which I have sent it” (emphasis added). We know that the word of God has several spiritual functions in which it can prosper, such as dividing the soul from the spirit (Heb. 4:12), building up the church (Acts 20:32), equipping the believers for spiritual warfare (Eph. 6:17-18), and nourishing the believers (John 6:57, 63, 68). Yet *Prepare* latches on to the word *prosper* in Isaiah 55:11 and then, extracting it from its spiritual context, employs it to assure believers that their invocation of God’s word over the financial seed they have sown will cause that seed to prosper (grow). Thus, the word of God is reduced to fertilizer for the garden of a believer’s financial portfolio.

Misinterpreting the Bible

In addition to violating the basic tenets of biblical exegesis, many advocates of the prosperity gospel flagrantly *misinterpret* the Bible, engaging in fanciful leaps of imagination to justify their prosperity construct.

Misinterpreting 2 Corinthians 8:9

One of the many examples of misinterpretation comes from *Prayer*, which uses 2 Corinthians 8:9 to support the absurd claim that “prosperity is a redemptive blessing” (89). In this verse Paul tells the believers that Christ “became poor in order that you, because of His poverty, might become rich.” Even a casual reading of the context shows us that being rich in verse 9 is a continuation of Paul’s thought in verse 7: “Just as you abound in everything, in faith and in word and in knowledge and in all earnestness and in the love in you

from us, abound in this grace also.” Paul is not speaking of accumulating material riches, but on the contrary, of the believers’ joining with the apostles in sacrificing their material riches for others’ sake. Paul’s emphasis here is on the fact that our real wealth lies in the accumulation of intangible, spiritual riches, such as faith, the word, and love. Such treasures, which Christ delights to bestow on us, are our heavenly “currency.”

Misinterpreting Galatians 3:13

The entire notion of financial bounty as a component of the redemptive work of Christ is a disturbing example of the prolific misinterpretation and misapplication of God’s Word found in the prosperity gospel. The verse cited most often to support this perversion of redemption’s purpose is Galatians 3:13, which says, “Christ has redeemed us out of the curse of the law, having become a curse on our behalf; because it is written, ‘Cursed is every one hanging on a tree.’” Prosperity proponents distort this verse in their attempt to apply it to the believers’ economic status. The *Laws of Prosperity*, henceforth *Laws*, by Kenneth Copeland states:

Jesus bore the curse of the law in our behalf. He beat Satan and took away his power. Consequently, there is no reason for you to live under the curse of the law, no reason for you to live in poverty of any kind....Prosperity is a provision of this covenant. (41)

Financial echoes this view: “So believe His Word that says we are redeemed from the curse of poverty” (30). This is *not* what the Word says, but is an addition to it, hence *another* gospel, and one of many examples of misinterpreting and misapplying Scriptures to manufacture credibility.

According to the Bible, Adam’s transgression ultimately led God to give the law to Israel so that sin would become both known and exceedingly sinful in the eyes of His people, thus serving as a child-conductor unto Christ (Rom. 7:7, 13; Gal. 3:24). The curse of the law is an issue of man’s sin. The law, being righteous and holy (Rom. 7:12), exposes man’s sin and condemns all those who do not “continue in all the things written in the book of the law to do them” (Gal. 3:10). However, no one can be justified before God by the law, because all have sinned and are worthy of death (v. 11; Rom. 3:23). To transgress even one aspect of the law is to transgress the entire law and thus to be condemned before God. We have been redeemed from the curse of the law, the curse of death, because Christ bore our sins on the tree and satisfied God’s righteous requirement. The law is not concerned with poverty or prosperity, but with righteousness and its satisfaction according to God’s way—death. The blessing that comes from this satisfaction is also according to God’s way—resurrection; that is, God gives the Spirit as the resurrected Christ to all those who are

redeemed through faith in Christ. God lives, moves, and operates in our experience in the realm of death and resurrection, not in the realm of money.

Misinterpreting the Good Land, the Blessing of Abraham, and the Seed

One of the most comprehensive types of Christ found in the Old Testament is the land of Canaan, “the good land.” In Paul’s Epistle to the Colossians, he emphasizes Christ in His all-inclusiveness, referring to “the kingdom of the Son” as “the allotted portion of the saints” (1:12-13). Christ is our New Testament “inheritance” (Acts 20:32), the fulfillment of the good land seen in the Old Testament. The good land is “the blessing of Abraham” in Galatians 3:14. The good land is also a great type of Christ in His all-sufficiency and all-inclusiveness. Yet here in Galatians, the promise to Abraham is called “the Spirit” (3:14). This is because Christ is experientially appropriated by us as the life-giving Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45; 2 Cor. 3:17).

Christ is also the seed. Galatians 3:16 says, “‘And to your seed,’ who is Christ.” In God’s eyes, Abraham has only one seed, Christ, and we must be in Him in order to participate in the promise given to Him. Therefore, the good land, the blessing of Abraham, and the seed are all details of the all-inclusive, all-sufficient, and all-encompassing Christ, the One who is the believers’ inheritance.

But how does the prosperity gospel apply these types? Rather than using them to portray the details of the all-inclusive Christ, they are utilized to misdirect the believer toward a more venal pursuit. *Prepare* promises, “You will eventually move into an area of living in harvest. You will be living in the ‘land of plenty,’ the equivalent of the Promised Land, referred to in the Bible!” (31). As we have seen, the promised land is a picture of Christ Himself with all the rich details of His person and work. To teach instead that the good land represents material prosperity is to defraud believers from their true prize—the daily gaining of Christ.

What does the prosperity gospel say about the blessing of Abraham? *Laws* says, “God blessed Abraham and his descendants with prosperity because He swore it in the covenant....Poverty is not a blessing of God” (39). *Prayer* says, “We are a part of Abraham’s family, and we should be blessed like faithful Abraham” and “God takes pleasure in our prosperity!” (70). *Financial* warns us, “Don’t Be Robbed of Your New Testament Blessing!” (25)—which in this gospel means an abundance of money and material possessions rather than the abundantly detailed experience of Christ.

What does the prosperity gospel say about the seed? Rather than telling believers that Christ Himself is the seed of life, the seed of the kingdom sown into the inner being

of His people, it teaches that dollars are seeds, and that you need to water your dollars with the Word of God (see *Prepare* 35-54).

Either Neglecting or Mutating God's Economy

Paul charged Timothy "to remain in Ephesus in order that you might charge certain ones not to teach different things...which produce questionings rather than God's economy" (1 Tim. 1:3-4). It is very possible to be teaching things concerning the Bible and yet miss the central point and focus of the apostles' New Testament ministry, which Paul calls "God's economy." The central work of God is to dispense Himself in the Son as the Spirit into His loving seekers, reproducing Himself and expanding His expression on earth. All the steps which God takes in our daily life are taken with this aim, this goal. Being conformed to the image of His Son is the glorious destiny to which we have been predestined.

But the prosperity gospel sees financial portfolios instead as a central part of God's predestination. *Freedom from Financial Bondage*, henceforth *Freedom*, by Dwight Nichols speaks of "Your Economic Destiny" and "God's Plan For Your Life" (1). *Freedom* audaciously considers the building of material wealth as God's economy, saying, "To build wealth in God's economy, you must believe...that you can have the financial resources that God says you can have" (187). Then it gives "21 Practical Steps to Build Wealth in God's Economy," an "action plan to 'jump-start' your personal finances" (xxi).

Positing personal property as the aim of Christ's redemption, God's will, God's economy, the believers' destiny, the promised land, and the blessing of Abraham defrauds believers of their true inheritance by causing them to regard prosperity as the major goal of their life. This replaces the scriptural pursuit and gaining of Christ with a false goal. It is a perverse mutation of the divine revelation to associate the Greek New Testament's use of the term *oikonomia* (economy), which Paul used to represent God's great plan to dispense Himself in His rich divine attributes and human virtues into His believers, with mere personal wealth. Having utterly fallen into this error, it is not difficult to chronicle or imagine what necessarily follows in this gospel, including detailed instructions and methods to follow in order to appropriate wealth. Following these ways, however, only causes believers to deviate from the path of God's economy.

Deviating from God's Economy

Covenant tells its readers,

You have a right to divine prosperity. But before it will ever become a reality in your life, you have to be totally

convinced that it's for you. You have to know that you know that you know that prosperity is the will of God for your life....With that same assurance of your salvation, you need to know that it is God's will for you to be financially prosperous. (16)

The only way to get such assurance is to read prosperity books, not the Bible, because if one reads the Bible in its context, he will emerge with a different view. Yes, some believers were wealthy, such as Philemon, but others were not, such as his slave, Onesimus. Paul even returned the runaway Onesimus to his owner, now as a brother, but still a slave and far from prosperous. Paul himself was not abundantly prosperous, but rather, "in imprisonments more abundantly, in stripes excessively, in deaths often" (2 Cor. 11:23), besides being often "in hunger and thirst...in cold and nakedness" (v. 27). If material wealth is God's New Testament blessing and poverty is a curse, then the apostle Paul was an extraordinarily cursed man. Even the Lord Jesus Himself was worse off than the foxes that have holes and the birds that have nests, and called His disciples to follow Him after giving them the assurance that "the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head" (Matt. 8:20).

Indeed, Paul at times had abundant provision, but more often he did not. And he was not alone. He spoke highly of "the churches of Macedonia, that in much proving of affliction the *abundance of their joy* and the *depth of their poverty* abounded unto the riches of their liberality" (2 Cor. 8:1-2, emphasis added). These believers were poor, but not cursed. Rather, their abundance was in their joy and generosity. Like Paul, they had learned the secret of knowing how both to abound and to be abased, by finding their contentedness in the Christ of God's economy (Phil. 4:11-12).

According to the prosperity gospel, after becoming convinced that "prosperity was bought and paid for by Jesus Christ" and that prosperity "is the perfect will of God for your life" (*Covenant* 18), there are several steps that need to be taken in order to accumulate your abundant blessings. "You have to do something to get them" (*Covenant* 63). *Prayer* tells a prospective follower,

The only thing that limits our income is us!...It's time to move from a poverty mentality to an abundance mentality, because important things need to be accomplished for the kingdom of God, and they need to be done in grand and glorious style! (63)

But a child of God living in His economy hears this: "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus, who...emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave" (Phil. 2:5-7). A person in God's economy wants the mind of Christ reproduced in him, desiring only to express Christ in His tender, inward feeling, caring nothing for a "grand and glorious style."

According to *Covenant*, “As legal citizens of God’s kingdom, we also have the right to prosper” (66). Preachers on television are often heard proclaiming that since we are sons of God, we are sons of the King, and a king’s son would never be poor. Because we are the King’s sons, we should live like kings! But a person who remains in the central lane of God’s New Testament economy does not want to “live *like* a king”; rather, he prefers to *live* the King—to live a life that is no longer I, but Christ (Gal. 2:20). This type of believer pursues the One who went to glory through Calvary, and his path to the kingdom’s glory is likewise through the cross, not through wealth.

Because the prosperity gospel is so contrary to the life of Christ indwelling the believers, as well as to the New Testament way of God’s economy, the prosperity gospel must help its new converts to deal with their inner witness, which is protesting the way they are now taking. *Covenant* attempts to calm this witnessing, saying,

If you want all things to be added unto you, don’t feel like a heel or like some less-than-spiritual Christian because you have set financial goals in your life. The Lord created us with some ambition and motivation....God has placed within us a desire to accomplish. We have been made in the image of God. (67)

In other words, the pursuit of prosperity is justified as being a reflection of God’s image. A person in God’s economy, however, seeks to be transformed into His image by means of the day-by-day organic transformation in his inner being that results from living in the spirit (2 Cor. 3:17-18). God’s image is not an attitude, ambition, or motivation but, rather, His own expression seen in the person of Christ. Our glorious destiny is to be like Him, even one with Him, and that objective governs the energy of the believer’s daily life.

Covenant charges believers to “Learn To Work Your Contract” because “God is waiting on you to make the first move and meet the contractual obligations in your contract for prosperity” (55). Under this contract, “We talk about Jesus redeeming us from poverty and purchasing for us a life of abundance” (55), but we are still obligated “to exercise or work the clauses of His Word” (56). We are then given a series of maxims, such as “Get Into the Flow of God’s System” (58) and “Become the Blessed of God” (59), exhortations which, while having a spiritual tenor to them, are vague and difficult to grasp. God’s economy, on the other hand, is much simpler. Rather than trying to fulfill “contractual obligations,” we spontaneously, effortlessly, even often unconsciously, fulfill the “righteous requirement of the law” when we walk according to the spirit (Rom. 8:4).

Laws adds another method: “If you are living in poverty and lack and want, change what you are saying. It will change what you have!” (80). *Laws* then misuses Matthew

18:19-20, which speaks of two or three praying in one accord for a backsliding believer. *Laws* misapplies these verses, cheapening their intent by saying, “It should be this firm between two Christians when they come together and believe that what they have agreed upon in the world of prosperity will come to pass” (80). *Laws* then directs believers to speak their prosperity goals until they are fulfilled. To direct believers into this kind of speaking is to mislead them away from the central purpose of God. Believers who live in God’s economy also speak much, but they speak to God in prayer for His interests, they speak to one another the high truths of God’s eternal purpose, and they speak to unbelievers the truths of the gospel.

Prepare promotes another method, saying, “God desires to promote you into new levels of prosperity, and He wants you to begin to water the seeds you have sown” (28). *Prepare* exhorts readers to not “kill your seed with your words! Water the seed you have sown by speaking life to it” (22). When the Bible mentions “seed,” the prosperity gospel speaks of “dollars.” The Word of God is viewed as water to help our dollar-seed grow—we are instructed to “speak life” to our dollars (19)! A believer who has been shepherded into God’s economy, however, has been helped to realize that God’s economy is centered on Christ and carried out *through* and *with* Christ. This believer enjoys the water in the word for the sake of growing Christ in his inner being.

The gospel of prosperity is a disturbing distortion of the gospel of Christ. Paul preached “Christ, and this One crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2). Prosperity preachers hawk wealth and entice believers with the promise of flourishing bank accounts. This “gospel” cheats and defrauds the saints of God, and base gain cannot be ruled out as a motivation (Titus 1:11). May the Lord recover His children who have been carried off as “spoil” (Col. 2:8) by this distracting, pernicious teaching.

by Gary Evans

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