

INTRODUCTION TO VOL.3, NO. 1

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First, please accept my sincere thanks for the honor of the invitation to give this Second Annual Yonas Deressa Memorial Lecture. I am grateful not only for this invitation, but also for the hospitality your community (specifically, the Mekane Yesus Seminary Gudina Tumsa Research Center) has shown to me and my wife during our exciting time here.

Our mutual colleague, Dr. Samuel Deressa, who has also served as my invaluable North American contact and resource as I have prepared these lectures, requested that I address the topic of “prosperity gospels” in a broader Lutheran theological context. I aspire to fulfill his request today [Wednesday, April 17, 2024], and on Thursday [April 18, 2024] and Friday [April 19, 2024] as well. The descriptive title through which I hope to fulfill his request over these three days is “Authentic Discipleship, the Cross, and the Lure of False Gospels.”¹

As you can see, this title breaks down into three distinct but interrelated topics. These individual topics are discipleship biblically considered; the theology of the cross as an important theological context within which to consider these matters; and, finally, some of the specifics of the so-called prosperity gospels themselves, including several of the most common biblical texts on which they are based. Each topic draws from the other two, and each one contributes something to the other two. In other words, there will be some overlap and a few references to the topics covered in the other presentations.

Before beginning the first major section, I should acknowledge immediately that a straightforward study of the prosperity gospels and the Bible passages that are most frequently cited in their support could easily take up all three of our days together. That might be incidentally useful, but such an approach would not provide the resources one needs to address the larger and more foundational theological issues that are at stake in any discussion of the prosperity gospels. While I do not ordinarily use analogies from biology, let me observe at the outset that the DNA of prosperity gospels is very different from that of a genuinely biblical and Lutheran understanding of the Christian gospel, including the Christian life that this gospel elicits. Moreover, the prosperity gospels read and understand the Word of God in Holy Scripture from an equally different interpretative framework from the one taught by classical Christian theology in general and by Lutheran theology especially (namely, in the latter case, its gospel-centered and gospel-informed hermeneutic). In a nutshell, these contextual but still no less substantive differences are the reason we will be spending some time in these first two lectures on the nature of authentic discipleship and the theology of the cross itself. If we can address the first two topics with a measure of clarity, our consideration of the prosperity gospels will follow with some theological and exegetical inevitability.

¹ As indicated here, the current iteration of these materials was originally given as three oral presentations on the dates indicated. On the basis of these presentations, and the subsequent questions and comments, I have revised the material ever so slightly, and in several instances enhanced the documentation. Most of the original oral dynamic remains, and no content has been altered. As they stand here, they are a hybrid of spoken presentations and written essays.