

THE LURE OF FALSE GOSPELS

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Abstract: The strong appeal of prosperity gospels in contexts of severe poverty and intense human suffering is understandable. Sadly, the dominant emphases of these prosperity gospels misunderstand the gospel itself and are typically a theology of glory rather than a theology of the cross. They routinely confuse law and gospel, promising temporal rewards for some human performance. They misunderstand the "already" / "not yet" eschatological structure of the New Testament, insisting that the "not yet" should be fully present in the here and now. Finally, prosperity gospels arise out of a thoroughly deficient hermeneutics (most notably, a philological carelessness and an altogether ahistorical and decontextualized reading of a very selective cluster of passages). Thankfully, the genuinely biblical gospel of Jesus Christ--which brings God's forgiveness of sins, new life, and eternal salvation--offers the theological resources and proclamatory power to address the needs that have given rise to the prosperity gospels in the first place.

INTRODUCTION: SETTING THE STAGE

This third presentation will attempt both to combine and apply what we have said about discipleship and the theology of the cross with some additional theological considerations that have to do directly with so-called "prosperity gospels." As one whose work has been in North America, my knowledge of the circumstances in Africa in general and Ethiopia in particular is based on secondary sources and on conversations with colleagues. I hope that what I am able to contribute here will suggest a theological foundation for evaluating and addressing those prosperity gospels that you encounter and with which you struggle.

Some years ago, what has usually been considered the flagship publication for North American evangelical Christians suggested that throughout sub-Saharan Africa, some form of the prosperity gospel (what this magazine called "prosperity-tinged Pentecostalism") was growing faster than not only other expressions of Christianity, but faster even than all of the other religious groups, including Islam.¹ The authors of this article went on to distinguish among various forms of the prosperity gospel; but they asserted that "many, if not most" of Africa's pastors proclaim at least "some version" of the prosperity gospel.² They concluded, somewhat dramatically, "the gospel of wealth now pierces the heart of Africa's dynamic, growing church."³ I leave you to judge the accuracy of that assessment.⁴

Historians of this movement have noted that the prosperity gospel phenomena (plural), while variegated, is an import from North American religion that reaches back into the early part of the 20th century.⁵ Lest I spend too much time on historical background, I am going to move to matters of

¹ This comes from "Gospel Riches," by Isaac Phiri and Joe Maxwell, in *Christianity Today*, July 2007, p. 23. At least at the time of this publication, Phiri was a writer living in Zambia.

² Phiri and Maxwell, p. 24.

³ Phiri and Maxwell, p. 26. In the same July 2007 issue of *Christianity Today*, Arlene Sanchez Walsh discussed the similar impact of "African-style" prosperity gospels in both Latin America and in immigrant Latino churches. See "First Church of Prosperidad," pp. 26-27.

⁴ This important qualifying sentence was directed to the overwhelmingly Ethiopian audience when this material was first presented in lecture form in Addis Ababa on April 19, 2024.

⁵ For historical accounts, along with the *Christianity Today* material cited above, see especially both the academic and popular work of Kate Bowler. For the Bowler material in this essay I am relying on Andrea Palpant Dilley, "When the Prosperity Gospel Got Personal," a book review of Bowler's book, *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved*, again in *Christianity Today*, January – February 2018, p. 76; an interview with Bowler conducted by Karen Swallow Prior, entitled "The

theology almost immediately.⁶ However, before doing so, I need to make one more historical (or perhaps more sociological) observation, and this has to do with the way these matters are often discussed in North America. So far I have referred casually to "prosperity gospels," without much definition, qualification, or nuance. In the United States, when these topics are discussed, one often also hears the catchy expression "health and wealth gospels." For the most part, the two labels are used interchangeably, and usually there is no confusion. However, more strictly speaking, there is a difference between the two; and, this difference can matter theologically. Simply put, "health" (or, if one wishes, "healing") was part of the reign of God brought to expression by the person and work of Jesus with his incarnation and the commencement of his public ministry. In other words, one can and must assert that Jesus did sometimes bring physical healing; but, conversely, it was never part of his ministry—then or now—to "make people rich." This distinction means that we need to exercise some caution and discrimination in our reflections going forward. In basic terms, many of the same critiques will apply, but not always in the same way.

I am dividing this third presentation into two overall parts. The first part deals with theological issues, while the second part takes up briefly a few biblical texts that are frequently invoked by those who promote a prosperity gospel.

THEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The first important theological order of business is to provide a definition. What do we mean by "prosperity gospels"? While my convictions on this topic have been clear from the beginning, I will attempt to state a definition as neutrally as I can, without prejudging things too much from the outset. For purposes of this exploration, I understand prosperity gospels to be those purportedly divine messages that claim the following: (a) Physical and/or material blessing are maintained as being essential elements of the biblical gospel, if not *the* gospel itself.⁷ (b) These kinds of blessing are in the realm of divine promise today and are not only part of one's fervent hope. (c) One should read the Bible primarily in terms of these expectations. Stated generically, using deliberately the very ambiguous English word, the prosperity gospels claim that "God wants you to *prosper*, and you can enjoy these blessings here and now."⁸

Before progressing, it is important to make three more positive observations. First, almost regardless of geography, prosperity gospels (again, understanding them in the most general sense) do not arise in a vacuum, and they are not *simply* a matter of religious entrepreneurs trying to "cash in." Sometimes they might be; but if they were only that, they would have negligible appeal. Much more seriously, prosperity gospels take root and may thrive in places where poverty is extreme, food is often scarce, violence of various kinds is routine, education is spotty at best, health care is minimal, and early death is all too normal. To the extent that the church catholic does not address these kinds of concerns, this is a more telling self-indictment than any criticism coming from the prosperity gospels could be.⁹

Second, while I have been speaking about prosperity gospels pretty generally, or without much qualification or differentiation, it needs to be acknowledged forthrightly that prosperity gospels are not the same, either in North America, Africa, or Latin America. Speaking bluntly, it is easier to dismiss those preachers for whom "prospering" means a lifestyle of opulence and excess, for whom the "abundant

Christian Woman's Path to Power," in *Christianity Today*, October 2016, pp. 64-67; and, finally, Jason Byasse, "Suffering with the Prosperity Gospel: A Review of *Everything Happens for a Reason*, in *The Other Journal*, April 19, 2018, which is an online journal accessed on November 20, 2019.

⁶ Readers will also note that I am not discussing at all the specific popular preachers who promote and propagate the prosperity gospels, sometimes with considerable visibility and media following. Information on particular figures within this movement, broadly construed, is a few internet searches away. I say this not to be dismissive entirely, because some of these figures have had enormous influence, but rather to emphasize that our primary responsibility is to assess their unifying and underlying theological assumptions and not the messages of one or another popular preacher.

⁷ This is based on Phiri and Maxwell, p. 26.

⁸ This is taken from Walsh, p. 27, but it is from a larger context to which I will return shortly.

⁹ The quote from Walsh, p. 27, is prefaced by her observation that pastors in immigrant Latino churches, availing themselves of "the African-style prosperity gospel" (p. 28) "view their theology as one of liberation" (pp. 27-28).

life" of which Jesus speaks in John 10 means enormous wealth and riches. To be sure, such preachers can be dangerous, and they cannot be ignored; but at least they are easily recognized and identified. On the other hand, one needs to be much more sympathetic and pastoral towards those people in our various contexts for whom "prosperity" more accurately refers to decent food, clean clothes, a place to sleep that is not threatened by violence, access to decent modern medicine, and at least some educational opportunity for all of their children. These people may misunderstand the New Testament gospel to one degree or another, but the manner of one's critique—in both substance and tone—will be significantly different.¹⁰

Third, recognizing this distinction, we should give some credit where credit is due. For all of the shortcomings that we will enumerate, those who practice (perhaps implicitly) a more "down-to-earth" and less extravagant version of the prosperity gospel at least take the biblical narrative and its texts seriously.¹¹ Whether they articulate these points or not, they intuitively understand the more "holistic" dimensions of biblical spirituality, and they have an inchoate recognition of the goodness of creation. They know, moreover, that Jesus really healed and fed people; and that he said "blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God," followed by, in the very next verse, "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied" (Luke 6:20b-21).¹² As Kate Bowler puts it, "the prosperity gospel looks at the world as it is and promises a solution. It guarantees that faith will always make a way."¹³

In the light of these comments, I now undertake the substantive critique, trying to be forthright and direct while at the same time heeding Luther's catechetical admonition to put the best construction on everything.

My critique of the prosperity gospels will move in these four directions: (1) The prosperity gospels misunderstand the gospel itself. They are typically a theology of glory and not a theology of the cross. (2) Using another of our central Lutheran distinctions, the prosperity gospels confuse law and gospel. (3) The prosperity gospels misunderstand the eschatological structure and thought of the New Testament. (4) The prosperity gospels are seriously deficient in their interpretation of the Bible (i.e., in their biblical hermeneutics), and these deficiencies play out in their selection and use of individual texts.

THE PROSPERITY GOSPELS MISUNDERSTAND THE GOSPEL ITSELF.

At one level, this is a terminological matter. First, and most important, the prosperity gospels, as usually presented, are not *gospels*. Their proponents' disclaimers notwithstanding, they do not focus on or emphasize the person and work of Jesus Christ *expressly for sinners*. For this reason, they are not "Good News," as the Greek word *euangelion* is usually translated. Why not? The prosperity gospels come in various shapes and sizes, but they have one thing in common: *They typically offer some combination of physical, material, and temporal rewards in return for human performance*. The "reward(s)" may be something in themselves quite positive, such as good crops or good health. In some instances, the reward may be more crassly material, along the lines of "perform and/or contribute to these levels, and you will be 'blessed' with previously unexperienced levels of wealth or prosperity." Also, the human performance to which one is exhorted may be something otherwise laudable and even pious, such as the strength of one's faith or more disciplined prayer; or, it may be something much less sanctified, such as the level of one's financial contributions to a particular "ministry." Literally in any instance, when someone is proclaiming something other than the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ to atone for the real sins

¹⁰ Phiri and Maxwell acknowledge these differences on pp. 28-29.

¹¹ After all, one would not have to critique their hermeneutics and resultant exegesis if they did not first take the Bible and its authority seriously.

¹² Some of the material in this paragraph is based on James K. A. Smith, "What's Right with the Prosperity Gospel?" in *Calvin Theological Seminary Forum*, vol. 16, no. 3 (Fall 2009), pp. 8-9.

¹³ Bowler, as quoted by Andrea Palpant Dillely, p. 76.

of real human beings, or when they are offering something other than or beyond the forgiveness of sins, this is not the New Testament gospel of Jesus Christ.¹⁴

One recalls that the indulgence salesmen of Martin Luther's era were in effect selling the remission of sins. Today, there does not seem to be as great a market for the remission of sins. The assumption may be crassly Pelagian, along the lines of "I'm personally okay, and I don't need forgiveness."¹⁵ Or, some people are in the market (quite literally) for more material or temporal rewards. In passing, I would observe that today's preachers of the prosperity gospels, at least in my part of the world in North America, are able to exploit a crudely and pervasively materialistic culture for precisely their own ends.

As we noted earlier, the aspiration to and expectation of tangible rewards immediately signals the presence of a theology of glory at work. Sadly, this is true both for the promoter of the prosperity gospels as well as for their often unwitting victims. The promoters of these gospels should and may in fact know better, and they and their claims can be addressed accordingly. Their victims, on the other hand, need to hear what gifts God really does promise, and not what spiritual exercise they are expected to perform in order to reap a material or temporal reward. When one's self-constructed theology of glory falls apart, faithful pastors and teachers should be present and ready with something infinitely better, with something eternal—in other words, a Word of God that sin, death, and the devil are powerless to destroy. Luther knew as much when he crafted the theses of the Heidelberg Disputation: "The law says, 'do this,' and it is never done. Grace says, 'believe in this,' and everything is already done" (Thesis No. 26). Those who are tempted by prosperity gospels need to hear the reminder: God's gospel is always his eternal promise in Jesus Christ; it is never a transaction, not even a "spiritual" one.

THE PROSPERITY GOSPELS CONFUSE LAW AND GOSPEL.

The prosperity gospels are in fact not gospel because their counterfeit benefits have displaced the forgiveness of sins. The Lutheran Confessions dealt with this problem repeatedly in the 16th century. To Luther, Melancthon, and their colleagues, their Roman opponents had "abolished the gospel" and "buried Christ" (see Apology of the Augsburg Confession IV, 81, 110, among many other places). The following summary is representative: "Since the opponents understand neither the forgiveness of sins, nor faith, nor grace, nor righteousness, they miserably contaminate this article [of justification], obscure the glory and benefits of Christ, and tear away from devout consciences the consolation offered them in Christ" (Apology of the Augsburg Confession IV, 3).

Following the Lutheran confessors' line of thought, the prosperity gospels falsify genuine New Testament proclamation not only because of their substitute set of benefits. Lutheran theology affirms and develops as its central teaching the apostle Paul's declaration that God has justified the ungodly on account of the completed work of Jesus Christ.¹⁶ This eschatological pronouncement—that is, in the absolution of sinners, God pronounces eternity's verdict in the present moment—is made within the context of the distinction between law and gospel, or God's commands and God's promises.

God's gospel is his *unconditional* promise that human sin has been forgiven and one's eternal destiny has been secured on the basis of the accomplished work of Jesus on the first Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Everything after that is announcement and acclamation. This is the God who has and will keep his promises; and his promise fulfilled and kept in Jesus Christ is the ground of all of our faith, trust, and eternal hope. The gospel is God saying, in effect, "I've taken care of this. There is literally nothing left for you to do."

God's law works differently. God's law makes demands. When and as it is spoken to sinners—in other words, to all of us—God's law always accuses. It exposes our sinful condition and all of its ugly

¹⁴ See again the Forde essay cited above, "Is Forgiveness Enough?"

¹⁵ It might be worth observing that this kind of claim can arise from either arrogance or ignorance, which invites different pastoral responses. The former instance is more deeply problematic than the latter.

¹⁶ See the "passive righteousness" discussion above, in the second presentation.

manifestations. In ordinary discourse, the language of the law is conditional; it is the language of "if . . . then." It is performance language, and it is routinely transactional. The language of the law is also seductive, because so much of our typical daily discourse is conducted in this sphere of interaction. Moreover, there is literally nothing "wrong" with God's law. It is *God's* law, after all. The only problem with the law has to do with the people to whom it is addressed. Functionally, this plays out inasmuch as the law cannot justify. In short, the law will never tell you, "Your sins are forgiven." Once again, Luther understood this: "The law says 'do this,' and it is never done" (Heidelberg Disputation Thesis 26). The prosperity gospels actually work in this second, legal realm. They impose conditions. They are transactional. They hold out certain kinds of rewards in return for kinds and degrees of performance. These conditions may be crafted and communicated ever so piously, but their effect is the same. As with any law statement left to stand on its own (i.e., one not countered and answered by God's promise), the burden is thrust back squarely onto the sinner. This is what is going on with the dynamics of the prosperity gospels: "Give and/or perform in order to get"; and when the desired result is not forthcoming, the onus continues to rest on the person who had the burden to begin with. In very blunt but I hope not unkind terms, the prosperity gospels are not really gospels at all; rather, they are law. The church and its theologians need to identify them as such.

It should also be observed that the prosperity gospels not only falsify the gospel and in the process confuse law and gospel. In addition, they do not get the law itself right either. Properly understood, God's law is never left to "hang out there" as an isolated indictment or accusation. Once again, the law of which we are speaking is *God's* law, and as such it always has a saving purpose. The intended point of God's law is never performance for its own sake, but real and *comprehensive* repentance, which is understood in classical Lutheran theology as a recognition of one's sin ("contrition," in the language of *The Book of Concord*), worked by the law's accusation, and a confident faith in Jesus Christ, bestowed entirely by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel in its spoken and sacramental forms. (See Article XII in both the Augsburg Confession and its Apology.)

This real gospel is predicated on God's promises, and not on any human performance. In the words of Timothy Saleska, God's promises create hope, authentic hope.¹⁷ God's promises kept in Jesus Christ engender confidence and trust. Conversely, false promises or conditions produce anxiety, fear, or worse. Promises unfulfilled, as is routinely the case with prosperity gospels, lead not just to disappointment but often also to exhaustion and eventually despair.

THE PROSPERITY GOSPELS MISUNDERSTAND THE ESCHATOLOGICAL STRUCTURE AND THOUGHT OF THE NEW TESTAMENT.

One of the great contributions of modern biblical scholarship is its recognition that the structure of biblical thought is to a very significant degree eschatological in character.¹⁸ The writers of our New Testament read the Hebrew Scriptures (or, perhaps more accurately, typically the Septuagint) eschatologically. In other words, and a little more specifically, they read their Bibles through the prism of a Christocentric eschatology. The New Testament itself saw the coming of Jesus as God's Messiah as the fulfillment of Old Testament hope and the agent of the coming reign of God. Jesus' public ministry indicated as much. He forgave sinners and welcomed outcasts. He healed the sick. He cast out demons. In several cases, he even brought the dead back to life. As he himself proclaimed, certainly the coming of this Jesus marked the arrival of the kingdom of God—and the longed-for new age—in its eschatological fullness. But then the unimaginable happened. This Jesus, in whom so many had come to place their hopes, was crucified; and, as an unavoidable conclusion for any reasonably conversant Jew, this meant that their hopes had died with him.

¹⁷ Saleska, "The Hope to which We Cling," in *Concordia Seminary Magazine*, Spring 2021, p. 9.

¹⁸ In general, the discussion in these paragraphs has been informed broadly by the contributions of an array of scholars, who approach the subject from various directions. Listed alphabetically, they are Geoffrey Bromiley, James Childs, Gordon Fee, Jeffrey Gibbs, Donald Hagner, Richard Hays, Robert Holst, Horace Hummel, Fleming Rutledge, Martin Scharlemann, Timothy Saleska, Lewis Smedes, and N. T. Wright. When their individual contributions are used specifically, they are appropriately cited.

One would think that Easter Sunday, when God raised Jesus from the dead, would have solved everything. Most certainly, in the most important sense it did, and it has. Jesus' resurrection ratified his atonement for human sin. In the words of Saint Paul, by his resurrection Jesus "was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness" (Romans 1:4). Jesus' resurrection is central to all New Testament hope, because it means that death—the last enemy (1 Corinthians 15:26)—will in fact never have the last word. The risen Jesus is the "firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Corinthians 15:20).

Yet even for Jesus' own contemporaries and immediate disciples, things were not so simple. The risen Jesus did remain with his apostles for 40 days, during which time he spoke about the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3). He promised the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5), a promise fulfilled with visible and audible manifestation some 10 days later (Acts 2:1-4).

It was left to Peter in the early chapters of Acts and the rest of the apostolic New Testament to make sense of the new situation in which the earliest followers of Jesus found themselves. In Jesus the Messiah, the end of the old age and the beginning of the eschatological new age had truly arrived, and with him the reign of God had come to tangible expression. The Holy Spirit had come, as promised. But Jesus himself had left again. Moreover, here is the most difficult part: Many of the same earthly realities his followers had known from before were still with them. God's servants were still getting sick and dying. Sin in all of its dark manifestations was still a personal and social force of destruction in the early Christian communities.

To this situation, by inspiration of the Holy Spirit the apostles interpreted these new circumstances for Christians struggling to come to terms with and understand their situation. Specifically, while the new age and the reign of God's grace had truly and *already* arrived with the coming of Jesus, it was *not yet* the new heaven and the new earth (Revelation 21). The new age now overlaps with the old age, but it does not do away with it completely. Only with the final return of Jesus does the "overlap" end. Only then will the promises of Revelation 21 be a comprehensive and exclusive reality: "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away" (21:4). All of this is bound up with Jesus' own promise at the end of Revelation: "Surely I am coming soon." To which John adds, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!" (22:20).

What does all of this mean for the "prosperity gospels"? The interpretative key comes with our use of the very well-known vocabulary of "already" and "not yet." The kingdom of God has already come; but it has not yet been fully and entirely consummated. Simply stated, advocates of the prosperity gospels do not recognize this current "tension" between the "already" and the "not yet."¹⁹ They are correct with respect to the first part, namely, that the kingdom of God most certainly arrived with the incarnation of Jesus. But, in the words of Gordon Fee, "they demand all of the future in the present age,"²⁰ and they cannot or will not live with the ongoing realities of life in a still fallen and broken world. However, while they may not be, the apostle Paul was. Writing to the Romans about 25 or 30 years after the resurrection of Jesus, Paul described his present situation well: "For I consider that the sufferings of the present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (8:18). This is the voice of one who understood eschatology.

In fairness, the preachers of prosperity gospels had their predecessors in the New Testament too. The gifted yet fractious and arrogant Corinthians had their own theologians of glory in their midst, who challenged Paul and his apostolic credentials in favor of other false apostles who seemingly were not burdened by Paul's own shortcomings. To these Corinthians Paul spoke of a crucified Messiah, with all this entailed, and of his own weaknesses and his "thorn in the flesh" (2 Corinthians 12). Gordon Fee

¹⁹ See especially Gordon D. Fee, *The Disease of the Health and Wealth Gospels* (Vancouver, British Columbia: Regent College Publishing, 2006), p. 33. For further help on this point, see also Lewis W. Smedes, editor and drafter, *Ministry and the Miraculous: A Case Study at Fuller Theological Seminary*, published by Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, in 1987, especially pp. 23-34.

²⁰ Fee, p. 33.

brings together these first and 21st-century contexts well, in connection with the eschatological emphases we have been making:

The problem in Corinth, and that which the wealth and health gospel is repeating, was to emphasize the "already" in such a way that they almost denied the continuing presence of the world. They saw Christ only as exalted, but not as crucified. They believed that the only thing that glorified God was signs and wonders and power. Because God heals, He must heal everyone. There is no place for weakness or hunger or thirst for this kind of eschatological existence.²¹

The "already / not yet" tension that I have been describing is routinely called "inaugurated" eschatology. There is also "realized eschatology" in its various forms, which tends to collapse the "not yet" into the "already" and claim that the coming reign of God is already fully present.²² This brief detour into quite common academic vocabulary is relevant here because advocates of the prosperity gospels seem to work with what Kate Bowler has described as an "over-realized eschatology,"²³ which not only overemphasizes the "already" but seems to deny altogether the ongoing force of the "not yet."²⁴

THE PROSPERITY GOSPELS ARE DEFICIENT IN THEIR INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE.

While it has become an expansive and sometimes very complicated discipline, one abiding purpose of biblical hermeneutics is to provide readers with the skills they need to read their Bibles so as to discern its meaning—both in terms of its central message and its individual texts. From there, if that enterprise is successful, Bible readers will have some resources to help them apply these texts to their Christian faith and life. As we have repeated several times in each of these presentations, the central message of the Bible, to which everything else relates and which informs everything else, is the gospel of Jesus Christ. As Saint Paul put it in Romans 4, "Jesus our Lord . . . was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification" (vv. 24b-25); or, a few verses later, "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (5:8). Using these and an assortment of similar passages, Martin Luther called this "the first and chief article," and he went on to evaluate teachings of the Roman church of his day in terms of their fidelity to or their falsification of this first, chief article. (See the Smalcald Articles, Part II, Article 1, followed by Luther's use of this "first, chief article" throughout his evaluative comments in Article 2 of these same Smalcald Articles.) This means that as we look at several of the favorite passages invoked by the prosperity gospels, we will seek to determine whether their interpretation underscores or undermines this gospel. We will be asking: Does their interpretation or use of a passage highlight this New Testament gospel? Or, conversely, does it divert attention from it?

Second, as one of the great prayers of the church puts it, Christians beseech God to help them "read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest" the Holy Scriptures.²⁵ We seek humbly to understand the reasons God gave us these Scriptures in the form and manner in which the Holy Spirit has inspired them. In other words, briefly put, we seek to understand and apply to our lives the *Spirit-intended* meaning of these texts.

God first gave these Scriptures through entirely human authors, to ancient peoples, in ancient languages. Each individual writing has its own real, flesh-and-blood, this-worldly setting. Before we are in a position to say what these texts *mean*, we have to try—with all the sanctified scholarly resources we can muster—to understand what they first *meant*, to the human author who wrote a particular passage,

²¹ Fee, p. 32.

²² See Richard B. Hays, "Operation Evil Power," a helpful, short essay on Colossians 2:15, in *Christianity Today* (February 2004), p. 74.

²³ See the Dilley review of Bowler, in *Christianity Today*, January – February 2018, p. 76.

²⁴ This is based on but is not identical to material in both Bowler and in James K. A. Smith, "What's Right with the Prosperity Gospels," pp. 8-9.

²⁵ *Lutheran Service Book*, Prepared by the Commission on Worship of The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (St. Louis: Concordia, 2006), p. 309.

and to the persons or communities who first heard or read them.²⁶ To state this positive point from the other direction, a passage cannot mean for us today what it never could have meant to its first human author or to its first human audience.²⁷

In practice, these observations mean that one will need to be attentive to language, to history, and, above all, to context(s). In the passages to which we will turn our attention in a moment, we will be raising questions about one or more of these considerations, either individually or in some combination. How should the passage be translated? Does one's translation speak to a passage's relevance to the claims of the prosperity gospels? What is the historical context of a particular passage? In other words, to whom was this text first spoken or written? What would it have meant—and what *could* it have meant—to this first audience? Is this historical meaning of the passage congruent with the claims made by supporters of prosperity gospels today?

Finally, the all-important issues of *context* do speak to these questions. This may be a relatively straightforward matter of literary or historical context. On the other hand, it may be a more involved question of assessing not only the historical setting of a passage but the role of this text in the overall presentation or argument of a longer writing or narrative.

To oversimplify considerably, this procedure may be "boiled down" to a couple of rules. First, attend to the language carefully (i.e., to the precise vocabulary and the translation of the passage). Second, be vigilant about context and potentially multiple contexts (and the plural is deliberate). Roughly speaking, this amounts to three questions: In what historical context was this passage first written? To whom was it initially spoken? What was its role in the life of ancient Israel (for Old Testament passages) or for the early Christian church (for New Testament passages)?

To preview our final section, we will be assessing one or more of the following issues: (a) matters of selection, or why a particular passage was chosen; (b) matters of translation, or whether the language of the text was rendered accurately; and (c) matters of historical and/or literary context. (In connection with one passage below, the celebrated text from Romans 8, we will also need to explore very briefly a more technical issue about the actual wording of the verse itself.) When we do so, we will discover that the principal texts on which the prosperity gospels are most commonly based will not stand up to careful exegetical scrutiny. In other words, the claims made by the prosperity gospel find no basis in any responsible interpretation of the Word of God.

SPECIFIC MATTERS OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

The several passages below are considered in what I regard—very informally and perhaps arbitrarily—as their order of importance to the claims of the prosperity gospels. They are illustrative. There are additional texts that others deem relevant. In terms of their relevance to the prosperity gospels, most of these texts can be addressed without a lot of intense research in commentaries as long as we keep a few of our hermeneutical basics (see above) in mind. The discussions will vary in length based on how straightforward or complex the arguments need to be.

REGARDING JEREMIAH 29:11, "FOR I KNOW THE PLANS I HAVE FOR YOU, DECLARES THE LORD, PLANS FOR WHOLENESS [*SHALOM*] AND NOT FOR EVIL, TO GIVE YOU A FUTURE AND A HOPE."

One does not need to be a full-blown advocate of the prosperity gospel to use—or, more typically—misuse this passage. The use of this verse to support a version of the prosperity gospel depends on what translation one uses. It really only "works" to that end when one uses the King James Version: "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to *prosper* you and not to harm you, plans to

²⁶ I am here borrowing the language of Andrew Bartelt, namely, that what a passage means is based on what it initially meant. As he and many others unfold it, this is a guiding principle of what has long been called the historical-grammatical method of biblical interpretation.

²⁷ This has been helpfully unfolded in Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), in their introductory chapter, especially p. 34.

give you hope and a future.” When I quote from the English Standard Version (or from most other modern translations), one sees immediately the word “wholeness” and not “prosper.” This is a much more accurate rendering of the familiar Hebrew word *shalom*. Instead of signaling material prosperity, *shalom* is a holistic, covenant term, which communicates that all is well between Yahweh and his people. Finally, such *shalom* is always a gift from God and never a product of human initiative or accomplishment.²⁸

Also, perhaps no other passage we will consider better illustrates the need to pay attention to context. The main point is clear: This passage was not spoken to modern Christians about their material or financial situation. Rather, it was addressed by God, through his prophet Jeremiah, to the people of Israel in the sixth century before the coming of Jesus. In other words, it was not addressed to any one individual—much less to any individual today—but to God’s ancient people as a community. It is part of Jeremiah’s letter to a collective people in exile, who were under the thumb of Babylon. In addition, right before the verse in question, Yahweh indicates that he would fulfill his promise and bring them back to the land, but only after their 70 years of exile were completed. This means, of course, that very, very few of those living at the time these words were spoken would be around to realize their fulfillment. This real fulfillment of the passage would be more and better than any short-term monetary prosperity might buy. As the text indicates, Judah would have a future and a hope. Yahweh would hear their prayers (29:12), they would be restored as God’s people, and out of this reconstituted people would come the Messiah who would himself embody and deliver on all of God’s promises.

Those who would be frustrated by the failures of the prosperity gospel need to be told that God has something even better in store for them. Read carefully and in context, this passage from Jeremiah 29 contributes to that proper understanding.

REGARDING THIRD JOHN, VERSE 2, “BELOVED, I PRAY THAT ALL MAY GO WELL [EUODOUSTHAI] WITH YOU AND THAT YOU MAY BE IN GOOD HEALTH [HUGIAINEIN], AS IT GOES WELL [EUODOUTAI] WITH YOUR SOUL.”

Perhaps more than any other single New Testament text, this passage has been central to the practice and public appeals of those who advocate prosperity gospels. (This seems to be true especially in North America.) The second verse of John’s very short letter, it is part of John’s personal greeting to “the beloved Gaius,” who is contending for the truth of the gospel in the face of doctrinal error. The text is often cited by advocates of the prosperity gospels because the first and third words in question, both forms of the verb *euodoo*, have sometimes been translated as “prosper” (e.g., by the King James Version). Then, if with respect to *hugiainein*, one opts for “good health,” one seems—superficially—to have both dimensions of “health and wealth” gospels.

In fact, this is a misreading, on the grounds of both language and context. With respect to language, the better rendering of *euodoo* is to “go well.” Moreover, historically, the combination of wishing both that things go well for the one to whom one is writing, and that one’s addressee be in good health, was a common greeting in ancient correspondence.²⁹ Gaius would not have concluded that John was praying for his personal, material prosperity, especially not in the context of the doctrinal priorities of this letter. He certainly would not have concluded that John was praying for the material prosperity of Christians at all times and in all places.³⁰ Such an interpretation would have been inconceivable to either John or Gaius.

Gordon Fee summarizes the point well: “We may rightly learn from this text to pray for our brothers and sisters that ‘all will go well with them’; but to argue from the text that God wills our financial prosperity is to abuse the text, not use it.”³¹

²⁸ See Richard L. Schultz, *Out of Context: How to Avoid Misinterpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2012), pp. 82-83.

²⁹ Fee, p. 10. In support of his claim, Fee cites the collection of personal letters from the Loeb series.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

REGARDING JOHN 10:10, "I CAME THAT THEY MAY HAVE LIFE AND HAVE IT ABUNDANTLY [*PERISSON*]."

This beloved promise of our Lord is situated within the account of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. It takes little imagination to recognize why it has been pressed into service by those who endorse the prosperity gospels, and that is its use of the adverb "abundantly" (*perisson*) to modify the clause "in order that they might have life [*zoen*]." Once again, the vocabulary will not bear the weight sometimes put on it. A better rendering of the verse, and in particular *perisson*, would be, "I came in order that they might have life and have it to its fullest." Material prosperity is not entailed here either by this adverb, or by the common Johannine word for life, *zoe*.

Also, as is well known, whereas the synoptic gospels typically speak of the reign of God, John's gospel talks much more commonly about "eternal life." Once again, an eschatological dimension is present and important, for John is talking about the new life God gives now and will give in the age to come. To capture this dimension, N. T. Wright has rendered the verse in question (with its adverb *perisson*), "I came so that they could have life—yes, and have it *full to overflowing*."³²

The passage is further explained by its context in John 10, where beginning in the very next verse Jesus declares, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. . . . For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord" (10:11, 17-18a). The self-sacrifice of the Son of God for human sin was about much more—something much different and better—than increasing his disciples' standard of living.

In short, reading John 10 in terms of material or physical prosperity is foreign to the language, the literary setting, and the theological context of the passage.

REGARDING ROMANS 8:28, "AND WE KNOW THAT GOD CAUSES ALL THINGS TO WORK TOGETHER FOR GOOD TO THOSE WHO LOVE GOD, TO THOSE WHO ARE CALLED ACCORDING TO HIS PURPOSE."³³

With respect to this beloved passage, my selection of the above translation from the New American Standard Bible instead of the English Standard Version involves a matter of textual preference. Specifically, I have chosen the reading of Pauline papyrus number 46, dated from about AD 200, and Codex Vaticanus, from the fourth century. The other, shorter reading, which admittedly is reflected in the Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament (as well as the United Bible Societies edition) and the ESV translation, does have diverse support, probably most notably in Codex Sinaiticus (also fourth century).³⁴ So, textually, it is a close and debatable call. What matters theologically is that God is the subject of the sentence.³⁵ Indeed, generally, when one is theologically in the realm of gospel—as Romans 8 most emphatically is—God is the subject of the sentences.

With respect to the passage itself, at a minimum it means that Christians can be confident resting in the providence of the triune God, who has revealed himself to be gracious in Jesus Christ. But very decisively, and contrary to some popular misunderstandings, Romans 8:28 does not mean that all of the things that happen to Christian people are somehow "the will of God," or that all things in an unqualified way will have a good outcome. This recognition means that one must be very cautious not to identify the "good" too quickly or glibly, and certainly not to identify the good with what may be personally pleasing

³² N. T. Wright's translation is provided in his popular commentary *John for Everyone*, Part 1, Chapters 1—10 (London: SPCK, 2002), p. 147. For a discussion of the eschatological point, see Fee, p. 11.

³³ Please note, this translation is from the New American Standard Bible, updated in 1995.

³⁴ Without going into any more detail, the older work of Bruce Metzger opts for the shorter reading, but he offers the following helpful comment: "Since *sunergei* may be taken to imply a personal subject, *ho theos* seems to have been a natural explanatory addition made by an Alexandrian editor." Metzger's comment seems implicitly to address whatever theological concerns may arise from the variant. See *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* [London: United Bible Societies, 1975], p. 518.

³⁵ As the Metzger quote indicates, God should be considered the subject of the sentence regardless of which variant reading one chooses.

or desirable.³⁶ The passage does affirm that for those who love God and are called by God, finally and ultimately this merciful God can and will work "good" out of even the most difficult and tragic of human circumstances.³⁷

Still, to this point, neither you nor I get to prescribe how this "work[ing] together for good" may happen, nor should we claim some insight into how God may or may not be exercising his providence. Above all, one will not try to identify the "goodness" in some particular event, and certainly not in some tragedy. The point is an important one: avoid any and all facile "explanations," for which there is no Word of God. It is very possible, even probable, that often one will never know the answer to the question of what good God might have been working through a particular episode in one's life.³⁸ As always, context is essential here. In Romans 8:28, Paul associates "the good" with the purpose of God, which in verse 29 he identifies as being conformed to the image of His Son.³⁹ As we read elsewhere in the Scriptures, being conformed to the image of God's Son may entail suffering trials (1 Peter 1:6-9) or enduring discipline (Hebrews 12:5b-11, in turn quoting Proverbs 3:11-12).⁴⁰ Such discipline can be an exacting teacher, for it exposes our own insufficiencies, breaks down our idolatries of autonomy and self-reliance, and in the process invites and draws us to entrust ourselves more completely to the grace and mercy of God.

REGARDING PHILIPPIANS 4:13, 19, [13] "I CAN DO ALL THINGS THROUGH HIM WHO STRENGTHENS ME. . . . [19] AND MY GOD WILL SUPPLY EVERY NEED OF YOURS ACCORDING TO HIS RICHES IN GLORY IN CHRIST JESUS."

First, no one can argue responsibly that the "all things" in verse 13 means anything and everything in an unqualified sense. Rather, it is generally taken to mean that God in Christ will help believers to do whatever they are called upon to do. In fact, however, the larger context (i.e., Philippians 4:10-20) indicates that the "all things" (4:13) refers to "whatever situation" (4:11) or to "any and every circumstance" (4:12) in which Paul might find himself. The point is that in any of these circumstances, Paul can rest secure and content through Jesus Christ, who gives him strength and will provide him with all of his needs.⁴¹ Finally, verse 19 is part of Paul's statement of gratitude to the Philippians for their having supported him materially, which Paul calls "a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God."⁴²

REGARDING MALACHI 3:10, "BRING THE FULL TITHES INTO THE STOREHOUSE, THAT THERE MAY BE FOOD IN MY HOUSE. AND THEREBY PUT ME TO THE TEST, SAYS THE LORD OF HOSTS, IF I WILL NOT OPEN THE WINDOWS OF HEAVEN FOR YOU AND POUR DOWN FOR YOU A BLESSING UNTIL THERE IS NO MORE NEED."

The post-exilic prophet Malachi is writing in about 450 BC, and he is an early contemporary of Ezra and Nehemiah. The first verse of this chapter is the prophecy that would be fulfilled by the coming of John the Baptizer (see Matthew 11:10), and then by Jesus himself. Malachi 3:10, the verse in question, comes as part of an illustration of Judah's post-exilic failures, despite the fact that they had returned to the land and their temple had been rebuilt. Their inattention to the tithe was one illustration of these failures (3:6-12). The text, then, is about faithfulness to the Torah, and it is not intended as a practical investment strategy whereby God's people could cultivate material wealth. Rather, whether in the Pentateuch or here

³⁶ See Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), pp. 427, 450.

³⁷ This is based loosely on comments by Michael Middendorf and Mark Schuler.

³⁸ This is a revision of a point made by Marva J. Dawn, *Being Well When We're Ill: Wholeness and Hope in Spite of Infirmary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg-Fortress, 2008), p. 67.

³⁹ See, most recently, N. T. Wright, *Into the Heart of Romans: A Deep Dive into Paul's Greatest Letter* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2023), pp. 154-174, especially pp. 154-161.

⁴⁰ See Marva Dawn, pp. 57ff. Also, see Millard Erickson, pp. 427, 450.

⁴¹ See Donald A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), pp. 115-116.

⁴² See Schultz, *Out of Context*, p. 44.

in Malachi, the tithe was intended as a response to Yahweh's prior gifts, first in the exodus event and now in the fifth century, having returned to their land after the exile.

For New Testament Christians, the same principle applies: Christians give not in order to get, or to get more, but rather because they have been *given to* in Jesus Christ. Finally, this passage from Malachi, first spoken in its Old Testament context, is alluded to by the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 9. There, in the broad context of the generosity of the Corinthians to the beleaguered saints in Jerusalem, Paul is resolutely focused on the gifts of God in Jesus Christ, genuine thanksgiving for these gifts, and the appropriate response of God's new covenant people.⁴³ In the process, he turns any thought of some prosperity gospel on its head. God gives bountifully, and God's people pass his gifts on to others. Hear the language of Saint Paul:

You will be enriched in every way for all your generosity, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God. For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints, but is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God. By their approval of this service, they will glorify God because of your submission flowing from your confession of the gospel of Christ, and the generosity of your contribution for them and for all others, while they long for you and pray for you, because of the surpassing grace of God upon you. Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift! (2 Corinthians 9:11-14)

EPILOGUE TO ALL THREE PRESENTATIONS

In these three presentations, we have had the opportunity to address an important topic by considering it within the larger context of the life of Christian discipleship, the theology of the cross, and finally the set of considerations that necessarily informs any direct theological examination of the prosperity gospels. In one respect, the prosperity gospels and the issues to which they give rise illustrate a pattern that runs through the history of Christian theological reflection. In the providence of God, questions, debates, and even error have been used often to help the church and its teachers clarify its own position on topics that everyone recognizes are central to its identity, its confession of faith, and its mission. This was true of Arius and the Trinity, Pelagius and theological anthropology, and the late medieval Roman church in terms of nature of the gospel itself.

While other examples could be given, each one of these three individually and collectively touches on the heart of the Christian faith. The fourth-century debates resulted in the ecumenical confession that Jesus is indeed the incarnate Son of God, of one substance with the Father. The early fifth-century controversy over original sin led people like Saint Augustine to reaffirm what Paul had told the Ephesians, namely, that fallen human beings are dead in trespasses and sins, and that their only hope of salvation rests in God's mercy in Jesus Christ (2:1-2, 8-10). The 16th-century saw itself embroiled in an argument about whether human merit played any role in the attainment of salvation, and if so what that role might be. Martin Luther realized more profoundly than most of his contemporaries that these were not academic games but rather matters of spiritual life and death. Once again, going back to the Heidelberg Disputation (among countless other places), Luther insisted, "the law brings the wrath of God, kills, reviles, accuses, judges, and condemns everything that is not in Christ" (Thesis 23), and, a few sentences later, "the love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it" (Thesis 28).

Given their prevalence around the world, it may not be saying too much to claim that the prosperity gospels have prodded the church to reassert, yet again, what is not the gospel—and, more importantly, what the gospel truly is. Luther's study of the Bible—in context, with the best academic tools at his disposal—taught him that idolatrous human beings could only be saved by a recreative act of the triune God. The only "exchange" he was interested in was Jesus Christ's righteousness for his sin.

⁴³ In the context of this collection and the example of the persecuted Macedonian churches, Linda L. Belleville makes the sobering observation: "Sadly, it is often those having the least, rather than the most, who model discipleship the best." See Belleville, "Imitate Me, Just as I Imitate Christ": 1-2 Corinthians," in Longenecker, ed. *Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament*, p. 139.

There could be no deals or transactions, no reciprocity, but only God's gifts in Jesus Christ and Martin Luther being "given to."

What was Luther given? He was not unaware of material human need, nor was he unresponsive to it. But Luther, his family, his colleagues, and their students and congregants could and did help with those kinds of things.⁴⁴ That was part of their vocation, or part of their discipleship. Luther knew, though, that in the terrors of sin and conscience the only gospel that would matter was God's absolution for the sake of Jesus Christ: "Your sins are forgiven." Without such forgiveness, the size of one's land holdings or bank account—whether in 16th-century Germany, North America, or 21st-century Ethiopia—do not matter.

At the same time, for Martin Luther and for those he taught, this gospel of the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ was not a minimalistic or "pared down" message. For him, this gospel itself was the whole bundle of God's very good gifts. Luther said as much in his Small Catechism. In talking about the comprehensive benefits of the Lord's Supper, he said: "The words 'given for you' and 'shed for you for the forgiveness of sins' show us that forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are given to us in the sacrament through these words, *because where there is forgiveness of sin, there is also life and salvation*" (SC V, 5-6). It turns out that Martin Luther knew not only what the gospel is. He knew what genuine prosperity is as well.

⁴⁴ See especially Robert Rosin, "Bringing Forth Fruit: Luther on Social Welfare," in *A Cup of Cold Water: A Look at Biblical Charity*, ed. Robert Rosin and Charles P. Arand (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary Publications [Monograph Series—Number 3], 1996), pp. 117-164.