

# Theological Pitfall of Prosperity Gospel in the Nigerian Church

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## **Abstract**

Prosperity gospel as a charismatic movement is a global culture. The effects of the prosperity movement are so much felt across the globe that there is today hardly a Christian denomination or sect which has not in one way or the other been influenced by this movement. What is responsible for the growth and spread of the prosperity gospel philosophy? All indications show that prosperity gospel churches are the fastest growing brand of Christianity in Nigeria today. The main focus of this article is to demonstrate how prosperity gospel has been misleading or rather potentially misleading if careful attention is not paid to it. The paper considers three major phases, namely: health, wealth and liberation. This article attempts to systematize the teachings, it is repositioned to consider the merits and demerits found in this theology. Finally, it presents the theological pitfall therein.

## **1.0 Introduction**

Prosperity gospel is a brand of theology that upholds amongst other beliefs that Christians must be faithful to the Bible. It is popularly referred to as dominion theology, faith gospel, or health and wealth gospel, it emphasises prosperity as a fruit of faith. Physical and spiritual poverty are major factors responsible for prosperity gospel in Africa. The rate of poverty in Africa in comparison to other continents is extremely high. Indeed, some people have described Africa thus: 'To think of Africa is to think of poverty'. The causes of poverty in Africa vary from one country or region to the other. Droughts, bad governance, laziness, corruption, ethnic conflicts and civil war are, however, some of the common causes. Others have also accused colonialism as a major cause. To this George Folarin says Christian theology must begin and continue to be faithful to the Christian Scripture, it should also take into serious consideration the human experience (p. 70). Hence, to move from poverty to prosperity, one needs deliverance from the 'spirit of poverty'. In these contexts of poverty, Pentecostalism has found fertile ground in Nigerian communities. This article attempts to systematize the teachings, and then identify the merits and the

demerits of the prosperity gospel in Africa as a whole and the possible contributions of this teaching to sustainable development. The paper critically reviews the Pentecostal gospel of prosperity in the context of the poverty experienced in sub-Saharan Africa.

## **2.0 The Emergence of the Prosperity Gospel**

The Council of Trent states, "Where there is irreverence, there will be corruption". Scandal follows corruption, just as night follows the day. It is an undeniable fact that prosperity gospel theology is a global phenomenon. It is one of the fastest growing religious movements in the world today. The African continent is awash with prosperity Gospel Churches and Church-related institutions such as the mainstream and Orthodox Churches. Although prosperity gospel does not meet the criteria, standards, or credibility of what is conveyed in the scriptures concerning wellbeing, however, it does grant an opportunity to address the subject-matter. Commenting on Prosperity gospel theology, Sarles Kemis says:

It is not a denomination, a tradition, or even a school of thought. It is a broad-based, variegated movement that overlaps both the charismatic and non-charismatic spectrums. It seems to be a blending of the positive thinking emphasis of a Norman Vincent Peale or a Robert Schuller and the faith healing ministry of an Oral Roberts. It certainly has a charismatic flavouring to it, but is by no means limited to Pentecostalism (p. 329).

Unfortunately, people attracted to the prosperity gospel are not the poorest of the poor says Herman Kroesbergen, but especially the young, urban middle-class and those who would like to see changes in the way churches are organized, the hierarchy. This reveals that most people are least at home with mainline churches because of its clericalism (p. 76). The movement imbibes deeply from the existentialism of the present age, which places a premium on human experience. It also borrows heavily from the materialistic emphasis of affluent, suburban Christianity.

Some of the prominent personalities of prosperity television preachers in the late 1970s and early 80s, writes Ken, include Kenneth Hagin, pastor of the Rhema Bible Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma; Kenneth and Gloria Copeland, founders of Kenneth Copeland Ministries in Fort Worth, Texas; Bob and Marte Tilton, founding pastors of the Word of Faith Church, Farmers Branch, Texas; John Osteen, pastor of the Lakewood Church, Houston, Texas; Jerry Savelle, evangelist and former associate of Kenneth Copeland; Charles and Frances Hunter, faith healers and founders of the City of Light, Kingwood, Texas; and Charles Capps, an Oklahoma pastor (p. 329).

In Africa, one of the earliest inspirers and promoters of this gospel was the late Nigerian Archbishop Benson Idahosa. In West Africa especially, it is hard to avoid churches with a strong prosperity theme. They find their most ostentatious expressions in the wildly successful ministries of preachers like Ghana's Nicholas Duncan Williams or Nigeria's David Oyedepo. Across Africa, prosperity Gospel teachings are central to the ubiquitous culture of revivals and miracle crusades, so much so that they overwhelm more traditional charismatic or Pentecostal doctrines.

The story of Robert Tilton is typical of the emergence of prosperity preachers. As an unbeliever, he was involved with drugs and the occult, having been a devotee of Edgar Cayce for a brief time. He was converted to Christ through the witness of a group of charismatic young people. Soon afterwards these same young people cast demons out of Tilton home, where startling occultic phenomena had been occurring. At this stage, Tilton was introduced to the Pentecostal understanding of Spirit baptism and received the gift of tongues. The result was God's call to preach, to which he responded by becoming a travelling tent evangelist. During his days of itinerating he was introduced to prosperity thinking through the teaching of John Osteen and the writings of Kenneth Copeland and Kenneth Hagin. In the mid-1970s, Tilton reportedly received a vision from God telling him to build a "Full Gospel" family church in Farmers Branch, Texas. The church began in March 1976 with seven people. Today the Word of Faith World Outreach Centre has a membership of over 8,000 as well as a Christian academy, a Bible school, a daily television program, a seminar ministry, a publishing ministry, and a satellite network to 1,700 other churches in North America. Certainly, Tilton has experienced prosperity of a sort, but it is still an open question whether this is biblical prosperity and whether this prosperity is designed for every believer in every society in all ages.

With a snapshot, the major emphasis of this movement can best be summarized by rewording the old adage about being "healthy, wealthy, and wise". In this case, the good news of the prosperity gospel is how to be healthy, wealthy, and demon-free which is a common phenomenon in Africa. The claim that the prosperity gospel came to Africa from the West, America in particular overlooks the fact that traditional religions have been battling with the problems of sickness, demonic oppression and poverty from time immemorial. It also forgets that prayer proffered solution to the African problem by the traditional religion. This establishes that prosperity gospel has some roots in a sense in the African tradition religion before the coming of Christianity. Due to corruption in Africa, economic deprivation and health-related problems, Nigerian man or woman easily becomes the chief drivers of prosperity Gospel, though there could be many other reasons for this clamour.

### 3.0 The Power to be Healthy

Candy Gunther Brown articulates that divine healing is the most essential marker of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in Nigeria. It is divine healing, rather than speaking in tongues or prosperity that characterises Pentecostalism as distinct from other forms of Christianity (p. 3). The universality of the importance of healing in Pentecostalism does not, however, imply a singular theology of healing.

The provision of healing, according to the prosperity gospel, is found in the Atonement. A trilogy of Scripture passages is used to support this notion. First is Isaiah 53:5 which says “by His scourging we are healed”. This is interpreted to mean that Christ was the divine Substitute for all forms of physical illness, so that through the Cross, healing is as readily available as forgiveness of sin. In other words, Jesus bore the curse of poverty to get us out of it, not to leave us in it. Second, Matthew 8:16-17 presents Jesus' healing ministry as fulfilling what Isaiah the prophet had said (cf. Isa. 53:4). The conclusion is drawn that since Jesus healed all who came to Him in His day (cf. Matt. 8:16), He still does the same today. Indeed, Jesus' healing power continues to happen among all people but not in the way of the prosperity gospel. In the words of Dennis Bennett, “Everybody knows Jesus is tender-hearted, and would never want anyone to be sick” (Ken, p. 328). The third reference is in 1 Peter 2:24, which says “by His wounds you were healed. At first glance, this seems to teach that physical healing was provided through Christ's substitutionary sufferings.

Outstandingly, the prosperity gospel evangelists narrate thirty-three miracles of Jesus. Out of these, seventeen are healings and four are exorcisms that involve healing. In one of several similar summaries of Jesus' ministry, Matthew tells us that “Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every infirmity” (Matt. 9:35). The healing of people who were sick, incapacitated or handicapped was characteristic of Jesus' ministry; and nowhere is Jesus seen turning away a person who sincerely wishes to be healed. It is only unbelief that prevents Jesus from healing (cf. Mark 6:5-6). If, then, Jesus is “the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb. 13:8), he must be willing and ready to heal all who now come to Him, through the church, in faith. In a sense, faithfulness is the key to healing of any sort.

The book of Deuteronomy chapter 28 is also used to demonstrate that sickness is a curse of the Law. Then Galatians 3:13 is introduced to prove that Christ has redeemed believers from the curse of the Law, which in this view, includes the curse of sickness and disease. Underlying this contention, of course, is the assumption that it is never God's will for anyone to be sick. The following

unambiguous assertion from Hagin illustrates this point: "Don't ever tell anyone sickness is the will of God for us. It isn't! Healing and health are the will of God for mankind. If sickness were the will of God, heaven would be filled with sickness and disease" (Ken, p. 329). A number of biblical texts are marshalled in defence of this basic presupposition. The passages are drawn from the Pentateuch (Exod. 15:26; 23:25), the Psalms (103:3), Proverbs (4:20-22), the Prophets (Isa. 33:24; Jer. 30:17), the Gospels (Matt. 4:23; 10:1; Mark 16:16-18; Luke 6:17-19), and Acts (5:16; 10:38).

The possession of the above divine healing is through the exercise of faith. The approach to faith can best be understood by the phrases such as "name it and claim it" or "believe and you will receive". In defence of its view of faith, the prosperity movement camps on Mark 11:23-24 that says "truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, be taken up and cast into the sea,<sup>1</sup> and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says is going to happen, it shall be granted him. Therefore, I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they shall be granted you". These verses are interpreted in the most literal and unrestricted sense to suit their listeners' interest. For this reason, the African Christian could go to any length in search for the Lord's healing power.

From the above context, faith is defined as speaking or confessing something with authority in the full expectation that what is spoken will happen. As the Hunters have expressed it: Talk to the disease! Speak with authority and then believe! . . . Saying is a command to be healed! Confessing is believing for a future act or manifestation of the healing, saying is giving authority to words, and confessing is receiving the promise; both confessing and saying are calling into being something that does not exist at the present time (Barga, p. 225).

The same concept was succinctly put by Hagin: "Faith's confessions create reality" (p. 11). Obviously, those in the prosperity movement have a high view of human faith. The confession of faith, it is believed, will cure any disease or physical handicap, since healing is always the will of God and has been provided for in the Atonement. But what if the words are spoken and faith is exercised, and healing does not take place? Perhaps an enemy is blocking one's chances.

The problem of not receiving what one believes, is supposedly overcome by patience and persistence. The seriously ill are exhorted to persist in their confession and build up their faith to the level necessary to obtain the promised healing. Bennett has given the following counsel to those not immediately healed: "The reason we are so hesitant to imply that someone doesn't have the faith to be healed is that we think we also imply that they don't love Jesus, or that

they don't trust God. No, no! It just means they're not yet open to receive the particular healing they need. We need to continue to break through the barriers that keep us from receiving" (pp. 53-54). In this case, great emphasis is placed upon the individual believer both in terms of being the object or recipient of God's blessings and in terms of personal responsibility for making it happen. This is what private ministries by some catholic priests uphold today. Bennett then gives an example from his own life. He has always had enough faith to overcome a head cold but not a chest cold. When he contracts a chest cold, it takes him longer to overcome it because he has to build his faith to a higher level (p. 54). In other words, the more serious the malady, the greater the level of faith needed to overcome it, and likewise the longer the time needed to reach the necessary level of faith. The interpreters of this passages about healing often turn blind eye to Saint Paul's exhortation "you have been given the privilege of serving Christ, not only by believing in him, but also by suffering for him" (Phil. 1:29). A Christian disciple cannot avoid suffering for Christ in anyway. This in my mind is a theological pitfall.

#### **4.0 The Power to Secure Material Wealth and Riches**

Prosperity gospel preaches that the purpose of wealth is philanthropic. Each one is to give of his material benefits to help meet the needs of others. In this case, the others referred to here are the ministers and elders. Most of the prosperity teachers would agree that God intends that the world's wealth should belong to His children, but that Christians have failed to lay claim to that which rightfully belongs to them. The teaching that is common among the health and wealth advocates is the Prosperity message; a teaching that emphasizes that God wants everyone rich and wealthy (Bennet, p. 54). The prosperity advocates emphasize financial prosperity, success in business and good health. The cardinal tenet of the prosperity gospel is one central theme: God wills the financial prosperity of every Christian; therefore, for a believer to live in poverty is to live outside God's intended will. In other words, Jesus bore the curse of poverty to get us out of it, not to leave us in it because it is a burden.

According to Kenneth Copeland, "true prosperity is said to be the ability to use God's power to meet the needs of mankind in any realm of life" (p. 26). This benevolent use of resources rests on what is considered to be a divine, spiritual law, called by Tilton the law of compensation (Ken, p. 340). The law is perfect and always in operation. "God's law that we should love our neighbour as we love ourselves is a perfect law. God sets the law into motion, and it will always work for our good if we do it. He designed the law to work wonders for us and to give us the greatest prosperity in our neighbourhood" (Hunter, p. 137). When one gives to others, whether money or something else, more will be given by God in return. Soon, a prosperity cycle begins, in which one gives and receives more in return, allowing him/her to give even more, meaning he/she will

receive yet more in return; and so, the cycle continues.

In view of this position, scriptural evidence is cited in support of the law of compensation, known also as the law of sowing and reaping: "Cast your bread on the surface of the waters, for you will find it after many days" (Eccles. 11:1). Other passages say "He who sows sparingly shall also reap sparingly; and he who sows bountifully shall also reap bountifully" (2 Cor. 9:6). "Whatever a man sows, this he will also reap" (Gal. 6:7). An example of how this law supposedly works comes from Tilton's personal experience and testimony: "I started noticing good things showing up around me. I gave away a pair of shoes, then I noticed three or four pairs came back. I kept giving watches away, then I noticed a very expensive Rolex watch jumped onto my wrist (Success, p. 137). The promise of wealth, the basis for the whole prosperity movement serves as the key to faith in God.

In the mind of Hagin, Abraham's blessing was threefold: spiritual, physical, and also financial (p. 14). For this reason, Gloria Copeland delights in pointing out that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph all became extremely rich because of their relationship to the Abrahamic Covenant. Justification for applying Abraham's promised prosperity to Christians today is sought in Galatians 3:14: "In order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles," this blessing is thought to be financial as well as spiritual. The blessings and curses of the Mosaic Law recorded in Deuteronomy 28 are also related to the Abrahamic Covenant. "The blessing and the curse of the law were the results of God's covenant with Abraham. The blessing included everything to do with the physical, material and financial needs. Healing was included in the blessing; Success was included in the blessing. Prosperity was included in the blessing, exceeding financial blessing (Copeland, pp. 4-6). In this view, the Law of Moses is given so that Abraham's descendants could possess the same degree of prosperity Abraham enjoyed.

Accordingly, possession of material wealth provided through the Abrahamic Covenant is achieved by knowing, obeying, and believing. First, there must be knowledge of the promise before the promise can be claimed. Jerry Savelle expounds shrewdly, thus: "If a person doesn't know it is God's will for him to prosper, it is highly improbable that he will prosper" (p. 47). The believer who is unaware that prosperity is his/hers, is like the passenger on a cruise ship who ate only cheese and crackers because he did not know that meals were included in the price of the ticket.

Obedience is a second key to becoming prosperous. "If they hear and serve Him, they shall end their days in prosperity" (Job 36:11). In other words, "If one doesn't obey the laws of God that produce prosperity, he will not be able to appropriate them. Therefore, obedience is the key to prosperity. If we are

willing to obey God's commands in every area of our lives, we will prosper. If we don't obey, we won't prosper. It's that simple" demands Savelle (pp. 47-48). Hence, many in the prosperity movement view the Abrahamic Covenant as conditional. The conditions must be met before financial blessings can come and flow. Consequently, Copeland suggests that the Israelites could have freed themselves from Egyptian bondage long before Moses if they had known and kept God's covenant with Abraham (p. 50).

The third common element, faith, is exercised in the same way as in achieving divine health. Faith amounts to claiming authority over the financial resources already guaranteed by God. Here is a straightforward account of how this faith is put into action:

If you make up your mind ... that you are willing to live in divine prosperity and abundance, Satan cannot stop the flow of God's financial blessings. If you are willing and obedient ... divine prosperity will come to pass in your life. You have exercised your faith in the covenant that you have with God. You begin to walk in divine prosperity with a decision to no longer allow Satan to put symptoms of lack on you (Copeland, pp. 37-38).

Such pitfall suggests that no one needs to live in poverty. Wealth and riches are there for the asking in faith. All that stands between a person and financial blessing is his decision to demand what he wants. To assure results, instructions are given on how to make the decision: " As Hagin claims, "God wants his children to ... wear the best clothing . . . drive the best cars . . . have the best of everything ... just claim what you need (Threshold of Faith, p. 55). The blessing impacted by Jesus on the poor does not make sense here. "Blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 5:3).

The symptoms of lack have no right to operate against the believer. Make this decision and you will begin to enjoy the financial blessing that belongs to you once you become a believer in Jesus Christ. Having decided to possess the wealth God has provided, a person naturally wonders just how wealthy he might expect to become. This explains the popular expression "poverty is not my portion in Jesus name' syndrome amongst prosperity seekers.

The prospects of wealth, according to some prosperity leaders and preachers, are truly astounding. The hundredfold return of Mark 10:30 is claimed as the basis of God's financial dealings with His servants. "You give \$1 (N300) for the gospel's sake and \$100 (N30,000) belongs to you; give \$10 (N3,000) and receive \$1,000 (N300,000) give \$1,000 (N300,000) and receive \$100,000 (N300,000,000). Give one house and receive one hundred houses or one house worth one

hundred times as much. In short, Mark 10:30 is a very good deal (Copeland, Prosperity, p. 48). Of course, the hundredfold return is not automatic. One must “believe it in”. The force of faith must be continually exerted, and if the pressure of faith relaxes, the return will stop flowing in. Faith is the means of collecting the amount owed from the hundredfold return. Any portion not collected goes into accounts receivable in the “heavenly bank account” for withdrawal when faith has increased.

### 5.0 The Power to be Demon-Free

The presence of demonic activity in the lives of Christians is an **important plank in the prosperity platform**. There is a general assumption that the world is inhabited by satanic powers that cause misfortunes to believers. Evil spirits are viewed as the major cause of life's problems and crises. As a result, most of the faith teachers are convinced that a Christian should have the right and the power to change the circumstances of his/her physical environment, his/her body, and his/her life, if liberated by the divine hand of God (Olupona, p. 12). It is assumed that manifestation of demonic opposition today is the same as it was in the first century A.D. The tendency is to attribute anything out of the ordinary or not readily explainable to the influence of demons. To Pentecostals, exorcism is a spiritual warfare. Olukoya, the General Overseer of MFM teaches that every Christian needs to undergo exorcism after conversion. Some Exorcists say that this is necessary because converts to Christianity have a faulty background. Olukoya goes to attest that:

A high percentage of the bondage, which people have gone into today, could be traced to the evil foundation or platform, which was constructed by their parents. If you fail to go through total deliverance, you would continue to pay dues as a result of the fact that your parents and future life has been mortgaged to the devil. You will only stop paying these instalment dues when you decide to subject yourself to a thorough deliverance (8).

The Hunters provide a case in point: “When a doctor says there is no cure, our spiritual antennas pick up the fact that it is a spirit” (p. 32). They have concluded that all incurable diseases are caused by evil spirits. Demons inhabit not only people, but also homes, cars, and other mechanical devices. This produces great consternation for the believer who wants to experience blessings promised to him or her.

The process of casting out demons solves the believer's demonic dilemma. Whenever a believer experiences demonic affliction, he/she is to claim 1 John 4:4 that says, “Greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world”. The believer is expected also to remember that Jesus has given him authority to cast

out unclean spirits (cf. Matt. 10:1). This gives the individual believer authority over the world of evil spirits. As Frances Hunter puts it: "I believe no demon in this world has as much power as I do" (p. 136). In the procedure for casting out demons, Satan is bound by the authority of Jesus so that he cannot render aid to his evil associates. Then the demon is addressed, commanded to name himself, and cast out. Since demons can do such things as planting seeds of disease and stopping the flow of financial wealth, the casting out of demons is necessary to insure continued health and prosperity.

## **6.0 A Critical Evaluation of the Prosperity Gospel**

The prosperity gospel is too recent a phenomenon and too varied to have anything approaching a pastoral theology. However, for the sake of convenience, the primary divisions of theology will be used in evaluating certain prominent ideas that undergird the movement.

### **6.1 Biblical Connotation**

Perhaps the most fundamental issue to consider in the prosperity movement is the nature of authority. The two areas where the view of authority is seriously compromised are the extent of revelation and the method of interpretation. Interestingly, prosperity preachers and writers never challenge the verbal, plenary, inerrant inspiration of Scripture. They accept the text of the Bible in all its particulars as revealed truth from God. The problem is not the inspiration of the text, but inspiration beyond the text. According to those in the movement, special, verbal revelation did not cease with the closing of the New Testament canon but continues today. Leaders frequently support their teachings with revelations, prophecies, dreams and visions, and liken these as of old. The implication is that they share the same status with Old Testament prophets and New Testament apostles as dispensers of progressively revealed truth. Many prophecies are recorded in quotation marks supported throughout with the claim phrase thus said the Lord". This introduces a canonical problem. If indeed, these are newly revealed truths from God, then they ought to be added to the canon of Scripture and disseminated as widely as possible, since they would constitute divinely given moral imperatives on a par with Scripture. However, these revelations are no more than wishful thinking of the overly zealous minister, and people heeding them are being simply led into serious error. Superficial comparison of these prophecies and visions with those in the Word of God quickly demonstrates that their source is all too human.

Prosperity gospel ministers frequently quote 3 John 2: "Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in health just as it is well with your soul". John began his letter with a friendly greeting and expressed his prayer for Gaius that "all might go well with him and that he might be in good health, just as his soul prospered." The prosperity teachers lay much emphasis on this verse

and use it to propagate the doctrine of prosperity. For instance, Gloria Copeland as seen earlier explicates this verse in this way: "You must realize that it is God's will for you to prosper in every area of your life, prosperity is available to you, and frankly, it would be stupid of you not to partake of it" (p. 8). The fact is that this verse is nothing more than John's personal wish for Gaius.

Prosperity hermeneutics also leaves much to be desired. Their method of interpreting the biblical text is highly subjective and arbitrary. Bible verses are quoted in abundance without attention to grammatical indicators, semantic nuances, or literary and historical contexts. The result is a set of ideas and principles based on distortion of textual meaning. Fee has analysed the problem well, thus:

The plain meaning of the text is always the first rule, as well as the ultimate goal of all valid interpretation. But plain meaning has first of all to do with the authors original intent; it has to do with what would have been plain to those to whom the words were originally addressed. It does not have to do with how someone from a suburbanized white American culture of the late 20th century reads his own cultural setting back into the text through the frequently distorted prism of the language of the early 17th century (p. 40).

In other words, the procedure adopted by prosperity interpreters starts with their Nigerian middle-class experience and then baptizes that experience with a handful of Bible verses that seem to substantiate what is claimed, when in reality, those verses have been removed from their original context and misinterpreted.

For instance, Joshua 1:8 teaches that the context of God's promise to Joshua that He would make his way prosperous and give him good success is military, nonfinancial. It specifically relates to the conquest of the Promised Land by Israel as the outworking of the land promises given unconditionally in the Abrahamic Covenant. The Book of Joshua traces Joshua's successes in conquering Canaan. Joshua was a general, not a banker; financial prosperity is simply not in view here.

In Mark 10:29-30, the promise of the hundredfold return was also not monetary in nature. Jesus was preparing His disciples for their apostolic itinerant ministries in the midst of persecution. When the disciples lost their houses for the sake of the gospel, they would be given access to homes owned by fellow believers who would share with them as they moved from place to place preaching the gospel. Likewise, when the disciples forsook their families for Jesus' sake, they entered new associations in the family of God that were a

hundred times as great. They give \$10 to the Lord's work expecting that the Lord must give \$1,000 in return misses completely the context of Mark's passage.

Similarly, 3 John 2, a verse often-quoted reads, "Beloved, I pray that in all respects you may prosper and be in good health, just as your soul prospers". The term "prosper" does not refer to financial wealth but simply means "to go well with someone". This is a theological pitfall of the gospel message. The New International Version renders the verse, "Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well". In line with this, Fee contributes:

This combination of wishing for things to go well and for the recipients' good health was the standard form of greeting in a personal letter in antiquity. The extent of John's wish for Gaius to refer to financial and material prosperity for all Christians of all times is totally foreign to the text. John neither intended that, nor could Gaius have so understood it to argue from the text that God wills our financial prosperity is to abuse the text, not use it (Fee, p. 40).

Unfortunately, most Nigerian prosperity gospel preachers do not locate the provision for material break-through in Abrahamic covenant, but in the atonement provided by Jesus. They interpret poverty as a consequence of sin, and they conclude that Jesus paid for sin and its consequences. Such blind social analysis leads to theological pitfall.

Prosperity gospel is very often blind to the key teaching of Jesus about wealth. Jesus says in Matthew 6:19-21,24 (also Luke 16:13): "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and thieves consume, and where thieves break in and steal, but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven ... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despises the other. You cannot serve both God and Money".

This reveals that one of the problems with health and wealth advocates is their inability to distinguish between need and want. God has promised to meet our legitimate needs, but he has not promised to meet our lustful desire or satisfy our selfish wants. Therefore, Christians are urged to work and pray and always look up to Jesus for satisfaction. The teaching of the health and wealth gospel has not contributed anything to poverty eradication in Nigeria. A standard salutation is forced by prosperity interpreters to carry far more weight than it can possibly bear.

The Bible does indeed speak well in few places, but never of the love for wealth. Danny McCain's observation is correct. For every positive reference to wealth in the New Testament, there are about ten negative statements about wealth. The New Testament writers recognized the danger of wealth, in the sense that it has a way of drawing a person away from God (p. 66).

## **6.2 *Theology of Prosperity Gospel Today***

The proponents of prosperity have gone astray concerning the doctrine of God in at least two particulars: the will of God and the sovereignty of God. The title of Gloria Copeland's book "God's Will is Prosperity" expresses the sentiment of those in the movement. But has God decreed that every believer in every society in every generation will be financially successful? Neither the examples nor the statements of Scripture lend credence to such a concept. Clear examples of those who did not prosper materially while doing the will of God appear in the great hall of faith as contained in Hebrews 11. "They were tortured, mocked, scourged, imprisoned, sawn in two, put to death with the sword, going about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated, wandering in deserts, mountains, caves, and holes in the ground. And even though they gained approval through their faith, they still did not receive what was promised" (Heb. 11:36-39). This description of faithful ones who were in the will of God hardly comports with Tilton's declaration, "Everything you touch should prosper" (p. 113). Jesus' own life adds eloquent testimony that the will of God does not always include material success. He grew up in an impoverished family. During His years of travel, He told His disciples that He had nowhere to lay His head (cf. Matt. 8:20). He had to perform a miracle in order to pay the two-drachma temple tax (cf. Matt. 17:24-27). At His death, the Roman soldiers cast lots for His clothing, His only earthly possession (cf. Luke 23:34). He left behind no estate, asked John the disciple to care for His mother (cf. John 19:26-27). Yet even in view of these circumstances, no one would dare suggest that God the Son was out of harmony with the will of God the Father. The two New Testament passages that specifically state the will of God for every believer define it in moral perspectives rather than economic terms. God's will for believers is their sanctification and abstention from immorality (cf. 1 Thess. 4:3), as well as their giving thanks in everything (cf. 1Thess. 5:18). The will of God as perceived and revealed in Scripture is more concerned with who the believers are than with what they have.

Subsequently, less attention should be focused on outward circumstances and more on inward attitudes and character qualities. Perhaps the best biblical advice for prosperity advocates is Ephesians 5:17, "Do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is". The sovereignty of God is also greatly undermined in the outworking of the prosperity gospel. Indeed, what emerges is a new view of God. The negative implications of such understanding will be,

first, even God Himself has failed. "God hoped for things. He had a plan. He had desires. He hoped they would come to pass, but they failed." In other words, God was hoping that His dreams would be fulfilled for man in the Garden of Eden, but His plan failed as a result of the Fall and He had to go to "plan B". Second, not only can God inspire man but man can inspire God. "When... you start believing it, God starts believing it ... and things happen, praise God" (Ken, p. 362). Third, God is bound by His own laws, such as the law of compensation, and man becomes the initiator, forcing God to comply by holding up His end of the bargain. No one has said it more pointedly than Tilton: "Success is here and readily available. It is up to us to come and get it. If you are not a success, it is your fault, not God's". Then he adds, "You determine your level of success. You make the choice He has placed the ball in your court. It's your move (pp. 28, 60). This denies God's sovereign rule and also places a tremendous onus on the individual to act in God's name by getting the ball rolling. The simple presentation of this view of God is its own refutation. No matter how much success is gained through the prosperity gospel, it cannot begin to make up for loss of the sovereign, majestic character of God (Ken, p. 353).

### ***6.3 Some Positive Aspects of Prosperity Gospel***

Prosperity Gospel elaborately uses the Sacred Scripture to defend its claims. It is marked by intensified preaching that is aimed at persuading believers to come to faith. Prosperity preachers also boldly preach the Word indiscriminately targeting not only those who belong to their fold but also those from outside. They invest heavily in the power of the Word of God to transform individuals (especially the masses). The more a person interacts with the Word of God, the more effective it becomes in shaping and transforming one's mind and lifestyle. Prosperity preachers spend long hours studying the bible in order to preach at length. These durations usually engender a long-term effect and advantage on their listeners. They focus on specific contemporary themes and use various Bible texts to make the Gospel relevant to people's daily living.

The three most common themes of prosperity Gospel sermons are: Divine healing, prosperity and positive confession. Elements of truth in the prosperity theology observes Thomas Mboya, include: "God is our heavenly Father; He provides generously for all our needs; we should not be anxious when afflicted by sickness, poverty or any form of danger and that God desires material success for those who believe in Him" (p. 34). Healing has brought many Nigerians into the Pentecostal churches. This key element plays in people's faith journey. Gotthard Oblau reports that a recent study of Protestant churches in China, for instance "estimates that more than half of all church members became Christians because they personally experienced divine healing or saw a family member healed. In one Filipino denomination, 83 per cent of church

attendees surveyed reported that healing was highly significant in their conversion" (p. 308).

Most often, prosperity Gospel Churches are financially self-supporting, self-propagating and self-governed, something which the mainstream or traditional churches have not been able to achieve yet, in spite of tried elaborating pastoral plans. As such, they do not rely on external funds and control that come with conditions. In this way, prosperity Gospel Churches exemplify self-reliance and self-sustenance in Church management. They do not rely on foreign aid or a "mother Church." Because of their contextualized preaching, prosperity Gospel Churches tend to be more in touch with the real felt-needs and mentality of believers in terms of their message content and delivery (Mboya, p. 34). They seem to be much in tune with the spirit of inculturation that is common with the Catholic Church. They embrace songs and dance that are part of the African culture. They believe in outreach evangelization and as such, reach large numbers of people through rough public preaching on the streets, market squares and work places (during lunch and other breaks), thereby leaving their comfort zones for the sake of the gospel. They also exploit the mass media to reach out more to people. Prosperity gospel Churches have become gathering points of all peoples from all walks of life. The emphasis on healing the sick and uplifting the poor is part of Jesus' Gospel and the Church's diaconal calling. Prosperity Gospel also represents an alarm and a call for the Church to strengthen its prophetic role in Africa. Healing and material blessings are genuine catalysts, signs and tools for witnessing God's compassion and power. In addition, the message of prosperity Gospel constitutes an ardent call to new evangelization. It challenges the traditional churches to re-think their existential theology and embrace a more spirit-oriented doctrine that speaks to the changing human condition. No doubt, prosperity Gospel has succeeded in shaping lives and moulding behaviour in society. In some cases, heavy alcoholics and smokers have been influenced to genuinely give their lives to the Lord. It has also built strong bonds of community, brotherhood and sisterhood among those who subscribe to its teachings. The prosperity Gospel also teaches that hard work is a means to material gain. As social organizations, prosperity Gospel Churches and related institutions also perform pastoral activities that aid and complement the social action of ministries. In the process, some of them give back to society in many ways what they have equally received (Mboya, p. 335). In my estimation, prosperity gospel offers premium to eradicate poverty by their common resolve to offer help to the underprivileged of the society.

#### ***6.4 The Theological Pitfall of Prosperity Gospel***

Prosperity gospel can be a real problem. One major problem with it is the insistence that the needy has to give in order to be blessed. Jesus said, "you

receive without charge give without charge". At the end of their teaching they compel the members to give generously and sacrificially so as to receive the hundred-fold return promised in the Bible. They even curse those who do not bring their tithes to the church. All these are done because of greed and avarice. Paul says in 1 Tim. 6:10: "For the love of money is the root of all evil": which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows. In the area of health, the faith-healer rejects the use of conventional medicine for healing. It holds that prayer alone should be used to heal the sick, and that the use of medicine is a sign of weak faith. In most cases this is a deception to faith and reason.

The excessive love for money or wealth usually associated with the prosperity Gospel constitutes a form of idolatry (cf. Col 3:5). The Gospel of prosperity has the subtle tendency to mask idolatry and false faith (cf. Lk. 4:5-7). This is often unknown and unnoticed by their listeners. True Christian-giving arises in thankful response to God who loved us first (cf. Jn. 3:16), to Christ (cf. Gal 2:20) and to the neighbour (cf. 2 Cor. 8:5, Gal 5:14 and Rm 12:1-2).

On the contrary, prosperity gospel is a transfer of the exclusive lifestyle to the church that creates the two-headed monster of evangelical affluence. One head, material prosperity, places its emphasis on the kind of life philosophy mocked by the writer of Ecclesiastes: "a feast is made for laughter, and wine makes life merry, but money is the answer for everything" (10:19). In this version of the gospel, faith leads to tithing, and tithing ignites prosperity.

The other element is theological prosperity, the position that health and wealth depend on faith. Surely, however, the essential message of the Book of Job suggests that prosperity does not indicate God's blessing any more than poverty indicates God's curse. Suffering invited Job to see and experience God in a way he had never done before. Job had to learn to accept the loss of all he had and still remain faithful to and worship of God. Consequently, he left US with an unforgettable message of the gift of faith in moments of suffering. Those who are deceived into believing God is rewarding them for being Christians also believe abundance is theirs to spend or to suck away. Such thought is misleading into theological pitfall.

Jesus the incarnate Son of God did not give His life on the Cross in order to enable His followers to achieve promises of material prosperity. Instead, He asked everyone who came to Him to live a life of self-denial (cf. Lk 14:33). He warned of the dangers of the desire for riches, and how it plunges people into ruin and destruction (cf. 1 Tm 6:9). Jesus, urges us his disciples to live according to the Spirit not the flesh (cf. Rm 8:13). Pain, difficulties, sickness, calamities are in fact reminiscent of the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. We are united with

Christ through these experiences. God is often encountered in moments of suffering and grief. In these ways, God's power is manifested.

The insatiable thirst for materialism has led ministers in Nigeria into unbridled prosperity ministries. Most times, such leaders are ignorant of the scripture and as such introduce occultism into the churches. As a result, a significant segment of the Christian churches is gradually but steadily departing from the basic goals of Christianity. Pastors preoccupied with material gains hinder the church's task of discipleship. Ministers involved in this distractive act claim that focusing the church's message on the things of this world is the way to be relevant to the listeners. In such a case, the inordinate thirst for materialism causes Christian leaders to become worldly. In many cases, this approach leads to financial corruption in the church.

Prosperity gospel as it stands, has many weaknesses. First, the gospel overestimates the devil and his power. In an attempt to stir people to pray for deliverance, preachers at times end up making their audience fearful of Satan. Much of warfare prayers are the outcome of fear. Some have even accused prosperity preachers of creating two gods with equal power, the good God of the Christians, and the evil god called Satan. Second, many preachers of the gospel do not place enough emphasis on salvation from sin and other traditional themes of Christianity such that love of God and sacrifice are often undermined.

Even in some cases, prosperity-preaching churches have relaxed messages on holiness. One danger of this is that even though the church in Africa is experiencing numerical growth, it may in reality, be spiritually weak. Prosperity gospel wrongly attributes all manifestations of poverty either to the devil or to sin. This is far from the teaching of the Bible. Prosperity gospel rates ministers that are into healing, exorcism, and wealth gospel higher than other gospel ministers. This is why Gotan Cletus observes that the emphasis of the gospel on materialism could be dangerous as many seek wealth at all cost. It can frustrate those that are promised various material blessings if the blessings are not realized. He further cautions that Prosperity gospel has the tendency to equate material prosperity with the salvation of the soul, and material success with divine favour (p. 28). Its interpretation of poverty as either a punishment for sin or a sin against atonement is heretical and could unsettle the righteous. It challenges ministers to seek power to do miracles and some have sought for it from demonic sources. It interprets and uses Bible texts out of context. This is theologically dangerous. By attempting to force God to bless all people now, contrary to His plan, prosperity gospel preachers are denying the sovereignty of God. Again, the strength of exorcism to attract audience in Africa is its liability outside Africa as emphasis on demons and supernatural explanations

to human predicaments hinders Westerners from joining the churches. Olufunke Adeboye's comment on this is in order:

The problem has in fact been that those Pentecostal churches have been unable to adapt to cultures in which people do not share the same worldview that emphasizes the activities of witches, demons, and other spiritual agents. There is therefore no common discursive ground between these Pentecostals and their host agents (web).

In other words, such gospel neglects the admonitions of the Bible to endurance, perseverance, and suffering (See Acts 14:22; 2 Tim. 3:10-12; 2 Thess. 1:5 etc.).

The gospel of prosperity undermines the spirit of *Communio* in the Church. Here, writes Mboya, "those who allegedly obtain material wealth as a sign of blessing from God tend to classify themselves in a higher social status than those who have not received wealth. Does it mean that the latter do not have the blessings of God? The tendency to classify congregants based on their material endowments leads to disunity in the Church. This disunity inspires tensions and marginalization in the larger community. Moreover, the Gospel of prosperity propagates a materialistic view of the Church (p. 36). In this way, the Church is thus only regarded as useful insofar as it meets or supplies the material needs and expectations of the believers and the ministers. This mentality also inspires nomadic movement of believers from one Church to another in search of more stable personal spirituality.

God calls his children to be faithful to and find joy in Him. Faithfulness to God does not always bring about material prosperity. Moreover, material blessings may give us happiness in this world, but they can never give us true joy. The saying goes, "money can buy anything but not buy heaven". We attain joy when we centre our lives around Jesus Christ, who is the source of life (cf. Jn. 14:6). Unfortunately, often in the Gospel of prosperity, joy and happiness are measured in materialistic terms. In this way, faithfulness is never emphasized in prosperity theology unless it is directly related with material rewards from God. Similarly, a Church is considered successful by the number of worshippers who attend its services, and by how much money they contribute. The ministers in such Churches parade their wealth and regard themselves as successful by the exorbitant lifestyles they lead. The measure of success of their ministry is seen in the expensive cars, houses, clothes and many travels and endorsements abroad. This is in direct contrast to Jesus Christ who had nowhere to lay His head (cf. Mt 8:20). Such pastors have their security not in the Lord God, but in their material property (cf. Mt 6:17). Most of them have developed the concept of running multiple ministries or business empires, big

educational institutions, mission training centres, literacy and medical missions, financial institutions like banks, micro-financial bonds, publishing, ministry, secretariat services and, of course, pasturing. Unfortunately, this is the calamitous situation of some catholic priests who are richer than their congregations and dioceses.

The prosperity Gospel disregards the place of grace in the Christian life and experience. It propagates a *quid-pro-quo* relationship with God. It tends to assume that God's faithfulness to us is dependent on our faithfulness to Him and vice versa. It reduces God to human control and manipulation. It elevates God's gifts above Him, the giver.

The gospel of prosperity undermines the gift of ministry. Ministry is not supposed to be a one-person show. Rather, it is the collective contribution of God's people working together, sharing their gifts for the common good. In most cases, the prosperity Gospel ministry is built around the pastor or evangelist who is most often looked upon as supreme or God and unquestionable. This single person is treated with absolute reverence and authority. This is partly the reason why most of such ministries tend to be cultic. Ideally, every gift and every member is needed for the Church to achieve its God-given purpose. However, prosperity Gospel ministers assume a "celebrity culture," where the leader is regarded as an indispensable authority of the Gospel message and manager of all of Church resources. In the process, the human agency becomes an end in itself (Mboya, p. 36). Prosperity gospel preachers are said to be the richest clergymen around and this informs the attack on the church and its ministers in the society today.

## **7.0 Conclusion**

In this paper, I have examined the theological trends in prosperity gospel that constitutes a pitfall in theology of prosperity gospel as perceived and practiced in Nigeria and in Africa. This work has considered three major trends in this enterprise namely healing, wealth and deliverance from demon. Particularly the paper has examined how each is understood in the Nigerian church, highlighted its positive contributions to the growth of the faith and its shortcomings.

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