

PROSPERITY DOCTRINE

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JESUS

No one has the right to change the Gospel, no matter how much we would like it to be different from what Jesus taught. The Gospel as preached by Jesus presents a value system totally different from worldly values:

- If someone unrightfully tries to take something from you, give him double, go the second mile, give him your jacket also.
- If someone hurts you, don't punch him back, turn the other cheek.
- If you want to be a leader, be the servant of all.
- Recognise your own sinful nature - even your thoughts make you guilty of transgressing God's law.
- Don't chase the dollars, because you cannot serve both God and money - Money is intrinsically deceitful and makes it almost impossible to get into heaven.
- The love of money is the most corruptive sin in this world. 'For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.'

PROSPERITY - THE SUBTLE CHANGE

So how on earth can a Christian church turn around and suddenly claim we got it wrong all this time: God really wants you to be wealthy?

This is the Prosperity Doctrine, a cut-and-paste of little bits of Bible verses, primarily from the Old Testament and the Old Covenant, now preached in many of the charismatic churches and by tele-evangelists.

There are many levels of Prosperity Doctrine. All of them are extremely dangerous. They have at their roots the teaching that there is a spiritual link between you giving to God and God giving to you. That may sound innocent enough, but it is that small twist in scriptural truth that has been the cause of many lives destroyed and many walks of faith ended. If somehow, by giving generously to God we loosen His purse strings and we enable Him to give to us, we have turned scripture upside down. ***God ALWAYS gives first. We cannot even work out a 'tithe' if we don't know how much He has given.***

The results of this small departure from scriptural truth, amongst other things, are enormous:

1. It changes the nature of giving from what should be a selfless, charitable or compassionate act, to a selfish one - we are now giving, in order to get.
2. It actually teaches the congregation to love money. In fact, it gives official church sanction to the desire to be wealthy.
3. It turns God into a spiritual poker machine. How many families have I seen, pouring money into the church coffers, not because they want to bless the poor or are moved by the Spirit, but because they are expecting a jackpot! In the end, the few who receive the jackpot (and there are always bound to be a few) are put up on the pulpit to give their 'testimony'. The many who didn't, keep quiet, because there must be something wrong with their relationship with God. Those who go bust, leave the church.

Those who are 'into' this doctrine, always seem to quote Malachi 3:10 ("**test Me in this ...**"), maybe because not enough of Jesus' words can be twisted to support it. Malachi was addressing God's Chosen People, (in fact primarily a corrupt priesthood), at a time when they were again in one of their back-slidden phases, this one about four centuries before Jesus. They were a people under the Law, and therefore obliged to tithe. (This tithe, mind you, went to feed the widows and orphans, and the Levites, and to fund the church, and to fund the government.) ***To bring this verse, out of context, into the New Covenant is totally inappropriate and unacceptable.***

Initially, Prosperity Doctrine draws a subtle link between you giving to God and God giving to you. It then promises financial security as a result of giving to God, a parallel to the charismatic thinking: if you're good, you'll never get sick. At the extreme stage it has people borrowing money to give to a specific 'God representative', in anticipation of receiving a hundred-fold return. (Remember we have in Australia one of the worst gambling problems in the western world). The pastor often suggests all of us should own our own home, recommends the way to get there is to give *him* your tithe, and quotes Malachi to give it scriptural authority.

WITHDRAWAL FROM THE LIE

Once they start on the prosperity path, few pastors can turn back and they slowly become entrenched in deeper and deeper levels. ***It is a seduction leading to addiction.*** One of the great contradictions of the Prosperity Doctrine is this: The preachers who tell us that *we* should have the faith that God will come through on His promise to pour finances from heaven into our pocket, obviously don't have the faith themselves to believe God will provide finances for their own churches. If they did, they wouldn't have to play these mind games with their congregations. Some pastors claim they only want to be prosperous, so that they can be a blessing to others (I only want a Mercedes so I can drive friends to church in comfort!). Assuming for a moment they have truly conquered their 'flesh' and only want wealth for purely altruistic reasons (ha, ha), it would still be grossly irresponsible to assume that everyone listening to their preaching has reached that same idealistic plateau. ***And if they haven't, they are leading them astray.***

The indoctrinating effect of constant exposure to the 'prosperity' message makes those exposed feel they must even tithe gifts offered to help them out. Imagine a poor widow whose only means of transport, her old bomb of a car, packs it in. So I offer to buy her a new engine for \$3,000, and she says, 'You'll have to give me another \$300 so I can pass it on to my pastors!' Not long ago, I offered to pay \$5,000 towards a young woman's operation. Can you imagine her coming back and demanding another \$500, so she can pass it on to the church? ***It is like a divine GST on every level of our generosity.*** Can anyone honestly imagine God sitting in heaven going through our monthly BAS statements, and picking out every case of 'tithe avoidance'? My God is much bigger than that.

I personally know of a suicide directly attributable to the prosperity doctrine. OK, the person was slightly emotionally unstable to start off with, but the doctrine pushed her over the edge. Pastors have no control over who hears their message. Believe it or not, I personally was swept away by the message for a short time, no matter how verbally opposed I was at the introduction of it. The details are in Essays Series 3, particularly 'Years in the Wilderness'. It shows just how seductive the message is. It appeals to the most degenerative part of our fallen human nature - greed (or the love of money).

WORLDLY BEHAVIOUR IN THE CHURCH

In this fallen world, there are untold numbers of predators looking for opportunities to take advantage of some other person's ignorance, weakness or vulnerability. Most fortunes are *not* made by being productive. For every dollar 'made' on the stock market, someone else misses out or loses one. Many people make more money through the inflating price of their home, than they make in wages. That not being enough, they buy 'investment properties', paid off by those less fortunate, who can't afford to buy their own. Please don't get me wrong. I'm not against wise investment or good money management. But sometimes the lines get blurred. I'm the first person to advise my children to buy their own home. But I am against underhand practices and hidden agendas and people taking advantage of other people's misfortune. I am against vultures waiting to swoop when others are vulnerable. And I am against the subtle *distortions* of God-given values that slowly creep into our culture, unnoticed.

Most fortunes are 'made' through some people's clever ways of causing the transfer of money from one person's pocket to someone else's. Some are called salesmen - they try to make you want what you don't need. Some are called casino operators - they lure you in with the 'promise' of easy wealth. Others are called thieves - they don't respect your rights of ownership. Others still are called con-men - they make you believe you're on a good thing, when really *they* are! It is an utter shame that there are churches which have stooped so low as to join the bandwagon of this depravity. The church, the one place in this world where you would expect honesty, integrity and people who genuinely care, has been compromised. *How can anyone justify using what Jesus accomplished to make a fortune for themselves?*

BE HONEST

In my opinion, distortion of the Gospel is one of the lowest acts you can commit. It is heresy. You are changing what Jesus died for. You are tampering with His eternal purpose. So, if by all means you want to pursue financial wealth, at least be honest and don't call yourself a Christian, which is a follower of Christ and His teachings. *Above all, don't do it in His name!* Call yourself a Malachite, or a follower of the man you are following (take his last name and add 'ian' or 'ite' to the end). And don't say you are going to a Christian church service, say you are attending a wealth creation seminar. Don't say you belong to a church at all, but to a prosperity club, pursuing worldly success.

I want to go to church and come out feeling challenged, edified, deeply moved, encouraged, knowing I have met with God personally. When I hear the prosperity doctrine, I feel sad, angry, deflated, sickened, cheated, conned, or at least as if someone has tried to con me. If I, as a full-on Christian have that reaction, how must non-Christians feel?

There is now a latest doctrine, fast spreading through the charismatic churches. It says you must *not* criticise your leaders/pastors under any circumstances, even if they're wrong, because it generates division and undermines their leadership. This new doctrine is simply an extension of the prosperity doctrine, designed to allow them to continue the heresy. Jesus Himself was never reticent about criticising the religious leaders when they had lost the plot, even to the point of calling them names: 'brood of vipers, serpents and hypocrites!' *What Jesus hated most was the hypocrisy of turning the house of God into a money-making business.*

THE TRUTH ABOUT GIVING

So, what *is* Biblical teaching on 'giving' under the New Covenant? I believe it is *based on* the Old Covenant principle of tithing - *God always gives first*; you give back to God from what He has already given you, not in anticipation of what He is going to give. But at the same time, it is a *liberation* from the letter of the Law and an entering into the Spirit of the Law. *Under the New Covenant, God doesn't want 10% of your money, but He wants 100% of your heart.* We are encouraged to be far *more* generous than 10%, but there is no way He wants to put us into a legalistic rut - only the beneficiary pastors want that.

I believe God places needs before us and the Holy Spirit prompts us to meet those needs, as we are able. We should always give as anonymously as possible (don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing) and never to get something in return. If I had my way, I would take the collection right *out* of the church service and put a note in the weekly brochure, explaining where a donation box can be found, in case you feel moved by the Spirit to put something into it. Wouldn't *that* show your Pastor's faith in the Lord's provision?

MORE POINTS FOR CONSIDERATION

Hereunder are a number of other points that may be of interest to you:

1. The only material thing Jesus taught us to pray for was 'our daily bread'.
2. God doesn't need our money to make things happen according to His will - He is the God who fed thousands with just a few loaves and fishes.
3. In response to those who peddle the idea that Jesus was wealthy: He sent Peter fishing in order to get a coin to pay the temple tax! (Matt.17:27) And He claimed **"Foxes have holes, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay His head"** (Luke 9:58). Jesus *walked* all over the Holy Land for three years, from one town to the next. He didn't get driven around in a limousine or even a cart.
4. It is Satan himself who is called 'prince of this world' and therefore has control of the purse strings. (God always has an over-riding vote of course). In some sense, it is therefore Satan who decides who is vulnerable in this area (the vast majority) and uses money to keep people blinded from seeing the true Gospel. When Satan offered Jesus the whole world and all its wealth, Jesus didn't say "Hang on a minute, that's *not* yours to give!" But He rejected the offer, in order to do things the Father's way. Satan doesn't offer us a blatant choice between good and evil. *He offers us a choice between good and the appearance of good.*
5. The West controls most of the earth's wealth, and globalisation is setting a trend for the rest of the world to emulate our living standard. If the whole world lived at that standard, the resulting pollution would cause the earth to perish within a couple of years. And in that outrageously unbalanced distribution of wealth, the church, through the 'prosperity doctrine', is encouraging us to want an even bigger share. Jesus is said to be coming back to **'destroy those who destroy the Earth'** (Revelation 11:18).

6. It seems that *the power of Money has replaced the power of the Holy Spirit in some charismatic churches*. I actually heard a leading pastor ask the congregation the question: 'How can we bless someone else if we haven't got any money?' Is it any wonder that we only have very limited access to supernatural power? Peter had no silver or gold, but did have the true blessing. I have to admit that the Charismatic churches have a formula that has great appeal for, particularly, the young people of today. They can lay claim to an enviable success rate in getting young people in touch with God, one that puts the traditional church to shame. I guess the questions we must ask are: 'Does the end justify the means?' and 'Is there an even better way, one that Jesus would approve?'
7. For a complete treatise, we must consider Jesus' own words, which have been used by proponents of prosperity to promise a hundred-fold return: Matthew 19 says it is '**riches after He returns**'. Mark 10 says it is '**now, in this age, ...with persecutions**', inferring it isn't such a good thing at all. Obviously, it is the Mark quote that is usually used, (leaving off the bit about the persecutions!) Jesus was talking to Peter and the other disciples, *none* of whom received a hundred-fold return in their lifetime. In fact, all except John died a martyr's death in poverty. It is therefore plain to me that Jesus was referring to the custom started in Acts, where all Christians sold all they had and shared everything, as true brothers and sisters.
8. Have you ever wondered why Jesus proclaimed (Luke 2) that He had come to preach the gospel to the *poor*? Why not just to preach the gospel? In 1990, a church I know sent a team to the Philippines, which at that time was suffering terrible poverty. They received a rousing reception, saw many conversions and spectacular instantaneous healings. Eight years later, the same team went back. By this time great changes had taken place. Half the country was now wealthy like the West. The wealthy were totally unreceptive to the Gospel message. However the other half, still living in poverty, were the same as before, with many conversions and miracles. Jesus knew that wealth is a great barrier to hearing the Gospel.

IT'S UP TO YOU - MAKE A DECISION

So there you have it. I can't say it any better. If you are attending a church where the prosperity doctrine is preached, it is now up to you to decide: Will you stand up for your church and defend its doctrine, even if it contradicts everything Jesus stood for? Or will you confront and challenge your pastor and stand up for the One Who died for you, your Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ?

CONCLUSION

You decide who your first love is.