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PROSPERITY

THEOLOGY

PETER COTTERELL

RTSF Monographs

PROSPERITY THEOLOGY

By

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PROSPERITY THEOLOGY

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INTRODUCTION

I am not an academic theologian. My theology is shaped by nineteen years as a missionary in Ethiopia. From my understanding of the Bible and from my experience through the years I believe in otherwise inexplicable, miraculous, healing. But, unlike the prosperity theologians I do not believe that our prosperity, whether in respect of health or wealth, relates in any law-related manner to our faithfulness to God.

And I am appalled by the cynical manipulation of myriads of Christians by those who promise prosperity in return for faith, and in return, also, for some more-or-less precisely spelled out financial contribution through the post or in the bag.

We who are in the forefront of the search for prosperity already have far more of the world's wealth than is good for us. What I would want to see would be a replacement of this appetite for more by the option for the poor, the determination to share with the peoples of Ethiopia and the Sudan and Bangladesh, with the peoples of the townships like Soweto, the squatter camps like South Africa's Crossroads, with the poor of New York and Liverpool and Bombay.

SECTION 1

WHAT IS PROSPERITY THEOLOGY?

The Origins of Prosperity Theology

It is important to recognise that prosperity theology is only part of a multi-faceted and aberrant form of Christianity which validates itself through a shrill insistence on its being 'biblical' but which in fact owes more to the kind of thinking associated, for example, with the New Age Movement than to Scripture. It is theosophical; it is dualistic; it is mystical; it is gnostic; it claims an esoteric wisdom not found in other strands of Christianity. And some elements of the charismatic movement along with other parts of the evangelical church, through its disdain of scholarship, have become permeated with it.

Dan McConnell has demonstrated with irresistible scholarship that the roots of prosperity theology in all its manifestations are to be found in Kenneth Hagin, of the Rhema Bible Institute in Tulsa, Oklahoma. McConnell argues that Kenneth Hagin took most of his ideas from E W Kenyon. And it is clear that Hagin did not merely adopt Kenyon's theology, but also was guilty of wholesale plagiarism from Kenyon's writings.¹

The significance of this identification of the source of prosperity teaching lies in the character of Kenyon's theology. McConnell quotes Kenyon's vision of the future to be brought about by his new teaching:

When these truths really gain the ascendancy in us, they will make us spiritual supermen, masters of demons and disease... It will be the end of weakness and failure.²

This is remarkably similar to New Age theology, a theology in which thought overpowers everything negative:

'New Age' thinking is a concept designed to unlock this potential. The key to its success lies in the exhortation: 'That which you can conceive and believe in, you can achieve'.³

And there is a further possible dimension to this emphasis on the positive: personal responsibility for sin is eliminated. Norman Vincent Peale's *Positive Thinking* seeks to convert traditional terms of Christian theology, such as sin, repentance, guilt into their positive counterparts, holiness, forgiveness, freedom⁴ without passing through repentance, without a sense of guilt. Everything becomes instantaneous light, total freedom, perfect power.

What I am saying here is that prosperity theology is only one of a bundle of unbiblical theologies which lie seductively and confusingly across modern evangelical theology. Freudian psychology with its views of the human subconscious 'like a dark cauldron of powerful forces largely beyond our conscious control'⁵ lies behind much of contemporary counselling practice, and yoga techniques of relaxation and emptying the mind (a notion which is alien to biblical Christianity Phil 4.8) have infiltrated even into evangelical conferences. And its seductive power is rooted in the contemptuous dismissal of orthodox theology and even of common logic. The fact that any thinking person knows that not all Christians prosper in business, however faithful they may be, affects their thinking not one whit. As we shall see below facts are dismissed as irrelevant and misleading elements in a material world into which prosperity and New Age thinking imports a spirituality which utterly transcends it.

The Theology of Prosperity Defined

There is no one authoritative theology of prosperity. Like liberation theology, it is a bundle of theologies which share a common philosophical core.

The logic lying behind prosperity theologies is uncomplicated and to that extent persuasive. Simply expressed the logic passes through five propositions.

1 God is omnipotent.

- 2 He is a Father to his redeemed people.
- 3 Like all fathers he wants his children to enjoy life, or, expressing the same thought negatively, he does not wish his children to suffer in any way.
- 4 However, his care for his children is limited by their obedience to his will. A rebellious child cannot at the same time be a child who is enjoying life. Or, again expressed negatively, a rebellious child is not blessed by his father; the blessing is withheld, in order to return the child to the condition of blessing.
- 5 There is, in fact, a direct relationship between our obedience to God and our prosperity. The matter of obedience to Scripture (or faithfulness to covenant) as the pre-requisite for prosperity is agreed by all schools of prosperity.

The term prosperity is understood in various ways: as financial and material, as concerning physical health, as concerning spiritual well-being and effectiveness, and as various combinations of these.

It is the extent to which the law element in the fifth proposition is formalised, and in the various understandings of the key term prosperity that the theologies may be distinguished from one another.

The logic of the theology may also be expressed by a simple appeal to common sense. God is our Heavenly Father, but he loves us far more than any ordinary father could: it is a perfect love. Unlike ordinary parents God is not at the mercy of circumstances, but above them, over them. No ordinary father would wish his children to be poor, or sick, or mentally backward. Ordinary parents cannot always do what they would like to do for their children. God can, and he does.

The presumed 'laws' of prosperity are variously framed, and are more or less comprehensive depending on the particular theology examined. At one point in the spectrum of theologies is the comparatively harmless prosperity law of tithing. The paradigm is expressed somewhat in the following form:

I am a business man and I run my own business. Well, I read that

passage in Malachi⁶ about bringing all the tithes into the barn, and I decided to do just that. I brought my tithe of ten per cent of my profits and gave that to God. It seemed like an awful lot of money, but I did it. And the following year my profits went up. So I could see that God meant what he said. And I increased my tithe up to fifteen per cent. My profits just went right on increasing. Now I'm giving twenty-five per cent to the Lord, and my business just keeps on growing...

Making reference to that same passage in Malachi Ray McCauley confirms this somewhat naive scenario as being consonant with his prosperity theology:

I want to get to the place where I can give away 90% of my income. We've had countless testimonies of people who have started tithing or increased their giving. God has prospered them in so many ways.⁷

T L Osborn places an almost identical emphasis on the Malachi passage in his book *How to Have the Good Life*, devoting chapter 21 of the book to an explanation of Mal. 3.10.

I have said that this is 'comparatively harmless' but I must at once add that in my view it is wrong. It is true that Christians in some types of business flourish, prosper, because they are Christians. They may well work harder than others. They will prove to be reliable traders. Their work will be of good quality. There will be no dishonesty in their contracts. But of course each of these traits may also prove to work against the Christian. The profit margins may be smaller. Customers may take advantage of him. His very honesty may be an embarrassment to fellow workers, who may do their best to discredit him and get rid of him.

When the law doesn't work the Christian may well feel that it is his lack of dedication to God that is at the root of the problem. Since we are all of us perennially aware of our inadequacy, the search for more spirituality, longer quiet times, more earnest prayer, more giving to good causes begins. That way leads to discouragement and even disaster.

There is however a much more radical (and potentially more harmful) form of the prosperity theology.

It is represented by the more developed theology as proposed by Kenneth Copeland⁸ and some of the Rhema churches associated with the names of Kenneth Hagin and Ray McCauley. Here the expectation is that the faithful Christian will *always* be healthy, materially prosperous and spiritually effective. The various 'laws' proposed by this school of prosperity theology are such that prosperity in any or all of these realms is in direct proportion to an individual's faithfulness to God (and especially to the Scriptures). This basic principle is then assumed to operate with something like mathematical precision. The resultant prosperity is then regarded as the best and clearest testimony to the consistency of that Christian's faithfulness to God.

As with the simpler form of the theology so here, the fact is that the 'laws' simply do not work. Certainly not as laws. For example, Christians are, from time to time healed, not through the normal application of medical science, but through faith and through prayer. But others are not so healed. The most appalling damage is done to those who are not healed, since the failure, according to the theology of prosperity, has to lie with the sick individual: the sick person's health is related to the sick person's faith. It is not related to the faith of the one who prays for the health of the one who is sick, or to the consequence of the prayer for healing. Ray McCauley has said, "There are about 37 reasons in the Scriptures why people are not healed, including strife, unforgiveness, not discerning the Lord's body".⁹ This seems to provide the doctrine of healing for all with ample excuse for its failure under any and every imaginable condition.

The issue of physical health is obviously significant. When Ray McCauley was asked bluntly, 'Do you teach that it is always God's will to heal sick Christians?', his answer was unequivocal:

Yes. Galatians 3:13 tells us that Jesus has redeemed us from the curse of the law - and that includes poverty and sickness. I don't accept that it is God's will for some to be healed, while others are

not ... I don't believe that believers have to die of cancer - they can die of old age!¹⁰

There are at least two major problems with this remarkable affirmation. The first problem is in the treatment of Scripture. It is not immediately obvious that any reasonable interpretation of Gal. 3:13 could include the profound teaching McCauley locates there on the subject of prosperity. The second problem is the last phrase is simply not true. One cannot die of old age. Old age is chronology, not a malady. Old people die as a consequence of some physical malfunction. Or to put it more simply still, old people die of disease, of illness, of ill health. But not of chronology. This text can not be stretched to mean that faithful Christians have some sort of right to long life. To even suggest this is to remove oneself from the reality of living in a fallen, suffering world. Christians simply are not exempt from the suffering involved in living in a world that is far from perfect.

This stark doctrine has led to the most tragic consequences, perhaps none more so than the well documented case of Larry Parker's son, Wesley. Wesley suffered from diabetes, but when prayer was offered claiming his healing, Larry 'by faith' claimed the healing for his son and cut off the insulin. The boy died in a diabetic coma, and his father was sent to prison for manslaughter.¹¹ McConnell refers particularly to Faith Assembly, in Indiana, and a total of 90 deaths associated with the ministry of the Assembly and its Pastor, who himself died of the consequence of an untreated fracture and broncho- pneumonia.¹²

On the question of the meaning of the key term prosperity Kenneth Copeland comments:

True prosperity is the ability to use God's power to meet the needs of mankind in any realm of life. This covers much more than just finances, politics and society.¹³

He then develops the theme to show that Christians ought to be in such a relationship to the unlimited power of God that God's resources can always be tapped into, so as to meet human need, but particularly to meet human financial need.

Ray McCauley generally agrees with this understanding of the term prosperity, and comments:

Prosperity means being in control, so that whatever circumstances you find yourself in, you are always in control.¹⁴

In the same interview McCauley also makes clear the broad spectrum of prosperity envisaged in this system:

There is suffering in the Christian life but I don't believe it includes sickness, financial or spiritual need - we've been redeemed from that.¹⁵

Here are the three areas of prosperity identified above, namely health, material prosperity and spiritual effectiveness. T L Osborn would follow precisely the same pattern of belief. So far as the obedient Christian is concerned:

Sickness, suffering and disease will no longer lord it over you because Jesus Christ will make his abode at your house. He becomes your health, as his life is manifested in your mortal flesh. You become God's property. Your body is not created for infirmities and illnesses. It is the Temple of the Holy Ghost.

Poverty and material deprivation, lack and insufficiency will no longer be your lot. God created the wealth of this planet and he placed it here for the prosperity of his children.¹⁶

At the end of the book Osborn sums up:

God wills that you prosper in three ways ...

- 1 Financially
- 2 Physically
- 3 Spiritually ¹⁷

SECTION 2

PROSPERITY THEOLOGY: SOME BIBLICAL TEXTS

It is not difficult to locate particular verses from both Old and New Testaments which appear to lend support to the prosperity doctrine. However, one of the questions we need to ask is if they can actually bear the weight placed on them to support prosperity theology. Perhaps one of the clearest is Dt. 28:1-14, which begins with the faithfulness and obedience condition:

If you fully obey the Lord your God and carefully follow all his commands...

and concludes with the assured consequences:

The Lord will open the heavens, the storehouse of his bounty, to send rain on your land in season and to bless all the work of your hands. You will lend to many nations but borrow from none. The Lord will make you the head, not the tail. If you pay attention to the commands of the Lord your God that I give you this day and carefully follow them, you will always be at the top, never at the bottom.

The same sequence appears in chapter seven of the same book:

If you pay attention to these laws and are careful to follow them...

He will bless the fruit of your womb, the crops of your land... the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks... The Lord will keep you free from every disease. (Dt. 7:12-15)

And again we have the comment in Dt. 15:4

there should be no poor among you, for in the land the Lord your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you, if only you fully obey...

but the passage continues with disarming realism,

If there is a poor man among your brothers ... do not be hard-

hearted or tight-fisted... (v.7).

In other words the Old Testament is picturing first of all the ideal, namely where the people fully obey, an ideal that never was and never could have been realised, and secondly the reality, 'a poor man among you'.¹⁸

In the New Testament we have a foundation verse in Phil. 4:19,

And my God shall meet all you needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.

Of course to explain this verse as though it promises material abundance is to miss Paul's point entirely. Only a few verses previously he has made a simple confession of his own experience of not having enough materially:

I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength. (Phil. 4:12-13)

It is this provision, being content whatever our circumstances, on which we may all depend, not on any supposed guarantee of permanent material abundance.

And there is in 2 Cor. 9:11,

You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion...

In the preceding chapter of the same letter Paul writes:

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich. (2 Cor. 8:9)

This passage also includes a statement on the issue of tithing:

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously (2 Cor. 9:6),

or

Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At this present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality, as it is written: 'He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little'. (2 Cor. 8:13-15)

A correct understanding of these verses can only come out of an understanding of the entire passage beginning at 2 Cor. 8:1 and ending at 2 Cor. 9:15. The actual context is of enormous importance: the collection being organised by Paul amongst the churches of Asia Minor for the poor Christians in Jerusalem. Paul does not respond by writing a letter to Jerusalem outlining the privileges of God's people so far as material prosperity is concerned. Instead he takes up a collection from Christians in Macedonia (2 Cor. 8:2) who themselves are experiencing 'extreme poverty'. And what is more, Paul precisely does not expect that their generosity will lead to a permanent condition of prosperity for them. On the contrary he anticipates a time when they will be even more impoverished than at the present, and could then expect to be helped by the Christians at Jerusalem.

This simply is not a basis for prosperity teaching. But it does, indeed, reflect the general experience of Christians all over the world: an experience of occasional relative affluence, an experience of occasional extreme poverty, and the glad experience of a Christian *koinonia* which makes even extreme poverty bearable.

Attention must also be paid to the vital christological comment in 2 Cor. 8:9. The sequence is clear:

Christ was rich

Christ, in his incarnation became poor

That poverty leads to our being rich.

It seems fairly obvious that the content of the word rich in the first part of the sequence must be the same as that of the third part. Christ's riches were, quite clearly, spiritual riches, his place within the Triune Godhead,

for example. It was that which was resigned, and the consequence is that spiritual riches, not material riches, come to Christ's redeemed people. That is the outcome of the incarnation, not material prosperity.

In fact what we have in this important passage is an appeal to action in a particular situation, to meet a particular need. It is not a general proposition. In a contemporary and parallel situation the same arguments would be relevant. For example we have known in recent years of poverty stricken Christians in Ethiopia, in the Sudan, in South Africa, in Colombia, and in many other parts of the world. In Britain, at least, the response of comparatively rich Christians (not Christians suffering 'extreme poverty', 2 Cor. 8:2) has been marginal, certainly in most cases not such as might lower their standard of living. The consequence of such behaviour must surely be their eventual impoverishment. Had they given they would still have had enough for their own needs. Although they might have been, in absolute terms, less rich, there would have been 'an equality'.

But these verses do not offer a paradigm for covenanted giving and assured returns.

To most teachers of the prosperity doctrine, but especially to those of the so-called 'name-it claim-it' school, Jn. 14:14 is of central importance. Colin Urquhart, in an authoritative book devoted to this subject writes in the first chapter (itself titled 'An Unbelievable Promise?'):

Jesus told his disciples: 'If you ask anything in my name, I will do it' (John 14.14). If you ask anything! And the promise he gives: 'I will do it.' Not, 'I may do it, or 'I might', or 'I can', or 'I could'. 'I will do it'.¹⁹

Chapter two of the same book at once identifies the condition of fulfillment of the promise of Jn. 14:14 as obedience to covenant.

This particular key New Testament text is often directly related to Mt. 18:19, where Jesus tells his followers:

Again I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For

where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.

These two verses, and perhaps especially the second, have been remarkably exploited in the past two decades. The phrase 'in the name of Jesus' is added on to every prayer, apparently in the mistaken belief that since the request is offered in that name it must be granted. It is common to find additional qualifying terms added, 'And this we ask in the mighty name of Jesus', again, apparently, reminding God of the terms under which prayer is being offered, terms which cannot be repudiated.

Of course it must be noted that prosperity teachers do not teach that prayers offered in the name of Jesus will automatically be answered. A condition for answered prayer is that the one who prays should be living in obedience to covenant. However, it must be said that the two verses used are of themselves unconditional, and granted the usual hermeneutics of the prosperity theologian there is no reason to add any condition. The simple fact is that not all prayer made in the name of Jesus results in God answering the respective requests.

There are at least two issues raised here. The first is the significance of the phrase 'in the name of Jesus'. The second is the intention of Jesus in the Matthew text.

The phrase 'in the name of Jesus' or 'in my name' or its equivalent occurs in Mk. 9:41:

I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward.

What is not in mind is the banal situation of someone handing over a drink of water and murmuring the token phrase 'in the name of Jesus' so as to guarantee the promised reward.

In Mt. 18:5 Jesus is recorded as saying:

...whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me.

Again the expectation is not that of the Christian taking a little child into his arms and repeating the formula 'in the name of Jesus' so that he will, in some sense, 'welcome' Jesus. In Mk. 9:39 there is reference to someone who 'does a miracle in my name'. Throughout the various uses of the phrase 'in the name of Jesus' there runs the thought of acting as Jesus would act. To give even a drink of water as Jesus would give it, to receive a little child as Jesus would do it, to perform a miracle as Jesus would do it. Indeed the phrase represents action undertaken by the Christian acting as Christ would.

To ask for anything 'in my name' similarly at least includes the idea of asking as Jesus would ask. And taking this further it would follow the pattern of submission to the will of the Father that Jesus himself demonstrated. Asking in the name of Jesus is not merely a question of a suffixed formula: it is a question of a prefixed determination of the will of God. John Wimber puts it very clearly:

A secret to healing prayer is that it comes from God having already touched our spirits; it is agreement with God about his will.²⁰

Praying 'in the name of Jesus' is just that: determining what the will of our Father is, as Jesus would have done, and then offering ourselves to further that will.

Realistically we have to recognise that we cannot always perceive God's will. We are often too personally involved. And death itself continues to be, to most of us, the worst of our enemies. So there are times when we sometimes cannot hear what God is saying to us. But we also have to admit that there are times when we are too rebellious. We already know what we think God should do and we won't hear him say anything else. And often we know our weakness. Then is the time to pray a prayer of submission: 'I don't know what Your will is, but still, Your will be done'.²¹

The second problem is, perhaps, more readily resolved. Mt. 18:19, like all other texts taken from Scripture, is to be understood only from within its own context. In fact it is the first part of a longer section of Matthew's Gospel, Mt. 18:15-35. The entire passage is dealing with the question of disagreements amongst God's people. The second main division, vv. 21-

35 deals with the consequence of a refusal to forgive. The first part, vv. 15-20, deals with the means by which two quarrelling believers can be reconciled. These verses are given coherence through the repeated 'two', 'three'. Two Christians have disagreed. They cannot seem to put things right. So a mediator is called in. If that does not work then two or three others may be brought in to the reconciliation process. If that does not work then the whole church has to be informed.

There is in fact another way forward for the two believers in dispute, however impossible the situation may seem. If those two (v.19) truly want to get things settled then they have only to ask God to settle it. They act as Jesus would act in such a situation. And God will bring confession and forgiveness into the situation. That is the significance of Mt. 18:19. The verse is not a magic formula which guarantees that the prayers of any two or three Christians together ganging up on God will be answered.

But contrast here the prosperity interpretation imported into v.19 by, for example, Kenneth Copeland, who formalises this process by proposing that a Christian should have 'an agreement partner' so as to meet the otherwise unlimited promise of the verse.²²

The account of the 'rich young ruler' which appears in the three synoptic gospels is often appealed to by proponents of prosperity theology because of the comprehensive promise at the conclusion of the pericope:

And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life . (Mt. 19:29)

Mark uses very similar words, but adds the phrase 'in this present age' to the description of the promised reward (Mk. 10:30). The Markan version of this promise is used by Kenneth Copeland as the source of his principle of the hundred-fold return on our gifts to God. On the story of the 'rich young ruler' he comments, on the basis of its conclusion: 'He intended to give the rich young ruler a hundred times what he had!'.²³ The whole section of explanation of this principle is worth quoting if only as an example of malexegesis:

Jesus said... 'an hundredfold now in this time, houses, and brethren,

Jesus said... 'an hundredfold now in this time, houses, and brethren, and sisters and mothers, and children, and lands, with persecutions; and in the world to come eternal life.' The moment God begins to bless you, you will get persecuted because you become dangerous to Satan. You begin to know that God is the source of your success, that he is the one giving it to you, that there is an endless supply behind you and an endless supply in front of you. All you must do is be a channel for it, and giving is the key that opens the door. Jesus knew the spiritual law of giving and he operated it proficiently. He gave to the poor at such an astonishing rate that when Judas left the room during the Last Supper, some people thought that he must be going to give to the poor.²⁴

Copeland re-iterates the centrality of this passage in his book, *Walking in Prosperity*, commenting 'We have been discussing the laws of prosperity and particularly have covered the promise of the hundred-fold return as in Mk. 10:30.'²⁵ T L Osborn refers to money given on the basis of the hundred-fold return as 'seed money' which must produce the inevitable multiplied returns.²⁶

Gloria Copeland is even more explicit:

You can give \$1 for the Gospel's sake and \$100 belongs to you; give \$10 and receive \$1000; give \$1000 and receive \$100,000. I know that you can multiply, but I want you to see it as black and white and see how tremendous the hundredfold return is ... Give one house and receive one hundred houses or one house worth one hundred times as much. Give one airplane and receive one hundred times the value of the airplane. Give one car and the return would furnish you a lifetime of cars. In short, Mk. 10:30 is a very good deal.²⁷

The incident involving the 'rich young ruler' is clearly recorded to illustrate the barrier raised to salvation by wealth. Jesus himself comments to his followers: 'It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God'. It is simply perverse to use

the passage as a promise of that condition against which it is a solemn warning.

Of course it is true (as those like myself who have been missionaries can easily testify) that having abandoned all opportunities to gain wealth we have nonetheless inherited brothers and sisters and fathers and mothers (though not wives and husbands!) and homes in every corner of the world. When I was in the Royal Air Force I left camp one Sunday morning, and returned late that night. 'Where have you been?' 'To church.' 'But where did you have your dinner?' 'With Mr and Mrs Wilson.' 'Did you know them before, then?' 'No!' 'Well, where did you have your tea?' 'With Mr and Mrs Stanley.' 'Did you know them before then?' 'No!' ... and they simply couldn't understand it. But how much more, now, when I have travelled all over the world! Of course the houses are not mine. They are his!

SECTION 3

PROSPERITY THEOLOGY: A CRITIQUE

There are four principle errors inherent in prosperity theology: the absence of a biblical world view, the imposition of a defective hermeneutic, an ambivalent attitude towards knowledge and an unbiblical dualism.

The absence of a biblical world view.

Our world view is simply the sum total of our understanding of the world as we reach that understanding both through our observation of it and God's revelation concerning it. And it is the latter that controls and supplements the former, since what we can perceive is limited by the senses which must be employed in all perception.

The biblical world view is apparent in the opening chapters of Luke's Gospel. Here we find a recognition of rulers and ruled, of husbands and wives, a world in which babies are conceived and born, and a world which allows for angels, demons, visions, signs, miracles, shepherds, circumcision, prayer and prophecy. There is disease and there is demonic oppression. There is death.

But this is only a partial world view. Opening up the entire Bible enables us to become aware of a schema of which we would otherwise be unaware. It is a world created by God. It is a world within which there are two kingdoms, the Kingdom of God and the Satanic Kingdom. There is a people of God, a people whose history runs right through the Bible, including Abel, Noah, Abraham, David, Elijah and the New Testament Church. The people of God are involved in a conflict, battling to bring salvation to the fallen world, and battling against the powers of darkness.

Significantly the biblical world view divides history into two parts, with two distinguishable 'Israels', the one evident before the coming of the promised Messiah, and the other continuing after his coming and after his death on the cross. The one is a people whose locus is geographically

circumscribed, the second is spread throughout the world. Each of the two 'Israels' is related to God through its own distinctive covenant.

Christians tend to make two opposite errors in relations to the Old Covenant. They either discard it entirely, and leave themselves without a key to an understanding of their New Covenant, or else they treat it as though it were identical with the New Covenant. Thus in discussing the Ten Commandments it is assumed that they are simply to be incorporated into the New Covenant. Except for the fourth, since we Christians observe Sunday, the first day, and not Saturday, the seventh day. But that is the only difference. Of course it is not. Rightly or wrongly we travel to church on Sunday, we light fires and we cook food. Preachers are allowed to work because Sunday is meant for worship. There is, of course, no indication in the Law that the Seventh Day involved some kind of worship service. It was a day of ceasing. Our Sunday practice is not based on a modified Covenant Decalogue. Failure to distinguish between the two covenants and failure to distinguish between the two peoples leads inevitably into a false world view. That is to say, promises appropriate to the one covenant are imported inappropriately into the second. Under the first covenant we have a people who are physically located in a promised land, in a defined territory. They are surrounded by other nations, casting covetous eyes on the land of Israel. To keep their land Israel needs an army, it needs a leader. To keep peace in the land it needs laws and judges. All this is swept away under the second covenant.

More importantly, under the Old Covenant and on the macroscopic scale it could be shown that when the people of God were faithful to the Covenant, God prospered them. He fought their battles, protected their boundaries, watered their crops. And since Israel was a visible and distinct nation it was possible for the surrounding nations to see for themselves the relationship between covenant obedience and national prosperity.

But that was all on the macroscopic scale. At the level of the microscopic, however, the suggestion that prosperity is in some way directly proportional to faith never did hold good.

No less important is the biblical schema as it relates to salvation. There is the Old Testament period when as a sign of obedient faith animal sacrifices (which never, in fact, dealt with sin) were symbolically offered, as we now know anticipating their fulfillment in the death of Christ, the Son of God, for the sins of the whole world. There is the period of history subsequent to the Passion, within which some of the fruits of Christ's sacrifice are enjoyed. A broken relationship with the Father is healed. The sting of death is drawn. Although we sin, we are no longer helplessly dominated by sin. Although we are ill and must all die inexplicably in human terms ('miraculously'), God steps in to heal the sick and even to raise the dead. But there is a third period anticipated, a period when,

He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. (Rev. 21:4)

So much of prosperity thinking conflates the second and third of these periods, inevitably leading to an unbiblical theology and to profound disappointment in those who adopt it.

A defective hermeneutic

By hermeneutics we mean those principles by which we interpret particular texts. Biblical hermeneutics are those principles by which we interpret the Bible.

There is probably no subject of greater importance for Christians today than hermeneutics. The putting together of proper rules for understanding the Bible would deliver millions from the seductive nonsense of a multitude of writers and preachers. And this is nowhere more true than in the contemporary determination to have victory without battles, to have crowns without crosses, in other words to have what Bonhoeffer unforgettably labelled Cheap Grace.²⁸

Evangelicals in particular have often been brought up on textual preaching, and have constructed proof-text theologies. That is to say the theology is constructed first, and then the Bible is ransacked for suitable verses in support of the theology. I am reminded of my early lessons in

navigation, when the navigator actually used a map. We had it drummed into us: always go from the map to the ground, never from the ground to the map. The fact is that if some prominent feature is seen on the ground it will not be difficult to find some such feature on the map. But prior references to the map might well show that there are several such features in the immediate area, and it is not, in fact, so prominent as a limited vision supposed.

And yet experience does have a role to play in an evangelical hermeneutic. Our understanding of a text ought to conform to the experience of the Spirit-led Christian. Thus the word 'experience' is at once modified by the addition of a recognition of the controlling work of the Spirit. Of course it is sadly true that we are very prone to a glib appeal to 'what God has shown me' as a way of obtaining Holy Spirit authority for what may well be no more than our own preference.

So then if an honest attempt to exegete Scripture leads to a conclusion that runs contrary to experience we may need to look again at our exegesis, or we may need to look again at our experience, or at our claim to the leading of the Spirit. The aim should be to bring experience and exegesis into agreement. Ultimately, of course, we must submit to the Bible and allow it to critique our experience.

So the Bible has priority over experience. And the discourse, the whole passage, the pericope, has priority over the word or even the sentence. The meaning of a word is determined by the sentence in which it occurs, and the meaning of the sentence by its paragraph, and the meaning of the paragraph by the pericope. Thus in 2 Cor. 8:9 the meaning of our riches when we are redeemed is (as we have seen) determined by the meaning of Christ's riches before the incarnation, and not by the meaning of 'rich' in any other context.

I have regularly introduced a series of lectures on linguistics by the casual observations: 'Now, you all know what I mean by the word "table"?', and everyone cheerfully nods. But of course they do not. They cannot until the word is used in some sensible context. It might refer to a dining room table, an arithmetic table, a water table, a cricket table or even to the flat

surface of a precious stone. Prosperity theology deals in text wrenched from their contexts, and it is context which gives meaning to words. Without their contexts we can impose almost any meanings we wish on words. A word without a context is merely a symbol waiting for someone to attach a meaning to it, a label waiting to be attached to a referent.

Everyone who is exposed to the sacred text of Scripture, as expositor or as one who listens to exposition must be taught this absolutely fundamental principle: meaning lies in the whole passage, and not in word or even in sentence.²⁹

An ambivalent attitude towards knowledge.

This third problem is very much more difficult to express than the other two, and the very statement of the problem opens the way to serious misinterpretation of the motives of the critic. The fact is that prosperity teachers on the one hand tend to disdain traditional and orthodox scholarship and yet on the other hand to elevate esoteric and revelational knowledge. Few teachers of prosperity have anything approaching formal theological education.

Ray McCauley, in a recent interview published in *Jesus Lifestyle*, third quarter, 1990, said:

Whatever you do should have a scriptural foundation but I also believe that the intellect is so high and mighty that it only dries prunes when it comes to meeting people's needs.

In the same article, in what is rather typical hyperbole McCauley says:

I was recently elected President of Christian Education in South Africa which is actually very funny because I have no education whatsoever.

However, along with this defiant attitude as regards their admitted lack of formal education the prosperity theologians have developed a whole doctrine of what they call Revelation Knowledge. This is set over against Sense Knowledge, knowledge which is available to anyone through the five senses, and which forms the basis for the normal educational

curriculum.

McConnell points out³⁰ that this distinction then leads to dualism and fideism. Dualism separates two distinct universes, the material and evil universe, and the spiritual and sacred universe. Fideism insists that truth can only come from revelation knowledge, not at all from sense knowledge. These two principles then lead to a distinction even amongst Christians, between the enlightened Christians who have access to Revelation Knowledge by which they can attain absolute truth, and the rest, who through their access to sense knowledge are deluded into thinking that they have spiritual truth.

This analysis certainly helps to explain the ambivalence so readily perceived amongst the prosperity teachers when they deal with knowledge, on the one hand highly prizing it, and on the other hand vehemently despising it.

The conflict produced by fideism is often seen in relationship to healing. The sick person is prayed for, but the symptoms do not disappear. The patient is then reminded of the delusion of the material symptoms. The reality is the healing that has taken place even though the evidence of the symptoms appears to deny it. Faith ignores the symptoms, the sense knowledge, and holds on to the Revelation Knowledge.

Of course this conflict works confusingly in both directions. John Wimber comments on the perplexing case of David Watson:

David experienced the sensations and presence of the Holy Spirit that on similar occasions I had observed to occur in the bodies of those who were eventually healed of cancer. He felt heat and tingling, what he described as 'energy' coming into his body ... David was not healed. He died in February 1984.³¹

Thus it appears that neither physical symptoms of disease nor physical symptoms of healing are to be trusted. The only trustworthy knowledge is Revelation Knowledge.

An unbiblical dualism.

Paradoxically prosperity theology both elevates the physical and material insofar as they affect the life of the Christian and minimises the physical as it relates to the process of the atonement. The physical becomes of central concern for humanity, our physical needs must and will be met. But the physical is de-spiritualised. It really is physical. And then the death of Christ, which is, of course, a physical event is denied spiritual consequences. Another kind of death, spiritual death, must be posited to provide atonement. This then produces a clear deviation from orthodox Christianity in a cardinal doctrine. Kenneth Copeland expresses the doctrine very clearly:

Jesus went into hell to free mankind from the penalty of Adam's high treason... When his blood poured out it did not atone...³²

A doctrine of Christ's two deaths emerges, the one physical, on the cross, which does not atone, and the other spiritual, in hell which does. Jesus' spiritual death in hell is followed by his being 'born again' so that two parallel series of events are produced: crucifixion, physical death, burial and physical resurrection, and descent to hell, spiritual death, and the new birth which constitutes Jesus Redeemer and Saviour. Over against this we may place a string of coherent biblical texts all referring to Christ's physical and atoning death culminating, perhaps, in 1 Pet. 2:24:

He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.

The centrality of the cross in New Testament soteriology is more than a metonymic way of referring to some event other than the crucifixion. The frequent references to the atoning value of the blood of Christ are not oblique references to some esoterically identified spiritual and therefore bloodless death in hell. At least on this all orthodox theories of the atonement are agreed: it was at the cross that atonement was effected, however we may choose to deal with the events separating the death of Christ from his resurrection.

SECTION 4

A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF RICH AND POOR

We shall look here at two aspects of the doctrine, at its promise of material prosperity and at its promise of health. And we shall attempt to show what the canonical teaching of the Bible is, that is to say the total teaching of the canon of Scripture, rather than the teaching of selected verses, the textual teaching of Scripture. Obviously this cannot mean dealing with every passage of the Bible bearing on the subject. What it does mean is attempting to understand the coherent teaching not of selected texts, but of pericopae, of complete passages of the Bible.

There is a coherent view of humanity presented in the Bible. It begins with the creation narrative, setting out what we intuitively recognise: the world that was created by God was good. We are not mistaken in thinking that our Father's will is plenty, not poverty. The Fall is vital here, explaining why we are not confronted with a world which presents evidences of the creator's hand but unclear evidences, compromised evidences, equivocal evidences.

At the other end of the Bible is Revelation which, perhaps simplistically, may be seen as restoring by divine action what divine action had once created. There is a second creation, and it will not be spoiled.

Between Genesis and Revelation we have a coherent account of God creating a people through whom the ravages of a spoiled world can be repaired. Because no one of us ever becomes what we could become there is no assurance of justice. There can no nice balance between our individual levels of righteousness and our rewards.

The Canonical teaching of Scripture on prosperity.

As we would expect, the canonical teaching of Scripture corresponds to what can be observed. Faith is never contrary to fact. The book of Proverbs³³ consists of eight distinct collections of proverbial sayings. There is some disagreement about the origin of the proverbs. On the one hand much of the wisdom of the proverbs is rough-hewn. On the

other hand they frequently show signs of careful crafting, of real poetry. William McKane proposes an explanation of these features, suggesting that while the wisdom literature has its origins in popular thinking, this was taken up and polished by literary figures of the day.³⁴

Ordinary people are not easily blinded by neat systematic theologies, and this is reflected in the realism of the proverbs. There are the rich and there are the poor. But the reasons for the one being rich or for the other being poor are highly complex. A man may be rich because of his righteousness, and a man may be poor because of his sinfulness. Prosperity may, indeed flow out of obedience to the covenant. But not necessarily so. A man may be rich because he exploits his workers, oppresses the poor, and a man may be poor despite his obedience to God and because he is oppressed by the wicked. The man of God is not, in fact, delivered from the general injustice of human society.

A poor man's field may produce abundantly, but injustice sweeps it away (Pr. 13:23). There are dishonest scales to contend with (Pr. 11:1), and there are lying tongues which deceive (Pr. 11:9). There are ruthless men who profit from their ruthlessness (Pr. 11:16), and there is the entrepreneur who stores his grain until the price goes up...and the poor hate him for his cleverness (Pr. 11:26). It is recognised that 'The Lord detests the way of the wicked' (Pr. 15:9) and he knows the heart of every individual (Pr. 15:11), but the Holy Spirit who breathes out the Word of God does not allow Proverbs to become trivialized. The only certainty that makes sense out of an otherwise absurd world is death. 'The faithless will be fully repaid for their way' (Pr. 14:14), but not necessarily now.

There is an exercise that teachers of English used, in which proverbs were paired, by opposites: 'too many cooks spoil the broth' against 'many hands make light work'. It would be easy, then, to dismiss either the one or the other of each pair as being untrue, but even the simplest among us would know that each is true in its context. In the context of an entire society obedient to covenant the righteous would be rewarded and the wicked would be punished, the righteous would prosper and the unrighteous be impoverished. But such a society never has existed and never will exist within the two apparent boundaries accorded to human existence, birth

and death.

In the New Testament we have a striking commentary on the Proverbs scenario, in the parable of the rich fool (Lk. 12:13-21). The rich man has land which produces, apparently without any particular effort on his part, a rich harvest. Probably because everyone had a good harvest that year it did not seem wise to sell the grain right then. Instead it proved actually to be profitable to destroy his existing barns, incur the expense of building new barns so as to be able to sell the grain later, when prices had risen. If in human terms the man's actions were astute, in divine terms he was stupid; he had left out of account the inevitability of death. The parable is intended to make clear our duty to be rich towards God (v.21) but more particularly to illustrate a fundamental principle of human life, that 'a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions' (v.15). In other words if God wishes to reward us he does not do so by multiplying our material wealth. There are greater blessings than these.

Some years ago I was invited to take part in a television programme in which the main speaker was the minister of the prosperity church in London's plush Hampstead area. His doctrine was a straight T L Osborn prosperity. One of the questions asked of us by the presenter concerned the obvious 'success' of the church. It was full when nearby churches were empty. Why was this? The answer is rather obvious: offered the choice between a society which guaranteed total prosperity in return for nothing tangible at all, the likely choice of anyone who was not enlightened by the Holy Spirit is only too predictable.

The programme had an unexpected sequel. A few weeks later the Associate Minister of the church telephoned, asking for an interview with me. When he came he explained. He had been at the TV programme, in the audience. He had been very angry with me because of what I had said about the prosperity doctrine. But then, he said, he went home, and turned to his Bible, and admitted that he could not find one person in the New Testament who had prospered materially because of his faith.

And what really bothered him was the example of Paul. As part of a canonical theology of prosperity Paul's own testimony provides an

important element. This is how he summarises the life of obedience and its consequences:

I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea. I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst, and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. (2 Cor. 11:23-27)

And if we need further confirmation of those consequences of faithfulness to God Paul again supplies it in Phil. 3:8, 'I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things.'

The minister concluded: 'I discovered that although I had been to Bible College I did not know my Bible'. (Incidentally he did not complete his course, because he despised sense knowledge). He simply wanted to tell me that he recognised the prosperity theology he had adopted as unbiblical, and that he was going away, now, to study the Bible and to sort out a biblical theology.

In any biblical theology of prosperity, however, it is vital to maintain a balance between idolising prosperity and idolising poverty. Certainly it is true that Jesus himself made clear the peculiar dangers of wealth: 'it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven' (Mt. 19:23). But it is also true that there is a consistent strand of teaching that runs right through the Bible illustrating God's particular concern for the poor. It is seen in the provisions of the Torah, it is a recurrent theme in the prophets, and it is especially illustrated in the provisions of the fiftieth year Jubilee. For the poor man there was this provision: light at the end

of the tunnel. The trumpets would sound and the cancellation of debts would be announced. Land would revert to its original owner. Or that was the intention. So far as we know the Jubilee was never put into practice. However we perceive that this particular legislation illustrates God's concern for the poor. There is no canonising of poverty. Poverty is a burden to be lifted off the stooped backs of the poor.

And yet always there is the danger of becoming rich. Old Testament Israel illustrates the danger perfectly. Any kind of wealth has a seductive power, offering an alternative to submission to Yahweh. There are other gods who are more pliable, who can be wooed by the offering of gifts. Brueggemann expresses it very clearly with respect to Yahweh's grant of a land:

In the land Israel encounters alternative possibilities. It experiences guaranteed satiation, it needs gods, surely other than Yahweh, who are committed to their own guaranteed satiation, who can function as symbolic legitimation for Israel's pursuit of satiation. And sure enough there are such gods who make themselves available. They present themselves as practical choices, usable loyalties put at the disposal of Israel as means of securing its own existence.³⁵

And this is an appropriate commentary on the prosperity doctrine. It serves another god, a god who in return for his own satiety will ensure that of his worshipper. The fact that he does not and cannot do so can be satisfactorily explained away, as can the failures of all false religions, all false worship.

Yahweh is different ... He doesn't have to do anything.

The Canonical teaching of Scripture on healing.

Not all covenant-observing Christians are healed when they are prayed for. Yet some Christians are healed when they are prayed for. Henry Frost wrote *Miraculous Healing* back in 1972, when it was published by the Overseas Missionary Fellowship. Zondervan re-issued it in 1979. Several reviewers have characterised it as the most balanced book on the subject available. In an invaluable and telling foreward Joni Eareckson says:

Just about every morning around our house my sister Jay goes through a daily routine of coaxing her reluctant handicapped sister out of dreamland and into a new day...‘Click’ goes the TV knob...sometimes there is a healing service on, and I will watch it as I am being exercised, dressed, made up and lifted into my wheelchair. It’s rather paradoxical to be sitting there, handicapped and unable to care for myself, listening to the sermon and watching people hobble onstage with crutches and walk off without them.

But am I to suppose that Joni is lacking in faith, or deficient in her discipleship and so is not healed? Was that the reason why David Watson was not healed? Catherine Booth died of cancer. Both George Whitefield and C H Spurgeon died before they were sixty. William Branham, an early prophet of prosperity, died at fifty-six and for the last nine years of his life was in debt.

With tremendous honesty John Wimber discussed his own experience of not being healed in his book *Power Healing*.³⁶ Medical tests in 1985 confirmed that his heart was not functioning properly, damage caused by his being ‘overweight and overworked’. At the end of that year he asked for prayer for healing from a gathering of twenty key Vineyard pastors, in Palm Springs. In July of 1986 he had further serious heart malfunction and was admitted to intensive care in hospital. It was there discovered that although there had been some improvement in his heart condition he was also suffering from ulcers. He summarised:

I wish I could write that at this time I am completely healed, that I no longer have physical problems. But if I did, I would be a liar. My experience raised a larger question about divine healing: what about those who are not healed?³⁷

Within the pages of the Bible we do have a number of examples of divine healing. But not a large number. There are, moreover, several examples of actual restoration to life, but only a very few. On the other hand we have important references to the illnesses of the people of God. Timothy needed advice on his frequent illnesses:

Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your

stomach and your frequent illnesses (1 Tim. 5:23).

And this is Paul giving the advice! No suggestion that if only Timothy had a closer walk with God the illnesses would disappear. And that same Paul had to confess: 'I left Trophimus sick in Miletus' (2 Tim. 4:20). I leave Paul's thorn in the flesh on one side, since we have no indication of just what that particular infliction was.

But we must give some attention to the claim that healing is part of the atonement. That is to say Christ's death delivered us not only from the power of sin, but also from the power of disease.

Matthew draws on Is. 53 in explanation of the healing of large numbers of the sick and the expelling of demons, recorded in Mt. 8:16. Following his description of the healing Matthew comments:

This was to fulfil what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah:
He took our infirmities
and carried our diseases.

The source of this quotation is Is. 53.4,

Surely he took up our infirmities
and carried our sorrows.

Probably the most helpful commentary on these statements comes from Donald Carson in his *Matthew* commentary in F Gaeberlein (ed.) *The Expositor's Bible*. Matthew's Greek rendering of Isaiah mutes rather than enhances any possible suggestion of a redemptive act. 'He took up' is *elaben*, 'He carried' is *esbastasen*. Neither of these Greek verbs carries any particular overtone of sacrifice or substitution. But this cannot detract from the fact that Matthew explains the healings in terms of the Isaiah reference which is set firmly within the context of the Servant Songs, and within the immediate context of the most clearly substitutionary of the four Songs at that.

If we consider the verbs used by Isaiah, 'He took up', *nasa*, our infirmities, and 'He carried', *šbalam*, our sorrows then although they do not necessarily bear substitutionary connotations they certainly may. At this point it is arguable that Carson, very unusually, misses the point. He comments:

But strictly speaking Isaiah 53:4 simply speaks of the Servant's bearing infirmities and carrying sicknesses and it is only the context plus the connection between sickness and sin, that shows that the way he bears the sickness of others is through his suffering and death.³⁸

As I have previously insisted it is only the context that can give meaning to any word or phrase. If the context shows that the servant bears our sickness in his suffering and death then that is what the phrase 'bears our sickness' means.

It is quite clear that Is. 53 is of central importance to several New Testament writers as a foundation for a doctrine of substitutionary atonement. What we have, in fact, is a double ministry of Jesus, anticipating a very much enlarged ministry to come following his resurrection. He now forgives sin (Mt. 9:2), but with the resurrection a wider ministry of forgiveness will open up. He heals the sick now, but after the resurrection the healing powers will pass on to his disciples. But even so the full consequences of the passion of Christ await their fulfillment in the realised Kingdom, at the parousia. We still sin, although we do find power to overcome sin. We do see healing, but not everyone is healed.

Carson sums up, importantly:

It should be stated that this discussion cannot be used to justify healing on demand... From the perspective of the NT writers, the Cross is the basis for all the benefits that accrue to believers, but this does not mean that all such benefits can be secured at the present time on demand, any more than we have the right and power to demand our resurrection bodies.³⁹

I have deliberately omitted a sentence from Carson's summary, not because I disagree with what he says, but because it is open to misinterpretation. He says, 'This text and others clearly teach that there is healing in the Atonement.' He is quite right, but the phrase he uses, 'healing in the atonement' has become a technical term, and for many means precisely what Carson does not mean, that because of the

atonement we all have the right to perfect health and to healing on demand. What Carson is saying is that where there is healing in demonstration of divine power, that healing is one of the benefits of Calvary.

Finally, in this section on a canonical approach to healing we make reference to the one New Testament passage that appears to offer guaranteed healing in response to the use of means, in this case anointing. The passage is Jas. 5:13-20. John Wimber quotes this passage and then without any attempt at a serious exegesis concludes:

This passage assumes that healing is a gift of God given freely to his people.⁴⁰

Scripture does demand more respectful treatment than that. Like the verses from Is. 53 already considered there is a regrettable pattern of interpretation of words and sentences, rather than of the whole context.

These verses in fact direct attention to a Christian who has sinned in some particularly grievous way, and the prayer of church elders, whose status before God is compared quite deliberately with that of Elijah. The promise is of healing (v.16), and the verbal form is *iathete*. The verb usually refers to physical healing, as in Mt. 8:8; three times refers to spiritual restoration, in each case quoting Is. 6:9-10 (Mt. 13:15, Jn 12:40, Acts 28:27); and, very significantly, in 1 Pet. 2:24, referring to Is. 53:5. It appears that James is referring to a dual healing of sin and of disease.

In the pericope Jas. 5:13-20 the word *hamartia*, 'sin', occurs four times. The situation being considered appears to be that of illness which is divine retribution for some particular sin. The sick person is to approach the church elders, confess his sin, and they are then to anoint him as a symbol of sacrifice, symbolising his double healing, from his sin, which caused the sickness, and from the sickness itself. Significantly the pericope concludes with a tidy summary:

...remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover a multitude of sins. (Jas 5:20)

It seems to me that the passage is not a general invitation to all sick people

to use a simple physical means, anointing with oil, accompanied by prayer, to bring about a guaranteed cure. If it does mean that then it doesn't work. Roger Cowley apparently believed that it was to be applied in an entirely general way:

To the straight question, 'I'm ill; where should I go for help?' my normal answer is, 'Request prayer after the pattern of James 5, and go to your doctor' (in that, or the reverse, order).⁴¹

However, Cowley clearly did identify the relationship between the confession of sin and healing in this passage:

I am much more ready to pray with laying on of hands, and/or with anointing with oil...my readiness to be ministered to by others has increased. Formerly, I resisted confessing my sins to another (Jas. 5:16), and in general I expected to be giving out to others...⁴²

What Jas. 5 does appear to mean is that where sickness is not a mere physical consequence of sin (in some sense all sickness is that), but an actual divine retribution for sin (and not all sickness is that), then the responsibility of an elder is to lead the sinner to confession and repentance, and then, as a symbol of the healing of body and spirit, to anoint the penitent with oil.

And finally, as Douglas Moo notes, it is crucial that James promises that the prayer of faith will heal. It is the prayer *tes pisteos*, and faith is the gift of God, directly related to the will of God. Faith is not given to us for anything other than what is God's will. To quote Moo directly:

...we may question whether the faith to pray effectively for healing can be present unless it is God's will to heal.⁴³

CONCLUSION

Few of us are free from anxiety. Few of us are free from the allure of wealth. And most of us are persuaded, at least in some measure, that wealth can free us from anxiety. The future can be guaranteed, we feel, if only we have a surplus in the present. It is to our anxiety and our materialism that prosperity theology makes its appeal.

This theology is, of course, the very antithesis of faith. Faith dares any future, and trusts God for whatever that future may be. Prosperity theology is a return to law, a law that promises certainty, that replaces the uncertainty which is inseparable from faith.

The unpalatable fact is that no theology can guarantee the future. Becoming a Christian does not provide us with an all-risks covered insurance policy in return for the payment of stated premiums. This pathetic search for prosperity by already wealthy Christians, conned into it by preachers who play on their listeners' anxieties, is certain to fail. I have to say that most often it is the preachers of prosperity who must bear the greater responsibility: at least they should know what the Bible actually says. They ought to know that they are perverting, wilfully perverting, its message.

Since I first encountered prosperity theology I have studied my Bible with great care, to see what element of truth there might be in it. Materially speaking I have become increasingly pessimistic. Spiritually speaking I have become more and more excited. My conclusion is that to anyone who becomes a Christian I can promise only one thing: a safe arrival home. I was recently in Thailand, and stayed in the home from which two missionaries were abducted and shot. I worked in Ethiopia where, up in the far north, two women were abducted and one shot. I conducted the funeral service of a young Australian doctor, stabbed to death as he set up his tent for a day of medical caring. As I write these final lines my wife and I are sharing our home with a Christian lady only recently released from fourteen years of communist imprisonment. In the same jail was a young Lutheran woman, similarly imprisoned, her husband executed. These give the lie to the theology of prosperity.

Paul lost everything for Christ. Others have known the same testing experience. But this much I do believe: while I am here God will provide me with the spiritual grace I need. And he will see me safe home.

Footnotes

- 1 D McConnell, *The Promise of Health and Wealth*, Chapter 1.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p.21.
- 3 M Cole, J Graham, T Higton, D Lewis, *What is the New Age*, p.30.
- 4 See especially the immensely important book by D Hunt and T A McMahon, *The Seduction of Christianity*, ch. 11, 'Christianised Idolatry?'
- 5 D Groothuis, *Unmasking the New Age*, p.74.
- 6 Malachi 3:10-11:
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 an overflowing blessing. I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not destroy the fruits of your soil; and your vine in the field shall not fail to bear...
- 7 *Redemption*, May 1986, p.31. (This is a published interview with Ray McCauley.)
- 8 See especially K Copeland, *The Laws of Prosperity*.
- 9 *Redemption*, May 1986, p.32.
- 10 *Ibid.*.
- 11 Larry Parker, *We Let Our Son Die* and D McConnell, *op.cit.*, p.81- 82.
- 12 *Ibid.*.
- 13 Copeland, *op.cit.*, p.26.
- 14 *Redemption*, May 1986, p.30.
- 15 *Ibid.*.
- 16 T L Osborn, *How to Have the Good Life*, p.18-19.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p.200.

- 18 See W Kaiser, Jr 'The Old Testament Case for Material Blessing', *Trinity Journal* 9.2 (1988), pp 151-170; see also below, section 4.
- 19 Urquhart, *op.cit.*, p.16. The emphases are the author's.
- 20 J Wimber, *Power Healing*, p.214.
- 21 See D Moo, 'Healing in the Health and Wealth Gospel', *Trinity Journal* 9.2 (1988), p.207f..
- 22 Copeland, *op.cit.*, ch.3, 'Your Heavenly Account', p.96, the section headed 'The Power of Agreement'.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p.66.
- 24 *Ibid.*, pp.66-67.
- 25 K Copeland, *Walking in Prosperity*, ch.4.
- 26 T L Osborn, *op.cit.*, ch.25.
- 27 G Copeland, *God's Will is Prosperity*, p.54, quoted in McConnell, *op.cit.*, p.172.
- 28 D Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, ch.1.
- 29 The reader is referred to P Cotterell and M Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation*, for a thorough exploration of this vital issue.
- 30 McConnell, *op.cit.*, p.105.
- 31 J Wimber, *Power Evangelism*, p.14.
- 32 Quoted in McConnell, *op.cit.*, p.120.
- 33 On this section see, for more detail, my *Mission and Meaninglessness*, ch.15 'A Theology of the Poor'.
- 34 See W McKane, *Proverbs*, pp.2-3.
- 35 W Brueggemann, *The Land*, p.57.
- 36 J Wimber, *Power Healing*, pp.159-162.
- 37 *Ibid.*, p.162.

- 38 D Carson, *Matthew*.
- 39 *Ibid.*, p.207.
- 40 Wimber, *Power Healing*, p.172.
- 41 R Cowley, 'An Invitation to Expectancy' in J Goldingay (ed.), *Signs, Wonders and Healing*.

There is a particular poignancy in Roger Cowley's contribution to this important book in that he very shortly afterwards died from a cancer-related illness, a comparatively young man and an enormous loss to evangelical biblical scholarship.

- 42 *Ibid.*, p.100.
- 43 Moo, *op.cit.*, p.207.

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Trinity Journal 9.2 (1988) which is dedicated to the study of prosperity theology. It includes the articles written by Moo and Kaiser referred to in the footnotes.

His name: make known his deeds among
people.

Sing unto him, sing psalms unto him:
Praise his wondrous works.

Glory ye in his holy name

rejoice that seek the LORD.

Seek the LORD

neper cydode hepa

Dr Peter Cotterell is Principal of the London Bible College and Senior Lecturer in Missiology and Linguistics. He was a missionary in Ethiopia for 19 years and brings a wealth of experience to the issue of Prosperity teaching.

As Dr Cotterell points out in his introduction:

'I am appalled by the cynical manipulation of myriads of Christians by those who promise prosperity in return for faith.... What I would want to see would be a replacement of this appetite for more by the option for the poor....'

This booklet explains why....

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