

GOD'S RESOLVES AND DIVINE ECONOMY: UNDERLYING MISSING CONCEPTS IN THE PROSPERITY GOSPEL AND PROSPERITY THEOLOGY CONVERSATION

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ABSTRACT

The prosperity gospel is a much-talk-about topic in Nigeria. It is the gospel of health and wealth. This hinges on the understanding that by his death Christ overcame sin, sickness and poverty. Therefore every child of God has a right to share in the blessings of health and wealth which Christ won. So, in prosperity gospel parlance, anyone who is riding an old car or is sick or die young has not understood the gospel. The prosperity gospel is largely seen by its challengers as *another* gospel. The antagonists see poor interpretative model, this-worldly emphasis and godliness-for-gain emphasis as major pitfalls in prosperity gospel teachings. This paper argues that the problem of the teaching of the prosperity gospel is deeper than meets the eye; it largely stems from a lack of understanding of some fundamental theological concepts. Thus, the paper introduces three theological concepts: God's general will, specific will and divine economy into the conversation. The three concepts are familiar concepts in Christian theology but rarely used in conversation on the prosperity gospel. These concepts are articulated in this paper in contention with the prosperity gospel and those who celebrate poverty as if it were a medal of honour. The methodology used is a qualitative one.

Keywords: Faith, Gospel, Prosperity, Wealth, Will

INTRODUCTION

The prosperity gospel is the gospel of abundant good health and material affluence. This hinges on the understanding that by his death Christ overcame sin, sickness and poverty. Therefore every child of God has a right to share in the blessings of health and wealth which Christ won. So, in prosperity gospel parlance, anyone who is riding an old car or is sick or dies young has not understood the gospel (Gifford *To Save or Enslave?* 11). The prosperity gospel has many names

such as health and wealth, positive confession, word-of-faith, and name-it-and-claim-it (Hummel 4). It is also known as faith gospel (Gifford *Its Public Role* 39). This gospel is found in many Pentecostal and Charismatic churches across Africa. It has also found its way into some mainline churches.

The prosperity gospel is largely seen by its challengers as *another* gospel. The antagonists see poor interpretative model, this-worldly emphasis and godliness-for-gain emphasis as major pitfalls in the prosperity gospel teachings. This paper argues that the

kernel of the problem of the prosperity gospel teaching is deeper than meets the eye; it largely stems from a lack of understanding of some fundamental theological concepts: God's general will, specific will and divine economy. The paper introduces these concepts in the conversation. The three concepts are familiar concepts in Christian theology but rarely used in conversation on the prosperity gospel. These concepts are articulated in this paper in contention with the prosperity gospel and those who celebrate poverty as if it were a medal of honour. The methodology used is a qualitative one.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PROSPERITY GOSPEL

Prosperity gospel began in America. There are two forms of the prosperity gospel: the earlier and later form. The earlier form centred on enterprise while the later form revolves around faith. The prosperity gospel which centred on enterprise began in the second half of the 19th century. During this time, the owners of big companies were amassing great wealth and were living in a style that was never seen before. The monopolistic practices of this class created fear in the minds of many people (Gifford *To Save or Enslave?* 13; Smelser and Gundersen 138-140).¹ In order 'to justify their wealth and legitimize their method of acquiring it, and [...] to forestall any government attempt to touch it,' (Gifford *To Save or Enslave?* 14) this class of people used social Darwinism and the prosperity gospel as tools of defence. They emphasized 'that the complainers had shown themselves

unfit to compete in a world of fierce struggle for survival' (Smelser and Gundersen 140).

The churchgoers among them came up with a form of prosperity gospel which stressed that poverty was the outcome of sin and wealth was the product of God's favour on the enterprising child of God. Soon, this gospel found ready preachers. One of these preachers was Russell Conwell. Conwell made it clear, in his sermon titled 'Acres of Diamonds' which he delivered over 5,000 times, that poverty was the product of sin; and no one should sympathize with a poor man as that means empathizing with a man whom God had punished for his sins. He encouraged the poor in America to get rich as doing so was the will of God for them. He stressed that there was prospect of wealth for any enterprising believer (Gifford *To Save or Enslave?* 14). This earlier form is different from the later form.

Unlike the earlier form, the later form (modern prosperity gospel) stresses that the believer needs not do anything as prosperity has been won for him by the Lord Jesus Christ, and it is his right; he should simply claim it by faith. He should also remember to give God his resources and God will in turn reimburse him plentifully. The modern prosperity gospel has several historical roots; but it is chiefly traced to Essek William Kenyon (Hummel 5-6, 7-17).²

² According to Charles Hummel, "Like every large river, the faith movement has a variety of tributaries [...] One stream of divine healing goes back to the teaching of several influential evangelical leaders [...] A second contributing stream was the Pentecostal movement [...] A third stream ran largely underground until the late 1960s when it emerged to provide a doctrinal framework for Kenneth Hagin [...] The essentials of prosperity theology stem primarily from the teaching of Essek William Kenyon" (5-6, 7-17).

¹ Since Conwell lived from 1843 to 1925, Paul Gifford should be talking about the age of economic transformation in the USA (1865-1900) which tallies with Conwell's time.

Kenyon was born in 1867 in Saratoga, New York. He attended Emerson College of Oratory, Boston where he came into contact with the metaphysical thought systems that greatly influenced his theology (Reid 611). Kenyon was a pastor, radio preacher and author. Before his demise in 1948 he had written fifteen books. His fifteen books stressed two things: the supremacy of revelation knowledge over knowledge obtained by the senses; and the power of word spoken in faith. Two examples of Kenyon's emphasis on the power of words spoken in faith are, "A strong confession [of positive faith] brings God on the scene", and "Faith counts the things done before God has acted. That compels God's action"(Reid 611). It is generally taken that: "Kenyon was not widely known during his life time, but his teachings on faith, healing, positive confession, revelation knowledge and the godlike spiritual power available to 'new creation' believers have directly influenced Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth Copeland, and other leaders in the Pentecostal faith movement" (Reid 611).

During the boom years of the 1960s and 1970s in America, the optimism to progress and the need to raise money to support their media ministries and preaching tours made Kenneth Hagin and Kenneth Copeland to borrow Kenyon's ideas to build the modern prosperity gospel (Gifford *Its Public Role* 39-40, Hummel 6, 9-10). The modern prosperity gospel came into Africa through the ministries of Don Steward and Reinhard Bonnke, among others (Gifford *To Save or Enslave?* 11-12). The late Bishop Benson Idahosa, of the Church of God Mission, was one of the chief

vehicles of the spread of the teaching in Africa (Young 4). The teachings of the prosperity gospel have crept into many mainline churches in Africa through young preachers with Pentecostal associations. Paul Gifford argues that the "[...] health and wealth gospel is appealing to Africans because of its harmony with primal religious sensibilities"³ and Africa's economic conditions (Gifford 'African Christianity' 65-67).

There is a lot of variation between the proponents of prosperity gospel on some of its details (Young 4). In this millennium some of the proponents of the gospel have taken some of its teachings to the extreme. They see godliness as a means of financial gain; they also teach that the surest way to affluence is faith and the 'sowing' of 'seed of faith.'⁴ However, others have refined some aspects of the teaching by borrowing some ideas from Conwell on enterprise. Thus, they advocate that the believer should not merely fold his arms to claim the blessings of the victory won by Christ over sin, diseases and poverty; he should add some efforts to his faith for a successful health and wealth making.⁵ But emphasis on affluence at its zenith remains the same. The teachings of the prosperity gospel have both proponents and opponents. The challengers of the gospel have advanced arguments against its major teachings. To these we now turn.

³ Africa's religious worldview focuses on health, flocks, crops and children; and whatever happens in the physical realm is given spiritual interpretation.

⁴ The late Bishop Benson Idahosa was one such extremist (Gifford *Its Public Role* 290-291).

⁵ The writer was privileged to hear this teaching during a Sunday worship service at Glory Chapel, Bukuru, in 1996. The preacher took Job 8:7 as his text and emphasised initiative or enterprise in business.

MAJOR TEACHINGS OF THE PROSPERITY GOSPEL AND CONVENTIONAL ARGUMENTS AGAINST THESE TEACHINGS

Teaching on death

To die young is outside of God's will for believers. Fred Price, one of the great leaders of the faith movement was quoted as saying, "God [...] said the number of your days shall be 120 years. I didn't write it! God said it. The minimum ought to be 70 years [...] The only reason people die before their time is because they do not understand how to exercise their faith according to the word to prevent death, or they choose to die before their time...."(Gifford *To Save or Enslave?* 20).⁶

The first problem of this teaching is that the sovereignty and freedom of God is limited. God has all the power; He has all the freedom. God can take away a believer before the age of 120 or even 70 for a reason other than his sin or lack of faith. For in Isaiah 57:1 we read: 'The righteous perish, and no one ponders it in his heart [...] no one understands that the righteous are taken away to be spared from evil' (NIV). This passage seems to allude to 2 Kings 22:20 where God said he was going to take away righteous king Josiah before the age of 120 to spare him from the experience of the exile.⁷ In these texts (Isaiah 57:1 and 2 Kings

22:20) the righteous die young not because of their sins or choice or lack of faith but because of their righteousness; the opposite of what the prosperity gospel preachers assert. Mention should also be made of the ascension of Enoch into heaven (Genesis 5:18-24), a form of cessation from this life, when he had not lived for half the life span of his father (Gen. 5:18-20, 23-24) because he walked with God; not because of lack of faith or his choice or some sins in his life.

The second problem of this teaching is that it does not allow us to challenge the activities of tyrant man. Since this teaching attributes the early death of a believer to his sins we cannot challenge *Boko Haram* for the death of innocent victims of bomb blasts across Northern Nigeria. What about the innocent National Youth Service Corp members who were murdered in the post-election violence of 2011 in Northern Nigeria? Could we say that it was their sins or lack of faith or choice that made them die young?

TEACHING ON WEALTH

Any believer living in poverty is living outside of God's will for his life. In other words, any believer who is riding an old car has not understood the gospel. Kenneth Hagin, the father of the faith movement, (Hummel 11) said; '(God) wants his children to eat the best, he wants them to wear the best clothing, he wants them to drive the best cars, and he wants them to have the best of everything' (Gifford *To Save or Enslave?* 11). One of the texts often quoted to back this teaching on

⁶The present writer was privileged to hear this teaching in November 2001 during a Sunday school class at the Air Force Base Military School, Jos. One man argued strongly for it. The verses that this teaching has in view are Genesis 6:3; Psalm 90:10 and Isaiah 65:20.

⁷2 Chronicles 35:20-22 attributes Josiah's death to disobedience. On the basis of the prediction in 2 Kings 22:20, even if Josiah did not die in the hands of Neco, God would still have taken his life before the age of 120!

material prosperity is Psalm 84:11(Gifford *To Save or Enslave?* 13).⁸

Here Hagin endorses the spirit of materialism in an uncritical manner. This “[...] raises questions regarding what the Bible actually teaches [...] (Asamoah-Gyadu par. 3). Luke 12:15, part of which reads, “[...] a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” (NIV) was addressed to believers.⁹ This appears to be in sharp contrast with Psalm 84:11. The prosperity preachers need to reconcile their proof texts with those texts in contention with theirs; else they are suggesting that we take the way of Marcion who did theology with his penknife. On the basis of Deuteronomy chapters 28, 29 and 30, and the like, the prosperity preachers teach that lack of material prosperity in the believer's life is the result of sin or disobedience. The story of Job's reveals in graphic terms that poverty is not always the product of sin. Job's sudden poverty in spite of his righteousness refutes the simple equations that righteousness equals to prosperity and unrighteousness equals to lack of prosperity. The third problem of this teaching is that it does not allow for corruption (a cause of poverty) in a nation to be challenged and addressed; as poverty is attributed to sin in the individual without considering the possibility of some forces outside of the individual that can cause poverty. If poverty is the outcome of sin, what can we say about the innocent victims of the Jos ultra-modern market inferno who were made poor over night? Would we be

fair to them to say they all suffered lost and subsequent poverty because of their sin?

Teaching on Christ

The teaching on material prosperity portrays Jesus as the wealthiest man who ever lived. Jesus' ability to feed the crowds and support his ministry are cited as evidence. They also say that Jesus wore the very best clothes money could buy – that was why the Roman soldiers officers gambled over his garment. These representations of Jesus are intended to buttress that when the believer stockpiles wealth, he is doing nothing different from what the affluent Jesus did (Young 7).

A serious problem of this teaching is that passages like 2 Corinthians 8:9 and Matthew 8:20 which depict that Jesus was poor while on earth are relegated to the background. If Jesus never really suffered poverty, passion and death, how could he be saviour? If he was living in affluence how could he possibly have been tempted in every way and yet without sin (Heb. 2:18; 4:15)? How could he have empathised with men's situation if he knew no wants? To insist that Jesus was the richest man who ever lived requires a restatement of evangelical Christology and soteriology.

Teaching on Sickness

To be sick is to be outside of God's will for one's life. Kenneth Hagin said, 'I believe that it is the plan of God our father that no believer should ever be sick' (Gifford *To Save or Enslave?* 17). The major problem of this teaching boils down to a misunderstanding of God's will which forms the main thrust of this paper, and which we shall soon consider. This teaching has pastoral implications. It leads to

⁸ Other proof texts are 3 John 2 (KJV only), 2 Corinthians 8:9 and Deuteronomy chapters 28, 29 and 30.

⁹ Other similar texts are Luke 16:15; 1 Timothy 6:6-10; Hebrews 13:15 and 1 John 2:15.

unnecessary feelings of guilt and confusion when a sick person is told that his sickness is due to his sin when in reality it is due to say, the poisonous bread he took.

Teaching on the Road to Affluence

Those who support the extreme form of prosperity gospel teach that the highway to affluence is giving. Gloria Copeland said, "You give \$1 for the Gospel's sake and \$100 belongs to you. You give \$10 and receive \$1000 [...] Give one airplane and receive one hundred times the value of the airplane. [...] in short, Mark 10:30 is a very good deal" (Gifford *To Save or Enslave?* 15)¹⁰ Thus, giving is not seen as an end in itself but a means of getting wealth. Some prosperity teachers even support this motive for giving. Note how Gloria Copeland sees Mark 10:30 as 'a very good deal.' Deal is synonymous to business transaction where one gets profit. This implies that she sees giving as a business, a means of getting profit, and means of becoming rich. Does this not also mean that she sanctioned such a motive for giving?

The problem of this teaching is twofold. It leads to wrong motives for giving. Christians are cautioned not to see godliness as a means of gain (1 Tim. 6:5). It also belittles the concept of the dignity of labour, as the child of God needs not soil herself on the farm to be rich- all she needs is a simple faith in God and the sowing of seed money to a man of God.¹¹ The quest for utopia on earth, the vague status of God, this-worldly emphasis, and poor

interpretative models constitute other weaknesses of the prosperity gospel.¹²

Peter Young rightly points out that not all that prosperity gospel teaches is to be denied. Young's submission may not find audience among conservative Christians who celebrate poverty. A pastor in Cameroon was prayed for, for buying a motor cycle. The members saw his acquisition of a motor cycle as backsliding (Slanwa Conversation). As we shall soon see, God does provide prosperity for the faithful within the framework of his sovereignty and freedom.

GOD'S GENERAL WILL, SPECIFIC WILL AND DIVINE ECONOMY: UNDERLYING CONCEPTS IN PROSPERITY GOSPEL CONVERSATION

A Theology of Material Prosperity

It is Not God's Will for All Believers to Prosper in All Areas of Life

It is important to have a proper understanding of God's will. By "will" the present writer means "resolve" or "plan." God does not have only one will in his dealing with mankind as is

¹⁰ Other passages often quoted to back this teaching include 2 Cor. 9:8; Luke 6:38; 2 Cor. 9:6 and Eccl. 11:1.

¹¹ It is important to note that some prosperity preachers have appreciated the value of proverbs 6:6-11.

¹² Prosperity gospel woos the individual to attempt to achieve personal utopia in this life-as he strives to attain a state of total well-being. Utopia is not possible this side of life; if it were, we would have no need of heaven. In prosperity gospel, God is reduced to an object to be manipulated as believers him to release to them what is their right. There is no balance between this-worldly and the other-worldly. Thus, the believer is more and more this-worldly as he focuses daily on the prospect of wealth. This-worldliness is a negative description we find in Phil 3:9. The prosperity gospel preachers use texts without any recourse to the context of the text, the chapter, the book, the Bible and holy history. The treatment of some texts in favour of our teaching and the abandoning of those in contrast with our teaching is an abuse of the Bible. Variant texts need to be reconciled.

often assumed by most prosperity gospel preachers. There is the general and specific will of God. It is also useful to clarify the phrase 'divine economy.' It means God's forethought, farsightedness, judiciousness and action meant to produce the highest and best.

On the basis of the general will of God, God wants all believers to prosper in all areas of life, including material prosperity (Psalm 1:1-3; 2 Cor. 9:8-12; 3 John 2). But on the basis of the specific will of God, lack of prosperity may befall some of the believers (Job 1:1-5, 13-19). This lack of prosperity is occasioned by God's divine economy to serve the secret purpose of heaven (Job 1:6-12; Duet. 29:29). Thus, to preach Psalm 55:22b as an absolute universal truth that must be true about all believers is an overstatement; for we have seen how he permitted the righteous Job to be moved.

In contrast, on a general note, it is not God's will that the unrighteous should prosper (Psalms 1:4-6). But on a specific note, God prospers some of the unrighteous (Psalms 73:3; Matthew 5:45), for example Osama Bin Laden.¹³ Similarly, the prosperity of the wicked is occasioned by God's divine economy to serve the secret purpose of heaven (Hab. 1:11-17; Proverbs 16:4).

From the foregoing it is obvious that it is the general will of God for believers to prosper materially. Therefore Christians should not celebrate poverty, a tradition of some mainline churches. Believers should be encouraged to attain material prosperity; but when they are prosperous they should wear the clog of materialism loosely (1 Cor. 7:29-31).

¹³Before he was assassinated by US commandos, Osama Bin Laden was among the richest men on earth.

Factors that Can Cause Lack of Material Prosperity to Believers

There are eight major factors that can cause lack of material prosperity to God's children. One of these factors is the tyranny of oppressive structures in society (Amos 5:12; Judges 2:18) such as a corrupt government. Corruption brings about decline in the economic fortune of a nation and of the individuals in that nation. Ignorance is also a major cause of lack of material prosperity. When believers don't know how to get out of poverty, there is no way that they can come out of it unless the God of miracle does one. Wrong mental attitude towards prosperity is also a factor of lack of prosperity. Many believers are discouraged from improving their economic condition. They see prosperity as mundane. This wrong mental attitude is sometimes due to a misunderstanding of Bible texts that seems to discourage material prosperity. These texts are never encouraging poverty. They are encouraging us to put God first in all we do in this life. Though there will always be the poor in the land (Deut. 15:4), it is the general will of God that we prosper so that we can have what we need and to support God's work (Prov. 6:6-11; 10: 4; II Cor. 9:11-12).

Ill-health can also cause lack of prosperity. When a believer is not in good health to work and earn a living he is bound to be poor. Sin is another cause of lack of prosperity. The sin of laziness and gluttony may not allow a believer to invest to prosper. God's divine economy to serve the secret purpose of heaven as in Job 1:6-20 can also bring lack of material prosperity to a believer. Another cause of lack of prosperity, with which many people may not agree, is the purchase of multiple church

uniforms as was the case with the Women Fellowship of Church Of Christ In Nations in the 1980s and early 1990s), multiple levies and multiple taxes. If God decides not to reward the believer in material terms or in this life, such a believer may experience lack of prosperity. If we must be honest to God, not all of these levies and taxes are relevant or pleasing to God. The motive for them may even be very unscriptural. Another serious cause of poverty is infertility of land and poor soil and farm cultural and management practices.

On the basis of the foregoing, Christians should refrain from jumping into conclusion that Brother X is poor because of his sin; there can be other factors that cause his poverty. Besides, since Jesus upholds the cause of the poor and oppressed (Ps 146:7; Luke 4:18; Ps 72:4) we should challenge oppressive structure in the society, including preachers who think that godliness is a means of material gain (I Tim 6:5), and so they craftily extort money from unsuspecting or ignorant members. Lack of prosperity caused by God's divine economy needs a pastoral approach (Rom 8:28); but a pastoral approach that truly empathises with the victim. Poverty caused by sin also needs to be addressed pastorally. Christians should also stop blaming poor crop yield on witches. We should be realistic and face our problems seriously and squarely.

How Believers Can Attain Material Prosperity Since it is God's General Will

The believer can achieve material prosperity by shunning the example of the sluggard (Prov. 6:6-11), by working diligently at a trade (Prov. 10:4), by seeking the Lord's blessing upon his efforts (Job 1:10) and by

learning from Jesus' love of prudence (John 6:12). Giving (Luke 6:38 and Mark 10:30 – Gloria Copeland's text on giving) is the least reliable means to achieve material prosperity for the following reasons. For one's giving, God may decide to bless you in return with peace of mind and not in cash or kind. Or, God may decide to save your blessings for you in the account of heaven, in which case you cannot use it now until you get there. Consequently, the believer should give with two expectations: to find it here or in the hereafter.

Church leaders should preach the dignity of labour, that is Nigeria's one of many problems today. We should help believers to shun evil gains (Hab. 2:9, 12). By means of teaching, preaching or literature we should save people who are eager to make money the cheap way from the menace of some preachers who are also eager to make money the cheap way. These preachers teach wrong doctrines of giving, reward and the path to material prosperity in order to extort money from others.

Limit of the Believer's Prosperity

Christians should not pray this prayer in its literal sense (Proverbs 30:8b-9). In its literal sense it is a selfish prayer. In its literal sense, how can this man meet the needs of the needy (Mt 25:3-46)? How can he meet the needs of his family (I Timothy 5:8)? How can he meet the demand of Romans 13:6-7? How can he meet the need of II Corinthians 8 and 9? How can he meet health, housing, education and clothing demands? And how can he contribute to political associations to bring godly men into government to check oppressive

structures that cause lack of prosperity to a nation's citizens?

In its metaphorical sense, Proverbs 30:8b-9 means having enough to meet the above needs. To have enough to meet the above needs means you should have surplus. After all, it is natural that diligence in work (Proverbs 10:4) plus God's blessing on our efforts (Job 1:10) minus excessive spending (Proverbs 25:16) plus attitude of saving (Prov. 21:20) plus prudence (John 6:12) is equal to wealth. The believer can be rich but it is dangerous to be very rich. However, we should note that God has giving some believers the gift to manage great wealth, without effect on their spiritual lives. A good example is Job. Another example is Abraham.

A believer can be moderately rich. Excessive wealth brings with it great dangers to both the soul and body. Excessive poverty also has its risks to both the body and soul. The bottom line in this matter is moderation. The believer should not strive to be rich, he should simply work and be prudent and avoid extravagant living and wealth will naturally come, overtime, without the believer's stirring.

Reconciling the Teaching on Affluence with Prov. 23:4; Mark 10:17-27; Luke 12:15; Matthew 6:25-33; Hebrews 13:5; I John 2:15 and I Timothy 6:6-10?

This question has been answered, but for the sake of emphasis repetition is in order. These texts are never encouraging poverty. If they were, we would not have passages like Deut. 15:4; Job 1:10; Prov. 10:4; Prov. 6:6-11 and II Cor. 9:11-12 in scripture. They are meant to encourage us to put God first in all we do.

These texts seem to have one thing in common – they caution the believer against love for material prosperity. But believers need to meet their needs, the needs of the Gospel, the needs of the needy and the needs of the civil society. If we are blessed with the prosperity with which to meet these needs, we should wear the cloak of materialism loosely (I Cor. 7:29-31) not tight. If we wear it tightly it means we are in love with it. Once more, the believer must never strive to be rich. He should simply avoid the example of the sluggard (Prov. 6:6-10) and work diligently. He should ask God to bless his efforts (Job 1:10). He should also be prudent (John 6:12) by avoiding extravagant lifestyles and the tendency to waste resources. If he does all of these, over time wealth will naturally flow in his direction without strivings. At whatever level of prosperity we must not put our hope on wealth, but on God. We must wear the cloak of materialism loosely.

A THEOLOGY OF HEALTH PROSPERITY

Must All Genuine Believers Reach the Age of 70 or 120 Before their Death?

Again, as in our discussion of a theology of material prosperity, there is the general and specific will of God. The general plan or will of God for his people is that they should reach the age of 70 or 120 before their death (Ps 90:10; Gen 6:3 and Isaiah 65:20). But on the basis of his specific plan and will, he can choose to call righteous believers to himself before they reach the age of 70 or 120. A good example is Isaiah 57:1. 2 Kings 22:20 is another example. We can also see the ascensions of Elijah and Enoch into heaven as examples because their lives in this world was

cut short before they reach the maximum life span the Lord had planned for the people of their generations. God may allow a righteous believer to die young, not because of his sins or ignorance or choice, but because of divine economy to serve the secret purpose of heaven.

It is lack of understanding the nature of the will or plan of God that makes some preachers to insist that any believer who die young must have sinned. We are never trying to rule out the possibility that sin can cause a believer to die young. All we are trying to do here is to show that the believer can die young because of his righteous.

Early Death and God's Divine Economy

Sin, maladies, human and natural factors can cause early death. God's divine economy can also be a cause of early death. Where this happens it is usually intended to serve the secret purpose of heaven (Isaiah 57:1; 2 Kings 22:20). Accordingly, Christians should not at first sight, accuse a believer who died young of sin without finding out the actual cause of his death. Scripture has cautioned us against hasty conclusions (Prov. 25:8). Apart from the believer's sin, there are other causes of early death. This understanding is essential as it allows us to work towards checking the activity of tyrant man.

Is it God's Will for All Believers to Enjoy Perfect Health in this Life?

This question is faulty because of the word perfect. All mankind are born with impairment. Of the millions of cells contained in the bones, brain, eyes, heart, lungs, blood, among other body parts, the possibility that all the cells will be perfect is remote. This is

never to mean that God's ability to create perfect human beings is limited. This imperfection is to make us to want to be clothed with a better imperishable body. The question should rather be 'is it God's will for believers to enjoy good health?'

It is God's general will that his children should prosper in all areas of life (Ps 5:12; Ps 1:1-3 and 3 John 2) including health prosperity. However, on the basis of the specific will of God, lack of good health may befall some believers, not because of their sins, but because of divine economy so that heaven's secret purpose may be accomplished (Job 2:7-8; 2 Corinthians 12:7-10). Thus, to preach Psalm 55:22b as an absolute universal truth that must be true of all believers is unwise. In his own wisdom, freedom and sovereignty, God can let the most pious of his children experience ill-health.

What Can Bring Sickness To Believers?

We have seen that God's divine economy to serve the secret purpose of heaven (as in the case of Job and Paul) can bring ill-health to the believer. Sin can also bring about ill-health. Sins of anxiety, lack of adequate rest, anger, immorality, smoking, drunkenness and drug abuse can bring various forms and degrees of ill-health. Corruption in a society leading to poor medical facilities can also contribute to ill-health. Corruption can also lead to high cost of living, as a nation's economy deteriorates, thereby leading to poor feeding. Poor feeding in turn can bring about ill-health. Ill-health such as sickle cell anaemia can be inherited. Lack of proper clothing and shelter can lead to ill-health from cold. Some processed foods are also sources of ill-health.

Bacteria, fungi, worms, viruses and the like can bring about ill-health.

Don't at first sight accuse a sick person of sin without confirmation. Doing so will bring confusion and unnecessary guilt to the sick person who is not aware of any sin in his life. It can bring about discouragement. It can even worsen the condition of the sick person. Accusing a sick person of sin without confirmation can bring serious pastoral implications. When a believer is sick or dies, no one considers that there are other causes of these; the sickness or death is blamed on witchcraft. This has led to the false accusation of some innocent people. Jungle justice is often meted on some of these people. Many pastors are encouraging a return to pre-Christian Africa by the way they blow secret society activities and witchcraft out of proportion.

How Believers Can Achieve Good Health Since it is God's General Will

God's children can achieve good health by avoiding those sins that bring about ill-health. They can also achieve good health through prayer (divine healing), feeding well, proper medication, taking good water and through a working knowledge of comprehensive health science. Challenging the activities of corrupt leaders in society is also essential to achieve good health. Good shelter and appropriate clothing are also essential for good health. The believer must be selective in his choice of processed foods and he must avoid drug abuse. Since it is God's general will for God's children to be in good health the church should teach the basics of hygiene in addition to the provision of clinics.

CONCLUSION

The traditional view of prosperity says, "Don't be rich." Conversely, the prosperity gospel says, "Get the best of everything." This paper rejects these extremes – it shapes a new view of prosperity, the middle way. Now that it is apparent that it is the general will of God for believers to prosper materially, the church should be involved in empowering the poor in her midst. The church should command the poor in her midst to get out of poverty, by rebuking the lazy and preaching the dignity of labour, farming and petty trading. The church should give them the means to get out of poverty. This means, among other things, teaching. The church should teach her members prudence (John 6:12), saving and capital creation and investment. The church may teach members to form themselves into groups to procure loans from banks to invest in less risky businesses. This means the church should encourage members with knowledge of economics, commerce, agricultural science and banking to put the larger congregation on the right track of business. The church should empower its poor because God is concerned about the plight of the poor (Ps 82:3; 140:12 and Luke 4:18). God is also a God who empowers the poor, he raises them from their condition (Ps 113:7). When the poor are helped to get out of poverty, they will be able to help the church more.

The more the church addresses people's health needs through teachings, orthodox medication, divine healing and the challenging of corruption in society, the less they will resort to traditional healers in time of crises. Only a spiritually and physically healthy group of Christians can produce a healthy and viable church.

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