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## **The Prosperity Gospel: A Distortion of the Fundamental Evangelical Tenets**

Abstract

Prosperity Gospel is a problematic issue for the Evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity, and it is so in at least two perspectives. First, it influences the teaching of many preachers who employ this approach to capture new believers on the one hand, and it is sharply criticised by many prominent Evangelical theologians who regard it as a serious heresy, a deception of many Christians, on the other. Second, it is a matter of profound theological question raised from the very core of Christian faith and asking how to find a delicate balance between Jesus' calling to bear the cross and his blessing from the Sermon on the Mount. The most frequent framework is the one that considers the prosperity gospel as the distortion of the substantial Evangelical tenets, and that stems from the various ideological and sociological processes in the 19th United States. The article offers a brief outline of the prosperity message and answers the following research questions: What is the prosperity gospel? What are the roots of it? What are the most critical theological points of the prosperity teaching? What charges are raised by the critics from the Evangelical background? The literary analysis of Evangelical literature is the primary method used to solve the problem.

**Keywords:** prosperity gospel, evangelicalism, the Lausanne Movement, the Faith Movement.

### **Teologia sukcesu: znieszczenie głównych założeń ewangelikalizmu**

Abstrakt

Teologia sukcesu jest zagadnieniem kłopotliwym dla chrześcijaństwa ewangelikalnego i pentekostalnego co najmniej z dwóch perspektyw. Po pierwsze, z jednej strony wpływa na nauczanie wielu kaznodziei, którzy stosują to podejście teologiczne, aby pozyskać nowych wiernych, z drugiej – jest bardzo mocno krytykowana przez ważnych teologów ewangelikalnych, którzy ujmują ją jako poważną herezję, zwodzącą wielu chrześcijan. Ponadto jest przedmiotem głębokich pytań teologicznych podnoszonych z samego jądra wiary chrześcijańskiej i dotyczących delikatnej równowagi pomiędzy wyzwaniem Jezusa do niesienia krzyża i błogosławieństwami z Kazania na Górze. Najczęściej ramą badawczą, w której interpretuje się teologię sukcesu, jest ujmowanie jej jako znieszczenia kluczowych założeń teologii ewangelikalnej. Artykuł przedstawia zwięzły zarys teologii sukcesu, dążąc do odpowiedzi na następujące pytania badawcze: Czym jest teologia sukcesu? Jakie

są jej korzenie? Jakie są jej kluczowe założenia? Jakie zarzuty są jej stawiane z perspektywy teologii ewangelikalnej? W celu odpowiedzi na powyższe pytania dokonano analizy literatury ewangelikalnej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** teologia sukcesu, ewangelikalizm, ruch lozański, ruch wiary.

Prosperity Gospel is a problematic issue for the Evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity, and it is so in at least two perspectives. First, it influences the teaching of many preachers who employ this approach to capture new believers on the one hand, and it is sharply criticised by many prominent Evangelical theologians who regard it as a serious heresy, a deception of many Christians, on the other. It appears as an internal ambiguity for Evangelicals and Pentecostals, and the most involved discussions on the problem occur within these communities. Second, it is a matter of profound theological question raised from the very core of Christian faith and asking how to find a delicate balance between Jesus' calling to bear the cross and his blessing from the Sermon on the Mount. After all, the expectation of earthly wellbeing is common to all people, cultures and religions, and it is somehow consistent with human nature – suffice to remind an echo of the ancient understanding of the natural law from the Fourth Commandment: “Honour your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you”.

There are many frameworks regarding the Prosperity Gospel. Some explain it in the context of the Lutheran teaching on justification. Some understand it in the perspective of post-Calvinist beliefs on the convergence of God's blessing and socio-economic success. Some link an emergence of it with the Romanticism and its concentration on individual experience. Obviously, this list is far longer and may be accomplished with different aspects: theological, anthropological, sociological, cultural, ethical and so on.

The most frequent framework is the one that considers the prosperity gospel as the distortion of the substantial Evangelical tenets, and that stems from the various ideological and sociological processes in the 19th United States. The article offers a brief outline of the prosperity message and answers the following research questions: What is the prosperity gospel? What are the roots of it? What are the most critical theological points of the prosperity teaching? What charges are raised by the critics from the Evangelical background? The literary analysis of Evangelical literature is the primary method used to solve the problem.

## 1. The roots of the prosperity gospel

The prosperity gospel is neither a theological school nor a theological system within a given denomination; it is instead a theological idea, and theological movement, very loose and very flexible. It does not exclude other theological approaches, as a lions' share of prosperity preachers employ theological background of whether Evangelical or Pentecostal sources. Prosperity gospel appears as an "add-on" (like an appendix to the computer software) to the theological teaching of a given Church. Thus the description of it requires wariness in putting rigid categories. It refers to both today's structure and the history of the movement.

Nevertheless, there is a consensus in tracing the roots of the prosperity gospel. Most investigations see the origins of it at the turn of 19th and 20th centuries and resorted to the American faith movement, the emergence of many new theological groups in the infancy of modernity, and, to the broad stream of "holistic" approaches overwhelmed with the spiritual and psychological ways to achieve mental and physical health. For instance, Catherine Bowler, in her in-depth research of the topic convincingly states the prosperity gospel comprises of "three distinct though intersecting streams: New Thought, Pentecostalism and African American religion"<sup>1</sup>. Following their studies, one might distinguish five main roots of the prosperity gospel: New Thought and other philosophical and cultural streams in America of the early modernity, the teaching of Essek William Kenyon, early Pentecostalism, emergence of black theology, and, finally, the Gospel of Wealth.

a) New Thought movement is a child of the Post-Civil War America, the era of growing spiritual individualism on the one hand and pragmatism on the other. Yet a background was laid earlier by some thinkers who attempted to combine elements of Christianity, metaphysics, the Enlightenment and natural sciences, and who appealed to two figures of the previous century. First, to the German doctor Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815), who taught of an invisible natural force possessing by all living beings in the universe, as humans, animals and plants and that may be manipulated for different medical treatments. Second, to the Swedish philosopher, mystic and scientist Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), who left behind an impressive number of books on natural science, theology and mysticism, whose original theological concept was teaching on the correspondence – on an internal spiritual meaning of every fragment of the Holy Scripture,

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<sup>1</sup> Kate Bowler. 2013. *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*. New York: Oxford University Press, 27.

and whose ideas influenced such authors as Goethe, Kant, Blake, Mickiewicz, Dostoyevsky, and Miłosz.

Many research on the history of prosperity gospel mentioned Phineas Parkhurst Quimby (1802–1866) and Mary Baker Eddy (1821–1910). The first was the healer and scientist, who searched for mental and spiritual ways of healing from all kind of illness (also employing his personal experiences) and who emphasised a holistic spiritual and mental alignment, an interdependence of healing and thought. The latter was the founder of Christian Science, a religious community that declares itself as Christian, that shares many Christian beliefs in the Calvinist way (God’s majesty, Jesus Christ’s salvific role, resurrection, the forgiveness of sin), however concomitantly acknowledging the existence of the Mind, which human beings share with Jesus Christ. Also, Eddy regarded links of spirituality, religion, and mental as well as physical health as crucial for every theological teaching. In general, Christian Science, and, respectively, New Thought were a sort of spiritual eclecticism, though the latter was shaping in hostility towards the former<sup>2</sup>.

The short survey of some forerunners of the New Thought helps to imagine its essence. It was a dispersed conglomerate of mind-healing ideas and methods, searching for spiritual, metaphysical, theological, and psychological backgrounds for mental, physical and spiritual health. There were three aspects crucial for the New Thought that one could define as anthropological, metaphysical and psychological; however, all of them are immersed in theology. Bowler lists them as follows: first, the New Thought understood the relationship between God and mankind not as an impassable gap but instead assumed that it is a matter of degree. Second, in a somewhat Platonic way, it taught that the world is rather a thought than substance and held the material reality is the projection of mind. Third, it assumed that people participate in God’s continuing creation; however, it explained this sharing in a different way than Christian orthodoxy. It is a conviction that human thought is creative, just like God’s Word created the world. This radical solipsism, theologically embedded, led to the conclusion like from the widespread, everyday psychology: “Positive thoughts yielded positive circumstances, and negative thoughts yielded negative situations”<sup>3</sup>.

b) The New Thought and Pentecostalism bridged the teaching of Essek William Kenyon (1867–1948), faith healer, pastor and evangelist who was called a grandfather of the Faith Movement. Essek reviled the conceptions of the

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<sup>2</sup> Stephen Gottschalk. 1973. *The Emergence of Christian Science in American Religious Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 100.

<sup>3</sup> Bowler. 2013. *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*, 31.

first when arguing they substitute the true Gospel with abstract principles<sup>4</sup>. He preached the primary Evangelicals motives as the authority of the Bible, the experience of the new birth, the need of sanctification, and, more particularly, the idea of one's transformation from the entire sanctification, a theological doctrine embedded in the theology of John Wesley and his theological offspring from the radical Reformed communities. An exceptional feature of it was the teaching developing from the mid of the 19th century and regarding the entire sanctification not as a process in time but as a calculable moment in one's life. It was identified with the baptism in the Holy Spirit; however, it ignited new controversies on the question of what is interdependence between sanctification and salvation; does the first converge with the latter?

Bowler argues that Kenyon's interpretation of these questions influenced a number of Pentecostal preachers. They shared the theological opinion that Christ's atonement work embraced not only sanctification but also justification in the "soteriological work of grace"<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, Kenyon developed a cosmology in somewhat Platonic way: God is the Spirit who created the spiritual universe of which material reality is merely a reflection. Obviously, this tenet refers to humans either. Thus the original sin and its consequences mean the spiritual power of devil on the fallen humanity and the signs of this power: sickness, death, and poverty. Christ's answer on the cross brought about human salvation, a unity of human spiritual nature with the spiritual nature of God, and, consequently, restitution of human dominion on the earth. In this way, Kenyon, unlike the Fathers of Reformation, understands the condition of justified Christians as only a little lower than that of Angels.

The theological approach of Kenyon was corresponding with the Evangelical healing movement, of which promoters regarded mental and physical health as another fruit of Christ's atonement. They preached faith as an instrument to restore human healing and when spreading the practice of "prayers of faith", they developed a specific devotion. Moreover, Kenyon's theological beliefs of God's creative Word stressed the significance of spoken words of faith and their spiritual power for one's life. Bowler argues that this anthropological model "left a lasting imprint" on the Pentecostal thinking about the condition of those fulfilled with the Holy Spirit<sup>6</sup>.

c) The starting point of recognising Pentecostal roots of the prosperity gospel is an assumption of the Pentecostal emphasis on the earthly blessing. Despite

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<sup>4</sup> Bowler. 2013. *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*, 33.

<sup>5</sup> Bowler. 2013. *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*, 36.

<sup>6</sup> Bowler. 2013. *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*, 41.

a strong spiritual, even “overspiritual” attitude, Pentecostals, in their early period, strongly stressed the significance of terrestrial wellbeing. It reflected elements of their fourfold preaching: divine healing, personal salvation, baptism of the Holy Spirit, and sings of Christ’s soon coming. Consequently, they understood salvation inclusively, as encompassing spiritual, eschatological, psychological, and physical aspects of human existence. In other words, one’s salvation refers to all what God did for the spirit, soul, mind and body of men<sup>7</sup>.

Moreover, and likewise, Kenyon’s teaching, the Pentecostal theology put the stress on the spoken word. Such an emphasis was even stronger when assuming a symbolic origin of the Pentecostal movement in Azusa Street and speaking in tongues (*glossolalia*) as a sign of Pentecostal confessional identity as well as a gift of the Holy Spirit<sup>8</sup>. *Glossolalia* might be even placed as being at the core of the Pentecostal theology since it is regarded as the initial evidence of the Spirit baptism which is, at the turn, the centre of this theology, and its “crown jewel”<sup>9</sup>.

A specific condition of those who gained the Spirit baptism corresponds with the meaning of their prayers which are rather a sort of contract instead of request. One might state that Pentecostals understood it somewhat mechanistically, as a confirmation of their relationships with God. Finally, this relationship is individualised and categorised, what manifests in the preaching appealed to particular groups of believers: those, who are sick, who are in poverty, who suffer injustice, and so on.

d) Proliferation of many black Pentecostal communities appears as another crucial factor of emergence of the prosperity gospel. There are at least three aspects that should be itemised when considering their impact. First, it is an adoption of the New Thought by African Americans, since it was a way of thinking that became ubiquitous at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. Second, it was an answer of Afro-Americans on the economic, cultural and social transformations of modernity: industrialisation, urbanisation, Great Migration, economic crises, headed by the Great Depression in the 1930s, the processes that heavily affected black families and communities. Third, it was a theological and cultural syncretism influencing black Pentecostalism, that included some beliefs and rituals derived from traditional African religions and cultures. Eclectic theology

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<sup>7</sup> Bowler. 2013. *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*, 41.

<sup>8</sup> Christopher A. Stephenson. 2013. *Types of Pentecostal Theology: Method, System, Spirit*. New York: Oxford University Press, 76.

<sup>9</sup> Frank D. Macchia. 2006. The Kingdom and the Power: Spirit Baptism in Ecumenical and Pentecostal Perspective. In *The Work of the Spirit. Pneumatology and Pentecostalism*. Red. Michael Welker, 110. Michigan: Eerdmans.

of black communities, combining New Thought, Pentecostal Christianity and African traditions, had a practical dimension, and, it rather positively regarded material world. “There is an obvious reason why prosperity gospel should be so readily received in Africa: African traditional religion was primarily concerned with health, fertility, and abundance”<sup>10</sup>. Fourth, this practical trait of the black theology manifested in an individual approach to the existential questions: poverty, racism, unemployment and so on and it corresponded with many examples of diaconal, mutual help within a given community.

e) The tradition mentioned above of spiritual endowment unfolded to the specific attribute of the American culture, namely positive thinking. When employing this category, one must not reduce it to a simply optimism. As Bowler noticed, the positive thinking was a syncretic worldview that stresses the power of the spiritual over the material, of mind over matter<sup>11</sup>. Obviously, it might have led to an increasing of social mobility on the one hand, and a dilution of the rigid social classes.

Yet the positive thinking might have paved the way to another Christian approach to the questions of wealth and prosperity, namely to the Gospel of Wealth. Referring to the famous essay of Andrew Carnegie, the same entitled, it was the theology of those Americans who adopted capitalist values like wealth and profit, and who strived for their Christian affirmation. An example is an emblematic sermon “Acres of Diamonds” of Russel H. Conwell, a Baptist preacher, who “promised listeners that wealth lay within any American’s grasp if they would only accept their Christian duty to work hard and see God’s hand through the workings of capitalism”; “I say you ought to be rich; you have no right to be poor”<sup>12</sup>; in this conclusion of Conwell’s sermon, Max Weber’s famous thesis of the correlation between capitalism and Reformed Protestantism found its fullest confirmation.

## **2. The Faith Movement and the essential tenets of the prosperity preaching**

The description of the roots of the prosperity gospel profoundly reveals the nature of this movement. Yet the immediate theological environment of it is the Faith Movement, a galaxy of independent preachers who share common beliefs

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<sup>10</sup> Steve Brouwer, Paul Gifford, Susan D. Rose. 1996. *Exporting the American Gospel: Global Christian Fundamentalism*. New York – London: Routledge, 172.

<sup>11</sup> Bowler. 2013. *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*, 52.

<sup>12</sup> Bowler. 2013. *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*, 53.

of the threefold teaching: divine healing, prosperity, and positive confession. This third element refers to the belief that just when speaking the spiritual or faith words believer can have what he asks. In other words, the former ones just existentially result from the latter. Positive confession is “a literally bringing into existence what we state in our mouth since faith is a confession”<sup>13</sup>. It is well depicted by such slogans used by the preachers as “you can have what you say” or “we can write our own ticket with God if we decide what we want, believe that it’s ours, and confess it”. A certain indeterminacy of these groups is proved even by a terminology mess; except the Faith Movement they are named as follows: “Word”, “Word of Faith”, “Word-Faith”, “Name It and Claim It”, “Blab it and Grab It”, and “Health and Wealth”.

Some researchers on the Faith Movement regard Essek William Kenyon as the grandfather of this approach however its direct originators were Pentecostal leaders who in the 1970s contributed to the spread of the message of both the positive confession and then prosperity gospel: Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth Copeland, Fred Price, and Charles Capps. Referring to the latter idea, some consider Oral Robert, televangelist and preacher, as “the patriarch of the prosperity gospel”, the one who claimed that those who “pray and donate with sufficient fervor would receive good health, wealth, and happiness”<sup>14</sup>. Thus the Faith Movement and the Prosperity Gospel are mutually entangled. In fact, some writers do not agree to see both as synonymous, yet, others contend that adherents of the former generally accept the tenets of the latter.

The leaders of the Faith Movement employ a specific theological distinction between the “Logos Word” and the “Rhema Word”. The first refers to the immutable Scripture, whereas the latter to the faith expressions as glossolalia, prophecy, and the spoken word of God to believers. Faith teachers presented “their supporters physical and inner healing, freedom from demonic oppression, and prosperity resulting from the spoken ‘word of faith’, which over and over again was a verbal confession of biblical phrases that the Lord was bound by covenant to honor to comply with”<sup>15</sup>.

Critical remark to the research on the prosperity gospel is the fact that there is no shared creed common to the adherents of the movement. Yet it is worthwhile to mention a specific Christology preached by the prosperity theologians. They portray Jesus as a relatively rich person. For instance, Aaron Philips reported

<sup>13</sup> Stanley M. Burgess. 2002. *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 992.

<sup>14</sup> Todd M. Kerstetter. 2015. *Inspiration and Innovation: Religion in the American West*. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 214.

<sup>15</sup> Russel Sharrock. 2006. *Covenant Theology: A Critical Analysis Of Current Pentecostal Covenant Theology*. Morrisville: Lulu Enterprises, 45.



a sermon of a prosperity preacher told that “Jesus had a nice house”, he “was handling big money”, and even “wore designer clothes”<sup>16</sup>. Thus, in the lenses of this Christology, the following of Jesus includes modelling the life of the followers by striving to a luxury and wealth life that is regarded as the destiny of the good, faithful Christian.

Another trait of the prosperity gospel is a very loose interpretation of the relevant fragments of the Scriptures. It refers, for example, to Biblical texts like Joshua 1:8, Mark 10:29-30, Luke 6:38, 3 John 2<sup>17</sup>. Phillips holds that these misinterpretations correspond with the set of the following biblical concepts that might be assumed as the common for the prosperity preachers: the Abrahamic covenant, the atonement, faith and prosperity including both health and wealth.

First, the teaching of the prosperity gospel distorts the significance of the Abrahamic covenant, when insisting that the primary purpose of God’s promise given to Abraham and subsequent generations is material prosperity. It understands, therefore, this covenant as a deal of material wealth made with God that needs to be activated by the words of faith. The quotation of the book of Kenneth Copeland well illustrates what is the thought of prosperity preachers: “Anything God taught Abraham or his descendants about operating financially will work just as well today as it did several thousand years ago. If you don’t believe it, you’ve never met a Jew!”<sup>18</sup>.

Second theological distortion of the prosperity gospel refers to the misinterpretation of the atonement. It is grasped as embracing one’s financial and health wellbeing. In order to confirm their claim, the prosperity theologians usually employ the 2 Corinthians 8:9 “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich”. Obviously, it strikes how they ignore the biblical context of these words of Paul and a common theological understanding of the atonement of Jesus Christ.

The third concept of the prosperity gospel relates to the meaning of faith. It regards faith as neither an act of will nor an attitude of trust to God; it is rather a spiritual deal with God, with an omnipotent, eternal “Donator”. Kenneth Copeland’s definition of faith illustrates it conspicuously: “Faith is a spiritual force, spiritual energy, a spiritual power. It is this force of faith which makes the laws

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<sup>16</sup> Aaron Phillips. *An Examination of the Prosperity Gospel: A Plea for Return to Biblical Truth*, 64 [15.10.2020]. <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2128&context=doctoral>.

<sup>17</sup> Lewis Brogdon. 2015. *The New Pentecostal Message?: An Introduction to the Prosperity Movement*. Eugene: Cascade Books, 103.

<sup>18</sup> Kenneth Copeland. 1974. *The Laws of Prosperity*. Fort Worth: Kenneth Copeland Publications, 16.

of the spirit world function... There are certain laws governing prosperity revealed in God's Word. Faith causes them to function"<sup>19</sup>. Thus faith is merely a spiritual entitlement to access to the endless gifts of God.

And finally, prosperity gospel puts the stress on the interconnection between one's prosperity, including health and wealth and his/her spiritual growth. It illustrates the teaching of Oral Roberts who declares the 3 John 2 ("Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers") as "a revelation of the prosperity gospel". One of the most famous prosperity preachers and televangelists unfolded a conception of faith-seeds that mechanistically explained Christian calling to almsgiving as a specific spiritual barter: when paying a contribution to Jesus (thus to the community organised around a preacher, you should expect prosperity in daily life). "Many of those who represent current prosperity teaching frequently link the acts of giving and receiving, between tithing and financial prosperity, as though they stand in a simple cause and effect relationship parallel to the sowing and reaping that is found in Jesus' Parable of the Sower"<sup>20</sup>.

### 3. The Evangelical criticism of the prosperity teaching

The presentation of the specific theology of prosperity from a more "positive" side might be accomplished by the critique of it. This negative insight helps to pay attention to other important concepts of the prosperity gospel. There are a number of examples of how Evangelical theologians understand the distortion of God's salvific message by the prosperity preachers. For many of them, the prosperity gospel is a grave heresy. For instance, the theologians from the Lausanne Movement state that it is a "false gospel" and declare an "overall view that the teachings of those who most vigorously promote the 'prosperity gospel' are false and gravely distorting of the Bible, that their practice is often unethical and unChristlike, and that the impact on many churches is pastorally damaging, spiritually unhealthy, and not only offers no lasting hope but may even deflect people from the message and means of eternal salvation"<sup>21</sup>.

The Lausanne Movement is the pan-Evangelical organisation, gathering various communities of all around the world. It declares itself as called to "connect

<sup>19</sup> Copeland. 1974. *The Laws of Prosperity*, 15.

<sup>20</sup> Cecil M. Robeck. 2019. Pentecostals and Charismatics in America. In *The Oxford History of Protestant Dissenting Traditions*. Vol. 4: *The Twentieth Century Traditions in a Global Context*. Ed. Jehu H. Hanciles. 241–260. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>21</sup> *A Statement on the Prosperity Gospel* [15.10.2020]. <https://www.lausanne.org/content/a-statement-on-the-prosperity-gospel>.

influencers and ideas for global mission”<sup>22</sup> and understands its mission as asking the following question: “Across the world today, men and women are faithfully stewarding God’s call as leaders and people of influence in organisations, churches, schools, and marketplaces. What would happen if these men and women were to gather together to form God-inspired, catalytic connections within and across regions, generations, shared interests, and ideas?”

The Statement on the Prosperity Gospel was issued by the African Chapter of the Lausanne Theology Working Group. The members of it offered a reflection “on the phenomenal rise of prosperity teaching around the world at large and Africa in particular”. Suffice to quote an African preacher who called: “Many are ignorant of the fact that God has already made provisions for his children to be wealthy here on earth. When I say wealthy, I mean very, very reach... Break lose! It is not a sin to desire to be wealthy”<sup>23</sup>. Thus, the above-presented introductory remark leads to the list of the ten detailed theological declarations on the prosperity theology. The list brings to mind the tradition of confessional documents, for instance the *Apology of Augsburg Confession*, or, more contemporary, the *Bar-men Confession*: every particular statement consists of *affirmativa* and *negativa*, of “we affirm” and “we reject”.

- 1) The starting point of the reflection is an affirmation of the power of the Holy Spirit manifesting in the growth of the Church. Yet this affirmation must not accept an automatic and manipulative meaning of God’s grace that is regarded as an instrument of human desires.
- 2) Further, the statement accepts as biblical the teaching about God’s blessing embracing both spiritual and material welfare; simultaneously rejecting identification of them (for instance when regarding wealth always as a sign of blessing or, otherwise, poverty as a sign of God’s curse).
- 3) The third declaration refers to human activity. Namely, it states importance of creative use of resources given by God, yet, on the other hand, it warns against the idea of “positive thinking”, and notion “that success in life is entirely due to our own striving, wrestling, negotiation, or cleverness”<sup>24</sup>.
- 4) The next point put the stress on a social context of the prosperity teaching, the one that is full of poverty, frustration and lack of hope of a better future. Yet the authors of the statement disagree that the message of prosperity would be a right theological answer for the poor and excluded people.

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<sup>22</sup> *The Lausanne Movement’s Unique Calling* [15.10.2020]. <https://www.lausanne.org/about-the-movement>.

<sup>23</sup> John Piper. 2010. *Let the Nations Be Glad!: The Supremacy of God in Missions*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 19.

<sup>24</sup> *A Statement on the Prosperity Gospel* [15.10.2020].

- 5) While not denying that some prosperity preachers have good intentions, the declaration holds that the prosperity gospel is lacking a holistic biblical hermeneutics and that it distorts and manipulates the biblical message, especially in the soteriological aspect.
- 6) Further, the authors of the statement unveil a disappointing lack of correlation between the statistical growth of the number of Christians in many countries and the theological and biblical quality of this progress: “popularity is no proof of truth; and people can be deceived in great numbers”<sup>25</sup>.
- 7) The next point refers to the threats of theological syncretism. It emphasises the links between indigenous tradition and religion and some aspects of the prosperity teaching. It asks the question whether “the popularity and attraction of Prosperity Teaching is an indication of the failure of contextualisation of the Gospel in Africa”<sup>26</sup>.
- 8) The statement discerns a threat of false dependence that links the faith with misleading expectations of material wellbeing, and that leads many to leave the church and Christianity.
- 9) It emphasises either that even though most of the prosperity teachers derive from the Evangelical background, a number of them distort the essential truths of faith according to the evangelical theology.
- 10) The last point is expounding in a more detailed way various examples of personal behaviour of the prosperity leaders that grievously distorts their calling to ministry, including: “flamboyant and excessive wealth and extravagant lifestyles; unethical and manipulative techniques; constant emphasis on money; replacing the traditional call to repentance and faith with a call to give money; covetousness which is idolatry; living and behaving in ways that are utterly inconsistent with either the example of Jesus or the pattern of discipleship that he taught; ignoring or contradicting the strong New Testament teaching on the dangers of wealth and the idolatrous sin of greed; failure to preach the word of God in a way that feeds the flock of Christ; failure to preach the whole gospel message of sin, repentance, faith and eternal hope; failure to preach the whole counsel of God, but replacing it with what people want to hear; and replacing time for evangelism with fundraising events and appeals”<sup>27</sup>.

The statement of the evangelical theologians from the African chapter of the Lausanne movement provides with the elaborated and convincing arguments, all

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<sup>25</sup> *A Statement on the Prosperity Gospel* [15.10.2020].

<sup>26</sup> *A Statement on the Prosperity Gospel* [15.10.2020].

<sup>27</sup> *A Statement on the Prosperity Gospel* [15.10.2020].

the more so that it reflects experiences of the wide spreading of the prosperity gospel in Africa.

Another example of a critical summary of the prosperity theology offer David Jones and Russel Woodbridge. They list five distinctive approaches of the prosperity preaching, all of them distorting fundamental evangelical tenets, as follows:

1. *The Abrahamic covenant is a means to material entitlement*: Prosperity theologians argue that the covenant between God and Abraham was primarily material blessing of the latter and Christians, as the heirs of Abraham, should expect inheritance of this blessing.
2. *Jesus's atonement extends to the "sin" of material poverty*: Prosperity theologians preach Christ's atonement encompasses wellbeing both in financial and health terms. This belief appears as even more aberrative when glimpsing different motives of such teaching. For instance, Jones and Woodbridge hold that this prosperity atonement stems from two theological errors: first, it appeals to the false depictions from the personal life of Jesus Christ himself, who would have had "nice, big house" and would be handling big money. Second, it refers to the complete misinterpretation of the 2 Corinthians 8:9 ("For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that you through his poverty might become rich").
3. *Christians give in order to gain material compensation from God*: Prosperity theologians preach something like the law of compensation, therefore, market-like thinking about diaconal deeds. They assume that if one gives an offer to spread the good news, God will pay him more in financial or material terms.
4. *Faith is a self-generated spiritual force that leads to prosperity*: Prosperity theologians regard faith as a spiritual Energy, a spiritual power that moves certain eternal laws of prosperity revealed in God's Word. Faith is neither an act of will nor God's gracious gift; it is rather a human action driven to God in order to achieve a worldly advantage.
5. *Prayer is a tool to force God to grant prosperity*: Prosperity theologians overemphasise meaning of prayer is an instrument to achieve personal benefits. They convince that if one asks God for even sheer material gains, he/she will be granted with this gain. Obviously, it brings about egoistic, selfish thinking about God and faith as a permanent source of prosperity<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> David W. Jones, Russell S. Woodbridge. 2017. *Health, Wealth, and Happiness: How the Prosperity Gospel Overshadows the Gospel of Christ*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 40ff.

## Conclusion

The preaching of the prosperity gospel crosses the confessional and denominational boundaries and becomes a serious problem inside and outside the Evangelical family. In fact, it is a proposal of a reduced Christianity that appears as attractive for many new believers, especially in the poorer countries of Africa and Latin America. Despite the roots in the Western philosophical approaches and the Western individualism, it converges easily with various beliefs of indigenous traditional religions. This convergence brings about theological syncretism distorting essential theological truths of the Christian faith. The criticism of the Evangelical theologians, especially from the Lausanne movement, gives a relevant starting point to the panconfessional discussion on the issue.

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