

# EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 4 P. 4

---

Volume 4 • Number 1 • April 1980

---

## Evangelical Review of Theology

*Articles and book reviews selected from publications  
worldwide for an international readership,  
interpreting the Christian faith for contemporary  
living.*

EDITOR: BRUCE J. NICHOLLS



Published by  
THE PATERNOSTER PRESS

Do Christians today have that kind of faith and courage? Will we pioneer new models of sharing for our global village?

Sadly I must confess my fear that the majority of affluent “Christians” of all theological labels have bowed the knee to mammon. If forced to choose between defending their luxuries and following Jesus among the oppressed, I am afraid they will imitate the rich young ruler.

Still I am not pessimistic! God regularly accomplishes his will through faithful remnants. Even in affluent nations, there are millions of Christians who would rather have Jesus than houses and lands. More and more Christians are coming to realize that their Lord calls them to feed the hungry and seek justice for the oppressed.

If at this moment in history a tenth of the Christians in affluent nations dared to join hands with the poor around the world, we would decisively change the course of world history. Together let us strive to be a biblical people at this point. Let us follow wherever Scripture leads. As we do, may the risen King give courage to bear any cross, suffer any loss and joyfully embrace any sacrifice that biblical faith requires in an age of hunger.

---

**Dr. Ronald J. Sider is Associate Professor of Theology, Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, USA. He is the Convener of the unit on Ethics and Society, Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Fellowship and a member of the Social Action Commission of the National Association of Evangelicals. This lecture was delivered at the 40th Annual Conference on World Missions, at Tenth Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, November 5, 1978. p. 84**

## **The Prosperity Doctrine: An Accretion to Black Pentecostalism**

James S. Tinney

*Reprinted from Spirit: A Journal of Issues Incident to Black Pentecostalism (April 1978) with permission*

The American capitalist impulse being what it is, it is not surprising that its most insidious features have infected the churches and molded them in many of the same ways as other institutions. Without controversy, religion is big business in this country; and Pentecostalism is no exception. In the Black community alone, there are more than 66,000 churches; and more than 10,000 of these belong to one of the organized Holiness or Pentecostal denominations, to say nothing of the thousands of congregations not affiliated with any larger body.<sup>1</sup> In scores of American towns and cities, more money turns over in the Pentecostal churches on any given Sunday than circulates through all the other Black

---

<sup>1</sup> These statistics represent the aggregate totals affiliated with denominations which are predominantly Black in membership. They are taken from tables found in Tinney's "Selected Directory of Afro-American Religious Organizations, Schools and Periodicals," published by the Howard University Institute of Urban Affairs and Research.

businesses during an entire week. In fact, since statistics show that the smaller churches and denominations raise more money per capita than do the larger and older churches, the ratio of Pentecostal churches to other kinds is in no way indicative of the disproportionate amount of wealth generated by the Pentecostal bodies.<sup>2</sup> In every sense of the word, Black holiness denominations are true corporations.

No room exists for boasting, however. For these churches have little to show for their millions, except devotion to the American ethos of materialism. What is more, many pastors and bishops and auxiliaries and official agents of the Pentecostal denominations make no attempt to be accountable to their constituencies in financial matters. Few operate on prescribed budgets; fewer still give periodic budgetary reports or open the books for the memberships. If secular businesses operated as do the churches, they would close within a short time. If they kept their books in as shoddy manner as do the churches, they would be subject to [p. 85](#) Internal Revenue Service investigations and many would lose their professional licenses.

But it is not the intent of this article to focus at inordinate length on this aspect of religious economics. Neither is it purposed to demonstrate the abuses and needs God's kingdom suffers as a result of misused and misdirected wealth, while educational institutions languish, presses silence, and missions starve. The God of justice will certainly hold the churches responsible for the failure to employ the unemployed (as well as house and feed and clothe the needy), and to use its potential economic clout to force social change.<sup>3</sup> That the Pentecostals—the very churches which minister among the discontented masses and buy limousines for preachers with widow's sacrificial offerings—should be so derelict in duty could be cited as damning evidence against the gospel's relevance.

This is not to deny that the churches (Pentecostal ones included) have contributed to the survival of their members in other, less mundane ways. Certainly the psychological supports are worth recall. Then too, some noteworthy examples of church involvement on housing and relief work do surface from time to time. But the danger is that these positive examples will serve as excuses to quiet the consciences of both members and leaders.

## CULTURAL THEOLOGY

Even more damaging evidence already exists that the churches' obeisance to capitalism has already infected its very theology. Black Pentecostalism as well as other branches of the church universal, not only sanctify the profit motive, uphold the American system with nondiscerning loyalty, place the God of poor peoples' money at the service of greed, and fail to monetarily return to the community its collected, enormous wealth. But an entire ideological framework has been developed and blindly promoted in accord with, and supportive of, these many economic evils. Specifically, the reference here is to the "prosperity doctrine" now rampant in Pentecostalism.

---

<sup>2</sup> See "Church Financial Statistics and Related Data," in Constant H. Jacquet, Jr. ed. *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches 1977* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977), pp. 249–257. Also see special edition on "Protestant Power and Wealth" in *Southern Exposure* (Vol. IV, No. 3), pp. 83–103.

<sup>3</sup> It is this author's contention that the churches should create their own work projects, hire the unemployed in their neighborhoods, and thus return money to the community. Such a proposal necessitates, however, that the churches cease the greedy and worthless sinking of contributions into building programs, personal coffers, and other self-perpetuating non-necessities.

This doctrine advances the ideas that prosperity is a gift of God, p. 86 that it is obtainable by faith, and that failure to prosper financially is indicative of some spiritual negligence. Accompanying this belief, in most instances, is a requirement that to get wealth, one must give wealth. Hence financial sacrifice (e.g. using money needed for food or rent as an offering of faith) may be viewed as a means to prosperity or a test of obedience and faith.

If one examines closely the rhetorical explication of this doctrine by its proponents, it becomes obvious that divine prosperity is coined in the same terms as salvation, sanctification, the Baptism of the Holy Ghost, or healing. (All of these are described as “a gift of God,” “obtainable by faith,” and failure is due to “spiritual negligence.” Further, in many churches, these experiences also require a faith-work” as a means of proof of reception.) The blessing of prosperity thus usurps the role of the traditional Pentecostal experiences; it supplements and supplants the gospel message; and it assumes a position of importance equal to blood-bought spiritual realities. In this latter respect, the prosperity doctrine comes dangerously close to rivaling the very blood of Jesus Christ. Spiritually speaking, it does not deserve the position of a doctrine. Experientially speaking, it seems to surface in those circles which earlier bordered on supplanting the gospel with “wonder worshipping and sign seeking.” Pragmatically, it is destructive of faith and confidence toward God for persons who have little education or few business contacts; or who live in a dying or sterile economic environment; or who are continual subjects of racism or exploitation or oppression; or who remain victims of either rural or urban poverty. Politically, the doctrine is dysfunctional—and this is most disheartening—since it works against people taking responsibility for protesting poverty and powerlessness, and rising up and doing battle with the forces of oppression. Those who advance the prosperity belief reveal their own political naivety; and the doctrine itself presupposes a totally false political analysis and foundation.

Be that as it may, scores of Black ministers, as well as nearly all popular/white revivalists whose campaigns involve numbers of Black people continue to promote God-promised financial blessings. The slogans which advertise the wares are endless: “You can have what you want, you can do what you want;” “God’s got it, I can have it, and by faith I’m going to get it;” “You can’t lose with the stuff I lose;” and “Pie in the sky, not bye and bye, but right now.” Radio broadcasts also pick up the theme, offering all kinds of “blessing plans,” “PPP packages,” and “seed faith.” p. 87

All kinds of theological half-truths are employed to buttress the appeal of the prosperity promoters. “God owns the cattle on a thousand hills and the wealth in every mine, so I know he can give me some of it,” one intones. “I’m a child of God; and I don’t inherit poverty because my Father’s not poor,” another explains. What these fail to point out, however, is the truth that God rules over this earth, but he does not yet reign<sup>4</sup>. The kingdoms of this world have not yet become the kingdoms of Christ. There exists a gap between what is potentially ours and what is experientially possessed.

Other evangelists advocate that the “gospel guarantees success;” that “God is concerned about everything about me;” and that “the full gospel includes the total man.” In actuality, however, the gospel is the good news that Jesus has through death conquered death and defeated evil, and now seeks to reconcile the world unto himself. But even the gospel benefits do not accrue to every man to the fullest degree yet. Death and evil still affect even the saints. Whatever freedom from sins and sicknesses may be offered now, it is always partial or relative freedom, and it is temporary. Even the usual Pentecostal

---

<sup>4</sup> See George E. Ladd *Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), pp. 63–100.

benefits of the gospel—power over volitional sinning and healing from some diseases—are less than perfect benefits. Both sins and sickness have beset every “saint” at some point in time since conversion; and furthermore, they will continue to do so.

Yet these prosperity ministers claim that prosperity is conditioned upon faith. “Faith is a work which enables us to obtain whatever we want,” congregations are sometimes told. The truth of the matter is that not even faith is perfect. Above all, faith is not a work; it is not something a person can work up or pray down or frenzy one’s self into. It is, if anything, a gift of God. Unless the Spirit imparts the gift of faith by grace, no amount of exertion or self effort will produce it. “All things are possible” to the person who believes. But the other side of the coin is that God does not impart faith to believe for all things.

That is not all. The doctrine of prosperity further appeals to those who are already upwardly mobile or well situated. It provides a perfect blanket endorsement of their attainments and helps to justify their status in full view of the comparative sufferings of those surrounding them. It grants a sense of divine approval to them. p. 88

There is also a sinister element to the teaching. For it appeals to the carnal, selfish nature of mankind. And it sounds inviting to those who envy the prosperous teacher—the only one who inevitably does indeed prosper as a result of such teaching.

Clearly, economic evils and benefits alike are neither the result of spiritual disobedience nor of spiritual rewards. For this reason, Pentecostals should reject the prosperity doctrine forthwith. Such doctrine is (1) imprecise in definition, (2) heretical in origin, (3) unscriptural in exposition, and (4) regressive in terms of political economics.

## **IMPRECISE DEFINITION**

Prosperity teachings assume that the believer has already defined for himself what “prosperity” means. Certainly no definitions or clearcut standards are ever set forth by those proclaiming the doctrine. The most that can be said for the concept is that it guarantees “more of whatever” one already possesses. It exemplifies “the Pentecostal passion for ‘more’ which is the most pervasively interesting feature.” In a different context, Bruner says: “The desire for more than usual is conditioned on more than usual obedience and faith and is evidenced by a more than usual experience.”<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately such circular rhetoric provides no indices for reasonable expectations or even limitations. Prosperity for one person may mean a “better” job, a “better” car, a “better” home, “more” money, “more” clothes, *ad infinitum*. For another person, it may mean something else. Who is to say what it does not include? Certainly not the evangelist, for he advises all hearers (regardless of their present status or success) to believe for “more.” Such indefiniteness makes the whole concept of prosperity a highly subjective one. The concept becomes so relative that it loses all rational meaning. It does not assure equality of results as do other of God’s gifts. Sadly, it perpetuates rather than equalizes distinctions among God’s people.

## **HERETICAL ORIGIN**

The prosperity doctrine is not only subjective, relative and imprecise in definition, it is also foreign to the historical mainstream P. 89 of evangelical Christianity. The early church, for example, voluntarily entered into a communal life in which personal property and private ownership were sacrificed. So simply did the Christians live that the mere presence of a visitor wearing a gold ring drew attention to the adornment. For a long time,

---

<sup>5</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner, *A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), pp. 129, 130.

the church did not even erect special buildings for worship or ministry, but utilized existing structures and make-shift ones. Both the eastern and Roman branches of the Christian church continued to view the higher life of the religious or spiritual as requiring vows of poverty. Later western Protestant movements within the church which sought to recapture early or primitive Christianity (such as the Anabaptists, Mennonites, Quakers, Methodists, Holiness Movement, and even early Pentacostals) not only stressed simplicity of life, but also shunned status symbols associated with wealth.

On the contrary, the prosperity doctrine originated in anti-Christian and often heretical surroundings. Most directly in this country, the teaching stems from the religions of Mary Baker Eddy (founder of the falsely-titled Church of Christ, Scientist or Christian Science) and Charles and Myrtle Fillmore (founders of the Unity School of Practical Christianity). Fillmore, who himself had studied Christian Science, wrote a revised version of the 23rd Psalm which included the following verses:

*The Lord is my banker, my credit is good.... He giveth me the key to his strongbox. He restoreth my faith in riches. He guideth me in the paths of prosperity for his name's sake.*<sup>6</sup>

The entrance of the doctrine of prosperity into Pentecostalism came via the fringe elements and independent “healing and miracle” and “deliverance” evangelists who incorporated metaphysicist (and specifically Unity and Christian Science) doctrines into the traditional Pentecostal understanding of healing. This was done at a time when the “healing and miracle” revivalists were being rejected by the major classical Pentecostal denominations primarily because of alleged internal abuses, growing negative publicity, and moral lapses and defections. It occurred at a time when these “healing and miracle” revivalists, largely discounted by white Pentecostals were forced to turn to Black audiences for *p. 90* support.<sup>7</sup> The appeal of the prosperity teaching to poor Blacks, who soon crowded the revivalists’ tents and crusades, was likely more than coincidental. It may, in fact, have been a calculated move by the revivalists to shore up support for their own failing evangelical enterprises by thus exploiting the Black community.

## UNSCRIPTURAL EXPOSITION

Because the prosperity-teaching evangelists claim Biblical support for their belief, they should be called upon to defend their concepts. Biblical theology, however, will not serve their cause. The New Testament, with one exception, is silent on the issue. Old Testament texts which might casually be thought to address the doctrine, actually do not. What they do say is that God supplies survival needs, that he is the source of wealth insofar as he created the world and its resources, and that wealth (when obtained in a legitimate manner and utilized in benevolence) may be considered a blessing. Even this Old Testament outlook on wealth is nevertheless somewhat disavowed by Christ himself, who repeatedly railed against the wealthy.<sup>8</sup>

Clearly the prosperity teaching is unscriptural. No one in the Bible received wealth as a result of obedience, spirituality, or holiness—not even as a result of faith. The Old Testament verses concerning divine provisions which are commonly misapplied to

---

<sup>6</sup> Frank S. Mead, *Handbook of Denominations* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970), p. 217.

<sup>7</sup> David Edwin Harrell, *All Things Are Possible: The Healing and Charismatic Revivals in Modern America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), pp. 198, 201, 202, 234, 235.

<sup>8</sup> See the article on “Wealth” in *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1960), pp. 550, 551.



today's Christians are either referent to spiritual blessings associated with the promised land of Canaan, or are very restrictive and temporary, and more closely related to sustenance than prosperity.

In actuality, prosperity is antithetical to the numerous, well-established and uncontroverted passages which call for sacrifice, self-denial, giving, fasting, a simple and unadorned life, voluntary vows of poverty and avoidance of evils associated with money, riches, usury, wealth, and mammon. In fact, rather than being proffered as a proof or reward of faith, prosperity is viewed in some scriptures as an enemy of faith. The rich shall not enter into the kingdom unless they dispossess their riches. The faithful are sojourners, pilgrims, dispossessed citizens of earth, whose riches are internal, psychological, spiritual and communal. The chosen faithful few are in truth the oppressed, the poor, the neglected, and marginal or persecuted members of society. On their behalf, p. 91 the land is to be returned to the people every seven years, and debts are to be forgiven. Wealth is not even viewed as necessary for the promotion or furtherance of the gospel.

### **PERVERTED POLITICO-ECONOMICS**

That the doctrine of prosperity does not belong to the realm of truth and universality is evident in the fact that it is an invention wholly of the American scene. As a white, middle class invention, it supports those values and provides a justificatory rationale for the continued exploitation and economic disparity of Blacks and other marginal groups. It serves as a sanctification of the present American system, and a restatement of the Puritan work ethic. Furthermore, it is Calvinistic in tenor and hence foreign to the Arminian emphasis of Pentecostalism. It blames the poor for their poverty and the oppressed for their oppression. It locates remediation of economic injustice within personal spheres rather than social and corporate ones. And it falsely places the responsibility for alleviation of deprivation on the victim rather than the victimizer; on the personal rather than the structural; on the spiritual rather than the practical or temporal; on self-effort rather than on reconstruction of social justice. In a word, it is a simplistic, naive, veritably deficient analysis which associates wealth with personal goodness, faith, industriousness and morality; while associating poverty with personal evil, faithlessness, idleness, laziness and immorality.

The prosperity doctrine further reaches a level of absurdity when applied to non-western, Third World countries, many of which are Black and most of which are non-white. It is inconceivably applicable to places where no monetary economy exists, to non-industrialized areas, to places just emerging from a semi-feudalistic society, and to countries where the average per capita income is, for instance, less than \$100 per year. No amount of prayer, faith, or holiness will change the subsistent existence of believers in these countries. What is more, since the under-development of the Third World is aided by their exploitation by American and other First World countries, there is a sense in which the prosperity of American Pentecostals ensures the uneven development of other countries (including the poverty and hunger of fellow believers located there). No U.S. Christian has a "right" to two cars, two pairs of shoes, two suits, or three daily meals while others are literally starving to death. To rationalize p. 92 that the prosperous can donate more money to missions or relief aid is to place one's self in the vain role of the condescending, as well as to misinterpret the structural and long-term problems which are inherent in present inequities.

The prosperity teaching should be rejected as an accretion to Black Pentecostalism and an example of the perverted economic theories which have helped to keep Black oppression alive.

(abridged)

---

Dr. James S. Tinney is assistant professor of Journalism at Howard University, Washington, D.C. USA and editor of Spirit journal. **p. 93**

# Reclaiming the Biblical Doctrine of Work

John R.W. Stott

*Reprinted from Christianity Today (May 4, 1979), with permission*

*In a world of riches and poverty, slavery and inertia, class and economic oppression, protest and revolt are not enough. One, but only one, facet of our Christian response must be the recovery of the work ethic of the Kingdom of God—an ethic that leads to service and to maturity through co-operation with the Creator in the stewardship of creation, and to accountability in redeeming the consequences of the Fall. In this brief article, John Stott explores some aspects of the divine-human collaboration in work that brings “fulfillment to the worker, benefit to the community and glory to God”.*

(Editor)

Let me say it before you think it: a clergyman is the last person in the world to expatiate on this topic. For everybody knows that no clergyman has ever done a day's work in his life. Instead, according to the old quip, he is “six days invisible and one day incomprehensible.” A few years ago a rather drunk Welsh Communist boarded the train in which I was travelling. When he learned that I was a pastor, he told me it was high time I became productive, and ceased to be a parasite on the body politic.

What is our attitude to our work? Here is a popular view:

*I don't mind work  
If I've nothing else to do;  
I quite admit it's true  
That now and then I shirk  
Particularly boring kinds of work—  
Don't you?  
But, on the whole, I think it's fair to say,  
Provided I can do it my own way  
And that I need not start on it today—  
I quite like work!*

What has been called “the orthodox view” of work (or so I have read in a secular book on the social psychology of industry), and has been the basis of industrial psychology and managerial practice (or so I am assured in the same book) is “the Old Testament belief that physical labor is a curse imposed on man as a punishment for his sin.” The author