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The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. ([Lk. 4:18-19](#))

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Prosperity Theology and the New Testament

W. Ward Gasque

INTRODUCTION

Prosperity theology—the idea that God loves you and has a marvellous financial plan for your life—is less than fifty years old. While its intellectual roots lie in the New Thought philosophy of the nineteenth century that produced the movement known as Christian Science, among other new religious and secular speculations, it is much more a product of the American optimism that was the result of the unprecedented economic boom that took place in the USA following the Second World War. You can search the pages of the history of the Christian church and you will find no evidence of this eccentric theological teaching prior to the 1950s.

‘Positive confession’ or ‘word of faith’ or *rhema* (from Greek ῥῆμα ‘word’) theology is the teaching of a sub-group of the larger Pentecostal or Charismatic Movement. It is important to point out that this is a minority viewpoint within this larger community of Christians and that it has been roundly criticized by many mainstream Pentecostal leaders.

Its leading proponents in America are evangelists Kenneth E. Hagin (1917–), Frederick K. C. Price (1932–), Charles Emmitt Capss (1934–), Kenneth Copeland (1937–), and, in a less extreme form, Oral Roberts (1918–). Another less extreme form of prosperity theology is the ‘possibility thinking’ or ‘theology of self-esteem’ of the Reformed pastor-evangelist Robert H. Schuller (1926–). On the other hand, this teaching has been secularized by many contemporary self-styled preachers and authors and a variety of New Age evangelists in North America, and, I imagine, also in Korea.

In its evangelical Protestant form, prosperity theology teaches that it is God’s will that all of his children should be financially prosperous. To put it another way, it is not his will for any of his children to be poor. Poverty, like sin, is the result of the fall. Therefore, to accept poverty is to accept less than God’s best. To be content to be poor is to accept spiritual defeat.

If we are poor, then we are not trusting God as we should, for he [p. 41](#) wishes to bless us, to make us a success; and his blessing includes financial success. If we are poor or if we are financial failures, it is an embarrassment to God. And it’s a bad witness to the world.

This teaching is often connected with a similar emphasis upon God’s desire for each of us to experience perfect health. God is a God of peace. The Hebrew word for ‘peace’ is *Shalom*, which implies ‘wholeness and well-being—hence, both **health and wealth**. To accept only a spiritual gospel is to believe in something less than the *full* gospel.

EXEGESIS OR EISEGESIS

Prosperity theology claims to be biblical:

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you ([Matt. 7:7](#)).

Until now you have not asked for **anything** in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete ([Jn. 16:24](#)).

If you believe, you will receive **whatever** you ask for in prayer’ ([Matt. 21:22](#)).

Therefore I tell you, **whatever** you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours ([Mk. 11:24](#)).

‘I tell you the truth, my Father will give you **whatever** you ask in my name’ ([Jn. 16:23](#)).

So if you need a job, or a new car, or a bigger house, a larger salary—whatever you need, you should ask the Lord, for he desires to bless you! ‘Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you **the desires of your heart**’ ([Ps. 37:4](#)).

The exegetical foundations of the *rhema* or ‘word of faith’ theology is based on a rather idiosyncratic interpretation of a handful of key texts. [Romans 10:8](#) is one of these: ‘ “The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,” that is, the **word of faith** we are proclaiming:’ (Ἐγγύς σου τὸ ῥῆμά ἐστιν ἐν τῷ στόματί σου καὶ ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ σου, τοῦς ἐστιν τὸ ῥῆμα τῆς πίστεως ὃ κηρύσσομεν.) The Greek for ‘word’ in this text is ῥῆμα, which means an utterance or a concrete expression of a λόγος. In classical Greek the word is sometimes used of stating something specifically. The phrase ‘word of faith’ is taken totally out of context to mean: ‘whatever is spoken by faith becomes immediately inspired and therefore dynamic in the particular situation or event to which it is addressed’. The distinction is made between two kinds of knowledge—‘revelation or faith knowledge’ and ‘sense knowledge’, the former dealing with matters that the empirical senses cannot discover or know but must be revealed by the Spirit and the latter dealing with natural, human knowledge. So ‘by faith’ we can speak of things that are not and bring them into being. Hence the nickname: ‘Name it and Claim it Theology’!

Other key texts for Rhema Theology are [Proverbs 6:2](#), [Romans 4:17](#), [John 10:10](#), and [3 John 2](#).

‘I have come that they may have life, and have it more abundantly’ ([Jn. 10:10b](#)).

The last text reads: ‘Beloved, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, [p. 42](#) even as your soul is getting along well’ ([3 Jn. 2](#)). [The KJV reads: ‘... even as your soul prospereth.’]

The fact is that each of these texts is taken wholly out of context and misinterpreted. They are used in a sense that is quite contrary to what the original authors actually intended. [Romans 10:8](#) is about the saving faith that God gives to those who confess Jesus to be their Lord. [Proverbs 6:2](#) refers to a security deposit in a financial transaction, not a ‘word of faith’. [Romans 4:17](#) is a description of the faith of Abraham rather than ours. [John 10:10](#) has nothing whatever to do with material prosperity. To interpret it in this way does extreme violence to the immediate context. [3 John 2](#) is a formal greeting to an individual, not an affirmation that it is God’s desire than all his children should be healthy and wealthy.

The first point of criticism of contemporary prosperity theology, then, is that it is **based on the misinterpretation of specific texts of Scripture**. The key proof-texts that are quoted do not say what they are interpreted as saying. The prosperity evangelists are doing *eisegesis* rather than *exegesis*; they are reading their own meanings *into* the texts rather than reading *out* the meanings which are there.

BIBLICAL REALITY IS OTHERWISE

The second point of criticism is even more serious. Not only do the preachers of prosperity theology attempt to read into certain key texts of Scripture a doctrine that is not found there, they are teaching **a doctrine that is quite contrary to hundreds of other New Testament texts**.

To recognize poverty and sickness as evil consequences that are ultimately results of the fall is not to say that it is God’s will that those who believe in Jesus should always be financially prosperous and in perfect health. It is quite clear from the New Testament that our Lord Jesus, contrary to the assertions of the prosperity evangelists, was poor ([Matt. 8:20](#); [Lk. 9:58](#); [2 Cor. 8:9](#)). He was regularly dependent on friends for food and housing; and he was buried in a borrowed tomb ([Matt. 27:57–60](#); [Lk. 23:50–53](#); [Jn. 19:38–41](#)).

It is also quite clear from reading the New Testament that many of the early Christians were also poor, and this was not the result of any lack of faith on their part ([Lk. 6:20](#); [Rom. 15:26](#); [1 Cor. 1:26](#); [2 Cor. 6:10](#); [Gal. 2:10](#); [Jas. 2:2–6](#); etc). God causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends his rain on the just and the unjust, according to Jesus ([Matt. 5:45](#)). The Galileans whom Pilate killed and the eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell were not great sinners ([Lk. 13:1–5](#)). The consequences of the fall have permeated the created order so that all are affected, yet God is still the benevolent Creator who showers his blessings upon the wicked and the good alike. God gives eternal life to those who trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, and he may choose to intervene at any time to heal or to provide for our daily bread in an unusual manner. But even faithful Christians get sick and are poor—in fact, **the majority of the world's** p. 43 **faithful Christians have been and are poor—and all of us**, this side of the parousia, **will someday die**, presumably of a final illness.

[Hebrews 11](#) speak of saints of old who won great victories in this life *by faith*, but also of others who were impoverished, imprisoned, tortured, and even killed *by faith* ([Heb. 11:24–39](#)). The writer pens these words to encourage believers who had ‘joyfully accepted the confiscation of [their] property’ ([Heb. 10:34](#)) so that they would not lose heart but rather remain faithful to the Lord in the light of their present suffering. They are promised vindication, but not in this life. Rather, they shall be vindicated by God in the age to come ([10:30–39](#)).

Paul’s teaching in [1 Timothy 6](#) underlines the Christian perspective on wealth and poverty: He writes of those ‘who think that godliness is a means to financial gain’ ([6:5](#)). It is interesting to note that the people who believe that godliness leads to financial success, according to Paul, are the people who are teaching the false doctrines that he urges Timothy to oppose.

To the contrary, Paul writes, ‘godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses ...

‘Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life’ ([1 Tim. 6:6–12, 17–19](#)).

As Gordon Fee has pointed out, ‘Wealth and possessions are a zero value for the people of God’ (*The Disease of the Health and Wealth Gospels* [Beverly, MA: Fronline Publishing, 1985], p. 7). Godliness does not necessarily lead to financial success. On the contrary, wealth and possessions may lead one away from the Lord. Those who desire to be wealthy very often lose sight of true spiritual values. They quickly begin to value things in terms of the temporal rather than the eternal, in terms of what is seen rather than what is unseen. And they are tempted to trust in their wealth rather than in their God. They become arrogant, forgetting that God is the source of their wealth and that he has entrusted wealth to them only as a temporary loan. Worse, they often begin to assume that their wealth gives them a moral superiority p. 44 over other people! Thus, Paul urges

Timothy to remind the few Christians who are rich to be generous with what they have been entrusted with and to share it with those who have less than they have, so that they may not lose out on the blessings of the age to come.

Wealth and possessions are, according to the Bible, gifts of God. But they can also be a snare and temptation. It is easy to say that it is not so much a matter of whether you are rich or not but how you view your riches. Most people who have wealth seem to believe that they have the right values. But we should not overlook the fact that the New Testament has a lot more to say about the dangers of wealth than the positive benefits of wealth.

‘It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God’ ([Mark 10:25](#)).

‘He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty’ ([Lk. 1:53](#)).

‘But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort’ ([Lk. 6:24](#)).

‘No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Mammon’ ([Matt. 6:24](#)).

The rich man, ‘who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day’ while the poor beggar lay at his gate and longed to eat what fell from his table, ‘died and was buried.’ He woke up ‘in hell, where he was in torment ...’ ([Lk. 16:19–23](#)).

The prosperity evangelists seem to suggest that we should give in order to receive more. If we give, they suggest, God will give us more in return. This is quite different from the New Testament ethic of *agape* (altruistic love) and *charis* (grace).

New Testament theology is both christocentric and theocentric, focused on the grace of God that has been manifested in Christ. **Prosperity theology is fundamentally anthropocentric**, focused on us and our desires. It is a product of the highly individualistic and self-centred culture of late twentieth century Western capitalism. The great themes of God’s holiness, God’s glory, and God’s grace are missing from the proclamation of the prosperity evangelists. Except for the fact that they are ostensibly quoting from the Bible, their message is more akin to the doctrines of self-actualization and self-esteem of the contemporary pop psychologists than it is to the motifs of classical Christian theology.

A FALSE UTOPIA

Finally, **the teaching of prosperity theology is simply nonsense in view of contemporary economic realities**. For a start, not only are the majority of the people living on this planet poor, but the majority of the Christians living in the world are poor. And it may come as a surprise to you that the continent in which there are more Christians today than any other continent, and where the church is growing faster than in any other place, is the poorest continent. I speak of Africa. And, contrary to what the prosperity evangelists would have us believe, it is getting poorer rather than richer. **P. 45**

The economic situation in West, Central, East and Southern Africa is little affected by the reality of the faith and commitment of the millions of believers who live there. Rather it is a product of forces that are at work quite independently of the faithful discipleship of African Christians. A vast array of cultural, environmental, and economic factors are at work to prevent the type of economic growth that Europe and America experienced in the 19th and 20th centuries and many Asian countries, such as Korea, are experiencing today.

And yet God is at work mightily in Africa, calling out a people for his name from all of the many tribes of Africa. Africa is experiencing one of the greatest outpouring of God's Spirit that the world has ever known, in spite of its great poverty.

There is, in fact, some evidence to suggest that as people become more economically prosperous they tend to forget God. Secularism seems to be a by-product of modern economic growth. This does not mean that we should be promoting poverty, but it does mean that we should never promote economic growth at all costs or allow it to become an idol.

It is also nonsense to think that the wealth that *some* people in the West have experienced in the past and that more and more people in Asia are experiencing today could ever become universal. Even in America and Europe, where there are millions of relatively poor people, many of whom are sincere and faithful Christians, it is far from universal. Sadly, many of the poor people who are frequently in the audiences of the prosperity evangelists, are being offered false economic hopes, just as many invalids and physically handicapped people are offered the false hope of perfect health by some of those same preachers. It simply is not possible for all Christians to become rich, and even if it were so, it would be spiritually unhealthy! I wonder how many people have been turned away from God by the failure of their financial dreams, that were implanted in their minds by the preachers of prosperity, to materialize.

Wealth then, can be not only an opportunity for *koinonia* but also a very real danger to the Christian. Whatever wealth the believer has is to be regarded as a loan from the Lord to be invested in his work, to be used for his glory, to be shared with his people, particularly with those who are poor. The rich Christian, like all Christians, is a steward of all that he or she possesses. All wealth belongs to the Lord.

On the other hand poverty is not seen by the New Testament writers to be better than wealth. God is the One who pleads the cause of the poor, who is concerned about justice for the widow, the orphan and the alien. But this does not mean that he is blessing poverty, or that poverty is to be preferred to wealth. The New Testament does not romanticize or idealize poverty as some forms of Christian piety have done in the past.

In conclusion, the New Testament perspective suggests that whether one is wealthy or poor should be a matter of indifference to the Christian. Neither wealth nor poverty is a positive value. The values of the kingdom of God as proclaimed by Jesus free the Christian from being p. 46 overly concerned about material things ([Matt. 6:22-34](#)). Kingdom values take precedence over worldly values. To desire to accumulate wealth represents the values of the old order, which is passing away. To share what one has with others is a core value of the new community of the kingdom of God ([Lk. 3:11](#); [Lk. 12:33](#); [18:22](#); [Ac. 20:35](#); [2 Cor. 9:2](#), [7](#), [11](#); [Eph. 4:28](#); [1 Jn. 3:17](#); etc).

A DIFFERENT GOSPEL

A third and even more telling criticism of current theology is that **it either neglects or seriously misrepresents fundamental New Testament theological themes.**

What does one make of **the theology of the cross**, which is at the heart of the New Testament?

'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me' ([Mk. 8:34](#)).

'Anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple' ([Lk. 14:27](#)).

'Any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple' ([Lk. 14:33](#)).

Jesus himself set the example of sacrifice for the disciple of Jesus by forsaking the riches of heaven ([Philp. 2:5-8](#)) 'for us men and for our salvation,' as the Nicene Creed confesses.

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

Prosperity theology also misses the heart of the New Testament's teaching about giving. Those who follow the Lord Jesus Christ give because they are responding to God's unconditional love. God has lavished his love upon us ([Rom. 5:8](#); [Eph. 1:7-8](#); [1 Jn. 3:1](#)). We give in response to his great love for us ([2 Cor. 5:14](#); [Eph. 2:4](#); [5:1-2](#); [1 Thess. 1:3](#)). His gift is without any strings attached ([Eph. 2:5-10](#) etc). His gift of grace causes us to desire to exercise the gift of grace by giving to others who are in need ([Rom. 12:6-8](#); [2 Cor. 8:1, 6, 9](#); [9:7-8](#); [1 Jn. 3:14, 17](#)).

We should fight against the poverty that imprisons so many of the world's peoples, as we should fight against sin, disease, and political tyranny. But there are much better and more effective ways to fight against these evils than to support teaching that is unbiblical, impractical, and, indeed, ultimately disillusioning. In short, the so-called 'word of faith' or *rhema* theology is not the 'full gospel' at all. Rather, it is at best a very partial gospel, or, at worst, what Paul calls 'a different gospel' ([Gal. 1:6](#); [2 Cor. 11:4](#)).

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A Response

C. Kee Hwang

It is great privilege for me to respond to Dr. Gasque's 'Prosperity Theology and the New Testament'. I thank the World Evangelical Fellowship Theological Commission and Korean Evangelical Theological Society for this opportunity.

Dr. Gasque has presented a timely subject. In Korea the theology of prosperity is, I suppose, not known widely as a theological discipline *per se*, but as a theological teaching that puts great emphasis on prosperity in the present life of this Age rather than the life of the Age to Come. It could be characterized as a Pentecostal Neo-Pentecostal tendency, impacting no less powerfully the contemporary Christian community in Korea than any other influence.

Dr. Gasque's presentation demonstrates a firm biblical foundation and his assertion maintains a remarkably sound theology. He describes the teaching of prosperity theology as 'the idea that God loves you and has a marvellous financial plan for your life'.

Dr. Gasque closes his paper with this final comment. 'In short, the so called "word of faith" or *rhema* theology is not the "full gospel" at all. Rather, it is at best a very partial gospel, or at worst, what Paul calls "a different gospel" ' ([Gal. 1:6](#); [2 Cor. 11:4](#)).

Although I may generally agree with Dr. Gasque's assertion on prosperity theology, let me point out some reservations.

First of all, it seems that his definition of prosperity theology is too narrow or one sided, because Dr. Gasque understands 'prosperity' mainly in terms of financial success. I