

# EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

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## Evangelical Review of Theology

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obedience of faith*

EDITOR: BRUCE J. NICHOLLS



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*in Latin America* by Dr. Pedro Arana of Peru; *Suffering in Eastern Europe* by Dr. Peter Kuzmic of Croatia; and *Christians Suffering in North Korea* by Dr. Sung Tae Kim of Korea.

Rev. Rene Daidanso of Chad, Africa, Associate General Secretary of the Association of Evangelicals in Africa (AEA), made an oral presentation on the sufferings and poverty of many Africans due to natural calamities.

I welcome this issue of ERT which is devoted to this important issue.

Bong Rin Ro p. 5

# Statement on Prosperity Theology and Theology of Suffering

## INTRODUCTION

This statement seeks to summarize the substance of a discussion held at the Korean Center for World Missions (Torch Center) in Seoul, Korea, 28 September–1 October 1994, under the joint sponsorship of the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Fellowship and the Korea Evangelical Theological Society. Our consultation involved approximately 50 representatives of the two groups, in addition to a lively group of postgraduate students, many of whom are already theological educators in Asia and Africa. Participants hailed from Australia, Canada, Germany, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Korea, Nigeria, Peru, the Philippines, Uganda, and the USA.

Seoul seemed to be a very appropriate setting for such a consultation. The Korean Church, having passed through the fires of intense persecution and suffering during the first part of this century, has become quite prosperous and is rapidly becoming one of the dominant sending churches in the world Christian mission. The beautiful and bountifully equipped facilities of the Torch Center where we stayed are a visible witness to the dedication of many newly affluent Korean Christians to the cause of the gospel. The warmth of the hospitality, the commitment of brothers and sisters in Christ, and the breadth of the vision of the Korean church was a source of encouragement to all who participated.

## I. PROSPERITY THEOLOGY

### A. Definition

A distinction should be made between ‘prosperity theology’ and the biblical teaching on prosperity. The former expression refers to a contemporary theological teaching which stresses that God always blesses his people materially, with wealth and health, as well as spiritually when they have a positive faith and are obedient to him. It is a teaching that is found frequently, though not exclusively, in some charismatic and pentecostal circles, where it is also frequently criticized. The accent is not placed on the stewardship of the wealth that God has given to a person, but rather on understanding the biblical concepts of faith, prayer, and blessing, and the consequences of this teaching for one’s daily life. A p. 6 biblical theology of prosperity, on the other hand, would emphasize the

responsibilities of the successful or prosperous to use their wealth for the glory of God and for the alleviation of the suffering of the poor and the weak.

## **B. Context**

Korea has experienced a great economic boom, and the Korean church has experienced both spiritual and economic growth. It now sits as an equal partner at the table of nations and is a model of success. Several of the other participants in the consultation were citizens of wealthy nations. On the other hand, there were brothers and sisters from other nations that are presently very poor by comparison. The church of Jesus Christ is alive and growing in most of these poor nations, several of them in a manner that equals or surpasses the recent growth of the Korean church and, indeed, far outstripping the spirituality and growth of the church in Europe and North America. Contrary to the Korean experience, the churches in some of these poor countries are not getting materially richer, in spite of their obvious faithfulness to the Lord Jesus and God's word. Consciousness of these present incongruities added a degree of realism to our theological discussion. Several participants felt called upon to warn the Korean church concerning the spiritual dangers of their newly acquired wealth, pointing to the coincidence of the decline of the church in Europe and North America with the growth in economic affluence.

## **C. The Christian Doctrine of Creation**

The Bible teaches that God made the world and all that is in it and declared it to be 'good' ([Gen. 1:31](#)) And God made man and woman, 'in his image' ([Gen. 1:27](#)); he 'blessed them' and commanded them to bear children, to inhabit the earth, eating of its fruit and perpetually caring for the world that he had created ([Gen. 1:28-30](#)). In the original state, man and woman had in abundance all that they needed in life; they had immediate access to fellowship with God their creator, and they had all the food that they needed for their sustenance. They had life in all its fulness (cf. [In. 10:10](#)).

## **D. The Results of the Fall**

As a result of the rebellion of Adam and Eve against God, sin, suffering, and death came into the world. The paradisaical abundance of the original creation was disturbed. Henceforth, pain ([Gen. 3:16a](#)), envy ([Gen. 3:16b](#)), strife ([Gen. 4:5-7](#)), greed ([Rom. 1:29](#)), and death ([Gen. 2:16](#); [4:8](#); [5:5](#)) were to become a part of the human experience; and it became necessary for men and women to struggle against nature in order to work out a bare living ([Gen. 3:17](#)). Thus, life in the world became a mixture of good and evil, abundance and scarcity, wealth and poverty, health and disease.

## **E. The Biblical Teaching on Wealth and Prosperity**

The Old Testament is full of promises of blessing to the person who walks obediently before the Lord and keeps his commands. The book of Deuteronomy, for example, promises the [p. 7](#) people abundant material blessing in their lives in the land of Canaan if they remain true to the Lord. At the same time, there are checks and balances written into the biblical laws to prevent those who become wealthy from failing to share from their abundance with the poor—for example, the laws of the gleanings, the sabbatical year, and the Year of Jubilee. The ideal in ancient Israel was that there should not be a very big gap between the rich and the poor, though in time this ideal seems to have been lost sight of by many of the rich families in Israel and Judah. This neglect of the poor and needy called forth the scathing denunciations of the prophets of the LORD.

While the Old Testament promises abundance, including both spiritual and material blessings, to the faithful, this emphasis must be balanced by other Old Testament texts that warn the people concerning the accumulation of great wealth and the neglect of the needs of the poor, namely, the widow, the orphan the alien, and the physically disabled. God is the champion of the poor, and God's people are called upon to manifest his love and graciousness in reaching out to the needy ([Exod. 22:22](#); [Deut. 10:18](#); [14:29](#); [Isa. 1:17](#); [10:2](#); [Jer. 22:3](#)). Both the Old Testament and the New Testament teach that a faith that does not care for the weakest members of the human community is no faith at all ([Isa. 1:11–17](#); [Jas. 1:27](#); [Jn. 3:17](#)).

While the Bible teaches that all wealth comes from the Lord and is his possession, it does not teach that those who have wealth are more godly than others who do not. God in his providence causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends his rain on the just and the unjust ([Matt. 5:45](#)). The wicked frequently prosper ([Ps. 72:3–12](#)), and the righteous are frequently poor even though they are rich in faith ([Rom. 15:26](#); [1 Cor. 1:26](#); [2 Cor. 6:10](#); [Gal. 2:10](#); [Jas. 2:2–6](#)). 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 all ([Ps. 127:2](#)).

The good news of the kingdom proclaimed by Jesus and ultimately made real by his death, burial and resurrection is good news for the whole created order ([1 Cor. 15:1–5](#)). He did not preach a message of the salvation of the soul after death but of the fulness of life; he announced good news to the poor, the imprisoned, the blind, the hungry, the weeping and the persecuted ([Lk. 4:18](#); [6:20–22](#)//[Matt. 5:3–11](#)). And he demonstrated the power of the kingdom by restoring people to wholeness (Heb *shalom*) in their relationships with God and with their neighbours ([Mk. 2:1–12](#); [Lk. 19:9](#); [7:36–50](#)), by driving out demons ([Mk. 1:23–28](#); [Mk. 5:1–20](#)), and by healing the sick ([Mk. 1:40–45](#); [10:46–52](#); [Lk. 7:18–23](#)). what Jesus promised by his kingdom proclamation, he wrought through his death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead.

The values of the kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus were set by a radical commitment to the double command to love God with all one's being and to love one's neighbour as oneself ([Mk. 12:29–31](#)). To trust God completely frees the disciple of p. 8 Jesus from being overly concerned about material things. The desire to accumulate wealth, to have security and personal happiness represents the values of the old order, which is passing away ([1 Jn. 2:15–17](#)). To share what one has with others is a core value of the new community of the kingdom of God ([Lk. 3:11](#); [12:33](#); [18:22](#); [Ac. 2](#); [35](#); [2 Cor. 9:2](#), [7](#), [11](#); [Eph. 4:28](#)). The disciple of Jesus is called to a life of self-denial and servanthood, following the example set by the Lord himself ([Mk. 8:34–35](#); [10:45](#); [1 Pet. 2:21](#)).

Both Testaments teach that everything that exists belongs to the Lord and that anything anyone of us possesses is held in trust from the Lord. Thus, no followers of the Lord should regard anything they possess as their own. What we have is a blessing from God, but it is not ours to use in any way we desire. We are responsible for using whatever wealth we have for the Lord, particularly in the service of those who are in need. Our motivation for giving is gratitude, rather than to gain more. God has lavished his love upon us by his many gifts to us, the greatest of which is the gift of his Son ([Rom. 5:8](#); [Eph. 1:7–8](#); [1 Jn. 3:1](#)). Therefore, we find it natural to respond by sharing what he has given to us with others who have less of this world's goods than we have.

If our wealth comes from God, why is it that so many people, including many Christians, are poor? The Bible suggests a variety of reasons. Some are poor because they are lazy ([Prov. 10:4](#) *et passim*). But many others are poor because of circumstances totally outside of their control—because of injustice being done against them by people more powerful than themselves, because of war or famine, because of the death of the husband

and father who is able to provide for his family. As it was in the Old Testament period and in the first century church, so it is today. The Scriptures teach that it is the responsibility of those who have to share with those who have not, and thus to fulfil God's command to love our neighbour as ourselves.

The kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus and inaugurated by his healing mission, death, burial and resurrection has brought salvation to all who come to God through him; however, our experience of salvation is only begun in this life. Christians live between the ages—the age dominated by sin and rebellion and the age of the coming new world order that will be established at Christ's return. At the present time, we experience a foretaste of the age to come through the liberating power of the Holy Spirit, by signs and wonders, by the fruit of the Spirit, the experience of joy and the assurance of the hope that we have in Christ. Jesus' saving work has touched our lives and transformed them, and he, through us, reaches out to bring health, wholeness, and well-being to others; yet we must still resist the temptation to live selfishly and to invest our energies in matters of less importance, giving greater priority to spiritual matters. Hence the New Testament writers constantly urge believers to live in the light of the *eschaton*, the day when each and every one will experience full health, wealth, and eternal prosperity ([Mk. 10:25–31](#); [Col. 3:1–4](#); p. 9 [Heb. 12:1–2](#); [2 Pet. 3:11–13](#); [Rev. 21:1–4](#)).

### F. A Search for Balance

The Bible does not, unlike some other religious and philosophical traditions, denigrate the physical and material. Wealth is not *per se* a negative. Viewed and handled properly, it can be an instrument for great blessing. On the other hand, it should not be given too high a value. Wealth can become a substitute for God; it can become an idol. Therefore, the Lord Jesus frequently warned his disciples concerning the dangers of riches ([Mk. 10:25](#); [Lk. 6:24](#); [Matt 6:4](#); [16:19–23](#), etc).

It is imperative that the church be taught a balanced perspective on wealth and prosperity. While there may have been times in the past history of the church where there was a danger of denigrating material things, that does not seem to be the present problem of the world Christian community. Rather, with the development of modern industrial and consumer capitalism, all too many Christians are obsessed with material things. Moderation is the true biblical perspective: 'Better is little with the fear of the Lord than great treasure and trouble with it' ([Prov. 15:16](#)). 'Give me neither poverty nor riches, ... or I shall be full, and deny you, ... or I shall be poor, and steal, and profane the name of my God' ([Prov. 30:7–9](#)). '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' ([1 Tim. 6:6–8](#)). Scripture teaches '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' and 'to do good, be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share' ([1 Tim. 6:17–18](#)). Through the writings of Proverbs, scripture teaches the poor to learn the disciplines of careful planning, hard work, frugality, and honesty, so that they will 'have something to share with the needy' ([Eph. 4:28](#)).

### G. Conclusion

Wealth and prosperity can be a blessing from God, but they can also be Satan's temptation ([Lk. 4:5–7](#)). Wealth can be used in a manner that brings great glory to the Lord and great blessing to his people, or it can subtly supplant the place of the Lord in one's life. Jesus warns us that we cannot serve both God and Mammon (Wealth) ([Matt. 6:24](#)). This message is as urgent in our day as it was in the first century and must be heeded. In the model prayer ([Matt. 7:11](#); [Lk. 11:3](#)), Jesus taught us to trust God for our daily bread, i.e.,

the necessities of life rather than the luxuries. Moderation and sufficiency mark the life-style of the biblically sensitive Christian. Paul had learned the secret of being content with whatever he had, whatever circumstances came his way, even in prison ([Phil. 4:11-14](#)). In another passage, Paul reminds us of 'the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich' ([2 Cor. 8:9](#)). Jesus thus provides the Christian with a model of sacrificial and truly altruistic love (*agape*). Whatever wealth an individual Christian or **p. 10** a Christian community has provides an opportunity for *koinonia*, for sharing. All the world's wealth belongs to the Lord. And if God's people could learn to be content with what is sufficient for a full and healthy life rather than the excesses that mark the overly developed world, there would be more than enough to go around. The earth is rich enough to support all those who are alive today and who will be born in the near future at a level of sufficiency but not at the level of prosperity and affluence presently attained by only a few. Both the creation ethic of the Old Testament and the kingdom ethic announced by Jesus call those who would be true worshippers of the living God to take steps to see that the basic needs of all are met. As God blessed Abraham so that he could make him a blessing to the nations ([Gen. 12:2](#)), so God has blessed rich Christians to make them a blessing to others.

## **II. THEOLOGY OF SUFFERING**

### **A. Definition**

Suffering is contrary to the original will of God. Suffering is a human experience which a person undergoes against his/her wish, an experience which causes pain, discomfort, disharmony, sorrow, despair, anxiety etc. in material, physical, psychological, spiritual, and social dimensions of life.

### **B. Context**

During our time together, we heard reports of the intense sufferings of Christians in Latin America, Africa, and in Eastern Europe. And we learned of the suffering of many due to the spread of the plague in western India. Although poverty, injustice, deprivation, hunger and disease are more widespread in some parts of the world than others, the whole world suffers. In spite of the technological and educational advances at the present time, many Christians are suffering because of their faith in Jesus Christ as well as as a result of the political or economic situation under which they live with the general populace. It is very important for theologians and Christian leaders to be aware of the suffering that is taking place in the world because the God to whom they have dedicated their lives is a God of mercy to those who suffer.

### **C. Place of Suffering in Redemptive History**

In the order of the original creation and in the final consummation, there is no suffering at all. Suffering is, however, characteristic of the period of human history between the fall of Adam and the *parousia* or coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. Suffering came into the world as a result of human rebellion and God will bring it to an end when he completes his work of salvation for humankind at the second coming of Jesus Christ. During this interim period God permits human suffering, but he is also actively at work in the world, saving men and women from sin and its consequences. God solves the problem of suffering by way of suffering, namely, through the cross of Christ. Jesus' suffering was incarnational, substitutional, and redemptive for the sake of suffering humanity. Christians suffer not merely because of their participation in a common **p. 11** humanity that has been infected



by sin, or the influence of the demonic, but also because of their identification with Jesus Christ and participation in his suffering for the sake of his kingdom and in the service of his cause. Jesus was the Suffering Servant of the Lord ([Isa. 53](#)), and we Christians are also suffering servants in the inter-advent period. In our suffering we have a sure and certain hope of a day when God ‘will wipe away every tear’ and ‘there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain’ for the old order will have passed away ([Rev. 21:4](#)). As Paul comments: ‘The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us’ ([Rom. 8:18](#)).

#### **D. Causes of Suffering**

In general, suffering is the result of the sin of Adam. But this is not to say that all who are suffering are suffering as a result of their personal sins. Some suffer because of natural disasters, such as famine, sickness, physical deformities and limitations, drought, floods, earthquakes, and storms, some of which might have been prevented by more faithful application of the creation mandate to care for the earth. Some suffer because of self-inflicted pain, such as poor health that is a result of bad habits or neglect, business disasters because of poor planning or illegal practice, injury caused by carelessness, and the like. Some suffer because of the social sins of mankind, such as economic and political injustice, wars and violent revolutions, terrorism, abuse and discrimination. Christians sometimes suffer because God puts his disciplinary hand upon his sinning people. Christians suffer also when they have done nothing wrong but simply because of their faithful obedience to Jesus Christ in this sinful world. On other occasions Christians suffer as a result of their foolish acceptance of Satan’s temptation to turn away from the Lord’s path. On the other hand, Christians frequently suffer because of their resistance to Satan’s temptation and their steadfast discipleship in the world. Often suffering is a mystery, as in the celebrated case of Job. God knows everything; our knowledge is limited. In such cases we must be patient, content to leave the question, ‘Why?’ unanswered and continue to trust the Lord.

#### **E. Significance of Suffering**

The mature Christian knows that there is no meaningless suffering; all suffering can become meaningful. No one wishes to suffer, but no Christian who has gone through suffering regrets this. Christian suffering is instructive and has retrospective, present and prospective purposes: it teaches us lessons from our past experience; it is a sign that we are God’s faithful children ([Heb. 12:5–6](#)), and it purifies us in holiness for our future life of service. Christians suffer in sympathy with others who suffer and in the cause of attempting to remove causes of suffering in response to the love command of the Lord Jesus Christ. We suffer also because of our identity as disciples of Jesus Christ, who calls us to take up our cross and follow him and warned us of the persecutions that would follow. If we participate in the sufferings of Jesus Christ, we will share in his glory in the future. Thus [p. 12](#) suffering is not always detrimental but may be beneficial—to oneself, to one’s neighbour, and to the cause of the kingdom of God. Suffering is a path to glory. If we do not drink the cup that Jesus drinks and share in his baptism of suffering, then we cannot share in his exaltation ([Mk. 10:38–39](#)).

#### **F. Christian Response to Suffering**

We rejoice in the privilege we have in our suffering because it prepares us for the glory that is to follow. The church is expected to complete her diaconal work with the same perspective as her Lord, who, having loved his own loved them to the full extent of giving

his life for them ([Jn. 13:1-3](#)). The reality of suffering in the world calls every Christian to the task of seeking to alleviate suffering and to remove the causes of suffering, both individually and socially. If our personal suffering is because of something that we have or have not done, or is it self-inflicted, we have to repent. If our societal suffering is a result of our negative action or neglect of God's principles of stewardship and justice, we must repent. As Christians we are called to work for justice, both individual and societal, for the preservation of the planet ecologically, for a better life for all of God's creatures—in short, for kingdom values ([Heb. 13:16](#)). We need to repent of our neglect of such matters as social justice, basic human needs, ecology, and the alleviation of social ills. We need to harness the resources of modern medicine, agricultural science, technology, economic development, business management, political science, and other scientific and social scientific disciplines in the service of our fight against human suffering till God himself removes all suffering. The church will be able to serve faithfully unto death only if she knows she is going to pass from this world to the Father and that her 'present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed ...' ([Rom. 8:18](#)).

### G. Conclusion

Human suffering belongs to the present reality of life between the fall and the consummation of all things at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. Although the kingdom of evil has been fundamentally undermined by the first coming of Christ, we live 'between the ages', in a period in which both sin and salvation with their attendant consequences are present. Jesus announced good news to the suffering: the poor, the imprisoned, the blind, the hungry, the weeping, and the persecuted ([Lk. 4:18](#); [6:20-22](#); [Matt 5:3-11](#)); and by his own suffering inaugurated the kingdom of God, a new world order. And in his short ministry on earth, he demonstrated the power of the kingdom by alleviating the suffering of many people. For nearly two thousand years his followers have sought to follow in his footsteps, preaching the good news to the poor and suffering and binding up the wounds of suffering humanity ([Lk. 10:30-35](#); [Matt. 25:31-45](#)). The church's ministry of mercy is an essential ingredient in her calling. To share the good news in word and deed is the reason that she has been left in the world. Suffering is a great mystery; however, part of the mystery has been revealed in the **p. 13** suffering of Jesus on the cross as a demonstration of God's great love for humankind. Christians have been called to suffer with Christ for the sake of the world; they are also called to demonstrate the love of God by reaching out to those who suffer. For in their suffering and in their service they validate the genuineness of their faith. **p. 14**

## A Bed of Roses or a Bed of Thorns

Sang-Bok David Kim

For the last few decades the Christian community has been embroiled in controversies over the issue of the so-called prosperity theology, which is considered a new teaching by many. The church has been sharply divided between the ardent followers of prosperity theology and those who severely frown upon it and call it 'heretical'. We are gathered here to have another round of a formal discussion on it. As we begin this consultation, my