

Socio-Religious Implications of Prosperity Gospel in Nigerian Churches: An Evaluation

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Abstract

Prosperity Gospel is prevalent in Nigerians Churches. Its spread cuts across sectional and denominational boundaries in Christianity. However, its content is fraught with heresies as some preachers consider it as necessary evidence of a believer's salvation. This paper aim is to examine factors responsible for the spread of prosperity gospel and evaluate its socio-religious implications in Nigeria. The work adopted a combination of historical, interpretative and evaluative approaches as research methods. The paper revealed that, there are positive and negative socio-religious implications of prosperity Gospel among churches in Nigeria. The work thus posits that, prosperity teaching is not strange to the bible. However, over emphasis on material possession on wealth as tantamount to genuine evidence of salvation as some prosperity preachers argue is heretical and therefore, should be discarded.

Keywords: Church, Nigerian, Social, Religion, and Prosperity gospel



Introduction

Prosperity Gospel, like the proverbial ‘wild fire’ is spreading among Nigerian churches at an alarming rate. The spread cuts across sectional and denominational boundaries¹ The development have been dubbed by critics as Nigerian’s brand of “cash and carry” Christianity² This is because of the emphasis of the prosperity preachers on giving and their various strategies of extorting money from people. For instance, a common catch phrase is “the more you give; the more blessings you get. They also claim that seed sowing is the only way to guarantee divine blessings.

The prosperity gospel is mostly associated with the Pentecostal movement. Although it is now becoming a common feature in both the Pentecostal and mainstream church denominations .Pentecostalism is a phenomenon that emerged at the beginning of the last century. It is a Christian experience in which the participants stress the gifts of the holy spirit and personal encounter with Him. The worship services of Christians who lay claim to this experience are usually vigorous and informal. Pentecostalism is spreading at an stupefying rate and some would now call it the fourth great Christian tradition aboard the Catholics Orthodox and Protestants, although in many respects it is a branch of the third.³ Pentecostalism has come to stay at the heart of Nigerian Christianity. According to G. A. Oshitelu in his article “The Trend and development of Orthodox and Pentecostal churches in Yorubaland” Pentecostal Church has its origin in Aladura Churches they are nicknamed “Prosperity churches” because of their emphasis on the material prosperity of their members ⁴. Reaction to colonial administration and slave-trade gave birth to the evolution of independent churches. The emergence of this assertion of independence by Africa leaders in the churches in Africa was the rise of the Pentecostal independent churches.⁵



The classical Pentecostal churches emphasize speaking in tongues, miracles, signs and wonders. Also, the Pentecostals believe in deliverance from the devil's bondage and casting out of demons; in addition, Neo-Pentecostals accentuate healing and wealth as part of the package of salvation for believers. Nigerian Christians who embrace this "Health and Wealth" gospel consider material blessings as a gain of salvation.

The doctrine and practice of prosperity gospel, and faith or positive confession which redefined evangelicalism from Christocentric to material wealth is Neo-Pentecostalism. It came to Nigeria through some American faith healers and televangelists such as Kenneth Hagin, Oral Roberts, Williams Barham, T. L. Osborne, Kenneth Copeland, Bob and Martie Tilton, Joel Osteen, Charles and Frances Hunter, Morris Cerullo, Benny Hinn and others. This movement believes that salvation is a deliverance from sin and demonic influences. In addition, they believe that material poverty is a type of disease from which Christians must be healed completely; they claim that Christ became poor so that His followers might be rich. They stress that prosperity or wealth in terms of material possession is a gain of salvation. One's salvation experience can only be proved by material wealth. In Nigeria today there are many Neo-Pentecostal preachers; famous among them are Benson Idahosa, David Oyedepo, Enoch Adeboye, Uwa Ukpai, Wale Oke, Simeon Okan, Matthew Ashimalowo, Oritsejafor, Mike Okonkwo, Tunde Bakare, Chris Oyakhilome, Daniel Olukoya. Majority of Neo-Pentecostal preachers teach prosperity gospel. What is prosperity gospel according to the Bible? Is prosperity gospel as practised in Nigeria different? If yes, what lessons should we draw from it? The paper therefore, examines socio-religious implications of prosperity gospel in Nigerian churches. Positive and negative effects were identified. The paper posits that, prosperity



gospel is not an alien to the Christian theology, but most of its preachers are extremists and thus make it heretical.

1. **CONCEPT AND LOGIC OF PROSPERITY GOSPEL**

Prosperity means state of being successful, especially in making money⁷ It means a state of being successful, good fortune. Prosperity can also be defined as the economic growth using profits and full employment. Prosperity does not only refer to economic growth but also and particularly to social progress and cultural efflorescence in which great parts of the population share⁸

The word prosper means to have continuous success, to thrive, grow, flourish and to have wealth and good fortune. The word appears ninety times in the Bible⁹. According to the Bible prosperity is more than having money. It is a state of abundance, wealth and riches. It connotes plenty, affluence; however, it is neither materialism nor excesses. It includes sound health, ability to reproduce biologically. To Paul true riches includes the mercy of God (Romans 9:23) Ephesians 11:13, 16:18, Philippians 4:19 Col 1:27. The wisdom and knowledge of God (Romans 11:33) True prosperity embraces all good things that happen to man.

The Bible submits that prosperity is salvation of souls Mark 8:36, fear of God Psalm 112:2-3, Power of the Holy Spirit, Wisdom Deut. 8:18, Righteousness, Isaiah 3:10 Peace, joy Nehemiah 8:10, God's presence Psalm 16:11, a good spouse, Godly children etc. As stated earlier prosperity gospel is associated with the Neo – Pentecostal. In Nigeria Pentecostal splits from the Orthodox churches and focus on prayer and fasting, miracles and deliverance from bondage of every form.

According to Akangbe the Neo – Pentecostal churches were ab initio established by educated members of the Pentecostal churches¹⁰ They believe in the great commission with signs and wonders, divine healing as part of the atonement, baptism of the holy spirit accompanied by an



initial sign of speaking in tongues, deliverance from the devil's bondage which includes poverty and casting out of demons. Today many Neo – Pentecostals have come to redefined Christo – centric theology and have embraced prosperity gospel with extremism. This gospel is taught and practiced by them; they defined prosperity as money making. They affirm that poverty is a sin against redemption. They believe that the will of God for them is perpetual well-being. However; this is not always true but they brain washed their members to believe that if they can sow seed financial blessing in multiple fold will be given to them.

It is important to examine the logic of prosperity gospel at this juncture. The arguments or reasoning of the prosperity teachers are examined below:

The prosperity gossellers teach that wealth (earthly riches) and health are indicators of faith in Jesus Christ and subsequent standing with God. This “Give to Get” doctrine is justified through extrapolation of some verses such as 3John 2:11 Corinthians 8:9. They argue that Jesus wore royal robes on donkeys and had travelled with private boats etc. Thus, they claim that Christ Jesus and His disciples lived a life of affluence. In addition, His parents had enough money to lodge at inn just before his birth¹¹ The prosperity teachers claim that Christ did not only die for our sins but also to make us rich. Since wealth is our redemptive right. It is ungodly for any Christian to be poor. They make people stay in their churches by making some people rich(either through loan or gift) This is used as a physical proof of their claim and thus making people to join their churches.

Giving is also emphasize as an important principle to actualize the dream of becoming rich. They teach people to sow seed. A Christian is enjoined to give money generously to God's anointed men. They often assure people of multiple returns of whatever they are able to sow. This amounts to a “Give to Get” doctrine. This system makes these preachers to gather huge sum of money for their

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own use. The proponents of prosperity gospel claim further that since Christ had a treasurer, in the person of Judas Iscariot, then Jesus was a rich man. However, all indications from the Bible and historical data of time clearly demonstrate that Jesus lived moderately. He was neither poor nor wealthy.¹² He lived a moderate financial life contrary to flamboyant lifestyle of the prosperity teachers. It has been observed that it is the poor and needy (the sick) who give most often to these preachers. This is because these people often feel that only a financial miracle can save them. It is not uncommon for desperate Christians to give and give, well beyond their means in the hope that God will rescue them from poverty and sickness. Some may even lose their homes, the elderly and sick often give sacrificially in the hope of some kinds of improvement.

Most prosperity preachers based their teachings on 3John 2 “Behold I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health even as thy soul prospereth” They believe that this verse is a promise of prosperity in the form of material possession. It is expedient to note that this verse of the Bible has suffered misinterpretation in the hands of the prosperity gossellers. They are not taken from the Bible but are pouring into it. The term “Prosper” in 3John 2 does not refer to financial wealth at all but simply means “to go well with someone” The new international version renders the verse “Dear friend I pray that you enjoy good health and that all may go well with you¹³” This combination of wishing for “things “to go well” and for the recipients “good health” was standard form of greeting in a personal letter in antiquity. To extend John’s wish for Gaius to refer to financial and material prosperity for all Christians of all times is totally foreign to the text. John never intended that nor Gaius have to understood it, that way to argue from the text that God wills our financial prosperity is to abuse the text¹⁴ The truth is this message is little different from one



which we use all the time today “I trust that this letter finds you well” prosper here in the Greek simply means something like “to go well with you” There is no financial sense to the word.

In addition, the promise of wealth the basis for the whole prosperity movement is seen in several scriptural passages interpreted from a vantage point¹⁵ A good example is II 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” Most prosperity teachers support the idea that Jesus Christ did not only come to deliver us from the consequences of sin but also from poverty. According to them, poverty is a sin against redemption. The interpretation of this verse by the proponents of prosperity gospel is wrong. The verse does not suggest financial well-being. It is only talking of the work of redemption which Christ came to do for mankind. The phrase though, “He was rich yet for your sake, He became poor” implies His incarnation. He stripped himself of the glory, He shares with the father (God) only to come to the world to take up our nature “So that through His poverty we might become rich” this phrase is talking of our redemption, through the incarnation of Christ, His suffered and died on the cross in order that we might be saved. If Paul was referring to material wealth, then he was promising the Corinthians something he himself did not possess¹⁵

There is no indication in the Bible that Paul was wealthy, he suffered many things for the sake of Christ Jesus. Jesus own life testifies to the fact that the will of God does not always include financial prosperity. His life adds eloquent testimony that the will of God does not always include financial success. He grew up in poor family¹⁶ During His years of travel, he had nowhere to lay His head (Matthew 8:20) He had to perform a miracle in order to pay the two – drachma temple tax (Matthew 17:24-27)

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At His death the Roman soldiers cast lots for his clothing his only earthly possession (Luke 23:34). He left no estate and had to ask Apostle John (one of His disciples) to care for His mother (John 19:26-27). It is arguable therefore, that most of the prosperity gossellers alluding to the above mentioned are suffering from biblical misinterpretation . They only interpret the Bible to suit their minds; obvious antic is outright and unacceptable in biblical hermeneutics. It is the main objective of the prosperity teachers to extort money from their gullible members.

11.FACTORS AIDING THE PREVALENCE OF PROSPERITY GOSPEL IN NIGERIA

Nigeria is a country in the continent of Africa. African countries are categorized as developing countries economically, politically and socially. The poor economic condition of Africa is spelt out by a number of factors which stand unfriendly to the economic development of Africa. Poverty in Africa is caused by a number of factors which are both internal and external. The under – development status of Africa with her heavy dependence on external sources for funding her developmental projects are mainly responsible¹⁶

According to the world bank poverty rate in Nigeria in 2023 is 38.9% with an estimated 87million Nigerians living below the poverty line.¹⁷ More people have fallen into poverty line due to torpid growth and uphill inflation. Nigeria has been declared as the second largest poor population after India in the world.¹⁸ According to Makua the world poverty clock has reported that there are 71million extremely poor Nigerians, according to 2023 data¹⁹ (Makua Ubanagu “71million genius extremely Poor – World Poverty clock” (19th June 2023). In addition, over population becomes a serious challenge for Nigerians to overcome. Over population means unrestrained population of an area to the point of overcrowding, diminution of natural resources, or environmental degradation²⁰. This ugly condition coupled with lack of hope for improvement which hamper speedy development

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have made Nigerians poor. Some factors which include, lack of sufficient capital, political instability, low savings, low per capital income, lack of adequate commercial facilities, predominance of primary products, poor transport / communication system, low levels of education and illiteracy, absence of well-developed market, all these factors are hindrances to the economics growth of Nigeria. No theology can survive in any society except it is relevant to the situation of the people living in such a society. It is obvious that the poor economic situation in Nigeria provides a good soil for prosperity gospel to thrive.

Added to this economic situation is the corruption that has crept into Nigeria system. Unfortunately, Nigeria has been subjected to a more devastating scourge through corruption. It is observed that politicians in Nigeria are not patriotic, embezzlement of the public funds is endemic, wealth is being displayed by the politicians at the expense of the poor masses. Many past governors have faced the wrath of Economics and Financial Crime Commission (The commission has the mandate of enforcing all economic and financial laws in Nigeria). However, this does not stop the embezzlement. Today money has become God in the hearts of many Nigerians because the rich men are being treated like heroes in the society, clubs and parties and even in the church. This has further fueled people ambition to be rich and thereby make every available avenue popular.

On the side of Christians, the way to liberation from inferior economy class is to look into the scripture. In the process, of doing this eisegesis (speaking to a text) is brought in while exegesis (speaking out of the text) is discarded. The expression of one's belief and experience on the scripture in other words they do not allow the Bible to speak to them but they are now speaking to the Bible. Exegesis which suppose to be our major tool of interpreting the holy Bible has been neglected by these new teachers of the gospel.

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In the midst of economic downturn that is hovering over Nigeria the need to raise people's hope of better future and the fulfillment of the material possession by God have to come into scene. According to Olukunle, a measure of anticipatory, futuristic hope is better than hopelessness of our social, economic, political situation²¹. In the midst of poverty and failure of our political leaders to mend the nation's economic theology of hope is relevant. These were supported by the scriptures; thus the theology has discovered a good soil to thrive.

Another factor which encourages prosperity gospel in Nigeria is the system of economy called capitalism that Nigeria practises. Capitalism may be defined as any economic system based on private ownership of all factors of production in such system, owner of capital act as entrepreneurs and coordinate their activities through the use of the market.²² Under capitalism, principle of management coordination is limited to the firm. Capitalism is sometimes also referred to as a free enterprise system because production and consumption activities are carried out on the basis of free contracts and voluntary exchange. The rules of the game under which capitalism operates formally censure the use of force violence, threats and fraud in market transactions²³. This is the economy system which encourages economy classes, thereby making people ambitious to join the highest economic group in the land. This makes Nigerian Christians more at home with a gospel which teaches them how to join the economic class of their hearts desire. Capitalism is about profit making.

11. SOCIO – RELIGIOUS IMPLICATIONS OF THE PROSPERITY GOSPEL IN NIGERIA: Which way forward?

Prosperity teaching probably came to Nigeria about four decades ago. David Oyedepo the leading prosperity teacher in Nigeria claims to have received the commission to make Nigerians rich



in 1987. In a regular Living Faith Church monthly publication, he claimed that he was in Tulsa on 26th August 1987, when the Lord spoke to him very early in the morning “Arise get down home and make your people rich”²⁴. It is no doubt that the gospel has impacted Nigerians, socially, economically and religiously.

On the positive note, prosperity is a theology of hope for the poor. It can otherwise be called “New Hope Evangelism”. It is glaring that most Nigerians are poor and there is no hope of improvement. All the efforts put forward by government are not yielding result due to corruption that is pervasive in the country. It was in the midst of this hopelessness that the theology of hope came to Nigeria. The theology is suitable for Nigeria. This teaching has prevented many havoc that would have pervaded the nation in recent years. The teaching reduces the rate of suicide although people are committing suicide daily but it would have been worse than this. The theology has built hope in the hopeless people. Instead of committing suicide they are waiting for financial miracle, promised by the prosperity teachers.

Furthermore, prosperity gospel has contributed immensely to the development of Nigeria. The numerical strength of rich men has increased. Those that became rich through prosperity teaching moved from low social status to the higher level. The financial capacity and economy standard of Nigeria is strengthened some of the Neo - Pentecostal churches that preach prosperity claimed to have accumulated wealth through the teaching. Obviously, they are adding to the economic development of the nation by providing job opportunities, for instance Oyedepo declared: ‘And I say that with all sense of humility we are going to continue to bring life to dying people and rescue nations from the pangs of poverty and penury’²⁵. It is abundantly clear from this assertion that this “Give and Get” theology has brought substantial capital into their personal and church accounts.

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In order to manage their various activities, prosperity preachers create employment, in so doing they rescue unemployment in the country.

On the negative side, prosperity gospel has made many Nigerians over ambitious to be rich. Lust of materialism has engulfed Christians and many populace of Nigeria. This is encouraged by the display of wealth by the prosperity teachers which is evident by the possession of cars, private jets, gorgeous dresses etc. Mad urge for money and materials have made some Christians to pursue wealth by hook or crook. The phenomenon is increasing social vices in the nation. A story was told of a man who stole three million naira in his working place and gave it to his pastor so that he could be recognized in the church. He believed that this will prove his claim of salvation, since wealth is the gain of salvation²⁶.

Desire to be rich has increased the spate of ritual killing for money. The politicians, pastors and people in high positions are suspects. It is evidence from newspapers and social media that politicians, prominent businessmen “men of God” have turned to head hunters, this they do because of desperation for power, money and affluence. Several stories of kidnapping and ritual killings fill the pages of newspapers. For instance, punch reported on 29th June 2021 that Delta State police command arrested a native doctor in possession of two human skulls²⁷ In recent times, the social media has been abuzz with news of rising incidences of ritual related killings, attributed majorly to the crazy way millions of Nigerian youths idolize money, an ugly development that has fueled crimes such as internet fraud, popularly called yahoo – yahoo, kidnapping, organ harvesting and money ritual communicating a collapse of common values²⁸. Today youths are more popular in the crimes of ritual killings because of mad urge for wealth. Prosperity teaching has influenced them and



raises their desire to get rich at all cost. Get rich quick syndrome has become a serious plague in Nigeria.

It is arguable that some Neo – Pentecostal pastors engage in ritual killings. A case of ritual killing by one of the Pentecostal pastors was reported by Vanguard newspaper on September 23, 2023 at Ughelli, founder of a Pentecostal church in Agbarha – otor on Friday morning reportedly killed a young girl, the daughter of his neighbour for ritual. This happened in Ughelli North Local Government Area of Delta state²⁹.

Corruption in sacred places has become common phenomenon in Nigeria. The spate of killings has assumed an alarming rate and government seem unresponsive to the situation. The pseudo-science act is on increase despite religious activities and civilization. Christian clergies especially from Neo – Pentecostal churches are fueling the undesirable through prosperity teaching.

Mounting desperation for wealth increased gruesome killings for ritual in Nigeria. Business leaders of course, had long been “vendible” themselves through the appropriation of religion³⁰. Most of these prosperity teachers / gossellers are business men in disguise, they established churches as business venture for money making. The situation becomes worst in Nigeria due to hardship and poverty level. The rate of privatization and commercialization of churches most especially by the so called Neo – Pentecostal churches is worrisome³¹.

The teaching of these “Health and Wealth” theologians is always centered on or end on giving. The disguised businessmen under the name of God usually make millions of naira at a single exploration. Proliferation of churches is another effect of prosperity gospel in Nigeria. The gospel has made proliferation of churches a truistic cliché. Churches are ubiquitous features of every street and town in Nigeria especially in the middle belts and southern parts. These gossellers attract legion



of followers into their churches. The numerical strength of the churches doubles every year. However, the church growth is adversely affected. Mainstream church denominations are almost empty; youths are trooping into these Neo – Pentecostal churches.

The salvation message which is primary has been neglected by those people. Rice growth is noticed in the church (Rice growth is the increase in the numerical strength of the church without salvation and life of holiness) because of material wealth while conversion growth which is the expectation of Christ is minimal. This is alarming because of material wealth while conversion growth only boasts of numerical growth. The name of the churches tells their purpose e.g, “God of now now” “Wealth of Zion Assembly “City of Miracle Evangelical Ministry”.

It is obvious that many churches exist to satisfy what Paul warned about the happenings in latter days³⁴ that the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine but according to their own desire because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers and they will turn their ears away from the truth and be turned aside to fables (11 Timothy 4:3-4)

These teachers thrive on the ignorance and biblical illiteracy of many Christians in Nigeria perhaps extreme poverty and hopelessness of our political situations made many people fall into their traps. These false teachers also sell olive oil, handkerchiefs, water, suits of General Overseers at exorbitant rates. The victims are unsuspected members who hope of getting out of their problems through these fetish objects. Ironically, it is the poor or middle class people that commonly fall into their traps because of the expectation of financial miracle. Poor people are impoverished as they spend their meagre income to get these fetish materials.

The activities of these charlatans are worrisome. Some of them preach that biblical interpretation needs to be pragmatic (biblical hermeneutics) and should be based on situational



exercise. They implore traditional methods of Africans to deceive people. Bizarre exegesis is to convince people that God works in diverse ways. It should be noted that Nigerians are already used to herbalists and native doctors for solutions to their existential problems. Therefore, they are able to convince them that they only need to add the name of Jesus. People are being brainwashed to eat grasses to prosper, bath with soda drinks. Some women had suffered sexual harassment or abuse in the hands of some of these neo – Pentecostal or prosperity teachers.

It is obvious that Christo – centric gospel is gradually going into extinction. Materialistic philosophy has taken the lead in Nigerian churches. Therefore, it is obligatory for the Christians to return to the old religion. It is pertinent for the Neo – Pentecostal ministers to return to the belief of older or classical Pentecostal.

The older Pentecostal believe in a life of suffering and sacrifice to safeguard the flock of Christ. They owe allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ based on salvation and sovereignty of God. They object to the believe that God is obliged to provide for all the needs of Christians. Eternal security, persistence material blessings “My God is not a poor God” “Wealth is the gain of salvation” “poverty is a sin against redemption” which are common slogans of the prosperity preachers are unscriptural. It is worth mentioning that some of these prosperity preachers have started to redress themselves, for instance, Evangelist Benny Hinn. The preacher who has taught prosperity theology for most of his ministry has now rejected the way of teaching calling it an offence to the Holy Spirit.³²



CONCLUSION

Throughout this paper, we have attempted to demonstrate that prosperity gospel is not alien to the Bible. It is glaring that God is interested in the prosperity of His people. However, it is wrong to believe that, poverty is tantamount to holiness. Riches or wealth does not disqualify anyone from entering the kingdom of God. However, it is lamentable that prosperity teachers have made the teaching heretical. It is not true that God is not interested in the blessings of His people but extremism should be discarded. The teaching should not be at the expense of Christo – centric evangelism which is central to Christian theology. Their doctrine is contrary to Jesus counsel in Matthew 6:34 “Seek ye first the kingdom of God”. We are enjoined not to think of tomorrow for God shall surely provide for our needs. The teaching of these people is the fulfillment of the end time prediction 1 Timothy 3:2. It is amazing that false teachers are not rejected for their distorted teachings but are actually being embraced. The legion of followers they boast of give them confidence that they are saying the truth and encourage them to go further

Our concern now is religious sanity. How do we return sanity to polluted religion. Worldliness should be eradicated from people’s mind. This will promote righteousness in the nation which is the only way to exalt a nation.

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