

Christian Prosperity Crisis

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Researchers point out that one of the main differences between the U.S. financial crash and others — for example, that of Japan in the 1990s — was that it was households (individuals and families) that became heavily overindebted. This was not the case in Japan, nor the Asian crisis of the late 1990s, nor those in Scandinavia in the early 1990s. There, it was more the actions of companies and governments that led to these crises. But why in the case of America's situation, did people become so easily seduced to take on such huge amounts of debt and to accept the vain predictions of perpetual prosperity? Responsibility of stewardship was thrown to the wind and the idea that prosperity and wealth was both eternal and effortless was the common belief.

It may have to do with another main difference. Namely America's major religion—a post-modern, utilitarian aberration of the Biblical Christianity. This may seem a harsh statement, but I believe that the facts well support it. Most definitely, America is the most Christian-professing, major nation in the world. That religious belief and philosophy had an impact on economies and financial markets is a well established fact. Why do Chinese households save so much? Could it be that their Confusion culture is predisposed to such behavior? Max Weber (see *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*) and other social economists developed a framework for such religious/economic connections.

Crucially, only in North America do we find such a significant influence of the Prosperity Theology. It is a teaching that will have played an insidious and contributing (perhaps causal) role in America's final slide into financial crisis and decline. We want to examine this connection further by investigating some of the doctrinal distortions behind this movement which merges Christianity and money into the eschatological timeline.

Deeply Rooted False Prosperity Beliefs

While Prosperity Theology tends to be more associated with the charismatic segment of North American Christianity, it could be said that virtually all of North American Christianity has been infected with its influences. This perspective co-exists comfortably with the ideology of the American Dream. For centuries the “Christian nation” of America has been a land of opportunity, espousing upward mobility and success for all who seek it.

Prosperity thinking is therefore subtly imbedded in the psyche of Western Christians. It is almost considered an entitlement in some circles. Of course, most will perhaps not swallow the teachings and techniques of the likes of Benny Hinn, Kenneth Copeland, Creflo Dollar and Peter Popoff — he of the “divine transfer” — and many others. After all, some of these more extreme teachers in this community even go so far as to claim that if you have much faith that you can “get wealth.” Just send in your seed faith offering and you may get a “divine wealth transfer” or “100-fold” return.

In this bartering system with God, one is taught to expect that He may choose to

reciprocate your seed offering with a monetary or material blessing of some kind. It could be a sizable check arriving in your mailbox from a mysterious source or some other lucky happenstance. Unfortunately, this erroneous teaching about money promotes the notion that God runs His kingdom on the principle of monetary and material incentive. How crass. God manipulates Christians to love Him and to obedience through the carrot of material wealth and well-being? They confuse the realm of Mammon for the Kingdom of God.

Theological Wealth Distortions Everywhere

False gospels are deadly, their heresies distorting virtually every doctrine, world view and eschatological perspective. In like manner, Prosperity Theology radiates its destruction into many doctrines and perspectives. If its destructive contributions to America's recent demise were already not convincing enough, there is yet more to consider. A sure sign of all false gospels is their perspective on money.

Every single false teaching or heresy mentioned in the New Testament epistles was associated with greed or an inordinate affection with money and wealth. This is evident today as it was then. If anything is different, it is that some of these heretical perspectives have become much more systemized than they were in New Testament times.

Though beliefs held by certain Christian sects may appear rooted in scriptural teaching, it is disturbing to discover how subjective and unfounded these are. These beliefs simply do not hold up under the scrutiny of all Scripture. This theology even merits an entry on Wikipedia which points out that this "somewhat similar (yet strikingly different) belief appears in most "New Thought" religions, Unity, Religious Science, Divine Science denominations." It should seem strange that such commonality is found with these other religions.

Moreover, Prosperity Theology does not even pass the test of common sense. If the promises of Prosperity Theology were legitimate and observable, then it should be discovered that its adherents indeed would be wealthier than the general population. Yet, the opposite is true.

According to the surveys of the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life², the average income level of all Christians is less than that of other faiths. For instance, the percentage of protestant Christians with incomes over \$100,000 per annum is 15%. This is less than Muslims (16%), Jews (46%), Buddhists (43%) and Hindus (43%).

Drilling down into comparisons between Christian denominations themselves, the same non-confirmation is evident. If one assumes that prosperity teaching is to be most prevalent in evangelical Pentecostal sects, the falsehood of this teaching is found to be most fraudulent. The Pentecostal demographic is the poorest of all, with the exception of Baptists in the Historically Black Tradition.³ 48% of Pentecostals have incomes less than \$30,000; only 7% greater than \$100,000 per annum. That compares to 31% and 18% in the Christian population overall, respectively.

Clearly, the promises of Prosperity Theology are a hoax. Much worse allegations could be made. It would be considered a financial sham were its promoters to be seen to be preying on the hopelessness of its congregants. In that sense, it would not be much different than the consumer credit business. Just which demographic has historically proven to be the most profitable credit market for financial institutions ... at least up until the GFC? The poor. It is these people that are made to pay high loan fees and interest rates and tend to run high balances on their credit cards with exorbitant charges. This gospel is certainly not “releasing the oppressed” as was Christ’s mission. (Luke 4:18)

Why is it that Christians are so gullible? It may be for the same reason that **the thickest complaint file of the Council of Better Business Bureaus in America is the category of religiously-associated fraud**. When con artists or teachers imply a relationship with God or make a purported scriptural reference promising prosperity, the wallets are opened unthinkingly. Charismatic churches time and again have proven themselves most vulnerable to the flimsiest of Ponzi schemes. It is simply astounding.

This quote from an op-ed article published just recently in the Russian online news portal, Pravda, offers a disturbing perspective. The journalist, though somewhat irreverent and an apologist for the official Russian Orthodox Church, does make some connections between America’s economic slide and liberal Christianity:

“First, the population was dumbed down through a politicized and substandard education system based on pop culture, rather than the classics. Americans know more about their favorite TV dramas than the drama in DC that directly affects their lives. They care more for their “right” to choke down a McDonalds burger or a BurgerKing burger than for their constitutional rights. Then they turn around and lecture us about our rights and about our “democracy”. Pride blind the foolish. Then their faith in God was destroyed, until their churches, all tens of thousands of different “branches and denominations” were for the most part little more than Sunday circuses and their televangelists and top protestant mega preachers were more than happy to sell out their souls and flocks to be on the “winning” side of one pseudo Marxist politician or another. Their flocks may complain, but when explained that they would be on the “winning” side, their flocks were ever so quick to reject Christ in hopes for earthly power. Even our Holy Orthodox churches are scandalously liberalized in America.”⁴

In the populist mindset of prosperity and easy money, what Christian might not be tempted to think that God and country abandoned them should they experience hardships and trouble during an economic downturn such as the Global Financial Crisis (GFC)? What Christian would not be inclined to whine to God, as did Jeremiah: “Will you be to me like a deceptive brook, like a spring that fails?” (Jeremiah 15:18) Jeremiah figured that since he was walking with God and answering His calling, that he deserved special treatment. He bargained with God, saying “I never sat in the company of revelers, never made merry with them; I sat alone because your hand was on me, and you had filled me with indignation. Why is my pain unending and my wound grievous and incurable?” (Jeremiah 15-17-18)

How did God respond? He didn't even acknowledge the complaint. He simply said this: "If you repent, I will restore you that you may serve me." (verse 19)

No doubt, all 12 of the New Testament apostles settled this same issue in a satisfactory manner. They were doing the Lord's will and were all blessed with rich robes and fine foods. Actually, directly to the contrary. 11 of them died an unnatural death. All of them physically suffered for their beliefs. Was this just? Said Paul, "Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love [...]" (2 Corinthians 6:4-6).

Notes

1. Prosperity theology, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prosperity_theology, accessed April 25, 2009.
2. U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, February 2008, Table: Income Levels of Major Religious Traditions, pg. 60.
3. Ibid, Income Level by Protestant Denominations, pg. 80.
4. Stanislav Mishin, Op-ed, Pravda Russia, June 1, 2009

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