

Health, wealth and prosperity

Bernhard Reitsma¹

Increasingly evangelical Christians are attracted by the so-called health, wealth and prosperity “gospel.” The central claim of this teaching is that a true believer in Christ can count on being blessed by God in all areas of life. Accordingly a believer should not have to be sick and will lead a long, wealthy and prosperous life. Since Christ has conquered sin, Christians no longer have to experience the consequences of sin: pain, suffering and poverty.

Although evangelicals have been and are critical, it seems that health and prosperity thinking has swept beyond its originally charismatic base into more mainstream evangelical circles.

There are two main reasons – among others – why I strongly disagree with the prosperity thinking and consider it virtually heretic.

First of all it is an insult to persecuted Christians, which could easily undermine their perseverance. Even if it theoretically could be possible to explain the reality of suffering believers by referring to unbelief, continuing sin, not claiming salvation or the reality of the devil, it is much more complicated for the predicament of the persecuted Church. Persecuted Christians are suffering precisely because of their allegiance and commitment to Christ. Because they do *not* want to give up their faith in him, they suffer, lose their jobs, are being harassed or thrown in prison. Exactly because of believing in Christ many Christians in the world will never prosper materially. Compromising their faith in Christ as the only saviour, would immediately end their ordeal. The prosperity gospel can therefore not account for the faithful martyrs of the past and present.

Secondly and theologically even more importantly, it does not account for Paul’s teaching in his Epistle to the Romans. In it Paul emphasizes that those who are “in Christ” are children of God and then heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed they share in his sufferings in order that they may also share in his glory (Rom 8:17 NIV). For Paul living according to the Spirit is not a life exempt from challenges and suffering. On the contrary, there is an intrinsic link between the future glorification of the believer and his present suffering. Even more, to suffer with Christ now seems to be a required condition for being glorified with Him in the

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future. Although believers have died with Christ to the powers of the old era, sin and death, in the present time, they have not been glorified with him yet. The old age of Adam is in a certain way still making itself felt. In Christ the powers of this age have been defeated, but only in the glorious future will they completely cease to exist. Then the whole creation will be set free from bondage to decay and corruption and share in the freedom of the glory of the children of God (Rom 8:21). In this present time – this *kairos* moment between the Christ-event and the future of the fullness of God's glory – Christians still suffer with Christ.

The suffering with Christ can only be interpreted in the light of Christ's suffering on the cross. Although what we call persecution was part of it, it was much more than that. Christ suffered the consequences of the presence of sin in this world and died for it. In baptism believers have been united with Christ. Suffering with Him is therefore the result of the power of death that is still manifesting itself as a mark of the old age; it is the consequence of what Paul wrote in Romans 8:10 that the bodies of the believers are still dead and therefore mortal. Death manifests its power in suffering.

This means we cannot limit the suffering of believers only to persecution. In Romans 8 the suffering of the believers is set within the wider perspective of the suffering of the whole creation (8:18-22). According to Romans 8:35 suffering includes all kinds of suffering: tribulation or hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger and the sword. So in Romans 8 Paul presents an overall and inclusive concept of suffering. In this sense the persecuted and the free churches are closely connected. They both suffer as a result of the fact that the old age has not completely disappeared, and this suffering is suffering with Christ, albeit in different appearances.

Is there therefore no truth at all in the health, wealth and prosperity thinking? Is it not true that God intends for his people complete redemption from suffering? Certainly. In Romans 8 Paul underlines that suffering with Christ is not a suffering in death pain, but in birth pain. It announces the fullness of the new life and indicates the immanent coming of the fullness of the glory of God (Rom 8:17). That is the fruit of Christ's suffering. The health, wealth and prosperity theology is certainly right in pointing out the connection between the salvation of Christ and the physical reality of mankind. The glory of Christ is life without sin, death and suffering. However, in my opinion the health, wealth and prosperity teaching derails in two ways, with respect to time and to quality.

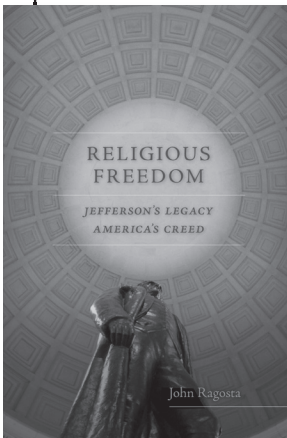
First of all, the health, wealth and prosperity thinking fails to acknowledge that the fullness of God's glory is still awaiting. The present time is still *kairos* time, decisive but in-between time. The mentioned predicament of the persecuted church and of all Christians who still suffer in this world, reminds us of that. For them the

health, wealth and prosperity gospel has no message. It cannot provide a coherent Christian worldview that accounts for suffering and persecution.

Secondly, the health, wealth and prosperity gospel promises too little. It presents God's blessing as something that remains primarily within the parameters of the present creation. It envisions material wealth as one of the ultimate blessings of God and physical healing of this mortal body as one of the highest objectives for which to strive. Apart from the fact that this does not reckon with the reality of death, it also gives too small an idea of God and his gifts. It fails to acknowledge that God's salvation is of a completely different quality than life as we know it now. For Paul the new creation is a total renewal of the present creation. What God has in store for his people surpasses our understanding. What no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived, that is what God has prepared for those who love him (1 Cor 2:9).

That gospel is the only reality which can encourage persecuted and suffering Christians in this world to persevere and to continue to fight the good fight. In the meantime it can also exhort prosperous Christians to do good to others and to help those in need.

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