

Prosperity Gospel and the Fulfilment of Transformational Development Mandate: A Developmental Theological Assessment

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Abstract

This study examines the teaching of the prosperity gospel to see whether its overall emphasis aligns with the wider ideals of transformational development, as particularly popularised by Bryant Myers. Proponents of the prosperity gospel claim that financial riches and success are markers of God's favour and that when individuals align their thoughts and actions with God's will, they may unleash a life of prosperity. On the other hand, transformational development is a holistic strategy for addressing material poverty as well as social, political, and spiritual challenges. It also strives to empower people, communities, and society to alter their lives and achieve long-term change. The research question that underlies this study is: Does the prosperity gospel fulfill the purpose of transformational development? The research is a theological assessment of the teachings of the prosperity gospel, partly seeking to identify its positive aspects. Teachings by selected preachers of the prosperity gospel, such as Enoch Sitima of Botswana, Mensa Otabil of Ghana, and David Oyedepo of Nigeria, are accessed through the internet, books written by or ascribed to them, and claims that are attributed to them. These teachings were assessed in the context of transformational development, including the interpretation of pertinent biblical texts that serve as the foundation for prosperity preaching.

From the interaction with the teaching of the prosperity gospel, it is evident that while the teaching caters to the fundamental areas of human life, it leaves believers with the tendency to maintain a utilitarian relationship with God.

Keywords: prosperity gospel, transformational development, poverty, Pentecostalism

Introduction

When calling sinners and Christians to come to Christ, prosperity gospel preachers emphasize God's promises of health, wealth, and a restored identity. This study compares Prosperity Gospel (PG) and Transformational Development (TD). Meanwhile, the aim of this study is to explore the theological undertones of these two Christian development views and not to highlight their physical success stories. The summary of our discussion is that PG would have perfectly fitted into the mould of TD except for one thing: its tendency to call people into a utilitarian relationship with God. This study holds that there is something TD gets right in its claim, which PG misses out on but can learn from TD: the need to call Christians into an altruistic relationship with God. The discussion is divided into 4 sections. The first section describes the TD concept and mandate. The second section enumerates the ministry of PG to the four fundamental areas of human need. The third section points out the negative tendency of the PG message. The fourth section provides a possible remedy to the negative tendency of the PG message.

The Holistic Nature of Transformational Development

The concept of TD has existed in Christian circles since the 1970s. According to Sugden (2003, pp. 71 – 72), it was borne out of a period when the leaders of evangelical development agencies were pastors and theologians, in order to assure the evangelical constituency that such

involvement was a legitimate expression of biblical mission. It grew out of a concern to ask what makes Christian development Christian.

As such, TD is a concept used to describe the peculiarity of Christian development practice, *vis-a-vis* the development practices carried out by the government and non-governmental development organisations such as the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) and Oxfam. First, TD is missional in nature, having to do with bringing the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ to the world in its holistic nature, catering for both material and immaterial aspects of human life. It primarily aims at ensuring, by virtue of the holistic gospel, the "change from a [sinful] condition of human existence contrary to God's purposes to one in which people are able to enjoy the fullness of life in harmony with God (John 10:10; Col. 3:8-15; Eph. 4:13)" (Sugden, 2003, pp. 71 – 72).

The concept was popularised by Bryant Myers in his book, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development*. Myers discusses the concept of TD in relation to the traditional understanding of development noting that development is not just "a social change or material change in the material world". It is not "a synonym for Westernisation or modernisation" as many people misconceived the idea of development. It is more than "simply having more things". It entails "seeking positive change in the whole of human life materially, socially, psychologically, and spiritually" (Myers, 2011, pp. 3 – 4). Talking about TD, the role of choices is very vital. Development will be transformational when people make their choices based on what really matters.

The transformational nature of the Christian development endeavour is in its holistic approach. It cuts across both material and immaterial aspects of human life. The aim of development work is always to eradicate poverty. Meanwhile, poverty has physical, social,

mental and spiritual effects on people (pp. 133 – 143). Unlike the traditional approach to development work, TD does not only focus on physical poverty but also takes seriously the problem of non-physical poverty – social, mental (or psychological) and spiritual poverty. The types of poverty discussed in this study are based on effect and not cause. For instance, the mention of “physical poverty” in this study refers to poverty as it physically affects people.

According to Myers, “the cause of poverty is fundamentally spiritual”. By making this assertion, he traces all the problems of humanity leading to physical, social, and psychological poverty to sin. The cause of poverty is fundamentally spiritual because humans are naturally sinful. Human sinful nature is a spiritual problem (Romans 7). It lures humans to steal, to be lazy, to violate someone else’s fundamental right, to inflict pain on others, to amass too much to them at the expense of others, and to abuse the environment (p. 144). Humanity daily succumbs to all these allures. The consequence of human sinful acts is physical, social and spiritual poverty. For instance, stealing deprives others of their physical possession, leading to physical poverty; abuse of other people’s rights deprives them of social and psychological dignity leading to social and psychological poverty.

TD acknowledges that the sinful nature of humanity led to broken relationship with God resulting to chaos in the world, the chaos that translates to all forms of poverty. Hence, the problem of sin is one important factor that brought about the problem of poverty. To this end, the Bible offers us the story of redemption. The fall of humanity happened in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3), but the biblical story of redemption “redirect the trajectory of human story after the fall. This was made possible by the finished work of Jesus Christ” (p. 87). Because of the problem of sin in the world, “Christian witness” (p. 4) is therefore paramount to TD agenda. Christian witness is about the story of redemption which entails reconciling humanity back to

God so that the two can maintain a cordial relationship again, after the fall. Christian development work is not complete without this message of Christ's redemption that brings humanity back to a cordial relationship with God (p. 98).

TD holds that by having a cordial relationship with God, followers of Christ become the light and salt of the world, people who are positioned to make the world a better place (Mt 5:13 – 16). As such, the story of redemption is a story of hope for the world, whereby God works in the lives of his people, through the finished work of Christ, working through them to do good works (Eph 2:10) until the emergence of the new world order that is free of tears, death, mourning and pain (Rev 21:4) – phenomena that go hand-in-hand with poverty.

Jean-Paul Heldt (2004, p. 149) following Christ's Luke 4 manifesto, argues that the gospel, as it was handed to us by Christ, is holistic because it addresses all the areas of human need (Heldt, 2004). Christ's mission during his earthly ministry fell into these four categories: sight to the blind, good news to the poor, release to the captives, and liberty for the oppressed. Therefore, as for Heldt, the gospel is holistic because it entails "the restoration of physical health, economic wellbeing, prosperity, social peace, and justice."

Like Myers, Heldt also groups the components of human life into 4: physical, mental (psychological), social, and spiritual, both of them arguing that the gospel does not bring transformation unless it speaks to all these aspects of human life. However, as much as both Myers and Heldt advocate that the gospel must touch all aspects of human life for it to be holistic and transformational, each of them also primarily emphasises the need for the human soul to have a cordial relationship with its Creator, because God is the ultimate need of humanity.

In spreading the gospel, it is vital to combine Christian witness and social services. Without Christian witness, the church becomes similar to secular development agencies. This

study argues that for transformational development, God must be recognized as the ultimate need and Jesus as the way to him. Other aspects of human life must also be addressed.

The Relevance of PG to Development in Africa

It is a well-known fact that Africa, particularly sub-Saharan Africa, is ravaged with poverty – physically, socially, psychologically, and spiritually. To talk about poverty in socio-economic sense, 27 countries in sub-Saharan Africa are listed among the 28 poorest countries in the world, implying that 413 million people live with a daily income of \$1.90 (Patel, 2018). This translates to psychological poverty because of the feeling of inferiority that naturally comes with socio-economic poverty. Likewise, almost all the nations of Africa have gone through colonisation. This has brought about some remarkable distortion to their traditional ways of life, and evidently caused identity problems, especially in terms of African socio-political and religious life (Ayittey, 1999). The question one needs to ask in light of this awareness is whether the message of the gospel has anything to say about the situation of things in Africa. For PG, the answer is yes.

In Ogungbile's view, being a Nigerian, "the depth and intensity of poverty in contemporary Africa provide a strong context for the theology and practices of the prosperity gospel and its message" (Ogungbile, 2014). In the same vein, Kasera (2013, p. 3), talking from his Namibian point of view, indicates that following the hopeless economic situation of his country, PG becomes "attractive intervention, appearing to offer hope and answers to the poverty problem." Like Ogungbile and Kasera; Zulu (2014), being a Zambian, also believes that PG responds to the issue of poverty in his country.

Despite debates on its effectiveness and ethics, scholars agree that PG is a response to Africa's poverty (Obadare, 2016, pp. 3 – 4). It aims to salvage the situation by addressing

material lack, marred identity, and mediocrity. Further research is needed to evaluate its impact, but this study highlights significant efforts made by PG preachers for people's wellbeing.

PG, born from Pentecostalism (Ogungbile, 2014), is occasionally linked to its origins. Despite a unified central theme among preachers, their ethics and practices vary (Heuser, 2015). This study explores how PG fits into the TD framework through examples of popular prosperity preachers with large congregations, online presence, and accessible literature.

The Response of PG to Physical Poverty

Physical poverty entails lack of basic needs that sustain human life – such as food, medical services, and social amenities. An example of how PG responds to the problem of physical poverty is by advocating knowledge acquisition and entrepreneurship. Prosperity preachers respond to the problem of physical poverty in Africa by empowering their congregations with knowledge. Like all other attempts and claims by PG, this response has its biblical basis. The Bible indicates that a lack of knowledge can bring about destruction (Hosea 4:6). Isaiah notes that the reason the people of God would go into captivity was that they do not have knowledge (Isaiah 5:13). Proverbs also teaches that the way to gather strength is through knowledge (Prov 24:5).

PG advocates that its adherent should be acquainted with the knowledge of God's promises and blessings. The Bible contains many promises of wealth and health, which God is willing and able to give to those who obey him. Examples of biblical basis for the blessing of wealth are in the story of Abraham who became rich because he served God (Gen 13:2); the story of the widow of Zarephath who had her food supply multiplied because of her encounter with Elijah the prophet of God (1 Kings 17:1 – 16); and Paul's prayer for the Philippians (4:19). Examples of biblical promises and blessing of health (healing) abound in the story of Jesus'

earthly ministry and that of early disciples. PG emphasises that it is important for believers to be aware of these blessings.

PG not only advocates spiritual knowledge but also intellectual knowledge, the need to enlarge one's intellectual capacity. At Winners' Chapel, David Oyedepo encourages his church members to be ardent consumers of information. He often challenges his church members to read as many books as they can. The weekly church bulletin contains a list of recommended books for reading. He particularly wrote several books emphasizing the role that knowledge plays in personal productivity. Such books include *Towards Mental Exploit* and *Mental Excellence: Testimonies of Career and Academic Exploit*.

Like Oyedepo of Nigeria, Mensa Otabil of Ghana is also reputable as an advocate of knowledge acquisition that leads to self-improvement. His book *Four Laws of Productivity: God's Foundation for Living* focuses on this. Through his advocate for personal development, Otabil is also noted for opening the eyes of his church members to business opportunities, against the backdrop of unemployment reality in his country. According to Gifford (1998), Otabil charges people never to waste their time seeking for government employment, but "teaches that success comes from skills and training."

PG also responds to the problem of physical poverty by emphasising entrepreneurship. The problem of unemployment also becomes a target for PG solutions. This is the spirit behind Otabil's laws of productivity, where he emphasises training and acquisition of skills. In Botswana, Enoch Sitima is also noted for teaching church members on entrepreneurship (Togarasei, 2011, p. 162). Through its commitment to entrepreneurship, PG seeks to mitigate the problem of unemployment in Africa, an area where most of African governments have failed.

Churches are going out of their way to train their members in diverse skills so that they

can be useful for the society and to earn a living without waiting for the government to provide them with jobs. Through a conversation with a pastor in Winners Chapel, it was made known that the aim of the church in entrepreneurship is to make people financially responsible for their lives rather than passively blaming things on the government. As noted earlier that the study does not seek to recount the PG's physical success story (nor that of TD); nevertheless, one can speculate what the outcome will be if people are genuinely taught to be entrepreneurially skilful, master the skill and put it into practice.

PG as Directed against Problem of Psychological Poverty

Psychological poverty, which refers to the impact of poverty on human psychology, is linked to the issue of a damaged sense of identity. Colonization has had a significant influence on Africa for over fifty years, resulting in significant changes to both the social and spiritual aspects of Africans' lives. These changes have contributed to a distorted image of Africans. One specific example of this distortion can be seen in the case of South Africa under apartheid rule. Apartheid was a system of racial segregation and discrimination enforced by the white minority government from 1948 to 1994.

Under apartheid, the social fabric of South African society was severely disrupted. The majority Black population was subjected to systematic oppression, forced removals, and limited access to resources, education, and healthcare. This created a deeply divided society, with severe social and economic inequalities (Maylam, 1995). Psychologically, apartheid left a lasting impact on the African population. The policy of racial superiority and dehumanization led to a sense of inferiority and low self-esteem among Black South Africans. The constant exposure to discrimination and violence also resulted in high levels of trauma, anxiety, and depression.

Against the label of inferiority placed on Africa, borne out of racial comparison, Matthew Ashimolowo (2020), a Nigerian, UK-based prosperity preacher developed a popular sermon, “I am Cush not Cursed”. The subject of racial discrimination against the black race is also the issue he addresses in his book, *What is Wrong with Being Black?* In addition to the identity-restoration teaching of PG, as exemplified by Ashimolowo, prosperity preaching also seeks to deal with the problem of self-image and self-worth through its emphasis on positive confession. Although, positive confession, also known as “word of faith,” has much to do with claiming and receiving God’s promises by faith in specific areas of need (Young, 1996); however, it also has some implications for identity restoration.

Influenced by Chris Oyakhilome’s teaching (Alake, 2021), Osinachi Kalu (Stage named Sinach) in her song “I know who I Am” gives a revelation that the positive confession that is embedded in the teaching of PG is an attempt towards recovery of marred self-image. The lyrics of the song partly go thus:

We are a chosen generation
Called forth to show his excellence
All I required for life God
has given me
I know who I am
I know who God says I am,
what he says I am,
Where he says I’m at, I know
who I am...
I am so rich
I am beautiful.

Kalu’s song affirms that despite the widespread reality of poverty in Africa, it tells “the poor” that they are rich and celebrates African beauty. It boosts the self-worth and self-image of those who have been affected by life’s challenges. When people fail to hold a positive image of themselves, it naturally translates to their self-worth. According to studies, a person’s self-

perception often indicates their success level. (Baumeister et al., 2003). In this regard, PG does well for “the poor” by affirming their self-worth and self-image.

PG as Directed against Social Causes of Poverty

PG is also a means of intervention against social oppression and behaviour that are common in Africa. Working as American missionaries in Tanzania, Healey and Sybertz (1996, p. 112) highlight the value of African wisdom in their narrative theology work, but also point out the common presence of jealousy among Africans. Duncan Williams (2019), a prosperity preacher in Ghana, discusses the issue of jealousy in his sermon “Household Wickedness.” He describes Ghanaian household wickedness as the “spirit of Cain” and emphasizes how this jealousy towards fellow Ghanaians hinders economic progress and leads to oppression.

PG as Directed against Spiritual Poverty

TD prioritizes Christian witness in its poverty eradication efforts, while PG focuses on spreading Christ’s salvation and inviting sinners to experience God’s power and promises. Prosperity preachers offer opportunities for people to confess Jesus as their Savior, following Paul’s teachings (Romans 10:9). Oyedepo regularly invites worshippers to commit their lives to Christ after his sermons. (A collection of David Oyedepo’s Sunday sermons is available at New Dawn TV: https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=new+dawn+tv.) As a result of this teaching and PG pursuit of holiness, studies claim that PG “churches were better positioned and more effective in development work than international NGOs at work in the same city” (Myers, 2015). PG, a pillar of evangelical Christianity, demonstrates its commitment to evangelism as exemplified by the Believers’ LoveWorld’s outreach programs (*Christ Embassy*, 2023).

PG tackles poverty holistically by addressing spiritual, physical, psychological, and social needs. It spreads the message of Christ for salvation, encourages entrepreneurship,

provides inspiration, and fights against social problems. According to Togarasei, the gospel of prosperity can help alleviate poverty in Africa (2011, p. 344). But does it fulfil TD's mandate for a personal relationship with God?

The Message of PG and TD Mandate for Personal Relationship with God

PG ministries emphasize that God is the source of all blessings, ensuring a good life and material wealth for Christians. Edwin Zulu (2014, p. 21) points out that being a Christian guarantees prosperity and freedom from suffering or sickness. Mumford (2012) adds that PG teaches believers to rely on God for success and enjoy riches and good health.

According to our analysis of PG ministries in the four areas of human need, central to its teaching, in its gospel proclamation, is the claim that *God is the giver of all good things, and that quality relationship with him always guarantees all good things – material and immaterial.*

Writing about PG, Zulu (2014, p. 21) of Zambia notes that its major claim is that “being a Christian is a guarantee of good life and material wealth. In addition, there is also the assertion that this life needs to be free from suffering or sickness as these are not the will of God, and by implication, whoever is suffering can be deemed to be living in sin.” Speaking from African American context, Mumford (2012, pp. 9 – 10) enumerates the critical claim of PG by saying, “the prosperity gospel teaches believers that where the system fails, God succeeds. If believers are faithful to the word, they can be rich and have good health.” Paul Gifford (1998) proposes the Faith Gospel (i.e. Prosperity Gospel), which stresses that every Christian should share Christ's victory over sin, disease, and poverty.

PG asserts that God's power is limitless for those who have faith in Jesus Christ. Christians are entitled to experience this powerfully in their lives. Is PG's message biblically sound and able to lead people into a life-changing encounter with God? The paragraphs below