

*This is selfish Christianity!*

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## **PROSPERITY-PREACHING IN WEST-AFRICA: AN EVALUATION OF A CONTEMPORARY IDEOLOGY FROM A NEW TESTAMENT PERSPECTIVE**

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**Abstract:** Prosperity preaching is a powerful trend in Pentecostalism and it is also an issue in West-Africa. In this article the author critically examines the way prosperity preachers interpret the New Testament. According to his understanding, prosperity preachers tend to (mis-)use the Biblical evidence for purposes contrary to the meaning of Gospel in the New Testament. However, their insistence that the Gospel affects every aspect of life is to be taken seriously. From the New Testament witnesses to the Gospel, the author suggests a model of caring for the needs of others in community as an alternative to a self-centred endorsement of a Western materialistic value-system.

### **Introduction**

In this paper, I would like to assess prosperity preaching from the perspective of the New Testament. The title of my paper already indicates

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<sup>1</sup> My gratitude goes especially to my colleague, Elizabeth Amoah, for critically reading a former draft of this paper, and to my students who never simply swallowed but critically examined my presentations. This paper is a revised version of a departmental lecture I gave in 2001 at the University of Ghana, Legon.

While the motifs 'overcoming sickness, fear and inferiority' can be *directly* linked to the New Testament<sup>4</sup>, in addition to being highly relevant issues in post-colonial Africa, I contend that business success *cannot* legitimately be proclaimed a value of the Good News as reflected in the New Testament. The motif 'business success' only occurs rarely in the New Testament, in an unambiguous sense. When it occurs, it is *always* valued negatively, from the perspective of the Good News.<sup>5</sup>

The following analysis should not be misunderstood as romanticizing poverty. This was neither done by Jesus nor by the Early Christians, none of whom enjoyed a comfortable life in the modern sense, but rather everyday hardship. Their economic plight and existential predicament is to a large extent comparable to the African situation. Nor is any idealization, i.e. idolization of such predicament attempted here. I do not also intend to discredit individual business success or attempts at securing one's life, e.g. by health-insurance. To do so, especially as a materially well secured European living in West-Africa, would be rather cynical. This study simply exposes prosperity preaching, *as defined above*, as an unbiblical ideology. In addition, the idolization of individual business success as divine blessing, undermines Gospel-values, and to a certain extent African traditional values, such as justice and equality, service-in-community, compassion, sharing and caring.<sup>6</sup> Against this background, prosperity preaching appears as a problematic, even dangerous ideology. Therefore, the African Theological Conference which met in Nairobi in August 2000, expressed its deep concern 'at the introduction of theologies such as the so-called 'prosperity gospel' that exploit rather than liberate people, and that

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. W. Kahl, *New Testament Miracle Stories in their Religious-Historical Setting. A Religionsgeschichtliche Comparison from a Structural Perspective* (FRLANT 163), (Göttingen 1994).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. at this point only Acts 16,16ff: A maid servant with a spirit of divination very successfully fore-tells the future. As such, she is instrumental in securing large profits for her masters. Paul, by exorcising her spirit, makes this business fail.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the evidence of African proverbs, e.g. K.A. Opoku, *Hearing and Keeping. Akan Proverbs* (African Proverbs Series 2), Accra 1997; K. Gyekye, *African Cultural Values. An Introduction*, Accra 1996. However, one should be aware of the – understandable – temptation of painting African traditional life in too bright colours, i.e. presenting a picture of Africa to romantic readers in the West which fulfils *their* needs rather than giving an adequate and critical description of reality with which those in the villages could easily identify.



seek to enrich church ministers at the expense of their church members.<sup>7</sup> It is remarkable that this conference, so closely related to the WCC, urges the 'full recognition of (...) the new Charismatic and Pentecostal churches as members of the body of Christ,' and that it recommends 're-visiting the tri-partite mission of the church – preaching, healing, and driving out evil spirits – as of vital importance in our African context (...).'<sup>8</sup>

My article is written in the same vein: I appreciate the phenomenon of charismatic ministries as authentic expressions of Christianity on African, Asian and Latin-American soil, and I do see their contribution to the spiritual development of world-wide Christianity. However, this positive assessment should not be tantamount to an uncritical appropriation of this powerful new trend in Christianity. It is the foremost function of theologians to *critically* evaluate new theological developments on the popular level, against the biblical evidence and contemporary necessities. There has been the tendency in the past, especially among European theologians, to be hyper-critical of any trends beyond the scope of traditional Western thinking. This attitude has rightly been exposed by scholars from the South and by adherents of post-modern theory, as arrogant and fundamentally imperialistic. It seems, however, that at the other end of the scale there lurks the danger among apologetic African scholars and sympathetic European colleagues of uncritically endorsing everything emanating from the neo-Pentecostal movement, that is to say, without the prior attempt at carefully verifying and weighing claims against the evidence of the biblical text *in its original languages, i.e. context and symbolic universe*. With respect to prosperity preaching, this holds true for both E.K. Larbi<sup>9</sup> and to an even greater extent, to the reviewer of his book, E. Dovlo.<sup>10</sup> Both of them rightly stress the need to understand prosperity preaching in the context of the socio-economic conditions of the people and their traditional belief-system. But both of them also fail to consult the biblical evidence in this respect or at least to carefully examine the use of scripture by prosperity preachers: Larbi<sup>11</sup> lists

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<sup>7</sup> Final Communiqué of the African Theological Conference, Nairobi, Kenya, 14-18 August 2000, in: WCC (ed.), *Ministerial Formation* (Oct. 2000), 65.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, italics W.K.

<sup>9</sup> *Pentecostalism. The Eddies of Ghanaian Christianity*, Accra 2001, 312-315.

<sup>10</sup> *Book Review*, Accra 2001, esp. page 5.

<sup>11</sup> *Pentecostalism*, 313f., 423.

a number of biblical passages used as proof-texts by prosperity preachers without passing any comment as to the validity of this appropriation of biblical passages (among them are 3 John 2 and Luke 6,38). While Larbi points out different degrees of prosperity thinking, Dovlo dismisses any criticism of, it seems, any degree of this type of theology as "stereotyped and pedestrian assumption people make without understanding the Pentecostal movement".<sup>12</sup> However, serious criticism of extreme prosperity preaching by insiders of the pentecostal movement like S.B. Asore invalidate this reproach.<sup>13</sup> In his book-review, Dovlo commends Larbi's choice of the syntagm /Abundant Life Gospel/ over /Prosperity Gospel/. This choice, however, is problematic, for the following reason: While some sectors of the neo-Pentecostal movement have chosen this syntagm, *derived from John 10,10b*, as appropriately bringing to expression their main theological thrust and identity, it is actually being filled with new meaning informed by African Traditional Religion and by Western values. This new understanding, however, focussing on individual material well-being and inner-worldly success, stands in a relation of contradiction to the Johannine understanding of abundant life which is *spiritualised* in this Gospel, with its focus on the other-worldliness of the hope of the Christ-believers.<sup>14</sup> To assume that John 10,10b connotes or even denotes inner-worldly comfort and material success for the individual *within* the parameters of the Johannine semantic universe, would be on the same interpretive level with an understanding of John 2,1-10 (Jesus changes water into wine at Kana) which takes the passage as an invitation to get intoxicated in the name of Jesus! For a limitation of the meaning potential of John 10,10b ('I have come that they may have life and that they may have it in abundance.') within Early Christianity, beyond the scope of the Johannine literature, cf. Luke 12, 15 which is set in the explicit context of the semantic values of /business success, comfort, riches/ versus /poverty and trust in God: 'Watch out! Be on your guard

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<sup>12</sup> Dovlo, Review, 5.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Larbi, *Pentecostalism*, 313; cf. also the excellent articles by O. Onyiah, Deliverance as a way of confronting witchcraft in modern Africa: Ghana as a case history, in: *Cyberjournal for Pentecostal Charismatic Research* (online n.d.), 1-18; U.C. Manus, The wiles of Satan according to the temptation narratives. An inter-cultural exegesis in the context of the Nigerian religions, in: *ORITA* 30,1-2 (1998), 21-40.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. P.-M. Jerumanis, *Réaliser la communion avec Dieu. Croire, vivre et demeurer dans l'évangile selon S. Jean*, Paris 1996.



against all kinds of profit-seeking, for a man's *life* does not consist in the *abundance* of his possessions.' As illustration follows the story of the so-called 'Rich Fool' (Luke 12,16-21).<sup>15</sup>

An illustration of the problematic method of biblical interpretation among prosperity preachers, I will concentrate on a New Testament passage which serves as key witness for prosperity teaching: 3John 2.<sup>16</sup> In the course of the study, reference will be made to other New Testament verses which are of special importance to prosperity preachers. In addition, I will present the New Testament position on prosperity and wealth as well as the New Testament alternative to these, negative, values. I will conclude with some remarks on the significance of the New Testament position for life in today's world.

### Methodological considerations

This is an exercise in biblical exegesis, the interpretation of scripture. So first of all I would like to address the issue of interpretation: When is an interpretation of scripture valid? What are the criteria for validity in

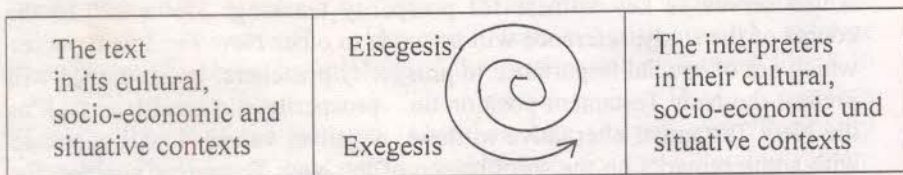
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<sup>15</sup> For a Catholic perspective on popular trends at the grass-roots level, cf. Center of Mission Research and Study at Maryknoll (ed.), *Popular Catholicism in the Two-Thirds World: Changes and Challenges for the Churches*, Maryknoll 1999. Since the nineties we have not only witnessed a growing interest among theologians from various denominational affiliations, in implicit theologies at the grass-roots level (cf. the documentation of a world-wide project of the Free University of Amsterdam: *Through the Eyes of Another. Intercultural Reading of the Bible*, ed. By H. de Wit e.a., Elkhart, Indiana 2004). We also note attempts at bridging the deep rift between socio-economically aware church-bodies like the WCC on the one hand and evangelically and spiritually oriented churches and movements on the other hand, by representatives of each group, reversing the trend which marked the seventies when political liberation seemed to stand in contradiction to spiritual liberation and which reflected cold war strategies. The emerging integrated paradigm aims at a *theology of life* from a spiritual perspective. It emphasizes the relevance of the divine spirit for *all* aspects of human existence. As such, this paradigm is able to integrate insights from primal religions as well as from the Bible. It takes seriously all spiritual experiences and religious aspirations *as long as they promote life in all its dimensions* (cf. J. Moltmann, *Die Mission des Geistes - Das Evangelium des Lebens*, in: *ZMR* 83/2 [1999], 83-93).

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Larbi, *Pentecostalism*, 314, and Addae-Mensah, *Power*, 22.

biblical interpretation? Is there more than one valid interpretation of one and the same passage? Can we identify false interpretations?

For valid interpretation, I propose the following model of contextual hermeneutics:



### An integrated model for plausible, relevant and legitimate interpretation

I presuppose that any biblical passage has a *meaning potential* which in most cases can be limited. In order to understand a given passage *in its own right*, i.e. to get to its intended meaning, we have to study its linguistic features as well as its literary and historical contexts. We try to understand the *world* of the passage: when, why, how, by and for whom was it written at a particular point in time, and what is its referential universe?

However, the meaning of a text is not static. To read one and the same passage from different cultural perspectives and in different personal situations will uncover aspects of that text which might be overlooked in a particular perspective. The authors of our New Testament writings are all unknown to us, at least personally, and they did not write with us today in mind. The New Testament writings have been floating through time and history for about 2000 years now; never floating freely, of course, but always being interpreted, often by people in power positions within the church, *for those without authority*.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Cf. G. Müller, *Die Geschichte der Ewe-Mission*, Bremen 1904, 44 (italics and translation: W.K.): "Mission aims at making all peoples disciples of Jesus. Part of it is that missions give the Bible to the people and *help them to be able to read and to understand it*. Therefore missionary work among the so-called natural peoples entails the establishment of a school system. *Schooling is absolutely necessary for missionary work.*" Cf. as alternative to this paternalistic view on non-western peoples, the approach of *reading-with* as it has been developed by G. West in South Africa, *The Academy of the Poor. Towards a Dialogical Reading of the Bible*, Sheffield 1999.



Today, the Bible is not looking for us. Rather, we are the active subjects in approaching the Bible. And we always do so with our own questions in mind. These questions are somehow grounded in a particular cultural perspective, specific socio-economic contexts and personal situations. Our background determines to a large extent what we are looking for in the Bible. It also predisposes us to what we are actually able or unable to see. We come to scripture with particular hermeneutical keys: A Lutheran is likely to read the whole Bible from the perspective of justification of the sinner by faith through God's grace. In this perspective, some New Testament writings like James or Revelation are less appealing than Romans or Galatians. Augustine's yardstick in evaluating biblical passages was the promotion of the love of God and neighbour, while a prosperity preacher concentrates on passages which indicate God's blessing resulting in individual success. The latter will tend to disregard biblical passages and statements which attest to a positive assessment of suffering and apparent failure (as in the case of Jesus and the early apostles).

It is my contention that a valid and meaningful interpretation of the Bible must be plausible and relevant for those who interpret in order to make sense. At the same time, the interpretation must be legitimate with respect to the text and its meaning potential. Appropriateness is possible, and misinterpretation is also a fact. The Italian semiotician Umberto Eco distinguishes *interpreting* a text from *using*; that is, abusing a text. Any reading of a text can be verified or falsified semiotically, with the text and its, limited, meaning-potential as parameter of any appropriation.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> U. Eco, *Die Grenzen der Interpretation*, München 1995 (ital. orig. 1990), 77f, in the context of discussing the post-modern trend to declare ALL readings as equally valid, gives the following, entertaining, example for a misreading or abuse of the New Testament: 'If Jack the Ripper told us that he committed his acts because of an inspiration he had while reading the Gospels, we would concede that his interpretation of the New Testament is at least unusual (...). Maybe we could say that Jack used the Gospels in his own way (...) and maybe we could even say that his view needs to be respected; nevertheless, taking into consideration the results of his *mis-reading*, I would be glad if Jack would never read again. However, it is hardly possible to say that Jack is a role-model for teaching children in school how to treat texts' (translation: W.K.). Sadly however, church-history is replete with examples of interpretations of one and the same biblical passage which are contradictory and all of which claim exclusive validity with some of these

What could serve as criterion for deciding whether an interpretation is textually appropriate or not? Here we can still learn from the North African and Latin Church father Augustine. In his work, *De doctrina christiana*, he formulates a helpful hermeneutical criterion: An interpretation which seems to make sense at one particular point of a biblical writing is only acceptable if another passage of that text either supports this reading or at least does not question it.<sup>19</sup>

Ideally, the interpretation of Scripture involves the reader or listener and the text in a dialectical process: Any given interpreter of the Bible approaches the text with specific questions in mind which may be conscious or subconscious. If the interpreter allows the Word of God to become subject in a dialogue, i.e. if s/he listens carefully to Scripture and is prepared to be challenged by Scripture, s/he can be *changed* in that encounter. A deeper insight might be gained into the meaning potential of a particular passage; additional aspects of that passage might come to light. From this new perspective, the Bible might begin to shine in another light, etc. In such procedure, the hermeneutical process can be described as spiral, rather than circular.<sup>20</sup>

With these considerations on hermeneutics, the art and science of interpretation, let us now move on to the discussion of 3John 2.

### **3John 2 in Biblical perspective**

3John

The original Greek of 3John 2 translated literally, means:

Beloved One, with respect to everything I pray that you may be led on the good way and that you may be healthy, just as your soul is being led on the good way.

There is no direct reference to prosperity in this verse. Do the proponents of this prosperity teaching have a different text from mine? They do. It is

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readings resulting in (the justification of) persecution, oppression and death of people (cf. the interpretations of Rom 13,1-7 in formerly segregated South-Africa).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Eco, *ibid.*, 48. Eco refers here to *intentio operis* which presupposes the coherence or congruence of a text.

<sup>20</sup> J.S Pobeie has pointed this out in a number of lectures.



the King James Version, among others, which translates in the following way:

Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things and be healthy, just as your soul prospers.

One may be emotionally attached to the King James Version, the same as others feel at home in the language of the German Martin Luther Bible of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. However, as the example of 3John 2 clearly shows, the old translations offer at times problematic interpretations which result in serious misunderstanding of scripture today.

Let us go into detail: First of all, on the surface level, verse 2 appears as a common introductory greeting. The sender of the letter expresses his wish that the recipient may be doing fine and be healthy. In a similar way he extends Shalom greetings to the recipient at the end of the letter (verse 15).

The Greek word, rendered actively by 'you may prosper' and 'your soul prospers' in the King James Version, is actually a passive construction in the original, meaning literally: 'to be led on the good way (euvodou/sqai). The passive voice needs to be retained in translation, lest its implication be lost. And the implication is clear for 3John: *God* is presupposed as subject of this activity, leading on a good way, which expresses a common understanding of ancient Judaism and Early Christianity.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, the elder *prays* for Gaius' being led and for his health. God leads the faithful on his that is God's way. Where does this way lead to? It leads to God. What are the attributes of the person being led by God? According to 3John, being led by God shows as 'walking in truth,' meaning living according to God's truth (verses 3 and 4). And this is exactly how the elder perceives Gaius. From the goodness of the addressee, which was reported to the sender, the latter concludes that Gaius' soul is already being led on the good way. His attitudes and way of

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. the apt comments by W. Michaelis in *TDNT* V (1967[1954]), 109-114, esp. 114. Lk 1,79 expresses the same as 3John 2, in *active* voice: It is ultimately God who 'sets our feet onto the path of peace.' For the Dead Sea Scrolls in this respect, cf. my *The Structure of Salvation in 2Thess and 4Q434*, in: *The Qumran Chronicle* 5/2 (1995), 103-21.

life, so to say, 'his walking in the light of God,' proves to the elder that, in fact, God is leading Gaius. This understanding is summed up in a general statement in verse 11: 'The one who is doing good is from God. The one who is doing evil has not seen God.'

The sender of the letter wishes and prays that Gaius may be led on the good way with respect to *everything* and that he may be healthy. Is it possible that the phrase 'with respect to everything' refers to wealth and riches? 3John does not give any hint into this direction. According to this letter, the attributes of a person led by God are walking in the truth of God and doing good, i.e. doing the will of God: In the context of 3John this means receiving missionaries who are in alliance with the elder, as Gaius did, versus rejecting them, as Diotrefes did.

### **Johannine Literature**

Let us move ahead and look beyond 3John for an answer to this question. First, we have to consider the writings closest to 3John, i.e. the Johannine literature. 1John assists in limiting the meaning potential of the phrase 'with respect to everything.' 1John 2,15-17 make it very clear that the believers are expected 'not to love the world nor what is in the world.' Rather the sole criterion for making it into God's eternity, is doing the will of God (verse 17). 1John does not leave the reader in any doubt as to the meaning of /will of God/: certainly not gaining riches but loving one another (chapters 3 and 4). Likewise, the prayers of supplication brought before God should be *according to God's will*, and not according to the will and desires of human beings: 'This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask *anything according to His will*, He will hear us' (5,14-15).

### **New Testament**

What has been brought to light so far mainly by means of inference is supported by clear evidence from the rest of the New Testament. We have a large number of passages which *explicitly* address the question of wealth and possessions. Reading the whole New Testament from the perspective of the semantic values of /rich/ vs. /poor/, it is remarkable to notice the consistency of the New Testament writings in this respect, cf. 1 Tim. 6,3-10; James 2,1-7; not to mention the beatitudes in Matthew 5,3-13 and Luke 6,20-26 including the condemnation of the rich. Think of the rich man who is unable to distribute his possessions among those who do not have, as precondition for following Jesus (Mark 10,17-22), the so-called



rich fool (Luke 12,13-21), the rich man and poor Lazarus (Luke 16,19-31), Jesus' teaching that one cannot serve God and Mammon (Matthew 6,24), etc. Remember the ideal(ised) community of the followers of Jesus after his ascension, as presented in Acts 2,42-47 and 4,32-37 which was marked by *sharing in order to meet the basic needs of those without means as precondition for a joint praise of God*, and we should not forget to mention in this context the fate of Annanias and Sapphira who tried to hide some of their own money from the fellowship of the believers and as result died (Acts 5,1-11).

What is the reason for this radical rejection of material belongings among Jesus and his followers? First, some observations from similar trends in the Graeco-Roman world: With respect to the rejection of material belongings, the Jesus movement shows some affinities with certain philosophical trends in the Graeco-Roman world, like Cynism, Stoicism, and New Pythagorism. While the Jesus movement shares some motifs, especially with Cynism, they differ with respect to motivation and aim. The adherents of the philosophical schools acknowledged the distraction possessions cause with respect to the search for philosophical truth. Their goal was *inner freedom* from possessions and this-worldly concerns (*eleutheria* which comes to expression as imperturbability, *ataraxia*) in order to reach the stage of 'happiness' (*eudaimonia*). While many Stoics accepted possessions solely as necessary material precondition for living a philosophical life without attributing any higher value to them, the Cynics, much like the Punk movement of the eighties in the Western world, radically chose to denounce all material goods, with consequences for their own lives, and, with a missionary zeal, they confronted the general public's thrive for wealth in drastic ways. The ethos of the Jesus movement, however, is most closely paralleled with the Qumran community which, in response to God's instructions, practised sharing of goods for the benefit of all *members*. Jesus seems to have radicalised this attitude towards possessions by emphasising the all-inclusive dimension of the Kingdom of God, with the consequence of sharing among *all* in need.

The reason for the Jesus movement's rejection of material belongings is that material prosperity, including individual business success, was not considered a value of the Kingdom of God. We can say more: According to the New Testament witnesses, riches not only represent a value of *this* world. They stand in *contradiction* to the values of the Kingdom of God. Jesus was driven by the experience of the unfolding presence of God's

realm on this earth. Under the impression of the power of the Holy Spirit, it was his mission to spread the values of God's Kingdom.

Up till recently NT scholars have explained, and rationalised, the radical and negative attitude of early Christians towards this-worldly-values, by reference to the imminent expectation of the Kingdom of God: Since these believers expected the coming of God's kingdom at any moment, they did not see the need of securing their lives in this world. However, this model does not account for the numerous NT passages which recommend an attitude guaranteeing a stabilisation of *some* this-worldly institutions, e.g. submission towards the Roman empire (Rom 13,1-7) or submission of slaves to their masters and women to their husbands (1Tim), while *at the same time* rejecting other values. We rather have to concede that the mystical and spiritual experience of God's closeness, including the awareness of his *already* unfolding kingdom among the believers, informed their behaviour. As far as it lies in *their* sphere of authority and as far as it does not put the existence of the Christ-believing community at risk, they are to live radically according to the value-system of God's kingdom; cf. Rom 12,18 with respect to peace, but *within* the parameters set by *pax romana*!

In continuation with Jesus' perception that the coming of God's kingdom had already commenced with John the Baptist,<sup>22</sup> the Early Christians lived under the intense impression of God's *already* unfolding and partly present kingdom, trying to live up to its value-system in order to spread it further.<sup>23</sup> What are the kingdom values? They are e.g. justice, i.e. *God's justice* and *servicing others* to overcome *their* pain and suffering (cf. Mark 8,34-38; 9,33-37; 10,35-45; Rom 14,13-15,6) so that *they* may live and be able to give praise to God.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Cf. M. Öhler, *The Expectation of Elijah and the Presence of the Kingdom of God*, in: *JBL* 118/3 (1999), 461-476; H. Boers, *Who was Jesus? The Historical Jesus and the Synoptic Gospels*, San Francisco 1989.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. K. Erlemann, *Endzeiterwartungen im frühen Christentum*, Tübingen 1996.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. the healing, resurrection, feeding and deliverance miracles attributed to Jesus and his followers: they aim at, and succeed in restoring life in all its *physical and social* respects.



Jesus, under the impression of the hidden *immanence* of God's kingdom, *radically* lived from the perspective of God's plan of salvation, as he understood it.<sup>25</sup> As itinerant preacher, teacher, prophet and healer, he left behind his profession and family, relying *totally* on God's guidance and provision, to the extent that his relatives regarded him as crazy (Mark 3,20f; cf. John 10,20). As human response to God's call, he was concerned with a *holistic integrity of personhood* (ψυχή as translation of Aramaic ܡܢܦܫܐ), which was not to be compromised by any means, not even by concerns for food and clothing.

It is against this background that the passage Mt 6,25-34 needs to be understood: The followers of Jesus are expected to be *inwardly free* from any concern for nourishment and clothing so that they may live radically *God-oriented*. They are admonished to trust in God's mysterious way of providing them with the *basic necessities for life*: 'Seek you first the kingdom of God and his justice, and all these things shall be added onto you. Therefore, do not be concerned about tomorrow' (6, 33). In prosperity teaching, Mt 6, 33 is often not only quoted out of context but also in a distorted fashion: 'Seek you first the kingdom of God (...!) and *everything* shall be added onto you.' The verse is first de- and then re-contextualised with 'everything' now referring to any kind of material success. However, the immediate context of this verse clearly indicates that it *exclusively* refers to nourishment and clothing. The immediately preceding verses 6, 19-24 in unambiguous terms *exclude* any understanding of material riches as positive values. /To be rich/ in 6, 20 is re-defined by Jesus: material, i.e. literally *earthly* richness is valued negatively while richness in a metaphorical sense, now signifying heavenly oriented richness, becomes a positive value.

Accordingly, the disciples are sent out for missionary work with neither food nor money, and without a second cloth (Mk 6,8f.). Jesus provides them with *power*, not for their own well-being but exclusively for healing others, at times by driving out evil spirits (6, 7.13). For food and shelter,

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<sup>25</sup> Significantly, the Greek verb for "to be close" in Mk 1,15 is undoubtedly in the perfect tense. The implication is clearly that the kingdom of God *has come close and as result of this past event it is now present*. However, most modern translations (English, German, French) seem to presuppose the aorist tense when they incorrectly, but maybe less theologically embarrassing, read: "The kingdom of God is at hand;" "Das Reich Gottes ist nahe herbeigekommen."

the disciples are to rely on hospitality provided to them by others (6,10f.) with the understanding that God will provide through the hosts. To live a heavenly-oriented life does not deny the importance of provision for basic human needs. But, according to Jesus, *God* will miraculously arrange for nourishment and shelter. He sternly warns against any human attempt at *securing one's life* since such an attempt would contravene God's plan.

Jesus' negative attitude towards riches and material belongings was shared by Early Christianity in a remarkably unified way as comes to expression explicitly or at least implicitly in all New Testament writings. *Nowhere* in the New Testament is individual business success *explicitly* regarded as positive value or blessing from God. We can even speak of a single New Testament position on riches which is summarized in 1 Tim 6,8-11 and which deserves to be quoted in toto:

For we have brought nothing into this world, and it is certain that we cannot carry out anything. And having *food and clothing*, with these we shall be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows. But you, man of God, flee these things and pursue justice, godliness, faith, love, patience, and gentleness.

The desire to have this-worldly success, i.e. to align one's life with the value-system of *this* world, is not regarded as blessing but rather as curse!<sup>26</sup> Those who *are* rich, have an *obligation to share* with those without means (1 Tim 6,17-19; cf. Mk 10,17-27 esp. 21; Acts 5, 1ff.).

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. the explicit curses against the rich and powerful in Luke's version of the beatitudes in 6,24-26. It is significant that Luke addresses his narrative to 'most excellent' Theophilus (1,1,-4) who is certainly a person of high societal standing demanding such respect. However, to take this address as indication of Luke's alleged siding with the 'ruling class.' as purported by Itumeleng J. Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa*, Grand Rapids/MI 1989, pp.173-179, is hardly convincing from the perspective of Luke's Sermon on the Plain in 6,20-49. His materialist reading of Luke 1 and 2, interpreting 'the text against the grain' (183) makes the interpretation of this Gospel a function of the struggle for political and economic liberation.



Consequently, to live according to God's value system as opposed to the value system of this world, is tantamount with sharing *all possessions* amongst one another within the Christian community, as Luke makes clear in his presentation of the ideal community in Acts 2,37-47 and 4,32-37. Such a community, providing for the needs of all, is blessed by God – according to Acts and the understanding of the whole of Early Christianity.

### Relevance and Plausibility of Prosperity Preaching

Prosperity teaching certainly seems *relevant* to many as the only solution in a situation of extreme economic hardship, where some can only afford one or two but not three meals a day; where many children cannot be sent to school because of the costs involved; where the sick cannot afford medical treatment etc.

It seems to me that prosperity teaching is so attractive to many in West Africa not only because of its relevance, but also because it is *plausible*: On the one hand, from the perspective of African Traditional Religion which always laid great emphasis on salvation from all kinds of *material needs* and on *individual* business success: 'The central focus of his (man's) religious exercises is thus directed towards the harnessing of power inherent in the spirit force *for his own advantage*.'<sup>27</sup> Whereas some thrive economically and socially, others suffer. Consequently, the time of the expansion of the cocoa industry in the 1920s witnessed an 'increased obsession with witchcraft' and the 'proliferation of new shrines' in Ghana because of growing economic and social imbalances: 'Financially successful men were full of fear, lest envious kinsmen would, by means of bad magic or witchcraft, bring about their ruin.'<sup>28</sup>

On the other hand, prosperity teaching is the religious counterpart of an unchecked *capitalist ideology* which pervades much of life in today's world, idolizing individual business success. Seen from this perspective it is no coincidence that the prosperity message originated with charismatic preachers in the USA, a number of whom visited West-Africa in the 1980s drawing enormous crowds to their crusades.<sup>29</sup> These motifs merged with the evangelistic credo of the 'belief in Jesus Christ as *my personal saviour*.' Significantly, the syntagm /personal saviour/ is non-, and if used

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<sup>27</sup> Larbi, *Pentecostalism*, 425 (italics are mine).

<sup>28</sup> Larbi, *Pentecostalism*, 40f.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Larbi, *Pentecostalism*, 307-311.

in an absolute way, un-biblical. In the New Testament 'saviour' appears 23 times as attribute of either God or Christ *and* always in relation to a group or community of people (sender and recipient of a letter, Israel, the world). Consequently, the first person plural form of the personal pronoun in the possessive case is most often used in qualifying saviour. Only at one time in the New Testament do we find a personal pronoun in the singular attached to saviour: In Marie's praise of *God* (Lk 1,47). According to the New Testament understanding, which is surprisingly uniform in this respect, Jesus is conceptualised first and foremost as *universal saviour* (cf. Joh 4,42; 1Joh 4,14; 1Tim 4,10). These findings are corroborated by the use of the Greek preposition  $\upsilon\pi\epsilon\rho$ , 'for' or 'on behalf of,' in conjunction with the relevance of the death and resurrection of Christ: It is typically expressed that Christ died 'for us,' 'for our sins' etc., i.e. always on behalf of a community or group of people (cf. Mk 14,24; Rom 5,8; 1Cor 15,3; 2Cor 5,14f; Tit 2,14; 1Joh 3,16). Among 150 occurrences of this theologically significant preposition, only Gal 2, 20 expresses the benefit of the death of Christ from an individual's perspective. This, however, is embedded in the communal understanding of the sacrificial death of Jesus (Gal 1, 4; 3, 13).

Salvation in Christian West Africa has been appropriated within the matrix of African Traditional Religion meaning rescue from any threats to inner-worldly life and material success. Against this background, Jesus has been conceptualised as divine, i.e. most powerful healer and provider of abundant life in the here and now and predominantly for individual, not communal concerns: Jesus is the life-saviour (this is the exact meaning of the translation of saviour in the Akan language Twi: *agenkwa*).<sup>30</sup>

### **A New Testament Alternative:**

#### **Selfless-Sharing in Community**

While New Testament teachings should not be mistaken as heal-all-and-everything-drugs,<sup>31</sup> they do give direction with respect to the value and

<sup>30</sup> Cf. my forth-coming book: Werner Kahl, *Jesus als Lebensretter. Westafrikanische Bibelinterpretationen und ihre Relevanz für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* (New Testament Studies in Contextual Exegesis 2), Frankfurt 2007.

<sup>31</sup> This is clear the tendency of an article by the Nigerian theologian C.O. Oshun, *Spirits and Healing in a Depressed Economy: The Case of Nigeria*, in: *Mission Studies* 15,1,29 (1998), 32-52. In line with a pan-African cosmology, he sees the impact of demonic powers – in a personalized sense – as the root



function of possessions which are worth considering today. Rather than uncritically promoting and, in fact, accelerating an unchecked capitalist ideology which results in even more economic hardship of an already extremely exploited<sup>32</sup> and impoverished people, as is done in prosperity preaching, the time might be ripe for alternative life-styles and orientations which are informed by New Testament ethics.

The early Christians tried to develop structures of community as an earnest attempt to live up to the ethos of Jesus' preaching. He served as the ultimate example of a charismatic leader who lived according to his teachings: Jesus not only *taught* his disciples that a radical change of life (μετάνοια as equivalent of שׁוּבוּה, cf. Mk 1, 15) is required, from a self-centred existence to a God-centred existence which makes possible and necessitates existence *for, i.e. to the benefit of others*; he also gave his very life *for many* (Mk 14, 24). The Early Christians including Paul (cf. Rom 14, 13-15, 6; esp. 15, 1-3) took this sacrificial dimension of Jesus' life as model according to which they *tried*, more or less successfully, to shape and interpret their own existence. One feature of the Early Christian communities as family of God (cf. Mk 10, 28-31) was the *ideal of sharing*.<sup>33</sup> The selling of possessions in order to provide shelter and food

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cause of Nigeria's manifold problems. Informed by the OT concept of *Shalom* he favours holistic healing, i.e. multidimensional salvation as solution for these, and all problems facing the world. While the emphasis on the all-encompassing significance of the Kingdom of God and of salvation, including the socio-economic dimension of life, is commendable since this is exactly what the NT writers presuppose, Oshun's contention that all problems will vanish simply by breaking the spiritual powers of evil, seems rather naive and unrealistic: Naive with respect to the conception of sin as part of human nature and unrealistic with respect to the reality that those who have an interest to hold on to political and economic power will not give it up because of religion. The contrary is true, and prosperity preaching is proof to this: Religion is easily turned into an ideology to serve the interests of those in power; cf. Reinhold Niebuhr's still valuable insights in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* from 1932.

<sup>32</sup> By both internal, i.e. African, and external, i.e. multinational, economic powers.

<sup>33</sup> Acts 5,1-11 gives ample evidence that this ideal has always been in danger of being distorted by selfish interests of single Early Christians who "were baptised in the Holy Spirit", cf. also the difficulties in the Christ-believing communities Paul was trying to solve in his letters, e.g. in Rom 14,13-15,6.

for all in Acts 2,42-47 and 4,32-37 functions as *precondition* for a joint and joyful glorification of God – the ultimate concern of the Early Christians.<sup>34</sup> At the same time, these new communities tried to implement structures which promote values of the Kingdom of God, i.e. ‘justice and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit’ (Rom14,17b). Furthermore, sharing in community in Acts 2, 42-47 is a necessary manifestation of the *common understanding* among former strangers and even enemies which Luke ascribes to the work of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2, 1-13).<sup>35</sup>

### Conclusion

With respect to the New Testament, prosperity teaching *as defined above* is not only not found, it is explicitly rejected. Proponents of prosperity teaching abuse the Bible. Their method of interpretation is by de-contextualisation, i.e. a single verse is first isolated and then taken out of its original context. This procedure does not take Scripture seriously. It rather *uses* the authority of Scripture for a purpose which is clearly unbiblical, i.e. individual business success. Prosperity teaching is rather a distortion of New Testament<sup>36</sup> theology and ethics, conflating and confusing selected aspects of African Traditional Religion (the focus on material salvation) and capitalist ideology (individualism, business

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<sup>34</sup> The same is true for Rom 14,13-15,6 where Paul admonishes his addressees to put the consideration for the brother or sister first ‘in order that you may glorify God together and in one accord’ (15,6a).

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Paul’s discussion on the relevance of speaking in tongues in 1Cor 14, 1-33: it has to serve the needs of the community otherwise it is a useless, even harmful for self-edifying exercise.

<sup>36</sup> The Old Testament, of course, especially in its narrative section gives examples of individuals whose material prosperity is presented as a result of divine blessing. However, it also contains the harshest criticism of the rich who oppress the poor with God siding with the latter, especially in the great and Minor Prophets but also in its poetic and wisdom sections. With respect to the Old Testament, prosperity teaching is at least the result of an arbitrary, uncritical, unbalanced and selective reading procedure. A *Christian* reading of the Old Testament, however, should be informed by the New Testament and its standards. The latter contains a number of re-interpretations, effecting in essence *invalidations* of Old Testament teachings, cf. only the dietary laws in the Pentateuch with Acts 10-11, and the issue of circumcision. In Early Christianity, our Old Testament was still highly regarded as divine revelation, but it was interpreted from the perspective of the ultimate revelation for those believers, i.e. the understanding(s) of the meaning of Jesus as Christ.



success) with Early Christian religion. The reference-point of such a theology is not the Gospel but clearly Western life-style, values and products.

The Gospel challenges our agenda, criteria, and perception of reality, be they West-European or West-African. New Testament ethics is certainly grounded in the experienced love of God which liberates the believer from any inner-worldly concern for him/her, so that s/he can become free to spread the good news of the universal love of God. This entails the will to effectively changing the predicament of those suffering from a lack of the basic necessities of life, because of their newly recognized status as beloved children of God. The believer's hope is to be eternally gathered with God and Christ after life on earth. In the meantime, s/he cannot but try to implement values of God's kingdom on earth. As such s/he is a follower of Jesus. Her or his comfort lies in the trust of doing the will of God, and not in *any* material security. This is the New Testament position on a 'Christian' way of life.

Having said this, it needs to be added that the focus on *some* of the physical, spiritual, and communal aspects of religious life in African cosmology could serve as asset for re-discovering meaning-dimensions of the kingdom of God as proclaimed by Jesus which have been neglected in European theology. Furthermore, it seems that contemporary European and African theology might be able to meet at a particular point, since both favour, from different cultural and theological perspectives, *concrete manifestations of physical well-being*. The following question could serve as criterion by means of which it could be verified or falsified if a particular activity is appropriate to the Gospel: Does this activity *effectively* enhance life or not?<sup>37</sup> Does it promote the *provision of basic*

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. in this respect the potentially life-threatening confusion caused by supernatural healing claims made by some charismatic pastors, like the eradication of HIV-positivity (claimed by the deliverance preacher before a large congregation in Duncan-William's Christian Action Faith Ministries International Church Head Quarters on the 26<sup>th</sup> of July, 2001); cf. also so-called "creative miracles" like the growing of amputated hands and legs (Addae-Mensah, *Power*, 105-111). People are being misled by obvious lies. On the question of the definition of miracle, cf. W. Kahl, 'Toward an intercultural understanding of NT miracles,' in: *Theology Digest* 46/3 (1999), 225-229.

*necessities for all*, or is it rather an expression of selfishness serving the needs of a few?<sup>38</sup> On the European part this criterion certainly implies radical repentance, i.e. a move towards effectively sharing material riches and structures which help to secure lives the world over. On the African part, this requires a readiness to work for the common good of the people, and not for some to accumulate riches beyond imagination and to the disadvantage of the people. At the same time, African Christianity might have the responsibility, and it clearly has the potential for doing so, to revitalize world-wide Christianity so that, e.g. Europeans might learn again to praise and to glorify God in a joyful, yet humble way.<sup>39</sup>

As a theologian I would like to add that it is vital for believers to allow themselves to be challenged by the word of God as witnessed in Scripture. Reading Scripture should not be an exercise like watching yourself in the mirror. It should rather be like looking through a window so that you can see where to go, and what to leave behind.

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<sup>38</sup> Most charismatic ministries are *owned* by their founders who at the same time function as main pastors of their churches. Some of these ministries are run like, and even as, private business (cf. Larbi, *Pentecostalism*, 449). It is no coincidence that the prosperity message is preached by quite a number of charismatic leaders, and that at the same time Pentecostal and Orthodox Mission Churches shy away from doing so. Prosperity preaching attracts many people, and its effectiveness can be verified most clearly for one group: Prosperity teaching undoubtedly works very well for the preachers.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. the apt assessment by K. Bediako, *Christianity in Africa. The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*, Maryknoll, NY 1995, 252-267.