

5 Ways the Prosperity Gospel Is Hurting Africa

I'm not an African, but in 2008 some Nigerian friends gave me a Yoruba name ("Akinwale") because I have been to that country so often. My visits there, along with trips to Uganda, Kenya, Malawi, South Africa and Egypt, planted a deep love for Africa in my heart. My first grandson's arrival this year from Ethiopia made the connection even stronger.

I'm often asked to describe how God is moving in Africa today. Since I'm an optimist, I usually tell of the large churches, the passionate praise and the intense spiritual hunger that characterizes African Christianity. But there is also a dark side, and I think it's time we addressed one of the most serious threats to **faith** on the continent.

I'm talking about the **prosperity gospel**. Of course, I know a slick version of this message is preached in the United States—and I know we are the ones who exported it overseas. I am not minimizing the damage that prosperity preaching has done in my own country. But I have witnessed how some African Christians are taking this money-focused message to new and even more dangerous extremes.

Here are five reasons the **prosperity** message is damaging the continent of Africa today:

1. It is mixed with occultism. Before Christianity came to Nigeria, people visited witch doctors and sacrificed goats or cows to get prosperity. They poured libations on the ground so the gods would hear their prayers. Today similar practices continue, only the *juju* priest has been replaced by a pastor who drives a Mercedes-Benz. I am aware of a pastor who buried a live animal under the floor of his church to win God's favor. Another pastor asked his congregants to bring bottles

of sand to church so he could anoint them; he then told the people to sprinkle the sand in their houses to bring blessings. The people who follow these charlatans are reminded that their promised windfall won't materialize unless they give large donations.

2. It fuels greed. Any person who knows Christ will learn the joy of giving to others. But the **prosperity gospel** teaches people to focus on getting, not giving. At its core it is a selfish and materialistic faith with a thin Christian veneer. Church members are continually urged to sow financial seeds to reap bigger and bigger rewards. In Africa, entire conferences are dedicated to collecting offerings in order to achieve wealth. Preachers boast about how much they paid for suits, shoes, necklaces and watches. They tell their followers that spirituality is measured by whether they have a big house or a first-class ticket. When **greed** is preached from the pulpit, it spreads like a cancer in God's house.

3. It feeds pride. This greedy atmosphere in prosperity churches has produced a warped style of leadership. My Kenyan friend Gideon Thuranira, editor of *Christian Professional* magazine, calls these men "churchpreneurs." They plant churches not because they have a burden to reach lost souls but because they see dollar signs when they fill an auditorium with chairs. A selfish message produces bigheaded **opportunists** who need position, applause and plenty of perks to keep them happy. The most successful prosperity preacher is the most dangerous because he can convince a crowd that Jesus died to give you and me a Lexus.

4. It works against the formation of Christian character. The prosperity message is a poor imitation of the gospel because it leaves no room for brokenness, suffering, humility or delay. It offers an illegal shortcut. Prosperity preachers promise instant results and overnight **success**; if you don't get your breakthrough, it's because you didn't give enough money in the offering. Jesus calls us to deny ourselves and

follow Him; prosperity preaching calls us to deny Jesus and follow our **materialistic** lusts. There is a leadership crisis in the African church because many pastors are so set on getting rich, they can't go through the process of discipleship that requires self-denial.

5. It actually keeps people in poverty. The government of Malawi is currently under international scrutiny because of fraud carried out by top leaders. The saddest thing about the so-called "Cashgate" scandal is that professing **Christians** in the administration of President Joyce Banda have been implicated. One of these people stole millions of *kwacha* from the government and hid the cash in a teddy bear! Most people today in Malawi live on less than \$1 a day, yet their leaders have been known to buy fleets of cars and huge plots of land with money that was not theirs. Sadly, the prosperity gospel preached in Malawi has encouraged pastors and leaders to follow the same corrupt pattern. As a result, God's people have been financially exploited.

When Jesus described false prophets as wolves in sheep's clothing, He warned us to examine their fruit. Matthew 7:17 says, "So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit" (NASB). What is the fruit of **prosperity** preaching?

Churches have been growing rapidly in many parts of Africa today, yet sub-Saharan Africa is the only region in the world where poverty has *increased* in the past 25 years. So according to the statistics, the prosperity gospel is not bringing **prosperity**! It is a flawed message, but I believe God will use selfless, broken African leaders to correct it.

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