

Defending the “Prosperity Gospel”

Richard C. Leonard, Ph.D.

The so-called “prosperity gospel,” or “health and wealth gospel,” is much maligned in certain Christian circles. An Internet search will turn up a plethora of web sites, blogs, and the like that raise objections to the idea that following Jesus leads to a healthier, more prosperous life. The assumption of these critics is that the Christian life is to be marked by suffering, so that Christians who view their faith as promoting prosperity and health are departing from the pattern of the New Testament church. We present here some arguments that counter certain assumptions of the critics of the “health and wealth gospel,” who would instead advocate a “sickness and poverty gospel.”

The early Christians were not poor.

Jesus and the earliest Christians were not poor by the standards of their time and place, as they are often depicted. Jesus was a general contractor; the word *tehton* (Mark 6:3) refers to something more than a simple carpenter. The first disciples were in the fishing business; Matthew (Levi) was wealthy, being a publican. Well-to-do people, including the wife of one of Herod’s officials (Luke 8:3), supported Jesus and his disciples in their ministry. The disciples maintained a treasury from which they distributed aid to the poor (John 13:29). Jesus’ garment was of such quality that the Roman soldiers declined to cut it up (John 19:22-23). Wealthy men provided a tomb for his burial (John 19:38-40).

Early Christians worshiped in the homes of substantial citizens (e.g., Lydia, Acts 16:14-15) whose residences could accommodate an assembly. People like Paul with his entourage, or Priscilla and Aquila, could afford to travel through the Mediterranean world, booking passage on merchant ships. Paul was able to rent the lecture hall of Tyrannus to conduct his seminars (Acts 19:9).

The New Testament writings are the work of educated authors.

The New Testament writings are not the work of poor, uneducated peasants. They display a literary skill consistent with a high level of education, vast knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures, and serious historical research (e.g., Luke’s introductions to his Gospel and Acts; a wealthy patron apparently underwrote the production and publication of these works, Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1). The manner in which the gospels are constructed reveals a deep theological insight into Jesus’ own intent, and reveals his intellectual brilliance in reformulating the story of Israel around his own ministry.

Paul’s writings reveal a philosophical genius that has been said to equal or surpass that of pagan thinkers of the time. The New Testament writers, and Jesus himself, were multi-lingual, conversant with Aramaic, Hebrew, Greek (Jesus, Matthew 15:22-28), and perhaps Latin and various local languages such as Lycaonian (Acts 14:11).

The early church had the witness of the Scriptures.

The earliest Christians did not have a “New Testament;” their Scriptures were what we call the Old Testament, i.e. the Hebrew Scriptures of the Law, Prophets, and Writings. Thus they had the example of wealthy Israelite leaders such as Abraham, Joseph, and Solomon. Moreover, they had the counsel of the Book of Proverbs, that “the reward for humility and fear of the Lord is riches and honor and life” (Proverbs 22:4), and such counsel was not lost on the New Testament church.

While Jesus made clear that excessive concern for wealth can be a hindrance to receiving the good news of God’s kingdom, he also promised a “hundredfold” material reward for his followers in the “age to come” (Mark 10:17-31). He also told a parable about faithful servants

who used what they were entrusted with for material gain (Matthew 25:14-23). Paul recognizes that some members of the Christian community will have ample resources to give “with generosity” (Romans 12:8), and underscores the Scriptural principle that “sowing” leads to reaping a reward (Galatians 6:7; cf. Malachi 3:10).

Suffering, in the New Testament, is not poverty or sickness.

While the New Testament refers to the suffering of Christians, this suffering is not poverty and sickness but persecution, because the message of the earliest Christians ran counter to prevailing societal norms. Among Jews, the inclusion of Gentiles threatened the exclusivist, revolutionary mentality of the Pharisees and others, about which Jesus warned them (Luke 13:1-5). Acknowledging Jesus as “Lord” threatened the Jewish understanding of monotheism, and it is clear that early Christians, while not abandoning monotheism, melded the work of Jesus into the activity of the Father (1 Corinthians 8:6; cf. Jesus’ words in John 14:9 and *passim*).

In the Roman world, the announcement that “Jesus is Lord” threatened the lordship of Caesar, who was worshiped as a god. For these reasons the activity of the followers of Jesus was accompanied by persecution. But Jesus taught his disciples to pray that they would not be subject to *peirasmos*, the testing of persecution (Matthew 6:13). Writing to Gaius, John reproduced the customary greeting of a letter writer, “I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in health” (3 John 2); he saw no need to alter the greeting to reflect an expectation of illness and deprivation.

The purpose of Jesus’ coming is not to foster poverty and sickness.

The New Testament abounds with brief statements about the purpose for which Jesus has come. While he came to serve, and to seek and deliver the “lost,” he also came “to impart abundant life (John 10:10) — however we take that phrase. He also came “to destroy the works of the evil one” (1 John 3:8). Since the “thief” comes to “steal and kill and destroy” (John 10:10), logically the Son of God comes to do the opposite — that is, to bring blessing instead of curse, fulfilling the promise of God’s covenant and delivering his people from “the curse of the law” (Galatians 3:13) in which pestilence, deprivation, exile and other evils are included (Deuteronomy 28). In so doing, Jesus comes to “deliver us from the present evil age” (Galatians 1:4) so that the harsh circumstances of sickness, poverty, and ignorance that mark this age can be overcome. Part of Jesus’ stated mission, at the beginning of his preaching, is to bring “good news to the poor” (Luke 4:18), which can hardly mean the continuation of their impoverished condition.

The New Testament church is a transitional phase in God’s purpose.

The New Testament is not the final story in God’s plan for his people. It is a transitional phase that records how the message of the kingdom of God was first proclaimed and spread throughout the Mediterranean world. The New Testament expresses the vision for a greater culmination: “Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). “Every knee shall bow . . . and every tongue confess that Jesus the Messiah is Lord” (Philippians 2:10-11). These were not realities achieved in the New Testament church, except by anticipation: “For whoever is in the Messiah, there is a new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17). The kingdom of God is like seed that takes root and eventually spreads throughout the earth (Matthew 13:31). The early church labored under great difficulty, but the difficulty was not supposed to last forever.

Two millennia of history show the beneficial results of Christian faith.

The history of those parts of the world that have been dominated by Christian influence reveals the beneficial impact of Christianity as a “health and wealth gospel.” The development of hospitals and charitable organizations, institutions for research and learning, and efforts to

promote the public good has been the result of the practice of Christian virtues. The rights of the individual, valued by God as a creature in his own image, have become a cornerstone of human culture leading to such milestones as the abolition of slavery. Industrial initiative and the results of technology have, on the whole, benefited people across a spectrum of society. Poverty has diminished, pestilence has been curbed, and people have been freed to explore their possibilities in life to a degree not seen in parts of the world where this Christian “health and wealth gospel” has not been promulgated. (For a summary of the cultural and social impact of the spread of Christian faith, see John Ortberg, *Who Is This Man?* Zondervan, 2012.)

Opponents of the “health and wealth” gospel are inconsistent.

Critics of the “health and wealth” gospel take the supposed New Testament church as their model, claiming that the Christian life is subject to poverty and sickness. To be consistent, they should apply that model to all aspects of their life and witness. They should not have church buildings, or if they have them, not furnish them with electricity or flush toilets. They should avoid the use of radio, television, or the Internet to propagate their ideas. They should walk to all church meetings instead of riding in automobiles, and meet during the night only because there was no “weekend” as we know it in the Roman world. They should not use printed or electronic Bibles, which were unknown in the early church, but restrict their use of Scripture to oral or handwritten format.

Insistence that Christians must suffer poverty and illness is a “gospel” of works.

The “sickness and poverty gospel” nullifies the suffering of Jesus on our behalf. It claims we have to suffer in order to be true Christians. It is a “gospel” of works, not grace. In a world awash in poverty, illness, injustice, and all forms of oppression one wonders why any Christian would not choose to preach a gospel of deliverance from these evils.