

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

Website: www.churchredeemeraz.org

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Pastor/Teacher
Gary L. W. Johnson

THE LORD'S SUPPER AND A DIFFERENT JESUS

We are called upon when we come to the Lord's Supper to take the bread and the cup in remembrance of our Lord Jesus Christ. However, it is critically important that we know the *real* Jesus and not a *false* Christ. Jesus, Himself warned His disciples, "Take heed that no man deceive you. For many shall come in My name saying; 'I am Christ,' and shall deceive many" (Matt. 24:4-5). Elsewhere Jesus issued a similar warning, "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly that are ferocious wolves" (Matt. 7:15). Obvious examples of this kind of deceit is the Christ of Mormonism,¹ or the equally false Christ of Jehovah Witnesses. The danger of embracing a *false* Christ (and by doing so, a *false* gospel) is growing. The biggest reason is so-called "Christian Television." The air-waves are dominated by the likes of Joel Osteen, Benny Hinn, Joyce Meyers, T. D. Jakes, Kenneth Copeland and dozens of others just like them. What they all share in common is called by various names: The Prosperity Gospel, The Health and Wealth Gospel, The Word of Faith Movement (name it and claim it). It teaches that Christ's death has not only overcome the curse laid upon us at the Fall (Gal. 3:10-13), it has also overcome the *effects* of this curse-for example, sickness and poverty (cf. Deut. 28:15-68) in this age. So Christians ought to expect, in this age, health and wealth. If they live in sickness and poverty, they have failed to exercise true faith in God. For proponents of the prosperity gospel, this would be as offensive as a Christian continuing to live in sin: it dishonours the Christ who died that we might be healthy and rich.

It is not difficult to find these convictions expressed by prominent teachers today. Passages such as Joshua 1:8, Psalms 34:10, 35:27 and 37:25, Job 36:11, Mark 10:29-30, 2 Corinthians 8:9 and especially 3 John 2 are regularly jerked out of context to support these views. An older example is seen in the writings of Kenneth Copeland, who is considered the foremost advocate of the movement: "You are an heir to the blessing which God gave to Abraham. This blessing, found in the 28th chapter of Deuteronomy, covers every area of your existence: spirit, soul, body, financially, and socially."² Elsewhere he says, "[H]ealing is just as much a part of the plan of redemption as salvation, the Holy Spirit and heaven as your eternal home."³ Jerry Savelle, an American televangelist once associated with Copeland, agrees: "Not only is it God's will to heal, it is God's will to heal all! Satan is the author of sickness and disease. By the authority of His Word, God has made provision for our healing. It is not the will of God that anyone be sick with any sickness or disease or pain whatsoever-from hangnails to tuberculosis!"⁴ Even if sickness or financial stress remain, the believer must transcend these things and rest secure in the promises of God and his word. But there is a catch. In order to receive God's many blessings, you have to "sow a seed of faith," i.e., give money to the ministry of the particular televangelist! Oral Roberts pioneered the "seed faith" concept and his many disciples, like Copeland (who attended ORU) have made it the building block of their "ministry." Copeland preaches, "Do you want a hundredfold return on your money? Give and

let God multiply it back to you.”⁵ The prosperity gospel not only misuses the Bible, it seriously misrepresents Christ. Although Copeland is the movement’s acknowledged leader, its most prominent representative is Joel Osteen. Copeland’s books and TV programs have never reached an audience the size of Osteen’s. Mike Horton’s recent critique of Osteen is spot on.

“From beginning to end, Osteen addresses his vast readership as though each person is ‘a child of the Most High God.’ God has breathed His life into you. He planned seeds of greatness in you. You have everything you need to fulfill your God-given destiny....It’s all in you. You are full of potential. But you have to do your part and start tapping into it...You have the seed of Almighty God on the inside of you...We have to believe that we have what it takes. It is indeed true that there are appeals to the Bible scattered throughout this book. However, in nearly every case a verse is either torn from its context and turned into a ‘fortune-cookie’ kind of promise that one can name-and-claim for oneself or it is actually misquoted to serve Osteen’s point. For example, we read that when God confronted Adam and Eve after their sin, ‘He said, “Adam, who told you that you were naked?” In other words, “Who told you that something was wrong with you?” God immediately knew the enemy had been talking to them. God is saying to you today, “Who told you that you don’t have what it takes to succeed?”’ Where, in the passage he refers to (Genesis 3:11), God asks Adam this question in order to convict him of his sin, Osteen makes it sound as if it were Satan who told Adam that he had failed the test. As in his earlier book, Osteen here never speaks of sin as falling short of God’s glory, but of falling short of God’s best for your life. In fact, Osteen’s attachment to the prosperity gospel is even more explicit in *Become a Better You*. Just as Kenneth Copeland, Benny Hinn, and other ‘faith teachers’ speak of believers as ‘little gods’ who share God’s nature, Osteen has an entire chapter devoted to ‘The Power of Your Bloodline.’ ‘You have the DNA of almighty God.’ It’s ‘what’s in you’ that is divine seed, he says. It is not that God has imputed Christ’s righteousness to us and adopted us as his children. We are not saved by an external and alien righteousness, but by an internal and essential righteousness that belongs to us simply by virtue of our being created in his image. Therefore, throughout the book Osteen can address all of his readers as semi-divine without any reference to faith in Christ. As if the fall never happened, Osteen writes, ‘He has programmed you with everything you need for victory. That’s why every day you can say things like, “I have what it takes. I am more than a conqueror. I am intelligent; I am talented. I am successful; I am attractive; I am an overcomer.”’ Where Paul, in Galatians 3:29 argues that the inheritance of eternal life comes through the promise (i.e., Christ) rather than by the law, Osteen again lifts a single verse out of its context as a promise of temporal prosperity: I love the Scripture that says, ‘If we belong to Christ, we are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise. That means that we can all experience the blessings of Abraham. If you study Abraham’s record, you’ll discover that he was prosperous, healthy, and lived a long, productive life. Even though he didn’t always make the best choices, he enjoyed God’s blessings and favor. This is a clear example of how Osteen turns even the most obvious references to *Christ* (as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy) into timeless examples of what can happen to us if we name and claim our blessings. He does not *interpret* Scripture; he *uses* it as a book of quotations to serve his own prosperity message. The book is shot through with the lingo of the prosperity gospel: we are to ‘declare’ God’s blessing, ‘speak’ prosperity, and ‘prophesy’ health, wealth, and happiness into our lives. All of this creates the impression that God has set everything up for our victory, but it is up to us to actually

plug into the power-source and create our blessings by following the proper principles and procedures.”⁶

This is why a number of leading Bible scholars and pastors, including John Stott, have declared it to be a ‘different gospel’ – not because it denies fundamental biblical teachings but because it *adds* false and misleading doctrines to them.⁷

I. PAUL’S OPPONENTS: PEDDLERS OF GOD’S WORD

The Apostles had earlier referred to opponents in Corinth as *peddlers* (II Cor. 2:17). The word KAPĒLEUONTES means a huckster, a person that resorts to manipulation to beguile and bamboozle people to buy his wares. This, in case these charlatans are using the Word of God as a pretense. They refer to themselves as “Super-Apostles” (11:5 and 12:11) and boast of their exalted status and tremendous gifts. Paul uses the following labels to describe them (II:13-15).

A. False Apostles, Deceitful Workers, Servants of Satan

Despite their claims, they are impostors who, as Hughes writes, “They are like those who, at a later date, set themselves up in Ephesus and called themselves apostles, but were not, and were found to be false (Rev. 2:2). They perform their destructive work with deceit, treachery, and cunning, similar to the ‘vain talkers and deceivers, specially they of the circumcision, ... men who overthrow whole houses, teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre’s sake,’ against whom Paul warned Titus (Titus 1:10f.), and to those who were causers of division and strife in the church at Rome, contrary to the apostolic teaching, and who are described by Paul as men who ‘serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly,’ and who ‘by their smooth and fair speech ... beguile the hearts of the innocent’ (Rom. 16:17f.). For the purpose of achieving their subversive ends these intruders even assume the guise of apostles of Christ. They pose as something which they are not, and in doing so they deceive those who through gullibility or inexperience are more ready to give credence to plausible impostors than to remember the sound teaching and the warnings of him who is their true apostle. If this was the case in the primitive New Testament Church it is no less so in our own day when we see the Church split into fragments by sectarianism and when an individual has only to make the most preposterous claims for himself in order to gain an enthusiastic and undiscerning following. In every age the Church is under urgent necessity to be proof against false apostles by remembering and holding fast to the doctrine of those who are Christ’s true apostles—that doctrine, in a word, which we possess in the writings of the New Testament.”⁸

II. PAUL’S WARNING

What determined the Apostle’s assessment of these men? The “gospel” they proclaimed was centered around a very different Jesus.

A. How was their gospel different? Some have suggested it was a heresy similar to that of the Galatians. However, evidence for a works theology is slight and subtle. The visible and dominant issue is what has been called ‘triumphalism:’ these new teachers brought a ‘gospel’ and a ‘Jesus’ of power and glory (triumph) without weakness and shame, and they had brought these things to a congregation already enamoured of such things (cf. 1 Cor. 4:8-10). It wasn’t long before the Corinthians were led to believe that being in touch with Jesus would lead to victory, power and success (all defined in worldly terms). The new teachers showed evidence of this themselves: they came with letters of recommendation (2 Cor. 3:1), they had the right background, they were impressive speakers, and they performed signs and wonders to support their teachings (cf. Paul’s critique in 2 Cor. 12:11-13).

- B. How did Paul combat this problem?** He taught the Corinthians about the true Jesus, the ministry of the cross and his own ministry, Jesus didn't walk in triumph according to the standards of the world. He suffered and was crucified. Therefore a true apostle doesn't live triumphantly (according to worldly standards). Instead, true power and true wisdom are found in weakness. This is why Paul reminds them of the very beginning of his ministry among them when he focused on the cross (1 Cor. 2:2). He wanted the Corinthians to know that God's ways are not man's ways and that God's power is seen in weakness-particularly in the humiliation of the cross (1 Cor. 1:18). Jews thought that miraculous signs were evidence that a person was in touch with the powerful God, and Greeks thought sophisticated rhetoric was proof of the divine, but Paul preached Christ crucified, 'a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles' (1 Cor. 1:22-24). But for those who have the Spirit, it becomes miraculously clear that this is where true power and true wisdom are found (1 Cor. 1:24; cf. 2:9-13).⁹

CONCLUSION:

The message of the Prosperity Gospel, despite its claims, is centered not in the faithfulness of God, but in human greed. The prosperity preachers are peddling the Word of God for personal gain. The Apostle Paul wrote of these types, "I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things" (Phil. 3:18, 19). The prosperity gospel is rooted in greed and as such it is idolatry. There is no more serious charge in the Bible than that of idolatry. Idolatry called for the strictest punishment, elicited the most disdainful polemic and prompted the most extreme measures of avoidance. The theological grounds for the judgment of idolatry is the jealousy of God, which inevitably leads him to stern action: "Do not follow other gods...for the LORD your God...is a jealous God and his anger will burn against you, and he will destroy you from the face of the land" (Deut. 6:14-15; cf. Josh 24:19-20; Ps. 78:58-64; Zeph 1:18). In the Old Testament, disgust and contempt for idolatry are communicated by several derogatory terms used to describe the idols. Idols are "unclean things," "weak" or "worthless things," "that which is insubstantial," and a "vanity" or "emptiness." The Israelites were not simply to avoid idolatry; the language of prohibition could hardly be more emotive and urgent; they are "utterly [to] abhor and detest" the heathen gods (Deut 7:25-26). For both Jews and Christians in the ancient world, the charge of idolatry evoked horror and alarm. The Church Father Tertullian (c. AD 200) did not exaggerate when he described idolatry as the "principal crime of the human race, the highest guilt charged upon the world, [and] the whole procuring cause of judgment." For this reason it is surprising to learn that the New Testament equates greed with idolatry on no fewer than four occasions. Colossians 3:5 states that "greed...is idolatry," and Ephesians 5:5 that the "greedy person...is an idolater." And according to Matthew 6:24 and Luke 16:13, Jesus portrayed wealth and possessions as a master that rivals God: "No-one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money [literally, Mammon]."¹⁰ In the final analysis the whole premise behind the Prosperity Gospel and their *different* Jesus is the idol of greed. John's words are a sober reminder that this is something that we are all prone to do. "My little children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21).

ENDNOTES

¹ I addressed this in my extended review of BYU professor, Robert Millet's book A Different Jesus? The Christ of the Latter-Day Saints (Eerdmans, 2005) in my chapter "The Reformation, Today's Evangelicals, and Mormons," in By Faith

Alone: Answering The Challenges to the Doctrine of Justification. Eds. G.L.W. Johnson & G. P. Waters (Crossway 2006).

² Kenneth Copeland, Welcome to the Family, KCP Publications, Fort Worth, 1979, p. 22.

³ Kenneth Copeland, You Are Healed, KCP Publications, Fort Worth, 1979, p. 7.

⁴ Jerry Savelle, God's Provision for Healing, Harrison House, Tulsa, 1981, p. 8.

⁵ Kenneth Copeland, The Laws of Prosperity, Kenneth Copeland Publications, Fort Worth, 1974, p. 67.

⁶ M. Horton, "Become a Better You: Reflections on Joel Osteen's Latest Book,"

<http://www.whitehorseinn.org/osteenreview.htm>.

⁷ Some helpful comments by John Stott can be found in Issues Facing Christians Today, Marshall Pickering, London, 1990, p. 244.

⁸ Philip Hughes, The Second Epistle to the Corinthians (Eerdmans, 1962) p. 392.

⁹ I am indebted to Philip Jensen for this helpful analysis. <http://matthiasmedia.com.au/briefing/library/3836/>

¹⁰ This is a summary of an excellent piece by Brian Rosner, "Unmasking Greed."

<http://matthiasmedia.com.au/briefing/library/2539>.