

## **Position paper of Theological Commission with regards to Prosperity and Blessings**

### **1. Introduction**

In the September 2006 issue of TIME Magazine, a controversial question which has been circulating within the evangelical circle virtually around the world has been posted –“Does God want You to be Rich? The article begins with the story of a certain George Adams who lost his job at a tile factory in Ohio, moved to Houston and became an avid viewer of the TV program of Lakewood Church mega pastor, Joel Osteen. It was said that after “subscribing” to Osteen’s teachings, Adams got a good job and was then on his way to a six-figure income. While most Christians would say that Jesus’ requirement for discipleship is self-denial and cross-bearing and that He warns people regarding the danger of gaining the world in exchange of one’s soul, others are clamoring, “Why not gain the whole world plus my soul? This theological and practical issue is not just prevalent in affluent countries like America but also in third world nations like the Philippines. The primary purpose of this paper is to examine, evaluate and discuss the teachings on health, blessings and wealth with the goal of producing a balanced understanding of the subject at hand. For those who seriously heed Christ’s call for discipleship, this matter is extremely significant. For those interested in a still deeper understanding of this topic, there are three more papers available on the ABCCOP website or email the National Office. There is one on the theology of blessings, from the OT as well as one from the NT. Also there is a Tagalog translation available of the very balanced discussion from the Lausanne Covenant regarding prosperity. Here we will give just a summary from all this study to aid the discussion in our Community.

At this time, people like Joel Osteen, Joyce Meyer and Joseph Prince might be the main people we hear from who preach to a smaller or larger extend the teachings of the prosperity, over time though we expect there will be others raising up and spreading teachings that do not seem Biblical. Therefore we have chosen to not come up with a statement against them, but rather with a Biblical Theology on blessings, health and wealth. For the Bible have things to say on this topic, but rather than fighting a person we try and go back to the Bible and see what it teaches us.

For the cause of this paper, we define prosperity gospel as ***the teaching that believers have a right to the blessings of health and wealth and that they can obtain these blessings through positive confessions of faith and the “sowing of seeds” through the faithful payments of tithes and offerings.***

## **2. Teachings on blessings from the OT**

### **2.1 Types of Blessing in the OT**

*Barak* with the meaning of “bless/blessing” comes in three types: God blessing human beings, human beings blessing other human beings, and human beings blessing God. This paper focuses on the first type, God blessing human beings.

### **2.2 God blessing human beings**

The first two occurrences of *barak* in the OT are found in Genesis 1, the first creation account. God blessed the animals (Gen 1:22) and the human beings (Gen 1:28) after he created them. In both passages the *barak* statements are the same. They consist of a narration and a pronouncement of blessing. The verb form of *barak* is also the same with the same subject, God (*Elohim*), the giver of the blessing.

The narration in these *barak* statements describes God’s act of blessing through speech: “And God blessed them saying...” (Gen 1:22); “And God blessed them. And God said to them...” (Gen 1:28). The narration is then followed a pronouncement of blessing: “Be fruitful and multiply and fill (the earth)” In this pronouncement, God uses the imperative: “be fruitful, multiply, and fill.” Note, however, that these statements are not mere commands but blessings expressed “in the imperative”.

Two areas constitute the blessing: first, the capacity to reproduce (fertility) and thus grow and populate on the part of the recipients of the blessing. Second, the blessing gives nuance to the adequacy of the earth to sustain and support all creatures God created. In other words, when God created the earth it was with the intention that it could adequately provide for the needs of the creatures that were created to live in it.

Based on the blessing statements above, we may formulate a general definition for bless/blessing. It is God’s bestowal of gifts to those whom God has favoured. These gifts may come in the form offspring (fertility), success, good fortune, power, or wealth.

Mitchell argues that the bestowal of gifts is not the most significant element in blessing. More significant is the relationship between the one blessing and the one being blessed. Thus, in Gen 1:22 and 1:28, the blessing shows the “positive relationship” between God and the animals and human beings. Blessing demonstrates the “goodwill” of the bestower of blessing towards the one being blessed.

Another factor to consider is the reason or purpose for giving the blessing. What was God’s purpose for blessing the animals and human beings in Genesis 1? The answer can be found in the blessing itself: so that both humans and animals would inhabit the earth and for man to rule over it. The blessing pronouncement then may be paraphrased this way: “I have created you with the capacity to reproduce, and I

have created the earth for you to live in. It is adequate of supporting and sustaining you. So live in it and fulfil the purpose(s) for which you were created."

Note that in Genesis 3, the curses directed to the first man and woman was also connected to fertility and the land. The woman was cursed in childbearing, while the man, in working land.

### **2.3 God blessing the patriarchs**

Genesis 12:1-3 (ESV) 1 Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. 2 And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

With Abraham, the blessing was a promise yet to be fulfilled. God's blessing was an "expression of his goodwill towards Abraham". The blessing was given not as a reward for what Abraham had done but to encourage him to follow him and enter into a covenant with him. In Gen 12:3, God's blessing extended to those who were in good relationship with Abraham. Other nations would also receive God's blessing through Abraham.

### **2.4 Blessing in the Wisdom Literature.**

The concept of blessing in the OT should be studied also in the Wisdom Literature. Wisdom literature represents the views and perspectives of the sages in the Old Testament. The scope of their study and interest is life here on earth. Their writings focus on day to day "human experience in a good world that was created by God." The sages in their endeavor to understand human life had to grapple also with the issue of blessing and retribution. In this paper, I will deal with wisdom perspectives in Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes.

The Book of Job shows that there are persons who are faithful and will remain faithful to God even when blessings are wanting or when they experience suffering.

The Book of Ecclesiastes deals with the issue of the discrepancy between expected reward and retribution. The speaker, Qoheleth, has sought out through wisdom what lasting reward a person will receive for all his toil here on earth (Ecc. 2:10). But he observes that the reward for a (righteous) person's toil does not bring lasting satisfaction, for everything, wealth and even life, is temporary (cf. Ecc. 2:1-11, 17-19). He further observes that at times there is no difference between the life of the righteous with that of the wicked (Ecc 2:14-16; 3:20) and at times the reward justly due the righteous person does not happen to him; instead it happens to the wicked

person.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Qohelet observes that life is filled with suffering or misery, that is, in life there is “much vexation and sickness and anger” (Eccl 5:17).

### **3. Teachings on blessings from the NT**

If we move to the NT we can observe that the Lord’s teachings would usher any student of Scripture to conclude that wealth is one of Jesus’ major concentrations in His messages.

#### **3.1 Material possessions**

##### **3.1.1 Material wealth and possessions are not inherently evil.**

1 Timothy 6:17 tells us that God “richly provides us with everything to enjoy”. Rich individuals like Joseph of Arimathea, Philemon and the lady supporters of Jesus, who are ardent believers of the Lord, are mentioned. After the radical conversion of Zacchaeus, he exclaimed that he would give half of his possessions to the poor, indicating that still a portion of his wealth would be left for him (Luke 19:8). The Apostle Paul makes it clear that the root for all kinds of evil is not money itself but the love of it (*filargyuria*, “love of money” –one word in Greek, 1 Tim. 6:10).

Gordon Fee says, “It is equally clear that Jesus did not have an ascetic’s eye toward property”. He justifies such claim by stating that “He and His disciples were supported by well-to-do women” (Luke 8:2ff) and that Peter owned a home in Capernaum.

##### **3.1.2 The quality of a person’s life is not measured by the amount of wealth one has.**

Jesus strongly announces in his story of the Parable of the Rich Fool that “one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” (Luke 12:15). Fee mentions accurately: “For Jesus, wealth and possessions were a zero value. In the new age, they simply do not count. The standard is sufficiency, and surplus is called into question”. Paul, in his second epistle to the Corinthians describes his entire apostolic team “as having nothing, yet possessing everything (2 Cor. 6:10)”. The Lord Himself says in John 10:10: “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” At the surface, it appears that Jesus promises a full or abundant life, which is to be understood in a material sense. However, the general teaching of the Bible and the context of John 10 asserts otherwise.

##### **3.1.3 Wealth is not indicative of the condition of one’s relationship with God.**

In a culture where wealth was presumed to be an indication of God’s favor and blessing, Jesus’ assertion was unequivocal. Wealth is not a sign of righteousness or God’s favor. Instead, it is a grave peril to our relationship with God”. When Jesus told the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus in Luke, the Pharisees could have been contesting it since they are lovers of money and believed that earthly wealth is an indication of God’s favor (Luke 16:14).

---

<sup>1</sup> Such as in Ecc 9:15 where a righteous man who deserves to live long ends with a short life and the wicked man lives a long life.

### **3.1.4 God blesses people in order for them to be a channel of blessing to others.**

As mentioned earlier, Jesus explicitly teaches that worldly wealth has no value unless it will be spent for the advancement of His Kingdom and for those in need (Matt. 6:19-21, 33; Mark 10:21; Luke 12:33). Paul mentions in 2 Cor. 9:8 that God is able to make all grace abound to the Corinthian believers so that they would also abound in good works. Later in v. 11, he asserts that the Lord enriches His people in every way so that they would become generous.

### **3.1.5 Contentment, not poverty, is a Godly virtue.**

This section very much connected to the second point that was presented in this paper earlier. Contentment can only happen through the enabling grace of Jesus and when there is that right understanding of wealth. Paul walks his talk regarding contentment. He announces to the Philippian believers that he learned to be content in whatever situation -whether in plenty and hunger or in abundance and in need (Phil 4:10-13). In his other epistle, he also emphasized that godliness with contentment is highly advantageous. Mankind brought nothing to this world and cannot take anything out of it. Then he asserts that if a person has food and clothing, he has to be content (1 Tim 6:6-8). In Phil. 4:11, the Greek word *autarkhs*, which is commonly translated as “content”, literally means “self-sufficient”. In his book *The Secret of Contentment*, William Barclay shares a powerful insight concerning Paul’s contentment: “What, then, does Paul mean by “self-sufficiency” in Philippians 4:11? In context, the idea of self- sufficiency here is that outward circumstances do not determine us. We are content no matter where God puts us, no matter what our situation. Furthermore, we do not rely on externals to bring us contentment”. In that sense, the pursuit of riches is in conflict with the practice of contentment.

### **3.1.6 Spiritual and eternal dangers coincide in the pursuit of earthly wealth that is fueled by the idolatry of covetousness.**

Paul warns Timothy plainly regarding the fatal dangers of the yearning to get rich (1 Tim 6:9). Then he concludes in v. 10 that love of money is the root of all kinds of evil and because of it many deserted the faith and lived miserable lives. The Lord Jesus also makes it clear that no one can serve both God and money. A choice has to be made for either he will hate the one and love the other, or vice versa (Matt 6:24). Demas, who was one of Paul’s faithful companions eventually deserted him because he was enamored with the world (2 Tim 4:10).

### **3.1.7 God does not promise His children that they will all prosper materially.**

There has been a common misunderstanding of the passage in 3 John 2 where Paul says to Gaius: “Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers”. Some understand this passage as a guarantee that all believers will surely prosper materially and be kept in excellent health on this side of eternity. However, such interpretation of the passage is faulty. Fee explains:

*In the first place, the Greek word translated “prosper” in the KJV means “to go well with someone”, just as a friend in a letter two days ago said, “I pray that this letter two*

*days ago said, "I pray this letter finds you all well" (cf. 3 John 2 in the KJV, GNB, NEB, RSV, etc.). This combination of wishing for "things to go well" and for the recipient's "good health" was the standard form of greeting in a personal letter of antiquity. To extend John's wish for Gaius to refer to financial and material prosperity for all Christians of all times is totally foreign to the text. John neither intended that, nor could Gaius have so understood it.*

## **3.2 Health**

Another matter that is covered is the issue on health. As mentioned earlier, some believe that good health and material prosperity are normative for every Christian. To address this matter, the following need to be examined:

### **3.2.1 Physical sickness came as a result of the fall of Adam**

Rom. 8:19-24 teaches that since the entrance of sin to the world, the whole creation was subjected to futility and held in bondage to corruption. Wayne Grudem asserts: "Illness and disease are simply part of the fall in Adam, and eventually lead toward physical death". Similarly, Millard J. Erickson asserts: "It appears that the origin of sickness in general was the fall, as result in which the host of evils entered the world".

### **3.2.2 While there is a connection between the fall and sickness, the latter is not always associated with sin**

In John 9:2-3, the story about a man that was born blind is told. The disciples had this notion that all illnesses are sin-related so they asked Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" But the Lord gave this answer, "It was not this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him." Paul got his "thorn in the flesh" for a purpose. Although one cannot be certain in telling what that is, there is a common understanding that it is a physical ailment, perhaps in the eye (Gal 4:15). He pleaded to God three times to take it away, yet it remained. God used it to humble Paul and lead him to always cling to His grace (2 Cor. 12:7-9).

### **3.2.3 Healing is not promised to all sick people**

Not all prayers for healing will certainly be answered in this age. There are indications in the Early Church that some people were not healed even in the presence of the apostles. Epaphroditus had an illness that brought him "near to death" (Phil 2:27). Paul instructed Timothy to drink a little wine "for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments" (1 Tim. 5:23). Paul said, "I left Trophimus, who was ill, at Miletus" (2 Tim 4:20).

Gordon Fee, though a firm believer of divine healing in the present age, argues: Basically [the conviction that praying in faith for the sick always results to healing] lies in some biblical and theological distortions which insist: (1) that God wills perfect health and complete healing for every believer, and (2) that God has obligated Himself to heal every sickness for those who have faith (unless the

sickness is the result of breaking God's "health" laws). Integral to this theology is the insistence that faith can claim such healing from God, and that any failure to be healed is not the fault of God but of the one who has not had enough faith. Very often claiming healing means to confess it as done, even though the symptoms persist, so that at times one meets a blind, or diseased, person who claims to have been healed, even though the blind continue to grope in darkness and the sick still are riddled with pain.

#### **4. Conclusion**

We like to call for further reflection on these matters within our ABCCOP community, and would like to make a very clear statement rejecting the excesses of prosperity teaching as incompatible with evangelical Biblical Christianity.

On the other hand we do affirm the miraculous grace and power of God, and welcome the growth of churches and ministries that demonstrate them and that lead people to exercise expectant faith in the living God and his supernatural power. We believe in the power of the Holy Spirit. However we do not *believe that God's miraculous power can be treated as automatic, or manipulated by human words, actions or rituals.*

We do see God blessing His people all over the Bible, from creation via the patriarch and wisdom literature up to the teachings of Jesus. But more important is that the material and physical gifts, is the shown relationship between the giver and the receiver of the blessings. The promise to Abraham were not specific to him, but to all the people. In the wisdom literature we find faithfulness in suffering (Job), worthlessness of material gains in the long run (Ecc.)

Material wealth and possessions are not inherently evil. The quality of person's life is not measured by the amount of wealth one has. Wealth is not indicative of the condition of one's relationship with God. The same can be said with regards to health. God blesses people in order for them to be a channel of blessing to others. Contentment, not poverty, is a Godly virtue.

We pray with this paper that the discussion of a Biblical view on prosperity and blessing can be started openly in our churches. For a deeper background, please refer to the following three papers available at ABCCOP.

OT theology on Blessing

NT theology on Blessing

Lausanne statement on prosperity gospel (Tagalog and English)

Theo Com:

Hilda de Keijzer (OIC theological education dept)

Ptr Sam Castro

Ptr Jun Gonzaga

Ptr Winner Delos Reyes

With contribution of Dr. Madaline Vega (OT theology on blessing)