

**PROSPERITY THEOLOGY:
MERE SYMPTOM OF GRAVER PROBLEMS IN
NEO-PENTECOSTALISM**
TEOLOGIA DA PROSPERIDADE:
UM MERO SINTOMA DE PROBLEMAS MAIS GRAVES NO
NEOPENTECOSTALISMO

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the Neo-Pentecostal Movement, particularly in Brazil but also in other Global South contexts, which is a principal advocate the prosperity theology message. However, this same movement, as explained herein, actually promotes and sustains other characteristics in addition to the prosperity message, which pose significant challenges to evangelical missions. Include two aspects: an unredeemed, animistic worldview and an inadequate evangelical soteriology. Gaining the understanding of such complexities will hopefully lead to a more compassionate posture and better evangelistic strategies to serve Neo-Pentecostal adherents.

Keywords: Prosperity Theology. Neo-Pentecostal. Pentecostal. Lausanne Movement. Missions. Universal Church of the Kingdom of God.

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RESUMO

Esse artigo focaliza no movimento neopentecostal, particularmente no Brasil, mas também em outros contextos do Hemisfério Sul, que é o principal movimento defensor da mensagem da Teologia da Prosperidade. Contudo, esse mesmo movimento, conforme é explicado aqui, promove e sustenta outras características em adição à mensagem da prosperidade, o que apresenta desafios significativos às missões evangélicas. Isso inclui dois aspectos: 1) uma cosmovisão animista e 2) uma soteriologia evangélica inadequada. O entendimento de tais complexidades pode, conforme se espera, levar a uma postura mais compassiva e a melhores estratégias para servir aos adeptos neopentecostais.

Palavras-chaves: Teologia da Prosperidade. Neopentecostal. Pentecostal. Movimento de Lausanne. Missões. Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus.

INTRODUCTION

As a participant at the Third Congress for World Evangelization held in Cape Town, South Africa and sponsored by what is known as the Lausanne Movement (LM), I benefited from reading articles and hearing responses concerning prosperity theology. I agree with what was stated at the congress about prosperity theology, as well as the declaration concerning this subject in *The Cape Town Commitment* (LM 2011). In general, a strong condemnation was pronounced as prosperity teachers exploit the poor, distort the Scriptures, and partake in and promote greed.

Although the LM's Cape Town Congress specifically dealt with the growing problem of prosperity teaching, documents by the LM previously pronounced such attitudes and tactics as deplorable. *The Willow Bank Report* (LOP 2, LM 1978), for example, denounced as "sin" any mixing of the Gospel with a "worldly (even demonic) attitude of wealth and power".

Larger problems, however, exists among those who espouse the prosperity theology message, especially in the context which many label as "the two-thirds world" or "Global South" - terms which include the nation of Brazil. This article will center on what is called Neo-Pentecostalism, which has been a principal carrier of prosperity theology, but poses additional and more complex challenges to evangelical missions beyond the prosperity message aspect.

This author does not set out to criticize or marginalize Pentecostal or charismatic brethren. The majority of Pentecostals and charismatics, particularly the ones with whom in the LM, would agree that this latest Pentecostal derivative presents grave concerns and does not characterize them.

Three general traits typically embody Neo-Pentecostalism: 1) prosperity theology; 2) aggressive spiritual warfare tactics and 3) the elimination of Pentecostal holiness practices. In fact, these same characteristics are generally observed in Neo-Pentecostal groups outside of Latin America, which merit mentioning next.² Evangelicalism overwhelmingly in Brazil is Pentecostal with at least 42 percent of Pentecostals estimated to be Neo-Pentecostals.³ With nearly half of all Pentecostals associated with this latest movement and its resultant impact upon the general Pentecostal camp and evangelicals at large, evangelicals must comprehend what Neo-Pentecostal proponents teach, what their participants understand and the implications generated for evangelical missions.

As cursorily stated, Neo-Pentecostalism should not be viewed as constricted to a certain nation or continent. The Brazilian Neo-Pentecostal denomination *Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus* (IURD), for example, is possibly the largest contemporary Christian export from a two-thirds-world nation with the country of South Africa as its missionary base to spread into other southern African nations.⁴ Sociologists who focus on religions also have noted the global spreading of the Neo-Pentecostal message and practices.⁵ During the LM's Cape Town Congress, colleagues spoke of this same phenomenon in many nations in Asia, Africa as well as in Central and Latin America. This issue continued to be mentioned at the LM's Global Consultation on Prosperity Theology, Poverty and the Gospel held in Atibaia, São Paulo in 2014; this author had the privilege of being one of the 40 gathered participants at this event. Thus, Neo-Pentecostalism should be viewed as a global movement which the global church must consider given its widespread influence.

From personal observations and research⁶ as well as reading about global Pentecostalism, it is this 'third wave' that significantly promotes the prosperity theology discourse. Prosperity theology clearly received its inspiration from North-American proponents, but it finds the most fertile soil in two-thirds nations. The discourse, however, alters (i.e. glocalizes) for a significantly different setting than that of North

² STÅLSETT, Sturla J. (Ed). *Spirits of globalization: the growth of Pentecostalism and experiential spiritualities in a global age*. London: SCM Press, 2006. p. 4.

³ PEREIRA, Camila; LINHARES, Juliana. Os novos pastores. *Veja*, July 12, 2006. p. 84-85.

⁴ FRESTON, Paul. The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God: a Brazilian church finds success in southern Africa. *Journal of Religion in Africa* 35(1), 2005. p. 33-34; 40-55.

⁵ E.g. CORTEN; MARSHALL-FRATANI, André; MARSHALL-FRATANI, Ruth (Eds). *Between Babel and Pentecost: Transnational Pentecostalism in Africa and Latin America*. Bloomington & Indianapolis, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2001; STÅLSETT, 2006.

⁶ BLEDSOE, David Allen. *Movimento neopentecostal brasileiro: um estudo de caso*. São Paulo: Hagnos, 2012.

America. This modified form needs to be better understood than just manipulating the poor or a few preaching of getting rich. Two areas follow which demonstrate that the Neo-Pentecostal Movement stands as threat to evangelical missions and a specific challenge to minister to associated adherents.

AN UNREDEEMED, ANIMISTIC WORLDVIEW

The folk religious worldview of *most* Neo-Pentecostals shows a deficient view of evangelical-based Christianity. Surely, Christ is not denied; he is included, since the prosperity theology message emphasizes health-and-prosperity benefits through the atonement. However, Neo-Pentecostal adherents and teachers have more in common with mediumistic religions, which commonly exist in fear-based societies. In mediumistic religions, shamans go through rituals and distribute amulets for avoiding or ridding a malady and receiving a needed blessing. The Neo-Pentecostal equivalent would call this shaman-like figure a pastor or apostle, and amulets with Christian-based connections are often distributed during worship services.

Gailyn Van Rheenen offers a concise explanation of animism:

The belief that personal spiritual beings and impersonal spiritual forces have power over human affairs and, consequently, that human beings must discover what beings and forces are influencing them in order to determine future action and, frequently, to manipulate their power.⁷

This general description of animism alarmingly applies to much of the worldview and resultant practices of Neo-Pentecostal churches and its teachers. As already mentioned, prosperity theology clearly exists; however, it is proposed that this animistic trait, present in how Neo-Pentecostals perceive the spiritual dimension which they must reckon, actually sustains the prosperity message. Using an agricultural analogy, the prosperity element would be the fertilizer on which lays on the top of the rich soil of animism, which has been prepared among the vast majority in their Global South contexts through the enculturation process. For this reason, Neo-Pentecostal groups bear resemblance with many mediumistic religions and folk religious groups.

The issue before the Neo-Pentecostal participant most often centers on daily struggles or a personal betterment project (e.g. better job to provide for one's family, purchase of a home, finding a spouse). Such matters are indeed necessary and

⁷VAN RHEENEN, Gailyn. *Communicating Christ in animistic contexts*. Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 1991. p. 20.

noble for churches to address. However, the spiritual strategy to bring about relief or improvement of the individual's situation overtly goes over of the line of groups which claim any measure of an evangelical allegiance. When it comes to the integrity of the Gospel message and its implications, the means never justify the end, even if intentions are noble. Further complicating the issue, the prosperity theology dynamic allows for one's need to be self defined which, in turn, encourages narcissistic desires beyond Christian boundaries. In Neo-Pentecostalism, the Lord and his Gospel frequently become the means to an end, which actually is a form of idolatry and also fits into the previously given definition of animism.

INADEQUATE EVANGELICAL SOTERIOLOGY

For *most* of Neo-Pentecostalism, the health-and-wealth benefits are not only included in the atonement, but it defines the hermeneutic for interpreting the Scriptures and consequently redefines the Gospel itself. The prosperity theology narrative also encompasses the liberation of oneself from demonic ills in order to receive desired prosperity relief; thus, one should not be surprised that the system is more 'demoncentric' than christocentric.⁸ In reality, Christ unfortunately is either placed in the background or merely brought up at the end of prayers instead of being the center of one's faith.

Furthermore, prosperity theology requires demonstrations of faith for results, and faith often becomes redefined as sacrifice, which usually shows itself in the giving of tithes and financial offerings. In medieval and folk forms of Catholicism as well as mediumistic religions, sacrifices are often required for divine provision or intervention. Therefore, one can discern a syncretistic parallel which also undermine the indispensable truths of the Gospel - only Christ, only Scripture, only faith, only grace, and only to God's glory - as confirmed by the reformers.⁹

In short, the Neo-Pentecostal message presents an inadequate soteriology when compared to a New Testament/evangelical based understanding of salvation. This statement has been confirmed over the years from personal research and particularly on the most recognized Neo-Pentecostal manifestation in Brazil, the IURD.¹⁰ Sadly, it is rare occasion that I converse with a Neo-Pentecostal who can articulate any notion

⁸ BLEDSOE, 2012, p. 128-134.

⁹ LM 1980. LOP 10. *Christian witness to nominal Christians among Roman Catholics*. Pattaya, Thailand. <<http://www.lausanne.org/all-documents/lop-10.html>>. Accessed: February 10, 2009. sect 1.

¹⁰ BLEDSOE, 2012, p. 111-159.

of a New Testament response for salvation. In fact, their response often lacks any mention of Jesus. Yet how can one be saved if the basis for salvation does not center on Jesus (Acts 4.12; Rom. 10.13)?

The tricky part for most evangelicals is that those within the Neo-Pentecostal Movement embrace cursory elements of evangelicalism. They also present themselves and seem evangelical, as they use the same evangelical vocabulary, cite familiar biblical stories, and also enjoy a sociological classification as part of the “army of God”. For these reasons pastors, missionaries, and leaders have difficulty assessing churches that associate with Neo-Pentecostalism and fail to see those within as the mission field rather than part of the evangelical mission force.¹¹

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As presented herein, the reader hopefully has perceived that this movement presents significant challenges for evangelical missions which include but go beyond prosperity theology. If the stated aim has been accomplished, then one can better appreciate the reality that Neo-Pentecostal adherents merit compassionate and evangelistic efforts.

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