AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY AND THE CHALLENGE OF PROSPERITY GOSPEL

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Abstract
Every Christian will agree with Prosperity message’s emphasis that God wills the blessing of His people. While most will insist that the greatest blessing of God is Jesus Christ, Prosperity Message equates divine blessing directly with the good things of this earthly life – health, wealth, fertility, upward social mobility, ‘break-through’. These are seen as evidence that one has the right relationship with God; that one is sharing in the dominion of God; that one is a winner. This dominion is exercised through faith understood not as humble submission to the will of God but as the belief that whatever one wishes would come true if only one did not harbor any doubt. This raises the question with regard to the extent this form of Christianity is in accord with the Christian tradition. The view espoused here is that it is a recomposition of Christianity. Christian tradition does not condemn prosperity, but the projection of prosperity rather than the kingdom of God and its righteousness (Matt 6:33) as the focus, has far reaching implications. Notwithstanding the resonance between the emphasis in Prosperity message and what has been described as the anthropocentricity of African traditional religions, it seems to me that the globalized consumerist and neoliberal culture provides the hermeneutical key to its appropriation of the Christian tradition. Such appropriations of the Christian message into new cultural settings and emphasis is normal. It is the dynamic inherent in the translatable of the Christian message. It is also what makes possible the reception and reimagining of the faith into different cultural milieus so that one can speak of African, Asian or European Christianity. But the appropriation of the Christian message in Prosperity message seems to have downplayed important elements and resulted in one-sidedness and distortion. Prosperity message therefore challenges African Christianity to engage this relatively new cultural context shaping the sensitivities of many Africans today that has made Prosperity message popular; to plumb the undercurrent of this brand of Christianity in view, among other things, learn from it and to work out the best way to contribute to the prosperity of Africa.

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Introduction

In what has been dubbed the “Benny Hinn confession,” made as recently as September 2019, one of the popular preachers of prosperity, Benny Hinn, made a public retraction. He denounced the Prosperity message and explicitly acknowledged that it is erroneous. “I don’t want to get to heaven and be rebuked. I think it is time we say it like it is: the Gospel is not for sale and the blessings of God are not for sale; and miracles are not for sale and prosperity is not for sale.” In another interview, Benny Hinn claimed that what began to bother him was “where is Jesus in the message?” About the Prosperity preachers, he said, “nobody talks about the cross,” and reaffirmed, “we have to preach the cross again.” Benny Hinn confessed that although he had always loved Jesus, he became distracted. Being sixty-seven years of age and reviewing his life with regard to how he wants to be remembered, he stated “I do not want to be known for prosperity. I want to be known as someone who preaches the cross of Jesus, on salvation, teaches the Holy Spirit … not on money, not on prosperity.”

Although stoutly denied by him, Benny Hinn’s confession could be an effort at damage control. Not long before his confession, his nephew, Pastor Costi Hinn who grew up with him, had published a book, *God, Greed and the “Prosperity” Gospel,* with the subtitle “How Truth Overwhelms a Life Built on Lies.” The book is both a scathing criticism of the Prosperity message and an exposition of life of stupendous affluence within the Hinn dynasty. Whatever were their reasons – Costi and Benny Hinns’ – for distancing themselves from this brand of Christianity, it has to be noted that they are not the first, and not even the first high profile preachers of Prosperity, to make such a denunciation of the Prosperity message. In the 1980s, Jimmy Swaggart attacked what he called “prosperity teaching” and other things he characterized as “feel good”

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2 This is my transcription of the declaration: “I am sorry to say that prosperity has gone a little crazy and I am correcting my own theology. You need all to know it because when I read the Bible now, I don’t see the Bible in the same eyes as I saw the Bible twenty years ago…. I think it is an offence to the Holy Spirit to place a price on the Gospel; I am done with it. I will never again ask you to give a $1000 or whatever amount because I think the Holy Ghost is fed up with it…. I think it hurts the Gospel…. If I hear one more time again ‘break the back of debt with $1000, I wanna rebuke them. I think that I buying the Gospel, buying the blessing, that is grieving the Holy Spirit. That is about all I will say. If you are not giving because you love Jesus, don’t bother giving. I think giving has become such a gimmick, it makes me sick. You know why? I have been sick for a while, I just couldn’t say, now the lid is off. You have heard it…..” See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4TQQirZl9Fs accessed on September 20, 2019.
3 Benny Hinn, Interview with David Diga Hernandez in https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8qUQwmwC7Oe accessed on September 20, 2019.
4 Benny Hinn, Interview with David Diga Hernandez, ibid.
aspects of Christianity.\(^6\) This made the waves for a short time and died down. Such retractions and other accusations of fakery, do not seem to impact the spread of this version of Christianity and understandably so. This means that the Prosperity message speaks to a felt need in today’s world, not only in Africa, but also in Europe and America. This is the need for security and for material comfort.

Beyond these self-evident needs of human beings, something deeper seems to have happened and continues to happen. There has always been insecurity and poverty. But Christianity’s responses to these have varied through history. There was a time when people were encouraged to see themselves as pilgrims on earth carrying their crosses in imitation of Jesus Christ as they make their way back to their heavenly home where all tears will be wiped away. This shifted to a mobilization of Christians to collaborate with Christ in the coming of the God’s Kingdom, by working towards making the love of God permeate their personal lives and also the socio-cultural, economic and political sphere in order to address the structural roots of poverty and insecurity. This was still a way of the cross that encouraged self-denial for the good of all. In the Prosperity Message, however, the response to insecurity and poverty, often reduced to only material poverty, is the mobilization of divine power through the speaking of the word of faith and through the sowing of seed. What is however sown is money and as in Ponzi schemes – MMM for example – the more you put in, the more you get out. In this vision, heaven has receded from view, so also the cross and commitment to the common good. Indeed, what has happened is that Christianity has been refitted in line with the globalized culture of consumerism and neoliberalism.

The main challenge of the Prosperity Message to African Christianity, in my view, is first of all cultural and then theological. This is because African Christianity so far can be seen as the outcome of the translation of the Christian message, shaped in European modernity, into the African cultural context also influenced by modernity. Prosperity message represents Christianity reshaped, indeed recomposed, by the culture of consumerism and neoliberalism. Through the transnational flow of images and meaning made possible by information communication technologies, the existential contexts of people are being reshaped by the globalized culture of consumerism and neoliberalism through the Prosperity Message. It is only by paying attention to the cultural shift occasioned by globalized consumerism and neoliberalism that the recomposition of Christianity and Christian theology taking place in the Prosperity Message

\(^6\)https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1987/04/08/jimmy-swaggarts-controversial-crusade/13ae9bdc-30e4-43de-b088-3b6c2ad57a44/ accessed September 19, 2019
can shine through. Through such attention, one also keeps track of the transformation in African cultures.

To work out the above insight, we shall present a sketchy history of the shifts in African Christianity guided by the principle of the translatability of the Gospel message. This will help one see Prosperity Message for the contrast it is with what has gone before it in spite of its similarity with the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement with which it shares family resemblance. This will open us up to a consideration of Prosperity Message and the culture of consumerism and neoliberalism. A theological engagement of some of the issues thrown up will then be undertaken. The conclusion will point towards a response, more adequate than Prosperity Message, to creating prosperity in Africa.

African Christianity and the Translatability of the Good News

African Christianity does not refer primarily to Christianity found on the continent of Africa. This will be a reference to the geography of the Christian spread. Rather, African Christianity presupposes some quality to that Christianity. It refers to a form of Christianity which has resulted from the translation, the crossing over, engagement and appropriation of the Christian message into the African life-world with the resulting enrichment of the form of Christianity received and the African culture. One can speak of this as Christianity that has incarnated into Africa. Just as the eternal Word of God at the fullness of time took flesh in the Blessed Virgin Mary (Gal 4:4) to become true God and true human being, in the same way, the Christian message is expected to take flesh in the African life-world and remain truly Christian and truly African. This is an ongoing project in so far as culture is dynamic and the depth of the Christian mysteries inexhaustible. But unlike the incarnation of the Word, Christianity always comes clothed in cultural garbs. Therefore, the spread of Christianity puts in motion an intercultural conversation – a give and take – for the mutual benefit of both.

Lamin Sanneh captures this intercultural conversation with the metaphor of translation. There is an anecdote that captures the complexity of intercultural conversation and translation. An adult Igbo catechumen was asked: *uzo mmuo one di?* (how many kinds of spirits are there?). The catechist was expecting the Thomistic classification of created and uncreated spirits. But the catechumen rather rattled off *Ogwugwu, Udo, Ajaana, Haaba* etc., - the names of the deities and spirits honored in his community and beyond. This is more than a misunderstanding. Rather, the translation of Spirit into vernacular *Mmuo*, became a meeting point of the Thomistic framework of missionary Christianity and the traditional Igbo cosmology. The success of the work of reception of Christianity into the Igbo cultural context depends on how much, as Sanneh puts
it, “the essence of the gospel is unscrambled from one cultural yoke in order to take firm hold in a different culture.”\textsuperscript{7} For this to happen, the cultural clothing of the Christian message brought by the missionaries has to be relativized and the frames of understanding of the Igbo culture used to appropriate the Christian message respectfully teased out from its embedded culture.

The early Christians, because they were predominantly Jewish, resisted crossing over into the culture of the Gentiles. This struggle is recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. One reads of Peter’s trance in Joppa which nudged him across the divide between Jews and Gentiles and to visit Cornelius where he learnt that nothing should be called unclean and that God has no favorites (Acts 10). This was contrary to what many of the early converts from Judaism to Christianity were thinking. These felt that the religious practices of Judaism have a place in the divine plan. To members of this group, the Jews were the favorites of God and unless the converts to Christianity were circumcised according to the Law of Moses, they would not be saved (Acts 15:2). The decision of the Council of Jerusalem not to put any burden beyond what is necessary on the converts (Acts 15:28) underlined thickly the principle of translatability of the Christian message. They relativized the Jewish culture and any other culture that the Christian message would ever be subsequently incarnated in. The Christian message stands open to cross over and take as its own, any culture. Pluralism of cultural expression of the same Christian message is legitimate. Thus, Pope St. John Paul II threw the challenge to Africans that African Christianity is not an option but an obligation. In other words, Christianity must not only be in Africa but be of Africa.

The answer to the question of how African the Christianity in the mainline Churches is depends on who one asks. My opinion is that appropriation is ever going on. Whatever is received is received into the receptacle deployed by the receiver. This receptacle can, however, be overwhelmed so that proper mastication and digestion is stalled. This is why conscious and concerted effort at appropriating Christianity in African categories must go on both in the mainline Churches with an institutional structure and tradition spanning generations and in the African Initiatives in Christianity (AICs) who have to appropriate the insights into the Christian message won by Christians over the ages and in different climes.

The AICs provide a large canvass for depicting the socio-cultural concerns that have impacted Christianity in Africa. Matthew Ojo gives a sketch

African Christianity and the Challenge of Prosperity Gospel

The wave of missionary effort that took a foothold in Africa, especially south of the Sahara began in the 19th Century. The cumulative effect of Christian literacy stimulated self-awareness, which partly manifested in the agitation for more opportunities for African leadership in the Churches and the quest to make the Churches more indigenous. Resistance resulted in secession from the mission Churches. Such groups were then called African Independent Churches or African Indigenous Churches. While the adjective, ‘independent’ not only draws attention to the fact that they broke away from the mission Churches but also to the fact that they have independent leadership, ‘indigenous’ points to the project of these Churches. Consequently, cultural practices such as polygamy and drumming were promoted in these Churches. In the second decade of the twentieth century emerged the Aladura Churches in Nigeria. These emphasized healing and prophecy and introduced some healing rituals that integrate African cultural elements.

In the early 1970s, the Pentecostal and Charismatic groups emerged on the scene. There have been different waves of Pentecostalism beginning with those closely aligned to the holiness movement. In this group are members of the Scripture Union. Ladies who tied the headscarf and wore no make-up were automatically suspected to be members of the Scripture Union. Another wave of Pentecostalism laid more emphases on the spiritual gifts especially, speaking in tongues. In the 1980s, what was distinctive of the Pentecostal and charismatic groups is the speaking in tongues and other manifestations of the Holy Spirit such as ‘slaying in the spirit’ etc. The emergence of Prosperity Message in the 1980s marked significant changes not only in Christianity but also in African cultures. What changed in my view is the globalization of consumerism and neoliberal culture accelerated by the improvement in information communication technologies. Prosperity message is both an offspring and a vehicle of this culture through religion.

GLOBALIZED CONSUMER AND NEOLIBERAL CULTURE

Human beings have always consumed goods and services. The Igbo, for example, have bartered, bought, sold and consumed food items, such as yam, cassava, etc. At a point in time, however, rice was introduced. Then it was the food of the rich. To eat rice acquired the added importance of marking one’s new status vis-à-vis others in the community. Similarly, in the days of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the mirror was also an object to mark one’s status and success. People strove to buy mirrors not because of their use value but as the

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expression of their new status and identity in contrast with others. Of course, rice and mirrors are now commonplace just as Volvo or Mercedes 190 series are, having been the desired cars in the 1980s.

Consumerism is about making goods the vehicles of self-expression, identity and status. Consumer society is one that builds on this as the engine of economic growth. The more people consume luxury goods and services, the more such goods need to be made and the more labor hands would be needed for their production and distribution. This means that more jobs are created. With more people gainfully employed, the wages they earn put more money at their disposal to spend. As long as the money is not put away in savings, the cycle continues. To lubricate the wheels of consumption, advertisement steps in not to give information about products but to create a reality in which buying a product is equated to an improvement on the person’s life, wellbeing or status. Adverts strive to align ownership of a particular product with social status and evidence of success. The success of a brand is in direct proportion to the desire created by advertising through inventing the need to own that product.9

One consequence of the culture of consumerism is the foregrounding of competition rather than cooperation as the context of human relations. People engage in a rat-race to the top of the ladder in an effort to stand out from the rest. Gone are the days when people are contented with the satisfaction of their basic needs as articulated in this saying in the Owerri dialect, “m taala ugba nuola mmayi, ndi mmemgba ga kuruma” (I am satisfied with some food and palmwine). Another consequence is the emphasis on authenticity through choice of what one consumes. In previous epochs in Europe, heredity gave people distinction. With consumerism, what people choose to consume – a Tecno phone often derisively called chichi (made in China) or Samsung Galaxy phone – is the vehicle for self-expression and distinction. Choice highlights the emphasis on

9“A consumer culture is a culture of consumption, meaning that ‘the dominant values’ of this society are not only ‘organized through consumption practices but are also in some sense derived from them’ …. A growing premium is also put on self-presentation and the promotion of the self, which itself becomes a commodity vying for attention in the marketplace of life. Consumer culture is the culture of a market society, in the sense that increasingly the various areas of social life are mediated by market relations in the form of the consumption of commodities. It is a culture in which marketisation, commoditisation, advertisement, and branding are fundamental processes. … Perhaps most profoundly, consumer culture is the means of expression and actualisation of the modern project of the individualised self, as it ‘provides a very particular set of material circumstances in which individuals come to acquire a reflexive relation to identity’” See, Francois Gauthier, Linda Woodhead, Toumas Martikainen, “Introduction: Consumerism as the Ethos of Consumer Society” in Francois Gauthier & Toumas Martikainen, ed. Religion in Consumer Society: Brands, Consumers and Markets (London & New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2013) 3.
the individual who needs the validation of other individuals through their acknowledgment or admiration of his or her status enhanced by consumption.

Consumerism recomposes religion, according to François Gauthier, from ‘below’. First, in the consumer culture, choice is central. Individuals choose their religion just as they choose any commodity. The choice is often in the service of the self-expression of the individual and not necessarily in respect to truth or any higher value. In Pentecostalism and in the Prosperity message, being ‘born again’ articulates this point of choice. This conversion also entails dissolution and sometimes demonization of previous bonds such the umunna – the extended family – and a choice of belongingness to a new community. The second effect is that religion also became a space for self-expression of the desire to get on and ahead in life. There is no concern for creed or for the true and the lasting. It is as if religion is being used as means to material wellbeing.

Neoliberalism is about the organization of society according to market principles. It believes in the efficiency and rationality of the market and seeks to place as many social functions as possible on a market footing, thus introducing the element of profit into every service. Before the triumph of this system, the market was regulated in the service of human solidarity. With neoliberalism, regulations which aimed at cutting down on the inequality within and among nations were removed. This was based on a review of the notion of society. Margaret Thatcher is quoted as saying “there is no such thing as society. There are men and women and children and families.” The atomization of society also makes it possible to sell the vision that pursuit of satisfaction as an individualized consumer in the private sphere is the route to empowerment and mobility. One swims or sinks without any hope of a safety net. At bottom, this represents a legitimization of inequality and ratification of the view of human beings as competitors.

Consumerism and neoliberalism as described above are reshaping consciousness in Africa. Africa is bombarded by the media production from Europe and America in which life is presented as lived in leisure and luxury.

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10 François Gauthier, “Religion is not what it used to be: Consumerism, Neoliberalism and the Global Reshaping of Religion,” accessed on September 24, 2019.


13 Jo Littler, ibid., 63.
This projects consumption as the goal of life and the standard of success. Invariably, the struggle to escape poverty and to join the middle class is exacerbated. Prosperity preachers project, as well as position themselves as gateway to upward social mobility and consumption. The Prosperity preachers not only model conspicuous consumption but they employ every skill to create and manage their brand. Glossy pictures of the pastor and wife with designer suits, wrist watches, handbags, hats etc., adorn billboards in the cities. Some make a show of their exotic cars, private jets and personal bodyguards depending on the level of their operation. All package themselves as being in possession of supernatural powers to miraculously bring about whatever state of affairs they desire. The Prosperity groups pride themselves as non-denominational. This implies a view of their group as one brand among many from which people like consumers can choose. This promotes affective rather than institutional belongingness. Fans of Chelsea FC or Manchester United feel connected to their football clubs and to one another. They form an affective community with one another not because they must but because they choose to or rather because the need has been created through advertising to express oneself through belonging to any of these clubs. The Prosperity groups cash in on this need for affective belongingness and keep open a space through their brand, where the invented need to relive the dreams of stupendous wealth is carried on. In sum, with the globalized culture of consumerism and neoliberalism as hermeneutical key, Prosperity preachers put together images from the bible and from other sources for the creation and maintenance of their brand of Christianity.

PROSPERITY MESSAGE: HIGHLIGHTS OF A TRADITION

I have deliberately left the exploration of the Prosperity message to this point so as to set the canvass against which to project it. Even then, the exploration will be limited to unpacking the implication of the names by which this tradition goes because there will be an engagement of this tradition in the next section.

Prosperity message is also known as the ‘Health and Wealth Gospel,’ ‘Name and Claim it Gospel’ or ‘Word of Faith Gospel.’ The different names highlight different aspects of this tradition. As the name suggests, ‘Prosperity message’ draws attention to the claim that God has promised blessings – physical and material. These blessings include financial prosperity, health, upward mobility, success, preeminence, etc. A passage that is often quoted is John 10:10. In this passage, Jesus presents himself as the good shepherd who has come in order that the sheep might have life in all its fullness. Fullness of life is then interpreted in terms of the fulfillment of all desires of the human heart – financial prosperity, health, upward social mobility, social preeminence (being head not tail), marriage, jobs, etc.
African Christianity and the Challenge of Prosperity Gospel

The other names draw attention to the proposed means of attaining the blessings. For example, the name ‘Word of Faith Gospel’ draws attention to the emphasis on speaking the desires of one’s heart into reality. This presumes a view of the human being as ‘spirit.’ A Bible passage of choice in this regard is Ps 82:6 where it is stated “you are gods.” This is interpreted to mean that human beings have Godlike powers. To be a born-again Christian is to share in the sovereignty of God so much so that whatever one ‘decrees in faith’, that is, without having any doubt in one’s mind, should be fulfilled. This links up with the other appellation ‘Name and Claim it Gospel.’ This underlines the belief that a born-again Christian does not need to pray, understood as making requests to God who has the prerogative to fulfil the request when and how He deems fit. Rather, prayer for a born-again Christian is to name what he or she desires and then claim it because he or she shares in the sovereignty of God.

It is not enough, however, to name and claim wealth. There are other principles – the principles of sowing seeds and tithing. With regard to tithes, it is claimed that in order to open the floodgates of heaven and harvest divine blessings, one needs to faithfully pay one’s tithes (Mal 3:10-11). Sowing of seed is taken from the injunction of St Paul to the Corinthians about giving generously for the relief of the Church in Jerusalem (2Cor 9:6-12). This is linked up with the obligation to share one’s bread with teachers of the faith (Gal 6:6). Such donations and support to the cause of the ministry are seen as receipts that people cash to obtain favors and blessings from God. It is against this practice that Benny Hinn, as seen above, protests by insisting that prosperity is not for sale.

In sum, the prosperity message takes off from the view that God has promised blessings of prosperity, health, success, marriage, upward social mobility, etc. to believers. The verification of these blessings in a Christian’s life is evidence of the right relationship with God. The absence of these blessings is explained either as due to lack of faith or knowledge or through the interference of demonic spirits. This is one way that Prosperity Message connects to the traditional African worldview. Another connection is with regard to what has been noted as the anthropocentricity of African tradition religion.

Engaging the Prosperity Message as Christian Message

We are trying to interpret Prosperity message as the recomposition of Christianity by the globalized culture of consumerism and neoliberalism. This

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means that in this translation, the Christian message is held captive by this culture frame instead of the cultural frame being purified and elevated by Christian message. Prosperity message privileges the culture as the hermeneutical key to the Christian message in a way that the globalized culture directs the elements that are highlighted from the Christian tradition. The result is one-sided emphases and the eclipsing of otherwise important elements of the Christian tradition. We shall draw attention to a couple of such one-sidedness and link them up with dynamics from the globalized culture of consumerism and neoliberalism.

**The Christian vis-à-vis the World**

In the Christian understanding, God created the world as context for human beings to exercise stewardship over creation and build up a loving relationship with God and others. The fulfilment of this life is the beatific vision – seeing God face to face (1 Cor 13:12). As the goal of life, the desire to see God should direct all of life’s efforts and commitments. It is in this sense that Christians are said to be in the world but not of the world (Jn 17:14-16). Although creation is good (Gen 1:31), the alienation of creation from God through disobedience resulted in creation standing under judgment. In some writings of St John, the world is presented as if under a prince who is opposed to God (Jn 14:30). The world is also presented as set for annihilation through fire. Yet there is promise of a new heaven and a new earth (Is 65:17; 66:22, 2 Pet 3:13, Rev. 21:1) as the final state of redeemed humanity. There are therefore two sides to the vision of the world in the Christian understanding: valuation and deprecation. These need to be held together in tension.

In the history of Christianity, the scale has tilted more often towards deprecation of the world. Unbalanced attention is paid to life with God in the here-after without concern for earthly wellbeing of people. Prosperity message moves in the opposite direction. It affirms the world in its worldliness by celebrating financial prosperity, power and influence as marks of divine blessing. This affirmation is made despite scriptural passages that insist on the opposite (1 Tim 6:6-10); passages that invite people to contentment, to self-denial and that insist on the salvific value of suffering undertaken for the sake of the Kingdom of God. Prosperity Message eclipses this part of biblical witness and above all, reorders the relationship between God and the world, the life to come and the present life by focusing on the present life and presenting God as in the service of the earthly wellbeing of human beings. This shift towards the worldly is in line with the inner logic of consumerism. The religious establishment pointed this out in the 18th century in the response to Bernard Mandeville’s book, *The Fable of the Bees* which articulated and endorsed idle consumption as the way to economic growth. Adam Smith’s book *The Wealth
of Nations agreed with Mandeville’s analysis about the implication of consumption in economic growth but tried to show also the necessity of education, health care, etc., to economic growth.\(^{15}\) Interestingly, Smith was still concerned about the wealth of nations. Neoliberalism however works with an atomized view of human beings. In line with neoliberalism, Prosperity message speaks only of the prosperity of individuals and families at most. There is no reference to the wealth or poverty of nations or communities and how these affect the inhabitants. The teeming population of young graduates are promised jobs in nations whose economies are contracting and unable to create jobs fast enough to absorb job seekers. Indeed, although I believe in miracles, one has to say that if the claims of the many Prosperity preachers in Nigeria were to be true, millions of jobs would have been ‘spoken into reality’ so that joblessness would have been a problem of the past and all the hospitals emptied of patients.

Finally, Prosperity message endangers the earth by its promotion of conspicuous consumption because not all earth’s resources are renewable. Having said these, it is interesting that Prosperity message speaks to the desire of the poor to escape their situation, to gain some reprieve here on earth. This desire is legitimate, although conspicuous consumption is not. But it cannot be fulfilled simply by invoking God’s miraculous powers.

In sum, Prosperity message raises the challenge of thinking through the implication for the Christian of being in the world but not of the world; of working with God for the emergence of the new heaven and a new earth where everyone’s needs, even if not wants, are taken care of. In this regard, it is crucial to ask why people are poor and give due weight to unhealthy practices of the poor as individuals and as political communities as well as the structural elements that have arisen in history in the relationship of peoples and of communities. Prosperity message rightly takes off from a conviction that poverty is not desirable. But because of the influence of globalized culture of consumerism and neoliberalism, it works with a narrow notion of poverty. A more nuanced notion such as given by Amartya Sen in which poverty is the lack of capabilities broadens the field of engagement.

**Prosperity Message and Interpretation of Scriptures**

The emphasis on financial prosperity, break-through, upward social movement, etc., shows an understanding of salvation as realized here on earth. This is what is called the immanentization of salvation. We have seen in the section above, how this need was shaped by the globalized culture of consumerism and neoliberalism. This necessitated the retrieval of

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\(^{15}\) History: Consumerism, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y-Unq3R--M0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y-Unq3R--M0) accessed on September 21, 2019.
Deuteronomistic theology and a coupling of the event of Jesus to make it sound Christian. Thus, the death and resurrection of Jesus are understood as that which guarantees the flow of the blessings enunciated in Deuteronomy 28. The blessing of abundant harvest of vine, multiplication of livestock and peace from enemies appropriate in an agrarian community surrounded by powerful foes are translated into the needs of contemporary people – financial prosperity, upward social mobility, health, etc. Faith in Jesus Christ and not simply fidelity to the terms of the covenant in the Old Testament is presented as what guarantees access to these blessings.

In the above view, the significance of the cross of Jesus Christ is reduced to that which guarantees earthly blessings. Significantly, the New Testament is interpreted in the light of the Old Testament instead of the other way. Prosperity message privileges the Old Testament because in older layers of the revelation therein, the idea of the afterlife has not crystallized out. Human fulfilment is presented as something to be attained in this world. This view fits easily into the emphasis of the globalized culture. Fulfilment in this world became privileged as standpoint from which the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is interpreted.

The above reversal undermines the centrality of the Jesus event in the Christian message. This centrality implies a historical view of revelation which Jesus thickly underlined. In the account of St Matthew, Jesus stated that he did not come to abolish the law and the prophets but to fulfill them. Then, he went on to revise some of the teachings of the law. The revisions were introduced with statements such as: “people were told in the past …. but now, I tell you …” (Matt 5:17-48). With regard to divorce, Jesus told the Jews that it was because of the hardness of their hearts that Moses allowed divorce. Then he went on to give the full interpretation of the divine will (Matt 19:8). These show that scriptural revelation has a historical dimension and that Jesus is the culmination of revelation. No part of Scripture is to be thrown away. But, for Christians, the Old Testament is to be interpreted in the light of the New Testament while being open to what the Spirit continues to say to the Church in the present. This is because Christians believe that Jesus is the fullness of God’s revelation, the denominator of everything and his revelation is normative through the ages. In Prosperity message, Jesus seems to have utility value, the means to prosperity and fulfilment in the world.

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The Love of Power versus the Power of Love

Prosperity message raises the question of what lies at the heart of the Good News of Jesus Christ and at the same time, challenges a form of Christian spirituality that settles for a dreary routine. In line with the best in the Pentecostal tradition, Prosperity message projects a spirituality in which there is expectation of the experience of the power of the Holy Spirit. More specifically, the power of the Holy Spirit is not for speaking in tongues or other spiritual gifts, but primarily for the conferment of dominion and power over all life’s circumstances. This is what has been summed up as love of power: the power to overcome all negativities and to rise up as winner, to become powerful, different and influential. Power is not understood as a capacity but more as that which is possessed by the individual and which can be deployed for the benefit of the individual and to the admiration of others.

The emphasis of Prosperity message stands out clearly when placed against the background of other interpretations. The Holy Spirit is what is given to all the baptized (Rom 5:5) but not to be deployed for their benefits but to inwardly transform them to be instruments of love. This is in line with the example of Jesus Christ, who, out of love (Jn 3:16) for humanity, emptied Himself and became human (Phil 2:6-7). As human, he had nowhere to lay his head (Lk 9:58). Although he could command the host of heaven to save him from death, Jesus stated that his kingdom is not of this world (Jn 18:36) and in obedience to the Father (Matt 26:39) laid down his life out of love (Jn 15:13). He challenged his followers to take up their cross every day and follow him (Matt 16:24-26) in obedience to the Father. By implication, he challenged them to walk in the footsteps of His self-giving love and trusting obedience to the Father. The challenge to cultivate the power of love rather than love for power is the dominant view that emerges from the Scriptures although there are few instances of promise of miraculous powers to believers (Mk 16:17-18).

With the manifest love of power preached in Prosperity message, one sees the globalized culture at work again. First, religion is seen as a commodity being marketed. Successful marketing strategies either create the need for which the product is then offered as fulfilment or discern an existing need and promote one’s product as satisfying that need. In Africa, there is heightened need for power and security both by the poor and by the rich. The poor fall prey easily to the machinations of others and to the predatory state apparatuses while the rich fear the jealousy of the poor and the mobilization of evil forces to pull them back into situations of poverty and powerlessness. A religion that promises power and security is therefore addressing a need it has partly generated. This perspective shades light on both the Prosperity message and the rising neo-paganism as related phenomena: responses to the rising sense of powerlessness and insecurity. This approach also shows the inner logic to the conspicuous
consumption of the Prosperity preachers, especially the successful ones. In Nigeria, some own private jets, dress in designer outfits, wear Rolex watches, expensive jewelry, have bodyguards and ensure that their images adorn billboards and handbills. This is part of their effort at putting themselves out there as success stories to call for affective community to the brand they stand in for.

Prosperity Message, the Power of Words and the Word of Power

In the Prosperity message the Word of God is seen as powerful not just to change people but also to alter reality. It is affirmed, in a quasi-magical sense, that there is power in the word. The spoken word effects something. It brings what is spoken into reality independently of any consciousness. This is the root of the emphasis on positive confession. If human words have such efficacious power, how much more, the Word of God. The Scriptural passage about the Word of God being alive and active (Heb. 4:12) is read in this sense. Consequently, some phrases and passages are taken from the Scriptures and repeated with the belief that whatever promise captured in them can be appropriated by such repetitions. This flies against the hermeneutical approach of the mainline Churches in which the meaning of any text of Scripture is given first and foremost in the context of the people to whom the Word was originally addressed. Secondly, the concern is primarily with meaning. The Word exerts transforming power by working on human consciousness. In Prosperity message, it is as if words, especially words from the scriptures, move supra-personal and supra-individual beings to action. This is why, in the Prosperity Gospel, verbal enactments are made with so much force to move both the human and supra-human beings to action.

A corollary to the above view about the power of words is the belief that believers are repositories of numinal power. Pastor Chris Oyakhilome asserted that if someone dying of cancer were only to touch a born-again Christian he or she would be healed because of the tremendous power in such Christians. Because of this power, the born-again Christian is not expected to fall sick (Benny Hinn had to admit being sick as part of his coming out ritual) and can speak whatever he or she desires into reality irrespective of the divine will. This is not simply because it is presumed that all quests for prosperity, success and health are in line with the divine will. Rather, it is because the believer is seen as divine and possessing the powers of divinity so much so that the distinction between God and the believer is blurred. Of course, this flies in the face of biblical evidence. In spite of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the distinction

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between God and creatures is still maintained. More importantly, the distinction and hierarchy between the persons of the Trinity as revealed in Jesus’ relationship to the Father\(^{18}\) show that divinization cannot be equated to being divine. Human beings remain human beings. Though human beings are sons of God, to use a biblical verse dear to Prosperity preachers, the Psalmist continues that they die like men (Ps 82:6). This means that the sovereignty of God has to be respected. One cannot presume a coincidence between the divine and the human wills. There is no basis for the equalization of the divine and the human.

What could be the reason for this attempted recasting of the Scriptures by Prosperity preachers in view of equalization of God and creatures? One may point to New Age spirituality as possible source of influence or to their debt to the self-help psychology. Even then, one can still ask why this tradition borrowed this element and not another? My guess is that it is still part of the outworking of a deep element of the globalized culture of consumerism and neoliberalism to which it is responding. The equalization corresponds in my mind to the neoliberal postulation of ‘equal opportunity’ in their effort to project meritocracy as the undistorted market-based mechanism for resource allocation and distribution.

The postulation of merit is in order to address the underlying social question of how to organize society so as to address the attendant inequality that arise among peoples because they are differently endowed and occupy different socio-cultural, economic and political locations. But there are different conceptions of merit. Let us illustrate with the situation in Nigeria where the quota system\(^{19}\) is meant to address the inequality. This is against merit. Because of the distortion of the quota system, there is strong advocacy for merit. These advocates are not opposed to affirmative action. They argue that the quota system is an ill-conceived form of affirmative action.\(^{20}\) Neoliberals however argue against affirmative action because, according to them, it distorts the market and entails big government. They insist that the task of the society is to provide equal opportunity for all. Individuals then distinguish themselves and are rewarded to the measure that their effort and entrepreneurial ability push

\(^{18}\) Jesus stated that his food is to do the will of the Father (Jn 4:34) and in the Garden of Gethsemane, he prayed that he be spared of the agony but concluded by saying to the Father, “thy will be done” (Lk 22:42).

\(^{19}\) Because those from the northern part of the country were educationally disadvantaged because colonial policy shielded them from western education, standards were reduced for them apparently to enable them to be absorbed in the educational system. However, this is affecting the whole system by promoting mediocrity.

\(^{20}\) They are open to some form of affirmative action, for example, massive investment in education in the disadvantaged region to upgrade the quality and bring the students at par with the rest. But not lowering the standards for these students.
them forward.\footnote{For a more in-depth analysis see Jo Littler, “Meritocracy as Plutocracy: the Marketizing of Equality under Neoliberalism,” op.cit.} This neoliberal view tells one side of the story. To provide a state-of-the-art medical facility, for example, without taking into consideration that not all can access it because of where they come from, does not satisfy the demand for equal access to health care in the community. This is because it has abstracted the individual from their socio-cultural embeddedness. In line with the concept of equal opportunity in neoliberalism, all the born-again believers are seen in the Prosperity message as repositories of divine power who can speak anything into reality. Theoretically, none needs the pastor or the overseer. There is equality of endowment. The difference is with regard to their exercise of faith – not harboring any doubt. The General Overseer or the pastor is presumably more distinguished than the rest on account of this. This departs from the New Testament teaching about the diversity of gifts by the one Holy Spirit for service not to self but to the Church (1 Cor 12; Rom 12).

With the insistence on equality of endowment, the question about the disparity in the level of prosperity enjoyed by the pastors and members of his flock is glossed over. More precisely, inequality is presented as a result of the failure to exercise faith and speak one’s desire into reality which covers up the more trite and mundane reason that the pastor occupies a social position that gives him or her access to the tithes and donations.

\textbf{TOWARDS A CONCLUSION: THE CHALLENGE OF PROSPERITY MESSAGE}

We have tried to show that Prosperity message can be profitably seen as a decomposition of the Christian message by the globalized culture of consumerism and neoliberalism. Prosperity message can be seen as a precursor. In so far as this culture is already strongly at work in Africa, Christianity in Africa has to engage this culture in openness without capitulating to this culture as Prosperity message seems to have done to a large extent. African Christianity has to learn some things from Prosperity message at least the way not to engage the globalized culture of consumerism and neoliberalism. In my view, this culture is not environmentally sustainable. It breaks down community and sets individuals on a path of competition and consumption. Christian resources are to be deployed in response to some of these ills. But the emphases of Prosperity message on immanence and on human wellbeing have to be taken up within a more balanced approach inspired more by biblical revelation appropriately interpreted.