

Editorial

ETHICS OF PROSPERITY THEOLOGY

Prosperity theology has sneaked slowly but forcefully into the fabric of Christianity, and it is so zealously promoted by its leaders worldwide that the Church cannot afford to ignore its effects. This phenomenon that began mainly in America has since its inception been seen as controversial because of what mainstream Christians consider to be this type of gospel's unbalanced biblical teaching. Some Christians go as far as to point out that if care is not taken to check the rate at which this brand of theology is influencing Christians, in particular the youth, its teaching will rock the theological and ethical boat of the African church to the point where it loses its biblical significance completely. On the other hand, many believe that through the influence of this brand of theology, the Christian gospel has, perhaps, reached more places in the world faster than it might otherwise have been possible, even at a cost to what may be considered as genuine Christianity.

The theology of prosperity has become so popular that it has earned various names in different environments. Thus,

depending on the geographical location or the particular Charismatic or Pentecostal church that focuses on the this brand of gospel, one comes across such names as health and wealth gospel, word of faith movement, the gospel of success, positive confession theology, and the theology of empowerment, etc. However, no matter what name is used, the teaching appears to be the same even though it may not be taught in the same way and with the same emphasis: God wants believers to be materially wealthy. In other words, the essence of the teaching is that it is God's will for all Christians to enjoy substantial wealth and good health as long as they live on this earth. Hence, while mainstream Christians are generally admonished to strive for a close relationship with God, magnify God, deny themselves the pleasures of this world, repent and confess their sins, and live holy lives separated unto God, these virtues do not appear to be the primary focus of the prosperity gospel's brand of Christianity. This would then make nonsense, if not light, of the lives of those, particularly the martyrs, who in times past gave up

everything, including life itself, to serve God. This is why the adherents of prosperity gospel are generally accused of being selfish, pursuing their own self importance, dreams, affluence, success, and aspirations.

One can identify some factors that are probably contributing to the rapid spread of the prosperity gospel. These include: poverty backlash, a phenomenon which involves extreme pre-occupation with a life of poverty. Some Christian leaders do, in fact, subject themselves to poverty by faith and make poverty a mark of piety for ministering the word of God. Biblical ignorance is another factor in that some of the claims of the prosperity gospel reveal total ignorance of the truths stated in biblical texts. Again, lack of response to prosperity resulting from the mainstream Church's preoccupation with poverty has blinded many church leaders from seeing the need to develop a response to the dangers of prosperity. In these days, no one would argue that it is trendy to pursue wealth, pleasure, happiness, good health and longevity, and the so-called cultured civilization. In the main, however, sheer greed could also be taken as one of the key factors fueling the engine that moves the prosperity gospel. The philosophy behind this teaching may be said to be "Get all you can, and Can all you Get." It cannot be ruled out, however, that despite the greed that has enriched many of its key advocates and caused havoc to some African social and cultural values, some aspects of this brand of theology have encour-

aged economic development in our African environment.

A call is being made here in this volume of the journal for a thorough examination and evaluation of the prosperity gospel. In a sense, some scholars in theology have already made a move to respond to this call. Emmanuel Kwesi Anim's Ph.D. dissertation on "Who Wantsto be a Millionaire? An analysis of Prosperity Teaching in the Charismatic Ministries (Churches) in Ghana and Its Wider Impact" (a copy can be consulted at the library of Pentecost University College, Accra) is one of such excellent efforts. As a result of his extensive study of the subject, he asserts that "Prosperity Teaching in Ghana has enormous appeal because it resonates with the traditional understanding of prosperity and well-being to which people can easily resonate." He is thus convinced that "any analysis of African Christianity must not only take account of the Western influence of Prosperity Gospel, but also the traditional worldview and experiences which inevitably inform peoples' sense of reality and self-expression." We on the Board of this journal are thus of the opinion that one should be cautious about any opinion one may hold about the Prosperity Gospel, and associate ourselves with Anim's sentiments that if the Church is to remain effective in Africa, it must rethink its theology and mission practice in the light of the human condition in Africa.