

TOWARDS A THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE MYSTERY OF SUFFERING IN THE MIDST OF PROSPERITY THEOLOGY WITHIN THE PENTECOSTAL AND EVANGELICAL CHURCHES IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA, PARTICULARLY YANGORU

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PREFACE

Prosperity theology is influential in the missional front today. It has an enormous impact on the religious, economic, and political life of the people. This stream of theology was developed in the 20th century, but its philosophy is as old as life itself. As it crosses cultural boundaries, it takes on and accommodates the recipient cultural stimulus about our life here and now, in a pragmatic way. Most of its teachings are simplistic and one-sided, and normally may result in extremism. It is a teaching that says a suffering-free life can be experienced here and now. On the other hand, we have also identified that a majority of faithful Christians across the globe are experiencing numerous sufferings, because of their faith in Christ. These two-faceted theological problems are promoting the current theological melee between Charismatic/Pentecostal and the Evangelical factions of the church.

However, in our discussion pertaining to these theological divisions, and their theological presuppositions, we have tried to listen to both sides of the debate. Therefore, we have surveyed the impact of prosperity theology in Papua New Guinea, particularly in Yangoru; what the Bible says about

prosperity, the theology of suffering, and a quest for theological balance, and its implications. We have, therefore, concluded that, from a biblical perspective, prosperity and suffering belong together. They should be understood from a biblical covenantal perspective. The OT covenants were relational, a relationship of reciprocity, but superseded in the coming of Christ. Thus, life, in communion with Christ, is a full life. Either in prosperity or suffering, all should live by faith, for God's glory. Therefore, Christian faith is relational, and prosperity and suffering both belong to this relationship. It is a faith that is founded on God's word alone, it cannot be shaken by external circumstances, it is immovable, even when external support and evidences, like prosperity, are removed, and it stands when all else fails (Job 13:15). Thus, the key to such strong faith and intimacy with God, and a healthier relationship with one another, depends on our close fellowship with God in all of life.

INTRODUCTION

Thousands of Christians across the globe are being made homeless, stripped of their dignity, are suffering, and experiencing persecution and death for their faith. Why is there suffering for a faith that promised freedom for the prisoners, eyesight for the blind, releasing of the oppressed, good news to the poor, and the year of the Lord's favour (Luke 4:18-19)? If these verses imply life in its fullness, why is there suffering? What is the biblical perspective on Christian suffering? On the other hand, many pastors in Papua New Guinea (PNG), particularly in Yangoru, are preaching prosperity theology. This is a theology that says the more you give to God, the more you will receive from God; you sow material possessions on certain Christian leaders, or the organisations they lead, and you will reap a rich harvest of blessings; or, if you become a member of a certain Christian organisation, and follow its spiritual principles, you will be blessed, spiritually and materially; or the more spiritual you become, the more material and spiritual blessings you will receive from God. Does God always bring physical and material blessings to the faithful? Is prosperity theology truly scriptural? Is prosperity a measuring rod for measuring one's spirituality? Is it the plumbline by which we measure who is and who is not a Christian? Is there any relationship between prosperity theology and the

theology of suffering? Where do we draw the line between prosperity theology and the theology of suffering?¹

Against this backdrop, this thesis examines some of the issues associated with prosperity theology in PNG, particularly Christian discipleship in Yangoru today. Thus, this paper argues that prosperity theology, divorced from suffering, is anthropocentric, and reflects Yangoruan pragmatism. It challenges Evangelical theologians not only to critique the teaching of prosperity theologians, but to explore the worldviews that may be influencing this strand of teaching – to biblically evaluate these worldviews, and to construct a more-theologically-balanced Evangelical theology of prosperity and suffering as a proposed guide to Christians for their daily lives.

Therefore, in order to explore, evaluate, and develop a balanced theology of suffering and prosperity, the issue will be addressed in the following manner. The first section, on the “Impact of Prosperity Theology”, will explore the impact of prosperity theology in PNG, particularly Yangoru. The second section, on the “Bible and Prosperity Theology”, will elaborate on the Bible and prosperity theology. Part A of this section will wrestle with the question “Is prosperity theology biblical?”, while part B will point towards a biblical theology of prosperity. Then, in part C, we will make an evaluation. In section three, on the “Biblical Theology of Suffering”, we will look at the cross-shaped character of God, the cross-shaped character of God’s church, and the cross-shaped character of Christian discipleship. Section four, on the “Quest for Theological Balance”, is an attempt to develop a balanced theological view of suffering and prosperity. And, in the final section, on the “Implications”, we will look at the theological and missiological implications that may arise in our theologising of this issue.

METHODOLOGY

The schemas that will be analysed in this study will include culture, theology, and biblical paradigms. These schemas will be applied, to approach the issue, enabling us to explore the unique social, economic, and

¹ Bong Rin Ro, “In the Midst of Suffering, is Prosperity Theology Scriptural?”, in *Evangelical Review of Theology* 20-1 (1996), pp. 3-4.

religious spheres of the people. This means we will study the issues in their natural settings, and make sense of the phenomena, in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Then, we will critically contextualise the cultural aspects, synthesise theological and biblical teaching, and seek a balanced view of the issue. Basically, it will be a historical and narrative theological method, from a Yangoruan perspective.

LIMITATIONS

This theological issue is of historical and global church concern. It has become a tug of war between Charismatic, Pentecostal, and Evangelical factions of the church. It has become problematic for the church across the whole world, including PNG. Its impact on churches or denominations is phenomenal.² However, due to the line of argument selected for this discussion, the author wishes to advise that this paper will be culture- and place-specific in its thought and frame. Therefore, this discussion will be specific to PNG, and, in particular, to the Yangoru people.

Due to the limitations of the written documentation of Yangoruan mythical and ancestral heritage, most of the contributions in the first section, on the “Impact of Prosperity Theology”, will come from the author.³ Interviews will not be done, because of distance, and the unavailability of funds, but related materials from other parts of PNG, and, especially East Sepik Province, will be selected just for the first section. Moreover, the key word in the development of this paper is “life”. Life, therefore, is, in principle, the fundamental basis upon which all human ontologies, epistemologies, and methodologies are carved out, to explain or protect individuals and societies

² Some key articles and books dealing with this problematic issue can be sourced from *Evangelical Review of Theology* 20-1 (1996); Robert M. Bowman Jr, *The Word Faith Controversy*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 2001; Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches*, Leicester UK: IVP, 1999; and John F. MacArthur Jr, *Charismatic Chaos*, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1992.

³ The author of this paper advises readers of this document that most of the Yangoruan stories and mythology have been imparted to the author by tribal specialists, in preparation for the author’s tribal leadership in the future. Therefore, the author has this privilege to use this knowledge as a tool for revisiting the cultural belief systems, in order to reinterpret them from a biblical perspective, in an endeavour to do contextual theology.

from harm or danger. Thus the presuppositions attached to the concepts of suffering and prosperity show the significance of life.⁴

THE IMPACT OF PROSPERITY THEOLOGY AS IT AFFECTS THE NATION, PARTICULARLY THE YANGORUAN PEOPLE

The culture of any human society is a historically- and traditionally-fashioned shell, hardened by time and experience. It becomes a shield of survival, and a navigating compass, in a world of chaos. It is designed to protect life from the onslaught of the ravenous world that may endanger it.⁵ Thus, any new socio-political, or socio-economic, or socio-religious values will be an imposition. As Narokobi observed:

The underlying nobility of Melanesian societies, and their values, are yet to be understood. Almost every modern official, whether government or religious, works on the assumption that Melanesians have nothing to teach them. The result is that every effort to develop, every effort to educate, every effort to Christianise, every effort to democratise, is an external imposition.⁶

This explicitly means that, no matter what one may be thinking, every new form of religious or secular development is an imposition: church ministries, church rites, education systems, political systems, judiciary systems, and economic systems, and so on.⁷ Many of these systems have attacked the solid Melanesian shell, and made an inroad into the integration of values.

But is this integration healthy for the country, or for the church in PNG? This is subject to investigation. For instance, one prominent imposition has been the Western liberal political culture, enforced by the colonisers, with little or no regard for the traditional structures, which embody ideas, beliefs, and values. After years of independence, we are watching the resurgence of

⁴ Maxon Mani, "Quest for Salvation in Papua New Guinea: The Yangoruan Perspective", in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 26-2 (2010), pp. 69-70.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁶ Bernard Narokobi, *Life and Leadership in Melanesia*, Suva Fiji: University of South Pacific, 1983, p. 60.

⁷ *Ibid.*

our ideas, beliefs, and values, in the form of a non-liberal political culture.⁸ As Gelu stated:

Thus, the emergence of a non-liberal democratic political culture is the result of a collision between the traditional political practices and the introduced practices. Even more of a complication, is the fact that many leaders do not seem to understand what is required of them as leaders in the new political environment. Despite the existence of rules and regulations that were, ironically, passed by the leaders themselves, their actions, basically, do not conform to these rules. In other words, the rules and regulations have become window dressing to show that government policy conforms to established principles, but, in practice, this does not occur.⁹

This portrays the general practice of the society in the whole of life, whether it be in the socio-political, socio-economic, or the socio-religious arena. This paper, however, is not devoted to politics or economics, but to a Melanesian society, like the Yangoru, where all spheres that promote life are seen as a whole, and, therefore, any cultural study should be approached in a holistic manner. However, like the development of a non-liberal political culture, we are also observing an emergence of a new religious culture that is a result of the collision between traditional religions and the introduced Christian religion. Looking through Yangoruan eyes, we cannot avoid noticing the emergence of our ideas, beliefs, and values resurfacing in the form of new religious movements. The most basic teaching of these movements is based on prosperity. Thus prosperity theology is very much at home in PNG.

Therefore, in this section, we will glance through a time tunnel, and investigate Yangoruan's pragmatism, their mythical prophecy for a Yangoruan saviour, their philosophy on life, and the arrival of the white

⁸ Alphonse Gelu, "The Emergence of a Non-Liberal Democratic Political Culture in Papua New Guinea", in Michael A. Rynkiewich, and Roland Seib, eds, *Politics in Papua New Guinea: Continuities, Changes, and Challenges*, Point 24 (2000), p. 91.

⁹ Ibid.

man. This advent has unwittingly led to enormous frustration and a counter-reaction by the Yangoruan community.

YANGORUAN PRAGMATISM IN THE MIDST OF SUFFERING – IS IT BIBLICAL?

The Yangoru people group is one of the Boiken language-speaking peoples of East Sepik Province of PNG. The Boiken language covers a considerable area of the province. It stretches from the western part of Yangoru, which borders Maprik in the west, to Wallis and the Tarawai Islands to the north, and expands southward to the Sausowia district, and to the surrounding villages of the Wewak township. The origin of the people group is possibly not known, but, according to popular myth, it is believed to be descended from a man, who survived, with his dog, from the big flood that covered the earth.¹⁰ According to this myth, life, from that point on, was prosperous and lively until *Saii Urin*¹¹ was killed by a wicked tribe from within Yangoru. *Saii Urin* is a mythical figure, whom Yangoruan believed was *Ye-Saii*¹² (creator-god), living in a bodily form among them. Thus, the Yangoruan philosophy of life and prosperity hinges around this mythical prophecy of the return of *Saii Urin* and their ancestors. This advent will usher in life in all

¹⁰ This myth defines the origins of the Yangoru people group. It is believed that the man, named *Sengihuafu*, which, in Boiken, means a history-man, was alone with his dog. He was commanded by *Ye-Saii* not to eat red fish. If he did, all that is life for him will be destroyed. He disobeyed, and the flood came and destroyed everything except him and his dog, who took refuge on top of a coconut tree. *Sengihuafu* is the first Yangoruan, who brought forth the Yangoru people group.

¹¹ *Saii Urin* (a Boiken term) is a combination of words. *Saii* is a root word, which means “god”. However, the descriptive terms attached to the root word define to whom it was applied. For instance, *Ye-Saii* means “creator-god”. *Urin*, in this case, is a male name. Thus, *Saii Urin* literally means “god-man”. In Yangoru, most prefer to call the god-man *Saii duo*. *Duo* is a generic term, meaning “male, in general”. It is now applied to see God as male, from a fatherly perspective. It is believed that, when that god-man was living among them, life was perfect, however, the killing of that god-man destroyed all that the Yangoruan called “life” in its fullness.

¹² *Ye-Saii* is a Boiken word combination, meaning “creator-god”, or, we would say “the Supreme Being”. The Yangoruan believe that *Ye-Saii* had actually become *Saii Urin* (god-man), and lived among them.

its fullness. Roscoe, in his observation of Yangoruan male initiation, has made an allusion to this *Saii Urin* myth.¹³

A Mythical Prophecy for a Yangoruan Saviour

The mythical prophecy of the return of *Saii Urin*, and the subsequent return of the lost life, are ancestrally, historically, and traditionally rooted in *Saii Urin's* pronouncements on the event of his death. *Saii Urin* was believed to be born of female blood, without any male involvement, this being significant for Yangoruans, as only a god can be born in such a way. Local Yangoruan Christians have already contextualised *Saii Urin* as the figure of the Emmanuel of the Jews, and allude to Jesus Christ as their *Saii Urin*. It is a famous Yangoruan myth that defines the Yangoruan philosophy of life and prosperity, which will be discussed later. This god-man was later betrayed by an old, wicked woman on top of a mountain in the western fringes of Yangoru, and was killed by an evil tribe. It was at this point in time that curses were pronounced on “life” itself. For instance, life will be short and toilsome, life in its fullness will be removed, people will die, brothers will fight against each other, and life will only be worthwhile in good living relationships with the environment, the people, the ancestral spirits, and *Ye-Saii* (creator god). However, life in its fullness will be restored when *Saii Urin* returns with the Yangoruan ancestors. Yangoruan socio-political, socio-economic, and socio-religious framework is established in relation to this mythical prophecy and expectation.¹⁴

Yangoruan Philosophy of Life and Prosperity

At this point, we should ask, “what is life?” Maybe, words like “flesh”, “blood”, “soul”, “breath”, or “body” denote life.¹⁵ It may be the personal existence enjoyed by the gods, and granted to their creatures, or spiritual, or material, things associated with one’s life, or life could be the principle that animates biological survival, one’s lifespan, lifestyle, and manner of living,

¹³ Paul Roscoe, “Male Initiation Among the Yangoru Boiken”, in *Sepik Heritage: Tradition and Change in Papua New Guinea*, Nancy Lutkehaus, ed., Bathurst NSW: Crawford Press, 1990, p. 404.

¹⁴ Mani, “Quest for Salvation in Papua New Guinea”, pp. 70-71.

¹⁵ D. H. Johnson, “Life”, in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, T. Desmond Alexander, and Brian S. Rosner, eds, Downers Grove IL: IVP, 2000, p. 640.

or a spiritual principle, which enables a relationship to one's deity, with a self-conscious existence after biological death.¹⁶ These words and phrases describe components that make up what life is, but life is still mysterious. Life's mysteriousness shows why all cultural approaches to making life meaningful are not uniform. As was observed earlier,¹⁷ any introduced cultural form of values, either religious or secular, is an imposition, because life cannot be explained or understood from a single cultural perspective. This discourages the drive to impose one's culture on another, without considering the recipient cultural value-based systems that define what life is.

Life for the Yangoru is spirit, as well as body, corporate, as well as personal. It is ancestral, and was passed on from ancestor to ancestor, beginning with *Ye-Saii*, who lived among them as *Saii Urin*, and who gave life to the family of Yangoruans, and, through time and space, fashioned how Yangoruans should live and sustain life. Therefore, Yangoruan life belongs to *Saii Urin*, who gave life, and it should be treated with all care here and now until his return. Thus, the pivot for the Yangoruan philosophy on life and prosperity is the mythical prophecy of the return, and the command to relate to one another, and to the ancestry.

Yangoruans define life as one holistic entirety.¹⁸ This means that, whether it be socio-political, socio-economic, or socio-religious, their interrelatedness gathers together what Yangoruans call life and prosperity. Thus, life itself depends heavily on good relationships. A relationship that is mindful of the total environment is what Yangoruans consider as life in its fullness.¹⁹ As Maladede notes:

Our relationship to the total environment must be maintained. Proper relationship with the environment enhances a healthy, thriving

¹⁶ Lawrence O. Richards, ed., "Life", in *The Applied Bible Dictionary*, Eastbourne UK: Kingsway Publications, 1990, p. 639.

¹⁷ Refer to pp. 9-11.

¹⁸ Mani, "Quest for Salvation in Papua New Guinea", pp. 70-72.

¹⁹ Margaret Mary Maladede, *Let Christ be a Melanesian: A Study of Melanesian Values in the Light of Christian Values*, Occasional Paper 11, Goroka PNG: Melanesian Institute, 2003, pp. 3-64.

community. If there is sickness and death, the first question to be asked would be: “which relationship has been damaged?” They may seek healing from traditional healers, or modern doctors, but the persistence of sickness is an indication that the broken relationship has not been mended, and this makes the community stop to review the relationships with ancestors, with the community, and with the whole environment. In this way, they discover what needs repair.²⁰

Mugabe, from an African perspective, has stated that:

It is important to realise that, in any discussion about salvation, in African traditional religions (or any other religion, for that matter), we should not assume that, what is considered to be crucial in Christian thought, necessarily carries the same weight in other cultures and religions. Salvation in the Shona religion, for example, does not lead specifically to the afterlife. Shona religion is anthropocentric; it is life-affirming. This worldly religion is concerned about protection, restoration, preservation, survival, and continuance of human, societal, and environmental life in this world.²¹

Much like the African, or other societies, whose religions are anthropocentric, Melanesian religious life is, too. This is the general principle by which Melanesians define their philosophy of life and prosperity. For the people of Yangoru, prosperity is the ruler by which one’s religiousness is measured. One’s state of life defines his/her relationships within the community, the environment, the ancestors, and the deity. Good health and wealth, in a very pragmatic sense, is a pointer to good and healthy relationships in all these areas. Misfortune is a sign of defective relationships and needs an immediate examination and restoration. Suffering, therefore, is a result of defective relationships.

The main focus of Yangoruan philosophy is pragmatic and worldly, as Strelan observed:

²⁰ Ibid., p. 25.

²¹ Henry J. Mugabe, “Salvation from an African Perspective”, in *Evangelical Review of Theology* 23-3 (1999), p. 239.

Salvation, in cargoist terms, is not oriented to the after life, to the life after death, but to the here and now. Salvation, it is thought, will eventuate here, on this earth, in this present age, and it will involve all known structures of the society. It is concrete, this-worldly salvation, for which Melanesians hope.²²

Although Strelan uses negative terms, his observation applies to the root of Yangoruan philosophy of life and prosperity. However, “this-worldly” search for life was not the end of Yangoruan philosophy, as it has its futuristic aspect. Thus, the Yangoruan eschatological concept about life and prosperity is rooted in yesterday. This simply means, for Yangoruans, the future depends on what happened yesterday, and today is a part of yesterday, but also a part of tomorrow.²³ Whatever happened in the past, either mythical or historical, has a profound impact on the religious, economic, and political welfare of the people of today. Therefore, the sustenance of life, here and now, is the cream of the Yangoruan search for the good life. Thus, an understanding of this concept can be a bonus for Christians, to present the gospel in a holistic manner, which considers life in this world, and also in the world to come.²⁴

Yangoruan pragmatism is essentially an anthropocentric philosophy. It is concerned more on one’s well-being here and now. So, to protect and preserve life from the ravenous world, reciprocal principles were developed to protect life from extinction. For instance, the principle of relationship to the environment, the people, the ancestors, the elemental spirit powers, and to *Saii Urin*, or *Ye-Saii*, all determine one’s state of life, here and now. Thus, the current Christian emphasis on prosperity theology in Yangoru is a resurgence of Yangoruan pragmatism. The language is biblical, but the undercurrent is Yangoru in nature, and prosperity theology is very much at home in Yangoru.

²² John G. Strelan, *Search for Salvation: Studies in the History and Theology of Cargo Cults*, Adelaide SA: Lutheran Publishing House, 1977, p. 81.

²³ Narokobi, *Life and Leadership in Melanesia*, p. 20.

²⁴ Mani, “Quest for Salvation in Papua New Guinea”, p. 73.

THE ARRIVAL OF THE WHITE MAN

The arrival of the first European missionaries was much like a fulfilment to the people of Yangoru. Roscoe, in his reconstruction of the Melanesian millenarian history, dates October 4, 1912, as the first arrival of European Catholic missionaries. On that date, Fr Eberhard Limbrock and Fr Francis Kirschbaum arrived at Ambukanja village in East Yangoru.²⁵ By this time, the European presence at the coastal fringes of the Boiken language group was enormous, with factory-made goods, and plantations that employed young men from around Yangoru, in comparison to the Yangoruan traditional lifestyle.²⁶

At the same time, the Catholic missionaries were welcomed all over Yangoru, because they thought of them as their expected ancestors, sent by *Saii Urin*, for the revival of long-lost Yangoruan life. In their excitement, they called the white missionaries and administration officers *Wale Saii* (spirit-god).²⁷ Without any knowledge of what was happening in the hearts and the minds of their local recipients, the missionaries went about introducing literacy and the distribution of iron tools, salt, and clothes, in exchange for land and labour, as the first step towards evangelism.²⁸ Strangely, they observed their *Wale Saii* turning into *Wale Kamba* (dead-spirit).²⁹ The changed name indicated a change of attitude towards the white man, and the Christian mission in general, because the people watched closely what happened to their young men. They saw, too, that goods were not distributed equally, as anticipated, relationships were not always healthy, their sacred places were destroyed, their land was taken, their shell money was regarded as evil, and their initiation ceremonies were stopped. In addition, that lack of anthropological awareness on the part of the

²⁵ Paul Roscoe, "The Far Side of Hurun: The Management of Melanesian Millenarian Movements", in *American Ethnologist* 15-3 (1988), p. 516.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 516-517.

²⁷ Boiken term, meaning "the spirit of god", who had come to rescue us from this world full of suffering.

²⁸ Roscoe, "The Far Side of Hurun", pp. 516-517.

²⁹ Boiken term, meaning "spirit of the dead". Boiken Yangoru people believe that these spirits can be either harmful or helpful. If they do bad things to people, then relationships may have been severed in some manner, so they need mending, or it may have come from evil environmental spirits.

missionaries, and the growing frustration of the local peoples, cultivated the seed bed for the millenarian movement within the foothills of Mt Hurun.³⁰

Looking through the time tunnel, we cannot avoid noticing that millenarianism has become a norm all across the Pacific, especially in Melanesia. Giving rise to the Vailala Madness in the Gulf Province (PNG), the Yali movement in Madang (PNG), the Paliau in Manus (PNG), John Frum in Vanuatu, and the Apolosi in Fiji.³¹ Generally, these movements have been branded as cargo cults by many outside observers. But, looking below the surface, we must acknowledge that these movements were the results of a collision that took place in history, which we tend to ignore. This ignorance gave rise to the construction of a colonial discourse on cargo cults. It may not mean that the movements lack a referent, but, traditionally and historically, the concept of cargoism does not capture any regularity among the peoples of Melanesia, and their social worlds and processes.³² Therefore, we could argue that millenarian movements grew out of frustrations caused by the clash of two differing cultures and religions. These movements have become a go-between, in an attempt to understand and accommodate the new into the old, thereby creating a hybrid culture. Thus, it may be an interpretive attempt to make meaning out of the prevailing outside value systems, which were invading the known structures that gathered for people's well-being. This has motivated the formation of the Peli Movement at the foot of Mt Hurun, as a way of responding to the changes that were coming.

THE PELI MOVEMENT – A YANGORUAN RESPONSE

The Peli Movement began in the foothills of Mt Hurun (now called Mt Turu), most specifically at Ambukanja village. This is the same village where the missionaries first arrived. The movement began in the 1930s, as a

³⁰ The birth place of the Peli (hawk) movement.

³¹ Frederick Steinbaur, *Melanesian Cargo Cults*, St Lucia Qld: University of Queensland Press, 1979, pp. 18-98.

³² Paul Roscoe, "The Evolution of Revitalisation among the Yangoru Boiken, Papua New Guinea", in *Reassessing Revitalisation Movements: Perspectives from North America and the Pacific*, Michael Harkim, ed., Lincoln NB: University of Nebraska Press, 2004, p. 162.

result of two *manki-masters*,³³ Hombinei and Paulus Hawina, returning from their encounter with the Europeans in the coastal areas west of the Wewak township, but it was not district wide and publicised, because it was condemned as madness, and was quelled by the Australian authorities.³⁴ However, the Peli Movement gained momentum, and gained publicity in the 1970s, under the leadership of Mathias Yaliwan and Daniel Hawina. Both are biological descendants of the pioneer founders of the movement.

In 1971, the cement survey markers on top of Mt Hurun were ceremonially removed, as they were seen as an intrusion into a sacred ground. During the removal ceremony, Yaliwan announced that the animal world will be restored, people of different races will eat together, people will live for one another, no more fighting among brothers, sickness and labour will cease, self-government and independence will come.³⁵ These are the Peli Movement's basic beliefs. They communicate the Yangoru's political, economic, and religious philosophy, incorporating the changes that were taking place, because of the economic, political, and religious imposition they were facing.

Combing through the historical and socio-cultural background of the movement, we cannot ignore the facts and assumptions established by various researchers, and their academic presentations. Steinbaur concluded that the Peli Movement was a counter-measure against the political and economic suppression of the colonialist, and a longing for freedom and self-determination.³⁶ Roscoe, on the other hand, deduced that the Yangoruan millenarian movement is a desire to acquire strength, relative to Europeans.³⁷ In addition, Strelan stressed that the Peli Movement, like other similar movements, is a politico-economic movement.³⁸ Camp believes the Peli movement was motivated by an idea that there is a secret that needs to be

³³ A Melanesian Pidgin term, with a similar meaning to "work gang foreman", for those who served the Europeans during the colonial era.

³⁴ Roscoe, "The Far Side of Hurun", pp. 519-520.

³⁵ Strelan, *Search for Salvation*, p. 81.

³⁶ Frederick Steinbaur, "Cargo Cults Challenge to the Churches?", in *Lutheran World* 21-2 (1974), pp. 162-165.

³⁷ Roscoe, "The Evolution of Revitalisation", pp. 162-182.

³⁸ Strelan, *Search for Salvation*, p. 33.

found, by the programming of activities, to achieve that secret.³⁹ These observations are commendable for their hard work and accuracy. However, these anthropologists, or missiologists, have studied the movement, and interpreted their phenomena, based on their own convictions. Several perceptions could be identified from these interpretations, the most basic one being a feeling of deprivation, and, as such, a desire for counteraction and social change. The deprivation, in this case, may be political, economic, or religious in nature.⁴⁰ The Peli Movement's foundational beliefs affirm this drive.

As we have observed earlier, the gospel message began with the distribution of goods, which, at that point in time, was the best way of introducing the foreign gospel. But, what the local people understood from such presentation, made all the difference for them. They may have interpreted it from a political, religious, or economic perspective. This is certainly enacted in the Peli tenets, in ushering in life in its fullness.

THE IMPACT ON SOCIO-POLITICAL, SOCIO-ECONOMIC, AND SOCIO-RELIGIOUS LIFE

The arrival of the white man, aided by the Christian gospel, had immense influence over the changes that took place in Melanesia, with results that affect PNG today. The anticipated imminent arrival of *Saii Urin*, and the Yangoruan ancestors, with the promised good life, has now receded. Thus, the Peli Movement, and other similar movements across the Melanesian landscape, slowly led the people to organise themselves. They brought the people together, united through their common beliefs, to press for a collective destiny. A destiny shaped to counter the new changing situations in their own societies, as an attempt to understand and accommodate the political, economic, and religious interferences caused by the clash of cultures.

³⁹ Cheryl Camp, "The Peli Association and the New Apostolic Church", in Wendy Flannery, ed., *Religious Movements in Melanesia Today (1), Point 2* (1983), p. 92.

⁴⁰ Sam T. Kaima, "The Evolution of Cargo Cults and the Emergence of Political Parties in Melanesia", in *Catalyst* 19-4 (1989), p. 334.

A Political Perspective

The Yangoru never had a centralised political system, whereby it could be organised into a state-like entity; instead, its political structures are tribalistic. Even though they share common religious, economic, and political philosophies, at no time, is one clan allowed to rule over another, although they may fight each other to settle issues. They are predominantly clan-based entities, separated by tribal landmark boundaries. Political leadership is thereby oriented towards day-to-day communal activities, as well as ritual processes, like initiation, organisation of clan defences, the equal distribution of wealth, trading, and so on.⁴¹ A leader only has power and a following in so far as people are obligated to him, socially and economically. He can only maintain leadership as long as his rivals do not outstrip him in wealth distribution and trading. This political philosophy still undergirds the way the Yangoruans think and act today.

Having observed our cultural form of politics, the Peli Movement's political ideologies look like a misfit. The movement was an alien, political drive to have all Yangoru under one leadership. However, digging through history, we can identify that, between 1930 through to the insertion of self-government in 1973, and eventual independence in 1975, there was an alien political intrusion, in which the Yangoruans were enslaved as plantation *wokboi*:⁴² some became *manki-masters*, and some were whipped in front of others, others were taken away, and separated from their home and family.⁴³ This was a situation that demanded immediate action. The Peli Movement, and its leadership, became that situational answer to consolidate Yangoru political affairs, at that point in time. Its principal beliefs spelled out the longing for a better day, when that political imposition would lose force. Thus, the Peli Movement's political drive was a counteraction against the imposition of a Western political system, which is the formal system in operation today.

⁴¹ Ronald Seib, "Introduction", in Michael A. Rynkiewich, and Roland Seib, eds, *Politics in Papua New Guinea: Continuities, Changes, and Challenges*, Point 24 (2000), pp. 5-16.

⁴² Melanesian Pidgin term meaning "male servants".

⁴³ Many Yangoruans are now citizens of most New Guinea Island Provinces, because, between 1930 and 1975, plantation labourers were forcefully recruited from Yangoru, as well as other parts of the country. Many did not return home after independence.

PNG has witnessed a lot of these movements, with their leaders later becoming political activists or parliamentarians. For instance, the leader of the Johnson cult of New Hanover in New Ireland was elected to parliament as a member of the United Party, Peli's Yaliwan was elected as the member for Yangoru Sausia, and the Kivung cult group has produced Koriam Urekit and Alois Koki as members of Parliament. Maybe the same is true in other Pacific Island nations, which are known for such movements, especially Melanesian countries. Although PNG has been riddled with what have been called cargo cults, some have evolved into political pressure groups, which may have influenced the independence of the nation.⁴⁴

What has happened since independence? Is there any relationship between the former cultic doctrines and the present political party systems in this country? Times may have changed, the level of education may have risen, and technology may have changed, but the legacy of the cultic doctrines still lives on. Our political leaders, and, maybe, representatives of our many political parties, are still preaching the same messages of development, as were preached by the cultist leaders. There may be overlaps in the relationship, but cargo doctrines of the millenarian movements are basic to any Melanesian political ideology, today.⁴⁵

Although PNG has adopted a Western liberal political system, we are now facing a real problem as to how we can balance the two incompatible and distinctive political cultures. This is resulting in the formation of a hybrid political system that Gelu has termed as non-liberal, democratic, political culture.⁴⁶ Now, we watch our big-man political philosophy coming alive, in the form of cash handouts and feasting. This is causing government instability, because elected leaders are moving from party to party, fishing for goods and services, to distribute to political cronies and supporters, to keep him/her in leadership. As Ketan explained:

⁴⁴ Kaima, "The Evolution of Cargo Cults", p. 336.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 334.

⁴⁶ Gelu, "The Emergence of a Non-Liberal Democratic Political Culture in Papua New Guinea", p. 87.

In the big-man political system, where status is derived from public distribution of wealth, the Electoral Development Fund offers the politicians to become “super-big-men”. But the demands of the system are such that politicians are often faced with enormous pressure to reward voters for their votes, friends and relatives for their contributions towards election campaigns, and clansmen for their loyalty. Since their parliamentary salary cannot be stretched to cover the myriad of expenses, politicians must look elsewhere to satisfy these largely unreasonable demands.⁴⁷

This hybrid system of governance has given birth to the idea of multiple party politics, which is causing more political instability, and periodical government changes. This is, in essence, a tribalistic ideology, thus making politics in PNG more personalised than institutionalised. It paints a picture of the impact of the two distinct political cultures.

An Economic Perspective

Cohesively with political enterprise, these cultic groups have also gone into business ventures. The Vailala Madness in Gulf Province later gave birth to the Tommy Kabu movement, which became a business venture. Yali’s rehabilitation scheme at the Rai Coast was another example of a well-organised, well-thought-out movement.⁴⁸ These cultic business ideologies later became corporate societies, which filled our nation. In Yangoru, we have seen the formation of the Yangoru *Yekere*⁴⁹ Society, which was made up of coffee growers from within Yangoru. Although cultic philosophies may have changed over time to accommodate newer ideas, the expectancy syndrome of the cultic philosophy is very much active, through the promises of our rural development schemes, cooperative societies, the National Development Bank initiatives, the Small Business Development Corporation, and other similar financial institutions, which are being promoted today. This expectancy syndrome has given birth to many community-based

⁴⁷ Joseph Ketan, “Leadership and Political Culture”, in Michael A. Rynkiewich, and Roland Seib, eds, *Politics in Papua New Guinea: Continuities, Changes, and Challenges*, Point 24 (2000), p. 79.

⁴⁸ Kaima, “The Evolution of Cargo Cults”, pp. 336-338.

⁴⁹ A Boiken Yangoru term meaning “good life”.

development associations, and micro-nationalist movements like the SPCA (Sepik Coffee/Cocoa and Coconut Association), which is dormant today, but they paint the picture of the economic impact the cultic philosophy has had on the local people.⁵⁰

A Religious Perspective

At the same time, some of these cult movements became the first indigenous churches in Melanesia. Some examples are Silas Eto's Holy Mama group from the Solomon Islands, the Hawina's Niu Apostolic group in Yangoru,⁵¹ and the indigenous church of Manus, founded by Paliu, the leader and founder of the Paliu movement.⁵²

The entire range of Melanesian cargo cults, and their possible philosophies, are recorded and described by Steinbaur in his book, *Melanesian Cargo Cults*. In the book, he discusses the cultic philosophies from a religious point of view. He aims to inform missionaries of the possible causes of the rising of the movements. This is because most of the movements were anti-mission and anti-white.⁵³ On the other hand, Strelan in his book, *Search for Salvation*, looks at the cultic philosophies from the idea of salvation. He confirms, and goes further than Steinbaur, by focusing on the present salvation aspects of a religious approach. He informs outside observers that the Melanesian attitude towards salvation is oriented, not towards life after death, but a life enjoyed here and now. Salvation is viewed in a more-pragmatic sense. Therefore, the immediate need for salvation was the desire of the people not to lose face, in the face of a religious imposition. The

⁵⁰ Patrick Gesch, "Cultivation of Surprise and Excess in the Sepik", in *Cargo Cults and Millenarian Movements: transoceanic comparisons of new religious movements*, Garry Trompf, ed., Berlin: Mouton De Gruyter, 1990, pp. 227-228.

⁵¹ This group is an offshoot of the Canadian-based New Apostolic church. However, when their missionaries arrived in Yangoru, they recruited Daniel Hawina as their translator. Hawina then used this opportunity, and propagated the Peli Movements teachings, and proclaimed himself as the head of the Niu Apostolic Congregation in Yangoru.

⁵² Steinbaur, *Melanesian Cargo Cults*, pp. 68-72.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-169.

cultic ideology, in the development of indigenous churches, is a drive to restore hope in Melanesian religion.⁵⁴

Since the arrival of the first missionaries, and the evangelisation of the Yangoru, many outward expressions may have changed, because of the clash of religions. But the current theological and philosophical emphasis on prosperity is worrisome for Christianity in PNG, particularly for the Yangoru. With the coming of the new wave of radical Pentecostal movements in the last 20 years, all promising to offer prosperity on becoming a member, or upon following certain spiritual principles, how can we discern truth from falsehood? For instance, we see the arrival of PNG Revivals, Life in the Spirit, the Israel Movement, the Seth Mission, and many other prosperity-oriented ministries, which have sprouted out of Melanesia. Are we observing the reversion to a cargo cult philosophy, or are these more-hybrid Christian churches? Is each of these a religion, clothed in gospel language, but dressed with real Melanesian undergarments, where it finds its real meaning?

SUMMARY

The collisions of differing political, economic, and religious philosophies have not left a vacuum in PNG, specifically among the Yangoru. Rather, it has left a legacy, in the form of hybrid political, economic, and religious systems, with which we wrestle to understand today. It would be childish to blame a particular culture, or people group, for the impact. However, the problem is the unhealthy intermarriage of the systems. The possible root to the problem is irrelevant contextualisation, which has produced a syncretistic worldview in politics, economics, and the religious life of the people.

Although prosperity theology, in its particularity, may have been promoted in the last 50 years, in terms of the Yangoruan pragmatic philosophy of life, prosperity is as old as life itself. Thus, the coming of the white man, aided by the Christian gospel, clothed in civilisation, was a form of prosperity

⁵⁴ Strelan, *Search for Salvation*, pp. 13-105.

theology, from a Yangoran perspective. It has enforced the idea, even before the arrival of the so-called Charismatic/Pentecostal phenomena.

THE BIBLE AND PROSPERITY THEOLOGY

Prosperity theology is a thriving religious economy in PNG, specifically in Yangoru, and this may also be true in other Melanesian countries, and other parts of the world. Yet, it is dividing the church between the faithful followers of prosperity theology, and those who regard it as heretical.⁵⁵ Since the inception of the Christian gospel in Yangoru, and the counteraction (Peli Movement) that followed, the conception of religion has not changed much. Many still hold on to the pragmatic and relational ideology about religion and life. On the other hand, the visiting prosperity theologians, and other prosperity tele-evangelistic messages, the numerous local and visiting prosperity teachers, who fill our towns, streets, and church denominations, the denominational doctrinal statements, testimonies of supernatural blessings, and numerous books and scripts about prosperity, are all fuelling the existing, and particularly affirmed, belief systems in PNG. Even the Bible texts, which speak about blessing and prosperity, are very appealing to our religious and pragmatic mindset.

However, what is prosperity theology, and what is wrong with it? Who is responsible for the idea of prosperity? Why prosperity? What should be the undergirding principle, by which prosperity theology should be defined? Whose definition is supracultural, or what definitive criteria should we use to measure every definition?

This section considers, and wrestles with, some of these challenging questions. We will approach the subject in three parts. Firstly, we will take a look at prosperity theology. We will investigate the modern origins of its history and definition, its beliefs, and its major arguments. Secondly, we will explore the Bible and its teachings on prosperity. This will cover the Old and New Testament conceptions of prosperity, and the historical Christian understanding of the concept. Finally, we will evaluate it, and

⁵⁵ Sang-Bok David Kim, "A Bed of Roses or a Bed of Thorns", in *Evangelical Review of Theology* 20-1 (1996), p. 15.

establish a better understanding of the subject, so that the church of Jesus Christ may follow the truth, in one's own cultural setting, without having to follow imposed cultural principles.

PROSPERITY THEOLOGY IN THE MIDST OF SUFFERING – IS IT BIBLICAL?

One of the crucial questions we asked in our Introduction was, is prosperity theology scriptural? This question has become a dividing line between the Charismatic/Pentecostal and the Evangelical factions of the church. Battle lines have been drawn between these two theological factions, over recent years, and many have argued and debated through their writings.⁵⁶ Some have criticised each other,⁵⁷ others have been neutral, while still others are trying to search the scriptures, to answer the question.⁵⁸ Only a few are trying to listen to both sides, and biblically and doctrinally endeavouring to find a way forward, for unity.⁵⁹

However, at the heart of this debate, we find the paradox of the Bible and culture. Thus, we face a theological paradox in our definitions, teachings, and arguments, which should be viewed with suspicion. This is heightened by the fact that God's creational imagery can still be found in every culture, except that no one culture may claim to be totally biblical, because, while God is at work in every culture, Satan is, too.

Definition and History

Although fractured in the fall, humanity was created with an innate ability to define and control the creation, as God's vice-regents (Gen 1:26-28), thus, meaning-making is an ability that is not shared with the animal world. Only humans, irrespective of their cultural or racial differences, will ask the same

⁵⁶ Some of these specific articles, dedicated to this issue, can be read in the *Evangelical Review of Theology* 20-1 (January-March, 1996).

⁵⁷ C. Kee Hwang, "A Response", in *Evangelical Review of Theology* 20-1 (1996), pp. 47-48; and Ward W. Gasque, "Prosperity Theology and the New Testament", in *Evangelical Review of Theology* 20-1 (1996), pp. 40-46.

⁵⁸ Young Hoon Lee, "The Case for Prosperity Theology", in *Evangelical Review of Theology* 20-1 (1996), pp. 26-39.

⁵⁹ Kim, "A Bed of Roses or a Bed of Thorns", pp. 15-25.

question “why” in the face of confrontation with any undefined interruptions in life. Thus, cultures are designed in such a way that a particular people group can define, from their perspective, what the world is for them.⁶⁰ Therefore, meaning-making is about trying to understand, and bring under control, any alien intrusion. Human cultures are, therefore, mechanisms, through which definition is revised, to control anything that may threaten life. Thus, definition is a cultural product, formulated by one’s presuppositions, energised by his/her cultural worldview. This shows us that, in any attempt to define any social behaviour, or reactions, to any socio-political, socio-economic or socio-religious endeavours, definitions should be redefined in consideration of their receptors’ cultural value systems. Having this in mind, let us investigate some definitions attached to prosperity theology, and its historical beginnings.

Since the formation of Charismatic/Pentecostalism in the 1900s, prosperity theology has become a stream of theological emphasis in contemporary Christianity. It has spread throughout the world, through personalities like Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth Copeland, Oral Roberts, T. L. Osborne, Charles Capps, Frederick Price, and others.⁶¹

However, in an attempt to define prosperity theology, Ro directs our attention to a distinction that should be made between prosperity theology and the biblical teaching on prosperity. His portrait of prosperity theology is drawn straight from the five pillars of prosperity theology, which will be discussed later. He stresses that God always blesses His people, materially and spiritually, when they have a positive faith, and are obedient to Him, irrespective of the responsibilities attached to those who are blessed materially.⁶²

Kim claims that, “Its tenet is that God desires that all faithful Christians should automatically prosper, as of divine right.”⁶³ He says prosperity

⁶⁰ Paul, G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: an Anthropological Understanding of How People Change*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2008.

⁶¹ Bowman, *The Word Faith Controversy*, p. 8.

⁶² Ro, “In the Midst of Suffering”, p. 5.

⁶³ Kim, “A Bed of Roses”, p. 14.

theology began as a result of American pragmatism, in which an idea should be formulated in terms of its financial value. Thus, religious values should be evaluated in terms of their practical consequences.⁶⁴

Gasque, likewise, defines from a financial prospect. He says prosperity theology is an idea that God loves you, and has a marvellous financial plan for your life. He points out that its philosophical and intellectual root, in the 20th century, goes back to American optimism, which resulted in the economic boom after the war, which was strengthened by the Christian Science movement, and other secular, and new, religious philosophies.⁶⁵

Saracco says prosperity theology is a theological teaching that states that, if certain physical and spiritual principles are followed, the expiatory work of Jesus on the cross can become a guarantee for divine healing, material riches, and happiness, without the need for suffering.⁶⁶

However, Lee, on the other hand, claims that prosperity is about a successful, flourishing, and thriving condition for life, wealth, health, and the environment. He defines prosperity theology from a generalised perspective. Furthermore, he says, it is a basic power to sustain life. He points out that prosperity theology is not only about material or financial success, but it includes material and spiritual success in life⁶⁷

Likewise, Hwang, in response to Gasque's definition of prosperity theology, argues that Gasque's definition is mainly based on American pragmatism, which understands prosperity predominantly in terms of financial success. He reiterated that Gasque's definition is too narrow and one-sided, because Gasque's American-oriented definition is not applicable in Korea, and elsewhere. He pointed out that "prosperity" should be defined locally, in accordance with local-value systems.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 16.

⁶⁵ Gasque, "Prosperity Theology and the New Testament", p. 40.

⁶⁶ J. Norberto Saracco, "Prosperity Theology", in *Dictionary of Mission Theology*, John Corrie, ed., Downers Grove IL: IVP, 2007, p. 322.

⁶⁷ Lee, "The Case for Prosperity Theology", p. 26.

⁶⁸ Hwang, "A Response", p. 47.

The authors of these definitions have defined prosperity theology from their historical and theological observations, which date back to American revivalism. These definitions are interpretive convictions, based on a specific locality and history, but, reading behind the words, we can see that all definitions are rallying around “life”. Therefore, prosperity theology can be defined with one word, “life”, and how it could be taken care of in this world. Essentially, it is about the fullness of life, here and now. In this light, we may argue that prosperity theology is just as old as life itself. Life is the reason why all human systems, like prosperity theology, are developed, to give life a meaningful destiny in a chaotic world like ours. Thus, in general, prosperity is about successful, flourishing, and thriving religious, economic, and political experiences in life.

Five Pillars of Prosperity Theology

However, like any human organisation that has its laws of operation, prosperity theology does have its own set of principles, by which one should live, in order to be part of it. Saracco identifies five pillars, on which prosperity theology stands: (1) the law of blessing; (2) the law of sowing and reaping; (3) the law of the proclaimed word; (4) the law of faith; and (5) the law of the expiatory work of Christ. It is implied that all these principles are activated through and by faith. Just as God’s governing principles govern the creation, to function in an orderly manner, these pillars govern prosperity, which is only functional through faith.⁶⁹ Thus, to understand prosperity theology, we must understand these five pillars.

The first is the law of blessing. The basis of this law is derived from the Old Testament (OT) covenant with Abraham (Gen 12:2-3). It is implied that the promises God made to Abraham were to bless him materially. Christians, as Abraham’s spiritual children, are heirs to the blessings promised to Abraham. Thus, Christians must affirm that prosperity is God’s will, because He wants all of us to prosper in all areas of life.⁷⁰

The second pillar is the law of sowing and reaping. The basis of this principle is the natural law of sowing and reaping (Gal 6:7-8). If you do not

⁶⁹ Saracco, “Prosperity Theology”, pp. 323-324.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 323.

plant, then you do not expect a harvest. How much you plant is how much you reap, or how much you give is how much you receive. This natural principle is also applicable in the spiritual realm. Therefore, you should sow your time, money, material possessions, and even your service in faith, to reap a rich harvest of tangible material blessings.⁷¹

The third pillar is the law of the proclaimed word. This principle is the idea that “you name it and claim it”. In this light, Kim said, “You can have anything you want. You just name it, and claim it; and it’s yours. Believe it, and receive it.”⁷² Therefore, it is not sufficient to believe something in the heart, and not see the reality. Hence, if something is to be real, it should be spoken out. This faith formula says that if you speak negative you, will receive negative, but if you speak positive, you will receive positive. This means you are the result of what you speak. This principle is argued from Mark 11:23-24.⁷³

The fourth pillar is the law of faith. The basis for this law is having faith in faith. It means, instead of having faith in God, having the faith of God. Having this faith enables the believer to say it and see it happen, just as God did at the time of creation. Therefore, God’s work today is done when believers in faith movements activate His power through the word. This law is based on Gen 1:3.⁷⁴

The fifth pillar is the expiatory work of Christ. This principle is based on the work Christ did on the cross. It is now believed that spiritual and material prosperity has been divinely provided through that expiatory work on the cross. In Christ’s death, God put to death all sickness, sin, poverty, pain, and all that stood against us. Therefore, in Christ, we are freed from all curses of poverty and illness.⁷⁵

These five prosperity pillars are the foundational posts upon which prosperity theologians are building their theologies. They (the pillars) stand

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Kim, “A Bed of Roses”, p. 18.

⁷³ Saracco, “Prosperity Theology”, p. 324.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

as the guiding governors that govern the behavioural patterns of the faithful followers of prosperity theology.

Major Theological Arguments

In essence, Christianity is about having faith in God, in His Son, Jesus Christ, and in His word, as revealed in the scriptures. This is crystal clear, in every sense of the scriptures, but, instead, there is confusion, because conflicting views are being trumpeted, for the whole world to hear.⁷⁶ The faith idea has been the single-most controversial aspect, in the debate over prosperity theology. Specifically, the war of words surrounds the question, “Is prosperity theology scriptural?” McConnell argues that the word-faith teaching of the prosperity teachers is not authentically Pentecostal, but a cultic teaching that originated in the mind science cults of the 19th century.⁷⁷ Hunt wrote a critique, entitled *The Seduction of Christianity*. He claims that Evangelicals and Pentecostals were seduced into believing heresies, cultivated from these cultic doctrines. He branded prosperity teachings as the beginning of the great apostasy, in anticipation of the coming of the Antichrist.⁷⁸ Following these critiques, Hanegraaff contends that, in the name of Jesus, multitudes are lured into believing a false gospel of greed, with its doctrines straight from the metaphysical cults.⁷⁹ Saracco considers that prosperity theology is speaking biblical language, but, in practice, it affirms the life philosophy of postmodernity. It is a scandal, because it focuses on materialism, and making Christ a Mammon, the god of riches. It teaches doctrines contrary to the values of humility, sacrifice, and suffering, which are characteristic of the kingdom of God.⁸⁰ John MacArthur Jr thinks that the sad reality of Charismatic/Pentecostalism is one of chaos and

⁷⁶ Bowman, *The Word Faith Controversy*, p. 7.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10, quoting Daniel R. McConnell, *A Different Gospel: A Historical and Biblical Analysis of the Modern Faith Movement*, Peabody MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, quoting Dave Hunt, *The Seduction of Christianity: Spiritual Discernment in the Last Days*, Eugene OR: Harvest House, 1985.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, quoting Hank Hanegraaff, *Christianity in Crisis*, Eugene OR: Harvest House, 1993.

⁸⁰ Saracco, “Prosperity Theology”, p. 326.

doctrinal misconception.⁸¹ Gasque argues that prosperity theology is fundamentally anthropocentric. He says this teaching is building a false utopia, and branded it as a different gospel, alluding to Paul's address to the Galatian church (Gal 1:6).⁸² McKnight says that the prosperity gospel is a half-truth, or even less than a half-truth. He argues that prosperity theology has made God into a vending machine for inserting faith to receive material blessings, and made humankind into a happiness-receiving machine. The paradigm for humanity in the Bible is the human who dies with Christ, dies to self, dies to everything we want, dies to the world, and dies to flesh. Thus, we are not to seek our own livelihood, but to live for others, and in sacrificial service to God.⁸³

However, Bowman argues that the word-faith movement, and their prosperity teachings, are not a result of the infiltration of the metaphysical cults, as assumed by the critics; it is a radical form of Pentecostalism. He asserts that, to claim word-faith teaching as metaphysical, cultic doctrine, and to classify these movements in the same category as Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, and Christian Science, implies that Pentecostalism or Evangelicalism, at the heart, is cultic. He cautions that, theologically, we could classify these religious movements as cults, because they claim to be Christian, yet deny the essential elements of the Christian faith. But, in the case of faith movements, and their advocates, like Kenyon, Hagin, Copeland, and others, they have not denied the essential elements of the Christian faith, as supposed in these arguments. While there are errors in their distinctive theology on prosperity, their roots are firmly located in Evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity, and not in mind-science or metaphysical cults.⁸⁴

Hwang, in response to Gasque's article, entitled *Prosperity Theology and the New Testament*,⁸⁵ argues that his narrow-minded argument is based on American prosperity philosophy, which hinges around financial success. He

⁸¹ MacArthur, *Charismatic Chaos*, pp. 23-296 (almost the whole book).

⁸² Gasque, "Prosperity Theology and the New Testament", pp. 40-46.

⁸³ Scot McKnight, *The Problem for the Prosperity Gospel*, article online, accessed April 6, 2012, available from <http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Christianity> March 2009.

⁸⁴ Bowman, *Word Faith Controversy*, pp. 10-12.

⁸⁵ Gasque, "Prosperity Theology and the New Testament", pp. 40-46.

argues from an American point of view, not representative of other geographical and cultural points of view. Hwang draws from his own Korean point of view to nullify Gasque's claim on prosperity theology as another gospel. He points out that, according to the Korean value system, prosperity is not just financial, as assumed in the argument, but it encompasses the whole of life. It communicates physical health, the status quo, an affluent environment, the success of one's children, fame, promotion, academic success, and all that makes life worth living. Thus Gasque's version of prosperity theology cannot be applied in Korea, and elsewhere.⁸⁶

Having surveyed the definitions, its historical roots, the five main tenets, and the major arguments surrounding prosperity theology, we can identify a few trends of thought. Firstly, theologies have a human origin, and they are developed in a real human situation. They are an endeavour to define real-life experiences in the light of the supracultural gospel, or to refute or counteract any injunction. For instance, liberation theology, which was developed in Latin America in the 1960s, feminist theology, political theology, Evangelical theology, the Reformation, or, in this case, prosperity theology, which could be identified with Charismatic/Pentecostalism, is an endeavour to apply the gospel in real-life situations. Thus, theology is not framed in the mind of God, but of humankind. It is, therefore, a human product, and subject to error. This is not to mean that theologies are not biblical, but it means that biblical truths are transported through cultural or philosophical presuppositions. Theology is, therefore, an attempt to interpret the Christian faith from one's locality, and from the perspective of the affected.⁸⁷

Secondly, the distinctive theological approach to prosperity is, in many respects, unbiblical and anthropocentric. Thus, a prosperity teacher's view on healing and prosperity has grown out of real-life experiences. Prosperity theologians are seeking to interpret the biblical concept of prosperity, in the

⁸⁶ Hwang, "A Response", pp. 47-48.

⁸⁷ Andrew F. Walls, "The Rise of Global Theologies", in *Global Theology in Evangelical Perspective: Exploring the Contextual Nature of Theology and Mission*, Jeffery P. Greenman, and Gene L. Green, eds, Downers Grove IL: IVP Academic, 2012, pp. 19-20.

light of our life, here and now. While the errors are largely rooted in the problematic elements of Charismatic/Pentecostal theologies, a sound biblical theology is emerging, and it is rising above the weaknesses.

Thirdly, the popular characterisations of prosperity theology as the gospel of greed, a mind-science cult, or a metaphysical cult, and many similar derogatory names like those, fail to take stock of the diversity in the teaching. Although there are errors in the distinctive prosperity teachings, prosperity theologians have not denied the main tenets of the Christian faith. Thus, it is unthinkable to brand prosperity theology as a mind-science cult, or align it with Christian Science, or a metaphysical cult, or any other cult that claims to be Christian, but denies the essential elements of the Christian faith.

BIBLICAL TEACHING ON PROSPERITY

All of humanity has a certain way of explaining what life is, and a way of interpreting the events that take place in and around it. This could be called a worldview, or a belief system, that underlies the way people think and react in all that makes life. Thus, each of us has a worldview, shaped by our culture that incorporates the religious, economic, and political systems, in which we grew. Some of us may be conscious of it, and some may not, but we all have a certain outlook on life.⁸⁸ This outlook is propagated through our opinions, and views attached to scriptural interpretation. Thus, our biases are shown in our definitions, our history, and the foundational principles, on which we build our theologies. Therefore, we should ask, “What should be the definitive character by which we could measure all our theologies concerning prosperity?” After all, why prosperity, and what is the basis for prosperity? These and other questions, asked in the introductory portion of the section, highlight a need to investigate the Bible on the concept of prosperity.

The Bible itself is a historical document. It contains God’s unilateral and bilateral covenants with humanity. These covenants should be surveyed, to give us the biblical framework, in which all prosperity teachings should be

⁸⁸ Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*.

measured. The Old and the New Testaments, in a way, could both be seen as God's covenants with humanity. These covenants spell out the "why and what" of the prosperity concept.

The Concept of Prosperity in the Old Testament

The Old Testament Hebrew terms, פָּלַח (*tsālēah*), לָגַד (*gādal*), and בָּרַךְ (*bārak^e*), convey the concept of prosperity. פָּלַח (*tsālēah*) means a successful venture, as a contrast to failure, or a prosperous ride in a journey, in which God is the source (Gen 24:21; 2 Chr 25:5; Ps 45:4).⁸⁹ לָגַד (*gādal*) means to grow. It implies the idea of growing big, or to become strong. This is specifically applied in terms of human work becoming successful in the light of political or economic achievements.⁹⁰ בָּרַךְ (*bārak^e*) means blessing. This term signifies dependency, in terms of humanity's survival in the world. Thus, it portrays the idea that the success of a person, or people group, depends on God's blessings.⁹¹ In analysis, these terms and definitions communicate two distinct, but related, ideas about prosperity. The first idea (פָּלַח (*tsālēah*) and לָגַד (*gādal*)) indicates human activity, and the second (בָּרַךְ (*bārak^e*)) indicates an act of God, entailing relationship – a relationship based on the biblical covenants. Thus, the concept of prosperity should be oriented, and understood, in the light of biblical-covenant relational stipulations.

Moreover, the word פָּלַח (*tsālēah*) also indicates that the provision of prosperity is given to aid a journey. It portrays that prosperity is not an end in itself, but a means to enable a journey. The first three chapters of Genesis describe the beginning and the reason for the journey. Gen 1 and 2 tell us about God's creativity, which included human life, as an image of God in substance (Gen 1:26-27; 2:4-7).⁹² God is preeminently portrayed as the living God. The whole biblical account reveals that all life originates from

⁸⁹ W. E. Vine, *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, Merrill F. Unger, and William White Jr, eds, Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson, p. 191.

⁹⁰ Lee, "The Case for Prosperity Theology", pp. 26-27.

⁹¹ Vine, *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary*, p. 18.

⁹² G. L. Bray, "Image of God", in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, T. Desmond Alexander, and Brian S. Rosner, eds, Downers Grove IL: IVP, 2000, p. 576.

God. He alone is the living God, who has life in Himself.⁹³ This is the essence of the whole biblical narrative. Gen 3 depicts the fall, and alienation of that life from God, and His determined decision of judgment, followed by grace (Gen 3:1-21). God's prolife actions, which fill history, throughout the Bible, are the indications of His providential grace towards His wanton and wayward children, again.⁹⁴

The Old and New Testament scriptures contain the prerequisites that define the different relationships between God and His wayward children.⁹⁵ These prerequisites express God's covenantal pronouncements on non-negotiable terms and conditions, for humans to relate to Him. Given that the relationship between God and humanity transpires in various forms in the scriptures, we will treat the subject under several covenants.

Firstly, in the Adamic covenant, although there is no mention of a covenant in the first three chapters of the Genesis account, until after the flood (Gen 9),⁹⁶ we may observe clear definitions, specifying sets of conditions, which stipulate the terms of relationships between the Creator and the creation, especially humanity. Adam was instructed, concerning what to do, and what not to do, in order to remain in relationship to the Creator (Gen 1:28-30; 2:15-17). God set before humanity both life and death, and prosperity and poverty, cautioning them about the immediate effects of disobedience (1:28; 2:8-17), which would mean death, and being separated from God, spiritually and physically. On the other hand, obedience would mean life in its fullness; it would involve endless physical and spiritual life,

⁹³ 1 Sam 17:26; Ps 84:2; Is 37:4, 37; Jer 10:10; Dan 6:26; Matt 16:16; John 5:26; Acts 14:15; 2 Cor 3:3; 1 Thess 1:9; Heb 3:12; Rev 7:2.

⁹⁴ William J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: An Old Testament Covenantal Theology*, Exeter UK: Paternoster Press, 1984, pp. 33-39.

⁹⁵ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, Leicester UK: IVP, 1994, p. 515.

⁹⁶ The covenant with Noah could be seen as the first, most-basic covenant for the survival of humanity after the fall, and the subsequent annihilation of the created order, through the flood. But, because it basically concerns the creation order itself, and has its main tenets embedded in the creation story, we can see this covenant as a partial physical reinstatement of the Adamic covenant, a covenant in which God's unilateral intentions to His creation are made known. Thus, it reaffirms God's creational intent, which has been disrupted, because of sin.

in an intimate relationship with the Creator.⁹⁷ The fall of Adam and Eve reversed the whole scenario, from innocence to guilt and shame, and from love and harmony to strife. These marked the downward spiral of humanity, and gave rise to the need for a renewed covenantal relationship with their Creator, and with one another (4-11). Thus, Adam's failure to uphold the creational covenant, laid a concrete foundation for understanding the periodical biblical covenants throughout Bible history.⁹⁸ Therefore, it is implied that, from the beginning, relationship is the central attitude for creating humanity, and the blessings and cursings that followed were the results of relationships. Thus, remaining in relationship with God is central to understanding the concept of prosperity.⁹⁹

Secondly, in the Abrahamic covenant, God gave Abraham three specific promises, (1) descendants,¹⁰⁰ (2) land,¹⁰¹ and (3) the promise to bless all humanity through him.¹⁰² In Gen 15, God confirms His promises to Abraham with a blood covenant. In a blood covenant, the two parties are required to walk to and fro between the divided halves of an animal. This type of covenant is about pledging one's own life. If either party should violate the stipulations, then the innocent party has the legal right to treat the guilty party just like the butchered animal. But, in this case, the LORD, God of the universe, alone, walked to and fro between the halves, indicating that the promises made to Abraham were unconditional, and God will keep the covenant, regardless of the failures of Abraham or his descendants.¹⁰³ This is much like a formal legal document, highlighting that God will keep the promises made to Abraham.¹⁰⁴ Before that, however, God pronounced Abraham righteous, on the basis of his faith, and it was credited to him as

⁹⁷ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 516.

⁹⁸ Geoffrey C. Bingham, *Comprehending the Covenant*, Blackwood SA: New Creation Publications, 1999, pp. 11-16.

⁹⁹ Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*, pp. 16-20.

¹⁰⁰ Gen 12:2; 15:5; 17:4-5; 22:17.

¹⁰¹ Gen 12:7; 13:15; 15:18; 17:18.

¹⁰² Gen 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14.

¹⁰³ Lawrence O. Richards, ed., "Covenant", in *The Applied Bible Dictionary*, Eastbourne UK: Kingsway Publications, 1990, p. 257.

¹⁰⁴ M. J. Evans, "Blessing/Curse", in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, T. Desmond Alexander, and Brian S. Rosner, eds, Downers Grove IL: IVP, 2000, pp. 397-401.

righteousness (Gen 15:6). It shows that Abraham's relationship to God was one of faith, and not of works. This is the basis upon which God continually renewed the promises made to Abraham, through Isaac (Gen 26:2-5; 26:24), and later to Jacob.¹⁰⁵ In line with these promises, God blessed Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and others, with material prosperity.¹⁰⁶ Therefore, the concept of prosperity, in the patriarchal covenant, should be judged in relation to Abraham's absolute dependence (Gen 15:6) on God's unilateral covenant with him.¹⁰⁷

However, in Gen 17, God expanded the initial promise of descendants and land (Gen 12:2-3). Here, God instituted the covenant of circumcision, unlike the sign of the rainbow (Gen 9:12),¹⁰⁸ or the blood covenant (Gen 15:17-19), but a bilateral covenant, a covenant, which the descendants of Abraham were obligated to uphold. Thus, the failure to undergo circumcision, resulted in exclusion from the promises, and brought suffering, as the consequence of the sanctions of the covenant (Gen 17:14). We would probably say that this was the beginning of a suzerain-vassal relationship, which was later developed in the Mosaic covenant. In this type of covenant, the concept of prosperity was regulated on the basis of the subject's total loyalty to his/her ruler. This meant obedience equalled prosperity, but disobedience equalled poverty.¹⁰⁹

Thirdly, in the Mosaic covenant, we see that God's promise to Abraham about descendants (Gen 12:2; 17:4-7) was fulfilled while they were in captivity (Ex 1:7-14). God took notice of their sufferings, and delivered them, through the hand of Moses, in accordance with His unconditional commitment to the patriarchs (Ex 3:7-14; 6:2-5). However, to prepare them for the next phase of blessing promised to Abraham (land), God brought the

¹⁰⁵ Gen 27:1-29; 28:13-15; 35:9-12.

¹⁰⁶ Gen 20:14-16; 24:35; 26:13; 30:43; 47:27.

¹⁰⁷ Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*, pp. 47-54.

¹⁰⁸ A unilateral covenant sign God made with Noah, an assurance from God to Noah that He will not destroy life again in the manner He did through the flood.

¹⁰⁹ Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*, pp. 72-74.

nation to Sinai, where He inaugurated the expansion of the bilateral covenant, initiated in Gen 17.¹¹⁰ Wright notes that:

The anticipation of the Promised Land in Deuteronomy, however, is but the culmination of a major theme running through the whole Pentateuch. The promise of land is a constituent part of God's covenant with Abraham; the Exodus is presented as God's first act in preparing to fulfil that promise; the law and covenant are given with a view to life in the land; the wilderness wanderings are "abnormal" – a punishment for cowardly failure to enter the land at the first opportunity. Beyond the Pentateuch, the land remains a primary theme: its capture and division in Joshua; the struggle to survive on it in Judges; the eventual complete control of the whole territory under David and Solomon; the prophetic protest at injustice perpetrated on the land; the Exile, as divine judgment, and the people's eventual restoration to the land, as a token of renewed relationship with God. And, besides all this, there are all kinds of laws, institutions, and cultic practices concerned with the use of the land.¹¹¹

Therefore, the Mosaic covenant laws on land and property ownership typify universal principles of liberty and justice. They describe how the Israelites should relate to God, through various relationships¹¹² within and without the

¹¹⁰ Ex 19-23; Deut 28-30.

¹¹¹ Christopher J. H. Wright, *God's People in God's Land: Family, Land, and Property in the Old Testament*, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1997, p. 4.

¹¹² Especially political and economic relationships, but, in particular, economic relationships. He blessed His chosen people, both, as individuals, and families (Deut 11:26-29), and promised to bless them specifically and practically (Deut 28:1-4). To validate economic transparency among the chosen people, economic legal codes were designed to foster healthy relationships in economic practices: the laws of interest (Ex 22:25-27; Lev 25:35-37; Deut 23:19-20), the laws of the sabbatical year and Jubilee (Ex 23:10-12; Lev 25:1-7, 8-25), the laws of tithes and offerings (Lev 27:30-33), and the laws of justice for the poor and alien of the land (Lev 19:9-10; Deut 24:19-22; Num 15:15). These laws were enacted so that there was a shared access to the land, and the use of its resources, everyone should be responsible and productive in the production of wealth and economic growth, and material prosperity should be governed within the covenantal context.

nation, once they received the Promised Land.¹¹³ In this arrangement, the laws were a national constitution, defining God's rulership over the nation. Israel's obligation to Yahweh was derived from His gracious acts on their behalf (Deut 7:6; 14:2; 26:18). He delivered them from the hand of Pharaoh, and gave them the opportunity to serve Him, which they accepted,¹¹⁴ but this covenant added no further promises to those given to Abraham. After the terms of the covenant had been revealed, it was ratified by the people, after which they were sprinkled with the blood of bulls – the blood of the covenant (Ex 24:3-9).¹¹⁵

Given the special nature of this covenant as suzerainty,¹¹⁶ we must note that the concept of prosperity, in this covenant, was contingent on Israel's obedience to God's precepts of justice and liberty. On the one hand, it painted the picture of material and spiritual abundance to the faithful, but, on the other, it depicted the dangers of accumulating wealth at the cost of the poor, the widowed, the orphaned, the alien, and the disabled. Thus, God's people were called to reflect God's graciousness, in the way they treated the needy of the society.¹¹⁷ But the neglect of this responsibility was a hallmark among the wealthy of the nation, which called forth scathing denunciations from Israel's prophets.¹¹⁸ This means that material prosperity is a gift from God, but it does not make one godlier than those who do not prosper materially. Therefore, prosperity should be seen as a providential act of God for all humanity, and should not be used as a measuring rod for godliness.¹¹⁹

Finally, the concept of a new covenant is specifically associated with Jer 31:31-34, but it was anticipated, because other scriptural texts alluded to the idea of an everlasting covenant, which would be established between God and His people.¹²⁰ Here, covenant language is applied to a mysterious figure "the servant of the LORD", a servant whose mission is analogous to the seed

¹¹³ Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches*, p. 55.

¹¹⁴ Ex 19:3-5; 20:2; cf. Jer 11:1-8.

¹¹⁵ Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches*, p. 55.

¹¹⁶ Richards, "Covenant", pp. 257-258.

¹¹⁷ Ex 22:22; Deut 10:18; 14:29; Is 1:17; Jer 22:3.

¹¹⁸ Ezek 22:29; 45:10-12; Hos 12:7; Mic 2:2; 3:11; Amos 4:1; 5:11-12; 6:4-6; Hab 1:16-17.

¹¹⁹ Ps 72:3-12; 127:2; Matt 5:45.

¹²⁰ Jer 30-33; Ezek 34, 36-37; Is 40-66.

of Abraham and David (Gen 17:19; 22:18; 2 Sam. 7:11-16).¹²¹ Therefore, the visionary character of this covenant in the OT may be difficult to follow, but some observations can be made:

1. The new covenant will include the nation of Israel¹²² as well as the rest of humanity.¹²³ The scope of this new covenant transcends national and territorial boundaries (Is 44:28; 45:13). It will be an unconditional divine promise, firstly, for unfaithful Israel, and secondly, for the rest of fallen humanity. It will contain forgiveness of sins, and the restoration of God's intimate relationship with humanity.
2. The idea of a new covenant goes right back to the Adamic, Abrahamic, and Mosaic covenants, and not just to the fall of Judah. In a way, "new" may imply the renewal of the old covenant. This may mean that there will be continuity, but it will be different from the one previous generations had broken (Jer 32). The significant components in the new covenant are: complete removal of sin;¹²⁴ an inner transformation of the heart;¹²⁵ and an intimate relationship with God.¹²⁶ These elements are indestructible and eternal, because, unlike the previous covenants, this new covenant cannot be broken unilaterally.¹²⁷
3. The new covenant, in a sense, is a climax of all the divine covenants with humanity, specifically, Israel. It summarises the key promises made to the patriarchs, for instance, a physical inheritance, a divine-human intimate relationship, an everlasting dynasty, and a blessing to the rest of humanity, but, at same time, it transcends them. Thus, the promises of earlier

¹²¹ P. R. Williamson, "Covenant", in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, T. Desmond Alexander, and Brian S. Rosner, eds, Downers Grove IL: IVP, 2000, p. 426.

¹²² Jer 31:36-40; 33:6-16; Ezek 36:24-38; 37:11-28.

¹²³ Jer 33:9; Ezek 36:36; 37:28.

¹²⁴ Jer 31:34; Ezek 37:29, 33.

¹²⁵ Jer 31:33; Ezek 36:26.

¹²⁶ Jer 31:34a; Ezek 36:27.

¹²⁷ Williamson, "Covenant", p. 427.

covenants find their definitive fulfilment in the new covenant, and they become eternal, in its truest sense.¹²⁸ The concept of a new covenant holds out hope for a prosperous relationship, a relationship of peace and prosperity, both materially and spiritually. This prosperous state will be granted by God to His wayward children.

Although we have not investigated other biblical covenants, like the covenants with Noah, David, or others, we have deliberately surveyed the Adamic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, and the promised new covenant. In analysis, these covenants could be categorised under two types of covenants: unilateral and bilateral. A unilateral covenant is a one-sided covenant, which God imposes upon Himself. A bilateral covenant is a two-sided covenant, or a mutually agreed upon covenant, between God and man. Both types of covenants require a continuous relationship between God and man. The quality of a covenant relationship is determined by love and affection. Thus, the OT concept of prosperity should be defined and understood in the light of these related, but distinct, types of biblical covenants.¹²⁹

The Concept of Prosperity in the New Testament

From the OT covenantal perspective, the New Testament (NT) is both a fulfilment and a continuation of the OT covenants. They are fulfilled, in the sense of the anticipated new covenant, and continuing, in the sense of scriptural unity. According to the NT witness, the covenant was ratified by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Thus, the NT concept of prosperity is more commonly seen in relationship to this event.¹³⁰ The conception in the NT stands in relation to the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. It means that those who accepted God's redemptive work on the cross, those who are willing to take up the cross and follow Him, those whose sins are forgiven, those who repent and put their trust in Him, those who keep the word of God, those who are invited, those who are being persecuted, those who have left their loved ones, those who forgive, those

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ More on Old Testament biblical covenants can be read from Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*.

¹³⁰ Evans, "Blessing/Curse", p. 400.

who ask, seek, and knock, those who love their enemies, those who do justice to the poor and needy, those who take up the case for the weak, these are the ones who are blessed.¹³¹ These teachings have radically expanded the meaning of “the good life”, to embrace suffering and self-sacrificing service to God and others as good, and not things to be avoided – so the nature of the good life has been redefined in the light of the perfect man, whose greatest work was to surrender Himself to death. This is a totally new way of understanding fullness of life – and this is where the challenge to prosperity theology is rooted. Through His death and resurrection, Christ enables both Jews and Gentiles to inherit the blessings, promised through Abraham.¹³² This should be seen in direct relationship to Jesus Christ. On the other hand, the language of cursing or condemnation is applied to those who reject Christ, those who are unrepentant, those who do not keep the word of God, those who are pretenders, those who are faithless, those who are selfish, those who are self-sufficient, the idolaters, the lovers of money and possessions, the lovers of power and authority, those who deny Jesus as God, these are the ones who will be cursed.

However, this does not mean that the OT Deuteronomic cycle of obedience equals prosperity, and disobedience equals curse, is abolished, but rather fulfilled in Christ (Matt 5:17-20). Thus, we should notice that the OT bilateral relational codes of conduct were fulfilled in Christ. It means that, if they are fulfilled, then they are no longer active, but, in relating to Christ, we fulfil the Deuteronomic code. Outside of Christ, no one can fulfil the Mosaic bilateral covenant.¹³³

This is the main point of argument taken up in the epistle to the Galatians. For Paul, the bilateral Deuteronomic covenantal codes played a preparatory role in bringing the people to faith in Christ, and were not an end in themselves. Paul describes these regulations as prison wardens and childminders (Gal 3:23-25; 4:1-3). He argues that humanity is only given

¹³¹ Matt 5:3-7:27; 8:18-22; 25:34; Luke 6:20-23, 27-49; Rom 4:7-8; Eph 1:3; James 5:11; Rev 19:20; 20:6; 21:14.

¹³² Evans, “Blessing/Curse”, p. 400.

¹³³ Scot McKnight, *Galatians*, NIV Application Commentary, Terry Muck, ed., Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1995, pp. 116-117.

the chance to relate to God, through Jesus Christ, alone (2:16). This involves not the Mosaic code (3:1-5), but the obedience of faith in Christ, who is the promised seed of Abraham, the progenitor of faith (3:6-9). Paul, in defence of this gospel truth, refutes the false teachers. These false teachers were telling the Gentile believers that they must observe Jewish bilateral principles, in order to be successful in their Christian lives.¹³⁴ Therefore, Paul's response in this letter applies to anyone who suggests that Christians need to rely on anything other than faith in Christ, as this misses the point, and the heart of salvation. Unlike the Deuteronomic bilateral covenant that policed us like slaves, the new covenant in Christ Jesus is a living and loving relationship between God and all who put their trust in Jesus as their Saviour. This is based on the life and death of Jesus – a much better blood covenant than that of animals (Heb 8:6; Rom 5:10). His offer of salvation is extended to everyone, first to the Jew, and then to the Gentile, on the basis of faith alone.¹³⁵

The gospel that Jesus proclaimed, through His death and resurrection, affects the whole created order (1 Cor 15:1-5). He did not preach just salvation of the soul, but also life in its fullness; it is good news to the poor, the blind, the lame, the hungry, the orphaned, the widowed, the marginalised, the weeping, and the persecuted.¹³⁶ He demonstrated the good news by feeding the hungry, healing the sick, restoring sight, driving out demons, and raising the dead.¹³⁷ Thus, the values of the new covenant, wrought through His death and resurrection, are set by a radical commitment of a double command to love God with one's whole being, and to love one's neighbour as oneself (Mark 12:29-31). To love God, means to trust Him completely, and it frees the disciple from being overly concerned with material prosperity and personal security, which would be a root to materialism (1 John 2:15-17). To love one's neighbour, means to live a selfless life, at the cost of one's own life, for the life of another. Thus, it portrays that true godliness is about trusting God, being in an affectionate relationship with God, with one

¹³⁴ N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology*, Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 1993, pp. 141-144.

¹³⁵ McKnight, 165-175.

¹³⁶ Luke 4:18; 6:20-22; Matt 5:3-11.

¹³⁷ Matt 8:14-17; 9:18-34; Mark 2:29-34; Luke 4:31-34; John 6:1-13.

another, and being rich in good deeds.¹³⁸ These radical NT prosperity values stand in total contrast to our many anthropocentric theologies on life in its fullness. These radical values should reshape our thinking about wealth, our theologies on prosperity, and our management of material possessions.

AN EVALUATION OF PROSPERITY THEOLOGY

The Old and the New Testaments are full of promises of blessings to the person who walks obediently before the Lord, in accordance with the covenantal principles. Generally, from a biblical point of view, the concept of prosperity should be understood in terms of covenantal relationships. Outside of this understanding, prosperity cannot be judged as a true success, in terms of Christian faith. This means having a measure of material prosperity, and succeeding in external wealth, is not enough to call this success, in Christian thinking. From a biblical perspective, true material and spiritual success is only found in relationship to God.

Material prosperity may be noteworthy from a worldly perspective, but it does not transform anyone into godlikeness, or foster a successful relationship with God. Solomon is a perfect example. He had all that the world could offer, yet there was emptiness, and so he counselled his people to seek to be in relationship with God (Eccl 12:13). This highlights that prosperity, without the blessing of being related to God, is meaningless.¹³⁹ Thus, material prosperity should be seen as secondary to a life of relationship with God. Material prosperity is a blessing from God, but it can be a form of temptation, a temptation that may lead us to put our trust in ourselves, and the material possessions we have. It can tempt us to covet, and live at the cost of others, who are poor, disabled, marginalised, and so forth. It can become a god in our lives, and hinder our relationship to our heavenly Father. It can tempt us to become powerful and manipulative, in the way we relate to other people. At the heart of wealth accumulation, and the seeking of material wealth, is greed. Paul, on the one hand, pronounced greed as idolatry, and Jesus, on the other hand, painted the picture of money

¹³⁸ Schirmacher, Thomas, ed., "Statement on Prosperity Theology and Theology of Suffering", in *Evangelical Review of Theology* 20-1 (1996), pp. 6-8.

¹³⁹ Lee, "The Case for Prosperity Theology", p. 30.

or wealth as a god that rivals with God.¹⁴⁰ Both Jesus' and Paul's condemnations of greed and idolatry seem fitting today. Just as the ancient peoples, who worshipped sacred stones and wood (Jer 2:27; Hos 4:12), today, we are devising theologies, writing songs, authoring books, and preaching messages centred around a materially-affluent life, here and now.¹⁴¹

However, material prosperity can also be a form of blessing to others, and bring glory to God. Therefore, moderation should be our motive: better is godliness with contentment, than great gain with greed.¹⁴² Just as God blessed Abraham, to be a blessing to the nations, we, as Christians, as promised children of Abraham, should be a blessing to the peoples, to whom we are sent to serve, not necessarily with material prosperity, but with all the blessing we have received in Christ, both materially and spiritually.

Therefore, life and relationships are the central tendon that holds the biblical covenantal stipulations together. Both unilateral and bilateral covenants spell out sets of relationships, setting forth, also, how the broken divine-human relationship can be restored. These covenantal stipulations found their fulfilment in the person Jesus Christ, and through Him, every believer, either rich or poor, persecuted or free, stands in perfect relationship to God the Father. In this light, material prosperity is only an aid to help us in that journey, a journey towards a life in its fullness, a journey that will end with the second coming of Christ.¹⁴³

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF SUFFERING

Suffering is contrary to God's original will for humanity, and all of the created order. It is a human experience that people undergo against their will. Why it exists is by no means clear, as suffering, in many ways, remains a mystery. As a result, most secular philosophies tend to see human suffering as a fact of life, which humanity should work towards alleviating. On the other hand, the sheer quantity of suffering in the world intensifies the

¹⁴⁰ Matt 6:24; Luke 16:13; Col 3:5; Eph 5:5.

¹⁴¹ Brian Rosner, *Beyond Greed*, Kingsford NSW: Matthias Media, 2004, pp. 45-49.

¹⁴² Prov 15:16; 30:7-9; 1 Tim. 6:6-8.

¹⁴³ Kim, "A Bed of Roses", pp. 24-25.

problem for Christian theology; it poses a theological problem, particularly with the development of prosperity theology. It is quite difficult to explain, in human terms, why God allowed suffering to enter His good world.¹⁴⁴

The Bible does not deal with the problem of suffering in a systematic way, as a theological issue, but it is extremely important that we survey the Bible, to address the current theological discussion surrounding the issue of prosperity theology. Both Testaments address the issue of suffering in a distinct, but related, manner. In the OT, the emphasis is built around the nation of Israel, both collectively and individually. It rarely mentions the sufferings of those outside Israel, except in the context of God's judgment on the surrounding nations. In the NT, the authors are concerned, firstly, with the sufferings of Christ, then the sufferings of the church and individuals.¹⁴⁵ However, from a covenantal perspective, surveyed in the previous section, suffering has been closely linked with the bilateral covenantal stipulations. This type of covenant basically describes the blessings and curses of divine-human relationships. But, it is always anthropocentric in emphasis, in terms of suffering. This anthropocentric focus has driven the theocentric perspective underground, and it only resurfaces in the event of the cross. Therefore, we need to ask, "Did it cost God to remain in relationship with humanity throughout history, or did He only suffer in the death and resurrection of Christ?" These, and other related questions, can be answered through the investigation of God's cross-shaped character that fills his-story throughout the Bible, and not only from the NT event.

THE CROSS-SHAPED CHARACTER OF GOD

The event of the cross stands as the hinge to understanding the eternal cross-shaped character of God. Having identified that the breaking of covenantal stipulations stands at the heart of human sufferings, consider how much pain God feels, because of human inability to uphold the relational conditions. Gen 6 echoes the first-ever spoken words of a suffering God (vv 5-7) "*the Lord was grieved . . . His heart was filled with pain*". These words paint the picture of an eternal cross, which was embodied in the cross of Calvary.

¹⁴⁴ F. P. Cotterell, "Suffering", in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, T. Desmond Alexander, and Brian S. Rosner, eds, Downers Grove IL: IVP, 2000, p. 802.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

Thus, the bilateral and unilateral covenants were fulfilled in the event of Jesus' death and resurrection. Having identified this trend, we should now see that God's cross-shaped character, in the Old and New Testament redemptive histories of the Bible, depicts the picture of a suffering God, a God who is willing to put Himself up for the good of His wayward children. In many ways, our theologies are filled with our own inward-looking assumptions, and we lose focus of how much it cost God to remain in relationship with humanity.

Old Testament Redemptive History

The OT has applied words like *grief*, *pain*, *sorrow*, *stress*, and *agony* to describe human suffering. However, the same terms are also applied in relation to God's emotions (Gen 6:5-7; Ex 2:25; 3:7-10), which are exemplified in Christ (Matt 26:38; 27:46). This is one of the hard facts about the Christian God, a God who is willing to identify with human suffering, and not a distant and unwilling God, a fact that amazes the religious beliefs of the world. This biblical fact underlines the redemptive history in the OT. Therefore, the mystery will only unfold when we take our eyes off ourselves and begin to focus on how much it hurts God, because of human sinfulness.¹⁴⁶ The OT may not be directly emphasising the theocentric perspective, but we can summon a hearing through these two significant themes.

1. *The fall and its impact.* As noted earlier, apart from the Adamic narrative on the fall and its consequences, the OT describes the emotional and physical sufferings of Israel. These sufferings could basically be seen as a consequence for its own disobedience in not upholding the bilateral covenantal obligations, which is retributive and restorative. But suffering is, first of all, a consequence of sin, as illustrated in the fall. It has caused immeasurable damage to the harmonious relationships between God and humanity, humanity against each other, and the created order against humanity.¹⁴⁷ However, imagine that you have just painted a nice portrait, resembling something of your own liking, but someone else comes along in

¹⁴⁶ Lawrence O. Richards, ed., "Suffering", in *The Applied Bible Dictionary*, Eastbourne UK: Kingsway Publications, 1990, p. 952.

¹⁴⁷ Cotterell, "Suffering", p. 803.

your absence and sprinkles ink all over the painting, and smears it. What would be your immediate reaction, or feeling? Probably it would be unbearable, distressing, worrying, heartbreaking, and painful. Although this illustration may not be adequate, try to envision what it was like for God, when His image was fractured in that historical moment in history. Is God affected by the fall of humanity? Why should God suffer because of human sinfulness?

In the light of the Genesis account, humanity is the apex of His creativity. This is enforced by His pronouncement, “let us make man in our own image, in our likeness” (Gen 1:26). Here, He painted His own portrait, within His handiwork. Thus, the idea of image, itself, defines the specialness of humanity’s standing, in relation to God, a standing, not shared with other created creatures, a standing, in which only humanity shares God’s nature, in a special way.¹⁴⁸ This portrays why human sinfulness affects God, and why He chooses to suffer alongside His wayward and wanton humanity. This should caution us to rethink our theologies, which are basically anthropocentric in character. We tend to forget that God suffers, because of human self-will. He suffers, because of His love for His creation. This is something that God cannot let go of, or stand and watch, while sin continues to rage, like a wild fox out for its prey. This is an unfolding of the greatest mystery in the whole Bible, a God who suffers, because of human sinfulness, and His desire for a renewed relationship.

The thought of a suffering God is made more explicit in the Servant Songs of Isaiah. Indeed, they unfold the keys to the problem of human suffering. These songs¹⁴⁹ build a powerful picture of a humble, but despised, Sufferer. He is, at the same time, a Servant, serving others by His suffering. It portrays a picture of an innocent Messiah, a man of sorrows, and familiar

¹⁴⁸ Robin Keeley, ed., *An Introduction to the Christian Faith*, Oxford UK: Lynx Communications, 1992, p. 146.

¹⁴⁹ Is 42:1-9; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:12-53:13.

with suffering. He would suffer in the place of God's strayed humanity. This suffering Servant culminated in the crucifixion of Christ.¹⁵⁰

2. *A search for renewed relationship (salvation).* On the other hand, we should also observe that the "image (likeness) of God" distinguishes humanity from other creatures, and that makes our salvation a matter of supreme concern to God. God's involvement sets the scenario for the whole biblical account, and His-story of involvement covers the history of humanity. From Gen 12, through to Malachi, we encounter God walking with humanity. It demonstrates that God's purposes cannot be thwarted, despite the sinfulness of humanity, and His fractured image should be restored.¹⁵¹ In God's mission to restore the fractured image, He called specific individuals, on the grounds of His gracious love. For instance, the Genesis and Exodus accounts develop the idea of God calling, and empowering, certain individuals for mediating His salvific acts towards His fractured humanity: Noah's faithfulness and obedience resulted in the rescue of a human family, and a subsequent promise to preserve the creation, including humanity (Gen 8-9); Abraham's obedience to God's call for the birth of a nation, and an eventual blessing to the rest of humanity (Gen 12:1-3.); and Moses' obedience, in God's calling, saved a nation, a nation through whom God will fulfil His promises to the patriarchs (Gen 12; Ex 12). These indicate that, although fallen, humanity is still at the heart of God, and His willingness to identify with humanity, resulted in Christ the incarnate Saviour.

These biblical events portray the picture of a willing God, who is ready to identify with humanity, in its struggle against sin and suffering. It paints the deeply-embedded motives of God in His work of redemption.¹⁵² He raised Moses, to liberate the nation from Egyptian bondage. He made a special covenant with the nation, for the inauguration of His earthly kingdom, and He erected His tent among the people of the nation. These accounts of redemption from bondage, covenant consecration of the nation, and pitching

¹⁵⁰ Geoffrey C. Bingham, *The Fellowship of Suffering*, Blackwood SA: New Creation Publications, 1980, p. 33.

¹⁵¹ Charles Ohlrich, *The Suffering God*, Leicester UK: IVP, 1983, pp. 48-49.

¹⁵² Ex 2:35; 3:7; Deut 7:7-9.

of His tent among the peoples, were all done through a chosen mediator, Moses. This discloses God's purpose in history, the purpose He would fulfil, through the nation, and, ultimately, through Jesus Christ, who is God incarnate.¹⁵³

Having identified the root of suffering, and the theocentric perspectives on suffering, we can conclude that the foundational reason for God's identification, willingness, and involvement in human suffering, can be traced back to the first three chapters of the primeval Genesis account. Firstly, there is the creation of human life, which is the breath of God Himself (Gen 1:26-27; 2:4-7), and, secondly, there is the fall and alienation of that life from God (Gen 3:1-17). This is indicative of the significance of human life, and why it should be protected from all harm, both physically and spiritually. This "life" is the reason why God is willing to suffer alongside His earthly and fractured image, until the time when God Himself will appear, to liberate humanity from evil and suffering.¹⁵⁴

New Testament Redemptive History

In the NT, we stand face to face with God, clothed in human flesh, the one Isaiah identified as "Emmanuel", and Matthew specifically referred to Christ as Emmanuel, and defined it as "God with us" (Is 7:14; Matt 1:23). This advent name signifies the momentous progress of God's suffering acts for humanity's restoration. God has not abandoned His wayward children to face the enemies (sin and suffering) alone. In Christ, God came alongside humanity, and suffered with and for us.¹⁵⁵ Ohlrich says, "The most-disturbing and the most-provocative teaching in all the Bible is that Jesus Christ, the son of a simple carpenter from the town of Nazareth, was, in reality, God in human flesh. It was this truth, which so motivated the early church."¹⁵⁶ Grudem further highlights that:

It is, by far, the most amazing miracle of the entire Bible – far more amazing than the resurrection, and more amazing, even than the

¹⁵³ *The NIV Study Bible*, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1995, pp. 84-85.

¹⁵⁴ Mani, "Quest for Salvation in Papua New Guinea, pp. 74-75.

¹⁵⁵ Richards, "Suffering", p. 953.

¹⁵⁶ Ohlrich, *The Suffering God*, p. 56.

creation of the universe. The fact that the infinite, omnipotent, eternal Son of God, could become man, and join Himself to a human nature forever, so that infinite God became one person with finite man, will remain for eternity the most-profound miracle, and the most-profound mystery in all the universe.¹⁵⁷

It portrays that the divine decision to identify with humanity is a decision to suffer on our behalf. A decision, God made through Jesus Christ, has made God vulnerable to suffering (Heb 2:18; 5:8-10).

God went further, through Jesus Christ, and willingly accepted the pain of suffering and crucifixion, for humanity's sake. Therefore, any theology on suffering must note firstly that Christ's suffering was intentional. An expression of God's eternal cross, from the beginning, has been to defeat suffering and sin, through suffering. Secondly, the NT interpretation of Jesus' death as a sacrifice is deeply embedded in the OT concept. The authors of the NT identified seven characteristics of the OT sacrificial system in Christ's death on the cross:

1. Jesus' death was an offering;¹⁵⁸
2. Jesus' death was a payment;¹⁵⁹
3. Jesus' death was a sacrifice;¹⁶⁰
4. Jesus' death was atonement;¹⁶¹
5. Jesus' death was a ransom;¹⁶²
6. Jesus' death was substitution.¹⁶³

These characteristics, as applied in terms of Jesus' death, point us to the OT sacrificial system, in which animal sacrifices provided the means by which

¹⁵⁷ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 563.

¹⁵⁸ Rom 8:3; Eph 5:2; Heb 8:1; 9:14; 13:11.

¹⁵⁹ Acts 20:28; 1 Cor 6:19; 7:23; Rev 5:9; 14:4.

¹⁶⁰ Rom 3:25; 1 Cor 5:7; Eph 5:2; Heb 10:5; 1 John 2:1; 4:10.

¹⁶¹ Rom 5:1; Heb 2:17.

¹⁶² Mark 10:45; 1 Tim 2:5.

¹⁶³ Matt 20:28; 26:28; Mark 10:45; Rom 5; 6; 14:15; 1 Thess 5:9; Heb 2:9.

sin might be atoned for, and to preserve Israel's relationship to God. The NT authors acknowledged that Jesus' death was a full and final means of atonement for human sinfulness, and a better means for a healthy relationship with God.¹⁶⁴

In a world, darkened by anthropocentric theologies, Jesus Christ, the perfect image of God, is the shining light, penetrating the darkest counsel of human proposals. In Christ, we see the revelation of God's suffering love. In the suffering and death of Christ, we perceive the sacred unveiling of the suffering God. In the outwardly visible event of the crucifixion, the hidden inner life of God was revealed. The material cross revealed the eternal cross. In seeing this vision of the suffering God, we have seen how much human sin affects God.¹⁶⁵ The divine pathos is the answer the Bible gives to the question of suffering. Our sin breaks God's heart, and even our suffering and pain grieves Him. Therefore, in Christ, God was not only bearing our sins, but He was also bearing our sufferings and pain that comes from our sins. Moreover, He suffered, so that we are saved, and His suffering, as a man, signifies His identification with humanity, to strengthen and comfort us in our sufferings.

As we have identified, God in His gracious choice, has become "God with us" in the person of Jesus Christ. On one occasion, Jesus announced, "The Spirit of the Lord is on Me, because He has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" (Luke 4:18-19). On another occasion, He declared, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10b). These proclamations paint a picture of compassion for a world, marred with suffering and pain. It portrays the heart of a suffering God, since the creation of humanity. By becoming human, He shows us the full extent of His love. God's compassion was demonstrated through Christ's ministry for, and among, His people.¹⁶⁶ This Messianic compassion is extended to the helpless crowds (Matt 9:36), the sick were healed (Matt 14:14), the blind had

¹⁶⁴ Keeley, *An Introduction to the Christian Faith*, p. 344.

¹⁶⁵ Ohlrich, *The Suffering God*, p. 87.

¹⁶⁶ Matt 9:36; Mark 6:34; John 13:1.

their sight restored (Matt. 20:34; John 9:7), the hungry were fed (Mark 8:2), the dead were raised (John 11:43-44), and the lame walked (Matt 11:5; 15:31; Luke 14:21). Therefore, in Christ, God suffers with us, in identifying with us, in our human iniquities, to walk together with us, until we reach our blessed hope in Him.¹⁶⁷

THE CROSS-SHAPED CHARACTER OF THE CHURCH

The church, as the new family of God, born through the death and resurrection of Christ, and the outpouring of His Holy Spirit, is called to conform to her head and Lord, particularly in His suffering and rejection.¹⁶⁸ Just as the cross is central to Jesus' life and ministry, so it should be with the people of God.¹⁶⁹ Thus, the church, as the community of the cross, should identify with her Lord.¹⁷⁰ Therefore, suffering is the basic hallmark of living a Christian testimony in the world, where we stand as our Lord's witnesses.

In addition to this concept, Milne highlights that, "In fulfilling His purpose of conforming the church to the image of its Lord, and releasing its witness more fully in the world, God uses suffering, both corporately and individually" (Job 23:10; Ps 119:67, 71; John 15:2; Rom 5:3; Heb 12: 4-14; 1 Peter 1:6f.).¹⁷¹ This points to the important functions of the church, as His people, living in a world infested with sin and suffering. Our suffering, therefore, should be seen as our act of worship unto our Lord, a form of witness for our Lord, and a form of fellowshiping with our Lord.

On the other hand, Jesus' suffering has created for us a living hope. The gospel is the good news that we are set free to be the kind of people God wishes us to be. It is good news, which God offers as a free gift to us, who are thoroughly unworthy of His generous self-offering. Jesus' "once-for-all" offering of Himself remains valid to the present day.¹⁷² Therefore, we are a people of hope, a hope that brightens our way in this world, and points us

¹⁶⁷ Richards, "Suffering", p. 953.

¹⁶⁸ Luke 14:25-33; John 12:23-25; Rom 8:19; Rev 1:9.

¹⁶⁹ Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth*, Leicester UK: IVP, 1982, p. 295.

¹⁷⁰ Mark 8:3-33; Acts 14:22; 2 Tim 3:12.

¹⁷¹ Milne, *Know the Truth*, p. 295.

¹⁷² Keeley, *An Introduction to the Christian Faith*, p. 226.

towards the world to come. The foretaste of this hope is seen in the resurrection of our Lord and Saviour. It was God's declaration that one day we shall be like Him. So John declared, "Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when He appears, we shall be like Him as He is" (1 John 3:2).

With the assurance of this hope, He points us towards a time when there will be no more sin, suffering, and pain. In the book of Revelation, we notice John's encouragements to the severely-persecuted church, who needed just a ray of light that could lighten up the road darkened by suffering. He informed those persecuted Christians that the final showdown between God and Satan was imminent. Satan will increase his persecution, but they must stand firm, and endure it, for they have already been sealed. They are protected against any spiritual harm, and will be vindicated, when Christ returns, when Satan and all wickedness will be destroyed forever, and when God's church will enter an eternity of glory and blessedness.

In this light, Beale comments, "The portrayal of the new covenant, new temple, new Israel, and new Jerusalem, affirms the future fulfilment of the main prophetic themes of the OT and NT, which all find their ultimate climax in the new creation. The new creation, itself, is the most overarching of these themes, of which the other four are but facets."¹⁷³ Therefore, seeing the eternal hope that is set before us, let us run the race, putting aside everything that may endanger our journey towards this promised future, in which everything will be renewed and recreated. This is the hope we should preach, teach, and live out in a world marred by suffering and pain.

THE CROSS-SHAPED CHARACTER OF CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP

The letter to the Philippians provides us with a first-hand account of the cross-shaped character of Christian discipleship. In this letter, Paul has painted some pictures about Christian suffering.

1. *The Cross-Shaped Character of Christian Discipleship* depicts the idea of identification. It highlights that Christian sufferings

¹⁷³ G. K. Beale, "Revelation", in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, T. Desmond Alexander, and Brian S. Rosner, eds, Downers Grove IL: IVP, 2000, p. 357.

are not merely because of our participation in common human sufferings, affected by sin, demonic activity, or self-will. It is a participation in an identification with Christ's own sufferings, for the sake of His kingdom, and for His service and cause (Phil 1:13, 29).¹⁷⁴ Suffering with Christ involves being persecuted for the sake of righteousness, the willingness to resist the comfort of home and material prosperity, the willingness to carry our cross daily, being rejected, because of Christ, being insulted, or even being poor.¹⁷⁵ Therefore, we should see Christian suffering as an opportunity for us to identify as Christ's disciples, as we accept His call to take up our cross daily, and follow him. Thus, if we participate in Christ's sufferings, we shall also participate in His future glory.

2. *The Cross-Shaped Character of Christian Discipleship* also involves the advancement of the gospel. Jesus died an unjust death on the cross, but God used Jesus' suffering to win our salvation, and God can use our sufferings in a positive and redemptive manner (Phil 1:12-14, 19-30).¹⁷⁶ The picture Isaiah painted about a Suffering Servant, portrays a life characterised by suffering service.¹⁷⁷ The striking thing about this picture is that suffering and service, passion and mission, belong together. The portrait, and the description, is fulfilled in Christ, who is the Suffering Servant, but we should also remember that Jesus' suffering service, to bring salvation to the nations, is also to be fulfilled through Christian discipleship.¹⁷⁸ Therefore, we should understand that suffering is not just for service, but it is a fruitful endeavour for effectiveness in Christian discipleship.

¹⁷⁴ L. Ann Jervis, "Philippians", in *At the Heart of the Gospel: Suffering in the Earliest Christian Message*, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2007, p. 42.

¹⁷⁵ Matt 5:3-11; Luke 9:57-62.

¹⁷⁶ Ro, "In the Midst of Suffering", p. 11.

¹⁷⁷ Is 42:1-4; 44:1-5; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12.

¹⁷⁸ John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, Leicester UK: IVP, 1986, p. 370.

3. *The Cross-Shaped Character of Christian Discipleship* entails growing and becoming mature (Phil 2:12-18). The author of Hebrews portrays to us that, in order for Christ to bring many of us to glory, He had to go through suffering, to make our salvation perfect. Although He was God, He learnt obedience from suffering, by which He became the source of our salvation (Heb 2:10; 5:8-9). This implies that, through suffering, the sinless Christ became mature for our sake. Therefore, He set an example of endurance, in the face of suffering. He demonstrated that suffering promotes maturity, and steadfast discipleship. Hence, we should know that suffering enables growth and maturity, for steadfast discipleship in the world. Thus, the biblical metaphors like pruning, gold refinement, and child discipline, portray an essential, but painful, process for our growth and maturity. Simply put, sufferings are good, because they direct us away from self-will to dependency on Christ. It is also the evidence of God's love for us, as His beloved children.¹⁷⁹

4. *The Cross-Shaped Character of Christian Discipleship* is a path to glory (Phil 2:5-11). In this light, Paul is saying suffering is a hope of a final glory. In becoming human, and in identification with humanity, Jesus looked beyond His sufferings to the glory that awaits Him. Indeed, He foreshadows the joy of the glorious ending of His sufferings, which sustained Him in His trials (Heb 12:2). In this hope for a glorious future, we should boast in our sufferings, because these momentary afflictions are preparing and equipping us for a better future (2 Cor 4:17).¹⁸⁰ Thus, as His followers, we are expected to share the same perspective in our walk with the Lord towards the final destination.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁹ Rosner, *Beyond Greed*, p. 36.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

¹⁸¹ Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, p. 372.

Therefore, our sufferings, as disciples of the cross, belong to the present reality, a life between the fall of humanity and the anticipated consummation of all things in the second coming of our Lord and Saviour. We are living at a time, in which both sin and salvation, with their attendant consequences, are present. Thus, suffering should be taken as an opportunity to identify with Christ in His sufferings, advance the cause of the gospel, grow and mature in Christian discipleship, and tread the path to future glory.

SUMMARY

Suffering raises the single greatest question to the Christian faith. The extent and the scale of its effects are random, and, therefore, could be considered unfair. A thinking individual will always ask why a loving God would allow suffering to intimidate His children, or how should we reconcile the reality of suffering and the concept of God, as a loving Father. Human theological proposals, like prosperity theology, are developed to define and reconcile the two-faceted theological problems. The secular existentialists see suffering as meaningless, and, therefore, absurd, and should be accepted as normal. But Christians should not walk down this dark alley. We should now conclude that, firstly, suffering is an alien intrusion into God's good world, but it will have no effect in the new, promised world that will come with Christ's second coming. Secondly, suffering entered God's good world because of Adam's fall. This event has caused the suffering of God. He suffers because of human sinfulness. His eternal sufferings were exemplified in the crucifixion. Thus, the church, as the community of the cross, should live a cross-centred life, to the glory of her Lord and Saviour, in her Christian discipleship.

From a covenantal perspective, explored in section two, on the "Bible and Prosperity Theology", we noticed that suffering is a part of the journey marked out in the covenantal stipulations. In the bilateral covenant, suffering was basically anthropocentric, retributive, and restorative.¹⁸² In the unilateral covenant, suffering was basically inclined towards a one-sided oath, an oath, in which the one, who swore to Himself, will face the

¹⁸² Refer to p. 43.

consequences, on behalf of the second party.¹⁸³ In the crucifixion of Christ, God revealed how much He suffered, on humanity's behalf, as a consequence of His unilateral covenant with humanity. Therefore, as the church, collectively or individually, is relating to God through Christ, we are to have the same attitude to our suffering, an attitude that resembles Christ-likeness in a world marred by suffering. In doing so, we become partakers in His unilateral covenant to humanity, who are yet to believe in Christ, the only means through which humanity will once again relate to God in an intimate way. Thus, suffering and prosperity are both aids to enable us in our journey towards the restoration of the lost life and relationships.

A QUEST FOR THEOLOGICAL BALANCE

Unlike our theological and philosophical traditions, which divorce prosperity and suffering from each other, the Bible does not separate them. Instead, the Bible paints a picture of a relationship, a relationship, in which they work together for humanity's survival in this world. Thus, it is essential that the church be taught a balanced perspective on prosperity and suffering. Although there may be setbacks following our theological views on the subject, in the best interest of Christian discipleship, we should seek to balance the subject, biblically and theologically. In an endeavour towards this unity, we should: (1) consider the need for a critical contextualisation of our worldviews, which is the possible breaking point in most of our theological and philosophical variances; (2) take into account the relationship between prosperity and suffering; (3) reflect on prosperity and its purpose; and (4), consider the importance of suffering, and its intent for humanity, then, synthetically, weave an evangelical theology of prosperity and suffering.¹⁸⁴

A NEED FOR CRITICAL CONTEXTUALISATION ON THE BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF SUFFERING AND PROSPERITY

Although the Bible is a supracultural document, it has been administered through cultural forms. Thus, in our endeavour to address the current theological issue, we should be aware of cultural biases. All human cultures

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Ro, "In the Midst of Suffering", p. 9.

have a certain way of explaining what life is for them. When confronted with an alien intrusion, it is natural to interpret and define the scriptures through one's culturally-known systems, to understand the new. This is the root of our many anthropocentric theologies. Therefore, there is a need for a critical contextualisation of the timeless scriptures, as they cross cultures. All human cultures and philosophies are oriented towards promoting life, here and now. Hence, it is not alarming to see human theologies ascending towards this direction.

Generally, human cultures can be defined as a way of life. In the light of this general definition, we should know that cultures are value laden, and should be handled with care. Although overlooked in the current theological discussion, cultural values play a fundamental role in the shaping of the current prosperity teaching in Yangoru today. Then, what should we do with the traditional cultural belief systems and practices of the recipient people group? According to Kraft, one of the most basic influential factors in doing theology is the culture. He points out that "worldview assumptions underlie the way people approach and interpret the Bible".¹⁸⁵ Therefore, this implies that the theological hermeneutics, surrounding the way we preach and practice theology, is influenced by our cultural hypotheses. This should ring an alarm bell at the back of our minds, as we seek to do theology in a culture other than our own.

As indicated earlier, theology is a human product, fashioned through cultural concepts. However, this conclusion may not do justice in the event that the Bible has been, in a sense, a cultural document, because of its human/divine origins. More so, we may also choose to argue that such inferences can make the Bible a mere cultural document. But, if we believe that God superintended the scriptures through a culture, then it paints a picture of contextualisation. God's incarnational ministry, in and through Christ, is the ageless piece of evidence to argue that contextualisation is God-ordained, and it honours God. Although the Bible is written in a particular place and culture, its message is context free. But our biblical theological

¹⁸⁵ Charles Kraft, *Anthropology for Christian Witness*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1996, p. 447.

undertakings are not context free.¹⁸⁶ Although our theological forms may be ideal for us, we should not coerce other societies into fitting their cultural systems into predetermined outsider theological systems. Rather, the context-free Bible message should be interpreted and applied from within a culture. Therefore, it should be both culturally authentic, and biblically sound, in its application from within the recipient culture.

Etic (outside) theological and hermeneutical ideals may be applied in mission endeavours, to help the receiving group understand the scriptures, but they should lead to an emic (inside) theological and hermeneutical enterprise.¹⁸⁷ To do a critical contextualisation of the supracultural Bible, we must seek to understand the socio-political, socio-economic, and socio-religious aspects of a given society. We must learn to understand these aspects, as the people themselves do. This emic-centred theological and hermeneutical approach will help us to recognise issues involved in contextualisation. It involves the type of theology people construct, when they read certain biblical texts, what they believe about the Bible, how they apply the scriptures in real-life situations, and what meanings they perceive from their observation of a missionary lifestyle.¹⁸⁸

The ongoing theological and hermeneutical problems in PNG, especially in Yangoru, depict a failure in critical contextualisation of the scriptures. It requires a fresh and new theological and hermeneutical approach, which seeks to encourage recipient cultural peoples to examine their cultural beliefs and practices from the scriptures. It requires guiding the people, through studying the scriptures, with an intention of helping them analyse and compare their old beliefs with the new. This sort of approach to theology and hermeneutics involves the people themselves, they will be responsible for what beliefs and practices to keep, what to discard, and what to redeem, or reinforce. Thus, having the people involved in the evaluation process, in the

¹⁸⁶ Paul G. Hiebert, and Eloise Hiebert Meneses, *Incarnational Ministry: Planting Churches in Band, Tribal, Peasant, and Urban Societies*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 1995, p. 363.

¹⁸⁷ The terms “etic” and “emic” refer to outsider theological framework (etic), and insider theological view (emic). These words are applied in terms of our approach to doing theology in a culture other than our own.

¹⁸⁸ Hiebert, and Meneses, pp. 363-364.

light of biblical truths, will play down the possibility of old, rejected practices going underground. Only then will they scripturally critique their own unbiblical beliefs and practices and grow spiritually, through applying biblical teachings to their lives.¹⁸⁹

However, for the people of Yangoru, the ignorance of critical contextualisation of the scriptures is a sad reality. The current prosperity theological fever stems from this ignorance. Although the Yangoru people group culturally searched for life in its fullness, there was never a time when suffering was absent. In fact, both existed and governed the life of the people. Suffering has always coexisted with prosperity. Suffering reminded people about unhealthy relationships that needed mending, and prosperity affirmed a healthy relationship. Both prosperity and suffering have groomed and kept the society together, in good and bad times. Therefore, life is basically about relationships, a relationship that will remain until the return of the mythical saviour, who will usher in the fullness of life. This is the mythical belief that went underground in the historical missionary enterprise. Hence, this mythical saviour needs to be reclaimed and reinterpreted, to see Christ as that Saviour, and, therefore, also embrace suffering as an inherent aspect of the way fullness of life will be found. Therefore, we should make every attempt to contextualise and give a balanced view of prosperity and suffering, in our efforts to present the gospel in Yangoru today.

PROSPERITY AND SUFFERING BELONG TOGETHER

As identified earlier, faith has been the most-controversial element in the current prosperity theology debate, but faith, properly understood and applied, will become the main uniting factor between prosperity and suffering. Although the Bible is crystal clear about the necessity of faith in relating to God, our many-faceted theological views have muddied and jumbled the ever-growing jigsaw among the various factions of the church. The Charismatic/Pentecostal faction of the church argues that faith, which is not accompanied by visible signs, is not faith, but a dead human religion. On the other hand, the Evangelical faction of the church maintains that faith

¹⁸⁹ Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 1994, pp. 88-90.

should not be seen and used as a credit card for personal material and spiritual success; it only makes God become a god of mammon, or a bank automatic teller machine. Instead, faith should be defined and appropriated as a surety in a world marred by sin and suffering. Thus, faith is the assurance of our future hope.

However, from the biblical narrative, faith is relational. It is a relationship of total trust in the Lord for one's well-being. This is explicitly expressed in Heb 11. But, before examining this text, and its application to us, we should consider some pitfalls in the application of faith. Firstly, there is the idea of faith, as faith in God's goodness to us. This kind of faith has one aim, which is concerned with our life, here and now. This is energised by the belief that a good God cannot allow interference in the flow of life; if we live a good life, in conjunction with the spiritual principles set forth for us to follow. Certainly, it is biblical that God wishes to bless His children, He is the giver of all good gifts (James 1:17), but they are also wrapped with odd trappings (James 1:2-4). Therefore, this type of faith will fail, and be defaced by the hard surface of reality in life, which encompasses trials and temptations.¹⁹⁰

Secondly, Paul in his response to the divided church at Corinth over the issue of gifts, highlighted another misconception. Here, faith itself is listed as a gift, apart from the faith each believer has in God. Here, some are given additional faith from the Holy Spirit, over and above that which every believer has (1 Cor 12:9). A gift is always at the disposal of the recipient of the gift. If it is used in proportion to its purposed end, it honours the giver of the gift, but if it is propagated for selfish ambitions, it can exalt its recipient. Thus, Paul declares that such faith can manifest in a spectacular fashion, but it means nothing unless it is motivated by loving relationships (1 Cor 13:1-13).

Thirdly, faith may be understood as a set of doctrinal beliefs. This could be noteworthy, but it also smells of danger, if we place too much emphasis on the doctrinal features of faith. The Bible does refer to faith as a set of

¹⁹⁰ George H. Guthrie, *Hebrews*, NIV Application Commentary, Terry Muck, ed., Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1998, p. 387.

beliefs,¹⁹¹ but it also denotes a personal, dynamic and heart-warming relationship with God. Evidently, this active relational motive rests on doctrinal faith statements or doctrines, but it cannot be summed up by a cognitive assent (James 2:14-26).¹⁹²

Fourthly, faith may be defined as a reflective devotion to God. Generally, this can be applied to followers of any religious system. It is sometimes applied interchangeably with spirituality. It suggests that a set of beliefs is not important, but sincerity, and a level of commitment that transforms one's life and attitude, is important.¹⁹³

None of these approaches to faith: faith in God's goodness, faith as a gift, faith as a set of doctrinal beliefs, or faith as a reflective devotion, is adequate to describe the thought-provoking scenario of Christian faith in Heb 11. This chapter paints a dynamic portrait of an authentic Christian faith, a faith that is totally confident in God's word, and involves bold action, a faith that is responsive to the unseen God and His promises, a faith that does not stagger in any human or cosmic situation, a faith that has a variety of outcomes, in which neither prosperity nor suffering separately can bracket it, and a faith which only God will reward.¹⁹⁴ This biblical faith summary can only be defined by one word: "relationship", a relationship of love and affection that cannot be interfered with by any human or natural circumstances.¹⁹⁵ The author of this Hebrew text piles example after example of the outstanding experiences of life, in relationship to God. These ancient characters of faith (Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Gideon, Barak, Jephthah, David, Daniel, and others) went through various situations in life. Some, by faith, conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, quenched the power of a blazing fire, escaped the sword, were empowered in weakness, became heroes, defeated foreign armies, became rich in material blessings, while

¹⁹¹ Gal 1:23; 1 Tim 4:1, 6; Jude 3.

¹⁹² Guthrie, *Hebrews*, p. 388.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 388-389.

¹⁹⁵ Ben Patterson, *Waiting: Finding Hope When God Seems Silent*, Downers Grove IL: IVP, 1989, p. 157.

others were tortured, maltreated, lived in poverty, were imprisoned, experienced mocking, were stoned, were sawn in two, being destitute, and many more wandered in the deserts, mountains, and took their shelter in caves and holes in the ground.¹⁹⁶ Some of them prospered, while others suffered, but both lived equally by faith. Those who prospered, and did great feats, did so by faith, and, likewise, those who endured great suffering, did so by faith. Therefore, Christian faith is about a relationship that finds its strength in God, a relationship that cannot be calculated, using human standards.

Prosperity and suffering both belong to this faith relationship, and should not be divorced from each other. Christian faith is about prosperity and suffering, and even suffering is a blessing. This means that, whether in prosperity, or in suffering, we should live by faith, and seek to glorify the Lord in all situations. Hence, it should be our earnest hope and expectation to glorify God in our body, by life, or by death, by prosperity, or by suffering. The ultimate aim for Christian living should not only be for one's own health, wealth, and happiness. Whether in prosperity or in suffering, the main purpose for Christian living is for God's glory. This calls for a right and mature attitude in our administration of material possessions, and to have the mind of Christ in our daily sufferings.¹⁹⁷

MATURITY AND PROSPERITY

Prosperity is not a negative, as may be assumed, if it is viewed and handled from a biblical perspective. It can become a great instrument for advancing the gospel of Jesus Christ in the world. On the other hand, if given the highest value, it can usurp the place of God in our lives (Matt 6:33). This calls for maturity in the handling of our material wealth. Unlike suffering, Jesus warned His disciples frequently about the dangers of prosperity.¹⁹⁸ Thus material prosperity can be a blessing from God, but it can also be the means through which Satan will manipulate our worship towards himself (Luke 4:5-7). This is an urgent reminder to us, just as it was in the 1st century. It is a message that needs careful attention, as we face the

¹⁹⁶ Kim, "A Bed of Roses", p. 22.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.

¹⁹⁸ Mark 10:25; Luke 6:24; Matt 6:4; 16:19-23.

development of modern industrial and consumer capitalism. It is too obvious that many of us will be obsessed with material prosperity, leading to an inclination that can frame our theology to become anthropocentric in character.¹⁹⁹

Therefore, the call for maturity in our material ministrations is about taking the biblical perspective seriously. Jesus' radical commitment to the double command of loving God and loving one's neighbour was central to His ministry, a ministry that is our example. The OT is pregnant with the idea of abundance in material and spiritual prosperity to the faithful, but it is equally charged with the dangers of accumulating wealth at the cost of the orphans, the poor, the alien, the widowed, the homeless, the disabled, and so on. God has always been the champion for the marginalised of the society. Thus, Christian discipleship is about manifesting godlikeness in the way we administer our material wealth.²⁰⁰

Both the Old and the New Testaments emphasise that anyone who says that he has faith in God, but does not care about others in the society, is self-seeking and immature; he, therefore, cannot claim to be a mature Christian, or may not even be a Christian at all.²⁰¹ Christian faith is about a living and active relationship, which honours God through the service of others. This means that the Christian knows that he is a child of God, is prepared to go another mile in serving others, will heartily use his material wealth to serve others, as to the Lord, has a strong sense of security, is full of confidence in God to gather for his daily needs without fear or anxiety, is full of love and hope, and has a proper perspective on life and material prosperity (James 2:14-26).²⁰² Therefore, moderation and sufficiency should be the marks of mature Christian discipleship. In moderation and sufficiency, we are content; we exercise faith, humility, love, and patience in suffering. It prepares us to receive service, and to propagate acts of service to others.²⁰³

¹⁹⁹ Gasque, "Prosperity Theology and the New Testament", p. 449.

²⁰⁰ Ex 22:22; Deut 10:18; Is 10:2; Jer 22:3.

²⁰¹ Is 1:11-17; James 1:27; John 3:17; Matt 25:14-46.

²⁰² Kim, "A Bed of Roses", p. 23.

²⁰³ Rosner, *Beyond Greed*, p. 99.

MATURITY AND SUFFERING

As we have identified in section three, on the “Biblical Theology of Suffering”, suffering is a result of humanity’s fall. We must also affirm that suffering is retributive and restorative. In light of the pre-fall creation story, there is no suffering, and, in terms of the redemptive history, there will be none in the consummation of the current order. Thus, suffering and sin are only characteristic of the period between the fall of Adam and the second coming of Jesus Christ. Suffering, therefore, is a result of human rebellion, but God will bring it to an end in the second coming of Christ.

Although suffering is generally associated with sin, we cannot randomly apply this to every form of suffering, because there are cases, in which suffering is not associated with personal sin. For instance, people sometimes suffer because of natural disasters, like floods, physical deformities, or geographical or climatic conditions, like deserts, storms, earthquakes, and so on. At other times, people suffer as a result of societal sins, like political and economic injustice, wars and violent revolutions, terrorism, racial violence, and discrimination. Some suffer because of their religious convictions (such as, Muslims, Christians, and others), and yet many suffer as a result of poor personal decisions, like ill-health as a result of bad habits, illegal practices, carelessness, or inadequate planning.²⁰⁴

However, in Christian discipleship, Christians do not suffer only because of their common identity with humanity. On the contrary, Christians suffer, because (1) God disciplines those whom He loves; He places His disciplinary hand on His beloved children to train and teach them His ways (Heb 12:5-11); (2) sometimes, Christians may suffer innocently, because of their identity with Christ, and in faithful obedience to Christ in this sin-infected world; (3) sometimes, suffering is a result of the foolish acceptance of Satan’s temptations to walk away from the Lord’s commands; and (4) Christians suffer because of their steadfast Christian discipleship, and the battle that is raging against the Lord, and His faithful followers (Eph 6:10-18).

²⁰⁴ Ro, “In the Midst of Suffering”, p. 11.

In this light, suffering is a vehicle for maturity. It implies that Christian discipleship is about growing up into being like Christ in our relationships with God, with one another, and our reflective management of the created order, for the benefit of all. Thus, seeing suffering as a means for growth in Christian discipleship, it is a blessing, just as other material blessings. Because of this, Christian suffering should be viewed as instructive, with retrospective, present, and prospective purposes for Christian maturity. Through suffering, we grow through the lessons of our past experiences. Suffering is a surety of our relationship with God, as His children (Heb 12:5-6), and suffering purifies us for a future life of service.²⁰⁵ Suffering, therefore, enhances healthy relationships with God, with one another, and with the created order, and contributes to the general behaviour of human societies.

SUMMARY

It would be erroneous to claim from the scriptures that the event of the cross is the guarantee for a life free of suffering in this world. On the one hand, it is also erroneous to say that Christian faith is only about suffering. But a closer walk with the Lord does guarantee the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ, a peace that surpasses all human understanding about prosperity and suffering. Jesus was determined to do His Father's will. He went through the humiliating sufferings of the cross, but yet triumphed over them. His life was not just suffering, or just prosperity, but both were characteristic of His life on earth. This demonstrates that life is not just about health, wealth, happiness, or even suffering, but life is all about relating to God. Therefore, having identified the Christian faith as relational, and divinely instituted it suggests that true Christian faith is not just for prosperity, or suffering, but a relationship that seeks to glorify God, in all situations. It is a relationship that cannot be determined by either prosperity or suffering, a relationship that is only governed by love for God, and love for others, a relationship that overshadows the temporal, and foresees the future hope in Christ, and a relationship that trusts God in all things.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

Thus, if we only emphasise scriptural passages that endorse prosperity, and ignore the scriptural passages that talk about suffering, we are in danger of misapplying the scriptural texts. In doing so, we tend to abuse the scriptures, by developing anthropocentric theologies that are the hallmark of religious phenomena in PNG, particularly in Yangoru today. Although suffering remains a mystery, through the suffering of Christ on the cross, God revealed the significance of suffering, which is God's eternal love for humanity. Therefore, it should be evident in our lifestyle. Either in prosperity or in suffering, in health or in sickness, our relationship to God, and to one another is the main tendon that should hold us together in our theological variances.

IMPLICATIONS

The current debate on prosperity theology has significant implications for theology in PNG, particularly in Yangoru today. It affects the integration of biblical texts about blessing with our cultural beliefs in experiencing a good life, here and now. How we theologise and approach the salient cultural aspects, how we relate the scriptures to the non-Christian religious phenomena, and our relationships to non-Christians, as persons, is also determined by our theological and missiological inferences.²⁰⁶ Therefore, the question is, should we impose our theological views on other cultural people groups, or should we seek to frame theology from within the culture, to which we are sent to minister the gospel?

THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATION

Etic theological conclusions may seem healthy, from their own particular theological stance, but, without the consideration of the recipient cultural beliefs, good intentions can become counter-productive. Thus, any theological input, without a prior knowledge of the recipients' epistemological stance, is built on the presumption that the visiting theologian or missionary knows what is best for the people group. In such an endeavour, we tend to do theology through our own cultural lenses, and this affects the way we relate to other cultural groups.

²⁰⁶ Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, p. 35.

Christianity has been identified as a Western religion in many parts of the world, because of its cultural trappings. Even countries that accepted the Christian faith, like PNG, cannot tell the difference between a Western lifestyle and the Bible message. The central problem is the way in which the gospel is presented, then and now. As indicated in sections one and two of this discussion, on the “Impact of Prosperity Theology”, and “Bible and Prosperity Theology”, the first wave of missionaries, with little anthropological knowledge, presented the gospel, wrapped in a Western civilisation, the second wave of missionaries, mostly Pentecostals took no notice of that historical failure, and presented the gospel from a prosperous and affluent lifestyle perspective, and the third wave, mostly overseas evangelists, and their Melanesian cohorts, are still making the same mistake. They (the third group) are presenting the gospel as a way of becoming prosperous, and emphasising more on faith, as a way of receiving spiritual and material blessings. However, we must recognise the sacrifices and commitments they made for the cause of the gospel. But, in many ways, they thought that their theological standpoint was biblical and true, yet they failed to differentiate between the gospel and their cultural particularities.²⁰⁷

In addition to this missionary enterprise, the failure of the national church leadership to recognise the difference, and to differentiate between a Western lifestyle and the gospel, is adding fuel to an ever-growing problem. This has now influenced the current theological trend, giving rise to a prosperity theology, which is seeking a materially-affluent lifestyle, here and now.

If we investigate the current theological drive on prosperity and an affluent lifestyle, we will encounter a religious phenomenon that is dressed with biblical language. It is easier to criticise these religious beliefs from an evangelical standpoint, but mere criticism, without a theological solution, is like beating the air without substance. A closer look at the current faith movement theology would indicate that Christians are trying to interpret, and apply, the Bible in real life situations today. Therefore, we should seek to develop an evangelical theology that is authentically Melanesian (PNG, Yangoru), and authentically biblical in content. It is a worthy and necessary task. Although there may be pitfalls in a contextual approach to the Bible, it

²⁰⁷ Ibid., pp. 45-46.

is a noble challenge to help a people group understand God, and His will for them, through their own known systems. Thus, the fundamental question in doing theology in PNG, particularly Yangoru, can be summarised as: is the centrality of our theology genuinely Yangoruan, and is it authentically biblical? Hence, if evangelical theologians are concerned with the current trend, then let us put our differences behind us, and collectively endeavour for a Christian faith that is truly Melanesian, and truly biblical.²⁰⁸

MISSIOLOGICAL IMPLICATION

Although, prosperity theology was developed in the 20th century, through Charismatic/Pentecostal movements, it also portrays a missional overtone. It has become a missiological tool for propagating a health, wealth, and happiness gospel across the globe. Therefore, it has contributed significantly in the way the gospel is preached, and the growth of the church worldwide.²⁰⁹ Its missional flavour rests on its appeal to human welfare. Though born in the US, and containing elements of American pragmatism, where success is calculated in monetary terms, what perpetuates in Melanesia is not a copy of an American model. But the missional proponent²¹⁰ of prosperity theology acts as a bridge, from which each culture group develops its own features.²¹¹ Thus, it signifies a need to revisit the historical missional presentation of the gospel in Yangoru today. It means a fresh missional approach to the theological phenomena (health, wealth, and happiness gospel) that is impacting the society.

The gospel, in its current form, presented through the eyes of prosperity theology, is more Yangoruan than biblical. The core problem lies in the failure to critically contextualise the scriptures to be truly Yangoruan, and, at the same time, truly biblical. In the presence of imposition (the gospel wrapped in Western theology), all the Yangoruan anthropocentric philosophies on life and relationship went underground. They are now

²⁰⁸ Paul Bowers, "Evangelical Theology in Africa", in *Evangelical Review of Theology* 5-1 (1981), pp. 38-39.

²⁰⁹ Saracco, "Prosperity Theology", p. 324.

²¹⁰ The missional proponent in prosperity theology, which has its crosscultural impact on people groups, is the appeal it has on human welfare.

²¹¹ Saracco, "Prosperity Theology", p. 325.

resurfacing, in the wake of prosperity theology. In this respect, we have a theological mission field, a mission field created by the gospel having been wrapped in a foreign lifestyle, and philosophical presuppositions. It implies that, if there is to be any theological balance, or a balanced biblical theology of suffering and prosperity, it will have to begin at the root (worldview) level of our people's belief systems.

Therefore, our missional approach towards a resolution should consider the need to study the phenomenological enterprise of the recipient culture, gather and analyse specific traditional beliefs on life and prosperity, in terms of the current teaching, give the people freedom to speak for themselves, in terms of what it means for them, without fear of condemnation, lead them through the scriptures related to the current debate, and allow them to evaluate their own culture, from a biblical perspective. This will help them to critically weigh up their old beliefs in the light of the new biblical understandings, acquired through the scriptural studies. Getting them to be involved in this sort of hermeneutical enterprise will help them to understand and live the Bible in their own lives, either in prosperity or suffering, in health or in sickness, in plenty or in scarcity, and all for God's glory, in one's own culture.²¹²

SUMMARY

The theological and missiological implications surveyed indicate that, if we are to develop a balanced theology of prosperity and suffering, we need to free ourselves from our own theological viewpoints, reflect on the recipient cultural aspects on the debated issues, encourage local participation in the drive for critical contextualisation of the scriptural texts, and develop a balanced theology, which is authentically Melanesian (PNG, Yangoru), and authentically biblical. This will mean that visiting theologians, or missionaries, should first become students in the recipient culture before becoming teachers. However, the visitors have done what was best, in their capacity as missionaries; today we (Melanesians) should take the initiative, and take the lead in revisiting our cultural beliefs, and reinterpreting them, from a biblical perspective.

²¹² Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, pp. 90-91.

Although anthropocentric in character, prosperity theology is influential in the missional front today. It has an enormous impact on the religious, economic, and political life of the people. We have observed that this stream of theology was developed in the 20th century, but its philosophy is as old as life itself. Therefore, as it crosses cultural boundaries, it takes on, and accommodates, the recipient cultural stimulus about our life, here and now, in a pragmatic way. Most of its teachings are simplistic and one-sided, and normally may result in extremism. It is a teaching that says a suffering-free life can be experienced, here and now. On the other hand, we have also identified that a majority of faithful Christians across the globe are experiencing numerous sufferings, because of their faith in Christ. This two-faceted theological problem is promoting the current theological melee between Charismatic/Pentecostal and Evangelical factions of the church.

However, in our discussion pertaining to these theological divisions, and their theological presuppositions, we have tried to listen to both sides of the debate. Therefore, we have surveyed the impact of prosperity theology in PNG, particularly in Yangoru, what the Bible says about prosperity, the theology of suffering, and a quest for theological balance, and its implications. We have, therefore, concluded that, from a biblical perspective, prosperity and suffering belong together. They should be understood from the biblical covenantal perspective. The OT covenants were relational, a relationship of reciprocity, but superseded with the coming of Christ. Thus, life, in communion with Christ, is a full life, either in prosperity or suffering, all should live by faith for God's glory. Therefore, Christian faith is relational, and prosperity and suffering both belong to this relationship. It is a faith that is founded on God's word alone, it cannot be shaken by external circumstances, it is immovable, even when external supports and evidences, like prosperity, are removed, and it stands when all else fails (Job 13:15). Thus, the key to such strong faith, and intimacy with God, and a healthier relationship with one another, depends on our close fellowship with God, in all of life.²¹³

²¹³ Patterson, 157-161.

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