

# **IMPACT OF THE PROSPERITY GOSPEL IN THE ASSEMBLIES OF GOD CHURCHES OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Papua New Guinea (PNG) is a developing country, rich in resources. It is the biggest island country in Melanesia and the South Pacific.<sup>1</sup> When combined with the West Papua Province of Indonesia, it is the second largest island in the world. PNG gained its independence from Australia on September 16, 1975, and has just celebrated its 33rd anniversary of independence.

In 1996, the economy of the country collapsed, and the people were severely affected.<sup>2</sup> The country has been struggling to recover ever since. The government was under pressure to reverse the situation. The church<sup>3</sup> also sought answers to the groaning and sufferings of the people. The answer that the church offered was the "prosperity gospel".<sup>4</sup> In

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<sup>1</sup> Here the South Pacific covers Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia.

<sup>2</sup> "The local currency (kina) dropped from par with the Australian dollar in 1996 to \$A0.40 in 2002, and the per capita income only increased from \$A1,200 in 1970 to \$A1,340 in 1999. There has been a steady decline in infrastructure and services in recent years, particularly in rural areas." Philip Gibbs, "Papua New Guinea", in *Globalisation and the Re-Shaping of Christianity in the Pacific Islands*, Manfred Ernst, ed. (Suva FIJI: The Pacific Theological College, 2006), p. 87.

<sup>3</sup> Church spelt with a capital letter "C" refers to the body of Christ, while spelling with a small letter "c" refers to denomination(s).

<sup>4</sup> The terms "prosperity gospel" or "prosperity theology" will be used interchangeably throughout the paper.

2002, under the Somare regime,<sup>5</sup> the economy stabilised, and the country has experienced positive economic growth.<sup>6</sup> Even with this positive economic growth, the country is still poor.

What is the “prosperity gospel”? Saracco defines it as a “theological current that states that, if certain principles are followed, the expiatory work of Christ guarantees, to all who believe, divine healing, the riches of this world, and happiness without suffering”.<sup>7</sup> The prosperity gospel seems to have the philosophy and the answer for the PNG people. The church has embraced the prosperity gospel, and felt its impact.

In this essay, I will discuss the impact of the prosperity gospel in the Assemblies of God (AOG) churches in PNG. The essay is subdivided as follows.

- Impact of Christianity and Western goods;
- Interpretation and contextualisation of the prosperity gospel;
- Evaluation and critique;
- Recommendations;
- Conclusion.

### **IMPACT OF CHRISTIANITY AND WESTERN GOODS**

In the South Pacific, the Polynesian societies were the first to receive the Christian gospel.<sup>8</sup> Before the arrival of the Christian missionaries, the local prophets and charismatic people of the tribal religions had

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<sup>5</sup> In the 2002 elections, Sir Michael Somare’s National Alliance Party won government. Somare was elected Prime Minister, and, together with the Integrity of Political Party, has provided stable government. As a result, many investors were attracted to PNG.

<sup>6</sup> Gibbs, “Papua New Guinea”, p. 88.

<sup>7</sup> J. N. Saracco, “Prosperity theology”, in *Dictionary of Mission Theology: Evangelical Foundations*, John Corrie, ed. (Nottingham UK: IVP, 2007), p. 322.

<sup>8</sup> The European sailors shipwrecked at Upolu introduced Christianity to the Samoans. This Christianity later became known as the “Sailor cult”. See Lowell D. Holmes, “Cults, Cargo, and Christianity: Samoan Responses to Western Religion”, in *Missiology* 8-4 (1980), pp. 472, 477.

predicted<sup>9</sup> the “arrival of the ships, and of new religious leaders, who would fulfil the old Pacific religions”.<sup>10</sup> The arrival of missionaries to Tahiti from the London Missionary Society on the ship *Duff*,<sup>11</sup> and then John Williams to Samoa, in 1830, was according to these prophecies. They brought with them goods that were superior to those of the indigenous islanders, which “were naturally coveted”.<sup>12</sup>

How did the Polynesians perceive the coming of the Europeans, the gospel, and Western goods? Were not the predictions, uttered by their prophets and charismatic people, fulfilled? Yes, Christianity was accepted, because it fulfilled the prophecies. One of the motives for responding to the gospel was to prove the supremacy of “the God, who seemed to be the source and controlling power behind a floating society of marvels”,<sup>13</sup> and of all the superior goods. This perception led to the formation of two related cargo-cult movements – Mamaia and Siovili.<sup>14</sup>

#### **A. MAMAIA MOVEMENT (TAHITI)**

The Mamaia movement was formed in 1826 under the leadership of two dissident prophets, Teao<sup>15</sup> and Hue, in opposition to the dominance of the LMS<sup>16</sup> Anglo-Saxon church. The Mamaia cult was a “Christian heresy” that had some Christian elements combined with tribal elements in its practice. It was millennial in focus, looking forward to the “imminent return of Christ to endorse their cause . . . with its

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<sup>9</sup> High Chief Tamafaiga prophesied “that, after his death, the people will hear of a new religion and a new god”. *Ibid.*, p. 472.

<sup>10</sup> John Garrett, *To Live Among the Stars* (Suva Fiji: University of South Pacific, 1982), p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> J. D. Freeman, “The Joe Gimlet or Siovili Cult”, in *Anthropology in the South Seas: Essay presented to H. D. Skimmer*, J. D. Freeman, and W. R. Geddes, eds (New Plymouth NZ: Thomas Avery, 1959), p. 187. A footnote in this article gives various names used by different authors: John Williams, in his journal, used Joe Vili, Suavili, or Seauvili, while Peter Turner used Jovili. In 1836, most LMS missionaries adopted the name Siovili. Garrett, *To Live Among the Stars*, p. 85, uses Sio Vili.

<sup>15</sup> Freeman, “The Joe Gimlet or Siovili Cult”, p. 189, spells the name “Teau”.

<sup>16</sup> LMS stands for the London Missionary Society.

expectations of ‘cargo from heaven’.<sup>17</sup> Tribal elements of Raiatean in the pre-Christian era were revived: “ecstatic behaviour . . . combining this with wild sexual conduct, . . . some of the great chiefs of Pomare II, who had adopted Christianity, veered toward the Mamaia. . . . The cult continued active until it finally died out in 1841.”<sup>18</sup> However, Mamaia influence gave birth to the Siovili cult in Samoa.

## **B. JOE GIMLET OR SIOVILI CULT (SAMOA)**

In the mid-1820s, Siovili travelled to Tonga, and then to Tahiti, “at the time when the Mamaia movement was at its height”.<sup>19</sup> During this time of travels, the sailors gave him the name Joe Gimlet.<sup>20</sup> Siovili saw a lot of “Europeans, their ships, and their posts”. In 1830, he returned to his village, Eva, as a hero, claiming to be knowledgeable in the Europeans’ ways, and brought the seed of the Siovili cult from Tahiti. He pieced together knowledge acquired in his brief and limited contact with LMS Christianity and the Tahitian Mamaia heresy.<sup>21</sup> As a self-styled prophet and visionary, in a few years, he had a large following.<sup>22</sup>

The Siovili cult had all the features of the Mamaia cult. The Siovili cult practised Christian “rites and tenets. . . . they accepted Jehovah as their God, built chapels . . . held services . . . singing of hymns, . . . offering of prayers, . . . preaching of sermons . . . celebration of . . . Lord’s Supper”.<sup>23</sup> The adherents believed that Siovili had travelled to distant lands, where Jehovah was known, and he was chosen by Jehovah and Jesus to be their spokesman. It was appropriate to listen to him.<sup>24</sup> The Siovili cult also believed in a millennial dawn “coupled with the great desire to acquire the material wealth, apparently associated with the god Jehovah”.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Garrett, *To Live Among the Stars*, p. 254.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Barff, 1836, cited by Freeman, “The Joe Gimlet or Siovili Cult”, p. 187.

<sup>20</sup> Freeman, “The Joe Gimlet or Siovili Cult”, p. 187. Siovili was nicknamed Joe Gimlet on the ship.

<sup>21</sup> Holmes, “Cults, Cargo, and Christianity”, p. 472.

<sup>22</sup> Freeman, “The Joe Gimlet or Siovili Cult”, pp. 187-188.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 190.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191.

<sup>25</sup> Holmes, “Cults, Cargo, and Christianity”, p. 477.

The Samoan chiefs and their people accepted Christianity with mixed motives. They wanted the Europeans' material wealth, which they perceived was given to them by their God. Chief Malietoa Vai'inupo, in comparing their primitive items with European goods, reasoned that these goods were created and given to them by their God. He reflected, "I, therefore, think that the God who gave them all these things must be good, and that His religion must be superior to ours. If we receive this God and worship Him, He will, in time, give us these things as well as them."<sup>26</sup>

Garrett states:

Samoan chiefs wanted to know what supernatural forces gave the white men their powers in navigation and war. . . . Such thoughts were in the mind of Malietoa Vai'inupo, holder of one of the country's highest titles, who was involved in fighting on Savai'i during the 1830s.<sup>27</sup>

However, Christianity, and the missionaries, did not meet the expectations of the people to provide the naturally-coveted items. The alternative that seemed available to the chiefs and the people was to veer towards the Siovili cult and its ideologies, which promised them the European manufactured goods they naturally coveted.<sup>28</sup>

From the above data, it is clear that the Mamaia movement and the Siovili cult philosophy are materialistic or cargoistic. By embracing Christianity, converts anticipated gaining material wealth from the Christian God. Cargo cults in PNG have a similar philosophy.

### **C. CARGO CULTS IN PNG**

Mantovani has stated, "Melanesians were and are religious people. Traditional religions play an important role in the people's spiritual affairs, and the total life of the community."<sup>29</sup> Each tribe, clan, and

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<sup>26</sup> Freeman, "The Joe Gimlet or Siovili, Cult", p. 187.

<sup>27</sup> Garrett, *To Live Among the Stars*, pp. 121-122.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>29</sup> Ennio Mantovani, "Traditional Religions and Christianity", in *Point* 6 (1984) p. 1.

family displayed their religiosity, in the worship of their own gods or spirits.<sup>30</sup> This belief in spirits is classified as animism. These spirits were believed to be the source of their daily sustenance. They were like “clouds overshadowing”, and were the “spiritual vitality of the community”.<sup>31</sup> The totality of life depended on these spirit beings. In return, people worship them; otherwise the tribe, clan, or the family will suffer calamity.

Among the animistic beliefs, there are mythical beliefs in a “better life and material prosperity” that will be ushered in by an “ancestor”. Myth is unlike animistic beliefs. The ancestor, in the mythical belief, is not consulted for daily living but is expected to return one day to make life better. Myths explain the reason for all the hardships and toils that people are currently experiencing – the ancestor(s) had not been careful with their actions in the past. Therefore, myth is a tribal way of explaining and understanding the millennium that is beyond their influence, which will be inaugurated by the ancestor – when a time of golden age will replace hardship and toil, forever. The myths provide the ideology for cargo cult movements.

The arrival of missionaries to Papua from Tahiti,<sup>32</sup> in 1871-1872, marked the initial introduction of Christianity. Bible stories were told to make converts. Some of the stories were similar to the myths people had, such as the Tower of Babel narrative. At this point, there was no known cargo cult movement. It was not until the presence of colonial government officials in many parts of Papua and New Guinea, explorers, and the Second World War, that cargo cults appeared. However, not all tribal religions or cults are cargo cults. Steinbauer divided these cults into three categories “according to their chief tendency: magico-mechanistic,

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<sup>30</sup> These included the spirits of dead ancestors, rocks, trees, and rivers.

<sup>31</sup> Joshua Daimoi, “An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage from an Indigenous Evangelical Perspective”, Ph.D. thesis (Sydney NSW: University of Sydney, 2004), p. 33.

<sup>32</sup> Garrett, *To Live Among the Stars*, pp. 206-229; and John Hitchen, “Roots and Shoots in the Pacific – Our Mission Heritage” (Class Notes, Banz: CLTC, May 2008), p. 35.

religio-spiritual, and political-social”.<sup>33</sup> Strelan said cargo cults are the “irrational response” of the tribal people to “Western culture, with its technology and wealth”.<sup>34</sup> To explain the new experiences, the tribal people turn to their myths to find answers, which, in turn, lead to the creation of cargo-cult movements.

The Polynesians perceived that the Christian God gave material wealth to the missionaries. If they accepted Christianity, the Christian God would give them material wealth, likewise. This is not so with Melanesians. Melanesians perceived that it was their ancestors who gave the Europeans the technology and wealth that was supposed be theirs, and not Jehovah God. With this worldview, and the desire for European-style wealth, Melanesians accepted Christianity, and revised their native cosmology to create a cargo-cult movement.<sup>35</sup> A cargo cult is the result of an indigenous struggle to rationalise Christianity and Western goods and the tribal religion.

Holmes identifies five similarities in Samoan and Melanesian cargo cults, where there is:<sup>36</sup>

1. a gifted or “charismatic leader, who assumes the role of hero or deliverer”;
2. a strong emphasis on acquiring material wealth;
3. prophecies on “millennium without want”;
4. a new revelation;
5. the practice of “rites and ceremonies, involving hysteria and states of trance”.

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<sup>33</sup> Friedrich Steinbauer, *Melanesian Cargo Cults: New Salvation Movements in the South Pacific*, Max Wohlwill, tran. (St Lucia Qld: University of Queensland Press, 1971), p. 2.

<sup>34</sup> John G. Strelan, *Search for Salvation: Studies in the History and Theology of Cargo Cults* (Adelaide SA: Lutheran Publishing House, 1977), p. 4.

<sup>35</sup> Dorothy Tweddell, “Cargo Cults: A Search for Meaning”, in *Anthropology* 870 (1977), pp. 4-10. Tweddell gives five theories behind the causes of cargo cult movements: (1) oppressive/deprivation; (2) relative; (3) psychological stress; (4) cognitive; and (5) a psycho-cultural factor.

<sup>36</sup> Holmes, “Cults, Cargo, and Christianity”, pp. 480-481.

He also notes one important difference. Melanesian cults look to the ancestors for cargo, while the Siovili cult looks to the omnipotent Jehovah, coupled with the Adventist belief of Christ's imminent return to set up His kingdom in Samoa.<sup>37</sup>

## **THE INTERPRETATION AND CONTEXTUALISATION OF THE PROSPERITY GOSPEL**

The prosperity gospel became popular in the mid-1990s, after the collapse of the PNG economy in 1996. Some world-renowned evangelists from the West<sup>38</sup> were invited to preach in PNG. During their visits, the prosperity gospel was introduced. The prosperity gospel took a foothold in the churches in Port Moresby, and spread through church networks across the country. Societies, influenced with cargo philosophy and the collapse in the economy, made the churches wonder what the likely impact of the prosperity gospel in PNG would be. I will answer this question, beginning with the biblical concept of wealth and then the prosperity gospel, followed by some examples of the contextualisation trends of the prosperity gospel in the church.

### **BIBLICAL CONCEPT OF WEALTH<sup>39</sup>**

The English definition of wealth is:

“the condition of being happy . . . prosperous” and “spiritual well-being”. . . . The most common usage . . . involves the narrower sense of “abundance of possessions, or of valuable products”. A large percentage of scripture focuses on right and wrong uses of this latter kind of wealth, while always subordinating to the former.<sup>40</sup>

### ***Old Testament***

Wealth originated from God, and it was given to humankind.<sup>41</sup> Sin has corrupted the process, but humankind's responsibility of managing and

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Benny Hinn, Morris Cerelo, Cleflo Dollars, and Tim Hall from Australia.

<sup>39</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, “Wealth”, in *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, Walter A. Elwell, ed. (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, 1996), p. 813.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Gen 1, 2.

using these blessings remains. God's covenant with Abraham was partly material blessing.<sup>42</sup> The patriarchs were blessed materially, as were the children of Israel at Goshen in Egypt,<sup>43</sup> during their exodus from Egypt, and throughout their journey to the Promised Land. On their way to the land of milk and honey, the Lord gave them rules to regulate wealth.<sup>44</sup> Canaan was the land of abundance. However God sternly warned them against accumulating unnecessary wealth, and ordered them to use their wealth to look after the poor. God promised the Israelites that, if they obeyed the Law, they would be rewarded with blessing, peace, and prosperity, but, if they disobeyed the Law, they would be conquered, disgraced, and oppressed. The promise, God made to Israel, was repeated on many occasions.<sup>45</sup>

Psalms and Proverbs give us "two-pronged riches and poverty".<sup>46</sup> Wealth can be accumulated as the result of being industrious or righteous,<sup>47</sup> or it can be accumulated through ill-gotten or wicked ways. Hence, it is better to be poor.<sup>48</sup>

The Old Testament (OT) concept of wealth is often seen as a blessing from God, and poverty is seen as a curse. It is linked with the land and the temple. This is not carried over to the New Testament, since no "piece of geography or architecture" is sacred any more.<sup>49</sup>

### ***New Testament***

The New Testament (NT) portrays Jesus as a carpenter, and the majority of His disciples were fishermen. Jesus taught that mammon is a major competitor with God. Wealth is deceitful.<sup>50</sup> The desire to accumulate wealth can make people godless in their thinking. Wealth can make it

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<sup>42</sup> Gen 12:7; 15:18; 17:8; 22:17.

<sup>43</sup> Gen 24:35; 26:13; 30:43; 47:27.

<sup>44</sup> Ex 16:16-18; 2 Cor 8:15.

<sup>45</sup> Blomberg, "Wealth", p. 814.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Ps 112; Prov 12:11; 13:21; 21:5.

<sup>48</sup> Ps 37:16-17; Prov 15:4-5; 16:8; 17:1.

<sup>49</sup> Blomberg, "Wealth", p. 814.

<sup>50</sup> Mark 4:19.

difficult for rich people to enter the kingdom of God.<sup>51</sup> Jesus did not disapprove of being wealthy, but, rather, advised people to use their wealth to honour God – providing for the poor, widows, orphans, and the needy. Jesus’ disciples put these teachings into practice, as we see in Acts, and the writings of the Apostles.<sup>52</sup> To have material wealth is not wrong. The Bible warns us that the desire for wealth can hinder us from knowing God, and can disqualify us in the afterlife in heaven with God. Now, let us see what the prosperity gospel teaches.

## **PROSPERITY GOSPEL**

There are several names given to prosperity theology. Names like “wealth-health-and-happiness gospel”, “name-it-and-claim-it gospel”, “success gospel”, and “positive-confession theology”.<sup>53</sup> Let us begin with the background of the prosperity gospel.

### ***Background***

The prosperity movement started in America in the early 20th century, and has spread throughout the world. It has been considered heretical by a number of Christian churches. It is the “expression of the so-called ‘faith movement’ ”,<sup>54</sup> which has been mainly advocated by “E. W. Kenyon (1867-1948), Kenneth Hagin (1917-2011), and Kenneth Copeland (1937-).”<sup>55</sup>

Kenyon had a good relationship with the Pentecostals, and then got acquainted with the “New Thought” and “Christian Science” movements.<sup>56</sup> The major teaching of these two movements is that “positive thinking and positive confession” will create health and wealth, while negative thinking and confession will lead to poverty and illness.<sup>57</sup> This teaching has become the pillar of the prosperity gospel.

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<sup>51</sup> Luke 18:18-24.

<sup>52</sup> Blomberg, “Wealth”, p. 815.

<sup>53</sup> Saracco, “Prosperity Theology”, p. 323.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 322.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

Hagin's view was that "the principles that made faith operative were believing with all your heart, confessing with your mouth what you believe, and receive what you have confessed".<sup>58</sup> He incorporated Kenyon's thoughts into his writings. Kenneth Copeland is now his successor.<sup>59</sup>

From this overview, it is obvious that the founders of the prosperity gospel movement propagated faith as positive thinking and positive confession, and this is the channel of prosperity for its adherents.

### **Major Tenets**

Based on the spiritual principles or laws that function unalterably, these principles or laws operate through faith in God.<sup>60</sup> "Spiritual laws or principles" and "faith" set the platform for the five major doctrines of prosperity gospel, as stated by Saracco:

- (i) The law of blessing. This is based on God's covenant with Abraham to bless him materially. Christians are the spiritual children of Abraham, and have inherited these blessings. It belongs to us here and now, and we must "prosper in all areas of life".<sup>61</sup>
- (ii) The law of sowing and reaping. This doctrine is derived from Mark 10:29-30. We will receive from God 100 times what we give Him. "Whoever puts into practice this law would practically enter into a cycle of endless wealth."<sup>62</sup>
- (iii) The law of faith. "In 'faith movements', faith operates by itself, just as a natural law. This is called *faith in faith*."<sup>63</sup> Mark 11:22, which says, "Have faith in God" has been

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 323.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

rephrased as “have the faith of God”<sup>64</sup> that operated in creation. Act with faith, name what you want with certainty, and it becomes reality.

- (iv) The law of proclaimed word. The formula is “proclaim to have”.<sup>65</sup> The text used to support “this idea is Mark 11:23-24. According to this interpretation, the force of faith is released by words”.<sup>66</sup> It is not enough by believing, you have to confess what you believe, and it will materialise.
- (v) The expiatory work of Christ. Ours is “divine healing and material prosperity”,<sup>67</sup> because it has all been given to us through Jesus Christ, who died and removed the curse of poverty and illness.

From this background of the prosperity movement and its major doctrines, it is clear that the prosperity gospel is more human-centred than God-centred. Scriptures are incorrectly interpreted to substantiate human ideas.

Christians in PNG have quickly embraced the prosperity gospel without careful examination from the clergy. With the given economic situation, and churches struggling financially, what a relief to know the secrets of prosperity. Give to God, and God will give you 100 times more, and your barns will overflow, because you are entering into “God’s cycle of endless wealth”. You hold the key to your prosperity. All you need to do is to have faith, think positively, confess what you need/want, and receive it. These were, and still are, the sorts of messages preached in churches.

### **CONTEXTUALISING THE PROSPERITY GOSPEL**

The AOG church preaches the prosperity gospel without careful interpretation and contextualisation. Christian ministry groups, which

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 323-324.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 324.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 324.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

were formed to minister to people's needs, have drifted in the direction of the prosperity gospel, which is apparent in their contextualisation of their ideologies. Three, in particular, will be considered: the Joshua Operation, the Israel Ministry,<sup>68</sup> and the most recent being the Apostolic and Prophetic Ministry. The founders/directors of these movements may deny any links to the prosperity gospel, but that is not important. What I want to point out is that their ideologies are related. Besides these religious movements, there have arisen false money schemes, which are the making of the prosperity gospel. This will be also discussed.

### ***Joshua Operation***<sup>69</sup>

The Joshua Operation movement has no connection with the prosperity gospel. It came into being in the early 1990s, with a genuine concern to address social, political, economical, and religious issues affecting the nation and the church by uniting churches together. Marlin Starky, the founder of the Joshua Operation, and coordinator of the National Prayer Centre in Mt Hagen, initiated and ran conferences in different parts of the nation to encourage, motivate, and challenge the churches to take up responsible positions in the spiritual dimension, and to take back the land, before it was taken over by the forces of evil. The movement derived its name from the Book of Joshua, which provided the spiritual principles for taking the land.

The movement envisioned that the way forward for communities, churches, and the nation is through confession and repentance of sin, reconciliation and redemption.<sup>70</sup> It has taken the lead in strategising and

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<sup>68</sup> The Israel Ministry is no longer a ministry, but a local church.

<sup>69</sup> The detail given here is from the author's general knowledge of the Joshua Operation. In 1999, he attended a conference organised in Lae (PNG) titled "Gate Keepers' Conference", and again, in 2007, at Maprik (East Sepik Province, PNG) titled "Joshua Strategy". In the latter conference, he witnessed some strange spirit manifestations, and heard from the participants of the hosting church and villages that soon there will be a material breakthrough in their churches and villages.

<sup>70</sup> Redemption, used in this context, has the meaning of taking back the things, culturally used for evil practices to glorify God. An example of this practice is the yam ceremony in the Maprik District. There the tribal gods, responsible for the planting of yams, were appeased in order to give a good harvest. However, this ceremony is being redeemed,

advocating these theological thoughts, as a means of releasing people from bondage, to inherit God's blessings in every area of life. Communities and churches that have facilitated the Joshua program have embraced it wholeheartedly, acknowledging that these teachings are the key to enter into an era of prosperity, which will be more materialistic. God's glory will be revealed, land will produce abundant crops, minerals will be discovered, and foreign aid will be channelled to develop communities.

### ***The Israel Church (Ministry)***

Another movement is the Israel Ministry, founded in 1996 by Paul Joe Sonumbuk, with the "desire to participate in fulfilling the prophecy of Is 49:22-23, about Zion's children being brought home".<sup>71</sup> It was part of the AOG ministry, but later broke away from that denomination, formed its own local church, and introduced Saturday Sabbath, to identify with Israel.

The philosophy of the Israel Ministry is to give to Israel, as this will result in abundant blessings. Israel is the key to all material blessings, as is being demonstrated in our spiritual blessings, which we share in Christ as a Jew. Therefore, Christians must give to Israel, and, in return, they will be blessed.<sup>72</sup>

### ***Apostolic and Prophetic Ministry***

The AOG clergy, without evaluating what has been happening, have embraced the Apostolic and Prophetic Ministry to raise their "water level" in ministry. This time they have turned to Dr Jonathan David<sup>73</sup> to instruct them to minister in the apostolic and prophetic dimensions. They believe that what is needed today in the church is apostolic and

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and, instead of paying homage to the yam gods, the worship and honour is being given to Christ.

<sup>71</sup> Gibbs, "Papua New Guinea", p. 123.

<sup>72</sup> The 2007 All-Pacific Prayer Assembly held in Port Moresby had a strong Israeli favour, which is an indication that Israel is the key to material prosperity.

<sup>73</sup> Dr Jonathan David is the Presiding Apostle of the International Strategic Alliance of the Apostolic Church (ISAAC) network. "Jonathan David", <http://www.jonathan-david.org/bio>, June, 2008.

prophetic worship<sup>74</sup> and leadership to connect into the movement of God on earth, to experience breakthroughs.

How will this happen? David has stated, “The foremost feature of this new move is a transformational paradigm shift of mentalities, migrating towards apostolic. . . . The church needs a clear change of philosophy and mentality of concept that have been handed down to the present generation.”<sup>75</sup> He adds that, across the globe, the churches must return to “biblical norms and New Testament patterns . . . to build churches and believers, according to heavenly blueprints . . . willingness to go back to apostolic mentalities. . . . The apostolic mindset is a new configuration of the triumphant breakthrough.”<sup>76</sup>

This emphasis on “apostolic mentalities”, or mindset, is what is needed to see breakthrough believers, who will dominate the globe, but how? To answer this question, I will refer to what I have heard being preached in churches that have embraced the apostolic and prophetic movement. Christians, who flow in the apostolic and prophetic dimension, will see breakthroughs in every area of life. It is declared that it is now time for Christians to rise up and “dominate the globe”. Consequently, in the last national and council election, many pastors contested, because they believed it is time for the apostolic and prophetic generation to take over and rule with God’s authority.

The philosophy of the apostolic and prophetic movement is the restoration of the apostolic and prophetic offices in the church, as the key to “breakthrough believers”. The language, used in the churches that embrace this movement, reveals its connection to the prosperity gospel. One clear example is that everything is locked up in humankind – think and speak positively, and you will see breakthroughs in your life.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> In so-called prophetic worship, speaking in tongues is a norm (without interpretation), from the start to the end of the service. Sometimes those unable to speak in tongues are taught to do so.

<sup>75</sup> “School of the Prophets”, <http://www.jonathan-david.org/bio>, June, 2008.

<sup>76</sup> “School of the Prophets”.

<sup>77</sup> David Dii (or David Dian Warep) is the founder of Covenant Ministries, which is widely known as Life in the Spirit Ministry in PNG. It has links with Jonathan David.

### ***False-Money Schemes***

The high propagation of the prosperity gospel in the churches has created a fertile ground for false-money schemes to germinate. Money schemes include Money Rain, U-Vistract,<sup>78</sup> Millennium, Money-Link, Nikong, and Papalain.<sup>79</sup> Some AOG church leaders envisioned the creation of a church financial institution.<sup>80</sup> They collaborated with Christian lay people, mobilising church congregations across the nation to make financial contributions toward the scheme, but, to date, they have not received anything in return.

Abel Haon comments:

In the mid-1990s, a number of Quick Money Schemes (QMS) sprang up, primarily in Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands, with a large following in other Melanesian island nations. These QMS alleged that they were Christian organisations, and so had the strong backing of certain denominations and their leaders. After siphoning people's money, they vanished – together with the “investment”; a large proportion of which belonged to ordinary believers and Christian denominations.<sup>81</sup>

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According to Gibbs, David has said “that if you give yourself completely to God, then God will give to you abundantly in return. If you give everything to God, then God will meet all your spiritual and physical needs.” Gibbs, “Papua New Guinea”, p. 120.

<sup>78</sup> Gibbs further explains, “Other movements include pyramid money schemes, such as U-Vistract, in which people contribute their savings, in the hope of getting incredibly large returns on ‘their investment’. These money schemes promote a religious aura with rallies, including gospel music and the conspicuous presence of pastors from some conservative evangelical churches.” Ibid., p. 132.

<sup>79</sup> One false money scheme still active today is Papalain, with active involvement of Christians, and those outside of the church.

<sup>80</sup> The AOG church was experiencing revival under the ministry of evangelist Joseph Walters. The church leadership perceived spiritual revival would lead to physical breakthroughs in the church. George Forbes, *A Church on Fire: The Story of the Assemblies of God of Papua New Guinea* (Mitcham Vic: Mission Mobilisers International, 2001), p. 265.

<sup>81</sup> Abel Haon, “The Church Impacting Melanesia: a Case for People-Centred and Participatory Ministry”, in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 24-1 (2008), pp. 20-21.

Eventually these False Money Schemes were curbed. The investors, who were promised 100 percent interest overnight, never got their money back. AOG churches, clergy, public servants, and grassroots people, who invested in those schemes, were defrauded, primarily due to their desire to find a quick way to prosper. Prosperity theology has created many dilemmas in AOG churches. It is an excellent illustration, and a warning for the clergy to carefully assess new theologies before embracing them. Unfortunately, it appears that there is still ignorance in the church.

### **EVALUATION AND CRITIQUE**

Having looked at the cults in Polynesia, with a special emphasis on the Siovili cult, a general overview of the cults in PNG, and the prosperity gospel, I will tie the three together, firstly by identifying their differences, then their similarities, followed by a critique. An important observation to highlight is that, whenever and wherever Christianity and Western technology are being introduced, they spark waves of movements, either religious or non-religious, as the contact groups try to hold on to their cultural heritage, and make adjustments to accommodate the new culture, in order to find meaning, purpose, and equality.

#### **DIFFERENCES**

The main difference between the three sects is the source of their prosperity. The Siovili cult looked to Jehovah God, Melanesian cults looked to their ancestors, and the prosperity gospel is human-centred, with a strong emphasis on positive thinking and positive confession. Another difference is the cargo-cult movements that came about when Christianity and Western technology were being introduced. The prosperity gospel movement, however, came after PNG was Christianised, and denominations were indigenised and modernised. Also, cargo cults are the product of Christianity, with its Western technological influence, contacting tribal religion, while the prosperity gospel is the sole product of Christianity from the West, with its wealth.

#### **SIMILARITIES**

The main philosophy that stands out in the three sects is that of material prosperity in every area of life, and a utopia that will last forever.

Another similarity is that all three sects are trying to address the physical needs of individual people, which Christianity may have overlooked. All three sects express the key to prosperity, meaning that there are certain rituals and formulae for adherents to follow that will open the way to prosperity.

Having identified their differences and similarities, one must ask, what is it that makes people, whether in the past or present, seek material prosperity, and a life without infirmities? Where can we find real prosperity? How about the cross of Christ? I will attempt to answer these questions in the following critique.

### **CRITIQUE**

When God created the first human beings, He placed them in a place of fellowship, wealth, and abundance. Everything they needed was provided, and they were given the responsibility of stewardship. However, they disobeyed God's command, and were banished from the place of prosperity. If this is the case, the quest for prosperity, expressed in cargo cults and the prosperity gospel, is the yearning of humanity to return to that state of originality.

The life of abundance, or the state of originality, is not decided by the acquired wealth of individuals, but is ultimately decided by the One who did the banishing in the beginning. Melanesian cargo cultists identify the terminator as his/her ancestor, prosperity gospel says it is the human being, while the Siovili cultist identifies the terminator as Jehovah God. Therefore, the terminator must be an ancestor, a man, or Jehovah God.

Is there someone like that in the history of humanity? Is He not the one called Jesus the Christ? Hebrews describes Him as the ancestor,<sup>82</sup> the prophet Daniel identifies him as the Son of Man,<sup>83</sup> and Mark's and John's gospels identify Him as the Son of God.<sup>84</sup> Matthew portrays Him

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<sup>82</sup> Heb 2:10-18. For a more detailed explanation of Jesus being an ancestor, see Daimoi, "An Exploratory Missiological Study", pp. 136-176.

<sup>83</sup> Dan 7:13-14; Mark 1:1.

<sup>84</sup> Mark 1:1; John 1:14-18.

as the Messiah of Israel,<sup>85</sup> one who will bring prosperity to Israel, and to the whole world.

To gain a true insight and road map to prosperity, one needs to start at the cross of Christ. He suffered to give the fullness of life to humanity, and His suffering cannot be divorced from a prosperous life by His adherents. The seven “I am” sayings in John’s gospel,<sup>86</sup> and the “seven last words” from the cross<sup>87</sup> are the sum total of prosperity – that Christ is the source of the prosperous life – made available through His suffering. Suffering is the terminator’s preordained plan to lead His adherents to prosperity.

The prosperity gospel is man-centred rather than Christ-centred. It is an experience-based theology, and is emotionally appealing to the adherent, with a promise of material prosperity. On a positive note, the prosperity gospel helps the adherents to break free from emotional bondage, impart a positive self-image, and gain a new worldview to life.

However, the prosperity gospel is theologically unbalanced. The five major tenets reveal the subjectiveness of the scriptural interpretation, which needs balancing. This is vital, in the Melanesian context, because of its cargo cult history and occurrences. Here, I will endeavour to present the balance needed in prosperity theology.

Firstly, the Abrahamic covenant of material blessing<sup>88</sup> should be understood in the context of Israel as a nation. Abraham needed the material blessing, because God promised to build a nation out of Abraham’s own seed. It is a national covenant, and is not universal. Contained in the covenant is universal blessing, and that is what needs to be sought,<sup>89</sup> not the material blessings of the Abrahamic covenant.<sup>90</sup> The

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<sup>85</sup> Matt 1:1, 18.

<sup>86</sup> John 6:35; 8:12; 10:7, 11; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1.

<sup>87</sup> Matt 27:46; Luke 23:34, 43, 46; John 19:26-27, 28, 30.

<sup>88</sup> In Gen 12:1-5, before God called Abram, he had already accumulated great wealth. When he obeyed God’s call, God’s blessing was upon his whole household, livestock, etc., and he prospered.

<sup>89</sup> Gen 12:1-3; Rom 4:16-18; Gal 3:6-9.

material wealth should be recognised in the Adamic covenant of dominance,<sup>91</sup> which is for all humanity. Sin did not remove this, but hindered it.

Secondly, the law of sowing and reaping is manipulative, as if human beings can manipulate God to give them what they want.<sup>92</sup> Mark 10:29-30 should be understood as the cost and sufferings of being a disciple of Christ, more than the prosperous life. This text also talks about suffering, which should not be excluded from the prosperous life. In a reciprocal society like Melanesia, this teaching will hinder church support, if givers do not get anything in return.

Thirdly, the law of faith, which reveals that God has faith, based on Mark 11:22, is, again, an error. God is all-sufficient, and does not need faith. We need faith, but God does not. There is no other scriptural support for this doctrine.

Fourthly, the law of proclaimed word derived from Mark 11:23-24 is not about the words you speak, but faith<sup>93</sup> in God, who is omnipotent, able to do anything according to His will. Spoken words are mere words, but words spoken through faith in God can move mountains.

Finally, the expiatory work of Christ should be understood primarily in terms of His taking the guilt of sin, and bearing its punishment on the cross. Divine healing is made possible through faith in Christ; however, real-life experience is quite the opposite. Job, a righteous man suffered. The apostle Paul struggled with an infirmity, and prayed that God would heal him, but God replied, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power

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<sup>90</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Material Possessions* (Leicester UK: Apollos, 1999), p. 36.

<sup>91</sup> The Hebrew word for “dominance” is *רָדָה* (*radah*). It means to rule over creation and people. It is not a right for exploitation or destruction of creation but the responsibility to govern, manage, and use it to the glory of God. See *The Revell Bible Dictionary*, s.v. “dominance”.

<sup>92</sup> Saracco, “Prosperity Theology”, p. 325.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 324.

is made perfect in weakness”.<sup>94</sup> What we need is the all-sufficient grace of God, and not easy lives.

Regarding the prosperity tenets, Saracco states:

There are . . . biblical interpretations, theological developments, and ethical positions that raise (*sic*) serious objections to this movement. Passages, such as Mark 10:30; 11:22; and 11:23-24 are key to the prosperity gospel, and interpreted by forcing their arguments on the translation.<sup>95</sup>

In comparing the major tenets of the prosperity gospel, we see that they are similar to rituals that were performed in tribal religions and cargo cults to appease the ancestral spirits, to make the people prosperous. Daimoi states, “For the community to obtain power and prosperity, contact with the spirit world is established through ritual in speech and action.”<sup>96</sup>

Are a healthy life and material possessions the true definition of prosperity? Christians should define prosperity in terms of salvation from the bondage to sin, Satan, and death, more than physical prosperity. God is concerned for the physical well-being of humankind. Nevertheless, God is even more concerned that we “seek His kingdom and His righteousness”.<sup>97</sup> When we become kingdom subjects, we rediscover our potential in the image of God to cultivate our gifts to make us prosperous.

God has given certain knowledge, skills, and abilities for everyone to use for their survival. He expects us to utilise our knowledge, skills, and abilities to meet our physical needs. However, we should strive to seek spiritual prosperity ahead of material prosperity, so that we develop a right attitude towards wealth. Hanson gives “Five principles for Melanesian believers” from Proverbs, regarding wealth. They are:

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<sup>94</sup> 2 Cor 12:9 (NIV).

<sup>95</sup> Saracco, “Prosperity Theology”, p. 324.

<sup>96</sup> Daimoi, “An Exploratory Missiological Study”, p. 49.

<sup>97</sup> Matt 6:33.

- (i) God blesses all believers with spiritual wealth;
- (ii) God blesses all believers with varying abilities, to gain material wealth;
- (iii) Believers should focus on spiritual wealth, and not material wealth;
- (iv) Believers should gain material wealth in a godly manner; and
- (v) God commands believers to spend their wealth in a godly manner.<sup>98</sup>

Therefore, the correct definition of the prosperity gospel is seen in the work of Christ in reconciling us to God. We are to focus on becoming more Christ-like, rather than on accumulating material wealth. Christians should not use God as a means for material prosperity. This needs correction, for the church's good.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

This section will provide practical and theological recommendations for the AOG denomination.

### **A. CONTEXTUALISE THEOLOGY**

Contextualisation is not a new school of thought in theological education. However, it is an issue that every generation must wrestle with. Whenever and wherever we deal with the Word of God, contextualisation is unavoidable.

I see this as one of the weaknesses in AOG churches in PNG. Often, contextualisation is not done well, and theologising is done through a Western context. The church is indigenous in structure and identity, but its Christianity is still Western. Western contextualised theology is deemed superior and attractive, and is copied in the churches. Christians are made to feel that Western culture is good, and theirs is evil. What is

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<sup>98</sup> Doug Hanson, "Wealth in Proverbs: Five Principles for Melanesian Believers", in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 23-1 (2007), p. 81.

cultural is deemed evil, and is suppressed. There is little contextualised theology in the churches. This is one of the reasons for shallow Christianity in PNG, today, where there is a lot of backsliding and nominalism in the churches. There is a need for Melanesian theologians to reenter their cultures, in order for them to do contextualised theology “to express the reality of Christ in our context”.<sup>99</sup>

As Guise says,

our greatest weakness is our failure to enter deep down into the people’s traditional faith and religious insight, understanding, and convictions, and then begin to build from there. . . . I am sure that the Christian teacher, who is not blinded by Western ideology (*sic*) will find, in his or her investigation of the traditional religious life and beliefs of this nation, . . . far from being incompatible with the Christian faith, there is a rich and fertile ground, ready and prepared to receive the Christian religion.<sup>100</sup>

The italic part of Hitchen’s definition, below, provides the steps for doing contextualised theology:

Contextualisation . . . is the task of representing, in a new cultural context, the message of God, so that it speaks the same message, as originally given in the biblical context. It impinges on, and in part, at least, embraces, the tasks of *biblical understanding (exegesis)*, *interpretation (hermeneutics)*, *translation and explanation (communication)*, and *application (indigenisation and enculturation)*.<sup>101</sup>

This is either done poorly, or not at all. The easiest way for many clergy is to transplant into our context what is done elsewhere. Doing

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<sup>99</sup> Leslie Boseto, “Foreword”, in *Christ in South Pacific Cultures*, Cliff Wright, and Leslie Fugui, eds (Suva Fiji: Lotu Pasifika, 1986), p. 1.

<sup>100</sup> John Guise, “How Deep-Rooted is the Christian Faith in our Nation?”, in *Christ in South Pacific Cultures*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>101</sup> John M. Hitchen, “Culture and the Bible – The Question of Contextualisation”, in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 8-2 (1992), p. 31. Underlining mine.

contextualised theology is a difficult task. Many clergy do not have the know-how. Contextualised theology will minimise transplanting of the message from a foreign culture, and will provide the way for Melanesian theology to bloom.

### **LAND – PRIMARY SOURCE OF WEALTH**

In PNG, 97 percent of the land is owned locally, while the government owns only three percent.<sup>102</sup> It is an inheritance that is priceless.<sup>103</sup> This wealth is the source of material prosperity for Melanesians. In countries, where people do not own the land, their source of acquiring material wealth is in their skilled knowledge.

God gave the land to our ancestors.<sup>104</sup> It contains all the ingredients to make us prosperous. He gave us the gift of work. We are to work our God-given land to meet our needs, and those who have skilled knowledge must use their skills.<sup>105</sup> Material wealth, which is acquired through hard work and honesty, is a blessing. We must take our eyes off Western material wealth, which is accumulated through advanced technology, and fix our eyes on God and the land, for our advancement. With the availability of Western technology, and our skills, we can maximise our land potential to supply our needs.

### **CONCLUSION**

The impact of Christianity and Western technology on tribal religions led to the cargo cult movements in Polynesia and PNG. The philosophy behind the cargo cult movements was material wealth and a utopia that will be ushered in by the god Jehovah/ancestor.

The prosperity gospel has a similar philosophy with cargo cult movements, but it propagates the view that the key to a prosperous life without suffering is humankind. You have to think and speak positively

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<sup>102</sup> Gibbs, "Papua New Guinea", p. 84.

<sup>103</sup> Land inheritance is either through the matrilineal or patrilineal system in PNG.

<sup>104</sup> Leslie Boseto, "Do Not Separate us From our Land and Sea", in *The Pacific Journal of Theology* 2-13 (1995), p. 69.

<sup>105</sup> On the right attitude for work, refer John Stott, *Issues Facing Christianity Today* (London UK: Marshall Pickering, 1984), pp. 165-166.

to have a prosperous life without suffering. However, the biblical doctrine of wealth emphasises that the prosperous life is Christ-centred. Material wealth is accumulated through honesty and hard work, and is to be used to glorify God. The prosperity gospel is being interpreted and contextualised by various movements, but its impact is such that the church ought not to embrace it.

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