

## False 'Prosperity gospel' in and around Bedford

**As a newly appointed Pastor in Bedford, several things have struck me, as I have started to get to know the area.**

Firstly, the remarkable diversity of the semi-rural Bedford population, with over 30% of the population knowing a language other than English. This was a major attraction for me and my family, having lived in London for the last 30 years.

Secondly, I have been struck by the sheer number and diversity of the churches and chapels in the area. This is a testimony, perhaps to both the ethnic diversity and the legacy of the likes of our most famous son, John Bunyan.

Related to this is a dawning realisation that, as in London, there are so many churches who could be characterised as "Prosperity gospel" in their teaching and practice. I am particularly concerned for those involved in such churches, especially in a Post-Covid world.

### Origins

In the last 100 years in the US and 50 years in the UK, the Christian Church has been badly infected by a perversion of the true and timeless Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. A heresy which is commonly called "The Prosperity gospel" ("Pg"), also known as "The Word of Faith Movement", has spread rapidly. The 2018 documentary "*American Gospel : Christ alone*" available on Netflix, has highlighted the impact.

The roots of Pg are in Pentecostalism in the US, with one of its early pioneers being a New York based Pastor called EW Kenyon at the turn of the last century. It was then quickly taken up by Kenneth E Hagin. The movement is now in its 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> generation of development and has become further and further divorced from the truth.

Current leading exponents include Kenneth Copeland, Benny Hinn, Joel Osteen, Todd White and Joyce Meyer. It is noteworthy that these are all Americans. This though is unsurprising, as in many ways the movement fits well with the much-vaunted American dream that "*you can have it all*".

### Perverted Teaching

The central teaching, as with all heresy, is skilfully designed to appeal to the sinful tastes of those who never truly have repented of sin.

Repentance is the first call in John the Baptist's recorded message (Mark 1v4) as he prepared the way for the Lord Jesus Christ. When the Saviour started his public ministry, His first words in Mark are a command "*to repent and believe*" (Mark 1v15). However, the Prosperity gospel has no such requirement and so many of its followers have not been called to turn their back on the world and all it stands for.



Kenneth Copeland with his latest jet plane

This distorted gospel has a particularly cruel appeal among the poorest sections of society. It is a wicked heresy, exploiting those who often have the least.

The core belief is that Christians should aim to be as rich as possible in this world, and it teaches "You can serve God and the world (or mammon)". Material things and as many possessions as you want can be relentlessly pursued at the same time as devotion to God. Indeed, "the more you have the more blessed you are." The implication is clear, that a large part of a Christian's happiness is to be derived from what we have, and what we have is a sign of God's favour. After all, it is God's will that His people are blessed materially as well as spiritually.

This is the very opposite of the teaching and numerous examples of the Word of God. We remember that the "*Son of Man had nowhere to lay His head*" Matthew 8v20. The Apostle Paul, as far as we are aware, never owned a home and supported himself through tent making. David in Psalm 37v16 says "*a little that a righteous man hath is better than the riches of many wicked*".

Biblical teaching of the sin of covetousness, and specifically the 10<sup>th</sup> commandment which prohibits it, is dismissed by Pg teachers as being old fashioned and unnecessarily depriving believers of deserved happiness. This is exemplified by one of its leading exponents, Kenneth Copeland, who has an estimated personal net worth of US\$300m (IB Times: “*The Richest Pastor in America*” - 20 April 2020).

In addition to covetousness, there is an almost total denial of illness or a confident ability to heal those who suffer from it; during the pandemic of COVID-19 in early 2020, Copeland gained national attention for his comments in response to the outbreak. He repeatedly claimed that the pandemic had ended or would soon end, and that he could heal sufferers from its effects.

Unsurprisingly he also called for his followers to continue paying tithes if they lost their jobs in the economic crisis of the pandemic. He later made claims to have destroyed the virus and to have ended the still-ongoing pandemic (The Independent - 6 Apr 2020).

Pg does not recognise that a larger part of the history of the Christian Church, especially the New Testament Church, has been characterised by persecution and suffering. The Saviour suffered, Peter, Paul, and the other Apostles suffered, and most were also martyred. To Pg advocates we are not to suffer we are to be positive and to triumph in everything we do in life.

Many of Pg teachings are quite simply outrageous, and yet in the UK and in around Bedford, there are over ten thousand people and a hundred churches which have been drawn in. In effect we can summarise the teaching as ‘Christ plus’ (wealth, health and prosperity).

### **Key NT Verse to Justify Pg Teaching**

The key verse used by Pg teachers to justify its position is 3 John 2 “*Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy souls prosper*”. Much is made of this verse, one of few in the New Testament which, on the surface at least, seems to encourage prosperity as the rightful pursuit of all true believers.

The Greek word translated as prosper means to lead on a good path. What clearly delights John is not that Gaius is made rich, though evidently, he was able to

give hospitality, but that “*he walked in the truth*”. It is a common feature of most heresies that they build whole beliefs and practices on one or very few verses, rather than “comparing spiritual things with spiritual” as Paul teaches us, comparing verse with verse and ensuring no inconsistency.

Nowhere does the Bible link true Godliness with poverty or wealth. In fact, the Bible teaches that it is not money, but our lust for and desire for money or “the love of money” which is “the root of all evil”. As true believers, we are to seek to avoid all covetousness. Like Abraham, and the Levites (Joshua 13v33), our riches and our inheritance is spiritual and eternal not earthly, physical, and passing.

The New Testament gives a strong warning about pursuing riches, “*but they that be rich fall into temptation and a trap*” 1 Timothy 6v9.

### **A New Authority**

What is the source and authority for this new set of teachings, which is a total departure from the teaching of the church over the centuries?

The answer is “New Revelation”. The Bible gives solemn warnings (e.g. Revelation 22 – Bible’s final chapter) for any that attempt to add to or take away from the Word of God. But as we know from history, as soon as the idea of modern-day prophets or revelation is introduced a flood of errors come in. To the Pg movement, it matters not that their teaching contradicts the Bible or indeed their own teachers.

### **Misunderstanding of the Fall**

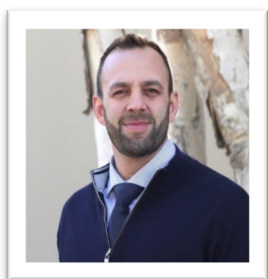
One of the major doctrinal errors of the Pg movement is a complete misunderstanding of the fall in the Garden of Eden. As a result of Adam’s sin, and ours sin in Adam, the blessings of creation were significantly reduced. Our relationship and communion with God, the most precious gift of all, was removed. Now, our heart’s desires are for those things that do not ultimately satisfy us.

As a result, the promise that we are to have “*dominion over the earth and enjoy its richness*” can now only be fulfilled in Christ when we are converted by Him, and then ultimately in its fullest respect only in heaven, when full communion will be restored.

Until then, as believers we have communion with God in Christ and through the means of grace, but this will be partial at best. However, Pg teaching totally ignores the consequences of the fall, or that ever since we fell, we have been vulnerable to idolatry and materialism.

### Costi Hinn

We have been greatly helped to understand the inner workings of the Pg movement by the nephew of Benny Hinn, one of its leading and most wealthy exponents. Costi Hinn parted ways with his Uncle several years ago, having worked for his Uncle in a gap year as a 'Catcher' of those supposedly slain in the Spirit. He has since professed Christ.



He says, in a revealing article in Christianity Today entitled '**Benny Hinn Is My Uncle, but Prosperity Preaching Isn't for Me**' - *"Growing up in the Hinn family empire was like belonging to some hybrid of the royal family and the mafia. Though Jesus Christ was still a part of our gospel, he was more of a magic genie than the King of Kings. Rubbing him the right way, by giving money and having enough faith, would unlock your spiritual inheritance. God's goal was not his glory but our gain. His grace was not to set us free from sin but to make us rich. The abundant life he offered wasn't eternal, it was now. We lived the prosperity gospel."* (Christianity Today September 2017)

### Providence Baptist Chapel (PBCB)

In the letter of Jude, we are urged to *"contend earnestly for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints."* When we see a significant perversion of the true Gospel and its teaching, which has once been delivered, our duty is to stand up and speak out. This article in a small way seeks to do this.

In my former church in London, over the years we had the great joy of many joining us who came out of Pg teaching churches, having seen through the practices as shallow and being no gospel at all.

At PBCB we would dearly love to help any who are confused with the teaching of this movement. We believe that whilst the leaders are clearly culpable, and many have become very wealthy, most of the followers have never heard the consistent teaching of the Word of God, which has been taught since the time of Christ, and has not changed.

Teaching which calls us to repent from our personal sins and turn to Christ as the only Saviour and as the primary source of peace and joy. We are called to live a life, as Christ did of holiness, in pursuit of heavenly treasures which are to be laid up for Him.

### Conclusion

We believe there are many already caught up in the Prosperity gospel or Word of Faith Movement in churches in and around Bedford.

With the likely consequences of the Covid-19 crisis on the economy and on people's incomes and lives, the appeal of a gospel which offers riches and perfect health could accelerate its penetration of the poorest and most vulnerable in our society. The way this false gospel has and continues to exploit the poorest in the UK, US, Africa and Asia is beyond cruel. Our desire is to help all who are open to hearing the Word of God and understanding what it teaches.

**Pastor Oliver Wyncoll**

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[pastor@providencechapel.org.uk](mailto:pastor@providencechapel.org.uk)  
[www.providencechapel.org.uk](http://www.providencechapel.org.uk)  
[www.providencechapel.org.uk/youtube](http://www.providencechapel.org.uk/youtube)

**NB – for a more in depth look at this subject we recommend "God or Mammon – The Snare of the Prosperity Gospel" by Robin Compston**