

10 SICKNESSES

of the Faith & Prosperity Gospel

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The Faith & Prosperity Gospel attracts millions of followers around the globe and influences even countless more through TV and social media. I was one of them. I studied under some of the most known leaders and I was an active part of the movement on three continents of the world as a preacher, teacher, and missionary. But the problems I bring up here made me rethink everything. Whether you're in the movement or from the outside looking in, I encourage you to read and consider what I have to say because I have first-hand experience and spent years researching the Faith & Prosperity Gospel—I wrote my doctoral thesis on the movement. My experiences and academic background don't mean you have to agree with me. All I ask is that you give these ten points serious and prayerful thought, like the Bereans in Acts 17:11.

The Faith & Prosperity Gospel is a complex movement that takes some effort and discernment to fully understand. If all you know about it is what you've picked up in a couple of YouTube videos that show clips of preachers acting weird and collecting loads of cash, then you could think that it is a simple get-rich-quick scheme where people are lining their pockets on the backs of gullible believers who either are desperate and need a way out or who want to tap into the success of their leaders. The movement is massive and there are sadly preachers with questionable character and morals who are part of it. There are numerous stories of ministers misusing funds and personally enriching themselves on money given to God often by suffering people hoping for a miracle in return. Such unethical behavior of some Faith & Prosperity Gospel ministers is

appalling. I can say nothing in their defense. Yet it is important to know that the whole movement should not be judged based on such extremes. I believe there are inherent sicknesses in the teachings of the movement that give these preachers a loophole but I don't agree that the movement at its core is as corrupt as the extreme personalities who attract most of the media attention. I'm painfully aware of how preachers within the Faith & Prosperity Gospel misuse power and manipulate people to donate money; I have witnessed that firsthand. Yet what I'm saying is that there is more going on in the Faith & Prosperity Gospel than what meets the eye. The movement doesn't just contain extreme preachers who have revived Jonathan Tezel's medieval methods of selling indulgences. Believe it or not but the Faith & Prosperity Gospel also offers some

significant gifts to the body of Christ. In another place I expand on these. To get a well-rounded and fair picture I recommend that you read what I have to say here together with that teaching. You can find the video and article on our website and YouTube channel.

If you're part of the movement and think that it is the fullness of the gospel, God's ultimate truth revealed, then I want you to think again. Jesus encouraged us to penetrate beneath the surface of things and not base our knowledge on mere appearances (see John 7:24). What is needed is an approach to the Faith & Prosperity Gospel that heals the sicknesses while cherishing and developing their important contributions. I believe the Faith & Prosperity Gospel can become genuine gospel if its sicknesses are properly healed. For that to happen they have first to be diagnosed. Let's start doing that.

1: Misreading the Biblical Story

The Faith & Prosperity Gospel misreads the biblical story and misses the Bible's red thread. Because this is such a key point to understand, I've dedicated more space to this sickness than the others. Let me give some background context. We're created to live out of a larger story that makes sense of everything else. To be a Christian is to live as if the biblical story is the true story of the world—which it is! Every Christian thinks, acts, loves, and is motivated based on what they believe is God's big story. To be a Christian is to enter this grand narrative and be a player within it. The Bible's story gives us the largest theater of action, so to speak, where we seek to act out our lives. So, we don't live based on a doctrine or two, a verse here or a verse there, but we live out of a complete narrative. The term *story* should not make us think that the Bible isn't true or that is just made-up fiction. The Bible is God's inspired and infallible Word while "story" speaks about how He chose to communicate His truth about the world to us through a story unfolding from

creation to consummation.

What the Faith & Prosperity Gospel believes is God's big story of the world is problematic and mistaken at several turns. Let's look at it. In a nutshell, this is how their narration goes:

God created the world through the power of faith and spoken words and then created Adam in His image and likeness. This placed Adam in God's class of beings to share equality with God and the ability to operate in the power of faith and so create by spoken words just like God. Adam was also given absolute dominion over the whole world to be its king with the task to rule and increase. Life in the Garden of Eden was blessed with material abundance and divine health that would ensure the success of Adam. But in the Fall Adam sold out his blessings and ruling authority over the world to Satan who became the god of this world. Adam lost his divine equality and position with God and had to face the curse of poverty, sickness, and spiritual death under Satan's dominion. For God to redeem the world He sent Jesus, who, as the second Adam, defeated Satan and won back the authority. The Christian should now operate by faith and rule the world like Adam. In short, by faith, the believer is back in the reality of Eden and can manifest here and now all Eden's fullness of health, wealth, and happiness which is available in the spiritual realm through the finished work of Jesus. One day Jesus will return to take the church to heaven but until then we are to occupy till he comes.



Check out the video "The Big Story of the Faith & Prosperity Gospel" on our YouTube channel.

So that is the basic underlying story that makes sense of the Faith & Prosperity Gospel beliefs, actions, affections, and motivations. But there are several problems with how they narrate the biblical story. I will speak to the problems of direction and expectations for now and point out others later on. The key problem is this: the whole direction of the story is misguided. The Faith & Prosperity Gospel reads the Bible as if all that Jesus came to do was to redeem and restore the believer's position of authority and blessing. Because they believe that everything is already accomplished through Jesus and that the believer is back in the

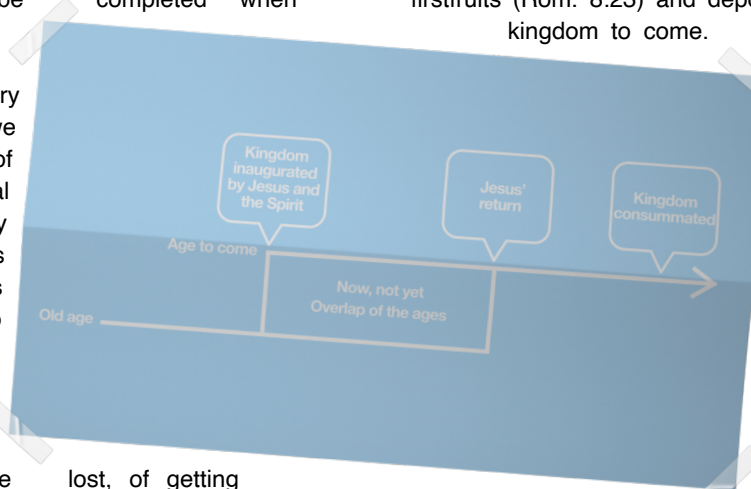
realities of pre-fall Eden, they hold strongly to the belief that God's kingdom can be present in fullness if we have faith. Our assignment is to reign as kings in this life. This is a key part of the big story of the Faith & Prosperity Gospel.

This view clashes with the biblical story which has its focus set on the future of God's kingdom when heaven and earth will be married. The story is about how God's dimension (heaven) and our dimension (earth) will one day be united into God's new world where we will share God's life (2 Pet. 1:4) and kingdom (Matt. 25:34). This merging started in Jesus, who is fully God and fully human, and continues in us (to a lesser degree) who are born-again by the Holy Spirit and will through the work of the Holy Spirit be completed when God will be all in all (1 Cor. 15:28). The thrust and direction of the biblical story are toward this future that we read about at the end of Revelations. In theological language, the biblical story is *eschatological*; it moves toward the future of God's fulfillment. This is crucial to realize because the Bible isn't simply telling a return story, that is, a story of regaining something that was once lost, of getting Eden back. But that is exactly how the Faith & Prosperity Gospel thinks of the Bible: equality with God and ruling authority was lost in Eden but now regained in Jesus. Instead of telling the Bible's story that moves towards God's future where His life and kingdom are shared with His children, the Faith & Prosperity Gospel tells a story that is moving backward; what we can call a "protological" story (protos meaning "first" or "beginning"). Because of this backward momentum in the story, the movement sees health, wealth, and success as the believer's rights and privileges. They are not interpreted as gifts which God may offer by grace according to His greater plan and purposes but something which the believer needs to claim as their birthright.

The Bible is better understood as a completion story, where the problem set out at first is finally resolved gloriously. The Bible is about Eden fulfilled rather than Eden restored. God desired to share life and reign with

His children which will be the reality in God's new world at Jesus' return. Humans were to rule *under* God, not to rule *as* God.

Why is this important? Because the Faith & Prosperity Gospel positions the believer in a faulty story that breeds false expectations and reignites the serpent's original temptation from Eden. The Faith & Prosperity Gospel's interpretation of the biblical story and expectation of seeing the reality of Eden here and now is a radical break with and diversion from the biblical pattern which teaches us that the future kingdom of God has broken into the present through Jesus and the Holy Spirit but the fullness of the kingdom still lies in the future at Jesus' return. We have given the Spirit as the firstfruits (Rom. 8:23) and deposit (Eph. 1:14) of the kingdom to come.



That is, as believers we live in the tension of the kingdom of God already present through the Spirit but still awaiting the fullness of God's kingdom (see Eph. 2:6-7; Heb. 2:8; Rev. 2:26). This *now-not yet* reality of the kingdom is one of the most fundamental and important truths

of the New Testament. So vital is this tension of the ages that anybody who tries to understand the Bible without it will go wrong, very wrong. Since the Faith & Prosperity Gospel believes that we can rule as kings now, they miss the teachings of the New Testament which says that we are to *prepare* in this life to rule in the next. In other words, this life is our kingdom prep school (1 Cor. 6:1-11). And while the Faith & Prosperity Gospel is right to speak of the abundance and blessings that accompany ruling with God, they, like the Corinthian church (1 Cor. 4:8) miss that in this life we show our readiness to inherit by laying down our claims for wealth, power, and glory. We practice for our future reign by imitating Jesus' humility, serving, and self-sacrifice now. That doesn't mean of course that we cannot trust God to provide our needs or that we at times are blessed way beyond our needs. The point that the Faith & Prosperity Gospel misses is the whole thrust of God's story and the timing of God's kingdom. This leads among other things to false expectations and

neglect of training in Christlikeness we are to undergo here as preparations to reign. More on that later.

The Faith & Prosperity Gospel is sick because it misreads the biblical story.

2: Limiting the Holy Spirit

The Faith & Prosperity Gospel puts limitations on the Holy Spirit. At a start we must know that it is a Charismatic and Pentecostal kind of movement that welcomes all gifts of the Spirit. Problems arise, however, in that several of the teachings lead to a limitation and submission of the Spirit. I'll point out four areas here.

First, the Faith & Prosperity Gospel invites the believer into a world where there are spiritual laws and eternal principles of faith which govern life. Once a believer knows these laws and principles, they can access the power and blessings of God. The problem is that the worldview of the Bible doesn't contain any spiritual laws when understood as eternal laws that govern God and the world. What the Bible teaches is rather that life with God involves an ongoing and dynamic relationship with the Holy Spirit. Spiritual laws are impersonal while walking with God is relational from start to finish. The teaching of spiritual laws exchanges a relationship with a legal and contractual approach to God—even if ever so slightly.

Second, much of the basic faith teachings in the Faith & Prosperity Gospel have its roots in frustrations many experienced with not seeing enough people healed by the gifts of Spirit and therefore seeking to create a teaching of faith that would work every time. If the gifts of healing operate only as the Spirit wills (1 Cor. 12:11) then faith is more reliable and always works, the idea

goes. The desire of the Faith & Prosperity Gospel to see more people touched by God is a good desire for sure but the resulting move of creating a system of faith that when adhered to would take the risk out of the equation and provide a failproof road to miracles was deeply misguided. The greatest problem is that the freedom of the Holy Spirit is caught by the system of teachings. In other words, the Faith & Prosperity Gospel quenches the Spirit by limiting Him to their teachings. This goes contrary to Jesus' teachings on the Spirit as free and unpredictable as the wind (John 3:8).

Third, the Faith & Prosperity Gospel carries a strong emphasis on the exalted and empowered position of the believer. I've already pointed out how they teach that believers are to rule and reign in this life and I'll return to it again later. The teaching on the believer's position of authority easily leads to an exalted view of the believer as the one who is to be proactive and initiate changes. The Faith & Prosperity Gospel makes the

believer the mover and shaker in God's kingdom. But this goes contrary to the biblical message where the believer is at every turn made dependent on the leading and guidance of the Spirit. The biblical instruction to be led

by the Spirit (Gal. 5:25) isn't just good advice; it is the way of the true Christian life (Rom. 8:14).

Fourth, the Faith & Prosperity Gospel also quenches the Spirit by its restricted view of the Spirit's role in creation. A foundational belief for the Faith & Prosperity Gospel is that God created the world by spoken words that released God's faith. This understanding empowers its view of faith and the practice of speaking faith declarations, positive confession, decreeing, or whatever else the practice is called. The teaching goes that since we are created in God's image and likeness we are to operate like God and release the power of faith through our words. The problem here is that it starts with at least one wrong assumption that hasn't factored in what the Bible actually teaches. When we read the creation story in Genesis we see that God created the world not by His word alone but that

“The teaching of spiritual laws exchanges a relationship with a legal and contractual approach to God.”

creation happened through God's Word *and* Spirit. God's Spirit was in operating before God spoke (Gen. 1:2). The role of the Spirit in creation is affirmed in Scripture (Ps. 33:6; 104:30). For the Faith & Prosperity Gospel to overlook this and say that God simply used faith and spoken words means that in reality, they replace the Spirit with the power of faith.

The Holy Spirit is quenched by the Faith & Prosperity Gospel teachings on spiritual laws, faith, the believer's position, and its oversight of the Spirit's role in creation.

The Faith & Prosperity Gospel is sick because it limits the Holy Spirit.

3: Replacing Scripture

The Faith & Prosperity Gospel misinterprets the Bible so ends up replacing Scripture. While claiming to be the movement that takes the Word most seriously and that bases all they do and say on Scripture there are significant problems with how the Bible is used. Their aim and ambition should be celebrated so where I part ways with the Faith & Prosperity Gospel isn't regarding their high view of Scripture but with how they handle the Bible. A lot can be said about this but here I will only speak to three core issues and then point out an underlying problem.

The first problem is that the Faith & Prosperity Gospel reads the Bible selectively. What I mean is that Scripture is handled like a smorgasbord where the preacher picks and chooses according to their own heart. For example, Jesus' teachings on the danger of wealth are ignored, overlooked, or downplayed. The common saying is that Jesus taught more about money than anything else (which is inaccurate because the focus of Jesus' message was clearly on the kingdom of God). Implied in this is that Jesus' message about money was positive and that he was affirming the pursuit of wealth as a blessing from God. But this is far from the truth. We need to know that

the Old Testament narratives and wisdom texts can speak of wealth as a reward from God (Gen. 13:2; Deut. 8:18; Eccl. 5:19) while the Old Testament prophets issued warnings about amassing wealth unjustly and unmasked the deceptive power of wealth (Jer. 5:7; Neh. 9:25–26; Hos. 13:6). And we must know that Jesus repeated *only* the prophetic warnings from the Old Testament—never its approval of wealth! There isn't one verse where Jesus speaks positively about the human pursuit of wealth. Not one. Only the selective reading of the Faith & Prosperity Gospel can lead to any other conclusion. This isn't to deny that God wants to provide our needs (Matt. 6:32–33) and can at times enrich believers financially (e.g., 1 Tim. 6:17–19). But teachings about money cannot be selective and must start with what Jesus taught.

Second, the most basic rules of Bible interpretation—what is called biblical hermeneutics—are compromised in the Faith & Prosperity Gospel. Verses and words are taken out of their rightful context (or surrounding material), figurative language is taken literally, the individual genres of the various biblical books are misunderstood, the original languages of the Bible are misused. The list could be extended and I give examples of these in other writings. The Faith & Prosperity Gospel isn't alone in doing this as other Christian groups fall into the same traps at times. The problem is, however, that it is of a more systemic nature and that several of the unique and key doctrines of the Faith & Prosperity Gospel are grounded in verses that break the rules of interpretation.

The third problem which comes as a result of the second is that meaning is often read *into* the biblical texts instead of being drawn *out of* the text. In theological language, *exegesis* is substituted for *eisegesis*. What I mean is that the Faith & Prosperity Gospel imports ideas foreign to the inspired biblical authors and claims that their new reading is what the Bible actually says. For example, the whole teaching on God having faith based on verses like Mark 11:22 or Hebrews 11:3 doesn't square with the original texts. It is simply an import of new ideas from outside the biblical

“several of the unique and key doctrines of the Faith & Prosperity Gospel are grounded in verses that break the rules of interpretation.”

worldview.

What fuels the selective reading, the breaking of universal principles of biblical interpretation, and reading extrabiblical ideas into Scripture is the expectation of revelation knowledge. In the Faith & Prosperity Gospel understanding revelation knowledge is a certain kind of spiritual insight that is given directly by God and is often gained through visions or revelations. Many of the particular teachings of the movement stem from spiritual visions of Jesus or angels teaching the key leaders.

Now, there is no reason to reject a teaching just because it seems new or because most present Christians don't believe it. Throughout church history, revival movements have recaptured truths that were lost along the way by an increasingly institutionalized and lukewarm church. That a person can gain Scriptural insights through experiences of the Holy Spirit is also perfectly biblical. Think of the disciples who only after

breaking of basic rules of interpretation, reading meaning into Scripture and privileging extra-biblical revelation knowledge, the Faith & Prosperity Gospel ends up falling short of their noble ambition of being a Word movement.

The Faith & Prosperity Gospel is sick because it replaces Scripture.

4: Misrepresenting Faith

The Faith & Prosperity Gospel movement makes a big deal of faith and what the power of faith can accomplish for a believer if they rightly use it. Some of the teachings on faith are good and very beneficial when they speak of faith as a personal commitment to God and a loyal

“our faith shouldn't be in the promises of God but in the God of the promises.”

experiencing the resurrection of Jesus understood what he had meant (John 12:16) or of how the doctrine of the trinity which is a fully authentic biblical doctrine yet took hundreds of years to formulate after the last book of the Bible was written.

What I speak of here is the type of knowledge that isn't grounded in the biblical story and worldview but is detached from them and at points even goes contrary to them. For the Faith & Prosperity Gospel, revelation knowledge creates a filter through which the Bible is interpreted and leads to a number of deviant doctrinal positions. This isn't the place to go into any details but among the most troubling beliefs is that that humans are spirit beings sharing equality with God, that Jesus died spiritually (often called JDS), that God has faith, that humans lost the image of God, that Satan got full dominion over the world, that there are spiritual laws and so on.

Because of its selective reading of the Bible, its

trust in God. I develop the good contributions the movement makes on faith in my article *10 Gifts from the Faith & Prosperity Gospel*. But that isn't all of what is taught. I will address three problems.

The first problem is that they speak of faith as a spiritual force, power, or substance. Faith is something in and of itself that the believer can release by positive speech and thinking. The Faith & Prosperity Gospel adds to biblical faith and in doing so moves the focus from the dimension of a relationship with God to that of the impersonal. This shift makes a big difference because the Bible always speaks of faith in personal terms. Faith happens in an encounter with God and grows in a relationship with God. God is the object of our faith and we put our trust in Him. If we take God out, there is no biblical faith.

The devil is in the details of faith. Believers are tempted to misdirect faith away from God to something else. It makes a world of difference when faith is moved away

from God, even when faith is placed in something good like the promises of God. Because our faith shouldn't be in the promises of God but in the God of the promises.

To teach that faith is an impersonal power, as the Faith & Prosperity Gospel does, is to place faith in a false group, what we can call a "categorical mistake" like saying that the number 8 is yellow. Mixing numbers with colors is to confuse categories and it ends up being nonsensical. Once we accept the false idea that faith is a spiritual power we will only head deeper into problems. And much of the teachings on faith in the Faith & Prosperity Gospel are based on the underlying assumption that faith is a commodity of power that can be grown, used, released, and so on. People who have absorbed the Faith & Prosperity Gospel message speak of faith as being something in and of itself, as operating by itself apart—at least in degrees—from a relationship with God. They can say that "faith works", "my faith produced this miracle", "faith attracted this blessing", and things like that. But faith doesn't move any mountains; God moves mountains!

The second problem is that the Faith & Prosperity Gospel teaches that God has faith and that God used the power of faith to create the world and the believer has access to this "God-kind of faith". I have addressed this problem and the verses used (e.g., Mark 11:22) in detail elsewhere but it is important to point out here that it is a totally foreign idea to the biblical worldview. The Bible is clear on the fact that faith is relational and God is the ultimate object of faith. There is no valid biblical reason to claim that God has faith or used faith and these misunderstandings all stem from the basic notion that faith is a force that God also uses. These beliefs come from outside the biblical world and only cause problems for those who embrace them.

The third and last problem is that faith has to be *now*. That is, based on a false reading of Hebrews 11:1, the Faith & Prosperity Gospel says that if we have genuine faith it means that what we believe for should be manifested now—or at least soon. For example, if we have faith for healing, our healing is now and we should act like it is so. The belief that faith is now is deeply problematic from a biblical point of view. Because the Bible

makes a difference between faith and fulfillment and that the fulfillment of all God's promises isn't yet (see Heb. 11:39). We need faith because we haven't yet seen the reality and fulness of God's kingdom; we walk by faith and not by visible manifestations (2 Cor. 5:7).

The Faith & Prosperity Gospel misrepresents faith by separating it from the relational dimension with God to become an impersonal power that God also has and uses and by claiming that faith's power can and must work in the now.

The Faith & Prosperity Gospel is sick because it misrepresents biblical faith.

5: Overspiritualizing Reality

Faith & Prosperity Gospel overspiritualizes their understanding of the world and their narration of the biblical story. The movement privileges the spiritual above the physical in at least three unbiblical and unsound ways.

First, the spiritual realm is held to be more real and of greater importance than the physical, material realm. The Faith & Prosperity Gospel says that we are first and foremost spirit beings that one day will lay the body down for an unembodied eternity in heaven. God is active in the spiritual realm and it is there all our blessings are kept. The believer should therefore create a bridge between the spiritual realm and the physical realm. The connection is made by faith.

The radical division between the physical and the spiritual in the Faith & Prosperity Gospel leads to problems in the Christian life where the believer thinks that to be spiritual they have to be almost less than human because what God *really* wants are Supermen and Wonderwomen who go from victory to victory. When this expectation gets out of hand, it leads to believers denying reality and exchanging the bare facts with

"The sharp division between the physical and spiritual isn't how the Bible portrays the world."

positive confessions as if what they wanted to be real is real. I've known people who died by sickness while saying they were well and never telling the full story to even their closest relatives. Others have thrown away their medicine with dire consequences. I don't criticize these believers sincerity and commitment; what I react to is the sickness of an overspiritualized view of reality.

The sharp division between the physical and spiritual isn't how the Bible portrays the world. Of course, there are spiritual and material dimensions to reality but these aren't related in the way the Faith & Prosperity Gospel says. God is present and active in all of creation through the Holy Spirit. It is misleading to say that the spiritual is more real and more important than the physical dimension. In fact, the biblical story as I mentioned is about a renewed creation where heaven and earth will be made one and believers living in God's new world in resurrected, glorified bodies (see Rev. 21:1–8 and 1 Cor. 15).

Second, I have already touched upon how the Faith & Prosperity Gospel's big story narrates that the spiritual world works according to a set of spiritual laws. This means that the believer can relate to God through a formula: if-I-do-X-God-will-do-Y. Guaranteed. For example, If I sow money God will give me a harvest of money. Guaranteed. Or if I speak my healing God will heal me. Guaranteed. Yet the idea of spiritual laws isn't drawn from the Bible. God's character is unchanging (Mal 3:6) but God is personal and not like electricity, which works the same always and in every situation. We see in the biblical story how God acts differently depending on the surrounding context. God's love and goodness are predictable, but what precise actions He will take for our eternal good aren't predictable. The reality of God's freedom requires that we trust Him. Authentic, biblical faith allows God to be God and trusts that He will only do us good. The main problem with the teaching of spiritual laws—when understood as absolute laws which God must follow—is that it limits God's actions, makes God predictable, puts God's power at our command, and shapes life according to the formula rather than relationship.

Third, there is a troubling upgrading of Satan's position

and power in the Faith & Prosperity Gospel. Their big story speaks of Satan getting total dominion over the world from Adam and literally running the world as its god. But the Bible speaks of Satan as the deceiver of the nations and never as their true king (Rev. 20:3). Satan has power over the sinful structures of the fall age, never over the earth as such. The earth is, has always been, and will always be the Lord's (Ps. 24:1) and the Holy Spirit continually renews life on earth (Ps 104:30). The authority to rule the earth God gave to humankind hasn't changed; not even by the fall into sin (Gen. 9:1–7; Ps. 115:16; Jer. 27:5). We must never create any story and belief system that makes Satan be something he isn't, because that empowers him and plays right into his lust for power. Satan's power rests in deception and lies. Believers' greatest problem is rather with sin and the corruption of our hearts into idolatry (Jer. 17:9).

The Faith & Prosperity Gospel makes a sharp division between the spiritual and the physical, teaches that God and the world operate by spiritual laws, and upgrades Satan's position and power in the world. None of these are based in the biblical story and worldview.

The Faith & Prosperity Gospel is sick because it overspiritualizes reality.

“Authentic, biblical faith allows God to be God and trusts that He will only do us good.”

6: Exalting the Believer

The Faith & Prosperity Gospel wants to overcome all human limitations and this makes them overread what being created in the image of God means (Gen. 1:26). It is important to point out that the genesis of the lies in a reaction to traditional Christian beliefs that they saw as limiting believers to think that they were nobodies, powerless, and poor sinners who simply were waiting for a better life in heaven. The Faith & Prosperity Gospel wants to change the image of the Christian from a poor victim to a mighty winner who isn't limited by their circumstances and takes initiative for positive change and experiences the impossible. Their intention is basically a good thing. The Bible does have a high view of human potential and believers should be encouraged

to be proactive in bringing positive change in their lives and the world by the power of the Spirit. But the Faith & Prosperity Gospel accepts too quickly and uncritically any idea and narrative that elevate human power and potential.

The Faith & Prosperity Gospel exalts believers beyond our rightful position while failing to give Jesus his due place. In their view, Jesus came to win back the ruling authority Adam lost to Satan and to model for us a life of faith and anointing. Jesus has already done everything needed for us to live in the authority and bounty Adam once had and has poured out the Spirit upon the believers. By using faith and the delegated authority in the name of Jesus the believer can now shape the world according to their desire. God, Jesus, faith, prosperity, health, and so on are available tools to be used as instruments to implement victory and breakthrough. The believer is put in the driver's seat, so to speak, and the only thing that can permanently hold the believer back is ignorance, unbelief, or disobedience. Satan can temporarily disrupt and hinder but never stop the believer who lives by faith.

What happens in this understanding of Jesus is that he is thought of as our supreme example and model for life and ministry. For the Faith & Prosperity Gospel, Jesus is fully God, but on earth he acted only as a human anointed by the Spirit. Since every believer has access to the same faith and anointing as Jesus they are now to do the same works and even greater (see John 14:12; Acts 10:38).

Though not every part of their understanding of Jesus is unbiblical there is one certain very disturbing thing that comes out as a result, which is that the present importance of Jesus is lessened making the Faith & Prosperity Gospel not be a fully Jesus-centered movement.

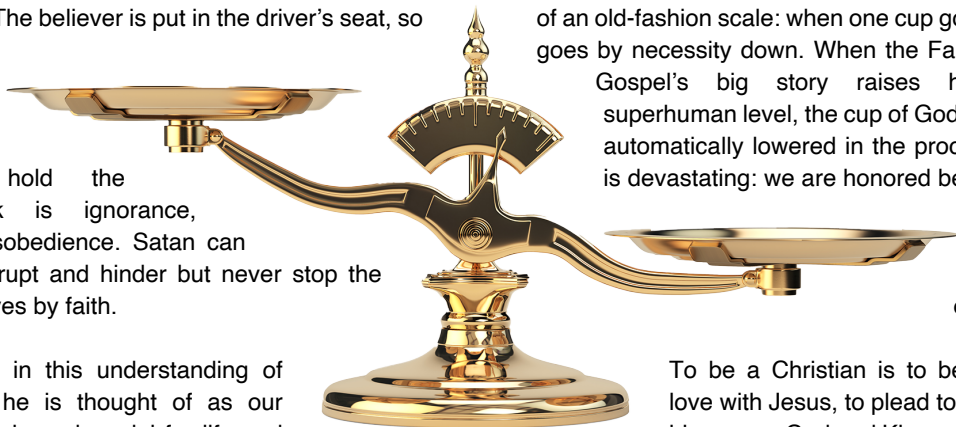
That might sound like an unfair and overly critical comment but hear me out. The energy of Faith & Prosperity Gospel teaching comes from the desire to empower believers to realize new and previously untapped potentials by faith. That isn't wrong in itself if

they only had known where the no-go zones are and where to stop in their promotions of the believer. The Bible sets Jesus as our example and model (1 John 4:17) but also as *more than* that. Jesus is our God (John 20:28) and king and that means that we are his bond-servants (Rom. 1:1) and will never be his equal. Jesus is the unique and matchless Son of God by nature (Col. 1:15–18; Heb. 1:1–4); we are the adopted children of God by grace (Eph. 1:5; Rom. 8:5). There is a world of difference of being between us and Jesus that will never be overcome. This difference is something all sound biblical teachings will always be sure to guard. The moment humans start to infringe on Jesus' place and position they are in danger of falling for the serpent's temptation of Eve and Adam "to be like God" (Gen. 3:5).

The problem with how the Faith & Prosperity Gospel interprets our human nature becomes clearer if we think of an old-fashioned scale: when one cup goes up the other goes by necessity down. When the Faith & Prosperity Gospel's big story raises humans to a superhuman level, the cup of God, so to speak, is automatically lowered in the process. The result is devastating: we are honored beyond our place and it comes at God's expense.

To be a Christian is to be in passionate love with Jesus, to plead total allegiance to him as our God and King and seek him and his will beyond anything else. The Faith & Prosperity Gospel loves Jesus but often more for what he has done than for who he is and so often end up seeking God's hands rather than his face. Therefore they miss placing Jesus at the very center of their life and belief system.

The Faith & Prosperity Gospel focuses on the individual believer's blessed life which makes them underemphasize the Christian community and the world. The focus is that the believer can now act and live like Adam, as an individual with God. In this it misses the communal dimension of being a part of the larger body of Christ, where the well-being of some should result in the uplift of those who lack (2 Cor. 8:13–15). The individualism of this present age shapes the Faith & Prosperity Gospel teachings so that it easily becomes a self-centered message of blessing that caters to the "unholy trinity" of Me, Myself, and I.



The believer is raised to an equal level and status with Jesus in the Faith & Prosperity Gospel resulting in a corresponding lowering of Jesus. The movement's focus on the individual misses the biblical focus on God's people as a community.

The Faith & Prosperity Gospel is sick because it exalts the believer.

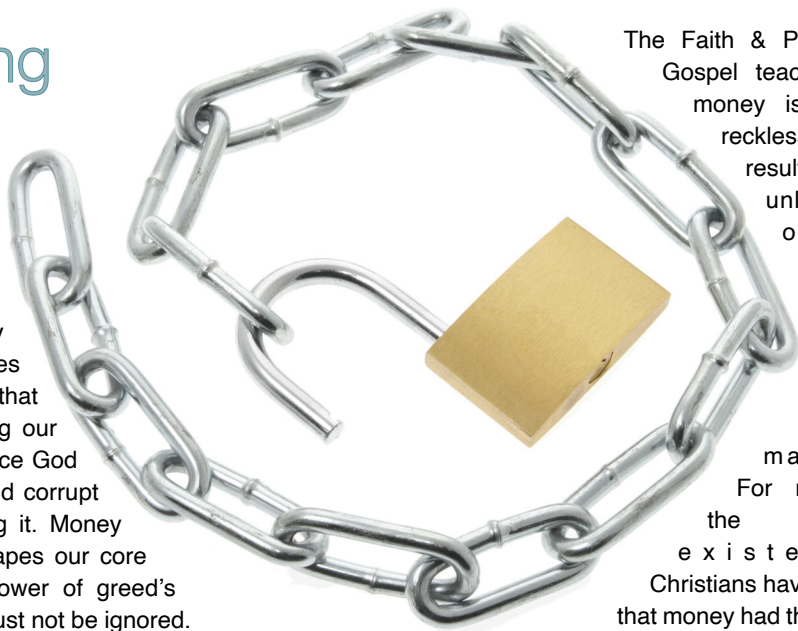
7: Unshackling Mammon

The Faith & Prosperity Gospel released the idol of mammon to roam free in the body of Christ. This was surely unintentional on their part but it is still a reality. Money is a very powerful idol that challenges God's rightful place. Jesus said that money has the capacity of attracting our worship and obedience and so replace God (Matt. 6:24). And it can influence and corrupt our hearts without us even knowing it. Money easily enters our worldview and shapes our core value system (Luke 16:11). The power of greed's deception on every person's heart must not be ignored. Jesus is clear: "*no one* can serve two masters" (Matt. 6:24, my emphasis). This dark spiritual power of money is absolutely crucial to remember. Yet the Faith & Prosperity Gospel overlooks, yes even ignores, these repeated warnings of Jesus. Instead, they offset Jesus' words by teaching that money is neutral. They get their point from a phrase in Paul who writes that the root of all evil is the love of money—not money itself (1 Tim. 6:10). That is true as far as it goes yet we should not leave this verse as quickly as the Faith & Prosperity Gospel does. Paul still said that the love of money is the root of all evil. Think of it: *all* evil! That should make us be very careful with any teaching about money that could kindle even the slightest love for money and desire for riches (1 Tim. 6:9). Also, we cannot use Paul's words to override the point that Jesus is making, namely that money sits on the power to attract our inmost love.

If the love of money is the root of all evil and money has the capacity to deceive and kindle our

desires this means that there isn't anything neutral about money! There is a spiritual power in money and wealth that can sneak passed all our protection and enters straight to the heart and lead to its corruption. Though we need to use money in this world and God entrusts some believers with wealth and the grace to handle it, the naïve handling of money that the Faith & Prosperity Gospel represents which thinks that money is just a neutral means of exchange without any spiritual realities has proven fatal; it is a deceptive myth.

The Faith & Prosperity Gospel teaching on money is simply reckless and it resulted in an unleashing o f



mammon. For most of the church's existence, Christians have known that money had the power to corrupt the heart and so hinder the work of God. To keep a tight rein on money, various teachings were developed. Some of these teachings were unbiblical and too legalistic leading to a glorification of poverty. When the Faith & Prosperity Gospel came along they rightly reacted against these and developed new teachings which they thought were truer to Scripture. The problem was that the Faith & Prosperity Gospel overreacted and unknowingly untied mammon from its chains. Mammon was free to roam at large in the body of Christ deceiving believers who no longer had any protection. Anyone with some level of discernment and honesty would agree that mammon has entered the church in a big way. We are now—and too late—starting to witness money's seductive and destructive powers as we see leaders and churches falling. If the sickness of the Faith & Prosperity Gospel goes unhealed the next generation will hold us accountable. We need to rein in this dragon or values of far greater worth than gold will be lost and the shape of Christianity as we know it will change.



The Faith & Prosperity Gospel is sick because it unshackles mammon.

8: Accommodating Worldliness

The Faith & Prosperity Gospel accommodates worldliness by not unmasking the idols of our time and by not carrying a prophetic word against the powers of this age. Let me explain. As fallen humans we rather worship anything created than the Creator (Rom. 1:25) and whatever we put our trust in apart from God becomes a false god. An idol doesn't have to be a statue of a god or goddess that is placed at an altar for to people bow down to in worship and sacrifice. In most parts of the world, the really influential idols are rather unseen powers that capture our love and desires. Space hinders me to talk about how the Faith & Prosperity Gospel fails to identify and prophetically criticize the idolatrous powers of fame, beauty, entertainment, political and institutional power, violence, privilege, nationalism, sex, and so on. I speak to these specific idols in other places while my focus here is on consumerism.

The Faith & Prosperity Gospel doesn't offer any prophetic critique of the dominant consumer society which shapes most of the world. *Consumerism* speaks of how people run after more and more things and experiences and how these commodities are used to shape one's identity and bring meaning and delight. It isn't necessarily about hoarding stuff and amassing wealth even though that certainly can be part of it. It is as much about just consuming something material to reach immaterial results and then quickly moving on to find the next object for consumption. Everyone needs to consume things for survival, like food, clothing, and shelter. God knows that we need such things and wants to provide them for us (Matt. 6:33). The error of the Faith & Prosperity Gospel is that consuming things takes on spiritual value and significance. One proves to have strong faith by believing for goods, services, and

experiences. Buying and displaying expensive stuff and consuming food, vacations, and services are held as signs of genuine faith. The larger the house, the more luxurious the car, the more expensive the dressing, the more exotic the vacation, the more gastronomic the eating, and so on, the greater the faith. We must remember that the expected signs often take on cultural expressions and will not necessarily be as extravagant and eye-catching as the ones I listed here but even when they look more mundane the underlying logic is still the same. The lifestyle of the rich and famous is held as the ideal for the true person of God. By adapting

to the dominant consumer patterns of this world the Faith & Prosperity Gospel believer thinks they are evidencing how they are ruling the world by the authority that Jesus regained from Satan.

There is a certain logic at work in the Faith & Prosperity Gospel movement which goes like this.

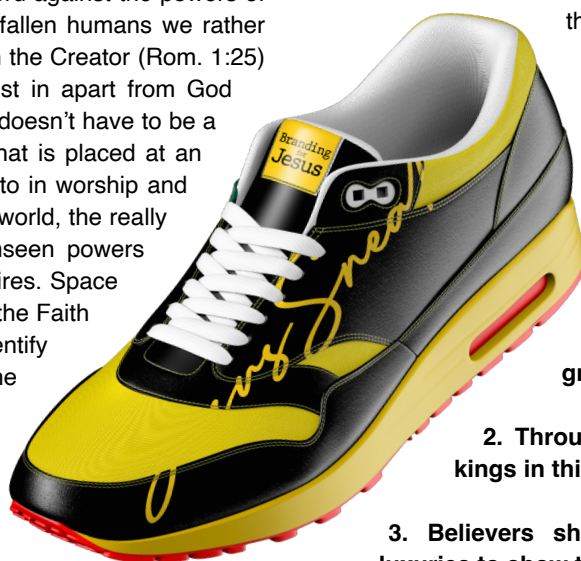
1. The kings of this world live in grandiose luxury (premise 1)

2. Through faith believers are to rule as kings in this life (premise 2)

3. Believers should enjoy and display kingly luxuries to show their royal position (conclusion)

The logic is simple, powerful, and convincing to many. This empowers certain financial behaviors that other Christians see as unethical and unbiblical. The logic justifies why a preacher can dress in a coat that costs four thousand dollars, don sneakers of similar price tag, fly in private jets which burn multiple thousands of dollars per hour, live in grand mansions costing millions, and spend money on cosmetic operations to look younger. And, not to forget, this logic motivates the people who give and so support those who live this way.

When we examine the structure of the argument, we can easily detect some very deep problems within it. I focus here only on the first premise and the conclusion while dealing with premise 2 in other places in this article. What is important to see is that from the very start, in the first premise, the Faith & Prosperity Gospel logic privileges the rich and powerful. God's children should therefore show power and authority by the same



means and signs that the worldly people in power do. But there is a significant flaw in this logic which is that it misses the nature of God's kingdom and that it operates radically differently from the kingdoms of this world. Jesus said to Pilate "my kingdom isn't of this world" (John 18:36). That is, God's reign is holy and qualitatively other than what we see displayed by the powerholders and the haves in this present world. This is why Jesus, after showing how people with worldly power act, turned to the disciples and said: "not so with you" (Mark 10:42–43). Jesus is the King and he showed us how we are to live in preparation to inherit God's kingdom. A disciple is someone who mirrors Jesus and the values of the kingdom of God, *not* the fat cats of this fallen age. Following our Master, our lives are to display a radical, sacrificial, self-giving love that critiques all forms of hoarding resources and lavish and wasteful consumption practices. Jesus exemplified the upside-down nature of God's kingdom. The warning from Jesus is that those who seek the places of honor and power in this life will have to leave them in the next (Luke 14:7–11). The promise Jesus gives is that the meek will inherit the world (Matt. 5:5). Jesus' message of the Great Reversal when the tables turn and the last will be first (Mark 10:31) challenges the narratives of this world which privilege those in the seats of wealth, power, and privilege. It challenges the worldly, top-down view of power which believes that influence must come from being on top.

The Faith & Prosperity Gospel logic gets its power from unrenewed thinking shaped by this world. By mimicking the powerholders of this world they fall for the temptation to conform to the image of worldly kings and not the King of kings. I'm well aware of the arguments made in the Faith & Prosperity Gospel that Jesus was wealthy and that they follow Jesus' example rather than the worldly kings. The movement claims that the gold received at his birth (Matt. 2:11), his one-seam coat (John 19:23), him supposedly owning a house in Capernaum, having a treasurer and a money box (John 12:26), his raiding on a "brand new" donkey (Mark 11:2), and finally placed in an unused grave (Luk. 23:53) all point to Jesus' royal and prosperous life. Paul's phrase "though he was rich"

(2 Cor. 8:9) proves the point, they say. It is true that Jesus wasn't poor as in totally destitute and in rags, but the idea that Jesus was wealthy and lived like a king is just nonsense—there are no biblical or historical grounds for that. Neither is there any text in the New Testament that showed that any of the apostles—Paul included—had a king-like lifestyle. The opposite is the truth (1 Cor. 4:9–13).

The Faith & Prosperity Gospel lets a this-worldly filter shape their interpretations of the Bible which generates a faulty logic that plays into the dominant consumerist practices of this age and privileges the lifestyle of the rich and powerful.

"The Faith & Prosperity Gospel makes God passive in regard to suffering while placing the impetus to act on the believer."

The Faith & Prosperity Gospel is sick because it accommodates worldliness.

9: Blaming the Victim

The Faith & Prosperity Gospel adds pain to suffering by blaming the victim for the suffering they undergo. Let me give some context. Inherent in the Faith & Prosperity Gospel is the conviction that all blessings are purchased for us by Jesus and lay ready to be claimed by faith—Ephesians 1:3 is a key verse cited to support this view. Since the power of faith always works, it is held, there is no reason for the believer who knows and uses faith to have to go through sickness, financial lack, depression, loneliness, childlessness, failure, or premature death.

This message brings a sense of hope to people who are struggling with these realities and a sense of comfort for those who fear being caught in any of them. But for those who don't get deliverance from their suffering in the Faith & Prosperity Gospel, they quickly find out the dark side of the deal, namely that the movement doesn't have the resources needed to handle human suffering; the belief system turns on you, so to speak. When somebody experiences prolonged suffering of any kind it is interpreted as the result of a lack of faith. That is the

only reason why somebody doesn't receive their answer to prayer. Had they used faith they would experience a breakthrough sooner or later, according to faith logic. Therefore, a person who is sick or poor has only themselves to blame. If they really wanted to come out of it and if they really had known what faith is and how to use it, they would have moved the mountain or at least showed signs of it being on the verge of moving. But as one pastor in the Faith & Prosperity Gospel movement told me when he had suffered a life crisis, "there was no merciful God on the other side of my prayer but only a God who was waiting on me to use my faith". The Faith & Prosperity Gospel makes God passive in regard to suffering while placing the impetus to act on the believer.

Those who suffer in the Faith & Prosperity Gospel often experience guilt and shame because they feel that their suffering is evidence of them having failed to believe for total victory. I know of sick people who stay home from church because they don't want anybody to know they are sick and others who take bad loans to hide their

Our walk with God involves more complex and paradoxical experiences than what fits these two categories. Taken from a biblical perspective, suffering at its most basic level requires a third category of mystery or paradox that cannot be fully explained on this side of God's new world. This is what Jesus had to teach his disciples who expected a simple correspondence between sin and suffering (Joh 9:1–3). Job never got a rational answer to why Satan attacked him but his heart was at peace after a personal encounter with God (Job 38–42). Even though sickness and pain never are God's best for us, there are times when sickness can be used by God for His greater purposes. Think of how Paul preached the gospel to the Galatians because of a sickness he had (Gal 4:13) or the thorn in his flesh that opened his eyes to God's greater power and purposes (2 Cor 12:7–8). It is very possible that the thorn speaks of persecution but even so it was still bodily suffering that Paul got the strength to endure rather than be delivered from.

The Faith & Prosperity Gospel misreads Jesus' mission

“Scholars say that suffering is the ultimate test of any worldview.”

financial challenges. The Faith & Prosperity Gospel logic dishonors the suffering, just as James warned not to do (Jam 2:15–16).

Scholars say that suffering is the ultimate test of any worldview. And the Faith & Prosperity Gospel worldview fails terribly at this point as it doesn't offer the resources needed to handle all aspects of human life. The worldview of the Faith & Prosperity Gospel places every experience in one of the two categories of *blessing* or *curse*. So when a believer faces suffering such as sickness they immediately ask themselves whether what they face is a blessing or a curse. The worldview forces them to choose from these two options only. The result is given; naturally one chose the option *curse* because very few would say that being sick falls in the category of *blessing*. But what is the problem with this? The error is that the Faith & Prosperity Gospel hasn't given all the options that the Bible offers. The Bible paints a more nuanced picture of human experience than what can be named simply a blessing or a curse.

by thinking that his suffering was only as a substitute and that all hardships he went through were in our place and that he is our example only in his victories. They miss the biblical teachings that we are called not just to walk in his triumphs—which we are—but also to live lives formed by the cross and to participate in his sufferings (Phil 3:10; Col 1:24; 2 Cor 1:5; 1 Pet 2:21). Not that anything needs to be added Jesus' work, only that it is through suffering and self-giving love that the kingdom is birthed into the world and we enter the kingdom (Acts 14:22). John wrote from the island of Patmos: “your brother and companion in *the suffering and kingdom* and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus” (Rev 1:9, emphasis added).

The cross is the paradoxical place of suffering where Spirit-empowered self-giving love overcomes Satan and all evil. This foolishness of the cross is the power of God (1 Cor 1:8). While not providing a rational answer to suffering the cross empowers us in the midst of it. The Faith & Prosperity Gospel need to replace their

logic with the logic of the cross. The Bible doesn't promise an easy solution to suffering; at times God moves the mountains while at other times He gives us the strength to climb it. In either case, God isn't a distant and passive observer but an active part by His Spirit in our troubles and hardships.

The Faith & Prosperity Gospel is sick because it blames the victim.

10: Privileging the Wrong Signs

The Faith & Prosperity Gospel brings trouble to the body of Christ by the set of signs they expect to show genuine faith. There isn't anything inherently wrong with looking for signs of faith. Jesus said that by the fruit we know a tree (Matt. 12:33). Paul spoke of how the Spirit creates signs (Gal. 5:22–23) and what signifies true apostles (2 Cor. 11:22–33). The problem arises out of a certain logic and the underlying story that empowers it. Here I want to point out the problems of the type and size of the signs that the Faith & Prosperity Gospel have selected as the key signs to show genuine faith and the process by which they say these signs appear.

At a start, the Faith & Prosperity Gospel believes that because God is big, what we do must match His greatness. To put it another way, the size and quality of the signs of faith have to correspond to the size and quality of God. We need to show signs of power because God is powerful. God is only pleased with signs that show Him to be big and great. This logic is very powerful and influential. But it is a deceptive and oppressive way of seeing God and the world. It becomes a hard taskmaster, like the slave drivers of Egypt who added to the burden of the Israelites (Ex. 5). Everything has to be bigger, better, louder, cooler, and more amazing all the time. So we need to perform mega-sized signs for God. Since most believers cannot deliver on such a scale, they end up as passive followers of a

pastor with a larger-than-life charismatic personality and gifts.

When we start operating in that mega-mindset what seems small, weak, and insignificant is easily overlooked and despised. A small budget cannot glorify God because God owns "the cattle on a thousand hills" (Ps. 50:10). A little church cannot glorify God because God is the God of all nations (Ps. 82:8). A weak body cannot glorify because God is all powerful and never grows weary (Isa. 40:31). An unimportant job position and title cannot glorify God because He is the King of kings (Rev. 19:16).

But this isn't so. The beauty of the radical nature of God's kingdom is that it doesn't operate by the logic of this world. God's greatness makes Him take pleasure and be glorified in things and by people that the world doesn't recognize. In His greatness and glory, God sees the orphans, the widows, and the powerless (Ps. 68:5; Isa. 40:11; Jam. 2:5). God is so great that He can use the small things—the things which aren't—to glorify

Himself (1 Cor. 1:26–31). The weakness and limitations of our body can be the tool God uses to show Himself powerful. God can use our financial lack to show His bounty (John 6:5–13; Phil. 4:11–12). God takes pleasure in using the small things, what people long ago have forgotten or counted as good for nothing so that no human could glorify themselves and boast (1 Cor. 1:29). This is a scandal for those who haven't met Jesus but it is good news to the poor, the blind, the oppressed, and the imprisoned. The message isn't that we have to change our circumstances to glorify God but that amid our limited circumstances God can show Himself great and powerful.

Jesus and his apostles give us narratives that challenge and subvert the expectancies this fallen age has on what signifies a true winner. In fact, Jesus and the apostles lived rather as anti-heroes in the eyes of the world and took pride in doing so. In what other worldview would crucifixion be seen as glorification and winning when it looked like a failure? How else could Paul boast about fleeing from a city when the ideal of the time was the macho warrior who would conquer

"Everything has to be bigger, better, louder, cooler, and more amazing all the time."



cities (2 Cor. 11:30–33)?

There isn't anything in Scripture to support the idea that health, wealth, happiness, victory, and success are signs of faith. Two things are important to know. First, the Bible often warns us that people who evidence the same signs the Faith & Prosperity Gospel celebrate can have compromised their faith. Remember how the devil tempted Jesus with much of the same things (Luke 4:1–13). Of course, God blesses His children but on this side of God's new world, we just get a taste the powers of the age to come (Heb. 6:5) while the fullness of the blessings God intends for us is still in the future. Second, many people of strong faith in God never experienced these blessings but were honored because they leaned hard on God despite the lack of fulfillment of their desires. God is pleased by faith in Him regardless of what the consequences are (Heb. 11:6) and the key sign of faith is His presence (Ex. 33:16) and not that we can display the type of signs that can be weighed and quantified on the scales of this world.

The Faith & Prosperity Gospel is sick because it privileges the wrong signs.

Now What?

In closing I want to point out that people are influenced by the Faith & Prosperity Gospel worldview to various degrees. There are some within the movement who haven't absorbed many of these sicknesses while there are believers outside the movement who have absorbed more or all of them. How receptive a believer is to the sicknesses varies as much as how one person's vulnerability to a virus differs from another. My point is that just because somebody is part of the movement doesn't mean they have been affected by all the problems. And just because somebody holds a critical distance to the movement doesn't mean they are totally unaffected. For all of us it takes some self-critical discernment and the help and illumination of the Spirit to know where we are.

The Faith & Prosperity Gospel struggles with some severe sicknesses. I have pointed out ten of the most significant ones. We mustn't do what God blames the false prophets for doing, which is to proclaim "peace, peace" and dress the wound of God's people as though it were not serious (Jer 6:13–14). These sicknesses are serious and unless treated properly and quickly they will

continue to cause much suffering in the body of Christ. It is time they are dealt with.

How can the healing begin? The first step is repentance; to name the sicknesses before God and actively turn away from them. After this, the process of healing can begin when the Holy Spirit guides out of the errors and deceptions into God's true story as found in Scripture.

My hope and prayer are that there will be a wave of repentance and new beginnings in the Faith & Prosperity Gospel. I've recently sat with leaders in the global movement and also heard from ministers in the movement that encourage me to believe that there is a new work of the Spirit to bring conviction, repentance, and change from within. When that happens on a greater level, the gifts they also have will then bless the wider church.



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