

Healthy and Wealthy? A Biblical-Theological Response
to the Prosperity Gospel

Robert L. Plummer, ed.

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Rich in Good Deeds: A Biblical Response to Poverty
by the Church and by Society

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Healthy and Wealthy and *Rich in Good Deeds* are the first two of four planned books edited by Robert Plummer in a series on Faith and Work with Fontes Press. Most of the contributors to these volumes are professors at Christian universities and seminaries in the United States. About half of them are at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (where Plummer teaches). The articles are written in a manner accessible to academics and laypeople. The topics and approaches vary considerably, so the relevance and usefulness of particular essays will depend on the interests of the readers.

The subtitle of *Healthy and Wealthy* is *A Biblical-Theological Response to the Prosperity Gospel*. Ben Cornish opens the volume with a relatively technical article on the historical connections among various “prosperity gospel” (PG) preachers. James Hamilton compares the PG-ish teachings in Proverbs to pessimism about the value of wealth in Ecclesiastes and the need to ground our lives in light of God’s kingdom and eternity. Michael Pohlman relies on Paul’s writing to talk about the underestimated role of suffering in the Christian life among PG preachers. Philip Chia discusses suffering and prosperity in light of Joseph’s story in Genesis. Michael Naylor details poverty and wealth in Revelation, particularly in the heavenly city and in contrast to Babylon. And Abeneazer Urga describes the PG in the context of Africa.

Of greatest interest to me is David Kotter’s essay, which is excellent in its biblical view on wealth and poverty, but only tangentially related to the prosperity gospel theme. Todd Scacewater’s description of blessing and happiness in Greek literature and the Bible was quite helpful for understanding some of the context in which the goodness of Jesus’ Gospel was first proclaimed. But I suspect that the most interesting and applicable essay for most people is from Matthew Westerholm. He wrestles with the use of PG songs in evangelical worship. Along the way, he analyzes the historical arc of PG worship, notes the varied attractions to PG-ish songs, and uses the lens of legalism versus liberty (in primary versus secondary issues) to draw his conclusions.

One problem with “the prosperity gospel”—especially for its opponents—is that it is a slippery concept, better understood along a spectrum than a binary. As such, it is important to read/listen to PG-ish messages with nuance and grace. It is tempting but facile to put people in one box or another, assuming too quickly that someone

is PG or missing the reality that two people are closer theologically than one might initially imagine.

This tendency to quickly put people into boxes reminds me of references to the papal encyclicals that touch on economics. Their arguments do not rely on standard terminology (popes are not economists); their analysis transcends the usual categories; and they critique all worldly “isms.” Therefore, it is easy for proponents of capitalism and socialism to find excerpts to use for their own ends. When a pope critiques some aspect of market activity and lauds some aspect of communal living, the socialist would claim the pope for his side. Or a fan of free markets would read the critiques of socialism and the acknowledgement of the market’s contributions to material prosperity—and see the pope as a capitalist. Of course, it is more complicated than this—and points back to the need to read the original source carefully, rather than relying on the interpretations of partisans.

Back to the context of the PG: I am no fan of Joel Osteen, an infamous purveyor of PG-ish ideas. But after reading one of his books, I saw that his writing was often slandered. In *Your Best Life Now*, Osteen talks about both suffering and the importance of serving at length—sprinkled throughout the book and then devoting over fifty pages to each topic. Some of his critics applaud John Piper’s *Desiring God* (a great book) with its subtitle on “Christian hedonism”—without any explanation for why Osteen’s views are terrible while Piper’s are glory. The fact is that all of us believe “Word of Faith” to some extent (e.g., words have power) and all of us believe in some form of the “Prosperity Gospel” (e.g., God wants to bless us on earth; God will provide eternal rewards in heaven). Especially from academics and Christian church leaders, we should expect more nuance and grace. In this volume, Westerholm expresses a strong grasp on Osteen, describing the evolution from the “classic” PG teaching of John Osteen to the “soft” PG teaching of Joel.

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The subtitle of the second volume *Rich in Good Deeds* is *A Biblical Response to Poverty by the Church and by Society*—and this set of essays largely fits the bill. Benjamin Hussung describes mercy, poverty, and personal benevolence to the poor in Matthew. In a bit of a tangent, Robert Plummer contributes a helpful list of key, broad economic principles with relevant Bible passages and comparisons to popular children’s books. Joseph Harrod provides a history of giving to the poor from prominent eighteenth- through nineteenth-century Christians, discussing the benefits of giving for the recipient and the donor. Michael Haykin profiles William Kiffen as the central figure for seventeenth-century British Baptists, describing his use of wealth and power to influence society. Megan DeVore details the prominence of female benefactors in early Christian history. And Matthew Hall contributes a thorough analysis of Carl Henry’s thoughts on socialism and capitalism over the course of his career.

Todd Scacewater describes poverty and wealth in James, with a focus on 5:1–6 and the various definitions of poverty in the Bible. Scacewater rightly observes that wealth *per se* is sometimes praised rather than universally condemned. Therefore, the Scriptures critique certain forms of the acquisition or use of wealth—in particular, oppression, profligacy, and idolatry. Timothy Paul Jones uses a secular book critical of Christianity as a springboard for early Christian care of the poor and parentless as an effective apologetic for Christianity. The philosophical references will bore some readers, but his conclusions are powerful: charity is attractional; good theology requires care for the vulnerable; and suffering is a “miniature martyrdom” that is central to the gospel and the goodness of God’s kingdom. But for most readers, I suspect the greatest value added may come from David Croteau’s thorough discussion of (Old Testament) tithes and offerings—and their relevance to contemporary Christianity. (He connects the common misunderstanding of the tithe to harming the poor, but is not as compelling when pursuing this tangent.)

David Kotter describes the pros and cons of a Universal Basic Income (UBI) from ethical and practical perspectives. Although the piece is titled “a moral case against” the UBI, his argument is balanced and certainly does not slam the door on UBI as a policy-improving move to replace all existing welfare programs. He cites Charles Murray’s 2006 book, *In Our Hands*—a slim but helpful resource on the topic. I would have liked more discussion of UBI reducing current disincentives for marriage (since welfare programs are largely conditional on not being married) and as an eventual replacement for Social Security (given its future insolvency, high and regressive taxes, and 0 percent average rate-of-return). But Kotter’s piece is a useful primer on an interesting policy topic that will probably gain traction as welfare and “entitlement programs” are seen as increasingly problematic.

These two volumes are a hodgepodge of good articles—useful to academics in the relevant fields and to laypeople interested in wealth, poverty, and the prosperity gospel. Thanks to Robert Plummer for organizing this effort.

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