PROSPERITY THEOLOGY ISN'T THE PROBLEM

Posted on October 17, 2018 by Eddie

We spend a lot of time talking about prosperity theology, but what we really need is a theology that will cope with suffering. It's not just that God doesn't always give us what we want, he might also allow us to suffer for no apparent reason. Can our faith and our theology cope?

Category: Observations

At the risk of offending some of my readers, I have to admit to some ambiguous feelings when it comes to prosperity theology. OK, I have no time for the charlatans who manipulate gullible Christians by promising them riches if they only give large sums of money to the pastor as a demonstration of their faith in God. Only one person gets rich in those circumstances and it isn't the members of the congregation. The extremes of the prosperity movement are insulting to God, debilitating to Christian discipleship and give the gospel a bad name. But...

I find Western critiques of the prosperity movement, especially the repeated comments that it is rife in Africa hard to take. There are a couple of things here:

Firstly, it is true that there are places in Africa where the prosperity gospel is all-pervading and very noxious. However, it is unfair and inaccurate to imply that this is the norm across the continent. Most of the African Christians I know (and I know more than most Brits) would have nothing to do with it. The African church is huge and diverse, it is unfair to cast aspersions on millions of believers by implying that they are all heretics!

Secondly, as I've written before, I'm more than a little uneasy about rich Westerners condemning people in poorer parts of the world for wanting to share some of the material prosperity that we, in this part of the world, take for granted. You see, we have our own, subtle form of the prosperity gospel here, too. It's not as crude as saying that if you pray, or give money then God will reward you with a BMW. Our version says that if you work hard, climb the career ladder and invest your money wisely, then you will be able to enjoy a prosperous life and a happy retirement. We assume that people will invest vast amounts of time and effort in their careers, even if this makes it difficult to be involved in church (or even family) life. I wish I saw people challenging the West's captivity to material values as often as I saw Westerners condemning the prosperity movement in Africa.

However, there is another aspect to this. We may not buy into the idea that God will provide us with a BMW as long as we pray the right prayers and give money in the right places, but we do tend to believe that God will give us a life which is pretty comfortable. We may not believe that he will make us rich, but we expect him to spare us from the worst of life's problems. If things do go wrong, we expect that the problems will be temporary and because God is teaching us a lesson. But how would our theology cope if we were, say, a 32-year-old woman who has suffered almost half a lifetime of excruciating, bed-bound pain?

> *Iâ€™ve been living with the realities of the non-intervening side of God for nearly fourteen years. It doesnâ€™t get easier but Iâ€™ve also realised that* ***my expectations were skewed by so much Christian teaching*** *â€“ that God always saves or rescues you and intervenes when you need it most and when you pray hard and passionately. None of this is actually promised in the Bible but, before becoming ill, I heard this preached so often.*
>
> *People seem to need to believe that God will intervene in desperate situations for them, even*

> *though when looking at the world, you can see thatâ€™s not the case in most instances.*
> ***Itâ€™s very rare that miracles happen.***

Jenny Rowberry, (@stroopwaffle to her friends) is a remarkable woman and her life has caused her to wrestle with difficult questions that many of us never have to face. Please head over to Tanya Marlow's blog and read the rest of Jenny's thoughts. YOU WILL NOT REGRET IT!

For my part, I think Jenny's experience highlights something very important. We spend a lot of time talking about prosperity theology, but what we really need is a theology that will cope with suffering. It's not just that God doesn't always give us what we want, he might also allow us to suffer for no apparent reason. Can our faith and our theology cope?