

The case for prosperity

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [November 30, 2010](#) issue



Faith Tabernacle, David Oyedepo's megachurch in Nigeria. [Attribution Some rights reserved](#) by Flickr user [josidaniel](#)

Prosperity can be a real problem. As new Christian churches have flourished in the non-Western world in recent decades, their conservative attitudes on theological and moral issues have caused some discomfort for liberal-minded Euro-Americans. In one specific area though, namely, the prosperity gospel, criticisms cross partisan boundaries. Even observers deeply sympathetic to the rising churches of Africa or Latin America are troubled by the astonishing success of U.S.-inspired megachurch preachers who present health, wealth and material success as the essential promises of the Christian faith.

If that is indeed the core message of emerging Christianity, should we not be concerned about the future of the faith? Comprehending the prosperity gospel might be the most pressing task for anyone trying to study the changing shape of global Christianity.

In West Africa especially, it is hard to avoid churches with a strong prosperity theme. They find their most ostentatious expression in the wildly successful ministries of preachers like Ghana's Nicholas Duncan-Williams or Nigeria's David Oyedepo. Across Africa, prosperity teachings are central to the ubiquitous culture of revivals and miracle crusades, so much so that they overwhelm more traditional charismatic or

Pentecostal doctrines. As distinguished scholars like Paul Gifford, J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu and David Maxwell have shown, the prosperity message has come to dominate the teaching of many new churches, which draw as much on American ideas of positive thinking and perky self-help manuals as on any familiar Christian theology.

In its most alarming manifestations—and the superstar ministries are by no means the worst offenders—prosperity teachings so exalt success as to pour scorn on the poor as stubborn infidels who have evidently refused to seek God's aid. In this version of the gospel, faith leads to tithing, and tithing ignites prosperity. A gratified Almighty will respond by opening the windows of heaven, pouring out blessings so rich that believers will not have room to store them all. You have to pay to play—and to win. And if the church's pastor follows a dazzlingly sumptuous lifestyle, that is just his way of exhibiting God's munificence to the world. These days, Elmer Gantry is a very familiar spiritual type around the world.

Anyone not alarmed by these trends is not paying attention.

The good news is that the prosperity message is nothing like the whole story. If we just take Africa, then Christians are hearing a great diversity of voices and opinions. While believers may well be hearing prosperity preachers, many will on other Sundays be attending more mainline churches with traditional theologies, groups very dubious indeed about prosperity teachings. Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Lutheran and other denominations all flourish, alongside purely African churches rooted in those traditions. Most ordinary Christians, like other believers, tend not to absorb the entire message that they are taught in a particular church, but draw selectively on what seems relevant to them.

For all the excesses of some preachers, moreover, most prosperity churches also contribute practically to improving the material lot of their flocks. Their actions belie their simplistic message of "Just tithe, have faith, and stand back!" Matthew Ashimolowo, for instance, heads a potent transnational ministry headquartered in London, with a strong health-and-wealth component. His church teaches that poverty and unemployment are manifestations of sin, against which Christians must struggle. In practice, this means that the faithful should help other members of the congregation by giving them jobs and that the church sternly teaches habits of thrift and sobriety.

Most prosperity churches not only condemn poverty but teach invaluable ways of avoiding it, like actually saving up in order to buy material goods. Debt is a demon to be defeated. Few communities in the world could fail to benefit from such a lesson, but it is vital for people moving suddenly from a rural setting into an overwhelming metropolis, with all the consumerist blandishments offered to the poor. In such a setting, being a member of a church offers life-saving access to social networks of mutual aid and support, which teach essential survival skills. Meanwhile, peer pressure helps believers avoid the snares of substance abuse.

If the faithful do not actually receive blessings too rich to count, at least their membership in a church vastly enriches their life chances. David Oyedepo has said that the prosperity promise makes sense only in the context of enriching the wider community far beyond the narrow confines of the church.

Whatever their undoubted problems, prosperity churches do not represent a negation of Christian faith. Controversies over their teachings also raise one perennial question for Christians of all persuasions: how seriously do we believe that prayer can actually affect conditions in the material world?