

2015

Posterity or Prosperity? Critiquing and Refiguring Prosperity Theologies in an Ecological Age

A.J. Swoboda

George Fox University, aswoboda@georgefox.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/gfes>



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Swoboda, A.J., "Posterity or Prosperity? Critiquing and Refiguring Prosperity Theologies in an Ecological Age" (2015). *Faculty Publications - Portland Seminary*. 94.
<https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/gfes/94>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Portland Seminary at Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications - Portland Seminary by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.

Posterity or Prosperity?

Critiquing and Refiguring Prosperity Theologies in an Ecological Age

A.J. Swoboda*

George Fox Evangelical Seminary, Portland, Oregon

swobodapdx@gmail.com

Abstract

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, prosperity theologies have simultaneously received a warm reception by some and a critical cold shoulder by others. With emotive responses provoked on both sides, what cannot be ignored is the influence prosperity thinking has, and will have, on the global church. Yet, little to no attention has been devoted to the intersection between prosperity theology and the issues surrounding the ecological crisis, such as climate change, environmental degradation, human greed, and wanton consumerism. Does such an intersection exist? This article explores this question by contrasting prosperity theology's *divine economy* and agrarianism's *great economy*. In sum, it suggests that the uncritical reception of prosperity teachings—though they speak pointedly to real, felt human needs—can ultimately create ecologically harmful, if not anti-ecological, modes of thinking and living within its adherents.

Keywords

ecothology – prosperity theology – environment – Pentecostalism – ecology

Introduction

In *The River Within*, Jeffrey Imbach connects the dots between greed and ecocide, the destruction of God's creation:

* I am indebted to the helpful editorial eye of friend and colleague Dr. Dan Brunner, who gave a hearty reading to this manuscript. It would not be in its present form if it were not for his assistance.

We've treated the earth like an oversized pantry. We consume its resources as unthinkingly as we would down a bag of chips during the Super Bowl. We've polluted the air and the rivers and raped the forests with a flood of greed. This is passion gone terribly wrong.¹

Alongside others, Imbach has drawn attention to the “passion,” or latent convictions, of the western industrial capitalistic mind, namely, its conviction that the earth is a kind of disposable planet existing primarily for the purposes of human pleasure, fulfillment, and convenience. Our world is ruled by greed, overconsumption, and boundless selfishness, and God's creation is paying the price for it—global temperatures continue to increase, the polar ice caps are melting faster than ever, and cancer rates continue to rise. Still, ours is a world inhabited by people that do not seem to mind. We enjoy our way of life even as it is levied upon the enslaved shoulders of God's “groaning” creation (Rom 8:22). The “groaning”—this ecocrisis—is the price of our selfishness.

If the ecocrisis results from human causality, how might the crisis be curbed? Increasingly, it appears doubtful that the global ecocrisis can or will be ameliorated through mere scientific or technological advancement, for neither science nor technology has the power to fix the real crisis behind the destruction of creation—the brokenness of the human heart. In short, there is no fix, update, or legislation that can magically end the human selfishness that drives ecological degradation. The anthropogenic ecocrisis creates a compelling opportunity for the Christian theologian, since the ecocrisis remains first and foremost a crisis of the human heart. Christian worship—the love and adoration of the living God among the people of God—must and will play a key role in curbing the ecological crisis by renewing the human heart and orienting it toward the Creator. Following William Schweiker of the University of Chicago, we must come to envision the ecocrisis above all else as a crisis of moral anthropology. Schweiker argues that human beings are incapable of finding meaning and value in commodity, in that which can be attained through money, labor, or human endeavor. “The love of God,” asserts Schweiker, “can limit the desire for acquisition precisely because what is desired exceeds objectification.”² In

1 Jeffrey Imbach, *The River Within: Loving God, Living Passionately* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1998), 195.

2 William Schweiker, “Reconsidering Greed,” in *Having: Property and Possession in Religious and Social Life*, ed. William Schweiker and Charles Mathewes (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004), 249–271, esp. 269.

returning our passions to God, we curb our proclivity toward greed and selfishness and we may avert the wanton destruction of God's creation.

Max Oelschlaeger writes, "There are no solutions for the systemic causes of ecocrisis, at least in democratic societies, apart from *religious narrative*."³ In the context of the Christian narrative, the "solution" to the healing of God's creation will inevitably wind its way through a path that returns us to the worship of the Creator. Most lamentable, of course, is when any religious tradition (Christianity, in this case) becomes hijacked, and the very greed and overconsumption that remains the engine for the ecocrisis is baptized as the divine plan of God. Ecofeminist theologian Sallie McFague quips that not one of the known global religious traditions holds to the maxim, "blessed are the greedy."⁴ Indeed, while various religious traditions may differ theologically or even practically, it would seem that every religious tradition shares the latent epistemological conviction that greed is not beneficial for humanity or for the rest of the world.

Or do they? Some historians, theologians, and pundits who have focused their attention on contemporary pentecostal and charismatic spirituality point out that there remains at least one example of a religious tradition that goes squarely against the grain of McFague's maxim. For it is in the phenomenon known popularly as the "prosperity gospel" that wealth, health, and financial blessing are interpreted as signs of God's hand of blessing; this "gospel" posits a theological, social, and practical vision that, in the pointed words of one scholar, has great power to "fuel greed."⁵

In the twenty-first century, prosperity theologies have understandably met with a warm reception by some and a critical cold shoulder by others. With emotions stirred up on both sides, the cacophony of responses is telling. The prosperity gospel has captured the hearts of millions of contemporary believ-

3 Max Oelschlaeger, *Caring for Creation: An Ecumenical Approach to the Environmental Crisis* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 5 (*italics mine*). I am aware that some readers may react strongly against such anthropocentric claims. Yet, I have and will continue to argue that if the ecological crisis is anthropogenic, then its reversal must follow suit. Aside from a miraculous healing from God, humanity has much work to do to ameliorate the ecocrisis and its effects. In that vein, it would be interesting to see the development of a fully-orbed pentecostal/charismatic theology of healing as it pertains to the ecocrisis.

4 Sallie McFague, *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), 81.

5 Nimi Wariboko, "Pentecostal Paradigms of National Economic Prosperity in Africa," in *Pentecostalism and Prosperity*, ed. Amos Yong and Katherine Attanasi (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 35–62, at 39.

ers throughout the world who claim it has drastically changed their lives, while others remain convinced that such thinking is rife with error. Yet, regardless of one's opinion, the influence of prosperity thinking on the global church cannot go ignored. From its seminal beginning in the theology of Essek W. Kenyon to its effect on the charismatic renewal, Latter Rain movement, and global Pentecostalism and its prominent role in contemporary pentecostal megachurches such as Yoido Full Gospel Church (South Korea) and Redeemed Church of God (Nigeria) or the ministries of Joel Osteen and Creflo Dollar, the social, theological, historical, and cultural footprint of prosperity teaching has been staggering. Yet, virtually no attention has been paid to the relationship of prosperity theologies to the contemporary ecocrisis, climate change, or environmental degradation.

This article asks: Is there a direct relationship between the prosperity gospel and the loss of ecologically mindful ways of thinking and living among those who espouse it? I propose that the uncritical reception and embodiment of prosperity teachings—though they speak pointedly to real, felt human needs—ultimately arouse an *unecological*, if not *anti-ecological*, epistemology and practice among its adherents. In this article I will first examine and contrast the economic and theological convictions of two different worldviews: prosperity theology and the agrarian movement, represented respectively by the *divine economy* and the *great economy*. Then I will offer a critique of prosperity theology, suggesting that the agrarian model better harmonizes with the biblical themes of “prosperity” and “shalom.”

Prosperity's “Divine Economy”

In broad strokes—comprising a surprisingly wide array of Christian communities, churches, and traditions—the prosperity gospel represents a diverse yet growing stream within Christianity that believes that God desires his faithful to live lives of health, wealth, and freedom from human sickness. Kate Bowler identifies four distinct elements of the prosperity gospel: 1) faith, 2) wealth, 3) health, and 4) victory. In short, through renewed faith, positive thinking, and action one can trust God to confer health, wealth, and victory in this temporal existence. Bowler asserts: “The prosperity gospel is a widely popular Christian message of spiritual, physical, and financial *mastery*.”⁶ It is this “mastery,” the

6 Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), 3–7.

overcoming of a life tainted by death, which distinctly marks the prosperity gospel. Simply put, “God wants you to thrive.”⁷

Despite the diversity of peoples and communities who promote these beliefs, the various streams of prosperity share a common origin in the theological trajectory of Essek W. Kenyon (1867–1948). Kenyon, in turn, rubbed shoulders with many early pentecostal and charismatic progenitors such as William Durham, Aimee Semple McPherson, and John G. Lake, and would prove to have had a deep and lasting influence upon them and others. But Kenyon’s most telling effect was on the life and teachings of the “father” of the American prosperity gospel, Kenneth Erwin Hagin (1917–2003).⁸

Hagin’s theology rests upon his own testimony of being healed by God of a deformed heart at birth.⁹ In his theology Hagin reacted strongly against believers who accepted any sickness in their lives instead of claiming the victory of Jesus. Hagin writes, “Don’t ever tell anyone sickness is the will of God for us. It isn’t! Healing and wealth are the will of God for mankind. If sickness were the will of God, heaven would be filled with sickness and disease.”¹⁰ Though ordained in the Southern Baptist Convention, Hagin soon shifted allegiances to the Pentecostals, who shared his affinity for belief in healing.¹¹ With his newfound friendship with Pentecostalism came a fresh wave of prosperity teach-

7 Quoted in Hyun Jung Jong and Scott Schieman, “‘Practical Divine Influence’: Socioeconomic Status and Belief in the Prosperity Gospel,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 51, no. 4 (2012): 738–756, at 738. For further definitions of prosperity teachings, see Debra J. Mumford, *Exploring Prosperity Preaching: Biblical Health, Wealth, and Wisdom* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2012), 1; and Paul Gifford, “Expecting Miracles: The Prosperity Gospel in Africa,” *Christian Century* 124, no. 14 (July 2007): 20–24.

8 On the roots of prosperity thinking through the trajectory of Kenyon and his influence on Hagin, see Bowler, *Blessed*, 14–21, 44–46. Certainly, some may contend that it was Kenyon who had the greatest influence on the emergence of Word of Faith movements. For instance, Dan McConnell suggests that Kenyon was the actual father of the Word of Faith movement, going so far as to suggest that Hagin plagiarized Kenyon’s doctrine. D.R. McConnell, *A Different Gospel: A Historical and Biblical Analysis of the Modern Faith Movement* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988), esp. 30.

9 Hagin claims to have experienced divine healing after reading Mark 5:34, a transformative experience that set the stage for his worldwide preaching ministry. Kenneth E. Hagin, *New Thresholds of Faith* (Tulsa, OK: Rhema Bible Church, 1985), 3–4.

10 Kenneth Hagin, *Redeemed from Poverty, Sickness, and Death* (Tulsa, OK: Faith Library Publications, 1983), 11–14.

11 Kenneth E. Hagin, “Healing and Miracles Through United Prayer,” *The Word of Faith Magazine*, 1998.

ings that swept the pentecostal and charismatic world just as America experienced the post-World War II economic boom. Although the prosperity gospel cannot be equated with any *one* movement, pentecostal and charismatic Christianity provided fertile soil for the prosperity gospel to take root, with its proclivities toward miracles, healings, and the divine activity of God among the impoverished. This stream of Christianity—combined with a dearth of trained, academic pentecostal theologians to critique it—made an ideal home for prosperity teachings to flourish.

The doctrinal core of Hagin's prosperity theology would be refined in the subsequent work of Oral Roberts, a disciple of Hagin.¹² Roberts believed that prosperity teaching rested upon an understanding of God's causal relationship to everyday life, what he called the "divine economy." This economy, Roberts asserts, is "based on the belief that God wants to provide God's people with material prosperity."¹³ It is important here to highlight two key epistemic commitments within prosperity thinking that relate to environmental concerns: human-centered prosperity and an "open" view of the economic world.

First, the divine economy undergirds a theological perspective toward health and wealth that prioritizes, above all, *human* prosperity. Within pentecostal and charismatic Christianity, prosperity teaching imported a form of "positive thought" theology—the epistemological belief suggesting that positive thinking leads to socioeconomic ascent—that had the ability to touch real, felt human needs, particularly among those of lower socioeconomic strata. In this worldview, God is involved in the everyday lives of impoverished people by providing a way out of physical and financial downfall.¹⁴ Such divine provision, it follows, becomes unlocked via changed thinking. Aware of it or not, pentecostal prosperity teachers (through Hagin and others) virtually adopted wholesale into their own theological paradigms the basic premises of Christian

12 I am aware that some might suggest that Oral Roberts' commitment to prosperity teachings is overstated. Despite this criticism, I see the connections between the two to be undeniable.

13 Original quote found in Debra J. Mumford, "Prosperity Gospel and African American Prophetic Preaching," *Review and Expositor* 109 (2012): 365–385, at 373. Furthermore, see Andrew Perriman and World Evangelical Alliance, *Faith, Health, and Prosperity: A Report on "Word of Faith" and "Positive Confession" Theologies* by ACUTE (the Evangelical Alliance Commission on Unity and Truth among Evangelicals) (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2003), 51.

14 Jong and Schieman, "Practical Divine Influence: Socioeconomic Status and Belief in the Prosperity Gospel," 739.

Science and New Thought epistemologies.¹⁵ In the words of Hagin, reality was shaped “in the minds and affirmed in the speech of believers.”¹⁶

It is important to note the anthropocentric interpretation of health and wealth in these theologies—the gospel offers prosperity for humans and humans alone. Human prosperity is interpreted as a sign of God’s hand of blessing—a conviction Ken Sarles aptly labels “anthropocentric prosperity.”¹⁷ The atonement, in such thinking, becomes the focal point by which Christ showers his blessings upon the human person *economically*. It is fascinating to consider the similarities between this prosperity vision and that of Adam Smith, who likewise interpreted accumulation of human wealth as the sole definer of an economy’s success. Smith tellingly referred to this drive for accumulation as “the invisible hand” guiding a capitalistic economy. Capitalism and prosperity theology view human, and only human, prosperity as the sole bottom line in God’s economy. Joe Barhart has made an analogous comparison between capitalism and prosperity theology:

The new Christian hedonism advances another democratic step forward to give everyone a justification for strongly desiring the material things of this world. No longer is money an evil that true believers must abhor or pretend to abhor, for capitalism is itself portrayed as belonging to the divine economy ... The God of the Gospel of Prosperity wants his children to think mink.¹⁸

15 McConnell, *A Different Gospel: A Historical and Biblical Analysis of the Modern Faith Movement*, 30. See also Joe McIntyre, *E.W. Kenyon and His Message of Faith: The True Story* (Orlando, FL: Creation House, 1997); Dale H. Simmons, *E.W. Kenyon and the Postbellum Pursuit of Peace, Power, and Plenty*, Studies in Evangelicalism 13 (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1997); Richard Riss, “Essek William Kenyon,” in *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, ed. Stanley Burgess and Eduard M. van der Maas (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988), 517.

16 Milmon F. Harrison, *Righteous Riches: The Word of Faith Movement in Contemporary African American Religion* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), 6.

17 Ken L. Sarles, “A Theological Evaluation of the Prosperity Gospel,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 143, no. 572 (1986): 329–352, at 329.

18 Joe E. Barnhart, “Prosperity Theology: A New Folk Theology,” in *Religious Television: Controversies and Conclusions*, ed. Robert Abelman and Stewart Hoover (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing, 1990), 159–164, at 163. Appearing to address directly prosperity teachings, Howard Snyder similarly connects capitalism to many Christians’ ways of thinking about “blessing” and “God’s hand.” It is lamentable, he argues, that “some even promote getting rich as a sign of God’s favor.” Howard A. Snyder and Joel Scandrette, *Salvation Means*

As a result of this anthropocentric interpretation, prosperity gossellers devote little if any attention to the ecological dimensions of human prosperity, whether or not said prosperity is sustainable on a finite planet.

Second, the divine economy offers an economic vision that relies on an open system of endless goods and resources provided by the earth. The economic principle of the divine economy is realized primarily through faith—"sowing and reaping"—or "seed-faith." By giving one can receive the "abundant life." Roberts, again, articulates what he sees as the three main ideas resident within this abundant life.¹⁹ First, in the act of turning one's life over to God, God becomes the source of one's needs. Second, everything sacrificed by a Christ-follower (such as money, time, energy, sacrifice) to God is a "seed" through which a giver might "reap" from God—a harvest of return.²⁰ Third, and finally, the sower can live in expectancy of a miracle following the act of sowing.

Interestingly, prosperity teachings blend socioeconomic theory with works-based theology. What is unique, however, is that prosperity teachings offer the compellingly unique assertion that religious belief becomes the means by which one might escape the gravities of poverty and physical limitations. Ultimately, God is close and involved in addressing the many social ills of everyday life—poverty, sickness, and unemployment. In fact, some have argued that once a person has converted to Christianity, these social ills of life should dissipate.²¹ Although not explicitly stated, the strangest ambiguity of prosperity teaching is the corollary that ill health and poverty are punishments from God for a lack of faith.²²

God desires that *all* would, and could, experience this "abundant life." One should expect, therefore, that faithful giving would reap rewards that move one up the socioeconomic ladder. This establishes a unique link between "faith" and economic privilege. In the context of American capitalism, a health and wealth gospel offers a perfect theological paradigm through which to conceptualize the blessed life of a culture of capitalism, free-market economy, and individ-

Creation Healed: The Ecology of Sin and Grace, Overcoming the Divorce Between Earth and Heaven (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), 49.

19 Oral Roberts, *The Miracle of Seed-Faith* (Tulsa, OK, 1970), 37.

20 Roberts points to Luke 6:38 as evidence of this: "Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give unto your bosom. For with the same measure that you give it will be measured to you again." Ibid.

21 John Blake, "Pastors Choose Sides over Direction of Black Church," *Atlanta Constitution*, February 15, 2005.

22 Cristina G. Mora, "Marketing the 'Health and Wealth Gospel' across National Borders: Evidence from Brazil and the United States," *Poetics* 36, no. 5–6 (2008): 404–420.

ual consumerism. As Jong and Schieman have suggested, prosperity teachings underscore “vivid strains of American-style materialism and individualism.”²³ Utilizing these new ways of thinking offered, in Bowler’s words, “a winning advantage within the framework of capitalism and industrialism.”²⁴ Prosperity theology is American capitalistic triumphalism wed to a theology of God’s radical involvement and interventionism. However, this presupposes the economic belief in an endless stream of goods and resources available for human acquisition.

Agrarianism’s “Great Economy”

The industrialism of the twentieth century inaugurated an unparalleled steady stream of technological advances that eventually gave way to an era of unprecedented human consumption, goods acquisition, and resource commodification; consumption, it must be added, we have only seen expand. Alongside this growth a globalized economy has been ushered in, rooted in transnational trade, instantaneous communication, and international air travel. Global, corporate economies are rapidly replacing local economies. Wall Street—no longer the farmer, the landowner, or the worker—rules this new economy. Industrialism is the proud parent of a novel capitalistic economy wherein monies, profits, and wealth creation rule. To illustrate, agribusiness—large, corporate, profit-minding organizations—now oversees what was once cared for by the small, pre-industrial local farms. Profits on the stock exchange have replaced faithful husbandry to the land. Health of local places takes a back seat to how much money is being made.

Ecotheologian, historian, and social critic Larry Rasmussen has dubbed it the “big economy.”²⁵ Rasmussen argues that this big economy bears ample blame for the modern ecocrisis. Without question, industrialization has fattened the bottom line for many in the human community (particularly in the West). Sadly, however, human profitability is where the profit margins end;

23 Jong and Schieman, “‘Practical Divine Influence’: Socioeconomic Status and Belief in the Prosperity Gospel,” 740. Similar arguments are made in Steve Brower, Paul Gifford, and Susan D. Rose, *Exporting the American Gospel: Global Christian Fundamentalism* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1992).

24 Bowler, *Blessed*, 28.

25 Larry Rasmussen, “The Big Economy and the Great Economy,” in *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 111–126.

the other-than-human creation continues to pay a great price for the industrial revolution. While this economy benefits the flourishing of the global human community—advances in medical technology, new business, the ability to travel great distances, and basic things such as refrigeration and electric shaving—its cost is now public knowledge. The big economy has benefitted the *human* community, especially in the West. The rest of creation “groans,” as it were, under the weight of human selfishness, greed, and consumption (Rom 8:22). It is without serious question that industrialism and the resultant global economy are the primary impetuses behind today’s ecocrisis.²⁶

In contrast to this big economy is what Rasmussen has called the “Great Economy,” a theme articulated throughout the works of agrarian writer, poet, and farmer Wendell Berry.²⁷ Norman Wirzba critiques industrialism and asserts that agrarianism in particular, and the “Great Economy” by extension, attempt to succeed in one thing: embody a “sustained attempt to live faithfully and responsibly in a world of limits and possibilities.”²⁸ Rasmussen describes this agrarian theme:

Economic production and consumption, as well as human reproduction, are unsustainable when they no longer fall within the borders of nature’s regeneration. So the Bottom Line below the Bottom Line is that if we don’t recognize that the laws of economics and the laws of ecology are finally the same laws, we are in deep doo-doo. Eco/nomics is the only way possible.²⁹

26 I will resist belaboring this point here, as the evidence stands strong enough on its own. For a substantive overview of the evidence of the ecological crisis and the connection between industrialism and the ecocrisis, see Dan Brunner, Jen Butler, and A.J. Swoboda, *Introducing Evangelical Ecotheology: Foundations in Scripture, Theology, History, and Praxis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), chap. 3. See also A.J. Swoboda, *Tongues and Trees: Toward a Pentecostal Ecological Theology*, Journal of Pentecostal Theology Supplement Series 40 (Blandford Forum, UK: Deo, 2013), chap. 1. Finally, see my recent edited volume bringing together various voices on the relationship between Pentecostalism and ecological dimensions: *Blood Cries Out: Pentecostals, Ecology, and the Groans of Creation* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014).

27 The idea is first discussed in the chapter “Two Economies” by Wendell Berry, *Home Economics* (San Francisco, CA: North Point Press, 1987), 54–75.

28 See the “Introduction: Why Agrarianism Matters—Even to Urbanites,” in Norman Wirzba, *The Essential Agrarian Reader: The Future of Culture, Community, and the Land* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 4.

29 Rasmussen, “The Big Economy and the Great Economy,” 112.

Berry sharply distinguishes between agrarian/great economy thinking and that of the big economy: "I believe that this contest between industrialism and agrarianism now defines the most fundamental human difference, for it divides not just two nearly opposite concepts of agriculture and land use, but also two nearly opposite ways of understanding ourselves, our fellow creatures, and our world."³⁰ There are two ways before us, Berry and Rasmussen suggest: big economy *or* great economy. The two, simply put, *are* mutually exclusive.

John Medaille, an interpreter of Berry's work, draws out what he sees as five general principles undergirding the idea of the great economy:

1. The great economy includes everything, even the fall of a sparrow. There is nothing outside this economy. "We are in it whether we know it or not or whether we wish to be or not."
2. The great economy connects everything to everything. Things within the Great Economy are not so much parts as a participation in the whole, with each thing reflecting the whole.
3. The great economy comprehends humans, but humans cannot give a complete or even adequate description of this Great Economy, nor perceive the whole order by which its elements are connected.
4. Nevertheless, we cannot violate for long the patterns of this Kingdom without incurring severe penalties.
5. There is no end to the great economy; we cannot by "scientific" or other means get outside of it.³¹

Three ideas reside within the worldview of the great economy that have important environmental dimensions. First, the great economy is reconciliatory. The reconciliation of all things—both in this life and the life to come—is at its heart. One might draw out a theology of reconciliation as it pertains to the life to come, as scientist and theologian Christopher Southgate has. Southgate has argued for a vision of heaven that encapsulates the creaturely abode of those creatures that experienced undue pain, suffering, and loss in this life. For instance, certain pelicans will hatch two chicks, the younger of which serves as a kind of backup in case the elder chick does not survive. Eventually, the younger will be pushed out of the nest and eventually starves to death if

30 Wendell Berry, "Watershed and Commonwealth," in *Citizenship Papers* (Washington, DC: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2003), 144.

31 <http://www.frontporchrepublic.com/2010/08/wendell-berry-and-the-great-economy/> (Accessed 9/1/14).

the elder chick survives. Christ's redemption, Southgate asserts, must incorporate such creational reconciliation, enveloping the "victims of evolution" like the younger pelican. "There must be some kind of pelican heaven," Southgate writes, "in which the second chick gets to have the experience of being a pelican and flourishing as a pelican."³² While reconciliation certainly has eschatological dimensions, the great economy emphasizes a present-day reconciliation. Humanity, as such, is invited into a harmonious and reconciliatory life with creation.

Second, the great economy judges an economic system not merely on whether it sustains human life in the current moment, but on whether it provides *transgenerational* prosperity to those on planet earth for generations to come. The agrarian great economy argues that blessing and prosperity must be transgenerational, extending life and health to the planet for future generations. If it is unsustainable, it is not a great economy.³³

Third, the great economy invites prosperity so long as it is prosperous toward all of creation and not merely toward its human inhabitants. Berry, for instance, refuses to interpret things solely in light of how it might affect the human community. In Berry's model of the great economy something is not decreed prosperous and good unless it is a blessing for the entire created world, including the other-than-human creation. Prosperity teaching, in contradistinction, envisions prosperity almost exclusively in terms of anthropocentric prosperity.

Refiguring Prosperity

In this final section, I offer three critiques of the divine economy from the perspective of the great economy. To begin, the agrarian great economy critiques the prosperity gospel's economic principle. Unlike the divine economy, which envisions an endless world of goods and resources from which God can draw, the great economy asserts that planet earth is a closed, limited, finite system. Human beings can neither create nor destroy matter—we have what we have been given. In such a closed system, limited resources are available for human consumption. Modern ecological and economic thinkers have long

32 <http://collegevilleinstitute.org/the-institute-and-beyond/interviews/debunking-bambi-theology-christian-conviction-in-light-of-extinction-suffering-and-cruelty-in-the-animal-world/>.

33 Again, on the idea of transgenerational ecology and how it relates to the agrarian vision, see Brunner, Butler, and Swoboda, *Introducing Evangelical Ecotheology*, 33–34.

been reminding us that capitalist economic models presuppose a limitless world in which no such boundaries exist. A theological critique of prosperity teaching would remind us of the same limitations. One could argue that this limitedness is the central error of the industrial world; we have erroneously based an economic model of endless resources upon a finite, limited ecological system.³⁴ The prosperity gospel, sadly, is guilty of the same error.

The limitedness of creation is a strong theme in the Old Testament. For example, while Israel was wandering through the desert, God commanded the people to gather, on a daily basis, “as much as they needed” (Ex. 16:16). Manna was to be shared, not hoarded. Despite the fact that God is a limitless God who can provide, here God proscribed a limited use of resources. God provided bread, but one could rob that endowment from others by selfishness and disobedience. The manna, the provision of God, was of limited scope. A limitless God invites limited people into a limited economy. A manna economy under which Israel existed in the wilderness was one built upon restraint, sharing, and trust. As a parallel, God instructs the people in Deuteronomy 15 to establish a plan for Jubilee by which inequality would be deconstructed so that all—rich and poor, human and animal—would have provisional sustenance, land would be returned to its original owner, and debts would be cancelled. Jubilee was based on an economic system of finite limitedness—there is only a certain amount of wealth and land to go around. Of course, historians are quick to remind us that Jubilee probably never actually happened. However, as Ched Myers has pointed out: “That’s no excuse to ignore God’s commands. That’s like saying we don’t need to worry about the Sermon on the Mount since Christians have never fully practiced it.”³⁵

The prosperity gospel mistakenly presupposes a world of limitless resources that can provide limitless wealth to limitless people. This thinking stands squarely against the agrarian imagination and against a primary strand of the biblical narrative. If everyone received prosperity through faith as promised, our limited ecological world would simply be unable to keep up. A limited world cannot provide a limitless economy. The prosperity gospel teaches something that the earth literally cannot provide. The earth is not, as industrialism assumes, an open system of endless resources, endlessly harvested. Rather, creation has its limits and humans are created to live within the laws of creation that God has sovereignly established. And a Christian must humbly learn to live

34 For a very helpful introduction to this idea, see Donella H. Meadows et al., *The Limits to Growth* (London: Earth Island, 1972).

35 Quoted in Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 125.

within those creational limits. Jesus' invitation to his disciples was one in which the dream was not in wealth but in godliness and trust. Jesus' model of prayer implies a kind of economic principle that trusts in a God who provides "daily bread" (Matt. 6:11). Provision is not to be hoarded; it is to be generously shared. It is in this way of Jesus—in a pattern of *cruciform* living—that we embody the "practice of restraint, diminishment, the death of unlimited desire, and control of ecological selfishness."³⁶

Second, while an agrarian model would challenge prosperity teaching for its economic assertions, it would likewise critique "anthropocentric prosperity" as the sole bottom line of a given economy. Agrarianism's great economy goes to great pains to take into account the health, well-being, and sustainability of the whole ecosystem. This relates quite nicely to the Hebrew notion of *shalom*, which includes the well-being of every piece of the fabric of creation. Cornelius Plantinga defines *shalom*: "The webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in equity, fulfillment, and delight; universal flourishing, wholeness, and a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts are fruitfully employed, all underneath the arch of God's love."³⁷ In an economy of *shalom*, humanity is not the sole benefactor; rather, the birds, the animals, the land, the air, and future generations are all benefactors as well. If a system does not provide this kind of *shalom*, then it is a failed system. Steve de Gruchy has stated, "The Great Economy is intrinsically an economy of *shalom*."³⁸ The opposite of anthropocentric prosperity is the biblical notion of *shalom*.

In contrast to *shalom* is the notion within the prosperity gospel that humans are at the center of God's plan of blessing. If prosperity theology is to be ecologically mindful, it must be expanded to include the prosperity of creation. God desires human flourishing, but not at the mindless expense of all of creation. True prosperity in the narrative of Scripture is one that includes every nook and cranny of creation. It is a return to God's words to Solomon: "You did not ask for long life or wealth for yourself ... but for discernment in administering justice" (1 Kings 3:11). Solomon's prayer reveals the king's heart. His ultimate desire was not for health ("long life") or wealth, but for God's justice and wisdom. Wealth

36 Wendell Berry, *Home Economics* (San Francisco, CA: North Point Press, 1987). On cruciform living as it pertains to the ecological crisis, see Joseph Sittler, "The Cruciform Character of Human Existence," *Chicago Lutheran Seminary Record* 54, no. 3–4 (October 1949): 18–21.

37 Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2010), 10.

38 See Steve de Gruchy, "An Olive Agenda: First Thoughts on a Metaphorical Theology of Development," 9. Available at http://acen.anglicancommunion.org/media/61043/DeGruchy_An_Olive_Agenda.pdf (Accessed 8/17/15).

without justice is greed. And when we return to that ultimate concern, we can be assured of justice in our world.

A theology of shalom takes into account the well-being of the future of creation and not just our present time. “Probably the most challenging task facing humanity today,” writes Robert Costanza, “is the creation of a shared vision of a sustainable and desirable society, one that can provide permanent prosperity within the biophysical constraints of the real world in a way that is fair and equitable to all of humanity, to other species, and to future generations.”³⁹ This kind of “permanent prosperity”—the prosperity of creation in the future, the prosperity of our children, and the prosperity of all of creation—is not a dimension of concern for the prosperity gossellers. Prosperity minus posterity must never be seen as true, or biblical, prosperity.

Lastly, the prosperity gospel largely ignores the biblical invitation to simplicity. Unlike the New Testament, it exalts upward mobility as the hope of believers. To be sure, the prosperity gospel succeeds in locating a dimension of Christ’s salvation in *this* world. It has offered a kind of “materiality of salvation,” in the words of Miroslav Volf.⁴⁰ Prosperity theology places God’s salvific work in a here-and-now, this-worldly location, refusing to adhere to the notion that salvation is merely about “going to heaven.” But there is a lurking danger in couching salvation in socioeconomic terms. “Adherents,” Mumford observes, “learn to have faith in God so God will bless them with wealth ... including luxury cars, designer clothes, large homes, and unlimited amounts of cash.”⁴¹ This theology flagrantly counters the biblical call to simplicity and material humility. Salvation becomes socioeconomic extravagance, a move that undermines Christ’s call to physical simplicity.

Jesus refused to assert that wealth *or* poverty is a sign of God’s blessing upon an individual—the sun rose and the rains fell on both the wicked and the righteous (Matt 5:45). Paul wrote boldly of “learning the secret of contentment ... whether living in plenty or in want” (Phil. 4:10–13). Christianity worships a homeless Jewish peasant who embodied a simple way. This kind of kingdom simplicity was key to his call to discipleship.⁴² Prosperity teachings, in con-

39 Robert Costanza et al., *An Introduction to Ecological Economics* (Boca Raton, FL: St. Lucie, 1997), 179.

40 Miroslav Volf, “Materiality of Salvation: An Investigation in the Soteriologies of Liberation and Pentecostal Theologies,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 26, no. 3 (Summer 1989): 447–467.

41 Mumford, “Prosperity Gospel and African American Prophetic Preaching,” 378.

42 For further dialogue on a robust theology of simplicity, see Brunner, Butler, and Swoboda, *Introducing Evangelical Ecotheology*, 189–192.

trast, have the propensity to baptize a form of individualistic consumerism that views human financial and material prosperity as a salvific end game, a move that simultaneously undercuts any prophetic voice. Again, Mumford writes, “Since prosperity preaching is individualistic and denies the existence of oppressive systems, it lacks the much-needed prophetic voice that cries for change.”⁴³

Conclusion

Internalized, often latent beliefs cannot *not* exert a great effect on how one lives. Someone who believes the earth will burn up at the great apocalypse may be more unlikely to do much by way of caring for its sustainability. Those who assume that life’s purpose is found in the pursuit and attainment of wealth may be tempted to lay their lives down in that pursuit. But, still, those who believe that life is best lived in quiet simplicity will seek ways to live in that light. Everyone is a victim, or benefactor, of his or her own theology. Each must live with the ramifications of his or her espoused beliefs. And the earth has had to deal with similar ramifications. Theological belief will inevitably have an inescapable consequence upon how one lives and on the world around them. In that sense, every theological conviction has a kind of ripple effect that is manifest throughout the communities, churches, and geographical contexts that are connected to it. How we act as Christians is interconnected with what we believe as Christians. If one wants to understand how one should act, attention must be given to how one believes. All beliefs, even ecological ones, have consequences. Prosperity teaching has consequences.

Pentecostal and charismatic theologies must willingly and meaningfully begin to engage the ecocrisis. While doing so will push the boundaries of what is comfortable, the maxim remains true: fresh questions always bring fresh

43 Mumford, “Prosperity Gospel and African American Prophetic Preaching,” 379–381. I would argue that this leads to the muting of voices that seek to amend a system that is oppressive to the poor while all the while offering false hopes of success in that system. This can lead to an ignorance of an oppressive system and practical escapism—a dangerous combination. “The dualistic nature of the doctrine of the divine economy,” continues Mumford, “encourages followers to ignore the realities of their lives.” *Ibid.*, 379. God, as such, intervenes through a system that looks a lot like capitalism. Prosperity theology both draws the poor and robs them at the same time, appearing to empower but simultaneously undermine them.

responses.⁴⁴ Critically thinking about the role pentecostal and charismatic communities play in healing the world's great needs will, in turn, bring about a renewal of fresh, Spirit-empowered approaches to justice-oriented living. Amos Yong, reflecting on his earliest pentecostal experiences, describes his awakening knowledge that the Spirit was at work "out there" and not simply within his own personal life.⁴⁵ Such realizations of God's Spirit in the world can no doubt be disturbing, scary, and a bit disorienting. A truly pentecostal theology acknowledges that God's Spirit is not the secured possession of the pentecostal church. The Spirit is *out there*, indeed. And when we revisit the Holy Spirit in *all* of creation, not merely the human community, we will find God's mission to bring prosperity, health, and vitality to all that God has made.

By way of conclusion, I wish to suggest three particular ways in which prosperity thinkers and practitioners might reframe their theological tradition in light of our ecological age. First, prosperity teachings have rightly espoused a high view of God's ability and willingness to heal the sick, broken, and downtrodden. Without question, this is a strength of prosperity thought. God is a healing God. Still, I would suggest an expanded prosperity vision of healing that incorporates the healing of human beings *as well as* God's entire creation realm. As humans experience healing, they can, in turn, be priests of healing to God's creation, bearing the ministry of reconciliation that Christ bore to us (2 Cor 5:16–21). Second, I strongly challenge any assertion that socioeconomic status is something to be healed. There is no context for such a vision of healing in the Bible. Sickness, illness, and even death can be healed—not a simple life of humble means. In the agrarian way, the healing of the world will come about only through a return to such Christlike simple, humble lifestyles. It was Jesus, our Savior, who came as a homeless Jewish carpenter only to be rejected by the world. Jesus was never healed of his lowly status. In an ecological age, the church of Christ must willingly learn to re-embody the simple way of Jesus. To that end, I would very much be pleased to see what a prosperity theology might look like if it were to reconsider its view of such simplicity.

Third, and finally, I would suggest a more communal understanding of blessing that intentionally remembers God's love and care for the whole world. Again, shalom is not intended for humans alone. Shalom is meant for the

44 I've always held close to the words of Mary Collins: "One of the best gifts for the critical mind and for a living tradition is the gift of a new question." Mary Collins, "Naming God in Public Prayer," *Worship* 59 (1985) 291–304, at 291.

45 Amos Yong, *Who Is the Holy Spirit? A Walk with the Apostles* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2011), ix–xi.

whole cosmos. Sadly, wanton individualism like that we've come to see particularly in western industrial nations has fabricated an ideal environment for the destruction of God's creation in which the welfare of humanity has been placed high above the welfare of God's entire world. I eagerly anticipate observing an expression of prosperity thought that does not baptize individualism as God's intended desire for the world come to the fore.