Contextualizing the Prosperity Gospel in Germany: A Theological Assessment

FRANK LIESEN

Vol 2:1 2022

Frank Liesen (PhD, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary) currently serves as director of the church planting organization Antiochia Teams in Kandern, Germany.

Pentecostal churches are the quickest growing segment of Christianity in the world today (Miller 2013, 9-10). A prevalent phenomenon among these churches is the preaching of the prosperity gospel, claiming that health and wealth are readily available for believers today (Yong 2012, 15-16). Three church plants in Germany translated the prosperity gospel differently while adhering to an evangelical view of the gospel, conversion, and transformation in discipleship. Hope Center in Berlin (HCB), an independent Pentecostal church led by a second-generation Ghanian migrant, openly embraced prosperity teaching. ConnectKirche Erfurt (CKE), which belongs to Germany's largest Pentecostal denomination, viewed the automatic claim to health and wealth critically. Nonetheless, the church affirmed the gospel effect of upward social mobility and the possibility of healing. The pastor of the non-charismatic Reformed church Gospel Church Munich (GCM), which belongs to the Redeemer City to City church planting network, vehemently rejected prosperity teaching. He directed his affluent constituency to find spiritual riches in healthy relationships. The missionary activities of these churches are salient expressions of correlating evangelical movements exerting a growing influence on German evangelicalism: Migrant missions, new Pentecostal churches, and American mission efforts along with globally active church planting organizations. Their faith expressions represent part of the new mosaic of lived Christianity in post-Christian Europe and pose the challenge of theological discernment to leaders across denominations (Liesen 2021, 40-78, 284-85).

The question arises whether the diverse contextualization of prosperity teaching remained within Christian orthodoxy or mixed cultural or religious sources foreign to the biblical message, leading to forms of syncretism. First, an introduction to the prosperity gospel offers insights into the central claims and prominent figures in prosperity teaching. The subsequent section describes the contextualization of health and wealth by the three church plants and its effect on the transformation of converts. The basis for these reports is a multi-case study about transformative conversion entailing interviews with converts and pastors in each church (Liesen 2021, 79-275).

Finally, a theological evaluation of prosperity teaching offers the framework for assessing the translation of the prosperity gospel.

The Prosperity Gospel

Kathleen Hladky (1994, 83) defines the prosperity gospel by the two teachings of God's assurance of well-being and the believer's claim to prosperity by faith: "First, God grants all his faithful followers physical health and financial prosperity; second, believers claim their divine right to wealth and health through positive confession, financial offerings, and the persistent faith that God must fulfill his promises." The believer's assertion of prosperity by faith finds its historical roots in the New Thought movement. Most of the New Thought proponents, such as Norman Vincent Peale (1898-1993), identified themselves as Christians and believed that the "proper use of the mind could control reality, including all the experiences and circumstances of an individual life" (Hladky 1994, 85, 84-88). Peale (2019, 10-23, 174-75) believed that positive affirmations through Bible memorization and prayer need to replace low self-esteem, the problem of modern man. Inevitably, a positive mental state will lead to physical well-being and success (Zimmerling 2009, 178-179).

Kenneth Hagin (1917-2003) popularized the modern-day prosperity gospel as the founder of the so-called Word-of-Faith or Faith Movement (Bowman 2001, 92-94; Bowler 2013, 44-46). Hagin refers to Gal 3:13-14 and teaches that the blessing of Abraham in Christ's redemptive death encompasses physical health and material wealth (Hagin, n.d.d.; Zimmerling 2009, 174-75). Satan causes all sickness, and there is no inherent value in suffering for testing the Christian faith or maturing the believer. Instead, 1 Pet 2:24 (HCSB) assures health to all believers who claim their right to healing since they "have been healed by His wounds." Lack of healing corresponds to a lack of faith (Hagin, n.d.a.; Otto 2017, 371-76). David Yonggi Cho added the idea of visualization to the concept of positive thinking. Believers need to enter a fourth spiritual dimension, where miracles and control over circumstances become attainable. According to Cho (1979, 38-41, 44, 65-66), a concrete vision or dream is the prerequisite for answered prayer. Well-known proponents of the Faith Movement include Kenneth Copeland, Benny Hinn, Joyce Meyer, and Paula White (Hladky 2012, 82; Peters and Dias 2019).

In the United States, the message of prosperity intertwined closely with American civil religion and instilled the confidence of upward mobility through hard work and divine favor. The prosperity gospel crossed over to mainline Protestant churches and

became an inspirational force for the American Dream (Bowler 2013, 6-7, 32, 226-29; New World Encyclopedia, n.d.). Reinhard Bonke (1940-2019) played a critical role in introducing health and wealth teaching in Africa during the Fire Convention in 1986. A concept of salvation that integrates supernatural intervention and applies it to physical well-being resonated with indigenous worldviews (Kalu 2008, 259-63). In present-day Germany, mostly churches with an immigrant background embrace the hope of the prosperity gospel. However, ministries such as Bill Johnson's Bethel Church, which is part of the Faith Movement, spread the idea that heaven's physical blessings are readily available on earth across evangelical denominational lines (Otto 2017, 370-71; Ehmann 2018, 76; Johnson 2003, 32-33).

Translating Prosperity

Each of the three church plants translated the claims of the prosperity gospel differently. This section begins with a description of how the background and theological orientation of leaders shaped translation. Then, a report about each church's contextualization of prosperity teaching within their social context precedes the converts' testimonies concerning their transformational changes.

Influences on Translation

The background and theological orientation of Christian leaders and the social context of their audiences influenced the translation of the prosperity gospel in each church plant. Pastor Lupemba grew up in a socially disadvantaged context and shared the same economic hardships with many young people at Hope Center in Berlin (interview with Joshua Lupemba, November 19, 2019). His childhood experience of participating in a Pentecostal immigrant church as a second-generation Ghanaian, his ordination in his father's Pentecostal church in Belgium, and his interaction with Bethel Church in Redding, CA, made Lupemba well acquainted with prosperity teaching (@cclnbe, Twitter; @PstJoshuaLupemba, Facebook, February 27, 2019). The deficient self-perception of people who were raised in poverty and the social limitations of his audience in Berlin supplied Lupemba with the urgent cause to preach a message of hope promised in the prosperity gospel.

Pastor Herla grew up as an atheist in Thuringia, the same federal state where he planted ConnectKirche Erfurt. Herla was converted only eight years before starting the church plant. Consequently, he related easily to the questions of the secular population

in Erfurt. His internship at Mountain View Church, a charismatic Mennonite church in Fresno, CA, and his studies at the seminary of the Bund Freikirchlicher Pfingstgemeinden (Federation of Pentecostal Churches) shaped his theological perspective to oppose the claims of the prosperity gospel (interview with Kevin Herla, April 20, 2020). Nevertheless, the growing disparity between a poor and rich population in Erfurt made him deeply aware of the needs of socially disadvantaged people and provided the impetus to inspire upward social movement.

Prior to planting Gospel Church Munich, Steffen Müller pastored a church within the Presbyterian Church of America, a denomination with many affluent congregations. His pastoral experience in the United States helped him to relate well to their wealthy audience in Grünwald, the richest town of Germany and location of their church plant at the time of this study (Braun 2019). Müller's education at a Reformed seminary and his conservative, Reformed theological convictions influenced his criticism of the prosperity gospel. In contrast to a message of health and wealth, Müller identified relational poverty as the greatest deficiency in a community of the super-rich (interview with Steffen Müller, February 21, 2020).

Hope Center in Berlin

Observations revealed that Lupemba translated his messages to socially disadvantaged young people in Berlin. The pastor affirmed that he "unashamedly professed a gospel of wealth," even if preachers often misrepresented the biblical concept. He believed that God would make him a multi-billionaire to accomplish the mission God entrusted to him. In the interview, the pastor explained that people who grow up in poverty adopt a mindset of poverty, making them believe that change is not possible: "Poverty is simply said: 'I do not deserve it. That is why I live in a limited way.'" The pastor believed that his congregation needs to replace their sense of deprivation with a sense of inner wealth. Lupemba wanted to "help these people first of all to generate wealth in their hearts, that is, to know that God wants me to be well and that I am loved by God. I am worth it." This inner wealth would naturally result in physical well-being since God does not destine believers to poverty and suffering. In a Sunday message on November 17, 2019, the pastor interpreted Abraham's blessing in Gal 3:13-14 as a physical blessing readily available for believers today. Christians could overcome all forms of deprivation by activating blessings through faith. Furthermore, each believer should learn how to enter a fourth dimension of the Spirit, where they could bend time and produce miracles at their will.

Each worship service during this research study included a thirty-minute message on prosperity apart from the main sermon. A congregational reading of financial blessings took place before each offering. Worshippers affirmed the expectation of material rewards by reciting claims of wealth. Concurrent with the emphasis on financial blessing was the expectation of generous giving, yet Lupemba did not coerce people into giving. "If it irritates you," the pastor explained during the service on October 29, 2019, "do not give!"

Lupemba also encouraged the idea that believers may claim continual physical health. Congregants should trust in God's healing and protection rather than place their faith in natural remedies. The church offered prayers for supernatural healing every Sunday. At the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, the pastor shared on Facebook that faith in Christ's blood protects believers: "No virus or disease will come near your home. Trust in the Lord for protection" (@PstJoshuaLupemba, Facebook, March 17, 2020). Lupemba rejected the idea that God's will is to teach spiritual truth through suffering. In the sermon on January 26, 2020, he explained that God intends prosperity for believers and to give "double for our trouble." Simultaneously, interviews and observations revealed that the admonishment to abstain from unhealthy habits, manage finances well, and pursue professional goals was integral to achieving physical well-being at Hope Center.

Finally, the church intended wealth accumulation to flow into social action. In the service on November 27, 2020, the pastor exclaimed that God generates wealth for Christians to address the world's needs. Hope Center pursued the ambitious goal of social transformation in the city district of Neukölln.

ConnectKirche Erfurt

Kevin Herla was not a proponent of the prosperity gospel but believed that the gospel has a positive, social effect on converts. He critically reflected on a message of health and wealth promoted by such ministries as Bill Johnson's Bethel Church in Redding, CA. The greatest treasure in heaven, according to the pastor, is not material wealth but individuals whom Christians help to convert: "I always say the greatest treasure I have in heaven are people whom I will see there again, who have met Jesus. That is worth more than all the money in the world. So, for me, these are the greatest treasures of eternity in heaven." At the same time, it is reasonable to presume that a positive social change occurs when individuals convert and acquire new self-confidence. At his Pentecostal seminary, Herla learned about the term *social lift* to describe the process of

social improvement through conversion: "One notices that the level of education increases with someone who becomes a Christian, but simply because he becomes self-confident, because he can love himself again, and because he feels loved by God."

Similar to Hope Center, CKE strongly encouraged its members to give financially by offering various giving opportunities, such as online giving in each service. Church leaders did not suggest, though, that financial giving results directly in financial blessing.

Moreover, Herla did not support the claim of the prosperity gospel that physical health is only dependent on the assertion of individual faith. In the interview, he elucidated that believers cannot claim a promise of supernatural healing, and the lack of healing does not relate directly to the measure of faith by believers. God may intervene supernaturally at any time, but He also heals through medical treatments. After Herla had become sick with a severe eye disease, his wife prayed during the service on April 25, 2020: "God, we know you are our healer, but you also have wisdom. We pray that you grant healing but also for wisdom for the doctors so they can find a diagnosis and so we can experience how you heal!" In another service during the COVID-19 pandemic, Herla's wife petitioned God to heal the sick, help those who lost their jobs, and give hope to the hopeless. She also thanked God for the service of all medical staff and prayed for conversions. Despite CKE's critical attitude toward claiming health, their annual report states that five miraculous healings occurred in 2018 (ConnectKirche Erfurt 2018).

Finally, CKE integrated the social improvement of converts with their approach to discipleship, allowing individuals to have the final say in determining their personal development. The website declares that after conversion, each person "can decide on their own what this decision means for their life," although church leaders assisted converts in the discipleship process (ConnectKirche Erfurt, n.d.).

Gospel Church Munich

Müller's approach to translating the Christian message into the social context of his audience related directly to his evaluation of the prosperity gospel. According to the pastor, the primary idol of the affluent community of Grünwald is the personal

identification with success or possessions. Successful people who become disillusioned with achievements need to hear that only the gospel can satisfy their deepest needs: "When the men open up, they eventually say that all their success ultimately does not satisfy them . . . We all have a hole in our heart that we desperately try to fill or to stuff with all sorts of things . . . In the end, only Jesus Christ and the gospel can really fill that." Thus, sermons should not exclude topics that contradict the assumptions of his wealthy audience. The doctrine of God's sovereignty, for example, postulates that even the rich depend on God entirely. Müller applied his Reformed theology to confront self-sufficiency and tell wealthy individuals that "the most decisive matter in your life you cannot do. God, in His grace, has to give it to you as a gift. You are completely, 100 percent, dependent."

Consequently, the pastor sharply opposed prosperity teaching as a false gospel since it teaches people to believe they are still in control and "selfish desires stay in the foreground, where Jesus must be a *Wunscherfüller* [fulfiller of wishes], like pressing a button on a machine." In the interview, Müller reflected critically on ministers who preach messages of prosperity for the sake of church growth, such as Joel Osteen, pastor of Lakewood Church in Houston, TX. In contrast, Jesus' ministry shrunk when he talked about his path toward suffering and death. Thus, the pastor motivated converts to reject false affirmations through material possessions and seek true wealth in restoring broken relationships, a significant issue in wealthy communities.

Observations revealed that financial giving was a minor aspect of the services at GCM, though church members gave large donations toward social causes globally. Social action in the vicinity of the church plant, according to the pastor, remained minimal due to the affluence of Grünwald.

Finally, Müller believed that the apostle Paul's hardships and Jesus' suffering and death prove that a claim to health contradicts Scripture. Authentic faith entails learning to live with sickness while God may intervene supernaturally at any time: "I know that many churches teach that Jesus heals you from all diseases. Yet, in the end, that is not biblical, even though God often heals. There are also situations where Christians have to live with suffering and sickness, and that is an authentic faith: 'What does it mean to follow Christ faithfully if I do not get healed?'" The pastor clarified that the possibility of supernatural healing does not mean that God shields every Christian from sickness and death. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, Müller taught his congregation that Jesus allows the virus to exist but may intervene to stop the pandemic suddenly or assist

scientists in developing medication quickly. This knowledge should cause Christians to trust in God's power, engage in evangelism, and expect God to bring about conversions.

Transformation of Converts

The divergent approaches to the translation of the prosperity gospel affected the discipleship process of converts. On the one hand, converts across church plants shared profound transformational changes. Notably, converts reported the experience of supernatural or emotional phenomena that solidified their discipleship. On the other hand, the prosperity teaching and its influence on transformation varied among converts.

At HCB, converts claimed their health, reported personal healings, or improved their financial outlook. Nadja recounted how she struggled with debt before her conversion. After she became a Christian and due to Lupemba's initiative, Nadja developed an altruistic passion for helping others manage their finances. She went on to study Public and Non-Profit Management at a Berlin university. Nadja also reported that she experienced supernatural healing, which solidified her commitment to discipleship. After her healing, she committed to following Jesus "*jetzt erst recht* [now, more than ever]" (interview with Nadja, January 24, 2020). Andrea, who grew up in social hardship, applied the message of wealth during a one-year discipleship program at HCB. She stated that for the first time in her life, she built healthy financial habits: "Then I was able to learn financial management," which "made me realize why I had not accomplished certain things in my life because I never knew how it works. No one ever taught it." Andrea also claimed a message of health and believed she was close to receiving permanent physical health by faith. After reading a book by Kenneth Hagin, she explained that "the healing in the Bible that God gives us is for us. So we have the right to be healthy . . . I received the revelation about healing. I cannot see it fully yet . . . but I have received the revelation about it, and I know it is mine" (interview with Andrea, November 20, 2019).

The testimonies of converts at CKE affirmed that their conversion not only led to transformational changes but engendered new socio-economic opportunities. In the interview, Herla recalled the example of a young man who had failed many job interviews. Soon after his conversion, he secured new employment due to the positive effects of an inward transformation. A new sense of identity provided confidence during the job interview: "He believes in himself again and trusts that God holds his whole life in his hand. He went into the interview with that attitude . . . He probably went in with

a wholly different demeanor because he understood more about who he is as God's son." Lara's attendance of a Christian leadership conference with the church staff inspired her to imagine a more purposeful career path. She decided to leave her current job and start her own consulting business while church leaders assisted her during this transitional phase (interview with Lara, April 25, 2020).

At GCM, converts found a new purpose apart from material wealth. Silke, a well-situated optometrist, gave up all reliance on material wealth and found true meaning in her spiritual life. In the interview, she explained that "I have no more respect for money or big cars or anything like that because I see the things that really mean something, and those are located somewhere else, on the inside" (interview with Silke, March 6, 2020). Andreas developed a passion for assisting social causes through his business venture and supporting the spread of Christianity worldwide. After his conversion, he started a new enterprise to help people generate income through sales in social networks. Additionally, the profits from a new clothing line would fund organizations that assist persecuted Christians: "This idea with [the clothing line] Plan of God is actually about releasing funds and making them available to help organizations that, in the name of the Lord, deal with the persecution of Christians around the world" (interview with Andreas, March 11, 2020).

Summary

Each church translated the claims of the prosperity gospel differently within their social context. The background and theological orientation of each leader shaped their view of prosperity. Hope Center embraced the gospel of health and wealth for a socially disadvantaged audience in Berlin. Converts responded to prosperity teaching by improving their financial habits, pursuing new professional goals, and claiming their health by faith.

Although many people came out of social hardship, CKE did not offer the claims of prosperity to their diverse audience in Erfurt. Nevertheless, pastor Herla believed that conversion results in a new sense of self-confidence and an improvement of social status. The church reported physical healings while denying an automatic claim to health. Converts developed confidence to pursue new professional careers and benefited from socio-economic improvements.

Gospel Church Munich rejected prosperity teaching as a false gospel that gives people the illusion of human control rather than to evoke dependence on God. Instead, pastor Müller preached a counter-cultural message to the affluent community of

Grünwald, challenging them to give up the idols of possessions and success. As a result, converts at GCM placed less value on material possessions, although economic opportunities could advance the global missions.

Theological Evaluation

This section offers a theological evaluation of the claims of prosperity teaching. The analysis of financial and physical blessings begins with affirming certain aspects of prosperity teaching and moves to address critical components. An explication of how prosperity teaching relates to foundational components of Christian salvation concludes this theological appraisal made from an evangelical viewpoint.

The Promise of Financial Blessing

First, the Bible does contain affirmations of material blessing for believers. Zimmerling (2009, 176) warns against spiritualizing biblical promises too quickly and jeopardizing their material focus since "without relating blessings to the earthly life, faith loses its connection to reality." Similarly, Pentecostal theologian Frank Macchia (2012, 226) interprets prosperity teaching as a way for Pentecostals to bring supernatural power "to bear on the concrete realities of the material and institutional life." Scriptural promises, such as Phil 4:18-19 and Mark 10:29-31, confirm a this-worldly outlook and relate material blessing to financial giving and the sacrifice of ministry. Second, the preaching of prosperity creates hope for socially disadvantaged people. Bowler's moving account of a lecture about the prosperity gospel to prison inmates reveals how people who endure suffering yearn for the assurance of a better life. Bowler (2015, 67) surmises that "people of faith are people of renewed expectations." Third, the hope of prosperity can result in behavioral changes that favor economic improvement, perhaps motivating "a certain cause of action that anticipates the gradual, if not more efficient, overcoming of poverty" (Yong 2012, 19). Jens Schlamelcher (2018, 300) explains that prosperity teaching calls for new work ethics and lifestyle changes that help the poor succeed in upward social movement by providing "the tools to achieve it." The Bible testifies a cause-and-effect relationship between hard work, non-excessive behavior, and material reward (Prv 14:23, 23:19-21, 1 Thes 4:10-12). Thus, the warning to condemn a message of prosperity too quickly is appropriate. Critics, especially speaking from an Anglo-American or Eurocentric perspective, might not know a life of poverty where such prosperity teachers as David Yonggi Cho developed their theology (Yong 2012, 20;

Zimmerling 2009, 181-82). Besides, evangelical opponents of prosperity ideology need to be self-critical in their assessments since many non-Pentecostal, Protestant churches also adopted the message of wealth (Bowler 2013, 236-37).

At the same time, a focus on material wealth in Christian discipleship is out of alignment with the biblical testimony about finances and foundational aspects of the spiritual life. First, Scripture encourages believers to pursue contentment regardless of wealth or poverty. The apostle Paul shares in Phil 4:11 that he "learned to be content in whatever circumstances" he was and offers himself as an example to believers on how to achieve contentment by God's power (Phil 4:13). Modesty in material possessions prevents an obsession with achieving material wealth, which is a fundamental distraction from the spiritual life (Prov 30:7-9, Lk 12:15). Hence, it is not surprising that scandals of moral failure and greed follow many prosperity teachers (1 Tm 6:9; Bowler 2013, 107-10). Second, proponents of prosperity often misuse biblical references to prove their claims of wealth (Brogdon 2015, 40-41). One popular example is the interpretation that the promise in Gal 3:14 entails the material blessing of Abraham for all believers. Jones and Woodbridge (2017, 54-55) point to the second part of the verse, which clarifies that the promise refers to the blessing of salvation in Christ. Third, a faulty understanding of giving that obligates God to reward those who donate to the church financially leads to the manipulation of donors (McConnell 1994, chap. 10). New Testament authors never portray giving as a technique to achieve material gain but motivate giving for the selfless purpose of supporting Christian ministry or meeting the needs of poverty (2. Cor 8:13-15, Phil 4:14-19).

The Promise of Physical Health

The New Testament implies that God may intervene through supernatural healing at any time. Pentecostal scholar David Mende (2019, 27-28) affirms this possibility while rejecting the notion that sin causes all sicknesses (Jn 9:3) or that healing is available automatically. Douglas Moo (1988, 195-96, 205-09) takes the same position against the viewpoint of the Reformers like Calvin, who denied that miraculous healing is possible after the apostolic age. Instead, passages like Jas 5:14-16 encourage elders to pray for healing expectantly. Furthermore, Otto (2017, 397) deduces that seeking spiritual intervention for physical needs enables believers to experience God in the context of their own lives, creating an "indissoluble connection between experience and faith." Candy Brown (2014, 40-42) goes further by stating that praying for healing empowers both recipients and facilitators of healing in contexts of social hardship by instilling the assurance of God's loving intervention.

Nonetheless, several reasons speak against the theology and widespread practice of healing by prosperity preachers. First of all, God does not always and continually heal those with sufficient faith. The New Testament is silent toward claiming that the presence of God's kingdom on earth must manifest itself through supernatural healing. Instead, the church is in a state of already-not-yet of the kingdom of God and awaits a final deliverance from suffering in the coming age (Rev 21:4). The example of Paul's thorn in the flesh shows that sickness and suffering do not necessarily originate from a lack of faith (2 Cor 12:7-10). Ultimately, healing rests on God's sovereignty rather than a human choice to pray for and believe in healing (Moo 1988, 197-98, 200-02).

Secondly, prosperity teaching, with its health claim, tends to misrepresent the meaning of physical suffering. The Bible depicts suffering as a common feature in the life of God's people, denoting general hardships and not limiting suffering to persecution (Moo 1988, 199-200). God transforms suffering, which is, in and of itself, not a blessing but a consequence of evil in the world, to become a blessing in the spiritual formation of believers. Christ's attitude toward suffering became the example for Christian discipleship in that "he learned obedience through what he suffered" (Heb 5:8). Paul encourages Christians to rejoice in afflictions since they will produce endurance, character formation, and hope (Rom 5:3-5). Thus, Jones and Woodbridge (2017, 86, 69-92) conclude correctly that the "greatest benefit of suffering is the growth in faith it fosters by forcing people to rely on God."

Thirdly, the inability of prosperity teaching to integrate the unavoidable reality of suffering generates negative psychological consequences for the believing community. A fixation on demanding supernatural healing blames those who do not recover from illnesses for lack of faith or the presence of sin. Consequently, congregations that adhere to a prosperity mindset are ill-prepared to comfort those who deal with sickness and death (Zimmerling 2009, 179-80; Brown 2014, 52; Bowler 2013, 174-77).

Prosperity and Salvation by Faith

Prosperity teachers often view faith as a mechanical formula or a spiritual force that compels God to respond to the believers' requests for health or wealth. This type of faith resembles the New Thought movement's understanding of mind control (McConnell 1994, chap. 8; Jones and Woodbridge 2017, 45-48). Conversely, biblical faith implies a reliance on God and guides the believing community to release control from the

individual to God and his sovereign will (Erickson 1989, 406, 939-40; Moo 1988, 204-09). Jesus prayed in Lk 22:42, "not My will, but Yours, be done," and Jesus instructs Christians to pray that God's will be done rather than ours in the Lord's prayer (Mt 6:10).

Therefore, promoting self-centered faith quickly misguides Christians to set aside the centrality of Christ's sacrificial death on the cross and salvation by faith. Jones and Woodbridge warn that prosperity teaching may alter the central message of the redemptive work of Christ and turn the gospel "into a human-focused religion" of self-fulfillment. In contrast, salvation by faith in Christ does not entail the promise of a comfortable life marked by continual well-being but requires the total abandonment of selfish interests in the way of the cross (Matt 16:24-25, Gal 6:14). Christ's redemption offers immediate forgiveness but not instant prosperity. Otto (2017, 398) concludes justifiably that Hagin's main error is the claim to prosperity simultaneous with salvation by faith at the point of conversion (McConnell 1994, chap. 10; Moo 1988, 202-04).

Assessment of Church Plants

The church plants in this case study exhibited commonalities and differences in the contextualization of prosperity teaching within their respective cultural contexts. All three churches implemented what Stephen Bevans (2002, chap. 4) calls the translation model, which gives priority to the authority of Scripture over contextual claims, making the gospel "the judge of all contexts, even though it seeks to work with and within all contexts." Bevans points out that this model fits in contexts of primary evangelization and secular cultures where people do not understand the premises of the gospel without attentive translation. Congruently, all three church plants faced a highly secular environment in the German cities of Berlin, Erfurt, and Grünwald. Also, each of the pastors affirmed a supra-cultural gospel, believed in the Bible's authority, and taught biblical texts as propositional truth. Thus, all three church plants shared in common that the translation of conversion resulted in the transformation of converts with a firm commitment to biblical standards. Each church was willing to go against pre-dominant cultural norms. One example was promoting marriage versus tolerating pre-marital sexual relationships, the latter posing a potential concession to cultural conventions in Germany (Bevans 2002, chap. 4).

Church plants were similar in translating evangelical conversion with a commitment to discipleship according to biblical values, while they differed significantly in their

translation of the prosperity gospel. Hope Center in Berlin embraced the gospel of health and wealth and related it to socially disadvantaged young people. Pastor Lupemba applied what Amos Yong (2012, 21-22) calls the missional argument when he explained in the interview that God would make him a multi-billionaire so that he could accomplish the mission God entrusted to him. One essential aspect of this mission was to raise converts out of poverty by teaching prosperity and encouraging new work ethics and moral virtues. Thus, he provided a "source of empowerment" for converts to work toward individual prosperity and move beyond a dependence on social welfare (Chesnut 2012, 2019). However, financial well-being, according to Lupemba, proceeds from a renewed sense of inner wealth. Similar to the New Thought movement yet not without biblical support (Eph 3:16-19, Col 3:2), the pastor challenged his congregation to replace their inner sense of deprivation with a sense of inward prosperity (Zimmerling 2009, 177-79).

Regarding the assurance of health and wealth, Lupemba affirmed Hagin's interpretation that Abraham's blessing in Gal 3:14 consists of physical blessings for believers today (Hagin, n.d.d.; Zimmerling 2009, 174-75). A congregational reading, which was a translated text from Bethel church, helped worshippers affirm the expectation of monetary rewards by "speaking into reality what does not exist" (Kalu 2008, 255; Bethel Church, n.d.). The manipulation of financial donors, despite the emphasis on giving, did not occur. In agreement with Hagin's theology, the pastor also propagated that believers may claim continual health. He denied that God has a spiritual purpose for suffering (Hagin, n.d.c.; Hagin, n.d.b.; Otto 2017, 371-75).

Moreover, HCB encouraged converts to enter into what Cho (1983, 38-39, 44) describes as a fourth dimension of the Spirit, receive new revelations, and produce miracles. The practice of seeking personal revelations corresponds to Bevan's (2002, chap. 8) transcendental model of contextualization, which presumes that the consciousness of the individual is the starting point for knowledge and "is intimately involved in determining reality's basic shape." This attempt to enter visionary stages for extra-biblical revelations in prosperity teaching subverts the corrective guidance of Scripture and the Christian community since believers may claim subjective experiences as authoritative revelations (Bevans 2002, chap. 5; McConnell 1994, chap. 10).

Nonetheless, the case study revealed that adopting a prosperity mentality at HCB did not jeopardize the clear communication of genuine Christian conversion and the transformation of converts according to biblical standards. Also, the church did not

neglect to initiate socio-economic improvements locally for the sake of individual prosperity. HCB pursued ambitious goals of cultural transformation in Neukölln alongside its message of health and wealth (Macchia 2012, 230). Respectively, converts at Hope Center reported how they claimed their health by faith, experienced healing, and improved their social status by adopting new economic habits and professional goals.

ConnectKirche Erfurt faced a population similar to HCB in Berlin, with many congregants coming out of social hardship. Nevertheless, CKE did not hold to the claims of the prosperity gospel while retaining the belief in the possibility of God's supernatural intervention. Similar to Mende's (2019, 27-28) argument, pastor Herla shared that believers cannot claim a promise of supernatural healing, and a lack of healing does not relate directly to the measure of faith. God may intervene miraculously at any time but also heals through medical treatments. Thus, the pastor contested the cynical attitude toward medicine by some prosperity teachers.

Furthermore, the pastor stated that the benefit of upward economic mobility does not necessitate the promises of prosperity teaching. A social lift is the natural consequence of conversion and a new sense of inner self-worth (Yung 2016, 80-81). CKE integrated the social improvement of converts with their approach to discipleship, allowing individuals to determine the progression of their spiritual transformation. In this way, CKE implemented the anthropological model in contextualization, which focuses on preserving the cultural identity of Christian believers (Bevans 2002, chap. 5). Aside from encouraging economic mobility for individual converts, CKE regularly engaged the congregation in social action activities on behalf of Erfurt. The frequent emphasis on financial giving did not engender forms of manipulation to fund the local ministry by promising compounded returns (McConnell 1994, ch. 10). As a result, converts at CKE benefitted from social mobility. Lara, for example, dared to leave an unhealthy work environment and start her own business.

Gospel Church Munich rejected the prosperity gospel vehemently. Pastor Müller called the prosperity gospel a false gospel that leads to self-reliance rather than dependency on God. Hladky (2012, 93) agrees that many proponents of the Faith Movement communicate to believers that they "are the only ones who determine the outcomes of their lives." Müller believed that the apostle Paul's afflictions and the reality of Jesus' suffering and death prove that a health and wealth gospel contradicts Scripture. The Christian life entails learning how to live with suffering and sickness as part of authentic faith (Jones and Woodbridge 2017, 71-74, 85-87).

Rather than accumulating material wealth, GCM's constituency needed to seek true wealth in healing broken relationships. The pastor explained that the upper-class affluence of Grünwald magnifies the dysfunctionality in relationships. Müller also motivated converts to avoid false affirmations through material possessions and instead seek fulfillment in the spiritual life. This pastoral directive did not fall in line with the presumed influence of Calvinism to a this-worldly rather than a spiritual perspective, moving Christians to accumulate "wealth as a sign that assured them that they were among the elect" (Lewis 2014, 69). Instead, Müller applied what Bevans (2002, chap. 9) calls a counter-cultural approach to contextualization as he rejected the idol of wealth in an affluent community. Especially in Western societies that are pre-disposed against the gospel, the counter-cultural model is helpful to oppose an overemphasis on possessions and individualism (Bevans 2002, chap. 4). Concurrently, the pastor affirmed the possibility of God's supernatural intervention, including the possibility of healing. However, this expectation should not misguide Christians to claim healing but encourage them to prioritize evangelism and anticipate conversions.

Compared to HCB and CKE, GCM showed minimal initiative in promoting social transformation locally due to their wealthy community, but church members sponsored global relief work through generous financial giving. Silke reported how she lost her dependence on material wealth after her conversion. Andreas offered capitalist business approaches to benefit foreign missions, which is a frequent practice among prosperity teachers (Macchia 2012, 231).

It is easy to understand why pastor Müller condemned all prosperity teaching as a false gospel in view of his affluent constituency, disregarding cultural variants that necessitate divergent approaches to contextualization (Cook 2010, chap. 5). The question arises whether the gospel of health and wealth is a valid form of contextualization or a form of syncretism, mixing elements foreign to God's authoritative Word with the Christian message of salvation. Each context calls for a creative approach of translating conversion yet retaining Scripture as a filter for culture in transformational processes (Eitel 2012, 72-75). Prosperity teaching that claims automatic access to financial and physical well-being simultaneous with conversion clearly moves beyond Scriptural promises. It must be rejected as syncretism despite positive ramifications, such as initiating upward economic mobility. Instead, a claim of health and wealth can create repressive dynamics within the Christian community when the sick and poor face the charge of ungodliness or sinfulness (Brown 2014, 52-53). Parents of children with Down syndrome, for example, tell the story of harsh criticism when facing Christians who presume the ability of supernatural healing if

believers would only exert proper faith (Moore 2020, 41-42). Prosperity teachers such as Bill Johnson and Kenneth Copeland, who claim the ability to heal Down syndrome, instigate such attitudes within Christian communities (Fongang 2016; tedthought 2017).

Nevertheless, "pluralistic shades" of the prosperity gospel and the reality that many prosperity teachers remain within Christian orthodoxy should caution critics from hasty condemnations (Yong 2012, 16; Bowman 2001, 225-28). The Atibaia Statement by the Lausanne Consultation states well that the varieties of prosperity theologies in particular contexts "require a more nuanced response to its manifestations around the world" (Lausanne Movement 2014). Hope Center in Berlin is an example of a church that teaches prosperity yet retains an evangelical call to conversion and transformation. In that sense, HCB did not teach a false gospel. Moreover, the church pursued the most substantial efforts to initiate social improvement within and beyond their socially disadvantaged constituency. A learner's attitude about differing contextualization approaches needs to replace sweeping judgments of churches that apply prosperity teaching (Tennent 2007, 189).

The case studies revealed additional aspects of translating the health and wealth gospel that caution premature categorizations. ConnectKirche Erfurt disclosed that it is not necessary to follow prosperity teaching so that converts experience social improvements. Gospel Church Munich demonstrated that the expectation of God's supernatural intervention on behalf of suffering believers is not limited to Pentecostal churches. In the end, human suffering is inevitable in a fallen world, and Indian scholar Ken Gnanakan (2012, chap. 7) argues convincingly for a theology that addresses "human suffering here and now." The problem of evil in the world necessitates the training of church leaders in how to counsel Christian communities when facing hardships, helping believers to integrate suffering as a joyful component in the process of Christian transformation (Jas 1:2-3, Rom 5:3-5; Nidever 2008, 270-71).

Conclusion

Each church plant in this multi-case study translated the gospel of health and wealth differently while preserving an evangelical understanding of conversion and transformation. The background and theological training of church leaders and the social context of each congregation directed the divergent approaches to contextualization. Converts applied the interpretation of prosperity to their transformational changes following the guidance of their respective churches.

Prosperity teaching with its claim of health and wealth as a Christian birthright must be rejected as syncretism. Nonetheless, careful theological assessments should prevent hasty condemnations of variations in contextualization. Christian leaders in Germany face the challenge of evaluating the theological expressions of new evangelical movements, as represented by the three case study churches, and guiding their congregations toward increasing biblical faithfulness in transformational changes (Eph 4:13).

Frank Liesen *(PhD, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary) currently serves as director of the church planting organization Antiochia Teams in Kandern, Germany. He may be contacted at frank.liesen@ateams.org.*

Bibliography

Bethel. "Offering Readings." Accessed June 5, 2020. https://www.bethel.com/offering-readings.

Bevans, Stephen B. 2002. *Models of Contextual Theology*. Rev. exp. edition. Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books. Kindle.

Bowler, Kate. 2013. *Blessed : A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*. New York: Oxford University Press.

———. 2015. "Field Dispatches from the Study of the American Prosperity Gospel." *Fides et historia* 47, no. 2: 64–67.

Bowman, Robert M. 2001. *The Word-Faith Controversy: Understanding the Health and Wealth Gospel*. Baker Books.

Brogdon, Lewis. 2015. *The New Pentecostal Message? An Introduction to the Prosperity Movement*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books.

Braun, Kathrin. 2019. "Nach Merz-Debatte: Wer ist in München reich? Und wie viele? [After the Merz debate: Who and how many are rich in Munich?]." *tz Merkur*. October 14, 2019. https://bit.ly/2v0wyUe.

Brown, Candy Gunther. 2014. "Pentecostal Power: The Politics of Divine Healing Practices." *PentecoStudies* 13, no. 1: 35–57.

Chesnut, R. Andrew. 2012. "Prosperous Prosperity: Why the Health and Wealth Gospel Is Booming across the Globe." In *Pentecostalism and Prosperity: The Socio-Economics of the Global Charismatic Movement*, edited by Katherine Attanasi and Amos Yong, 215–23. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Cho, David Yonggi. 1983. *The Fourth Dimension*. Comb. ed. Newberry, FL: Bridge-Logos.
ConnectKirche Erfurt. 2018. *Ein Jahr der Wunder: 2018* [A year of miracles: 2018]. Erfurt: 2018.

ConnectKirche Erfurt. n.d. "Über uns [About us]." Accessed May 6, 2020. https://bit.ly/34CYqgl

Cook, Matthew. 2010. "Contextual but Still Objective?" In *Local Theology for the Global Church*, edited by Matthew Cook, Rob Haskell, Ruth Julian, and Natee Tanchanpongs. William Carey Library. Kindle.

Ehmann, Matthias. 2018. "Pentecostal Mission: A German Free Church Perspective." *International Review of Mission* 107, no. 1: 64–80.

Eitel, Keith E. 2012. "Scriptura or Cultura: Is There a Sola in There?" *Southwestern Journal of Theology*, no. 1 (Fall): 63–76.

Erickson, Millard J. 1989. *Christian Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

Fongang, Gishlain. 2016. "Prophet Brian Carn Prophesying to Pst Bill Johnson." July 12, 2016. Video, 6:11. https://bit.ly/3005e50.

Gnanakan, Ken. 2012. "Some Insights Into Indian Christian Theology." In *Global Theology in Evangelical Perspective: Exploring the Contextual Nature of Theology and Mission*, edited by Jeffrey P. Greenman and Gene L. Green, Kindle. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic. Kindle.

Gooren, Henri. 2010. *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation: Tracing Patterns of Change in Faith Practices*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Hagin, Kenneth E. n.d.a. "Healing: A Forever-Settled Subject." Kenneth Hagin Ministries. Accessed July 28, 2020. https://bit.ly/3jO1LOL.

———. n.d.b. "Must Christians Suffer?" Kenneth Hagin Ministries. Accessed August 26, 2020. https://bit.ly/31sd9ce.

———. n.d.c. "Possessing the Promise of Healing." Kenneth Hagin Ministries. Accessed July 17, 2020. https://bit.ly/3fBzjNG.

———. n.d.d. "Redeemed from the Curse of Poverty." Kenneth Hagin Ministries. Accessed July 28, 2020. https://bit.ly/2X3zKcr.

Hiebert, Paul G., Tite Tienou, and R. Daniel Shaw. 1999. *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

Hinn, Costi W. 2019. *God, Greed, and the (Prosperity) Gospel: How Truth Overwhelms a Life Built on Lies*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. Kindle.

Hladky, Kathleen. 2012. "I Double-Dog Dare You in Jesus' Name! Claiming Christian Wealth and the American Prosperity Gospel." *Religion Compass* 6, no. 1 (January 1): 82–96.

Johnson, Bill. 2003. *When Heaven Invades Earth: A Practical Guide to a Life of Miracles*. Shippensburg, PA: Treasure House.

Jones, David W, and Russell S Woodbridge. 2017. *Health, Wealth, and Happiness: How the Prosperity Gospel Overshadows the Gospel of Christ*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications.

Kalu, Ogbu. 2008. *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Lausanne Movement. 2014. "Atibaia Statement on Prosperity Theology." Last modified August 5, 2014. https://bit.ly/3eVCqyZ.

Lewis, Donald M. 2014. "Globalization, Religion, and Evangelicalism." In *Global Evangelicalism: Theology, History and Culture in Regional Perspective*, edited by Donald M. Lewis and Richard V. Pierard, 60–81. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity.

Liesen, Frank. 2021. "Conversion in Germany: An Analysis of Patterns of Diffusion in Evangelical Church Planting (2010-2020)." PhD diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Macchia, Frank D. 2012. "A Call for Careful Discernment: A Theological Response to Prosperity Teaching." In *Pentecostalism and Prosperity: The Socio-Economics of the Global Charismatic Movement*, edited by Katherine Attanasi and Amos Yong, 225–37. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

McConnell, Dan R. 1994. *A Different Gospel*. Upd. ed. Peabody, MS: Hendrickson. Kindle.

Mende, David Prasanna Kumar. 2019. "A Biblical Analysis of the Main Teachings of the Prosperity Gospel, with Special Reference to the Preachers of Hyderabad, India." *Journal of Asian Evangelical Theology* 23, no. 1 (March): 19–35.

Moo, Douglas J. 1988. "Divine Healing in the Health and Wealth Gospel." *Trinity Journal* 9, no. 2: 191–209.

Moore, Richard P. 2020 *Entwurzelt: Aktuelle christliche Irrtümer* [Uprooted: Current Christian fallacies]. Dillenburg: Christliche Verlagsgesellschaft Dillenburg.

New World Encyclopedia. n.d. "American Civil Religion." Accessed August 24, 2020. https://bit.ly/2QkaWZX.

Nidever, Rodney James. 2008. "Evangelical Pastors and the Problem of Evil: Theodicy, Practical Theology and an Independent Study." Ph.D. diss., Graduate Theological Foundation.

Otto, Konrad. 2017. "Kenneth E. Hagins Heilungsverständnis im Rahmen der Word-of-Faith-Lehre: Darstellung und Kritik [Kenneth E. Hagins understanding of healing in the Word-of-Faith teaching: Explanation and critique]." *Interkulturelle Theologie* 43, no. 4: 368–400.

Peale, Norman Vincent. 2019. *The Power of Positive Thinking*. New Delhi: Digital Fire. Kindle.

Peters, Jeremy W. and Elizabeth Dias. 2019. "Paula White, Newest White House Aide, Is a Uniquely Trumpian Pastor." *The New York Times*. November 2, 2019. https://nyti.ms/3gIOZyE

Schlamelcher, Jens. 2018. "Evangelikalismus und Wirtschaft [Evangelicalism and economy]." In *Handbuch Evangelikalismus*, edited by Frederik Elwert, Martin Radermacher, and Jens Schlamelcher, 289–303. Series for the Federal Agency of Political Education 10174. Bonn: transcript.

Tedthought. 2017. "Kenneth Copeland and Oral Roberts Brag How Rich They Are. " Oct. 21, 2017. video, 5:30. https://bit.ly/30JfyNS

Tennent, Timothy C. 2007. *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the GlobalChurch Is Influencing the Way We Think about and Discuss Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic. Kindle.

Yong, Amos. 2012. "A Typology of Prosperity Theology: A Religious Economy of Global Renewal or a Renewal Economics." In *Pentecostalism and Prosperity: The Socio-Economics of the Global Charismatic Movement*, edited by Katherine Attanasi and Amos Yong, 16–33. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Yungh, Hwa. 2016. "The Gospel in Nation-Building in Emergent Nations: An Evangelical Agenda." In *Mission in Context: Explorations Inspired by J. Andrew Kirk*, edited by John Corrie and Cathy Ross, 78–87. New York: Routledge.

Zimmerling, Peter. 2009. *Charismatische Bewegungen* [Charismatic movements]. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.