

“...BUT THE POOR OPTED FOR THE EVANGELICALS!” – EVANGELICALS, POVERTY AND PROSPERITY

ABSTRACT

This article discusses developments in the historical discourse on evangelicalism, poverty and prosperity. Have the global evangelical celebrations of 2010 bridged the dichotomy between social responsibility (Ecumenicals) and the proclamation of salvation (Evangelicals)? The article focuses on the rapid growth of a specific brand of evangelicalism, namely “prosperity faith” as predisposition within the neo-Pentecostal churches, especially throughout sub-Saharan Africa. In an appreciative, but critical enquiry, this article reflects on the radical claim of dispensing “health and wealth” to the desperately poor. Are proponents of prosperity faith putting forward a credible answer to poverty, a new entrepreneurial and creative evangelical response to the call for social responsibility? Or will the poor ultimately be disillusioned? What challenges are posed to Evangelicals?

1. INTRODUCTION

Several global conferences held in 2010 commemorated the centenary of the Edinburgh 1910 World Missionary Conference – notably the one in Edinburgh itself, the Global Mission Consultation and Celebration in Tokyo and the Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization in Cape Town. These conferences displayed and celebrated the rapid, worldwide expansion of evangelical Christianity since 1910, especially the phenomenal growth in the Global South, which clearly constitutes a shift in the centre of gravity of Christianity. These global events of 2010 stimulated reflection on the growth of evangelical Christianity, specifically among the poor in the Global South.

Dr Gideon van der Watt, Research Fellow, Department of Missiology, Faculty of Theology, University of the Free State. E-mail; missio@ngkvs.co.za.



In an article in *Time Magazine* of 24 June 2001, Richard Ostling described the phenomenal growth of Evangelicals in Latin America. This happened despite the Marxist-tinged liberation theology that has been the hope of the Catholic left. He commented that this “born-again religion has the upper hand” while the Catholics are dwindling. Ostling quoted Rev. Nilson Fanini, one of Brazil’s leading Baptists, who put this paradoxically as follows: “The Catholic Church opted for the poor, but the poor opted for the Evangelicals.”

This article reflects on the tendency of the poor who are apparently opting for the Evangelicals, or at least for specific evangelical trends, and discusses developments in the historical discourse on evangelicalism, poverty and prosperity. The question is whether the global evangelical celebrations of 2010 have bridged the dichotomy between social responsibility (*Ecumenicals*) and the proclamation of salvation (*Evangelicals*). This article focuses on the rapid growth of a specific brand of evangelicalism, namely “prosperity faith” as predisposition within the neo-Pentecostal churches. This phenomenon is spreading like wildfire, especially throughout sub-Saharan Africa. In an appreciative, but critical enquiry, this article reflects on the radical claim of dispensing “health and wealth” to the desperately poor. Why are the poor opting for this brand of evangelicals? Are proponents of prosperity faith putting forward a credible answer to poverty, a new entrepreneurial and creative evangelical response to the call for social responsibility? Or will the poor ultimately be disillusioned with this “opting for the Evangelicals”?

2. DIVERSITY AMONG EVANGELICALS

As is the case with the concept “evangelization”, it remains difficult to define the term “evangelical”. “Evangelical” is indeed a very “broad Church”, an umbrella term covering different groupings and theological emphases (Larsen 2007:1-15, Schreiter 2011:88-92). Broadly speaking, the Evangelicals could be characterised by upholding biblical revelation, believing in the centrality of Jesus’ cross and resurrection for salvation of sin and the ministry of the Holy Spirit in and through those saved, leading to personal conversion and enthusiastic participation in mission, evangelisation or disciple-making (Nkansah-Obrempong 2010:294, see also Chilcote & Warner 2008:xxvi). During the 20th century Evangelicals developed as an alternative mission movement next, and even in opposition to the Roman Catholic missions and those of the Lutheran, Anglican, Reformed and Orthodox Churches that joined the ranks of the World Council of Churches – the so-called Ecumenical Movement (Robinson 2010:116). A very strong and fast-growing subdivision within the Evangelical Movement

is the neo-Pentecostal and Charismatic grouping, the latter becoming a growing phenomenon within the main-line Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches. The rapidly growing African Initiated Churches could also be classified under this Neo-Pentecostal or Charismatic movement.

Theologians classify the 20th century Evangelical Movement under the following categories:

1. Old Evangelicals – a more fundamentalist group focusing exclusively on personal conversion and mass evangelism and joined together in the International Council of Christian Churches.
2. The New Evangelicals – represented by people such as Billy Graham, John Stott and others who venture to join all Evangelicals together in one movement, culminating in the Lausanne movement since 1974. This grouping also acknowledges social responsibility and apologetics.
3. Confessional (conservative) Evangelicals focus on the proper confession. The many conservative churches in America's Bible Belt are examples of this group.
4. The Pentecostal and Charismatic movement with growing influence is considered to be the fastest growing group. The Charismatic movement could be defined as those remaining within the traditional, main-line churches as they play a role in catalysing the "Charismatisation" of these churches, while the neo-Pentecostals could be defined as those consolidating outside the main-line churches into independent and often mega-churches (Kalu 2007:5-7).
5. The radical evangelical movement, led by theologians such as Samuel Escobar, C. René Padilla, Orlando Costas, as well as the North American groupings such as the Mennonites with a strong focus on socio-political engagement. They are also called justice and peace Evangelicals (Nkansah-Obrempong 2010:295; Robinson 2010:127).

The three main conferences commemorating Edinburgh 1910 demonstrated the diversity in the evangelical streams, each approaching the issues of poverty and prosperity differently.

3. THREE GLOBAL CONFERENCES COMMEMORATING THE CENTENARY OF EDINBURGH 1910

The historical World Missionary Conference Edinburgh 1910 is regarded as the origin of the modern ecumenical movement, but also of the global evangelical mission movements. In 1910 more than 1200 delegates convened in the Assembly Hall of the Church of Scotland with an overwhelming representation of main-line Protestant mission organisations – mainly from Europe and the USA. There were very few delegates from Latin America, Africa or the East. Women played almost no role in the meeting. The 1910 Conference strived to heal the divisions between the mission organisations and the churches operating in the Global South, and it ventured to join forces in evangelising the world in their generation. An optimistic spirit prevailed at the conference, but had to be sobered down in the eventful decades following 1910. Nevertheless, Edinburgh gave birth to the 20th-century ecumenical movement culminating in the establishment of the World Council of Churches and a focus on socio-political programmes for justice, peace and the elimination of poverty. Conservative Evangelicals were bitterly disappointed in these developments. This led to the formation of the Evangelical Movement, focusing on the calling to evangelise the world – a vision claimed to have been born at Edinburgh 1910 (Robinson 2010:120). During 2010 both Ecumenicals and Evangelicals celebrated Edinburgh 1910.

While each of the three global conferences of 2010 claimed that their historical roots can be traced back to Edinburgh 1910, there were, however, noticeable differences in approach. Each conference represented different constituencies and evangelical groupings.

Reflecting on these major conferences, this article focuses on how each of them approached the calling to engage with poverty. In other words, how did each conference seek to bridge the dichotomy between verbal proclamation (the Evangelicals' preference) and social action (the Ecumenicals' stance)? What implications would the different approaches have for new developments in Evangelical churches and institutions in Africa? How could their approaches to the question of poverty and prosperity be applied in the African and specifically Southern African context? At least Tokyo and Cape Town have cautiously avoided the preferential option for the poor and socio-political action, while, typically evangelical, deliberately expressing the priority of evangelisation to social action in the church's calling. But despite this apparent negligence of socio-political action on behalf of the poor, Evangelicals are in fact the fastest growing movement in the poorer Global South, especially in Africa.

3.1 Edinburg 2010

Although only attended by some 300 delegates, Edinburg 2010 significantly brought together representatives of main-line or historical churches (Protestant, Orthodox and Catholic), but also Evangelicals (including Pentecostals and “Independents”), from all continents. One third of the delegates were women. The theme “*Witnessing to Christ Today*” focused strongly on mission theory. There was a clear recognition of the new context of mission: the majority Christianity are located in the Global South and are thus the new mission force. The phrase “*Mission form everywhere to everywhere*” was repeatedly heard. The conference formulated a Common Call (*Edinburgh 2010*), consisting of nine points.

The Common Call started from faith in the mission of the Triune God, the salvation in Jesus Christ and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. John F Gorski, a Roman Catholic scholar and participant in the conference, summarises the approach as follows:

Salvation in Christ was described as an integral reality with dimensions of forgiveness, reconciliation, life in abundance and liberation for all poor and oppressed. Missionary witness is expressed in reconciliation, hospitality, zeal for justice, peace and the protection of the environment, culminating in liturgical praise (Gorski 2010).

The Edinburgh 2010 Common Call was accepted on 6 June 2010. The following quotations from the Common Call are relevant and underline the typically ecumenical approach prevalent in the World Council of Churches:

Trusting in the Triune God and with a renewed sense of urgency, we are called to incarnate and proclaim the good news of salvation, of forgiveness of sin, of life in abundance, and of liberation for all poor and oppressed [...] we are called to become communities of compassion and healing.

Regarding the church’s calling to give a prophetic witness and engage with social action, the following was decided:

Disturbed by the asymmetries and imbalances of power that divide and trouble us in church and world, we are called to repentance, to critical reflection on systems of power, and to an accountable use of power structures [...in] the full awareness that God resists the

proud, Christ welcomes and empowers the poor and afflicted, and the power of the Holy Spirit is manifested in our vulnerability.

Liberation for the poor and oppressed and critical reflection on and even repentance from systems of power remain central to the Church's call, but then in conjunction with the call to proclaim and embody the good news of salvation.

3.2 Tokyo

The Tokyo 2010 Global Mission Consultation and Celebration convened from 11 to 14 May 2010 in Tokyo. It was attended by 1 000 mission leaders, representing mission agencies and networks from 73 countries which, in turn, represented over 100 000 cross-cultural missionaries. The late Dr. Ralph P. Winter, who died just prior to the meeting, conceptualised the event. Winter has been the editor of the well-known evangelical mission magazine *Mission Frontiers* and leader of the AD 2000 movement, focusing on closure in the missionary mandate of reaching the remaining unreached or unengaged people groups of the world. He deliberately wanted this conference to resemble that of Edinburgh 1910 in that only representatives of evangelical mission societies and not of churches attended. Representatives were compelled to sign the Lausanne Covenant before their application to attend would be accepted; the ideals of the evangelical Lausanne Covenant had to be firmly entrenched (Cho & Taylor 2010a:1).

The purpose and special contribution of Tokyo 2010 was to reproduce four elements of Edinburgh 1910 which made that gathering historically significant: delegates had to represent major evangelical sending agencies; the specific focus was on final frontiers, getting closure on the Great Commission; to fill the gaps of inter-mission collaboration, and to put in place structures and networks to assist the continuous outreach to the remaining list of unengaged non-Christian people (Taylor & Cho 2010a:2).

Tokyo also differed remarkably from Edinburgh 1910. Whereas nearly all the delegates at Edinburgh 1910 were from Western countries, more than 70% of the delegates at Tokyo 2010 were from the Global South – from Asia, the subcontinent of India and South Pacific Islands, Africa, Latin America and the Arabic World. Well-known evangelical leaders from the Global South were responsible for arranging and chairing the meeting: Dr. Obed Alvaraz of Peru was the chairperson; the co-ordinator was Dr. Hisham Kamel of Egypt. The chairperson of the hosting committee was Dr. Minoru Okuyama of Japan, with Dr. Sang-Bok Kim and Dr. Yong Cho of

Korea also at the forefront. The absence of women in any leading role was obvious and significant.

The growth of evangelical Christianity and successes in reaching the unreached peoples were celebrated – almost in triumphal fashion. The optimism of Edinburgh 1910 was revived; the statistics speak for themselves:

- In 1910 more than 90% of people groups in the world were not yet reached; currently there are only 25% people groups without any established church.
- In 1910 there were less than 100 000 evangelical Christians in Latin-America; currently there are more than 150 million.
- In 1910 there were 1.6 million evangelical Christians in Africa; currently there are 175 million.
- In 1910 there were 4 million Christians in Asia and the Pacific Ocean countries; currently there are more than 200 million.
- There were also some statistics about the rapidly dwindling numbers of Christians in Western and European countries.
- In 1960 only about 30% of the global Christianity was from the non-Western world; currently nearly 80% are from the Global South (the non-Western world).

The mission agencies from the Global South are also sending more missionaries to the West than vice versa. In 1910, 25 000 missionaries were operating in cross-cultural fields, of whom 99% were from the West; currently, more than 220 000 are operational in cross-cultural work, of whom 75% are from non-Western countries. In 2010 there were over 650 million evangelical Christians in the world, 80% of whom were worshipping Christ in the Global South (Cho & Taylor 2010b:8-9) The concept “Majority Christianity” was often used to describe Evangelical Christianity in the Global South. This clear shift in the centre of gravity of Christianity – what Philip Jenkins (2006) and Lamin Sanneh (Sanneh & Carpenter 2005) call the “New” or “Changing” Faces of Christianity – was to be acclaimed, celebrated and enhanced.

The Tokyo 2010 theme “*Making Disciples of Every People in Our Generation*” was based on Matthew 28:18-19 and linked to that of Edinburgh 1910, but with some alterations. “*The evangelization of the world in this generation*” (1910 theme) was thus broadened and deepened. The focus was on two concepts, namely “people groups” (understood

as ethno-linguistic groups) and “making disciples” (Newell 2010:50-53). The main verb in the text of Matthew 28:19, namely “making disciples”, is believed to be going deeper than the term evangelising: it entails “going” or reaching out, “baptising” or collecting into the communities of faithful and teaching them to obey, which means to transform individuals and communities. When this happens, communities will be transformed; injustice, violence and poverty will disappear, and kingdom peace (*shalom*) will dawn.

In the Tokyo Declaration, under the category of Transformation, this depth of the Great Commission – “teaching them to obey all that I have commanded” – is explained as the “evangelical” response to the “ecumenical” accusation of neglecting socio-political involvement in the understanding of mission:

The new believer’s worldview must be adjusted to a biblical worldview; his lifestyle changed to increasingly conform to the image of Christ; and his ethical conduct progressively marked by biblical morals. Ideally, this results in individuals applying the gospel of the kingdom to every sphere and pursuit of life – from government to economics, from education to health, and from science to creation care. As a consequence whole communities, cultures and countries benefit from the transforming power of the gospel (Taylor & Cho 2010a:3).

Specific versions of the Charismatic and neo-Pentecostal approach featured very strongly at the Tokyo Conference. This specific trend of Charismatic and neo-Pentecostal rhetoric was evident in a focus on spiritual welfare, power encounters, signs and wonders in world evangelisation - reflecting the realities and experiences from the “burgeoning Pentecostal/Charismatic Movement in the Majority World” (McClung 2010:9).

In several of the public appearances and worship services, the signs of specifically prosperity faith were also evident. Charismatic leaders claimed that people joining their churches would surely experience health and wealth and a victory in the battle against demonic forces. Dr. Tsugumichi Okawa, senior pastor of the Yamato Calvary Chapel in Tokyo, and Dr. Yong Jo Ha, senior pastor of the Onnuri Community Church in Seoul, representing two of the largest mega-churches in Japan and Korea, respectively, participated in the worship services in Tokyo and taught on the basis of 3 John 2 the threefold blessings of Christ, namely health, prosperity, and salvation. The chairperson of the meeting even argued in a keynote lecture that now that the Global South is taking over the baton in world evangelisation from the Jewish apostles of the

first ages, the European Church of the 19th century, the American Church of the 20th century, the Global South will also be blessed materially like their predecessors (Alvarez 2010:35-39). It was clear that nationalism in, for instance, the Korean Church, and the charisma of individual church leaders (in the fashion of typical American TV Evangelists) were playing a definite role. Power, a male-dominated approach and human effort (mission organisations, strategies and networks) in realising eschatological closure were defining issues.

3.3 Cape Town 2010

The Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelisation convened in October 2010 in Cape Town, with the theme “*God in Christ, reconciling the World to Himself*” (2 Corinthians 5:19). It was by far the largest of the conferences, attended by more than 4 000 participants and 1 100 volunteers from 198 countries. Women made up one third of the delegates. As at the Tokyo Conference, the overwhelming majority of participants were from countries in the Global South. Two-thirds of the speakers and presenters were from Africa, Asia and Latin America. A feature of the Conference was the way in which many thousands could follow the proceedings through media technology.

3.3.1 Cape Town Commitment

Cape Town published a document called the Cape Town Commitment, consisting of two parts: a confession of faith and a commitment to action. Historically it expands on both the Lausanne Covenant (1974) and the Manila Manifesto (1989) (Hunt 2011:81-85). On the basis of the great Commission of Matthew 28, mission is regarded as participation in the “purpose of God” who

has been calling out from the world a people for himself, and sending his people back into the world to be his servants and witnesses, for the extension of his kingdom, the building up of Christ’s body, and the glory of his name (art. 1) (see also Schreiter 2011:88-92).

The document states that two important theological concepts are framing Christians’ participation in God’s action in the world, namely love and reconciliation. The Gospel of John and the Pauline Letters formed the basis of the Bible studies – thus the focus on love and reconciliation.

“World evangelization is the outflow of God’s love to us and through us”, Cape Town declared. This must also become visible in our love for the poor and suffering:

The Bible tells us that the Lord is loving toward all he has made, upholds the cause of the oppressed, loves the foreigner, feeds the hungry, sustains the fatherless and widow [...] Such love for the poor demands that we not only love mercy and deeds of compassion, but also that we do justice through exposing and opposing all that oppresses and exploits the poor.

The conference therefore committed themselves anew “to the promotion of justice, including solidarity and advocacy on behalf of the marginalized and oppressed”.

However, this action is also framed by reconciliation in Christ:

Reconciliation to God and to one another is also the foundation and motivation for seeking the justice that God requires, without which, God says, there can be no peace.

Special action needs to be taken on issues such as modern-day slavery and human trafficking. Regarding poverty and calling the rich to repentance, the following was stressed:

God’s desire both for systemic economic justice and for personal compassion, respect and generosity towards the poor and needy, [...] but also in challenging excessive wealth and greed, the idolatry of rampant consumerism.

The church’s responsibility regarding the created order was also linked to the plight for the poor. John Houghton, co-chair of the U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, made the bold claim that environmental change is a Christian issue because it is affecting the world, the ecosystem, God’s creation – “and because it affects the poor more than anything” (Green 2011:7-10). However, echoing the calls from Lausanne 1974 and Manila 1989 again and again, the imperative of upholding the urgency and priority of evangelism was led from the platform at Cape Town 2010. Although René Padilla (2011:86-87) observed that Cape Town 2010 was not going far enough in social action and voicing the plight of the poor, Cape Town 2010 represents a considerable “move” in the Lausanne Movement (Bonk 2011:57-58).

3.3.2 The duel challenge: Poverty and prosperity

It was very significant that Cape Town reflected on poverty and prosperity as two inseparable issues. The reality is that poverty and misery are growing exponentially by the day, while a small percentage of people and big business are becoming exponentially richer. The gap between the two is growing by the day. The importance of reflecting on poverty and wealth together, as the two sides of one coin, was stressed. The stark reality of wealth and that of poverty mutually explain each other. They have to be reflected upon together. Poverty cannot be understood in isolation without reference to the immorally high levels of wealth in this world (Villacorta & Segura 2010). Increasingly poverty cannot be understood without the degradation of our environment. Within this context the calling to a holistic witness is becoming increasingly important – taking hands with different partners in society. But equally important is the prophetic voice against injustices, systemic imbalances, consumerism, the looting of natural resources, and environmental destruction.

In terms of this duel problem of poverty and prosperity, a salient issue discussed at the Cape Town Conference was prosperity faith as a growing concern for Evangelicals, especially in the fast-growing Charismatic and neo-Pentecostal movements in Africa. Presentations were given by, among others, Femi Adeleye of Kenya and J. Kwabena Asamoah of Ghana, followed by a panel discussion. This made headlines in secular media.

4. PROSPERITY FAITH IN AFRICA

Prosperity faith is spreading rapidly in Africa. In an article by Phiri and Maxwell (2007) in *Christianity Today*, a figure of 147 million “Renewalist” (a term that includes neo-Pentecostals and Charismatics) for sub-Saharan Africa is mentioned; this is outgrowing any other branch of Christianity and even the spread of Islam. In this article Prof. Allan H Anderson is quoted as saying: “The older churches are struggling to keep up with the jet-setting entrepreneurs who head up these new organizations”. (See also Asamoah-Gyadu 2009:38-39 on the fast growth of prosperity faith in Africa).

The neo-Pentecostal churches emphasise prosperity of all kinds, wealth, health, success, prospering businesses, fertility, vitality, decent jobs, power and even purely material items such as luxury cars and houses – as signs of God’s favour and as the only marks of a genuine faith. The basic assumption is that poverty is to be demonised as it is regarded as resulting from a lack of proper faith. Prosperity, on the other hand, is to be glorified. Believing Christians are entitled, have the right and even the duty to enjoy material blessings, to obtain health and wealth

here and now (Jenkins 2007:90). Advocates of prosperity faith mostly build their arguments on texts such as John 10:10 and 3 John 2 and the fact that Abraham was rich. Christians only need to claim prosperity in faith; but it could also be mediated by the charismatic leaders. Tithing - which often ended up in the coffers of church leaders - is also an important means of insuring material blessings. The charismatic leader with designer suits (Asamoah-Gyadu 2009:38-40) and a wealthy lifestyle embodies the miraculous material blessings which are preached.

The notion of making a “positive confession” to bring emotional and physical desires into being dates back to spiritual innovators such as Phineas P. Quimby and Mary Baker Eddy of the 19th century and Essek W. Kenyon of the early 20th century USA. In the 1930s Kenneth Hagin promoted a “Rhema doctrine” which held that words spoken in faith must be fulfilled, giving birth to slogans such as “name it and claim it” (Phiri & Maxwell 2007). These concepts were disseminated in the latter part of the 20th century by the Word of Faith movement, evangelists such as Kenneth Copeland and Kenneth Hagin jr. and authors of bestsellers dishing up recipes for wealth and health, people such as, among others, Joel Osteen, Benni Hinn, Bruce Wilkerson, Creflo A. Dollar. This was carried further by African pastors such as Chris Oyakhilome and others. The wealth of leaders of these neo-Pentecostal churches makes regular headlines in media reports, for example in articles with titles such as “Nigeria’s pastor’s as rich as oil barons” (BBC News 2011a) and “Nigeria: Where religion is big business” (BBC News 2011b).

The miraculous growth of the Bloemfontein (Free State, South Africa)-based Tyrannus Apostolic Church provides a case study. Apostle Simon Mokoena is the charismatic founder of the Tyrannus Apostolic Church, established in QwaQwa in 2000. The *Sowetan Newspaper* of 18 July 2001 reported that he is known for his luxurious lifestyle. He leads one of the fastest – if not the fastest – growing churches in South Africa, counting hundreds of thousands of members. Each weekend sport stadiums around the country and in neighbouring countries are filled to capacity with large crowds of uniform-wearing participants in the Tyrannus worship events.

Apostle Simon Mokoena was trained by Ray McCauley’s mega Rhema Bible Church. His life calling changed in 1998 when he met *Apostle John Eckard from Chicago, USA*, who anointed him with a prophesy on his own calling to become an apostle. He received a revelation from Acts 19, where the Apostle Paul did “transference of anointing” on twelve students whom he taught “at a school called Tyrannus”.

The Tyrannus Apostolic Church and its founder are indeed wealthy. Some of the assets include a restaurant and clothing factory in QwaQwa

and a funeral business with a fleet of vehicles. The Apostle is blessed with a beautiful voice and musical talents; several very popular CDs have been produced; he recently even signed a contract with EMI. He bought regular slots on national television. The Tyrannus web page advertises all the clothes, fashion trimmings and other souvenir products of the church. All of these commercial articles, displaying the Apostle's picture or the church's logo, are sold to members at church services. Most members believe that these articles are blessed and have "healing power". The web page also displays photos of the apostle purchasing several luxurious Mercedes Bens cars. Under the heading "Church rakes in millions" a local newspaper, *Free State Times* (19-25 August 2011) reported the Apostle's recently purchased helicopter in which he travels to church services around the country. This is done in order to prevent the church from loosing "such a precious gift", and "If Pastor Chris (Oyakhilome of Nigeria) can travel in his own private jet, why can't our own pastor have a helicopter?", Richard Bokveldt, the church's official spokesperson, replied. Marketing the brand has been outsourced to a marketing company. The church recently bought a farm in a prime spot outside Bloemfontein, where a "Zion City" is being erected.

Mass meetings in stadia are carefully choreographed, with the Apostle and entourage making a dramatic entrance (see also Hunt 2000:74-84), with the colourful uniformed crowd waving, singing and dancing to music coming across powerful sound systems. The stage décor suggests affluence. The Apostle is clearly very popular. Asked why he is so popular, the Apostle answered that they are different to "white churches"; they take "*tokoloshe*" (a traditional, illusionary and wicked little figure), and "*mashonisa*" (the so called 'loan sharks' lending money to poor people at ridiculously high interest rates) seriously. They speak mainly Sesotho, but also IsiXhosa, "No English". "Our ancestors never spoke the Queen's language (English) but they still managed to connect with God. Most of our members, especially the elderly, love the fact that in our church we pray, preach and sing in Sesotho." (*Sowetan* 2011). He takes the need of people seriously: "There's no way you can be effective if you don't empathize with them – if you don't speak their language. I take the Bible and make it relevant to the situation of the worshippers" (*Sowetan* 2011). He normally preaches to men and women differently and often separately. Men are especially important "Let's make men feel important. A man needs to be celebrated." Important is also the "Sons of Zion" movement within the church. His own lifestyle is a testimony.

It is good to pray but it is also good to see your dreams realised, then it becomes easier to testify on God's miracles (*Sowetan* 2011).

There is a clear link to Afro-nationalism and Afro-renaissance; the aim is to bring an end to Afro-pessimism. Very prominent politicians and businessmen frequently attend his services to receive blessings. In a short space of time the church became a power house. On the web page it is stated:

Tyrannus Apostolic church has a mission to reach people and revive lives. God gave me a nation to lead and heal; people experience financial breakthroughs as well as making significant lifestyle changes. (See official web page <http://tyrannusapostolicchurch.co.za/>.)

5. CHALLENGES TO EVANGELICALS

Prosperity faith offers tremendous promises to an economically deprived people. It provides hope against the bleak backdrop of 315 million sub-Saharan Africans living below the breadline, with an average life expectancy dropping to below 40 years. It renders an escape, at least momentarily, from desperate situations; it gives motivation, encouragement, self-confidence and a make-believe, and it provides role models to aspire after. It offers a new dream of escaping poverty and of attaining wealth. It stimulates entrepreneurship, gives advice and creates networks and opportunities. Wealthy Western Christians living in upmarket suburbs should be hesitant in hypocritically criticising Africans who want to “prosper”, driven by the desire to escape desperate conditions, to have a job, to live in a decent house and to drive their own car. Prosperity faith is prospering in situations of urbanisation, the meeting point of traditional Africa and modernity (Phiri & Maxwell 2007).

Prosperity teachers describe the Christian lifestyle as “direct communication with God”, and this serves as key to the success of the prosperity gospel in Africa (Phiri & Maxwell 2007). In this sense, it often fills the gap left by leaving traditional African belief systems with their focus on accessing immediate healing and power, the traditional belief in mystical causality. It highlights Africans’ longing for a gospel that embraces the supernatural, the body and soul.

We also need to be humble in judging the gullibility of the poor, and rather ask self-critical questions. Is this not a reaction to lacunae in main-line (Evangelical) theology: the absence of faith in God’s miraculous blessing which is so often the only way out for the desperately poor; the absence of a critical reflection on prosperity (especially our own prosperity), but also on prosperity and poverty as dual challenge; the inability in certain Evangelical circles to bridge the dichotomy between

witness through word and deed; the absence – despite much talk about it – of a real holistic approach among the Evangelicals; the inability to hold independent leaders in the Evangelical world accountable; the imperialist way in which Evangelicals exported a “readymade-in-affluent-America-theology” to the Global South, without really taking matters regarding contextualisation seriously; the Global South’s own inability to deal with modernity and secularisation; the absence of a proper work ethic and prophetic engagement in socio-economic issues countering the unbiblical Prosperity Gospel (see also Hammond 2010), etc. The challenge to a credible witness among the poor (and the rich) remains considerable.

But we also need to be critical. Jenkins (2007:93) refers to a Nigerian journalist Chris Ngwabo who wrote about the now prevalent “free market capitalist brand of Christianity” with its “*nouveau riche*’ smooth talking prophets of profit peddling a feel good gospel of greed.” The competition for the hearts and minds of the poor and gullible is so intense that self-promoting and marketing is being taken to outrageous heights; the damage thus being done to the Christian witness is incalculable.

Another critical question would be whether these churches really embrace the poor by wrestling with theological questions such as the cost of discipleship, failure, pain, and disappointment – Christ’s crucifixion –and thus really engaging pastorally with the millions of Africa. The Gospel of deliverance and abundance, of forgiveness and grace, and of restoration can never be presented as a gospel of poverty. But as the Bible never glorifies poverty, it also does not glorify greed (Asamoah-Gyadu 2009:40).

At the Lausanne 3 Conference in Cape Town (2010) it was concluded that prosperity faith is

nothing less than seduction into false delusion. It is an unrealistic solution to the challenges of daily life [...] It reduces God to the magic genie in the bottle (Hammond 2010).

Chris Wright, who played a major role in chairing the theological working group preparing for Lausanne 3 in Cape Town (Lausanne Theology Working Group Statement on Prosperity Gospel 2010:99-101), gave the keynote address at the 2010 Conference. He spoke about Integrity – Confronting the Idols. In an exposition of Matthew 4, Jesus’ temptation in the desert, he spoke on how we as church, especially church leaders, are so easily deceived by the threefold temptations of power/pride, popularity/success and wealth/greed. He called for humility, integrity and simplicity as signposts to unity and a faithful witness among the poor and

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the prosperous: “Reformation is once again the desperate need. It needs to start among those who claim the name Evangelical” (Hammond 2010).

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