

# The Gospel of Greed

by Ruth Padilla DeBorst

## A Response to Asamoah-Gyadu's 'Did Jesus Wear Designer Robes?'

To facilitate a truly global conversation, we ask Christian leaders from around the world to respond to the Global Conversation's lead articles. These points of view do not necessarily represent *Christianity Today* magazine or the Lausanne Movement. They are designed to stimulate discussion from all points of the compass and from different segments of the Christian community. Please add your perspective by posting a comment so that we can learn and grow together in the unity of the Spirit.

"Is anyone here poor? No; surely not! We are children of the King of all riches! But I am poor, you murmur? Then, in the name of Christ, cast away all sin! Claim the blessing God has in store for you and you will prosper!"

Sunday after Sunday, in megachurches across Latin America, hundreds of thousands of Christians sit—or sway—through similar pep talks. Weekday after weekday, radio, TV, and Internet broadcasts harangue believers with a "name-and-claim" theology. Desiring, attaining, acquiring, receiving, and accumulating are the dispositions fostered. In these churches, one is forced to ask: are believers ever challenged to take up the cross and follow a Lord who gave away all he was and had, who renounced his divine prerogatives in order to serve and to reconcile his creation with its maker and people with each other? Renouncing, simplifying, denying self, giving, sharing—all core marks of the community of the King—appear to have no space in this gospel of greed.

### The 'apostles' of prosperity

If in Africa the holy seal of approval to lust, greed, and consumerism is granted by Neo-Pentecostal bishops and archbishops, in Latin America the prophets preachers of prosperity tend to advertise themselves as "apostles," and "prophets." Organized in networks, coalitions, and councils, they name and authorize one another with unction from the Lord and proclaim themselves pioneers of a blessed apostolic reform that will transform our continent. As God's special emissaries, they name and declare prosperity and material wellbeing to individuals, families, and even entire nations.

Power, success, wealth, and health are all wrapped in a tightly secured package that allows no room for questioning, for pain or suffering, for concern about justice, or for awareness of the needs of other people. Self-appointed apostles are accountable to no one in matters theological, financial, or ethical. These "saintly" men—yes, they are all men!—wear, drive, and live in the signs of success according to the rulebook of a consumer society. They so arrogantly witness to God's favor and set the bar for their followers who are supposed to take pride in and vicariously enjoy the trappings of power.

### Seeds of blessing

Like the African leaders Asamoah-Gyadu describes, and with no regard for context, textual or historic, the apostles of prosperity wield biblical texts in order to legitimize their authority and build the religious scaffolding for the idols of our day. One favorite passage they love to twist is 2 Corinthians 9:6: "Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously."

In publicly broadcast "prosperity marathons" believers are cajoled—through word and music—into offering not only [tithes](#) and generous offerings, but also jewels, cars, and property titles. These are all "seeds" of self-improvement, of better things to come for the giver. They are deal-sealers of economic covenants with God. Given in faith, these become means to purchase God's over-abundant harvest of blessing. No allusion is made to the fact that Paul is actually encouraging Christians in Corinth to abound not in material goods but in "good works" (v. 8), to set their eyes on generosity not for themselves but for the needy in Jerusalem (v. 13), to see the use of their wealth as form of liturgy—ministry, public service (v. 12)—and to actively participate in an economy not of accumulation and inequality but of sufficiency and justice for all (vv. 8, 13-15).

### Good News for none or for all?

The religious legitimization of the pursuit of prosperity, as Asamoah-Gyadu laments, surely leaves little room for the poor. But I am afraid there is no truly good news in a theology of prosperity even for the "upwardly mobile youth" of Africa, Latin America, or anywhere, regardless of how "expressive and exuberant" their worship styles may be! Truly, a personal and communal Christian ethic that draws people away from destructive practices is liberating: it frees people and their many resources—financial included—for service to others.

Certainly the economic measures God institutes for his people—in the desert, under Roman imperialism, and today—are not ones of

deprivation. Our creative God is God of abundance, diversity, beauty, and life! And Asamoah-Gyadu rightly affirms that the Bible does not glorify poverty. But I wonder if in a context in which wealth itself is being deified, we can so confidently assert that the Good News of God's kingdom is *not* a gospel of poverty. Let me clarify: I am not advocating for the poverty of deprivation and need, but for the poverty of renunciation. In a culture of superfluous expenditure and waste, in a system of over-production and planned obsolescence, in a context in which people are valued and discarded according to their material goods, and in the face of false teaching and blatant disregard for the values of God's kingdom and God's justice, perhaps we would do well to stop cranking our prosperity gears and heed the example of yet another saint—Francis of Assisi. In radical followership of Jesus, this young man of the Italian bourgeoisie stripped himself of his wealthy trappings and lived among the lepers and other poor people in order to share the Good News of God's love for them. Perhaps, like Francis, we should take more seriously the example of another poor, itinerant teacher, our Lord Jesus Christ, who though he was rich, yet for our sake became poor, so that through his poverty we could be made rich (2 Cor. 8:9). Perhaps, when we do so, we'll discover and joyfully celebrate the Good News, the abundant wealth of shared goods and life, and right relations with our Creator and with all our fellow creatures!

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/globalconversation/november2009/response3.html?start=3>