

Theologian: Most Christians Infected with Prosperity Gospel

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Most professing Christians in America are infected with at least some measure of the health and wealth gospel, said one theologian.

That is, believers have no concept of a love and a joy that does not eliminate hardship and heartache, Sam Storms of Bridgeway Church in Oklahoma City said at a pastors conference this week.

"For most professing believers if God is love He must promise to minimize my struggles and maximize my pleasure," he lamented. Many believe it's their spiritual birthright to experience comfort and prosperity and that it's God divine obligation to provide it.

It's a disease that's rampant in the culture and in the church. People are inundated with messages from powerbrokers, media, entertainment, TV evangelists and bestselling authors that say joy is inextricably bound up in material prosperity, physical health, relational success and all the comforts and conveniences Western society provides.

For most people, joy and suffering are incompatible, Storms noted.

Thus preachers have a difficult task at hand in communicating to such a culture a genuine joy found in Christ.

The so-called prosperity gospel that teaches wealth and good health is a sign of God's favor and blessing is prevalent in the church, Storm lamented. Underlining the seriousness of the problematic theology many preachers have picked up, the Oklahoma City pastor called it a "corrosive and disintegrative pox" on the church and "a disease far more infectious and ultimately fatal to the soul than the worst bubonic plague and the affects it might have on the human body."

"We have to fight this infection in the body of Christ," he emphatically told pastors at the Desiring God conference in Minneapolis.

But the blame for the rampant "disease" shouldn't fall on the TV evangelists, Storms noted.

"I want to lay it (the blame) at our feet," he said.

"It's the pastors and leaders of the church today who fail to explain from the biblical text how hardship and tribulation are actually used by God to expose the superficiality of all the human material props on which we rely," he explained. "We failed ... to show ... how hardship and persecution and slander compel us to rely on the all-sufficiency of everything God is for us in Jesus."

That failure has left most professing Christians unable to grasp "the simple truth" that "infinitely more important and of immeasurably greater value than our physical comfort in this world is our spiritual conformity to Christ," Storms noted.

And conformity to the image of Christ is orchestrated through trials and hardship.

"If I suffer it is because God values something in me greater than my physical comfort and health that He in His infinite wisdom and kindness knows can only be attained by means of physical affliction and the lessons of submission and dependency and trust in Him that I learn from it," he said.

"That's how suffering serves joy."

Everyday people are hearing about a joy less durable and far inferior than the one offered by God. Yet, Storms asked pastors, when was the last time you expounded on the nature of the fullness of joy, ... the superior beauty of God?

Citing the work of 18th century theologian Jonathan Edwards, Storms advised pastors on how a "Christian hedonist" should preach on the pursuit of joy.

"The pursuit of God brings 'delights of a more sublime nature', 'pleasures that are more solid and substantial . . . vastly sweeter, and more exquisitely delighting, and are of a more satisfying nature . . . that exceed the pleasures of the vain, sensual youth, as much as gold and pearls do dirt and dung,'" he said, reading from Edwards' sermon "Youth and the Pleasures of Piety."

He continued, "Loving God 'is an affection that is of a more sublime and excellent nature' than the love of any earthly object. Such love is always mutual, and thus the love one receives from Christ 'vastly exceeds the love of any earthly lover.'"

"Edwards argued that the problem isn't the pursuit of pleasure but the willingness of uninformed minds to settle for comparatively inferior joys when God offers us unsurpassed and far more durable delights," Storms explained.

The Bridgeway pastor reminded fellow ministers that delighting themselves in the Lord isn't a choice, but a command and duty. Sin, he said, is denying a fillet mignon so you can fill your bellies with rancid ground beef.

We are not pursuing pleasure without God, but in Him, Storms stressed.

Speakers at the Feb. 1-3 Desiring God conference devoted their talks on the foundation of Christian Hedonism, a term coined by Desiring God's John Piper, and the pursuit of joy.

Bob Blincoe, U.S. director of Frontiers in Phoenix, Ariz., defined Christian Hedonism as "the desire for God," "desiring Him more than all other things" and "the confidence that there is nothing else worthy of our desire, nor rival treasure to treasuring Him."

"Christian Hedonists ... neglect every distraction, every attraction, every seduction, every sinful thought, and every temptation because we have set our hearts on the far exceeding treasure: God Himself," Blincoe said.

<http://www.virtueonline.org/portal/modules/news/article.php?storyid=12054>