



Reflections

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Prosperity Gospel: A Brief Critical Analysis

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Many contemporary Pentecostal and Charismatic preachers have become wealthy by promising their givers financial prosperity. Based on the blessings associated with tithes and offerings (“Bring all the tithes . . . and try Me now in this . . .” [Mal 3:10]),¹ some of these preachers assure that the generous givers can even choose in advance the kind of blessings to be requested from God. The various options include the style of house they would like to own, the brand of car they would like to drive, and even the bank account balance they would like to keep. All this, and much more, they would receive for being generous and “trying” God to fulfill His promises!

For example, Edir Macedo (1945-), founding leader of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, speaks of tithe and offerings as a worthwhile financial investment. In his book, *Vida Com Abundância* [Life with Abundance], Macedo argues,

According to the Bible, to pay tithe means to be a candidate to receive unlimited physical, spiritual, and financial blessings. When we pay tithe to God, He is *indebted* (because He promised) to fulfill His Word, rebuking the devouring spirits that disgrace the life of man, and acting in the diseases, accidents, additions, social degradations, and in all realms of human activities that cause man to suffer eternally.

When we are faithful with our tithes, in addition to be freed from such sufferings, we also began to enjoy the wholeness to the Earth, having God on our side to bless us in everything.²

In his book, *O Poder Sobrenatural da Fé* [The Supernatural Power of Faith], the same author adds:

It is clear also that those who are faithful with their tithes have the privilege to *demand* from God the fulfillment of His promise in their lives, and, *compulsorily*, *the Lord has to fulfill it*. [...]

Personally I consider more than *fair* the contribution, whether in tithes or offerings, because *the more we give, the more God returns to us multiplied*.³

While Macedo seeks biblical endorsement for his ideas, Kenneth E. Hagin (1917–2003), father of the Word of Faith Movement, even claims divine revelations for his own views. In his pamphlet *How God Taught Me About Prosperity*, Hagin states, “The Lord Himself taught me about prosperity. I never read about it in a book. I got it directly from Heaven.”⁴

The financial ambitions of the prosperity gospel movement⁵ are well expressed by Bill Hamon in his book *Prophets and Personal Prophecy*. He argues, “the Holy Spirit has made known that now is the time for the army of the Lord to arise and possess the wealth of the world.” According to Hamon, this goal should be achieved with assistance of modern prophets, who can reveal “words concerning problems that are hindering a business, as well as new directions, activities, and goals. Many businessmen seek the prophet for confirmation before making major decisions in their endeavors.”⁶

At any rate, if the preachers of the prosperity gospel are right, then it is very easy to become rich! The believer only needs to give generous tithes and offerings to the coffers of these churches, and the expected financial returns will be much higher than the interests paid by any other investment in the financial market! Yet if the multiplied return does not happen as promised, the fault is usually attributed to the giver—who did not exercise enough faith to receive the blessing.

Many people believe in this superficial interpretation of the blessings God promised to those who are faithful to Him (Mal 3:10). But, on the other hand, there are also those who, before trusting in human promises, prefer to carefully examine the word of God to see if

things are indeed so (Acts 17:11). These usually justify their stand not only on the apostolic teaching that “we ought to obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29), but also on Christ’s admonitions

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against the false preachers who speak in the name of Christ but whose teachings are not in full agreement with God’s word (Matt 4:4; 7:20–23; see also Gal 1:8, 9; Rev 22:18, 19).

The present article provides a critical analysis of some basic postulates of the prosperity gospel in light of the Scriptures.⁷ The content of this article is divided into two main parts. The first is a brief exposition of Malachi 3:7–12, which unveils the main blessings promised to those who are faithful in paying their tithes and offerings. The second part provides a critical analysis of the prosperity gospel and its implications on a few basic teachings of the Scriptures.

Curses and Blessings in Malachi 3:7–12

The book of the prophet Malachi was written around the year 425 B.C.,⁸ a time of much spiritual decline among the Israelites who returned from the Babylonian exile and their descendants. Both the priests (Mal 1:6–2:9) and the people (2:11) were defiling the sanctuary of the Lord. There were also those who married pagan wives (2:11) and who were unfaithful to the wives of their youth (2:14, 15). Allusions are made to “sorcerers” and individuals who exploited “wage earners and widows and orphans” and who turned “away an alien” (3:5). People did not keep the divine “ordinances” (3:7), and even robbed God “in tithes and offerings” (3:8).

Curses From Unfaithfulness

Departure from God and general unfaithfulness in tithes and offerings brought about great curses to the people. The book of Malachi records the following words of God: “You are cursed with a curse, for you have robbed Me, *even* this whole nation” (3:9). The curses included the devourer who consumed the fruit of the ground and the vine that failed to bear fruit in the field (3:11).

Harvests were frustrated—not because of any accidental climate change or natural soil infertility, but rather as a result of the people’s insolent disobedience to the divine commandments and ordinances (Deut 11:16, 17; 28:15–68; 1 Kgs 8:35). The disobedience of the people had reached its limit; for almost one thousand years they had been warned of the punishments they would receive for being unfaithful to their covenant with God, as recorded in Deuteronomy 11:16, 17:

Take heed to yourselves, lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them, lest the Lord’s anger be aroused against you, and He shut up the heavens so that there be no rain, and the land yield no produce, and you perish quickly from the good land which the Lord is giving you.

Well-known were the admonishments of Deuteronomy 28:15–68, including the following:

But it shall come to pass, if you do not obey the voice of the Lord your God, to observe carefully all His commandments and His statutes which I command you today, that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you: “Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the country. [...]

And your heavens which are over your head shall be bronze, and the earth which is under you shall be iron. The Lord will change the rain of your land to powder and dust; from the heaven it shall come down on you until you are destroyed. [...]

You shall carry much seed out to the field but gather little in, for the locust shall consume it.

You shall plant vineyards and tend them, but you shall neither drink of the wine nor gather the



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grapes; for the worms shall eat them. You shall have olive trees throughout all your territory, but you shall not anoint yourself with the oil; for your olives shall drop off. [...]

Locusts shall consume all your trees and the produce of your land. [...]

Moreover all these curses shall come upon you and pursue and overtake you, until you are destroyed, because you did not obey the voice of the Lord your God, to keep His commandments and His statutes which He commanded you.

Malachi explains that those curses were coming upon the Israelites not only because they were robbing God “in tithes and offerings” (3:8), but also because they had departed from other divine “ordinances” (3:7; cf. 1:6–3:5). Due to the magnitude of the problem, a mere restitution of tithes and offerings would not be sufficient to reverse God’s disfavor. To the scribes and Pharisees who paid a faithful “tithe of mint and anise and cummin,” Christ declared that they should also observe “the weightier *matters* of the law: justice and mercy and faith” (Matt 23:23; cf. Luke 11:42). As in this case, the contemporaries of Malachi also needed to rededicate their lives completely and unconditionally to God and His ordinances.

Blessings From Obedience

But if the Israelites of the time of Malachi would abandon their wrong ways and surrender themselves unconditionally to God, being also faithful in their tithes and offerings, the Lord would open “the windows of heaven” and would pour out upon them such blessing that there would “not *be room* enough to receive it” (3:10). Included in the blessing was the promise that the Lord would rebuke “the devourer” to no longer consume the fruit of the ground, as well as the assurance that the vine would bear its fruit at the right time (3:11). Consequently, the land of Israel would be “a delightful land” and all nations would call them “blessed” (3:12).

Such blessings reflected clearly the rewards to the covenant obedience mentioned in Deuteronomy 11:13, 14:

And it shall be that if you earnestly obey My commandments which I command you today, to love the Lord your God and serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul, then I will give *you* the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the latter rain, that you may gather in your grain, your new wine, and your oil.

Similar blessings are also promised in Deuteronomy 28:1–14, including the following:

Now it shall come to pass, if you diligently obey the voice of the Lord your God, to observe carefully all His commandments which I command you today, that the Lord your God will set you high above all nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, because you obey the voice of the Lord your God:

Blessed *shall you be* in the city, and blessed *shall you be* in the country. [...]

The Lord will command the blessing on you in your storehouses and in all to which you set your hand, and He will bless you in the land which the Lord your God is giving you.

The Lord will establish you as a holy people to Himself, just as He has sworn to you, if you keep the commandments of the Lord your God and walk in His ways. [...]

The Lord will open to you His good treasure, the heavens, to give the rain to your land in its season, and to bless all the work of your hand. You shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow.

The books of Deuteronomy and of Malachi explain that the curses and blessings previously mentioned were the results of the negative or positive attitude of the people toward the expectations of the covenant to serve God and keep His ordinance (Mal 3:14). But one has to recognize that even the natural calamities derived from disobedience had the redemptive purpose of leading the people back to God (Amos 4:6–11; cf. Jer 18:7, 8; Rev 3:19).

Although God promised to materially bless those who would be faithful to Him (Mal 3:10–12), the evidence of God’s favor cannot be limited to that realm because material prosperity seems to be more common among the wicked than among the righteous. The Israelites of the time of Malachi recognized this reality when they declared, “So now we call the proud blessed, for those who do wickedness are raised up; they even tempt God and go free” (Mal 3:15). And Psalm 73 addresses a similar condition:

But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled; my steps had nearly slipped. For I *was* envious of the boastful, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For *there are* no pangs in their death, but their strength *is* firm. [...] Behold, these *are* the ungodly, who are always at ease; they increase *in* riches. Surely I have cleansed my heart *in* vain, and washed my hands in in-

nocence. For all day long I have been plagued, and chastened every morning.

The apparent antithetical reality of the prosperity of the wicked and the affliction of the righteous became clear to the psalmist only when he “went into the sanctuary of God” and understood the end of the wicked (Ps 73:17). By its turn, the book of Malachi explains that such reality would be completely reversed only on “the great and dreadful day of the Lord” (4:5), when the righteous would be kept as “jewels” for the Lord (3:17, 18; 4:2, 3) and the proud and wicked would be completely destroyed, leaving of them “neither root nor branch” (4:1).

However, there are those who, even aware of the Bible teachings considered above, continue to insist that God is obliged to reward with material and financial prosperity all those who faithfully pay their tithes and offerings. So we will critically consider the prosperity gospel in light of some basic teachings of God’s word.

The Prosperity Gospel and Its Implications

There are serious tensions between the prosperity gospel, as taught by many popular contemporary preachers, and some foundational doctrines of the Scriptures. There are at least five aspects on which that gospel distorts some Bible teachings.

The prosperity gospel distorts God’s character. The Scriptures reveal God’s love in the way He treats human beings. He is merciful and just even with those who hate Him. About the plan of salvation, we know that “God so loved the world” (John 3:16) that He gave His own Son to die for us when we were still “sinners” and “enemies” of Him (Rom 5:8, 10). The same impartiality is manifested also in the way God still preserves today the required conditions for human beings to live on this planet (Gen 8:22), despite the degenerating consequences of sin (Gen 3). Christ Himself stated that God “makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matt 5:45).

One also has to recognize that, within the large framework of God’s treatment of human beings, many times He has to punish the wicked and to discipline those professed Christians who allow sin to separate them from Him (Isa 59:2). But even such a punitive process is permeated by the redemptive love that seeks to lead sinners into a personal relationship with God and obedience to His will. Despite being “a consuming fire” to sin (Heb 12:29), God continues to love sinners to the point of not wanting “that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Pet 3:9). The same Christ who always loved His enemies and offered His forgiveness even to those who crucified Him (Luke 23:34) still grants the gift of life and many other blessings to millions and millions of people who make fun of God and even blaspheme His holy name.

Ignoring God’s character as revealed in the Scriptures, many preachers of the prosperity gospel are not afraid of presenting to the people a god caricatured by nepotism and financial bargains with His followers. These preachers present a god much more interested in receiving financial resources from their worshipers than in leading them to live by “every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matt 4:4). They present a god willing to accept even moneylender deals such as “we will loan you such amount, under the condition that you will return it ‘multiplied’ to us!” As tempting as they might seem, such deals are populist distortions of the holy and blameless character of God as revealed in the Scriptures.

The prosperity gospel presents a utopian image of human existence within the context of the great cosmic conflict. Human history is a long and dramatic process that began with human beings separating themselves from God and will end with their eschatological reencounter with God. Each step in this process has been marked by a continuous conflict between the powers of good and the forces of evil. Paul referred to this conflict by stating that “we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual *hosts* of wickedness in the heavenly *places*” (Eph 6:12). And Christ declared that the agencies of evil are trying “to deceive, if possible, even the elect” (Matt 24:24).

Satan is qualified in the Scriptures as “the father of lies” (John 8:44, RSV) and “the accuser of our brethren” (Rev 12:10), and someone who does whatever he can to denigrate God’s character and bring troubles to the lives of God’s children. Even being a blameless and upright person, Job was deprived of his possessions and suffered innocently—not because he sinned but rather for God’s name to be glorified (Job 2). In regard to a man who was born blind, Christ explained, “neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him” (John 9:2, 3). And Christ Himself was born in a humble manger (Luke 2:7) and lived a humble life of suffering, deprived of material possessions (Matt 8:20; Luke 9:58).

Even so, the promoters of the prosperity gospel continue preaching that those who have genuine faith and give their possessions to the coffers of the church will receive multiplied material and financial return. If this is the case, then why did God not give such generous “financial blessings” to His own Son, instead of leaving Him without a place “to lay *His* head” (Matt 8:20; Luke 9:58)? Why did God allow the apostle Peter to reach a point where he had to confess that he did “not possess silver and gold” (Acts 3:6, NASB)? Why was the consecrated and dedicated apostle Paul allowed to experience such “needs” that others sometimes had to supply them (2 Cor 11:9, NASB)? Could it be possible that the god

of the prosperity gospel is much more generous than the God of the apostolic church (cf. Jas 1:17)?

Some preachers of the prosperity gospel teach that disease and poverty are caused by demons that can be expelled once for all, so that a Christian can enjoy full health and material prosperity. It is true that sickness and misery were never part of God's plan for the human race. But that kind of "exorcism" of sickness and poverty, as advocated by the prosperity preachers, undoubtedly suggests a kind of gospel without a cross (cf. Matt 10:38; 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23; 14:27). If things are really so easy, then why did the apostle Paul not succeed in having his "thorn in the flesh" being removed (2 Cor 12:7–10)?

The Bible states clearly that struggles with the powers of darkness will never cease for Christian while he or she is still in this world of sin and hardships (Eph 6:10–18; 1 Pet 5:8, 9). Therefore, it is quite unrealistic to say, "Accept Christ and all your problems will disappear!" Christ Himself declared that His followers would face many problems (Matt 10:34–39). And the apostle Paul also admonished that "all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution" (2 Tim 3:12). In reality, Christ never promised to remove all storms from our lives, but rather to be with us in the midst of those storms (cf. Matt 8:23–27; Mark 4:35–41; Luke 8:22–25).

The prosperity gospel distorts the very essence of Christ's teachings. The essence of true Christianity is conversion that generates self-denial and full surrender to Christ (Matt 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23). In that experience, sinners, who are by nature *egocentric* beings (centralized on themselves), are transformed into *alterocentric* Christians (centralized on God and humanity). In Philippians 3:4–9, Paul speaks of the transformation of his own life:

If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.

But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which *is* from the law, but that which *is* through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith.

The preachers of the prosperity gospel pretend to lead their listeners to an altruistic life through financial

sacrifices. But such altruistic intention is completely neutralized by constant promises of material prosperity from those very same preachers. As a result of such an egocentric motivation, believers end up paying generous tithes and offerings, believing that the more they give, the greater the multiplied financial return they will receive!

In addition to such an egocentric motivation, it is worthy to highlight that the ego of the givers end up being exalted even more through public testimonies about the donations and the resulting prosperity experienced (We cannot forget that many of the testimonies broadcast by the media are about financial prosperity!). Such practices might be backed up by good intentions, but they are in direct opposition to Christ's example and teachings! In His remarks about the poor widow's offering (Mark 12:41–44; Luke 21:1–4) and in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9–14), Christ reprovved forcefully this kind of show-off "testimonies." In Matthew 6:2–4, He highlights the same principle of giving in humility:

Therefore, when you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory from men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, that your charitable deed may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly.

The prosperity gospel applies to the New Testament church many Old Testament promises of theocratic prosperity. To understand the matter of material prosperity in the Scriptures, one has to distinguish between the *centripetal* missionary emphasis of the Old Testament theocracy-monarchy and the *centrifugal* missionary purpose of the New Testament church.⁹ In the Old Testament, God chose Abraham and his descendants to make them a prosperous and model nation that would centripetally attract other peoples and nations to worship the true God (Gen 12:1–3; 15:13, 14; 22:16–18). Israel came close to that ideal during the prosperous kingdoms of David and Solomon (1 Kgs 4 and 10), but ended up departing from that ideal under the increasing manifestations of apostasy and idolatry that culminated in the fall of the kingdom of the North (2 Kgs 17) and the exile of the kingdom of the South (2 Kgs 25; 2 Chr 36:17–21; Jer 39, 52).

Under the New Testament, one finds Christ's church with the centrifugal mission of going out to preach the gospel of the kingdom to the whole world (Matt 24:14; 28:18–20; Mark 16:15, 16; Luke 24:45–49; Acts 1:8). This is a very challenging mission, for "the field is the world" (Matt 13:38) and "the laborers" continue to be proportion-

ally few (Matt 9:37; Luke 10:2). Under such reality, the classic words of Christ recorded in Matthew 6:19–21 are still pertinent for us today. There we read,

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

It is true that, on one side, the preachers of prosperity gospel encourage people to detach themselves from their material possessions in favor of the church. But, on the other side, they promise the believers automatic material and financial prosperity during this life. Such promises ignore the reality of the great controversy and the fact that even the righteous may undergo suffering and deprivation, as demonstrated in the experience of Job.

The prosperity gospel distorts the whole spectrum of Christian obedience. In the book of Malachi and in Deuteronomy chapters 11 and 28, the condition to receive divine blessings is not only faithfulness in tithes and offerings (Mal 3:10–12) but also dedication of one's life to God in full obedience to His will. Christ spoke of this same reality in Matthew 7:21–23, where He stated:

Not everyone who says to Me, “Lord, Lord,” shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, “Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?” And then I will declare to them, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!”

Although Christ emphasized several times in His teachings that it is much more important to *be* than to *have*, the preachers of the prosperity gospel place, according to Caio Fábio, more emphasis on *having* than *being*.¹⁰ Not very concerned whether the believers are keeping “clean hands and a pure heart” (Ps 24:3–5), or living “by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matt 4:4), or even allowing the true Holy Spirit to guide them “into all truth” (John 16:13; cf. 1 John 4:1; Acts 5:32), those preachers seem to be more interested in knowing whether the believers spoke in tongues, experienced some miracles, and had their material possessions multiplied.

Unfortunately, the religion taught by many prosperity preachers is a populist marketing religion apparently aimed at increasing the number of members in order to

multiply the revenues of their churches. Many of them regard speaking in tongues much more significant than taming the tongue (Jas 3:1–12; 1 Cor 14:18, 19), miraculous healings more meaningful than living in harmony with the biblical principles of health (1 Cor 3:16, 17; 6:19, 20), and preaching temporal prosperity much more important than leading sinners to “the inheritance of the saints in the light” (Col 1:12). Those preachers are much more excited about ordering like Peter, “rise up and walk” (Acts 3:6) than admonishing like Christ, “go and sin no more” (John 8:11; see also 5:14).

Summary and Conclusions

The books of Malachi and Deuteronomy list numerous blessings and curses depending on the attitude of the people toward the covenant “to serve God” and keep “His ordinance” (Mal 3:14). Although God promised to bless His faithful children materially (Mal 3:10–12), the true evidence of divine favor cannot be limited to this realm, for material prosperity seems to be more common among the wicked than among the righteous (Mal 3:15; Ps 73:2–17).

The prosperity gospel taught by many popular preachers (1) distorts God's character; (2) presents a utopian image of human existence within the framework of the great cosmic conflict; (3) distorts the very essence of Christ's teachings; (4) applies to the New Testament church many Old Testament promises of theocratic prosperity; and (5) distorts the whole spectrum of Christian obedience.

Since “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil” (1 Tim 6:10) and Christians are warned by Christ not to lay up for themselves “treasures on earth” (Matt 6:19), it is quite evident that the prosperity gospel distorts New Testament teachings about the Christian relationship with material goods. If full dedication to God always results in the blessing of “financial prosperity,” why did neither Christ nor the apostles receive such blessing? Could it be the case that neither of them fulfilled the required conditions for that to happen?

The preachers of the prosperity gospel encourage believers to give more and more generously to the church. But the motivation used to reach that goal ends up strengthening even more the egocentric tendency of the believers and the financial wellbeing of the preachers. People give huge donations—not motivated by an unselfish love for the gospel cause, but because they believe that with such donations they will receive a highly lucrative financial return (“multiplied”). This kind of egocentric prosperity incentive, preached in God's name (cf. Matt 7:21–23), denies the very essence of Christ's teachings (Matt 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23).



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¹Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible references are from the NKJV.

²Bispo Macedo, *Vida Com Abundância*, 12th ed. (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Gráfica Universal, 1996), 79, italics supplied.

³Bispo Macedo, *O Poder Sobrenatural da Fé*, 30th ed. (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Gráfica Universal, 1997), 145–147, italics supplied.

⁴Kenneth E. Hagin, *How God Taught Me About Prosperity* (Tulsa, OK: Kenneth Hagin Ministries, 1985), 1.

⁵For a comprehensive history of the American prosperity gospel, see Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013). For a critical survey of the Brazilian wealthy and fast-growing Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, see Leonildo Silveira Campos, *Teatro, Templo e Mercado: Organização e Marketing de um Empreendimento Neopentecostal*, 2nd ed. (Petrópolis, RJ, Brazil: Vozes; São Paulo, Brazil: Simpósio Editora; São Bernardo do Campo, SP, Brazil: Unesp, 1999).

⁶Bill Hamon, *Prophets and Personal Prophecy: God's Prophetic Voice Today: Guidelines for Receiving, Understanding, and Fulfilling God's Personal Word to You* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image, 1987), 124, 126.

⁷For a more detailed critical analysis of the prosperity gospel, see e.g., Gordon D. Fee, *The Disease of the Health & Wealth Gospels* (Vancouver, British Columbia: Regent College Publishing, 2006); David W. Jones and Russell S. Woodbridge, *Health, Wealth & Happiness: Has the Prosperity Gospel Overshadowed the Gospel of Christ?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2011). See also Bruce Shelley and Marshall Shelley, *Consumer Church: Can Evangelicals Win the World Without Losing Their Souls?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 109–121.

⁸Francis D. Nichol, ed., *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, ed. rev. (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1976), 4:1121.

⁹For a more detailed study of the subject, see e.g., Johannes Blauw, *The Missionary Nature of the Church: A Survey of the Biblical Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974).

¹⁰See Caio Fábio, *A Crise de Ser e de Ter*, rev. and enl. ed. ([Rio de Janeiro]: Vinde, 1995).

“Who is My Neighbor?": Some Thoughts on Racism and Nationalism

BY ELIAS BRASIL DE SOUZA

Racism and nationalism remain crucial challenges in our contemporary world. Media coverage, government actions, and academic studies have drawn attention to the persistent evil of racial, ethnic, and nationalistic prejudices in different parts of the world.¹ Unfortunately, these problems may also affect the church and nullify its privilege of being the salt of the earth. The present essay addresses the problem of racism and nationalism from a biblical perspective, and offers some principles to deal with these challenges.

At the outset, it is convenient to lay out how race and nation are usually defined. Although precise definitions of

these terms are fraught with difficulties, some brief comments are in order. One source defines race as a “group or category of persons connected by common origin.”² Another concedes that the concept of race might include some physical differences that may distinguish one group of people from another, but clarifies that current scientific knowledge has established “that the diversities recognized in human beings are not founded on a biological definition of race.”³ In fact, this affirmation finds clear corroboration in the fact that “all human groups share the same type of blood, are inter-fertile and can receive and donate organs across so-called racial boundaries.”⁴ As used in this essay, race and ethnicity⁵ are virtually synonymous, and the latter, in terms of ancient people, could be minimally defined “as group identity.”⁶

Similarly, the concept of nation has been defined as a “large body of people united by common descent, history, culture, or language, inhabiting a particular state or territory.”⁷ From these two concepts derive the terms “racism” and “nationalism.” Racism “actually designates two very different things. On the one hand, it is a matter of behavior, usually a manifestation of hatred or contempt for individuals who have well-defined physical characteristics different from their own; on the other hand, it is a matter of ideology, a doctrine concerning human races.”⁸ Nationalism, in turn, can be defined as “a sense of collective solidarity within identified geographical and cultural boundaries,”⁹ although oftentimes it may develop into an exclusivist ideology insofar as it postulates the superiority of one nation or people group over others. For our purposes, nationalism, racism, and even tribalism are taken to be elements of a single problem: the difficulty of humans to accept the ethnic or cultural “other.” No attempt is made at absolute precision in the use of these three terms since, in this study, what is predicated of one may apply to all of them.

Our consideration of this topic is divided into four main sections. The first section addresses the concepts of race and nation in the Bible; the second offers a theological reflection on ethnic diversity; the third focuses on biblical responses to racism and nationalism. In the fourth section we will summarize these reflections and offer some suggestions.

Race and Nation in the Bible

One should be careful not to impose contemporary concerns upon the Scriptures. After all, modern notions of racism or nationalism were foreign to biblical writers; nevertheless, nationalism or racism in the sense of some cultures viewing themselves as superior was certainly an issue in biblical times. For Greeks, foreigners unfamiliar with the Greek language and culture were barbarians; for Jews, non-Jews were Gentiles (i.e., pagans).¹⁰ In addition, time and again the Bible indicates the diversity

of peoples and nations that populate the earth. A search of an electronic database yielded 1,972 occurrences of ethnic designations in the Old Testament,¹¹ conveyed by gentile nouns such as Egyptians, Cushites, Philistines, Assyrians, etc. Similarly, the New Testament also contains a variety of terms indicating ethnic, national, or racial affiliations. The list of pilgrims present in Jerusalem on Pentecost may be illustrative: Parthians, Medes, Elamites, etc. (Acts 2:9). Thus it becomes apparent that the Bible has much to say about race and nations.

Common terms used in the Old Testament to convey the idea of race or ethnicity are *gôy* (555 times) and *‘am* (1866 times). In spite of considerable overlap, *gôy* designates nations and people as political and social entities, whereas *‘am* stresses kinship and more often refers to Israel as God’s people. The word *lê’ôm* (31 times) often occurs in parallel with *gôy* in the prophetic literature and Psalms.¹² Occurring in both Hebrew and Aramaic, the term, *‘ummâ* (7 times) means “nation,” “tribe,” “people.” The words *šēbet* (190 times) and *matteh* (252 times) may designate “tribe” while *mišpāhâ* (303 times) indicates the subdivision of a tribe and is mostly translated as “family.” The New Testament, in turn, uses *ethnos* (164 times) and *laos* (143 times) to denote people or nation. In actual usage, however, *ethnos* refers more to the nations, gentiles, unbelievers, and even to non-Israelite Christian gentiles,¹³ whereas *laos* tends to designate the people of God,¹⁴ much like *‘am* in the Old Testament. Sometimes the plural *laoi* occurs in parallel to *ethnos* as a reference to “the whole of humanity.”¹⁵ Two other terms may also be noted. One is *phylē* (31 times), which means “race,” “tribe” and may refer to the twelve tribes of Israel (historically, or metaphorically of Christians) or to the tribes of the earth, in the sense of peoples and nations.¹⁶ The other is *genos* (21 times), which conveys the notion of “family,” “country,” among others, and therefore may have ethnic connotations. To conclude, we should note the words *barbaros* (6 times) and *ethnikos* (2 times); the former designates those of non-Greek race¹⁷ and the latter designates Gentiles in contrast to descendants of Abraham.¹⁸

Having looked at some linguistic data, we turn to the so-called table of nations (Gen 10), which provides an overview of peoples and ethnic groups at the early stages of world history. Close examination of this table indicates that the variety of nations and peoples forms the backdrop for subsequent promises that the nations of the earth would be blessed.¹⁹ The desirability of a diversity of ethnic groups and nations appears to have been implied in the mandate to “fill the earth” (Gen 9:2).²⁰ This may partially explain why the builders of Babel met with God’s judgment (Gen 11:1–9): They resisted God’s mandate to fill the earth.²¹ By confusing their

language and scattering them over the face of the earth, God brought about the diversity of families, nations, and ethnic groups that eventually filled the earth. Subsequently, God called Abraham to be a blessing to “all the families of the earth” (Gen 12:3).

An interesting aspect of God’s inclusive and sovereign plan for the entire world should also be mentioned: God apportioned land not only to Israel, but also to other nations. He gave land possessions to Esau (Deut 2:5), the Moabites (Deut 2:9), and the Ammonites (Deut 2:19). A prophetic oracle by Amos claims that the Lord acted in the interest of other nations in ways that resemble the Exodus event: He brought the Philistines from Caphtor and the Syrians from Kir (Amos 9:7). Deuteronomy 32:8 further reiterates, “When the Most High divided their inheritance to the nations, when He separated the sons of Adam, He set the boundaries of the peoples, according to the number of the children of Israel.” Classical prophets envisioned a time when the nations would come to Jerusalem to worship the Lord and learn His laws (e.g., Jer 50:5; Zech 8:21–23; 14:16–21).

Admittedly, the Old Testament also contains oracles of judgment against the nations. However, such messages imply no trace of ethnic or racial prejudice.²² In fact, Israel and Judah often receive the harshest judgments (see, e.g., Amos 7:8, 15; 8:2). Nations are not judged because of their ethnic or racial “otherness,” but on the basis of loyalty to God’s eternal covenant.²³ Nowhere in the Bible do national, racial, or ethnic identities receive a negative evaluation.²⁴ The election of Abraham and his descendants to become God’s special people does not happen in detriment to the nations, as noted above. Against all odds (Deut 7:7; 26:5), Abraham, and later Israel, received the mission of becoming a blessing to all the families of the earth.

Theological Reflection on Ethnic Diversity

As noted above, the Bible not only mentions races, nations, and ethnic groups; it also portrays God as actively involved on behalf of nations and families of the earth as the plan of salvation unfolds. In fact, the biblical text offers principles and guidelines for facing the challenges posed by racism and nationalism.

First, we start with the most foundational principle on which the entire enterprise of biblical theology stands or falls: the theological premise that out of one couple God made humanity. As Paul reminded the Athenians, God “has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings” (Acts 17:26). In avowing the unity of the human race, Paul likely alludes to the Creation account (Gen 1, 2) and possibly to the

Table of the Nations (Gen 10).²⁵ On the grounds of Creation, there is no place for superiority of one group over another since the “doctrine of creation affirms the unity as well as the dignity of all humanity.”²⁶ Over and above the variety and diversity of human cultures, societies, races, and nationalities stands the fact that all are created in the image of God. Ultimately, “there are not multiple human races, but just one human race.”²⁷

Second, as the Scriptures make clear, the fall has not only affected the relationship between humans and God; it has also driven a wedge between humans and their fellow human beings (Rom 3:23). As different people groups become more and more alienated from God, they develop worldviews that result in racism, nationalism, and ethnocentrism—natural consequences of which are oppression and destruction of the “other.” Instead of admiring the beautiful tapestry of cultural and ethnic diversity, some place themselves and their culture as the standard according to which others are to be measured. Claims such as this underlie the racism, ethnocentrism, and nationalism that have so badly damaged God’s people at distinct moments in history.

Third, God’s eschatological promises include the nations. In a lofty depiction of classical eschatology, Isaiah and Amos picture the nations (*gôy*) and peoples (*‘ammîm*) flowing to Jerusalem to learn God’s ways (Isa 2:1–4; Amos 2:1, 2). Isaiah also envisions a day when an altar will be erected in the land of Egypt and the Egyptians will serve the Lord (Isa 19:19–22). Next, Isaiah announces that Egypt, Assyria, and Israel will be one, and applies to both Egypt and Assyria covenantal language previously restricted to Israel.²⁸ Egypt is called “my people” (*‘ami*),²⁹ and Assyria, the “work of my hand” (*ma’seh yaday*).³⁰ Isaiah 56:6 promises incorporation of the foreigner (*nekar*) into the covenant community. The New Testament likewise presents the gospel being preached to all nations (*ethnos*) of the earth (Matt 13:10; 24:14; 28:19; Luke 24:47). Although the nations may also become hostile and reject the message of salvation (Rev 11:18; 14:8; 17:15; 18:3), nevertheless out of them come people for God’s kingdom. In the eschatological consummation, all the nations are represented among the saints (Rom 1:5, 6; Rev 15:4; 21:24) and walk in the light emanating from God and the Lamb (Rev 21:24).

Fourth, the Bible recognizes and affirms the diversity of races and nations that populate the earth (Gen 10:1–32; Deut 32:8), and the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost reaffirms God’s plan for all peoples, languages, and cultures (Acts 2). Individual ethnic, national, or tribal identities give a sense of kinship and community, helping humans meet their need for security and belonging. This kind of diversity also fosters human creativity and stimulates human enrichment.³¹ It has also been

observed that the “multiplicity of peoples serves providentially to contain human pride and evil on a global scale and has done so throughout history. Over-powerful, totalising regimes are restrained and brought down by other peoples, either alone or in combination, who are threatened by and stand up to them. Ethnicity thus serves as a brake on certain forms of human sin and their potential to cause limitless evil.”³²

Fifth, nations and ethnic groups are not absolute entities. Important and useful as they may be in the current state of the world, the aforementioned entities “are historical communities and not part of the original created order. They are therefore provisional and contingent communities that can lay no claim to any ultimate human loyalty.”³³ Furthermore, racial and national entities—as meaningful and indispensable as they appear to be—bear the consequences of sin. Awareness of this reality should move one to challenge nationalism, tribalism, racism, and all kinds of ethnic idolatry.³⁴ The Bible clearly subordinates any status based on race or nationality to the absolute Lordship of Jesus. In Christ, all barriers erected by sin are demolished. As Paul stated: “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:28).”³⁵

Sixth, God does not condone or tolerate racial or ethnic prejudices. Two interesting cases may illustrate this point. An episode that seems to reflect ethnic prejudice appears in the case of Aaron and Miriam against Moses “because of the Cushite woman whom he had married; for he had married a Cushite woman” (Num 12:1, ESV). The double use of the expression “Cushite woman” in this short verse shows that the ethnic identity of Moses’ wife had become a problem for Miriam and Aaron. It may have been only a pretext to raise the real issue, which was their ambition to share Moses’ leadership (not an unusual situation: an interested party raises an ethnic excuse in order to achieve a dubious goal). As a response, God struck Miriam with leprosy and she became “as white as snow” (Num 12:10). Assuming that the term “Cushite” indicates the dark complexion of Moses’ wife, the whitening of Miriam’s skin would be an ironic response to her complaint. In a similar vein, the experience of Jonah also reveals some ethnic or nationalistic prejudices. After preaching to Nineveh, the prophet emerges displeased with the success of his mission and prays for God to take his life. He soon finds shade under a plant the Lord had prepared; but when the plant is struck by a worm and withers, the prophet again wishes for death. God Himself draws out the lesson: Jonah had pity on a plant for which he did not labor; should not the Lord have had pity on Nineveh, a city with more than 120,000 persons and also many animals? (Jonah 4:1–10) The point is

clear. God is no respecter of persons, nationalities, or ethnic identities. Even Israel's worst enemies—the Assyrians—had a share in God's love.

Seventh, as just indicated, God shows no partiality. Such an obvious statement may not have been so obvious then, nor was it fully understood by the early church. Peter had to receive a vision in order to understand that God does not discriminate against people on the basis of ethnicity. Peter's opening words to Cornelius' household were: "In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality" (Acts 10:34). Interestingly, the verb "perceive" in this verse denotes a process; that is, Peter appears to admit that he had not come to a full and absolute understanding, but he was still in the process of grasping such a deep and foundational truth.³⁶ Subsequently in Acts, Christian leaders had to convene a council to discuss the situation of converted Gentiles. After Bible study and prayer they embraced the Gentile converts without forcing them to be circumcised and keep the whole ceremonial law (Acts 15). We notice that—in spite of the vision given to Peter and the decision of the Jerusalem Council—the problems did not disappear. Paul had to deal constantly with factions and divisions inside the church, some of which may have been prompted by ethnic or nationalistic prejudices. Even Peter appears later on to fall back into his previous prejudices (Gal 2:11, 12).³⁷ Some New Testament letters such as Galatians, Ephesians, and Colossians³⁸ go to some length to underscore that Jews and Gentiles are equal members of the body of Christ, indicating that issues of ethnicity remained a challenge for the early church.

Biblical Responses to Racism and Nationalism

In light of the above, we should note that serious distortions of the biblical perception of race and nationality occur when identification with one's own nation, country, tribe, or ethnic group results in hostility toward other groups.³⁹ In an insightful study, Miroslav Volf names such hostility as "exclusion" and categorizes three main ways in which this exclusion occurs: by elimination, domination, or abandonment.⁴⁰ This is what happens when humans get infected with racism, nationalism, or any kind of ethnic idolatry.

Benevolence. The Scriptures replace elimination with benevolence. The command to "love your neighbor" (Lev 19:18; Mark 12:31) certainly transcends tribal and national boundaries and includes the tribal, ethnic, or national other. Elisha comes to mind at this point since he did not consider the Syrian commander an enemy to be eliminated, but a neighbor that needed healing (2 Kgs 5:9–19). Proverbs makes a similar point: "If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink; for so you will heap coals of fire on

his head, and the Lord will reward you." (Prov 25:21, 22). Paul takes up this passage and adds, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom 12:20, 21). Benevolence "eliminates" the enemy by turning him or her into a friend.

Service. Instead of domination, the Scriptures recommend service. Legislation in favor of the foreigner reads: "You shall neither mistreat a stranger [*gēr*] nor oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exod 22:21). We should note that God invokes Israel's experience in Egypt as motivation for keeping the law. Since the oppressed may become the oppressor, God reminds His people of their former status so that they would exercise solidarity toward the foreigner. In this connection we should remember that among the nations of the ancient Near East, Israel was unique in having laws that demanded the protection of foreigners (*gērīm*).⁴¹ In a time when the Jewish people groaned under Roman oppression, Jesus preached that "if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also" (Matt 5:38). To make the issue even clearer, Jesus added, "if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles" (Matt 5:41). The latter statement, as some commentators have pointed out, likely alludes to a Roman self-asserted "privilege" imposed upon dominated citizens, according to which "Roman soldiers had the legal right to impress the labor, work animal or substance of local residents (cf. Mk 15:21)."⁴² This saying raises some hermeneutical questions that cannot be treated within the confines of this short essay. It should be stressed, however, that Jesus' words—uttered as they were in a context of tyranny and oppression by a foreign enemy—underscore the core principle of service to the ethnic other.

Solidarity. The abandonment of the ethnic other must be replaced with solidarity. At the dedication of the temple, Solomon prays that God would hear the prayer of the foreigner (1 Kngs 8:41, 43), which indicates that the Temple cult would include foreigners—not exclude them, as happened later when the temple service became a symbol of exclusion for Gentiles.⁴³ In this connection, the parable of the Good Samaritan may be instructive since it portrays a "classic example of racism."⁴⁴ As the story unfolds, the Jewish victim abandoned by the road is denied help first by a priest and then by a Levite. In the end it is the Samaritan—the ethnic other—that, contrary to the expectations of the original audience, brings healing to the suffering victim. This parable has been categorized as an "example story"⁴⁵ because, in contrast to some other parables, it portrays an example, a model, either to be rejected or emulated. Ironically, the positive model is not given by the priest nor the Levite—functionaries of the Temple—but by the foreigner. It was the Samaritan

who embodied God's way of dealing with the ethnic other (Luke 10:29–37).

As we relate to our ethnic neighbor, the Scriptures compel us to exemplify an attitude of acceptance, service, and solidarity. This, of course, is easier said than done. Ethnic cleansing and race-related conflicts have left a stain of blood on the twentieth century (and on human history, for that matter).⁴⁶ Horrendous acts perpetrated by one ethnic entity against another may still hurt, as the loss of people, cultures, and properties may still linger in the collective memory of nations or tribes; we should not minimize the depth of such suffering. We should remember, however, that grace and forgiveness remain the only viable options for permanent healing and restoration.

Through baptism, believers join a worldwide community of brothers and sisters that relativizes ethnic and national loyalties. As relevant and important as these earthly ties may be, they should not be allowed to break the ties that bind us to Christ and our fellow believers. As Christ's words well express: "Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My sake and the gospel's, who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time—houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions—and in the age to come, eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first" (Mark 10:29–31).

Final Considerations

As noted above, the Bible affirms the diversity of races and nations along with the conviction that all races, ethnic groups, and nations are one and the same human family. Upon this theological foundation the Bible erects its perception of nations and ethnic groups. This theological principle relativizes tribal and national distinctions. Above these human loyalties stands the absolute loyalty we owe to the Creator God, who demands that we love our foreign sister or brother. Therefore, any manifestation of racism, ethnocentrism, nationalism, or tribalism is unacceptable not only from a humanitarian point of view, but also from a biblical or theological perspective. Admittedly, Christians sometimes have been unable to resist the allure of ethnic and nationalistic idolatry.

Only a worldview shaped by the Scriptures can provide the solid foundation to approach race, ethnicity, and nationality on a practical basis. As the Bible makes clear from the "beginning," Creation provides the foundation to base our relationship with the foreign neighbor. In addition, the Scriptures reveal that sin has distorted our perception of the other. Racism and related forms of prejudice have infected human nature and can

only be eradicated by the blood of Jesus. As we lead our congregations and institutions to live and proclaim the gospel, we should always remind others and ourselves that "there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all" (Col 3:11).

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¹See, e.g., Les Back and John Solomos, eds. *Theories of Race and Racism: A Reader*, Routledge Student Readers (London: Routledge, 2000); Wendy Kline, *Building a Better Race: Gender, Sexuality, and Eugenics from the Turn of the Century to the Baby Boom* (Berkeley, NY: University of California Press, 2001); James W. Perkinson, *White Theology: Outing Supremacy in Modernity, Black Religion, Womanist Thought, Social Justice* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); John Downing and Charles Husband, *Representing Race: Racisms, Ethnicities and Media* (London: SAGE, 2005); Glenda MacNaughton and Karina Davis, eds. *"Race" and Early Childhood Education: An International Approach to Identity, Politics, and Pedagogy, Critical Cultural Studies of Childhood* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Steven Leonard Jacobs, ed., *Confronting Genocide: Judaism, Christianity, Islam* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009).

²Ernest Cashmore, Michael Banton, and Heribert Adam, *Dictionary of Race and Ethnic Relations*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 1994), 294.

³Robert Miles, "Nationalism" in Guido Bolaffi, Raffaele Bracalenti, Peter Braham and Sandro Gindro, eds. *Dictionary of Race, Ethnicity and Culture* (London: SAGE Publications, 2003), 240.

⁴J. Andrew Kirk, "Race, Class, Caste and the Bible," *Themelios* 10:2 (1985):7.

⁵Due to the use of the word "race" with a biological sense in eugenics and in racist ideologies, scholars have tended to abandon this word in favor of the term "ethnicity," in which culture, not biology, was the primary category to distinguish groups of people. Eric D. Barreto, "Ethnic Negotiations: The Function of Race and Ethnicity in Acts 16" (Ph.D. dissertation, Emory University, 2010), 38–41.

⁶Ann E. Killebrew, *Biblical Peoples and Ethnicity: An Archaeological Study of Egyptians, Canaanites, Philistines, and Early Israel, 1300-1100 B.C.E.* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 8.

⁷Catherine Soanes and Angus Stevenson, *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁸Tzvetan Todorov, "Race And Racism," in Les Back and John Solomos, eds. *Theories of Race and Racism: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 2000), 64–70

⁹Cashmore, Banton, and Adam, 254.

¹⁰Dennis L. Okholm, *The Gospel in Black and White: Theological Resources for Racial Reconciliation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 118.

¹¹Anderson-Forbes Phrase Marker Analysis, *Logos Bible Software*.

¹²Duane L. Christensen, "Nations," ed. David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1992), 4:1037.

¹³William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 276.

¹⁴Arndt, Danker, and Bauer, 586.

¹⁵H. Bietenhard, “Λαός,” ed. Lothar Coenen, Erich Beyreuther, and Hans Bietenhard, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 799. See, e.g., Luke 2:31; Rom 15:11.

¹⁶N. Hillyer, “Tribe,” Colin Brown, ed. *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), 871.

¹⁷See Hans Windisch, “βάρβαρος,” Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, eds. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 1:546–553.

¹⁸Arndt, Danker, and Bauer, 276.

¹⁹J. Daniel Hays, *From Every People and Nation: A Biblical Theology of Race* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 56–60. Cf. Frank Crüsemann, “Human Solidarity and Ethnic Identity: Israel’s Self-Definition in the Genealogical System of Genesis,” in Mark G. Brett, ed. *Ethnicity and the Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 197–214.

²⁰Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version.

²¹See Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1958), 118, 119.

²²Contra Christensen, who asserts that, “particularly within the prophetic literature, there are passages which express the narrowest self-interest and even hatred for Israel’s enemies among the nations” (4:1037).

²³Jon D. Levenson, “The Universal Horizon of Biblical Particularism,” in Mark G. Brett, ed. *Ethnicity and the Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 147. See Reinaldo W. Siqueira, “The Presence of the Covenant Motif in Amos 1:2–2:16” (Ph.D. dissertation, Andrews University, 1996).

²⁴In the case of some negative portrayals of Cushites, it must be noted that these are motivated by particular historical events, not by a “racialist ideology.” See Rodney Steven Sadler Jr., *Can a Cushite Change His Skin?: An Examination of Race, Ethnicity, and Othering in the Hebrew Bible* (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 148.

²⁵See Hays, 56–60. Cf. Frank Crüsemann, “Human Solidarity and Ethnic Identity: Israel’s Self-Definition in the Genealogical System of Genesis,” in Mark G. Brett, ed. *Ethnicity and the Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 192, 193.

²⁶Keith Ferdinando, “The Ethnic Enemy—No Greek or Jew ... Barbarian, Scythian: The Gospel and Ethnic Difference,” *Themelios*, No. 2, September 2008 33 (2008):57.

²⁷Ferdinando, 57.

²⁸John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1–39* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 381.

²⁹See Isa 10:24; 43:6, 7; Hos 1:10; 2:23; Jer. 11:4.

³⁰See Isa 60:21; 64:8; Pss 119:73; 138:8.

³¹Ferdinando, 58.

³²Ibid., 59.

³³William Storrar, “‘Vertigo’ or ‘Imago’? Nations in the Divine Economy,” *Themelios*, No. 3, April 1996 21 (1996):4.

³⁴Ferdinando, 58.

³⁵This sweeping statement does not obliterate gender functions and distinctions (male and female) established at Creation; rather, it affirms God’s restoration of Creation through the saving work of Jesus. In other words, this passage “does not claim that maleness and femaleness are irrelevant in every respect” (Thomas R. Schreiner, *Galatians* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010], 259). Cf. Dennis Ronald, *There is no Male and Female: The Fate of a Dominical Saying in Paul and Gnosticism* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1987), 130.

³⁶Indicated by the present tense of the Greek verb *katalambanōmai* (“perceive”), as noted by Dennis L. Okholm, *The Gospel in Black and White: Theological Resources for Racial Reconciliation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 139.

³⁷That the incident reported in Galatians 2 is subsequent to Acts 15, the Jerusalem Council, is confirmed by Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), 197–198. See Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Epistle of Paul to the Churches of Galatia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1953), 75–97.

³⁸See John M.G. Barclay, “‘Neither Jew Nor Greek’: Multiculturalism and the New Perspective on Paul,” in *Ethnicity and the Bible*, 197–214; Hays, 181–193.

³⁹Ferdinando, 59.

⁴⁰Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 75. See the useful summary in Ferdinando, 59.

⁴¹See R. J. D. Knauth, “Alien, Foreign Resident,” in T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker, eds. *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 24–33.

⁴²Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 60.

⁴³Craig S. Keener, “The Gospel & Racial Reconciliation,” in Dennis L. Okholm, ed. *The Gospel in Black and White: Theological Resources for Racial Reconciliation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 117–130.

⁴⁴David G. Benner and Peter C. Hill, eds. *Baker Encyclopedia of Psychology & Counseling*, Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 896.

⁴⁵K. R. Snodgrass, “Parable,” ed. Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 593.

⁴⁶See, e.g., Longman, Weitz, Eric D. *A Century of Genocide: Utopias of Race and Nation*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

SCRIPTURE APPLIED

Christians and the Church

BY EKKEHARDT MUELLER

Today, more and more people are just concerned about their own wellbeing without caring much about society, family, or other groups of people. This may also

influence Christians and their relation to the church. On the other hand, people like to meet in clubs, pubs, at sporting events, etc. because humans are sociable beings. But is it necessary to attend church?

I. Jesus and His Church

Luke 4:18 At the time of Jesus, Jews met every Sabbath in the synagogue for worship (Acts 15:21). It was Jesus’ custom to go

to “church” regularly on Sabbath.

Matt 16:18 Jesus established the church. The church is a group of believers that follows Jesus, believes what Jesus believed, and does things together.

John 10:16 Christians are also called His “flock.” This term implies that Jesus’ disciples are not only isolated believers but form a group that meets, listens to God’s Word, prays, proclaims the gospel, etc. Without meeting, sharing a common message, and being involved in a common task, there is no “flock” or church.

Matt 18:20 Sometimes the local congregations may be small, but where two or three are assembled in the name of Jesus, He has promised to be with them.

Jesus emphasized the ordinance of footwashing (John 13:14–15), instituted the Lord’s Supper (Luke 22:19, 20), and gave the Great Commission (Matt 28:18–20). All of this requires a church and believers that meet regularly—particularly on Sabbaths—to worship God and serve humanity.

II. The Practice of the Early Church

Acts 1:15 After Jesus’ ascension to heaven, the believers met in Jerusalem.

Acts 2:1 While together, they experienced the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 2:41; 5:14 Those who accepted the gospel were baptized and added to the church. Baptism involves living with the community and family of Christ—His church.

Acts 2:42, 46 They enjoyed regular fellowship.

Acts 12:5 While Peter was imprisoned, the church was praying for him and a miracle occurred.

III. Paul and the Church

Acts 13:14, 42 Paul went to the synagogue on Sabbath.

Acts 16:13 On Sabbath, Paul and his companions were looking for an outdoor gathering place for communal prayer.

Acts 17:2 It was Paul’s custom to attend worship services on Sabbath.

Acts 18:4 This was also an opportunity to discuss and teach Christian beliefs.

Heb 10:25 This text contains a clear admonition to meet together. Christians cannot be people who live in isolation, unless they

find themselves in a place with no other believers. To meet is necessary in order to encourage, comfort, and strengthen each other; learn from each other; be more and more grounded in the Lord and His message; and be prepared to do what He calls His disciples to do.

IV. Christians Meeting over the Centuries

Church history reveals that over the centuries Christians maintained that they needed to meet on a regular basis. Even when persecuted, Christians did not give up assembling for worship and other purposes. They may have fled to other places (Acts 8:1, 4). The Waldenses moved to remote places in the Alps; others went underground. Christians, Adventists among them, met regularly.

It was very well understood that it is not optional to form a fellowship of believers in order to meet as a church.

V. Adventists and Their Meetings

Adventists meet on the biblical Sabbath to study and worship. They believe it is necessary to have a Bible study session in which believers and guests can learn, share their experiences, ask questions, make meaningful comments, and prepare for their ministry. Jesus opened the Scriptures on Sabbath morning and shared. Paul taught and discussed the gospel with people on the Sabbath.

In addition, the Adventist Church devotes time to hearing God’s message preached in a sermon, singing and praying to the Lord, thanking Him for His guidance, and bringing tithes and offerings.

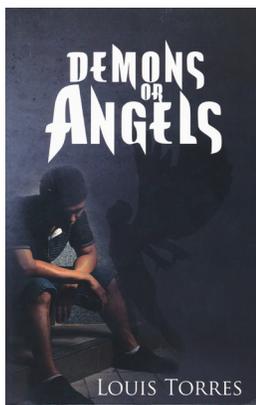
However, the life of the church is not totally expressed by meetings on Sabbath. There are other meetings and activities on other days of the week. Some churches have official prayer meetings, meetings for pathfinders and youth, meetings for women and men, social meetings, etc. In addition, larger churches may have small groups that meet for Bible study and prayer during the week and for various other purposes. To join them can be very beneficial.

Conclusion

A Christian in deliberate isolation is an oxymoron. Believers in Jesus Christ form His church. They refrain from thinking just about themselves. They form a larger community—a fellowship and family that lives for the common good, shares the wonderful gospel entrusted to it, and reaches out to those having all kinds of needs.

“But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Pet 2:9).

BOOK NOTES



Louis Torres, *Demons or Angels: Demonic Possession*, Gaston, OR: Torres LC Ministries, 2013, 192 pp. US\$13.99.

In *Demons or Angels*, Louis Torres draws attention to a phenomenon that by and large goes unaddressed—spiritualism in our times. Torres exposes the phenomenon of contemporary spiritualism in thirty-four short and easy-to-read chapters. His own early

life experiences appear to have prepared him to write on this topic.

As the subtitle of the book indicates, Torres focuses primarily on demonic possession, a phenomenon that he believes some practitioners deceptively label as “oppression” (p. 25). Torres makes this point with many real-life experiences, showing that in most cases supernatural forces take ownership of the so-called “oppressed” persons. He biblically traces the origins of these supernatural forces to the fall of Satan and his angels, and shows how they manifested themselves in biblical times (pp. 29–68). Throughout, he emphasizes that the com-

monly held false doctrine that dead persons either go to heaven or hell is to blame for making people gullible to demonic possession. While acknowledging that evil angels often masquerade as dead people’s spirits, Torres provides a positive counterpoint and documents several instances—both in Scripture and contemporary times—when God’s angels have manifested themselves among humans on missions of mercy (pp. 69–78).

In the rest of the book, Torres discusses manifestations of demonic possession in relation to mental illness (pp. 82–120), precipitating factors for demonic possession (pp. 121–134), and the Bible’s approach to ridding oneself and victims of the phenomenon as opposed to contemporary deceptive techniques (pp. 121–139).

Torres has done a good job in exposing a phenomenon that often goes under the radar, and this is perhaps the biggest value to the book. The many demonic encounters recounted in the book should give skeptics pause to re-examine the evidence. An added strength is the author’s personal familiarity with the issues involved in demonic possession. But above all, the supporting biblical material for the positions adopted by the author makes this work commendable to sincere Bible-believing Christians who are often at a loss as to what to make of a phenomenon that can be bizarre and frightening.

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