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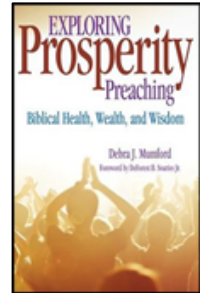
Book Review

Exploring Prosperity Preaching: Biblical Health, Wealth, and Wisdom

Debra J. Mumford

Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Judson Press, 2012

In her book, Debra J. Mumford, the Frank H. Caldwell Associate Professor of Homiletics at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, explores Word of Faith theology and its central teachings. Mumford does not simply condemn the prosperity theology of the Word of Faith movement, but reveals both strengths and shortcomings of prosperity theology by critically analyzing prosperity preachers' sermons and teachings. The book offers a profound understanding of the core problems of prosperity theology, and several ways to reconstruct faith for the followers of the prosperity gospel after rejecting it.



In chapter one, Mumford explores the history of the Word of Faith movement and its leading figures. Mumford traces the origin of the Word of Faith movement back to the New Thought movement which taught that “changing one’s thinking could not only affect one’s health but every aspect of one’s life, including financial well-being” (11). This claim of “New Thought” provides a fundamental ground for the Word of Faith movement and prosperity theology.

From chapter two to eleven, each chapter deals with the central teachings of prosperity theology and their shortcomings. However, three major problems of prosperity theology are related to other problems: overemphasis on material wealth, inadequate biblical hermeneutics, and individualistic messages of prosperity preaching. All of the teachings and preaching of the prosperity preachers relate to material wealth. The prosperity preachers teach people to have faith in God so God will bless them abundantly with material wealth and good physical health. God is the source of everything they want, and will provide them anything if they believe in God’s promise and invest money, prayers and whatever they can offer to God. The anointing by the Holy Spirit, using the authority of the name of Jesus, and positive confession, all are means of becoming rich and healthy. Heavy emphasis on material wealth inevitably distorts the messages of the Bible in accordance with a capitalistic framework (130). The poor are recognized as unfaithful and richness is a sign of faithfulness, whereas the Bible claims the poor as the blessed children of God (54).

Second, the biblical interpretation of prosperity theology reveals a major flaw. Mumford investigates the biblical interpretation of the Word of Faith theology. Based on belief in the Bible as the literal word of God, Word of Faith preachers reject standard biblical exegesis and interpret the Bible as proof text and as typology, ignoring the original intention of the biblical authors and the historical contexts of the Bible. In this kind of interpretation, the biblical texts can be interpreted as diversely as one wants, and lose relevance to the original meanings of the texts (31). Interpreting the entire Bible as God’s redemptive plan distorts the particular messages of the biblical texts.

Third, the prosperity preachers focus on the individualistic aspect of faith. While cooperative sin and systemic injustice exist in the world, the prosperity preachers ignore its existence, concentrating only on individual conversion and repentance. They argue that social ills can be overcome through individual conversion to faith (121). Mumford points out the fact that the systemic injustice is still present in our society today, and personal conversion does not automatically solve these social ills. She argues that the prosperity preachers should be more aware of the nature of social injustice and the communal aspect of sin. For these reasons, despite the fact that prosperity theology can give people some gifts, such as faith, hope, personal accountability, and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, Mumford concludes that prosperity theology is unbiblical and that many claims of Word of Faith preachers are not valid (132). Therefore, in the final chapter, she provides several ways that adherents of the prosperity theology can reconstruct their faith.

One minor critique of her work is her proposal of the reconstruction of faith for the adherents of the prosperity gospel. Mumford judges that prosperity theology is unbiblical and many of its claims are invalid. Then what is gained by reconstructing its faith? What benefits can be earned by reconstructing the faith of prosperity theology? It seems to me her way of reconstructing the faith of the prosperity gospel is removing unbiblical claims from prosperity theology. What are left are general theological claims that can generally be accepted by most Christians. By addressing what can be gained by reconstructing its faith, Mumford can strengthen her claim for the reconstruction of the prosperity gospel.

Because of the strong influence of the prosperity gospel on the church today, our church should critically engage with it, and understand it as a phenomenon rather than ignoring its existence. Mumford provides a helpful guide and rich resources to understand prosperity theology, its weakness and strengths, and possible contributions to Christian churches and theology.

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