

Prosperity Preaching from the Ears and Eyes of a Victim-Survivor

by Rev. Sharon Ellis Davis, PhD

I was a guest in a local church celebrating the confirmation of a well known pastor's elevation to the position of Chief Apostle. The service had a great mixture of the High Church with its liturgical style, and the Charismatic Church with its gospel singing, foot-stomping, mind-blowing enthusiastic worship and praise followed by a Spirit-filled message. The worship was long. However, I was enjoying this combination of worship style and wanted to experience the church's method of elevating one to the position of Chief Apostle. So I stayed although two hours had passed and the main event had not yet taken place.

After a fiery sermon that lasted for forty-five minutes, after being billed by the guest preacher as a twelve-minute sermon representing the twelve apostles, the true meaning of this worship experience came alive. The preacher began to collect the offering. He started by asking for those with \$1,000 to stand first and line up at the front of the church where he received their checks in his hand to ensure that the exact amount requested was listed on the many checks that were written. After about twenty minutes he asked additionally, for those who could give \$100 to come forth also.

I am not an advocate of this method of collecting the offering. And I am especially not fond of utilizing more than an hour of worship time to motivate or might I say con folks out of their money in exchange for a personal blessing and promise of prosperity or some form of dynamic healing from their infirmities. This type of fund raising in the church reminds me of the prosperity preaching tradition that I believe sends the wrong message to everyone. Prosperity preaching is usually connected with the "Give and You Shall Receive" message. This message in general ties ones "worthiness" as an individual to how much one is able to give or how financially prosperous one is.

Neither of these messages benefits women who are victim-survivors of domestic violence. Many victim-survivors struggle with their self-worth and their value as a human being. In times when the Gospel message to those who are wounded and "poor in spirit" should be, you have value and worth, value and worth become directly related to how much you can give. However, only those who came up to the front of the church with their \$1,000 or \$100 dollars were worthy of receiving a personal blessing and prophetic word of healing and financial blessings from the preacher. I kept wondering, when will I get the opportunity to walk up with my twenty dollars I had saved all week to give to the church? It was twenty dollars that I chose not to eat with because I wanted to bless the church with what I had. It soon became apparent that I or my twenty dollar gift were not worthy of a blessing or a prophetic word of increase and elevation from my present circumstances. So I sat and watched everyone else willing to

give, get blessed, prayed over, and have increase spoken into their lives. And I kept silently wandering, when will it be my turn? My turn never came.

Prosperity preaching, no matter how well intended it may be, is not healthy for anyone, especially for those who are sitting in the pews battered, recovering from abuse, and wanting to hear a word from the Lord that brings healing, hope, wholeness, and empowerment into their lives. Yes, God wants all of us to live the abundant life. However, abundance is not directly tied to how much you can give, how much you earn, where you live, or, what type of car you drive. Many victim-survivors have suffered the loss of their homes because it became an unsafe place to live. Many victim-survivors have suffered the loss of income because they were unable to feel safe or protected from the violence that followed them to their place of employment.

Approximately one out of ten people in the congregation are victim-survivors. Prosperity preaching must speak to their self worth and value while in their present state, with a promise and hope for healing, deliverance, and restoration from their present circumstances and situations. Prosperity preaching must signify a Gospel that wants and promises the abundant life to all of God's children and that abundance begins with internal liberation from all that keeps us from living out our full potential as loved and valued children of God.

We used to sing a song in church that contained the following lyrics: "If anybody asks you who I am tell them I am a child of God." People must leave worship feeling their full power and inclusion regardless of how much they give. Remember the biblical story of the Widow's Mite? She gave one penny. God received it as good because she gave all she had. Victim-survivors need to be reminded that their choice to leave their relationship was for their own health and wholeness after giving all they could give to keep their relationship alive. They need to be celebrated for the difficult choices they had to make for themselves and their children. They need to be lifted up among the congregation as people who have chosen to live the abundant life and celebrated for their new found power in Jesus Christ.

One well known self-identified prosperity preacher was interviewed by a local news station. His empire was built on the message that God does not want you to be poor. I am in total agreement with this statement. However, the Christian Bible also teaches that the poor will be with us always. With this understanding, prosperity preaching must include how it ministers with and among those who are poor. Jesus said there was good news for the poor. I believe this good news is the same good news for victim-survivors. You are loved, you are worthy, and, regardless of your circumstance, you are valued.

Well I had a choice to make during the worship service I attended. I could have chosen to sit in church and continue to allow my worth to plummet. Or I could choose to do something personal that would lift my sense of who I was and my self-worth. I chose to do the later. I left the church during the offering time and went to a restaurant and had a delicious meal. "Oh taste and see that the Lord is good."