

ARE WE BEING BLESSED, PROSPEROUS AND IN VICTORY?

Dorothy Bullón, Mesoamerica

A few years ago, a pastor flew over Costa Rica spreading oil over the country's air space to free it of evil spirits. Miguel L. Llenas comments: "In Mexico, a few months ago, an unusual event occurred. A famous Mexican preacher emptied barrels of oil over the Aztec capital from a helicopter to anoint it, give it liberation from and protection against the hosts of evil."¹

There are people who think that their alcoholic husband has the spirit of alcoholism, or that their transvestite son has a spirit of homosexuality. They say that the solution is to exorcise these unclean spirits with the voice of authority. There have been services where the congregation spends a lot of time trying to "tie up or bind Satan." Are Satan and his helpers responsible for evil? Is exorcism the solution? Do we have any power over Satan?

To raise money for the international television channel for the Hispanic world, ENLACE, there are periodic campaigns to raise money. I heard the following comments on one occasion: "If you want to see your husband or your son at the altar, pledge your offering to the channel." And on another occasion: "If you give 10% of your debt to ENLACE, God will see that the rest gets paid." Do Christians have to be prosperous? Is poverty a curse of God? Can we bargain with God or invest in Him, as if He were a bank?

Dr. Osías Segura in his book *Riquezas, templos, apóstoles y superapóstoles* (Riches, Temples, Apostles and Super-Apostles) tells the experience of a congregation that wanted to build a huge temple because it is "the house of God."

Several Sundays have gone by and the Apostle hadn't preached, and everyone knew that he was going to bring a new word ... The apostle said: "The Lord has spoken to me, and He wants a larger temple for us to worship him, where his people may be able to fit in". We will have to invest millions of dollars, as it is for the house of God, there will be a campaign to raise more offerings and tithes (2012, p. 7).

The pastor's call to build this huge sanctuary sounds more like Solomon's call to build the Temple in Jerusalem. Does God live in buildings or in us His people?

Guillermo Maldonado, a pastor in Florida says that it is possible "to enter into the glory. God wants to introduce us to the movement of the glory ... Faith is a requirement to enter into glory. Faith will be given to us to enter the supernatural atmosphere because it is the atmosphere of God."² When a minister has the glory of God, incredible miracles are possible, such as changing water into wine or raising the dead. The question is: What is the glory of God, a supernatural atmosphere? Is it possible to enter into it?

One part of the program of some churches is to bring new believers to weekend retreats where one of the purposes of these events is to lead them to "break curses". In other words, to have experiences of "cleansing" of evil spirits and influences of these, even as far back as in the lives

¹ Miguel L. Llenas, <http://www.biblicaemanuel.com/Brujeria%20Evangelica.pdf>

² Apóstol Guillermo Maldonado "Ser Introducidos a la Gloria de Dios"
<http://jovenesfyv.blogspot.com/2012/08/ser-introducidos-la-gloria-de-dios.html>

of grandparents and great-grandparents, to the fourth generation.³ What does the Bible mean when it speaks of curses? Do they always come from the evil one? Does it matter so much what one's great-grandfather did?

They say that every word that is said must be positive, because words themselves have power. People can claim their health and their prosperity. Is there power in positive thinking as Norman Vincent Peale says? So, what is faith?⁴

These are some of the teachings that go out by satellite to our homes and many believers, even Nazarenes in different parts of the world, listen and see what appear to be powerful truths that can lead the church to victory. One of the phrases they repeat in greeting one another is **"We are being blessed, prospered and in victory."**

Let us now turn to some biblical and theological answers from a Wesleyan perspective, to find the real meaning for this phrase.

What is Faith?

Those who promote prosperity theology often assert that a word has power in itself. In this case, faith amounts to a positive pronouncement. For example, they say that God created the world by "the word of faith". We must distinguish between having vision, believing in the great things that God can do and this position of prosperity theologians who say that there is power in the "words" we use.

Every pastor should have a vision of what God can do. As William Carey said, "we must expect great things from God and do great things for God". This is faith in God and not faith in the "positive pronouncements." No church is going to grow without vision in what God can do. Although a positive attitude can open doors in any situation and a negative one can be discouraging, in the Christian life we go beyond this. We believe in an omnipotent God who can do great things.

Faith then amounts to trust, faith implies relationship, it is faith in someone, in our case it is faith in God. Not faith in itself, the words spoken do not represent something magical for this or that question. Christian faith represents a confidence, a total assurance, in a Supreme Being who has promised to help us if we trust in Him (Hebrews 11: 1 and 6, Hebrews 12: 2).

Wholistic Prosperity

The promoters of Prosperity Theology base their teachings mostly on the promises given to the Israelites in the desert, found in the book of Deuteronomy, the Old Covenant that God made with his people. However, the New Testament, which is our basic document as the Christian Church, speaks of a New Covenant with a leader who was born in a manger, came from a humble family, escaped as a refugee to Egypt with his parents, grew up in the house of a craftsman in the insignificant town of Nazareth, died possessing only one robe which the Roman soldiers threw dices for at the foot of the cross, was crucified with criminals and buried in a borrowed tomb. His

³ See the answer of Juan Stam ¿Qué enseña la Biblia sobre "maldiciones generacionales"? <http://www.juanstam.com/dnn/Blogs/tabid/110/EntryID/315/Default.aspx>

⁴ Norman Vincent Peale (1952). *The Power of Positive Thinking*. New York: Fireside publishers

prophetic teachings never exalted prosperity. He himself healed and forgave many people who were not accepted or were even despised by the society of his day.

Similarly, though Paul came from the middle-class, he and his father were Pharisees and tentmakers, yet he left all this to be the missionary to the Gentiles. He did not even ask for financial help from the churches, he worked with his own hands so as not to burden them. The following verses make clear the teaching of Jesus and Paul about riches and prosperity (Luke 18:24, Mark 10:23, Matthew 6: 19-21, Luke 12: 33-34, I Timothy 6: 3 -10).

One thing is certain, when many people become followers of Jesus, their lifestyle changes, their financial situation improves as they do not spend money on vices and the family begins to be more prosperous. There is also another facet, we as members of the fellowship must be sensitive to the possibility of sharing with others to help them in the process of managing their resources better (see the example of the first church in Jerusalem, Acts 2:41-47, 4:32-37). This could involve a compassionate social aid project, teaching new jobs to bless people as much as we can, and sharing what we have with the poor.

The Manifestation of the Glory of God

The essence of God's glory is His holiness. Holiness and glory are inseparable as this verse says: "Who among the gods is like you, Lord? Who is like you— majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?" (Exodus 15:11). The glory of God was manifested in the Old Testament by means of a series of symbols such as fire, light, or through nature that declares His glory (Psalm 8:1, 19:1).

The great and real manifestation of the God's glory is the incarnation of God in this world, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. John 1:14 tells us: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (see also Hebrews 1: 2-3). In John, the hour of Jesus' crucifixion is the hour of His glory (John 7:39; 12: 23-28).

Given the link between glory and holiness, the best manifestation of the glory of God today is the believer, from the moment he or she is born again; but those who manifest the "glory" of God more clearly are undoubtedly those who "radiate" their love and deep and selfless compassion, feed the hungry and care for the sick and dying, those who exhibit in their lives the crucified Savior, those whose power is perfected in weakness, who have learned to die with Christ and who live to serve others.

The bottom line is, that glory is the manifestation of holiness, and holiness is the manifestation of love - faithful, compassionate, selfless love. According to II Cor. 3: 18 "And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."

The Biblical Curses

Something else that needs to be addressed is the issue of curses. In the Bible most curses are divine and not satanic (see Deuteronomy, chapters 27-30). Probably we should translate the word "curse" more as punishment or judgment, or the opposite of blessing. The curses that God promised to the Israelites in the Ancient Covenant come because they did not obey the stipulations. In the New Testament, obedience to God remains a key issue. Both the teachings of

Jesus and those of Paul are full of imperatives that show the ethical path that God wants us to follow. In the end it will be the obedient ones who will inherit the Kingdom, since “to him who overcomes” in the end, will be saved.

The expression "up to the fourth generation" found in Deuteronomy is a Hebrew expression. It should not be taken literally. It implies that disobedience has its consequences that can pass to other generations. When God took his people to Babylon, they suffered 70 years of captivity. People of different generation were banished and younger generations were born into captivity.

The Role of the Devil and Fallen Angels in Today's World

There really is a need to study a little more what the Bible teaches about this character. From Genesis to Malachi, there really is no clear reference to a fallen angel identified as the devil. There are about three references to Satan that occur just after the exile (1 Chronicles 21:2, Job chapters 1 and 2, and Zechariah 3:1). The word Satan means in the Hebrew "accuser." In Job and in Zechariah the accuser is in the presence of God, and this does not sound like the devil of the New Testament.

It is curious that even when he appears in the Old Testament, he comes as a tempter. In Genesis, he appears as a serpent that tempts Eve. In Revelation, we learn who that serpent really was. In the prologue of the Bible he enters as a serpent, but later becomes big and fierce, and in the epilogue of biblical revelation he is a dangerous dragon, but he will be defeated and punished for ever.

When we come to the New Testament we find much more teaching about Satan and the demons. The word is used 36 times in the New Testament, and he is always a sinister character who represents forces and influences which oppose Christ. In the New Testament we see that people can be tempted, demons can possess certain people, he is the "father of lies," among other phrases. Paul speaks of principalities and powers in high places. It is a force that opposes the church. In Revelation we see that all the supernatural forces of evil are finally to be destroyed.

Some questions arise

1. Is Satan responsible for evil?

Many of the Spiritual Warfare movements believe in this: So people can have spirits of drunkenness or adultery, etc. People talk about binding Satan, cleaning the atmosphere with oil to free us from the territorial spirits. When God created the angels and us, in His love, He gave us free will. Both Satan and those who fell with him and our first prehistoric parents chose to disobey. They did not have to. Although Satan is one more rebel, he tempts us to do evil, but it is we who fall. Then, ultimately, man is responsible for his own evil.

2. Are God and Satan in a head-to-head war?

Satan is a created being, inferior to God. God limits his actions. We do not believe in dualism. When Jesus died, He overcame Satan and the powers of evil. This victory will be completed in the final times. Although the Bible calls Satan "the prince of this world," God is the King of all Creation. We must not forget this.

3. *What then is evil?*

The Bible speaks of three spheres of evil (Ephesians 2: 1-3)

- **Human evil.** This is what is in our heart, what we inherit, what makes us disobey just like our ancestors did. Most of the evil in the world is evil that comes out of the human heart. We cannot and should not blame the demons for all this. Jesus did not die for the sins of the demons. What led him to Calvary was our wickedness.
- **Structural evil.** Here we are talking about political structures or different orders of powers that create situations of evil, call it corruption, slavery, manipulation, etc. It amounts to human evil on a larger scale.
- **Occult evil.** In the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments, it is very clear that there is a world of necromancy and magic (Deuteronomy 18: 9-14; Acts 8:9-25; 19:13-19). If man chooses to enter this world, he risks having contact with the evil world of a supernatural order.

Biblical Teaching on Spiritual Warfare

The New Testament mentions that there is a battle against the forces of evil. What should we do? In the first place, Jesus showed us the way when we are tempted to do evil, each of us must resist. The New Testament offers us protective armor, but it does not invite us to attack the supernatural forces of evil at any time. The battle at this level is in the hands of God.

As for structural evil, we have a responsibility as prophets of the Kingdom of God to denounce it as a system and work to free people enslaved by it. Our ministry of compassion is part of the strategy of helping people become aware of evil structures and to help them to be freed and restored. We must love our neighbor as a sign of our love for God. God invites us to work with him to take away the evil that is in human hearts, in order to come to the justice and love of the Kingdom of God.

Wholistic Liberation

We have mentioned meetings that are taking place in different churches around us, where techniques are used to free people from the supposed curses, wounds and damages of the past, "up to the fourth generation." We have already mentioned the fact that the curses referred to in Deuteronomy are from God, and that the phrase "unto the fourth generation" is a Hebrew refrain.

Is there something that we need to be released from? Obviously, if someone comes to the church possessed by an evil spirit, the pastor and the elders have a responsibility to exercise the authority given by Jesus to expel these supernatural wicked influences.

But can a believer be possessed by an evil spirit? A Christian, who is living a life of obedience, walking faithfully in the ways of the Lord, cannot be possessed by an evil spirit. It is not possible for the Spirit of God and an unclean spirit to cohabitate together. For a person who rejects God or apostatizes, it is possible. An active and faithful believer cannot have an evil spirit. We reject

the prevalent belief in these groups that in order for new Christians to grow they need to be released from evil influences in their lives through exorcism.

We recognize that each person may have possible traumas of the past, or the need to forgive those who have hurt them. This is a matter of counseling, it is a delicate issue and it does not seem wise to do it in a mass event. We must, however, improve our practice of ministering to people who require profound inner changes due to things that have happened to them before they knew the Lord.

Is there a liberation that we can accept? We Wesleyans believe that in an act of total surrender, of deep consecration, God can free us from the desire to sin. If we believe that most of the guilt for the evil in the world is in the human heart, then the liberation that counts is this. When our will is changed by "the filling of the Holy Spirit," we no longer want to sin. This release is possible only through the work of the Lord and we can call it an wholistic liberation, as it will affect all areas of our lives and is an important part of the process of sanctification that will last for a lifetime. A process in which we are being transformed, not by magic, or mass exorcism, but by the work of the Holy Spirit working with our wills, until we become like Christ.

Religious Manipulation

In pagan religious systems they believe that gods can be manipulated by magical acts or rites. Magic involves an act of giving something in exchange for a favor. Much of what is seen in the services of these movements under study falls a bit in this category. For example they say, "Give God a hundred dollars and you will receive 1000", or "buy this rose and it will bring the presence of God to your home." In the "Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (a Brazilian sect), the worship service is for the most part an act of liberating intruding spirits supposedly affecting every area of the parishioners' lives.

Even in the more orthodox Protestant evangelical churches there are techniques for changing the atmosphere, as in the case of boisterous "praise" songs followed by softer "worship" songs, with the purpose of affecting the mood of the congregation. While it is good to recognize the importance of creating an appropriate worship environment, we must take care of not manipulating situations. Sometimes a chorus is repeated over and over again, as if it were an evangelical "mantra"; and sometimes people fall into trance in the same way as Hindus and Buddhists who employ their "mantras." It seems that the true meaning of worship has been lost. One should go to church not for what can be received but for what we can give in adoration of God and in communion and friendship with the fellowship. One should be very cautious about the use of music or other elements that could manipulate the congregation emotionally.

Are We Being Blessed, Prosperous and in Victory?

We receive our blessing because there is more blessing in giving than receiving, because if we walk in obedience, we receive the joy and the smile of God. **We are prosperous**, not because we have the most luxurious house in the neighborhood, but because God promises to be with us and promises to provide what we really need. We know that we are not going to stop suffering which

is part of this world in which we live. But as the old Apostle we know that in times of mourning or sickness, the grace of the Lord will suffice and the fellowship of the brethren will comfort us. **We are in victory** because God is working in our lives, encouraging us to want to do well. The prosperity or "shalom" that God offers is not measured in dollars, it is to live in peace with God and our neighbors, it is to know that we are loved, and that we love God with all our heart, and also others, including our enemies. **It is wholistic sanctification.**

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