

# Atibaia Statement on Prosperity Theology

## Recommendations from The Lausanne Global Consultation on Prosperity Theology, Poverty and the Gospel

**Atibaia, Brazil, 30 March – 02 April 2014**

### Preamble

We, the participants of The Lausanne Consultation on ‘Prosperity Theology, Poverty and the Gospel’, gathered in Brazil to discuss, debate, and better understand the growing influence and work of what is known as Prosperity Theology (PT) in our world today, how it relates to poverty, and how it affects the mission of ‘the whole church taking the whole gospel to the whole world’. We studied the Scriptures, prayed together, heard stories and reports from various parts the world, and worked to discern the Holy Spirit’s prophetic voice to the church. We came together, driven by our passion for the gospel of Jesus Christ and in obedience to the mandate to share the good news through words, deeds, and character, because of a shared concern that PT offers a shallow gospel that actually undermines the fullness of the good news of Jesus. The fullness of the gospel includes a plan of personal salvation, leading to eternal life, in the context of the over-arching biblical story of what God has done to save his whole creation through the death and resurrection of Christ.

We understand that the term ‘Prosperity Theology’ is itself imprecise. There are varieties of prosperity theologies, all of which are rooted, expressed, and embraced in particular contexts. We further acknowledge the need for a better understanding of the diverse historical, sociological, cultural, economic, psychological, and theological contexts in which the teachings of PT take hold. We recognize that the issues raised in this consultation will not be exhausted or solved in a few days, and that a deeper understanding of PT might lead to a more nuanced response to its manifestations in different parts of the world. Yet despite the limitations, we humbly offer these recommendations to the wider church as a call for further reflection and action by evangelicals as we work together to serve God’s Kingdom and to participate in God’s work of reconciling the world to himself.

This consultation built on prior work and resources within The Lausanne Movement. In particular, the Lausanne Theology Working Group’s ‘[Declaration from Akropong](#)’ (2008 – 2009) and [Section IIE of the Cape Town Commitment](#), ‘Calling the Church of Christ back to humility, integrity and simplicity.’<sup>1</sup> We encourage churches and Christian organizations to study and carefully consider the challenges raised in those documents.

## I. A call to confession

- We recognize that The Lausanne Movement was birthed and remains largely within a privileged context. Such a context shapes our worldview, informs our perspectives on simplicity, and limits our understanding of the complexities of poverty. Therefore, walking in humility must include a deep awareness of the ways any call to simplicity or a biblical lifestyle might be irrelevant to, or even further burden, those who already find themselves oppressed by poverty.
- We recognize that often we have been too quick to judge and to make pronouncements about justice, poverty, or wealth distribution, without taking the time to listen and to be present with those whose lives are shaped by poverty and oppression. We confess that our failure to live out the gospel is in some cases responsible for some of the aberrations and injustices.
- We recognize that we have often denounced the excesses of PT while failing to denounce the ways a therapeutic or self-help gospel has replaced the supremacy of Christ in many of our churches.
- We recognize that a consumerist understanding of the Christian life is pervasive in many churches. Such an understanding blinds us to the suffering, persecution, and oppression endured by many of our sisters and brothers around the world.

## II. A Call to Action

- **Justice, mercy and service:**

Christians are called to act justly and to love tenderly. We are further called to serve others and in so doing to recognize Christ in the least of our sisters and brothers. Service is not just *for* others, but is done *with* others – with the poor, with the oppressed, with the neighbour.

- Acts of service – such as education, health care, relief services – and acts of justice and advocacy are an integral part of witnessing to the gospel. The exploitation of poverty and need has no place in Christian outreach. In witnessing to the gospel through service and advocacy, Christians should denounce and refrain from the exploitation of poverty, including offerings of false hope, rooted in a mechanistic understanding of divine reward and blessing.

- **Ethics of power and wealth:**

Christians are called to denounce injustice. In many parts of the world the media expose scandals of abuse and corruption by leaders of PT movements. Whether such evils are public or hidden, Christians must challenge (i) the abuse of power, including spiritual power; (ii) a ‘right to wealth’ ethos that discourages accountability and promotes unethical fundraising efforts; and (iii) practices that exploit and oppress those who are most vulnerable.

- Christians must confront any teaching which measures its success in material health and wealth with a coherent theology of creation, sin, Christ-centred redemption, and future creational hope.

- **Generosity and blessings:**

Christians are called to give of our very being and to share the gifts that God has given us. We recognize the empowerment that comes from gift-giving and the importance that Jesus our Lord placed on even the smallest gift offered sacrificially for the Kingdom. Acts of generosity and blessings should be central marks of the Christian church.

- **Structural justice and shalom:**

Christians are called not only to give and share generously, but to work for the alleviation of poverty. This should include offering alternative, ethical ways, for the creation of wealth and the maintenance of socially-responsible businesses that empower the poor and provide material benefit, and individual and communal dignity. This must always be done with the understanding that all wealth and all creation belong first and foremost to God.

- We recognize that there are places where structural changes must take place before alternative sources of income can be created. In such cases Christians must denounce the corruption and oppression that limit the options for those caught in poverty and thus engage in the search for alternative and just political, economic and cultural structures.

- **Healing and compassion:**

As an integral part of our witness to the gospel, Christians exercise ministries of healing and compassion. We are called to have great discernment as we carry out these ministries, fully respecting human dignity and ensuring that the vulnerability of people and their need for healing and / or compassion are not exploited. We affirm the need for compassionate evangelism, knowing

that suffering for the gospel and bearing the pain of another are acts worthy of the Kingdom of God and are genuine ways to embody Christ with those who suffer.

- **Building relationships:**

Christians should strive to build relationships of trust and respect with all people, seeking ways for genuine, truthful conversations in which convictions can be challenged and the gospel made clear.

### **III. A call to life in the Kingdom**

- We affirm a biblical vision for the wellbeing of humanity and all of God's creation.
- We affirm that God wishes the best for his children, and we seek ourselves to emulate his desire; but we recognize the ways our cultures distort our desires and draw us away from the fullness of life that is offered to all in Christ Jesus. Materialism and consumerism are two primary forms of the distortion of desires. Where the teachings of PT manipulate and control, Christians must be a prophetic voice, offering genuine justice and hope.
- We affirm the need to distinguish between a pastoral response that cares for individuals and the prophetic denouncement of the leadership responsible for any kind of manipulation and oppression. Jesus had compassion for those who were confused and lost because of being led astray, but he fiercely denounced those who did the leading. All Christian leadership must embody the model of service and self-sacrifice given to us by Jesus Christ.
- We call the church back to life in the Kingdom – a life marked by service, humility, and integrity, where we speak the truth to those in power, denounce the false gods of our cultures, and live as followers of Christ in the multiplicity of our contexts.

In obedience to God the Father, we call the church to be of the same mind, the mind that is in Christ Jesus; to share life in the Spirit, life in all its fullness, so that we shine like stars in order that the world may know the saving love of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

### **IV. A call to reflection**

- We must respond to immoderate and to subtle manifestations of PT by careful engagement with the entirety of Scripture. This means we will (i) engage with the whole biblical narrative; and (ii) give a clear expression of the gospel, and thoughtful reflection on the hermeneutical assumptions and practices that inform interpretations of the Bible. It is not enough simply to claim that 'the Bible is on our side', since Christians with different convictions, who would also affirm the authority of Scripture, will make the same claim, pointing to numerous texts that they believe support their practices.
- We are called to participate in a productive conversation about how the whole Bible should shape convictions regarding health and prosperity, and how we understand our lifestyles in light of God's saving act in Jesus Christ.
  - *How do we engage those whose hermeneutical strategies are so different that a fruitful conversation about interpretation seems almost impossible?*
- We acknowledge that sometimes God uses suffering to refine people's faith and to strengthen his people. Too often the church focuses on preaching a gospel of blessings whereas the proclamation of the whole gospel to the whole world will require the church to take adequate account of the place of mourning and lament.
  - *What are the biblical resources and practices that need to be learned so that we can better engage and be present with those who suffer and grieve?*

We recognize that poverty is a complex, multi-dimensional reality. It includes (i) lack of income and productive resources sufficient to ensure sustainable livelihoods; (ii) hunger and malnutrition; (iii) ill health; (iv) limited access or no access to education and other basic services; (v) increased morbidity

and mortality from illness; (vi) homelessness and inadequate housing; (vii) unsafe environments; and (viii) social discrimination and exclusion. It is also characterized by a lack of participation in decision-making and in civil, social and cultural life. It affects both the individual and the community and has wide-ranging repercussions on all of creation.

- *As a relational reality, poverty has economic, physical, social, mental, and spiritual causes. How would a biblical, evangelical gospel offer an answer to these poverties?*
- We acknowledge that, in the global market economy, one of the most effective tools for the elimination of poverty is economic development, and yet evangelicals have often failed to promote value-driven business solutions to poverty.
  - *How can we more effectively work for the establishment of creative, ethical, and sustainable business endeavours in the fight against poverty? (See [BAM Think Tank website](#))*
- We realize that many manifestations of PT, even in its basest and most contractual expressions, offer people a place of belonging, a sense of hope, and a theology that challenges the status quo.
  - *How can we offer deeper community, a better hope, and a theology that challenges the status quo and oppression through the embodiment of justice and love? What are the biblical resources for developing a Christian anthropology that accounts for the emotions, religious experiences, feelings and thought processes of people and communities in the multiplicity of their contexts?*

## **Epilogue**

A Consultation such as this often raises more questions than answers. We hope we have helped to shed light on some of the challenges PT brings. We also hope that through careful reflection we might reconsider the ways we think about wealth and poverty and the relation of these to an ethical Christian witness.

It is our prayer that Christians worldwide will take this text and use it wisely within the many contexts in which God has placed us. We trust that it will inspire biblical preaching, teaching and living that confronts the abuses of PT, and that it will encourage Christians to lead ethical lifestyles that indeed make us bearers of a better hope, the hope we have in Christ Jesus.

## **Appendix I: [Akropong Statement \(2008-2009\)](#)**

## **Appendix II: [Cape Town Commitment \(2010\) Section IIE-5: Walk in simplicity, rejecting the idolatry of greed](#)**

Cf. United Nations, 'Programme of Action of the World Summit for Social Development', Copenhagen 1995, A/CONF.166/9.