

The ancient Greek Sophistry: A synthetic analysis of the 21st century prosperity gospel preachers

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ABSTRACT: The Ancient Greek Sophists occupy a very important and a unique period in Western civilization, scholars are not certain if they should be considered as philosophers. This is largely due to their mode of operation. They were considered as corrupt people who made their way out of every opportunity at the detriment of others. Christianity in the 21st Century has taken a new dimension in several churches around the world; many contemporary preachers of the gospel have mastered the acts of preaching to convince their gullible followers into trusting and believing their teachings. On a daily basis people are falling prey to corrupt and unrealistic doctrines such as prosperity and healing. This has become easily possible because people, mostly Africans are going through very many difficult situations, they have grown ardent desires to better their lives, and perhaps prosperity gospel seems to be glaring opportunity to achieve such desires. Prosperity theology is commonly a part of the televangelist, Charismatic, and Pentecostal churches. Prosperity theology makes the claim that God wants Christians to be abundantly successful in every way including financially. This study seeks to draw a comparative study of the ancient Greek Sophists with our contemporary preachers, which many seem to be masters of all like the sophists. The study employs historical and analytic methods of research. The study concludes that people will always be deceived and manipulated by their desires or longings.

Keywords: Christian, God, gospel, preachers, prosperity, Sophists, theology.

INTRODUCTION

It is painful but worth stating categorically clear that the sophists who existed in 5th Century BC in Athens have no surviving verifiable documentation of their thoughts. Fragments of what we have read about them were presented by Plato. What we have read and perceived about them maybe true or false more so that Plato sounded to have heated them that notwithstanding this research goes with a popular opinion that the sophists were tricky, deceitful and dishonest. The sophists shifted the interest of philosophy as the former Pre-Socratic had from natural phenomena to human affairs, there are nevertheless essential connections between the Pre-Socratic tradition and the new intellectual ferment generated by the Sophists.

It is no longer news that the prosperity gospel is

becoming one of the most talked about discussions of the 21st century within the Christian Community. Bowens observed that "The battle lines have been drawn by prominent and influential scholars, pundits, televangelists, and theologians alike, who are on different sides of this debate and no one is conceding any ground to the other" (2012, p 8). The goal and objective here is not solely to discuss the controversialist, or to talk about the flaws, pitfalls, miscommunication, misinterpretations and miscalculations of the prosperity gospel, but rather to express how the controversy has actually caused the Christian community to critique, examine and reconfigure definitively what actually is the message of prosperity. Moreover, we will determine and affirm both theologically and the scope and extent by which believers can embrace.

the prosperity gospel, if at all. This research also intends to chiefly use the charlatans who due to the harsh realities of history, in a period of unscrupulous imperialism and the war of Greek, were encouraging corresponding theories of the right of the powerful to do as they pleased. Theories that were commonly associated with the names of some of the Sophists, enabled the practice of democracy which created the demand that the Sophists claimed to supply in their capacity of professional educators. The prosperity gospel preachers portray similar behaviour to the 5th century Greek sophists.

WHO ARE THE SOPHISTS?

Kenny asserted that “the Sophists were itinerant teachers who went from city to city offering expert instruction in various subjects. Since they charged fees for imparting their skills, they might be called the first professional philosophers if it were not for the fact that they offered instruction and services over a much wider area than philosophy even in the broadest sense” (2004, p. 29). The sophists claimed expertise in mathematics, astronomy, music, history, literature, and mythology, as well as practical skills as tailors and shoemakers. Other sophists were prepared to teach mathematics, history, and geography; the sophists were all skilled rhetoricians (Kenny, 2004. pp. 29-30). They did brisk business in mid-fifth-century Athens, where young men who had to plead in law courts, or who wished to make their way in politics, were willing to pay substantial sums for their instruction and guidance. The sophists list techniques of argument, and tricks of advocacy. As interpreters of ambiguous texts, and assessors of rival orations, they were among the earliest literary critics. They also gave public lectures and performances, and set up eristic moots, partly for instruction and partly for entertainment (Kenny, 2004, pp. 29-30).

Guthrie described the sophists as a set of charlatans who appeared in Greece in the fifth century, and earned an ample livelihood by imposing on public credulity: professing to teach virtue, they really taught the art of fallacious discourse, and meanwhile propagated immoral practical doctrines. Gravitating to Athens as the Prytaneion of Greece, they were there met and were later overthrown by Socrates, who exposed the hollowness of their rhetoric, turned their quibbles inside out, and triumphantly defended sound ethical principles against their pernicious sophistries (1977, pp. 11-12).

Guthrie observed that, “those who sell their wisdom for money to anyone who wants it are called Sophists”, says Socrates in Xenophon, and adds a comment more caustic than anything in Plato. In the *Meno*, it is Anytus, a typical well-bred member of the governing class, who violently abuses them, and Socrates who is their some-

what ironic defender. Socrates in his old age defended the profession, which he equated with his own philosophical ideal, an ideal much closer to Protagoras than to Plato. The best and greatest reward of a Sophist, he says, is to see some of his pupils become wise and respected citizens. Admittedly, there are some bad Sophists, but those who make the right use of philosophy ought not to be blamed for the few black sheep. In conformity with this, he defends them from the charge of profiteering. None of them, he says, made a great fortune or lived other than modestly, not even Gorgias who earned more than any other and was a bachelor with no family ties. Plato on the other hand emphasizes their wealth, saying for instance that Protagoras earned more from his *Sophia* than Phidias and ten other sculptors put together, and Gorgias and Prodicus more than the practitioners of any other art. Aristotle describes a Sophist as one who makes money out of apparent but unreal wisdom. (1977, pp 36-37).

From the foregoing, the Sophists existed, and they lived by selling their ideas perhaps to anyone who needed help, they were able to use gullible people to attain their selfish interest, this is not to say, nothing good came out of the sophists, there were good ones among the bad eggs too. There are sophists who took pride in their students performing very well and earning respect among the citizens. Guthrie further opined that the absence of universities or colleges gave the sophists an opportunity to fill a gap, to their profit, men like Protagoras, who gloried in the title of Sophist and proudly advertised his ability to teach a young man ‘the proper care of his personal affairs, so that he may best manage his own household, and also of the State’s affairs, so as to become a real power in the city, both as a speaker and man of action (1977, p.19).

Gagarin collaborated with the above that the sophists were groups of people who emerged in the fifth and fourth centuries as intellectuals, whose knowledge was widely applied in many areas, they were orators, logographers, etc. they were famous for a particular attitude, and they took pay for their teaching. He considered them the only professional teachers in Greece; they formed post-elementary institutions (2002, p.9). To Gagarin, Plato objected the sophists for taking pay for two reasons: “because they cannot say exactly what it is they are selling or show its value; and because anyone who accepts pay is obligated, like a merchant, to sell his wares to anyone who can pay for them” (2002, p.10).

PROSPERITY GOSPEL PREACHING

To Bowens, prosperity in the Old Testament perspective connotes the terms; prosperous, property, and prospers.

The term can be referred differently, depending on the context in which it is used. In Gen. 24: 40, the term prosperity conveys being upon a prosperous journey and that those who are undertaking the journey will be successful (2012, p.11). "He said unto me, the Lord, before whom I walk, will send his angel with thee and prosper they way". Genesis 39: 3, the scriptures state; "Joseph was successful or prosperous in all his endeavours and in all his activities because the Lord was with him". "And the Lord was with Joseph and he was a prosperous man; and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian. And his master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord made all that he did to prosper in his hand. He was not prosperous because he obtained wealth, riches and honour, but he was prosperous because the Lord was with him according to the aforementioned verse of scripture. Bowens further captured that:

The English usage of the word prosperity seems to predominately focus on material benefits and blessings while the Hebrew seems to focus on making progress, championing a cause, fulfilling a mission or reaching a destiny. This distinction is further suggested in the terms which are used in the Hebraic form such as break out, or come mightily, to push forward. The impression which this research gets goes way beyond the English translation of riches, wealth, and material blessings. There are a number of instances when prosperity in the Old Testament just simply indicate fulfilling a task or assignment which is to be accomplished. For example, Judges 4:24v, states, "And the hand of the children of Israel prospered." In this instance it is implied that the people of God were successful in battle against Jabin the King of Canaan. In 2nd Chronicles 32:30, states, "And Hezekiah prospered in all his work". According to this reference, the term infers accomplishing various tasks or fulfilling certain assignments. It places a great deal of emphasis on promotion, influence, and making a difference where God has planted you. Wherefore, the term prosperity in Hebrew has a slightly different connotation than what is meant by prosperous in English and American culture. However, the term which seems to be more closely connected or associated with what traditionally has been referred to and employed by the prosperity teachers is a term which is commonly known in the Hebrew language as Shalom. The term Shalom has evolved over the centuries and has come to mean a number of things to different people as well as different segments of society. However, the ancient term carries with it the connotation of advancement, increase, and prosperity (2012, pp. 11-12).

Baer asserted that the prosperity gospel is a bitter harvest of an ancient seed planted in modern soil. That from the fall of our first parents Adam and Eve, human beings are determined to make gods of themselves and idolized the pleasant treasure of this life. Therefore the true and living God has been domesticated for the enrichment of human selfish interest (2002, p.40). Baer tagged a good number of the prosperity preachers such as Joel Osteen, Creflo Dollar, Joyce Meyer, T. D. Jakes and Benny Hinn as prosperity gospel celebrities. These celebrities hawk many of their materials to their hungry and eager consumers, materials such as books, audio and video records etc (2002, p.39). He further added that these and other prosperity gospel sound very tempting and intoxicating like a brew which is appealing to basic human needs "which is culturally conditioned desires, offering a quick high output to a nasty hangover. And it's extremely lucrative for its purveyors since one of the principal ways to demonstrate faith is to sow financial seeds, which is to say, give gifts to prosperity preachers or purchase their products" (2002, p.40).

Albert Mohler described prosperity theology as a false Gospel. That its message is unbiblical and its promises fail. God never assures his people of material abundance or physical health. Instead, Christians are promised the riches of Christ, the gift of eternal life, and the assurance of glory in the eternal presence of the living God. In the end, the biggest problem with prosperity theology is not that it promises too much, but that it promises far too little. The Gospel of Jesus Christ offers salvation from sin, not a platform for earthly prosperity. While we should seek to understand what drives so many into this movement, we must never for a moment fail to see its message for what it is a false and failed gospel (2009, p.15). Conrad Mbewe stated that prosperity gospel is sadly and gradually taking over the continent of Africa, he calls it a "religious fraud" it is a gospel that is used to deceive people with a false version of Christ (2012, p.7).

The origin of prosperity gospel

Costi Hinn, in his magnificent work; *God, Greed, and the Prosperity Gospel*, observed that the prosperity gospel finds its theological roots in what is called New Thought. This is essentially a metaphysical ideal, about faith healing, prosperity and other related ideas depending on faith, it is the ability of the human mind to be able to unlock the potentiality and the true reality of the human mind, it therefore goes for anything it sets up to achieve. The movement is traced back to the 1800s, and many people have played very significant roles in its fast spread. This movement has spread so vastly and has been received by very many people throughout the world (2019, p.114). Phineas Quimby (1802–1866) is arguably the most influential. The father of New Thought, he was an American philosopher, hypnotist, and spiritualist. He did

not claim to be aligned with classic Christianity or any other religious teachings, but his philosophies invaded Christian theology. John Haller quoted Dresser thus:

Quimby had no specific religious affiliation, inclined as he was to be skeptical. Nor had his family been especially religious-minded, if one defined religion in terms of a specific creed. Neither he nor his family had membership in any denomination or sect. Nevertheless, he was always curious to understand the opinions of others, including the religious beliefs of Unitarians and Universalists, whose services he sometimes attended and, later, those of his patients. In this latter sense, Quimby was indeed religious, which manifested later when he looked to the historical Jesus as the founder of spiritual science (1988, p.46).

Costi Hinn opined that Quimby's beliefs can be summarized as follows: that all sickness and disease originates in the mind, healing can be obtained with right thinking, to Quimby, the secret method of healing belongs to Jesus. He captured that Jesus was an ordinary man using mind-control methods to perform healings and other miracles; he denied the body resurrection of Jesus. To Quimby the mind is capable and has the power to achieve all that it desires to achieve.

As observed above, Quimby was neither a Christian nor a Christian pastor, but his philosophy has spread and made waves in Christendom. This is largely due to the fact that Christians have borrowed his teaching and they are using it to spice up their ministries. Norman Vincent is at the centre and has played a very crucial role in spreading Quimby's ideology into Christianity, Norman was an American pastor of Marble Collegiate Church in New York City. He published a book in the 1950s titled; *The Power of Positive Thinking*, this work helped in the spread of the New Thought beliefs in Christianity. Other men like E. W. Kenyon helped in facilitating the fast spread of the New Thought into Christian theology and teachings. However, was not explicitly New Thought in his theology, but its ideology is found in his teachings. Kenyon is the most influential teacher in the life of the infamous Kenneth E. Hagin, who became a Word of Faith theology icon and controversial preacher (Hinn, 2019). Hagin in turn became the spiritual father to self-claimed billionaire preacher Kenneth Copeland. During the same time, Oral Roberts steadily headlined the explosion of televangelism and rock-star prosperity preachers who claimed to heal the sick and rain down blessings from Jesus. These men became the household names for "name it and claim it" theology and the prosperity gospel. Today, there are many revered heroes of the prosperity gospel all over the world such as Benny Hinn, Joel Osteen, Joyce Meyer, Maurice Cerullo, and many others.

THE NEXUS BETWEEN THE ANCIENT GREEK SOPHISTS AND THE PROSPERITY GOSPEL PREACHING

In the fifth century, individual sophists in Greek lived in Athens. The city is said to have hosted many sophists for a period of sixty years. Perhaps without Athens, there would have been no sophists. The city gave room for the movement to flourish. The social and political conditions of the city gave rise to the movement to thrive. The economic revolution of the city at that time had surpassed it and was only comparable to an empire. Its affluence was much more than earlier generations of the city (Kerferd, 1981, p.15).

Kerferd further opined that the political system of the state was such that power had to be with the people and not a selected few individuals, with this development, everyone wanted to be well-equipped with the knowledge that will be needed or required for politics (1981, P.16). What the sophists offered was not an education for the masses. They offered an invaluable expensive service to those seeking careers in politics and general life. Sophists usually persuade their audience with vocabulary commands (1981, p. 17).

Karen Whedbee's investigation of Greek sophists shows that the traditional view of the Greek sophists which the research was done in comparison with the eighteenth century Britain, with a few exceptions, the research reviewed the following about the life of the ancient Greek sophists and the 18th Century British: The sophists were products of the corrupt commercial culture and popular government of Athens; the sophists were participants in and exploiters of the commercial culture of Athens; The sophists promoted vulgarity and immorality. The sophists taught their students how to display an "appearance" of wisdom and virtue without "reality". The sophists contributed to a climate of skepticism and disrespect of authority (Whedbee, 2008, pp. 607-08).

David Jones asserts that for biblical scriptures, the prosperity gospel is fundamentally flawed. That prosperity gospel is false with a wrong connotation of what the relationship between man and God entails, in sincerity, the prosperity gospel make God obsolete and irrelevant, the gospel is man centered, man becomes the measure of all things here. Whether they are talking about the Abrahamic covenant, the atonement, giving, faith or prayer, prosperity teachers turn the relationship between God and man into a quid pro quo transaction (2002, p.64). James Goff observed that the relationship between God and man has been "reduced to a kind of cosmic bellhop attending to the needs and desires of his creatures" (2018, p.17).

Prosperity preaching turns God to a relationship between a "side chick and a sugar daddy" whose intention is just to get their beneficial needs at any time they have an encounter.

On the fast spread and widely acceptability of the

prosperity gospel Miguel Núñez simply attributes it to the lack of biblical knowledge, and no one can deny this fact. The scripture is misinterpreted to suit the desires of prosperity preachers and seekers, the bible verses are used at the expense of gullible people, to make them believe in their thought of a God who is ready to provide wealth and healing. These acts have risen and are on the increase because, contemporary teachers of the word are not preaching very expositional, thereby giving room to all kinds of heresies (2002, p.45). Miguel further marveled why this heresy has persisted for a while and why now? He, therefore, asserted that there are deep evil roots in people's hearts and strong secular ideas in the heart of our society and even in the church that serve as fertilizers for this harmful seed. Miguel further opined that human desires to live largely and enjoy life lead us to this;

Pursuit in life is the self-gratification to which they feel entitled. Indeed the entire advertising industry is dominated by this sentiment: "you deserve the luxury of this car"; "Take care of yourself, because nobody else will"; "You deserve a resort vacation," and hundreds of other similar phrases. If people are willing to believe such lies, imagine how they would feel when they hear a pastor preaching that God wants you to be rich and healthy, or that you should have your best life now. Members of the entitlement culture may conclude that even God believes that we deserve unconditional riches and health. So, the believer does not approach God with a humble and contrite heart, seeking his grace, but rather with a proud attitude, expecting well-deserved blessings. We now feel that we should have what we want when we want it because it is my constitutional right to be happy. If the government cannot provide it, then others should. And if they cannot, then the God who created me should be that supplier. Some even get angry with God for not providing what they desire (Núñez, 2002, pp. 45-46).

At the same time as this entitlement culture has sprung up, the postmodern movement of the past few decades produced a vacuum of truth, doing away with absolutes. In the absence of truth, people became more and more skeptical and therefore more pragmatic. Many preachers have embraced this mindset. Rather than calling us to follow Jesus as the truth, the way, and the life at whatever cost, they proclaim a pragmatic, "how to" gospel that tells us how to solve our problems, especially those related to finances and sickness. When pragmatism invades the pulpit, exposition is pushed aside and biblical ignorance becomes its fruit. Now the sheep become more vulnerable to all kinds of lies. Pragmatism aims at man and his convenient life; exposition of the Word aims at God and his

glory (Ravi, 2000, p.28). Miguel quoted Joseph Haroutunian, a Presbyterian theologian who said that "Before, religion was God centered. Before, whatever was not conducive to the Glory of God was infinitely evil; however, now that which is not conducive to the happiness of man is evil, unjust, and impossible to attribute to the Deity. Before, the good of man consisted ultimately in glorifying God; now the glory of God consists in the good of man."(47). For a generation as self centered and greedy as ours, the prosperity gospel is the right recipe.

In 21st century, one pertinent question to ask is who wants to hear about the fact that in this world you will have tribulation? Our orientation and attitudes are centered on our self-sufficiency not minding what cost it comes with. The same way the ancient Greek accepted the teachings of the sophists is the same way prosperity gospel seekers accept everything that comes from the prosperity preachers. There are some similar attitudes between the two groups. The sophists like prosperity gospel preachers seem to have the powers to do everything, they are doctors, teachers, counselors etc, the same way the sophists claimed monopoly of everything. Both movements claim to give what they do not have, the prosperity preachers claim to give healing and wealth which they rather in turn embezzled from their followers. They both have rhetorical powers to be able to convince their followers into believing in anything they say. In the same way truth and being was argued to be relative to the sophist, the real gospel has been substituted for one that would be most appropriate for our generation: a gospel of wealth, health, and happiness. And many people are buying the "gospel" these preachers are selling.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study discovered that, the teachings of the prosperity gospel preachers may not be completely bad, hence there are several claims by those who have faith in their teachings that it is working for them. That notwithstanding, it is also observed that most of their teachings are heretical and misguided. The religious beliefs and teachings of the prosperity gospel is diametrically opposed to the teachings of the orthodox doctrines of the Christian Churches. Many Christian apologists particularly of the older generations consider prosperity preaching as an aberration of the Christian theology. There are a lot of fake and fabricated prophecies that comes with this type of preaching. Many preachers of the prosperity gospel have made themselves the standard of what they preach; they live very luxuries lives at the expense of their followers. This study recommends that this trend of the gospel be checked and advised to live by what Jesus Christ preached; this can be done by Christian organizational bodies. Preachers of the gospel should be trained in Christian theology, quoting the Bible from Genesis to Revelation is not enough to establish a Christian ministry.

Conclusion

This study takes a critical look at two different and significant movements in the history of humanity, the ancient Greek sophists and cotemporary prosperity gospel preachers, the study did not in totality condemn these two movements despite their attendant flaws, the sophists made a systematic study of forensic debate and oratorical persuasion. In this pursuit they wrote on many topics, hence, they were able to make some useful imprints to the sophistic relativism, which to Protagoras doctrine, the wind may be cold to the man who seems cold and warm to the man who seems warm. Prosperity gospel preachers have turn the scriptures in the bible to suit them and their intentions. The important thing is not actually what the word says and stands for but what they interpret to suit them. Their rhetorical powers to convince people to join them have led many to their untimely deaths. We conclude this paper with the words of Sean DeMars, in his confessional work 'A Gospel that almost Killed me' he stated that "If you meet someone who is lost in this false gospel, please, please, please love them and tell them the truth. Sit them down, buy them lunch, and open up your Bibles. Speak life. Be brave. No one has ever loved them enough to tell them the truth about themselves. The truth is that they cannot be saved by a false gospel, and the prosperity gospel is certainly that" (2002, p.57).

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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