

What do I think about "Health and Wealth" Teachings?

"Is Substance a Health and Wealth Church?" The short answer is "No". In fact, it's almost laughable whenever someone asks me this question because anyone who hangs out with our staff for longer than a few minutes could immediately tell where we stand. Yet, at the same time, it can also be such a loaded question because everyone seems to define "health and wealth" differently.

Some people perceive this expression to refer to any church where they constantly preach on "*God's plan to make us wealthy.*" Other people use this expression to ask: "*Do you as a pastoral staff believe that pastors should make million dollar salaries off of church tithes?*" Still others think it refers to "*any church that doesn't preach suffering for Jesus*" as much as they think it should.

As I've talked with people, the most common stereotype of "health and wealth" refers to those churches where the pastor owns a fleet of luxury vehicles and vacation houses, thereby mooching off of the church. So, to continue living the lavish lifestyle, the pastor continually attempts to fleece the congregation through Bible based wealth teachings.

Obviously, by this definition, Substance is pretty much the complete antithesis of health and wealth. After all, one of our key pastoral staff members doesn't even have hub-caps on one side of his rusty car. Even more, our church has traditionally operated on less than 60% of its income (an income which is already extremely low compared to the average church our size). In fact, I'm proud to say that I've never seen a growing church operate as efficiently and frugally as Substance church.

Even more, I don't even control my own salary. (It's actually controlled by our board of trustees). And based on national averages, most of Substance's pastoral staff are actually *under* the national average (not that we hope to keep it this way). It's just that, if anyone ever wanted to accuse Substance of being a health and wealth church, we'd be a pretty poor example. The average Lutheran or Baptist church is far more fiscally extravagant than Substance.

And even though I don't agree with the outrageous materialism of health and wealth churches, I equally disagree with what I like to call: "Pain-& Suffering" churches. I.e., there are Christians who, on the opposite end of the spectrum, seem to preach a Good News that's devoid of anything "good."

For example, in some Calvinist circles, it's not uncommon to run into what I like to call the "pain-&-suffering" Christian. (You know... those people who remove the "good" from the "good news"). I once preached that "God will make you rich in every way." Afterwards, I had a young man from a local Bible college tell me: "That's not a Biblical teaching!" Of course, he didn't know I was directly quoting 2 Corinthians 9:11. So when I showed him the passage he was totally stunned.

But what surprised me most about the conversation was how determined the young man was to remove anything "good" from the "Good news". And every time I

brought up a scripture where God promised healing, blessing, or hope, he'd go off on a rant as though God hates American Christians.

Of course, I agree that sacrifice, persecution and suffering are often key components of "taking up our crosses" to follow Christ. Yet, Christ also said that he came to bring "life to the fullest" Jn 10:10. And his most common message was: "The kingdom of heaven is near." I.e., the realities of heaven are currently invading the earth. And then he'd prove it by healing people's physical bodies (because, in heaven, there will be no more sickness).

To be fair, most of the people who object to the health and wealth message aren't the twisted "pain and suffering" kind of Christian; rather, most people are just reacting to immodest pastors who show up to church in their Lambourgini's and then preach a 30 minute offering message... (in addition to endless building campaigns.) The implication of greed is all over them. And, as a result, they make it impossible for pastors across the U.S. to even breathe the word "money" from the pulpit (without being thrown in with the "Donald Trump Pastors."

Also, most people are just reacting to the materialism that seems to saturate the American church. And that's something I can agree with.

For example, I don't think that there are many Americans who understand how wealthy we are. In fact, if you own both your own home and car, you are in the top 5% of the world's wealthiest people.

Of course, we like to compare ourselves to the "Bill Gates-type people" of the world who are in the .000000001% of the worlds wealthiest. But in reality, we are the world's wealthiest Christians who have ever walked on the face of the earth! Once again, the Bible says, "to whom much is given, much is required!"

In fact, if American Christians would simply give 10% of their income to local churches, we would almost have enough money to solve global poverty. Thus, the Bible teaches us: "*If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?*" (1 John 3:17).

That's why I've made it my goal to live a lifestyle of modesty and generosity. I.e., I don't need to have the best cars and the best house. Besides, "my soul finds rest in God alone." (Psm 62:1)

Of course, no matter how modest or generous I am, there will always be someone who thinks it's not enough. No matter how efficiently I'm running the church... or no matter how many missionaries we support, it will never be enough for some Christians.

I learned this a few years ago when I had a young college student accuse Substance of being a "prosperity church." Of course, this couldn't have been further from the truth. At the time, I was personally giving over 40% of my income away (which wasn't much to begin with in the first place). I was driving a dying rusted out Chevy Lumina that had over a quarter million miles on it. I'm pastoring a poor portable church that was inconveniently giving over 26% of its income away to missions; and yet, this stuck up little rich kid from a local Bible college had the guts to tell all of his friends that I was theologically off based. (Sorry, I think I'm still a bit bitter).

But what really made me mad was that, this very same Christian was going to a private Christian college that was costing more than \$25 grand per year – a sign of

excessively luxury by most of the world's standards. And I'm not against Christian Colleges; yet, this guy wasn't even measuring himself by the same standards he was measuring others. As my grandma once taught me: "Those who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones."

So, right before I went off on him, the Lord convicted me that, I too, have misjudged people. I once judged another Christian for owning a luxury SUV. Of course, I didn't know that it was given to them. I also didn't know that they had tried to sell it, yet couldn't. You see, back then, I learned a good lesson: Everyone simply needs to focus on themselves: I.e., How modest and generous are YOU being?

In an ironic twist, I recently read a study that found "health and wealth" churches tend to be far more generous towards missions and outreach than non-health and wealth churches. Wow. That tells me something. Perhaps we'd be better off letting God be the judge. After all, things are not always what they seem.

So where do I stand on the issue of Health and Wealth? I believe with all of my heart that God wants to bless us (2 Cor. 9:11). But I also believe that he wants us to store up the majority of our blessings in heaven rather than wasting it all on earth (Mt. 6:19). Even more, despite God's offers to bless us, I also believe that sometimes God calls us to seasons of difficult sacrifice. He doesn't always answer our prayers the way we want. And more importantly, he's not a genie in a bottle who grants our every materialistic wish.

So here's the deal: Let's live modestly. Let's live generously. And let's leave judgement up to the Lord. Amen?