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America's Gospel

How the American Dream Hijacked Christianity

Colin MacKichan

Senior Thesis

Spring 2015

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Foreword

I am often asked, “What are you?” Inside my mind, a complex array of emotions arises as I attempt to summarize what I believe in a simple phrase. I usually respond, “Christian, but more specifically PCA, which stands for the Presbyterian Church of America.” It is interesting to look back at my spiritual development and realize that this wasn’t always the case. There was a point in my life that I would simply answer, “Christian”, assuming that all Christians believed exactly what I did. However, this naïve assumption changed during the sophomore year at Trinity College.

It was the spring of my freshman year when Pejay Lucky, an employee of the Office of Residential Life, approached me and asked me if I wanted to assist a couple other students he had come in contact with start a new Christian group on campus. I had only met Pejay once before when I had interviewed for a position as a resident advisor. During the interview I talked about Tim Tebow and the exemplary example he was setting for young men across the country. Pejay asked me why of all the celebrities in the world I chose Tebow, and I responded that he was Christian, as was I, and I felt that he was doing the greatest good. Evidently that response indicated to him that I was serious about my faith, so much so that it qualified me to help found a Christian student organization.

Needless to say, I agreed to help out, and a few months later during the introductory meeting I found myself as the only white person amidst a group of six African-American students, a situation that nearly all white Trinity students will never experience in their four years. We spent the first five minutes going around

the circle introducing ourselves with our name, class year, major, hometown, and denomination. The answers I heard further revealed the fact that I was undoubtedly the odd-man out in the group. Almost every single student was African-American, and said he or she was Pentecostal and was from either Chicago or New York. We spent the next hour talking about our collective goals for the organization and one of the members closed us in prayer. We all bowed our heads and the woman across the table from me burst into a prayer that more closely resembled the pregame speeches from my high school football days than anything I had heard in church. Again and again I heard the phrase, "Lord Jesus" in an increasingly enthusiastic and emotional tone, followed by requests such as spiritual guidance, good health, or clear vision. I left the meeting thinking to myself, "That was different!"

During the second week of meetings, a member of the team was asked to present on a topic of his choice. He started out by talking about various ways we, as Christians, could harness the power of God. "If we follow God, and do what he says in the Bible, then we will be able to get that "A" on the test, or get that promotion we have been working for." Then session ended, and I quickly grabbed another member of the group and pulled them aside and asked, "Am I the only way one that felt that topic was entirely unbiblical?" The answer I received showed me that I was indeed the only one. Weeks following the discussion, the topic of TD Jakes and his particular requests came up. A rumor had spread that he had recently requested \$75,000, one black and one white Escalade to transport him to and from the hotel, a certain type of cologne, and specific colored M&M's waiting for him at his hotel room in payment for a speaking engagement. My fellow members in the Christian group found no

problem with his requests, and even viewed the fulfillment of his requests as direct blessings from God.

It was at this point in my life when I first came in contact with the prosperity gospel. Since this initial exposure, I have had countless conversations with friends and colleagues trying to understand the beliefs of the prosperity gospel, attempting to see how any of its doctrines correspond with the rest of Christianity. I have become so fascinated by the fact that such seemingly unbiblical doctrine has infiltrated mainline Christianity and become one of the largest Christian movements in America today. It is my hope that this thesis will illuminate for the reader exactly what the prosperity gospel believes, and identifies and analyzes the influences that have formed its unprecedented version of Christianity.

Introduction

The prosperity gospel, or the gospel of health and wealth as it is sometimes called, has become arguably the most visible form of Christianity in America. Prosperity preachers such as Joel Osteen, Creflo Dollar, Joyce Meyer, Ed Young, and TD Jakes can be found on the cover of *Time* magazine¹, on *60 Minutes*², or with their works atop the *New York Times* Bestsellers List³. Many of these teachers are lead pastors at megachurches across America, which resemble basketball arenas rather so than churches. In fact, Joel Osteen, lead pastor at Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas, leads Sunday services in the former Houston Rockets arena, which allows more than 40,000 congregants to attend on a given morning⁴, making it the largest megachurch in America⁵. Proponents of the prosperity gospel claims to have the answers to all your habits, hurts, and hang-ups, and want you to experience a better and more fulfilling life. You are the master of your own destiny, they say, in that you have the ability to change your life through your words, thoughts, and actions.

¹ Preacher T.D. Jakes | Sep. 17, 2001, *Time*, September 17, 2001, <http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,20010917,00.html>.

² CBS News, "Joel Osteen Answers his Critics" *60 Minutes*, October 11, 2007, 6:40. <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/joel-osteen-answers-his-critics/>.

³ New York Times Bestsellers, *Joyce Meyer Ministries*, 2011, <http://www.joycemeyer.org/productfamily.aspx?category=newyorktimesbestseller>.

⁴ Terry Pristin, Commercial Real Estate: A Sports Arena Gets Religion, *New York Times*, March 10, 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/03/10/business/commercial-real-estate-a-sports-arena-gets-religion.html>.

⁵ "Database of Megachurches in the U.S." *Hartford Institute for Religion Research*, 2014, http://hrr.hartsem.edu/cgi-bin/mega/db.pl?db=default&uid=default&view_records=1&ID=*&sb=3&so=descend.

In spite of its millions of followers, the prosperity gospel has not won over the hearts of every American, including many respected pastors in mainline denominations. Men like John Piper, John McArthur, Mark Driscoll, David Platt, and Michael Horton have all spoken out against its claims and criticized it as being unbiblical, materialistic, and self-centered. The American government even took issue with its practice as the Senate began an investigation of six leading prosperity televangelists for possible financial misconduct in 2007.⁶

Unlike many smaller, more obscure Christian movements, the prosperity gospel has been able to attract followers even though many of its teachings are unprecedented in Christian history, which calls us to question, what makes the prosperity gospel's teachings so popular? Through analysis of the prosperity gospel's origin and emergence, and through examination of the primary writings of Joel Osteen, TD Jakes, and Joyce Meyer, I will argue that the prosperity gospel is both unbiblical and nothing more than the American dream repackaged and presented with sparing Christian rhetoric. It is because of the prosperity gospel's close relationship to the American dream and other American ideals such as individualism, self-reliance, optimism, and an emphasis on wealth that it has gained such popularity in the United States. At the same time that the prosperity gospel is highly influenced by America, the prosperity gospel is unbiblical in that it does not appeal to either of the two traditional sources of Christianity, scripture and church tradition, but instead relies on the authority of a central charismatic leader. This new source of authority is necessary for the prosperity gospel to spread because

⁶ Laura Strickler, Senate Probes 6 Top Televangelists, *CBS News*, November 6, 2007, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/senate-panel-probes-6-top-televangelists/>.

many of the claims found in it are found neither in scripture or church tradition, but are also entirely contrary to Christian teachings that have been accepted elements of the religion for centuries.

Chapter 1

The Origin and Emergence of the Prosperity Gospel

"God has already done everything He's going to do. The ball is now in your court. If you want success, if you want wisdom, if you want to be prosperous and healthy, you're going to have to do more than meditate and believe; you must boldly declare words of faith and victory over yourself and your family"

- Joel Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*

Although the prosperity movement has immense popularity in America, it is difficult to track because it is present in a multiplicity of denominations ranging from Pentecostalism to Calvinism, Lutheran to Catholic. The Prosperity Gospel is not exclusive to one denomination or group, and its adherents are often reluctant to use the word prosperity due to the negative connotations associated with it. Present day prosperity theologians such as Joel Osteen, Joyce Meyer, and TD Jakes tend to identify themselves with the Charismatic Church, or avoid any category all together labeling themselves as nondenominational. Most often the prosperity gospel is associated with the Pentecostal Church, but a large percentage of the Pentecostal Church reject its teachings.

Without a clear denominational tie, how can the origins of the prosperity movement be identified? In order to outline the origins and development of the prosperity movement, I will rely heavily on Kate Bowler's book *Blessed*⁷, in which she traces the prosperity gospel's starting point all the way back to the Gilded Age, or the era immediately following the Civil War. During this time an emphasis on the power of the mind began to arise in popular culture. Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson, Swedish theologian Emmanuel Swedenborg, and occultist Helena

⁷ Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Blavatsky all developed different strategies to harness the power of the mind. Free Masonry, Christian Science, spiritualism, mind-power, and New Thought also tapped into power of the mind, teaching the importance of a positive and centered consciousness. However, it was New Thought that had the most influence on the creation of the Prosperity Gospel. New Thought was a school that taught that humanity was united with the divine. The material world was a construct of the mind, and because of these two assumptions, humanity “shared in God’s power to create by means of thought.”⁸ E.W. Kenyon, former educator, evangelist, and revivalist of New Thought⁹, is considered by many scholars to be the grandfather of the prosperity gospel. Kenyon was the first theologian to interweave New Thought and Christianity, which made his teachings unlike any other before him.

Kenyon (1867-1948)¹⁰, teaching during the turn of the 20th century, spoke with the charisma of George Whitfield and John Wesley to a new generation of Christians looking to unlock the powers of heaven. He taught that God has granted each one of his believers more than just spiritual redemption, but also endowed innumerable blessings for his believers in the here and now of daily life. Each Christian was a “Superman”, closer to the essence of an angel than the essence of a man¹¹. These supernatural powers enabled the Christian to dispel sickness, through his or her faith in the promises of God. Jesus has already conquered the power of

⁸ Bowler, 14.

⁹ Ibid., 15.

¹⁰ Randall Herbert Balmer, *Encyclopedia of Evangelicalism*. (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2004), 380.

¹¹ E. W. Kenyon. *Advanced Bible Course: Studies in the Deeper Life*. 5th ed. (Lynwood, WA: Kenyon’s Gospel Publishing Society, 1970), 133, quoted in Bowler, 18.

disease through his resurrection, and it was the responsibility of the Christian to show his or her belief through action, living in a way that denied the existence of any sickness. According to one historian, faith was the “confident assurance based on absolute knowledge that everything is already provided through the operation of certain immutable laws.”¹² At the point of sanctification, the Christian unlocked the power of heaven. Through Jesus’ victory, the Christian was entitled to his power, and it was her or his responsibility to lock these blessings through their words. Just as God spoke creation into existence, Kenyon urged his audience to speak their desires into existence. Unlike the mainstream Christian denominations of the time, “faith filled words” were believed to be what caused the creation of the universe, and these same words governed the universe, acting as a conduit to carry faith to its fulfillment in reality¹³. Kenyon went as far as to encourage his audience to demand, instead of ask Jesus for the blessings of heaven.¹⁴

Kenyon was the pastor of the New Covenant Baptist Church, in Spencer, Massachusetts¹⁵, but interestingly self-identified as an evangelist due to the fact that the Baptist Church did not embrace much of his New Thought doctrine. As a result, it was a section of the Pentecostal Church that continued Kenyon’s legacy of the power of the word. The first pastor and evangelist to do so was F. F. Bosworth, noted faith healer, evangelist, and author. Bosworth conformed Kenyon’s teachings on the power of spoken word to the field of medicine and healing, teaching the

¹² Dale H. Simmons. *E.W. Kenyon and the Postbellum Pursuit of Peace, Power, and Plenty*. (London: Scarecrow Press, 1997), quoted in Bowler, 19.

¹³ E.W. Kenyon, *The Two Kinds of Faith: Faith’s Secrets Revealed*. (Lynwood, WA: Kenyon’s Gospel Publishing Society, 1998 (1942)), 20, quoted in Bowler, 19.

¹⁴ Simmons, 167, quoted in Bowler, 20.

¹⁵ Balmer, 380.

audience of his radio program, National Radio Revival Missionary Crusaders¹⁶ to speak health into their lives, even if all their senses “contradicts Him”¹⁷. These beliefs were passed on and borrowed by the healing revival of the 1940’s.

Another mainstream Christian leader, John G. Lake, had a much more direct link to New Thought than those before him. Lake initially began his leadership in a New Thought Church alongside Albert Grier, but in 1915 chose to found his own faith healing ministry in Spokane, Washington. He quoted John 10:34¹⁸, and used it to demonstrate his belief that God desired his followers to become like Him, transforming them into supermen. According to Lake, “There is a God-power and a soul-force in the nature of man that God is endeavoring to bring forth... The man within is the real man. The inner man is the real governor, the true man that Jesus said was a god.”¹⁹ Lake carried over this doctrine into his healing ministry in Spokane, Washington to heal a reported 100,000 plus people in the name of Jesus and the power He bestowed upon humanity.

Pentecostalism, in response to the rise in New Thought, began to create doctrines that further cultivated the power of spoken word. Beginning in the Azusa Street Revival, Pentecostalism emphasized the believer’s ability to speak in tongues or engage in glossolalia. Followers were urged to speak in the words of the divine to reveal the grace of God in their souls, and ensure them of their salvation. Increased

¹⁶ Bowler, 21.

¹⁷ F.F. Bosworth, *Christ the Healer: Sermons on Divine Healing*, S.I.: F. F. Bosworth, 1924 edition, 188, quoted in Bowler, 21.

¹⁸ “Jesus answered them, “Is it not written in your Law, ‘I said, you are gods’?”, ESV.

¹⁹ John G .Lake, *Spiritual Hunger and the Other Sermons*, Edited by Gordon Lindsay. (Dallas: Christ for the Nations, 1994),20. See also pages 86,90, quoted in Bowler, 23.

emphasis was also put on the different names of God that depicted his divine traits such as healing or redemption. These names bestowed power to adherents that uttered them. Kenyon's *The Wonderful Name of Jesus* and Bosworth's "The Seven Redemptive Names of Jehovah" in *Christ the Healer*, were widely accepted by Pentecostals and used as a guidebook to bring "petition, praise, or deliverance to completion"²⁰

In many ways, the coupling of New Thought and Pentecostalism brought about social equality that many other mainstream denominations did not. It taught its believers that they were the masters of their spiritual lives. Jesus had already conquered the evil powers of the world, and it was in the hands, or rather mouths of the believer to unleash His power. Unsurprisingly, African-Americans in the 1920's and 30's embraced this form of Christianity that held no racial prejudice amidst a society of Jim Crow laws and poverty. They mixed their African religions with Pentecostalism and New Thought, to produce a uniquely African-American religion that gave them power and a new identity. Men like Prophet James Jones, Father Divine, Father George Hurley, and Reverend Ike lead this new generation of African-Americans, showing them victory of their oppression in Christ.²¹ Father Hurley George Hurley encouraged his congregation to battle racism with prayer and positive thinking,²² while Father Divine provided his followers with clothing, food,

²⁰ Bowler, 25.

²¹ Ibid., 26.

²² Hans A. Baer, *Universal Hagar's Spiritual Church*, In *Encyclopedia of African and American-American Religions*. Edited by Stephen D. Glazier. (New York: Routledge, 2001), quoted in Bowler, 27.

housing, and job training²³ and integrated his church by seating blacks and whites together²⁴.

Out of this positive beginning, it was, nonetheless also during this time that African-American pastors began to embrace “symbolic materialism” as Bowler calls it. These men began to accumulate wealth in order to reveal to their congregations that through God there was financial blessing. Prophet James F. Jones acquired expensive furniture inside of his mansion, while Reverend Clarence Cobbs and Sweet Daddy Grace accumulated luxury vehicles, clothes, and cigars²⁵. This newfound religion presented itself as something that could be used in everyday life, a lifestyle that would lead to personal flourishing.

Interestingly, mainline Pentecostalism did not initially embrace wealth like their African-American counterparts. E.W. Kenyon, ran his ministry with a barebones budget, but believed that the Lord would account for his needs. However, as Kenyon’s message developed and spread, it was molded and altered according to a culture increasingly obsessed with the material. During the Gilded Age a gap was becoming increasingly apparent between the rich and the poor. On one side, men and women were looking for a way to attain wealth, and on the other side were those seeking a justification for their already attained wealth. As the economy in America began to create divides in the population, the theology of prosperity was

²³ Marie R. Griffith. *Born Again Bodies: The Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004, 141); Jill Watts, *God, Harlem, U.S.A.: The Father Divine Story*, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1995), 106, quoted in Bowler, 28.

²⁴ Bowler, 28.

²⁵ Ibid.

became modified in order to create a united theology that accounted for the disparities that were evident.

“Positive thinking” or “positive confession” endowed men the means to achieve their financial goals²⁶. Positive thinking should not be mistaken for optimism, but is rather a synthesis of monism and philosophical idealism to describe the reward for those aligned their thoughts. Monism is the belief that the creator, God, and creation, man, are of one substance, while idealism is the emphasis on the spiritual or ideal in order to interpret experience.²⁷ This synthesis leads to the belief that because men were of the same substance of God, he or she could demand, or confess things into existence because spiritual conviction leads his or her experience in the world.²⁸

Positive thinking mixed religion, medicine, psychology, and self-help into one philosophy or ideology of success. Russell Conwell, best known for his sermon entitled, “Acres of Diamonds” preached to the self-reliant spirit of the American, urging them to earn their reward by displaying “innovation, pragmatism, and self reliance dipped in bronze”²⁹ Bruce Barton, author of *The Man Nobody Knows*, demanded that Christians work twice as hard to achieve success³⁰. These men understood the increasing influence the American desire for wealth and power was having on the population, and adapted their theology to reflect the American

²⁶ Bowler, 31.

²⁷ *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, s. v. "idealism", accessed April 27, 2015, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/281802/idealism>.

²⁸ Monism was a key element in the theology in many of the early heretical Gnostic communities.

²⁹ Bowler, 32.

³⁰ Bruce Barton, *The Man Nobody Knows*, (N.p.: Lewis Press, 2011), 70, quoted in Bowler, 34.

virtues. By taking a little bit from religion, medicine, psychology, and self-help and creating a comprehensive spiritual theology, both Barton and Conwell created in a theology that did not resemble any Christian ideals before it, but rather appealed to a new generation in America in which spirituality began to be viewed as an answer to everyday problems.

Beginning in 1890, New Thought separated from Christianity, and began to move away from its original belief in a static tranquil mind, into an acceptance of the mind as an access point for the divine. Metaphysician Ralph Waldo Trine encouraged his audience to “See yourself in a prosperous condition. Affirm that you will before long be in a prosperous situation... You thus make yourself a magnet to attract the things that you desire.”³¹ Trine taught that anyone could attain health, happiness, and fortune if they would spiritually align themselves with these values³² According to Bowler, Trine no longer sought to avoid theological precision, but desired his teachings to be utilized by the audience and not simply read.³³ Although Trine identified himself with the New Thought movement, many of his readers were Christian, came from a Christian background, or at least spiritual in that they sought supernatural remedies for their physical problems. In response, Trine strategically selected words that elicited the themes of Christianity in order to appeal to a mainline Protestant audience. Christian rhetoric allowed him to appeal to a largely Christian American audience, a population that would be otherwise opposed to any spiritual option that did not include at least some slight overtone of Christianity.

³¹ Simmons, 216, quoted in Bowler, 34.

³² Bowler, 35.

³³ Ibid., 35.

By the beginning of the twentieth century New Thought had become “theologically thin but thick with guarantees of success” and “sought availability over respectability”³⁴. Book after book with titles like, *The Secret of Success* (1908) and *The Christian Business Man* (1922) demonstrated to its readers how to take New Thought and apply it to everyday life while avoiding any mention of scripture. The movement established momentum by becoming filled with self-help novels promising its readers success. In an increased effort to appeal to the masses, New Thought began to seep into the newly emerging field of neuroscience in order to demonstrate the scientific truths behind its claims. Men like Frank Haddock, in his bestselling book *The Power of the Will* (1907), established the ideology of New Thought in the form of psychology.³⁵ This trend continued in popular culture in which New Thought healers, physicians, Protestant ministers, and early psychotherapists were viewed as equals. However, as New Thought’s influence began to soar, its distinct existence began to diminish. According to Catherine Albanese, Professor of Religious Studies at UC Santa Barbara, New Thought disappeared because “it became part of a general culture, so that by effacing its own logo it successfully shaped American mentality in marked and continuing ways.”³⁶ In an attempt to conform to the needs and concerns of the population, New Thought lost its unique identity

³⁴ Bowler, 35.

³⁵ Ibid., 36.

³⁶ Catherine Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 436, quoted in Bowler, 36.

During the First World War, and the proceeding economic boom, the gospel of wealth continued to hold influence in popular culture. Bruce Barton described Jesus as “an extraordinary successful executive who forged an organization that ‘conquered the world’ by the use of modern business methods.”³⁷ However, the first challenge to the gospel of wealth came about during and following the Great Depression of 1929. The economic free-fall caused some to question the hope it had to offer. Money was scarce and the idea of prosperity seemed unattainable. In order to survive, proponents of the gospel of wealth began to adjust their teachings to align with the current economy. Salesman Dale Carnegie repackaged the message into one that taught the value of positive thinking, instructing his audience to “smile” or “be a good listener”³⁸ in his book, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936). The depression was no match for an optimistic mind. In the words of Elder Lightfoot Solomon Michaux, “the sun is shining. The birds are singing. They’re not complaining ‘bout the depression. Why should we?”³⁹

While some began to doubt, most continued, and even increased, their confidence in the gospel of wealth. According to Mark May, noted Yale psychologist, and Union Seminary theologian William Adams Brown, “The modern psychology of business success guided lay expectation of ministers. The churches wanted ‘a

³⁷ Ruth Miller Elson, *Myths and Mores in American Best Sellers, 1865-1965*, (New York: Garland, 1985), 186, quoted in Bowler, 37.

³⁸ Bowler, 37.

³⁹ “Happy Am I.” *Time*, June 11, 1934.
<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,762188,00.html#ixzziEK5wcVNn>, quoted in Bowler, 38.

winner, not only of souls, but of dollars and prestige.”⁴⁰ Christians hoped that their religion was bigger and stronger than the failing economy. Successful businessmen were attributed with the combination of “‘religious’ virtues of faith, hope, charity, etc., with the ‘secular’ virtues of industry, thrift, honesty, practicality, rationality, and the like.”⁴¹ Even in the face of financial hardships, the optimism of the gospel of wealth seemed to rise above rationality. Reason revealed that many of the causes of the depression were not supernatural. People were not becoming rich overnight. Instead, most families were falling further into poverty with no real hope of future prosperity. In contrast, the gospel of wealth urged its followers to hope for change and it would come. This characteristic of hope in the face of certain failure increasingly became integral to prosperity theology. In the American tradition of hard work and perseverance, the gospel of wealth taught that its audience that they were in control of their own destiny. Hope without results was never false hope, but rather planning for the inevitable prosperity of the future.

By the time of Pearl Harbor in 1941, America was beginning to recover from the effects of the depression. Things were indeed getting better, and it seemed as if the optimism of the gospel of wealth was being shown to work. The war was creating the stimulus America needed to transition from depression to fortune. Following the defeat of the axis by the Americans and the allied forces in World War II, the US experienced economic boom and medical advances unparalleled in its

⁴⁰ Brooks Holifield, *God's Ambassadors: A History of the Christian Clergy in America*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 219, quoted in Bowler, 38.

⁴¹ Donald Meyer, *The Positive Thinkers: Popular Religious Psychology from Mary Baker Eddy to Norman Vincent Peale and Ronald Reagan*, (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), 129 quoted in Bowler, 39.

history. Riding the flow of the post-war optimism, Pentecostals began to combine financial prosperity and healing into one coherent message of success attainable for Christians who had a “supplemental set of tools to solve problems”⁴². The dividing boarders between the deified qualities of the American character such as resilience, self-reliance, and the pursuit of happiness, Pentecostalism, and New Thought were disappearing, resulting in an all-encompassing theology of prosperity. Christian truths were now “‘techniques’ waiting to be ‘applied’.”⁴³ In 1948, E.W. Kenyon died, leaving behind him a legacy that would continue to influence Christianity. It is at this point in history that Bowler believes the modern prosperity gospel, proper, is born.

Beginning in 1945, soldiers became to return home after fighting overseas in World War II. America began to flourish economically as it celebrated the defeat of the Axis Powers. Wealth, health, and prosperity were attained at new heights unprecedented in the nation’s history and Christian churches across the country began to develop a theology that incorporated these luxuries into sermons. In many ways, the conditions in post-war America enabled the prosperity gospel to develop into a unique belief system of its own. In fact, according to Margaret Poloma, after 1945, hundreds of preachers and ministers across the country broke from their Pentecostal denominations and instead introduced “independent evangelical associations”⁴⁴. In her book *Blessed*, Bowler identifies three elements that she believes contributed the formation of the prosperity gospel. First, mind-power transitioned from a minor to a major theme in American culture. Second as mind-

⁴² Bowler, 40.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Margaret M. Poloma, *The Charismatic Movement: Is There a New Pentecost?* (Boston: Twayne, 1982), 193-97 quoted in Bowler, 40.

power increasingly influenced preachers, these men increased the scope of what belief might produce, including “health, happiness, and creature comforts.” Third, the prosperity gospel grew in the 1950’s and 1960’s as “one revival crested into another” which appealed to a much larger audience in both Protestants and Catholics, which created the momentum needed for the movement to become established.

Health seems to be the first theme that the prosperity gospel embraced. The pathology of diseases were never taken as simply physical, but rather were viewed as a physical manifestation of a spiritual action or an attack by Satan. Anything from a common cold to cancer was believed to have been caused by Satan himself. Faith in God allowed the believer to have access to the ultimate doctor. Christians were urged to “proclaim a reality they cannot see”⁴⁵. T.L. Osborn urged his audience to “TALK FAITH-TALK” for “anything less signs a package delivered by Satan, who holds the receipt.”⁴⁶, while A.A. Allen demanded “ACT YOUR FAITH... Leave your wheel chair. Throw away your crutches. Walk and run! Leap for joy!... Quit ‘trying to believe.’ Simply believe, and ACT.”⁴⁷ These statements demonstrated the belief that God is subject to the requests of His followers. Allen’s commanding rhetoric reflected E.W. Kenyon’s earlier belief that when Jesus died and was resurrected, God established a legal contract that entitled Christians to “rights and privileges” of

⁴⁵ Bowler, 44.

⁴⁶ T.L. Osborn, . “Divine Healing Through Confession.” *The Voice of Healing* , July 1950, 12, quoted in Bowler 44. Emphasis original.

⁴⁷ Grant Wacker, “The Pentecostal Tradition.” In *Caring and Curing: Health and Medicine in the Western Religious Traditions*. Edited by Ronald L. Number and Darrel W. Amundsen., 526. (New York: Macmillan, 1986) quoted in Bowler, 44.

safety, health, happiness, and financial security⁴⁸. When a church member was miraculously healed, the story was celebrated in church and in prosperity magazines, which further legitimized the power of faith. Outside of the pastor's claims, stories of miracles were the prime source of authority for prosperity claims.

As America came into a period of economic flourishing, churches began to adopt and utilize many of the same attitudes and business practices found in 50's society. During this era, prosperity theologians began to demand God give them an endless amount of goods, which matched the increasing materialism of the 50's. It was an age of private telephones, indoor plumbing, and electrical appliances.⁴⁹ Prosperity churches increasingly mirrored men's clubs such as the Lion's Club or the Rotary Club, yet with an added hint of religious language that gave an added dimension. Men could attend religious annual events that included networking, the exchange of business cards, and hear a message of empowerment based in the theology of the healing revivalists.⁵⁰ These new Christian organizations allowed men like Oral Roberts, John Osteen, Jack Coe, Gordon Lindsay, R.W. Culpepper, William Branham, and Kenneth Hagin a platform to spread their message of financial favor⁵¹. Many Christian radio programs also began to instill fundraising techniques, that later became a staple of prosperity theology, in which radio hosts continuously reassured their audiences that they would reap what they sowed.

Just as the 1950's shaped prosperity theology, the 60's created it own set of challenges and influences that molded the message and nature of prosperity

⁴⁸ Bowler, 45.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 51.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 52.

⁵¹ Ibid.

churches. For the first time, diseases like whooping cough, polio, and tuberculosis were no longer threatening the health of America thanks to medical advances and the creation of vaccines. The American population also became increasingly desensitized due to overexposure to the miracles and wonders of the healing prosperity theologians. Prosperity preachers began to realize that their audiences were growing more apathetic towards their ability to “cure” diseases in astonishing and supernatural ways. Although spiritual healing was sought after in the previous generation, it was usually viewed as a last resort when medicine had failed. Now that medicine could cure the previously believed incurable diseases, the need for supernatural healing was removed. In response, prosperity theologians began to deemphasize healing in their theology.

The 60’s were also an age of doubt, in which established institutions were questioned. Vincent Norman Peale became one of the first in the prosperity tradition to openly reject Jesus’ role as savior, but instead focused on the legitimacy of his moral teachings.⁵² Although Peale’s rejection of the divinity of Jesus seemed to be an isolated conviction, the conviction further distanced the prosperity movement away from established Christianity. Yet at the same time, the prosperity movement began to settle down in established churches much like their mainline Christian counterparts. Oral Roberts, Gordon Lindsay, and Kenneth Hagin all opened their own universities and churches, all in Texas and Oklahoma which began to establish the South as the epicenter of the prosperity movement.

⁵² Norman Vincent Peale. *The Power of Positive Thinking*. (New York: Fireside/Simon & Schuster, 39, 41. 2003), quoted in Bowler, 56.

The increased number and presence of churches also brought with it an increased population of leaders, including both Kenneth Copeland and Reverent Ike. However, not all leaders were as enthused by the growth of the prosperity gospel. A.A. Allan responding to the increased numbers of prosperity ministers said, “God told me he had given me the power to bestow power to get wealth. He did not say it was given to Tom, Dick, and Harry, or to just anyone who says ‘Lord, Lord.’”⁵³ Unfortunately for Allan, the message of prosperity had been let out of the cage and could not be contained. The 1970’s marked the founding of The Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN), Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN), and Praise the Lord (PTL)⁵⁴ Network all helped contributed to the exponential increased in potential audience.

The 1970s brought with it the introduction of one couple that would fundamentally change the landscape of the prosperity gospel. In 1970, *The Jim and Tammy Show* introduced America to a young Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker a couple that embraced the connection between their Christian faith and wealth more than any before them. In 1978, the couple introduced Heritage USA as a Christian themed amusement park located in South Carolina and quickly became the third most visited attraction in the United States⁵⁵. Heritage USA was not just for the enjoyment of its guests, but also was a signifier of God’s favor upon Jim and Tammy Faye. It gave a physical manifestation to the fact that the Bakkers were building their empire

⁵³ David Edwin Harrell Jr. *All Things Are Possible: The Healing and Charismatic Revivals in Modern America*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 200, 1985), quoted in Bowler, 68.

⁵⁴ Bowler, 75.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 77.

on the promises of God. What it was really built on was something entirely different. In 1987, Jim Bakker was accused of having an affair with his secretary in 1980.⁵⁶ Soon after both *Newsweek* and *Time* reported that the Bakkers had built Heritage USA and their PTL kingdom on fraud and conspiracy⁵⁷. Reports also surfaced that their bathroom fixtures were plated with gold and their doghouses had their own air conditioning systems. These accusations, paired with other less significant public debacles lead to the decrease in audience numbers from 15.1 million in 1986 to under 10 million in 1989.⁵⁸

The Bakker scandal resulted in many changes the many key characteristics of gospel of abundance. Up until 1989, the main emphasis of the prosperity gospel was centered on hard prosperity. Pastors taught their audiences to demand of God their exact needs, naming their financial needs to the precise dollar amount⁵⁹. However, the Bakker scandal outlined the main issue with prosperity theology. It was a system in which the current amount of wealth was never enough, leaving leaders scrambling to attain more in order to legitimize their authority. Beginning in 1990, preachers began to shift toward soft prosperity, which is characterized by Bowler as “therapeutic inspiration”. Audiences were no longer given an exact science as to satisfy their needs, but rather were inspired to reach their goals with the use of positivity and proper business practices.

A second shift that occurred was the split between black denominations and white denominations. In its earlier stages, the prosperity movement stood in

⁵⁶ Ibid., 107.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 108

⁵⁸ Ibid., 109.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 97.

contrast to its surrounding society, in that it was a haven for racial reconciliation. Both blacks and whites were viewed in equal status and were joined together as one unit. Unfortunately, following the Bakker scandal the white audience became weary of prosperity teaching, while African-American denominations continued to embrace enthusiasm for “faith, wealth, and victory”⁶⁰, which divided the once unified movement. Bowler identifies four reasons for the African-American embrace of prosperity theology. First, “the message suited the economic mood”⁶¹. More and more African-Americans were entering the middle class, and they desired to be given the tools to economic success. Second, African-Americans were migrating into the South, which was still the stronghold of the prosperity gospel. Third, many leaders of growing African-American churches gleaned from and adapted to many of the more prominent white prosperity gospel churches. Fourth, African-American churches have historically been the center of mutual aid, congregations not solely focused on the spiritual well-being of fellow members, but addressing the more broad issues of life⁶².

Just as the era following the Bakker scandal lead to the creation of uniquely African-American prosperity theology, it also was adjusted to meet the needs of its female audience. Before the scandal women were viewed as subservient to male leadership. Wives of notable preachers such as Doddie Osteen, Gloria Copeland, and Marilyn Hickey, were given supporting roles in the ministries of their spouses⁶³. These women had to appeal to their husband’s authority in order to establish any

⁶⁰ Ibid., 111.

⁶¹ Ibid.,112.

⁶² Ibid., 113.

⁶³ Ibid, 210.

personal legitimacy, solely due to the fact that they were women. However, in 1990 Joyce Meyer changed this trend and became the first widely accepted female prosperity theologian. Meyer altered and utilized many traditional prosperity teachings to meet the female needs of her audience. Instead of focusing on finances and career success, Meyer applied prosperity theology to combat gossip and negative body image.

In the Gilded Age that followed the Civil War, the prosperity gospel movement began its close relationship with American culture. E.W. Kenyon was the first theologian to combine New Thought ideologies and selected Christian rhetoric in order to make a wholly new brand of Christianity. Following his example of borrowing trends and values from the surrounding culture, the prosperity gospel developed into what can only be understood as a uniquely American Christianity. It adopted healing in the late nineteenth century, the power of spoken word in the twentieth century, racial diversity in the second and third decade of the twentieth century, financial abundance in the fourth, business savviness in the fifth and sixth, decreased emphasis on traditional Christian teachings in the seventh, use of radio and television in the eighth, and a theology of excess and abundance in the ninth. Each decade brought with it new trends in American ideals and also developments in technology and the prosperity gospel incorporated those changes into their belief system. The form of the prosperity gospel movement that we see today is a limited amount of Christian rhetoric combined with the past one hundred and fifty years of America culture, leading to an unforeseeable and unprecedented all-American Christianity.

Chapter 2

Modern Thinkers

Most of the views and positions of the prosperity gospel, as a whole, have remained unchanged since the 1990's. The 90's gave birth to arguably the three most popular faces of the prosperity gospel in Joel Osteen, TD Jakes, and Joyce Meyer. Each represents a unique segment of prosperity theology, and brings with them different perspectives on the meaning of Christian Life. In this survey, primary work of these three leaders will be used as representations on how the prosperity gospel has adapted to the needs, aspirations, and values of twenty-first century America. As different and unique every writer is, emphasizing some beliefs while downplaying others, each of the writers emphasize the American ideals of individualism, self-reliance, and optimism which are based in the charismatic authority of the author given creditability through experience and personal anecdote.

Joel Osteen

Today, the face of the prosperity gospel is best represented by the central figure of Joel Osteen. Nicknamed the "Smiling Preacher", Osteen preaches to more than 38,000 attendees at his Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas, which is recognized as both America's largest church as well as America's fastest growing church⁶⁴. Osteen is also recognized by the Nielson Research Center as the "most

⁶⁴ "About Joel," *Joel Osteen Ministries*, 2015, <http://www.joelosteen.com/Pages/AboutJoel.aspx>.

watched inspirational figure in America”⁶⁵, as he preaches to more than seven million viewers in America and is broadcast in more than 100 nations around the world. Osteen’s first book, *Your Best Life Now*, became the New York Times #1 Bestseller and stayed on the bestsellers list for two years selling more than 4 million copies.⁶⁶ Joel is also the son of John Osteen, who is considered one of the founding fathers of the prosperity gospel movement. In 1999, Joel took over his father’s Lakewood Church, at which he is now the Senior Pastor.

According to the about Joel section of Joelosteen.com, Joel’s core message is:

That our God is a good God who desires to bless those who are obedient and faithful to Him through Jesus Christ. It is Joel’s deepest desire that his own life be an example of that principle and that everyone who hears this message of hope and encouragement would choose to accept God’s goodness and mercy and to become all that God wants them to be.

This message conveys the belief that God exists for the enjoyment of the believer, and those that obey his commands will be blessed. Osteen’s mission statement is clearly reminiscent of the root doctrines of the prosperity gospel in that God is a willing tool to be wielded for the believer. He desires for his people to follow Him and listen to what he says, and when they do, He will improve both their health and their wealth.

Due to the fact that of all Osteen’s books, *Your Best Life Now* spent the most time atop the New York Times Bestsellers List, and is widely considered his seminal work, this survey will use it as a road map to the theology of Joel Osteen. *Your Best Life Now* is a comprehensive life guide for Christians. The book is broken up into seven parts titled; Enlarge Your Vision, Develop a Healthy Self-Image, Discover the

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

Power of your Thoughts and Words, Let Go of the Past, Find Strength Through Adversity, Live to Give!, and Choose to be Happy. Each section is broken up into subchapters that command the Christian to change patterns or habits in his or her life that are keeping them from thriving as God desires them to. As the titles of the chapters reveal, the book is a collection of imperatives and advice given directly from Osteen, and illustrated through personal anecdotes.

Osteen is all about “you”. Overwhelmingly, he refers to what God can do for you and how his power can be harnessed for the individual. Osteen persistently refers to the reader as an individual, separate from a Christian community beginning on the first page of the book. An introduction often acts as a roadmap for the book that lies ahead, outlining the author’s motivation for writing the book, or giving an introduction to the problem that will be solved in the coming pages. I naturally assumed with a title, *Your Best Life Now*, Osteen would begin to describe how God could make this happen. However, the words God or Jesus were entirely absent from the introduction. Instead the personal pronouns “I”, “you”, “we”, and “our” are used over and over again. These phrases are used an astounding 53 times while any mention of God is entirely absent. In a sense, this fact should not be surprising. As the title implies, the book is written for “you”. However, it seems unusual to start a Christian book without any mention of God.

Your Best Life Now is written in a progressive manner. Osteen begins the book with the chapter entitled, Enlarge Your Vision which outlines his central belief, or what he would like to call God’s plan for the Christian’s life. His readers are instructed to dream big and raise his or her level of expectations to match what God

desires for His children. In many senses, the individual is entirely control of his or her destiny, and at the same time, God is ultimately in control. Osteen writes, “I can guarantee you that your difficult situation will never improve as long as you stay in a negative frame of mind.”⁶⁷ Clearly, the individual has a role in the outcomes of his or her life. Osteen also writes, “While I’d never suggest that anyone should abandon his or her dreams, the truth is, your life will follow your *expectations*. What you expect is what you will get”⁶⁸ It sounds like the wisdom of Peter Pan, “You Can Fly!” combined with the American belief, “If you set your mind to it, you can achieve anything” overlain with Christian pretext. Each person has the power and the ability to project his or her life exactly where he or she wants it. If you want a ten million dollar mansion (the alleged value of Osteen’s current home), want to be CEO of your company, or want to have a joyful marriage, God has made this a possibility.

Inevitably any rational reader will begin to ask the ultimate question, “What if these things don’t happen?” Beginning in chapter four and outlined in greater detail in chapter five, Osteen begins to address the questions that will inevitably arise if his line of logic is followed. Chapter four, titled *Let Go of the Past*, Osteen urges his audience to put aside the past and move on with a mindset that expects the best. The story of the lame man and Jesus described in John 5 is outlined and used as evidence for the power of the positive thinking. Jesus encounters a man that has been lame for thirty-eight years and his first words to him are, “Do you want to

⁶⁷ Osteen, Joel, *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential* (New York: Faith Words, 2004), 16.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

be made well?"⁶⁹ Osteen interprets Jesus response to be a universal question for all Christians, "Do you want to be well or do you want to continue lying around feeling sorry for yourself?"⁷⁰ In the midst of tragedy or at the heights of success, the Christian has the opportunity to change or continue his or her circumstances. The past should never have any effect on the future, because it is over and finished. Osteen strategically eliminates any opposition by constantly looking forward. Essentially, the past is irrelevant. Even if one believed he or she had faith that expected flourishing and misfortune occurred, he or she had to be wrong because the simple act of recognizing misfortunate is to express a faith with doubts.

The second way of defeating misfortune is to simply view them as God's will. If one had his or her mind set on living in a mansion and instead, they lost their house to foreclosure, it had to be have occurred because of the will of God. Osteen illustrates this belief by citing *The Tale of Three Trees*, in which three trees dream of being used made into great things,⁷¹ such as a treasure chest, a great ship, and a tall tree on the top of a mountain. Unfortunately the trees find themselves being made into a manger, a fishing boat, and scrap wood. At first the trees' dreams are shattered because each is used for something seemingly unimportant, but later the manger is used to hold baby Jesus, the fishing boat carries Jesus, and the scrap wood was used in Jesus' crucifixion. According to Osteen, "The point of the classic tale is

⁶⁹ Ibid., 148.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., 70.

clear: All three trees thought they had lost their value, that their stories were over, yet they became integral parts of the greatest story ever told.”⁷²

By negating any objection to his belief in the power of positive thought, Osteen creates a flawless theology that guarantees the reader’s future success. God is calling each and every person to a life of abundance. It is up to “you” to accept.

TD Jakes

T.D. Jakes is the pastor of The Potter’s House Church in Dallas, Texas, a church with a congregation of 16,140 people, making it the twenty-fourth largest mega church in the United States as of August of 2014⁷³. Bishop Jakes is also arguably the most popular minority pastor in the country. In 2001, Time Magazine named T.D. Jakes as “America’s Best Pastor”⁷⁴. Interestingly, Bishop Jakes avoids the classification as a prosperity gospel preacher, and rather identifies himself as a “charismatic leader, visionary, provocative thinker, and entrepreneur”⁷⁵ even though his doctrine is thoroughly prosperity theology. The motivation behind Jakes’ decision to disavow association with the prosperity gospel is two-fold: he is trying to avoid the negative connotations associated with the prosperity gospel, while at the same time, continuing to embrace the strong influence that American ideals such as innovation and entrepreneurialism played into the formation of the prosperity gospel in the 1950’s.

⁷² Ibid., 71.

⁷³ “Database of Megachurches in the U.S.” *Hartford Institute for Religion Research*, 2014, http://hirr.hartsem.edu/cgi-bin/mega/db.pl?db=default&uid=default&view_records=1&ID=*&sb=3&so=descend.

⁷⁴ Preacher T.D. Jakes | Sep. 17, 2001.

⁷⁵ “Bishop T.D. Jakes” *T.D. Jakes Ministries*, 2014, <http://www.tdjakes.org/bishoptdjakes.html>.

In the examination of the theology of T.D. Jakes, his book entitled “Reposition Yourself: Living Life without Limits” will be used as a guide. This book is unique in Jake’s work in that it is not written to one sex, or written on one single topic⁷⁶. As the subtitle says, it is about life in general. As previously seen in Osteen’s *Your Best Life Now*, Jakes’ *Reposition Yourself* also begins with an introduction that sets the tone for the rest of the book to come. Starting on the first paragraph of page one, Jakes establishes a basis for the advice and guidance to come by giving the reader his credentials, or the accomplishments that make him qualified to address the topic at hand. He writes of his appearance on the cover of *Time* magazine, the size of his congregation, and his meeting with “presidents, Academy Award-winning actors, and celebrated professional athletes”⁷⁷ to support his authority. As the book continues, these sources of authority become more critical. Jakes makes many free-floating proclamations without any citation of a source. In fact, the book is entirely free of any cited works besides a total of thirteen Bible verses used over 273 pages; no external church documents, no academic literature, and no external sources of authority. Without any mention of his resume, the reader would be left to trust Jakes as authoritative. Instead, Jakes essentially lays down why the reader should listen to what he has to say.

The book is laid out in a format similar to *Your Best Life Now*, in that it moves from issue to issue with his own personal anecdotes sprinkled through each.

However, unlike *Your Best Life Now*, *Reposition Yourself* moves in a progressive

⁷⁶ Other bestsellers include *Let It Go: Forgive So You Can Be Forgiven*, *He-motions: Even Strong Men Struggle*, and *Woman, Thou Art Loosed*

⁷⁷ T.D. Jakes, *Reposition Yourself: Living Life Without Limits* (New York: Atria Books, 2007), 3.

manner. The book is split in three separate sections, *The Sky's the Limit*, *Beyond the Limits of Mediocrity*, and *Beyond the Limits of Success*. The introductory passages under *The Sky's the Limit* urge the reader to recognize his or her need for help, the passages in Part II: *Beyond the Limits of Mediocrity* move to the application of certain tools to attain personal goals, and the final section under *Beyond the Limits of Success* gives advise on how the reader should live once his or her goals have been met. The reader is taken on a journey that should eventually lead them to financial success, personal happiness, and career success, but these goals can only be attained through recognizing one's need for help, which in this case, comes from Bishop Jakes. Although the process from mediocrity to success is never an overnight occurrence, Jakes presents it as an attainable goal by gradually moving the reader from step to step in a relatively short read. Like much of prosperity writing, *Reposition Yourself* does give practical tools for success, but more than anything its purpose is to inspire and motivate its reader.

There are several unique traits that seem to set TD Jakes apart from his prosperity gospel-preaching counterparts. First and foremost, it is his direct rejection of many classic doctrines of the prosperity gospel. It becomes very clear to the reader that Jakes makes every attempt to distance himself from his identification with the prosperity. In the introduction he writes,

“Too often the term prosperity gets hijacked to mean nothing more than a elusive state of temporary bliss and positive karma. Certain extremists in the faith-based community teach that faith is only a matter of dollars and cents. They quote scriptures that promise great wealth. They don't emphasize the importance of a practical, pragmatic plan of a faith-with-works ethic, education, and economic empowerment.”⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Ibid., 7.

Later on in his chapter concerning the significance of titles, Jakes admits that he avoided the “P-word” entirely when he was choosing the title of his book. He did not want to be associated with the negative connotations the word has, and did not want to be associated with “preachers who some say have marginalized the Gospel and relegated it in favor of capitalist ideals.”⁷⁹ Jakes attempts to further himself even more so by directly attacking the name-it-and-claim-it approach that characterized the prosperity gospel prior to the Bakker scandal. He calls the approach “dangerous” and equivocates it to an easy bake oven. We “do this, do that, and tell God how we like it”⁸⁰. In response Jakes believes that Christians are able to learn by losing just as much as they are by winning. As the classic adage goes, “it’s not whether you get knocked down, it’s whether you get up.”

This attitude is not exclusively in Jakes’ writing, but it does seem to more of an emphasis than many other prosperity theologians. The prosperity gospel lost legitimacy for much of America following the 80’s, and it is clear that he is attempting to distance himself as far as possible away from that legacy. It is true that Jakes is not a hard prosperity theologian. He does not have the audacity of the early prosperity preachers who demanded God give them what they desired. Jakes is still a prosperity gospel preacher, however, he takes a soft prosperity approach, which seeks to inspire its followers to embrace earthly pleasures such as material wealth and personal success. It is truly this doctrine that sets apart and classifies the

⁷⁹ Ibid., 218.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 179.

prosperity gospel from mainline Christianity, which leads to Jakes' reluctant classification as a prosperity theologian.

Bishop Jakes is also unique in that he speaks to a multitude of different demographic audiences. Books like *So You Call Yourself a Man*, *He-Motions: Even Strong Men Struggle*, and *Woman, Thou Art Loosed!* speak to men and women separately. In *Repositioning Yourself*, chapters eleven and twelve are written directly to women amidst a book that speaks to both sexes. As previously stated, Jakes is arguably the most recognized minority preacher in the United States. Due to this fact, Jakes persistently appeals to his African-American heritage in order to gain legitimacy in the African-American culture that may have many of the same cultural experiences as he does. From the beginning of the book, Jakes attempts to reveal to the reader that he wasn't always successful. He "remembers" living in poverty, entering homes that had holes in the walls filled with old newspapers and drinking milk provided by WIC.⁸¹ He continually uses popular minority figures such as Barack Obama, Oprah Winfrey, and Denzel Washington to illustrate his points. In Chapter Four, Jakes tells his audience that demographics do not have the final say. Although there are many situations and circumstances that surround the individual that hinder them from easily achieving success, achievement ultimately lies in the hands of the individual. In essence, Jakes believes that there is not one universal application of the Gospel, but rather it is applied in different ways to be used by a variety of people in a vast horizon of positions in life, which is reflected in his

⁸¹ Ibid., 6.

audience specific books such as *He-Motions* and *Woman, Thou Art Loosed!* and his cultural rhetoric when addressing the African-American population.

The third distinctive quality of Jake's writing is the emphasis on the power of the individual. The book in itself is a self-help book, giving advice and strategies to men and women looking to reach their full potential. In his view, it is a sin to waste the gifts and talents God has given each individual. Each Christian has an obligation not only to themselves, but also to God to succeed. Jakes simply is laying out several practical strategies like eating out less, saving money for retirement, and associating with the right crowd, that act as a roadmap to success for the reader. American ideals such as hard work, grit, and perseverance are presented in a Christian light. Paul, Elijah, and Moses are shown to be self-made men that rose above their circumstances to do God's work.⁸² Each person's individual success or lack thereof is a direct reflection of their own personal choices. Jesus' words addressed to the lame man in John 5, "Wilt thou be made whole" are interpreted as Jesus asking, "Do you really want to walk again?"⁸³ In the words of Bishop Jakes, Jesus is really saying, "its up to you. You must stop procrastinating, waiting for others to lead you to where only you can go yourself, or blaming the past."⁸⁴ Just as it was the lame man's refusal to accept a life of mobility, so it is the individual's choices that keep them from prospering.

⁸² Ibid., 72.

⁸³ Ibid., 102.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

Joyce Meyer

The voices of Christian prosperity theology are reflective of the leadership demographic of Christian theology as a whole, in that men are the overwhelming majority. In order to fill the female leadership vacancy, men like TD Jakes have made an attempt to bridge the male-female gap by publishing books such as *Woman, Thou Art Loosed*, which address a female audience that they believe have certain spiritual concerns that their male counterparts do not share in common. However well these messages are received, many women still believe there is still an ultimate disconnect that male figures fundamentally cannot understand because of the simple fact that they are not women.

Joyce Meyer, founder and President of Joyce Meyer Ministries, fills this female void by adapting many ideas and beliefs common to prosperity theology in order to meet the needs and concerns of her female followers. According to her website, joycemeyer.org, Joyce is “one of the world’s leading practical Bible teachers” and “teaches on a number of topics with a particular focus on the mind, mouth, moods and attitudes”⁸⁵. Her television program *Enjoying Everyday Life*®, broadcasts to a potential audience of about 4.5 billion people⁸⁶. Meyer’s most recent work, *Change Your Words, Change Your Life*, will be used as a guide to her theology and understanding of the Christian life. Released in 2012, *Change Your Words, Change Your Life* became a *New York Times* Bestseller through its emphasis on the power of positive thought and speech, and their application in everyday life.

⁸⁵ “About Joyce,” *Joyce Meyer Ministries*, 2014, <https://www.joycemeyer.org/AboutUs/JoyceBio.aspx>.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

As previously seen in both *Your Best Life Now* and *Reposition Yourself*, the introduction lays out many core principles that guide and direct the ensuing pages by establishing a foundation for the rest of the book to build on. *Change Your Words, Change Your Life* is no exception to this rule, demonstrated by the sentence, “Our mouth gives expression to what we want, think, and feel; therefore, it reveals a great deal about the one who is speaking.”⁸⁷ This single sentence acts as thesis of sorts, that assumes one’s that words are a direct reflection of the heart, and by aligning one’s words to God’s instructions outlined in scripture, one can fulfill God’s desire for his or her life.

Throughout the book, there are certain qualities that clearly delineate Meyer as a prosperity theologian. The first and most obvious characteristic is Meyer’s belief in the power of spoken proclamations, which has already been shown in Osteen’s *Your Best Life Now*. As the title reveals, the words that one chooses or denies to use in everyday life dictate his or her circumstances. In the chapter titled, “What Do You Want in the Future”, Meyer writes, “We can reach with our faith into the spiritual realm where God is and talk of the things that exist there as if they were a reality in our life.”⁸⁸ Faith, according to Meyer, is the ability to know and trust in God enough to be able to speak things into existence. If one truly believes that God is bigger than any of his or her surrounding problems, then they have no choice but to verbally recognize the power of God through his or her speech. She goes onto write

⁸⁷ Joyce Meyer, *Change Your Words, Change Your Life: Understanding the Power of Every Word You Speak*, (New York: Faith Words, 2012), ix.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 54.

that people that complain about their circumstances are inevitably guaranteeing them, because their words reveal a heart of doubt.

In the same way that Osteen runs into a roadblock, Meyer must also deal with the issue of spoken words that do not create a parallel reality. What happens when one consistently speaks in faith to declare their interpretation of God's blessings in his or her life, only to find surrounding circumstances worsened? One on hand Meyer agrees with Osteen in that she believes that unfulfilled words are a test for the believer. In her chapter titled "Don't Complain", Meyer writes, "He (God) fully intends to greatly bless the one who apparently is being treated unjustly, if he or she passes the test. We must praise and bless God in the valleys of life as well as on the mountaintops."⁸⁹ Instead of viewing the continued presence of unwanted circumstances as proof that God doesn't want him or her to receive what he or she has been speaking of, the individual is instead urged to persist speaking words of faith because God is testing his or her faith. If one were to give up and begin to speak in a manner that revealed doubt, then his or her hearts would be revealed to lack faith, which explains why the words did not come to fruition. In the same way that Osteen does, Meyer creates circular logical trap forcing the Christian to persevere in their faith speech.

The second major prosperity gospel belief that Meyer establishes is the responsibility of the believer. Both Osteen and Jakes were shown to be proponents of this belief as well challenging their readers to take action to ensure a life they desire. Similarly this principle underlies everything Meyer writes. In her book,

⁸⁹ Ibid., 158.

Meyer describes a particular circumstance that did not go the way she desired and begins to question God, to which God responds, “You have stopped saying negative things, but you have not started saying anything positive!”⁹⁰ God’s response illustrates the point that God is a just and fair God, and only rewards those who meet the requirements. Meyer’s situation was not changed because she had not done all the things necessary. It was her own actions that were keeping her from the realization of her goal, not God’s. This belief is further shown in her discussion on unanswered prayer. “If I want my prayers to be quickly answered, I need to treat people really well, never judge them critically, and learn how to talk properly by removing false, harsh, unjust, and wicked speaking.”⁹¹ Once again, Meyer creates an “if then” rule that governs our interactions with God. If we are good enough, then we will be rewarded.

In almost all respects, Meyer fits the mold of the stereotypical prosperity theologian. However, like Jakes and Osteen, there are certain beliefs that seem to be unique to her, or rather there are specific characteristics that delineate her teachings from other prosperity theologians. This uniqueness is shown in her extreme emphasis on the power and ability of the individual. Both Jakes and Osteen relied heavily on the power of individual. Yet Jakes outlined the need for Christian mentors and even went as far as to say it was dangerous to be alone in the faith. However, Meyer entirely negates this statement, and instead proposes that independence is the pinnacle of faith. “It is not wrong to get counsel from the right person or people, but we can also develop a close relationship with God that will

⁹⁰ Ibid., 58.

⁹¹ Ibid., 122.

help us in most situations to spiritually discern what course of action should be.”⁹² In essence, the individual is the only one that fully understand his or her personal issues, and by developing a strong enough relationship with God, these issues are able to resolved separate from a body of fellow Christians.

The second unique characteristic is the fact that she is a woman. As stated earlier, Meyer stands almost entirely alone in a field dominated by men. However, it is this characteristic that makes her writing so unique and so powerful. She is able to speak with authority about female issues because she experiences them on a daily basis. As stated on her website, Meyer experienced sexual abuse as a child.⁹³ Continually throughout her book, she references this experience as something that emotionally damaged her, but was able to find restoration through Christ. Although this issue is not entirely exclusive to a female audience, the facts are that sexual abuse occurs to woman at a much higher rate than men. Meyer uses her experience of sexual abuse to demonstrate and validate the power of her teachings as a woman. Although *Change Your Words, Change Your Life* is not written exclusively for women, it is strongly implied. In her discussion on humility, Meyer uses the feminine personal pronoun “she” instead of a gender-neutral term to describe one that is humble. However, it is not clear if Meyer uses the feminine personal pronoun because she is attempting to relate to her female audience, or rather if she is believes humility is a uniquely female trait. Unlike many other female Christian leaders today, Meyer reaffirms many traditional Christian gender stereotypes. In her discussion on gossip, Meyer writes, “Women are more likely to fall prey to these

⁹² Ibid.,101.

⁹³ “About Joyce”

types of ‘word sins’ than men.”⁹⁴ She also reaffirms gender roles in her subchapter titled, “Stay Within Your Sphere of Influence” as she writes, “at home I am Dave’s wife, and in that sphere he has the top position of authority and should be treated with respect and admiration.”⁹⁵

In most ways, Meyer aligns herself with prosperity teachings and unapologetically refers to God’s plan for prosperity throughout her work. However, like Jakes and Osteen, Meyer represents the diversity of leadership and doctrine present in the prosperity gospel.

These surveys have demonstrated that Osteen, Jakes, and Meyer each contain specific and unique characteristics that set them apart. Osteen acts an inspirational speaker and highlights God’s favor for “you”, Jakes address a minority audience and presents the reader with concrete practices and tools in order to attain success, and Meyer speaks to women and accentuates the power of the spoken word. Yet all three figures touch on the topics of individualism, self-reliance, diversity, optimism, and abundance in health and wealth as a measure and reward for strong faith, which all draw their legitimacy from a charismatic leader.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 195.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 215.

Chapter 3

Analysis & Criticism

The writings of Osteen, Jakes, and Meyer highlight many of the core teachings of the prosperity gospel today. First, the ultimate purpose of the prosperity gospel is to motivate and inspire the individual. Each author utilizes traditional Christian doctrine such as the love of God, the covenant blessings of Israel, and the power of the Holy Spirit and uses them to demonstrate the power endowed through membership as a Christian for the individual, separate from a community of believers. Second, prosperity preachers are optimists that focus almost entirely on the positive side of life. The realities of suffering, pain, and failure are rarely recognized, and when they are, are presented as contrary to the desire of God. Third, the prosperity gospel embraces material wealth and personal success to an unprecedented extent in Christian history. Fourth, self-reliance is an underlying theme in every belief. It is up to the individual to make choices that will lead to prosperity. These unprecedented Christian doctrines lead to the fifth characteristic of the prosperity gospel, in that it creates a need for a non-traditional source of authority, which is found in the Charismatic leader.

Historically, Christianity has relied on two main pillars of authority, namely scripture and church tradition. Beginning in 325 AD following the Council of Nicaea, the Church leaders decided which books were to be included in the Bible, giving them a universal governing document for the first time in their history. However, the absence of such a document meant that for about three hundred years

Christianity had been governing itself solely through the authority of the Church⁹⁶. Following Nicaea, the Catholic Church made an attempt to unify the two sources of authority, and began to interpret scripture in a manner that aligned with church tradition.

The Christian Bible is not a fully coherent or seamless document, in that it is a product of writings from a multitude of authors, spanning thousands of years, each with their own style and purpose of writing. The same principles used to interpret Genesis should not be used to interpret Lamentations, which should not be used to interpret Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. This difficulty in articulating the author's original intent lead to a wide spread difference of interpretations which was combatted by the Catholic Church by attempt to create a universal or orthodox interpretation, which belonged to the church itself. In an effort to uphold the integrity of the Bible, the Church effectively degraded scripture, making it subject to Church teaching and tradition.

The unchecked authority of the Catholic Church lead to many abuses of power, revealed in the doctrine of indulgences in the 15th century. Martin Luther, valuing the ultimate authority of scripture, led a reformation against the abuses of the Catholic Church. Luther's reformation valued the "priesthood of all believers"⁹⁷ which focused on the individual's ability to interpret scripture for his or herself without the traditional oversight of the Church. With Luther's belief in "sola scriptura" as sole authoritative source in Christianity, the reformation challenged

⁹⁶ It should be noted that the Catholic Church's claim to authority was in no way universally accepted during the first three centuries. Instead factions fought for authority and over doctrinal issues.

⁹⁷ Martin Luther, *Address to the German Nobility*, 1520.

the authority of the Church: yet it also disintegrated the unity of the Catholic Church. The disappearance of unity not only led to a disconnected church, but also allowed a wide array of different beliefs to emerge that were unparalleled in Christian history.

In 1799, Modern Christianity established a new source of authority through the beliefs of Friedrich Schleiermacher outlined in his *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, which identified the necessity of experience and “feeling” in the life of the Christian. Schleiermacher, known as the Father of Modern Theology⁹⁸, responded to the critiques of Christianity by the Enlightenment and created a theology in which Christianity could not be taught, but instead had to be experienced by the individual. The Enlightenment pointed to the many seemingly irrational beliefs found in Christianity to discount its validity. In response, Schleiermacher divided religion into the three aspects of feeling, activity, and perception⁹⁹, which undermined both scripture and church tradition. On the other hand, Schleiermacher did not undermine the ultimate dependence of man on God. God was still transcendent and omnipotent, and never subject to the requests of the individual. However, Schleiermacher’s redefinition of authority did indeed allow future generations of Christians to redefine Christianity, as they desired by relying on experience and “feeling” for legitimacy.

In many ways the prosperity gospel is a product of the reformation and the teachings of Schleiermacher. Prosperity theologians heavily rely on experience to

⁹⁸ James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought: The Enlightenment and the Nineteenth Century*, (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2006).

⁹⁹ Tamsin Jones, “RELG 110: Introduction to Christianity, Lecture 18: Romanticism”, (lecture, Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut, November 5, 2014).

justify their claims, and almost never use scripture as a starting point, but rather use it to justify claims already made, instead of directing the formation of beliefs itself. It should also be noted that when they do cite scripture, it is almost always presented in single verses, effectively ignoring the surrounding context. For instance, according to Amazon.com's summary, TD Jakes' *Reposition Yourself* is written "In the vein of Joel Osteen's *Become a Better You* and Dr. Phil's *Life Strategies*, *Reposition Yourself* uses wisdom collected from more than thirty years of Jakes's experience counseling and working with high-profile and everyday people on financial, relational, and spiritual creativity on the path to an enriched life filled with contentment at every stage."¹⁰⁰ The words "God", "Christian", "Jesus", or "Bible" are entirely absent from this summary because the main inspiration does not arise from the Bible or Church tradition, but rather from his own experience. Jakes' experience is authoritative in that it gives direction to the reader in order to reach a level of "contentment" not experienced.

The prosperity gospel is also unique in that has no governing authority. Unlike the Catholic Church, the Presbyterian Church, and the Lutheran Church, the prosperity gospel is not a denomination. In traditional denominations, a governing authority will approve of the pastors selected in the churches bearing their denominational identity. If the pastor began to preach doctrine that was contrary to the accepted denomination doctrine, the pastor would be subject to disciplinary action. However, the prosperity gospel is most often found in nondenominational

¹⁰⁰ "Reposition Yourself: Living Life Without Limits", *Amazon*, August 26, 2008, <http://www.amazon.com/Reposition-Yourself-Living-Without-Limits/dp/1416547304>.

churches that eliminate the intervention of any external influence on the doctrine of the church. In traditional denominational churches, a congregation bearing the denominations name is subject to intervention when theology is taught that does not comply with the doctrine of the denomination as a whole. On the other hand, nondenominational churches place ultimate authority in the hands of the pastor, which allows him or her to develop unprecedented theology without being subject to any denominational governing authority.

Due to the fact that there are no governing structures in nondenominational churches, very often charismatic and talented pastors emerge as proponents of untraditional theology by appealing to their popularity as their source of authority. In Max Weber's *The Sociology of Charismatic Leadership*, Weber develops a notion of "charismatic authority" which can help us understand how the prosperity gospel preacher functions. He writes these types of leaders have been, "holders of specific gifts of the body and spirit; and these gifts have been believed to be supernatural."¹⁰¹ The modern day prosperity thinkers like Osteen, Jakes, and Meyer emerged in a religious landscape in which their wealth was recognized as a sign of God's divine blessing in their lives. Their wealth is a material indication that God approves of their lives, including their teachings on wealth. In the same way that these leaders developed a circular logic to justify the power of faith, their authority is legitimized in a circular manner as well. Since they have wealth, then God must favor them. If God favors them, then God must approve of their doctrine. If God approves of their doctrine, then their teachings on wealth must also be true. If their

¹⁰¹ Max Weber. *Essays in Sociology*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), 245.

teachings on wealth are true, then they must be wealthy. The only necessary piece of evidence needed for this logic is the wealth of the leader, because without it the entire message falls apart. Weber continues on by noting that, “The charismatic leader gains and maintains authority solely by proving his strength in life.”¹⁰²Osteen, Jakes, and Meyer’s wealth is their strength. Since they have attained success in their personal lives, then they must be respected as authoritative.

It is not just the gifts of the charismatic leader that legitimate his or her authority, but rather a combination of the gifts and recognition of the gifts by his or her audience. Weber writes the leader’s charismatic “claim breaks down if his mission is not recognized by those to whom he feels he has been sent. If they recognize him, he is their master- so long as he knows how to maintain recognition through ‘proving’ himself.”¹⁰³ In order to ‘prove’ him or herself, the prosperity theologian must demonstrate that his teachings actually work. Followers desire to see real life success stories. The most important aspect of charismatic leadership, argued Weber is that, “Above all, however, his mission must ‘prove’ itself in that those who faithfully surrender to him must fare well. If they do not fare well, he is obviously not the master sent by the gods”¹⁰⁴ In the prosperity tradition, there is a constant need for evidence of success in the lives of its followers. For this reason, the main sources of proof-text in these books are anecdotes that further legitimize the authors’ claims.

¹⁰² Ibid., 249.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 246

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 249.

In the chapter titled, “Be Happy with Who You Are”, Osteen writes about a specific interaction he had with one of his congregants, Melanie. Melanie was offered a promotion at work and came to Osteen seeking council on whether to accept the position or not. Joel advised her to “learn to follow your heart” and to not let “outside expectations keep you from following your own heart.”¹⁰⁵ In turn, Melanie listened to Osteen’s advice and now “she and her family are thriving”¹⁰⁶. These kinds of anecdotes demonstrate both that the leader is well respected and sought after for advice, and that his advice leads to success and happiness. However, these are the only purposes that anecdotes are included. The reader has no personal connection to Melanie, and feels no need to see her succeed, but each of the books are littered with them in order to further back the claims the authors are making.

The authority and legitimacy of the prosperity gospel has been shown to be almost entirely dependent on its charismatic leaders. Without these leaders, the message inevitably falls apart. However, it is exactly this sort of authority structure that is conducive to prosperity doctrines. Nondenominational churches lack the structure that would stop teaching that is entirely separated from scripture and church tradition. The charismatic leader is the master of his or her destiny in that he is only subject to the approval of the audience. If the leader can continue to prove him or herself, then his or her doctrine continues to be legitimate.

¹⁰⁵ Osteen, 96.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

Criticism

With popularity comes criticism and the prosperity gospel is no exception to this rule. It has received vehement rejection and denunciation from leaders from many different denominations. However, the leading voice seems to come from those from the reformed tradition who ascribe to a theology of suffering¹⁰⁷. These leaders focus their criticisms on the prosperity gospel's focus on material wealth, its individualistic focus, and its inability to connect with reality.

The leading criticism of the prosperity gospel is undoubtedly its overemphasis on money. John Piper, founder of [desiringGod.org](http://www.desiringgod.org), Chancellor of Bethlehem college and seminary, and head pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church for the last 33 years¹⁰⁸, used his website to speak out against the prosperity gospel in his interview titled, "Why I Abominate the Prosperity Gospel"¹⁰⁹. From the beginning Piper attacks the central claim of the prosperity gospel that God wants his people to attain wealth. He opens his Bible and quotes from 1 Timothy 6:6-11, which says,

But godliness with contentment is great gain, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.

¹⁰⁷ The modern theology of suffering is largely based in Luther's "Theology of the Cross" laid out in the *Heidelberg Disputation*.

¹⁰⁸ "John Piper." *Desiring God*. 2015.

<http://www.desiringgod.org/authors/john-piper>.

¹⁰⁹ John Piper, "Why I Abominate the Prosperity Gospel." *Desiring God*. October 29, 2008, <http://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/why-i-abominate-the-prosperity-gospel>.

According to Piper, the prosperity gospel preachers “nurture and cultivate” the very pangs, namely the desire to become rich, that lead to ruin and destruction. “They are encouraging that this suicidal behavior happen. That’s abominable!”¹¹⁰

Piper is not alone in his attack on the materiality of the prosperity gospel. John MacArthur, pastor-teacher of Grace Community Church, author, conference speaker, and president of Masters College and Seminary¹¹¹, speaks out against the embrace of money characteristic of the prosperity gospel: “They claim to possess great spiritual power but in reality they rank materialists and enemies of everything holy.”¹¹² He compares prosperity preachers to Bernie Madoff and accuses them of taking advantage of “destitute, disconsolate, disabled, elderly, sick, suffering, or dying. The faith-healer gets lavishly rich while the victims become poorer and more desperate.”¹¹³ These are clearly not light words, and are largely based in the prosperity gospel’s tradition of asking, or begging, for contributions, often from those who are already in financially difficult situations. In the Christian tradition that has embraced the support of the poor, asking for donations from them seems inconsistent and unbiblical.

The second most prominent criticism that is leveraged against the proponents of the prosperity gospel is their emphasis on God as a tool to be used for one’s own individual goals. The prosperity gospel is undeniably all about the good things that come from faith in God, without mediating on God’s will. Michael Horton,

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ “John MacArthur’s Biography” *Grace to You*. 2015.

<http://www.gty.org/connect/biography>.

¹¹² John MacArthur, “A Colossal Fraud Part 1” *Grace to You*. December 7, 2009, <http://www.gty.org/blog/B091207/a-colossal-fraud>.

¹¹³ Ibid.

professor of apologetics and theology at Westminster Seminary, California, had addressed this self-centered form of Christianity and has even wrote a book titled, *Christless Christianity*. In his four part lecture series based off of the book, Horton says that Christians are being slowly drawn away from “sin, the atoning work of Christ, His having propitiated the wrath of God, and our being justified by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.”¹¹⁴ The problem in modern Christianity is that these ideas and beliefs are increasingly becoming “assumed, if its believed at all”¹¹⁵ and instead Christians are being taught to focus on the “felt needs of consumers... the inner self... as the authority to tell us what is right and wrong, what is true and false, what is good and evil, beautiful and ugly.”¹¹⁶ Prosperity gospel theologians begin their doctrine where the majority of Christian thought ends. The meaning of Jesus of Nazareth’s life, death, and resurrection are passed over and salvation is presented as a given. Instead there is an increased emphasis on living life enjoying the gifts resulting from God’s blessing. Horton continues to reject this self-centered approach to the Gospel, and instead argues that these sources of authority are actually the sources of the problem. “The further you go into yourself, the more you actually become a captive of your own bondage.”¹¹⁷

Horton’s rejection of self is not an exception in the history of Christianity, but follows the reformation thought of both Luther and Calvin. Luther believed that

¹¹⁴ Horton, Michael *Christless Christianity* Michigan, (Baker Books, June 1, 2012) as outlined in White Horse Inn. “Christless Christianity - Dr. Michael Horton” *YouTube* Video. 2:54. August 28, 2008. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ReJr_Z1GQY.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

suffering was the only way to understand God¹¹⁸ while Calvin believed in the total depravity of man.¹¹⁹ Yet both of these men believed that the self was able to interpret scripture without the guidance of the Church. It is a paradox that creates a theology that rejects and embraces the inner self. Calvin elaborates on this belief in his *Institutes* saying, “Thus, from the feeling of our own ignorance, vanity, poverty, in firmity, and-what is more-depravity and corruption, we recognize that the true light of wisdom, sound virtue, full abundance of every good, and purity of righteousness rest in the Lord alone.”¹²⁰ On one hand the fleshly desires should be rejected and are viewed as fallen, wicked, and detached from God. On the other hand, the individual is able to understand God’s will laid out in scripture through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit covers over the believer’s sinful desires, and makes him or her clean.

The emergence of mega-churches has allowed leaders of Christian churches to attain fleshly desires more so than ever before in history, which is reaffirmed in the authority structure of the charismatic leader. Joel Osteen has an estimated net worth of \$40 million¹²¹ while TD Jakes has a net worth of \$18 million¹²². This kind of

¹¹⁸ Luther develops these ideas in the “Theology of the Cross” laid out in the *Heidelberg Disputation*.

¹¹⁹ John Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. John T. McNeill, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, London, 1960), 36.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ Ivey DeJesus, “Defending success and fame: Joel Osteen says he is keeping the faith”, *The Patriot-News*, May 28, 2013, http://www.pennlive.com/midstate/index.ssf/2013/05/joel_osteen_harrisburg_pennsyl.html.

¹²² G. Thorpe, “8 Black Pastors Whose Net Worth is 200 Times Greater Than Folks in Their Local Communities”, *Atlanta Black Star*, June 26, 2014, <http://atlantablackstar.com/2014/06/26/8-black-pastors-whose-net-worth-is-200-times-greater-than-folks-in-their-local-community/3/>.

excessive wealth stems from the prosperity gospel's embrace of fleshly desires revealed as sinful in scripture and scorned by Calvin, Horton, and Piper. Prosperity megachurches have become moneymaking machines for the lead pastors because prosperity theology supports the financial abundance of the charismatic leader, rather than focusing on the fundamental issues of Christianity. In an interview with Byron Pitts, Osteen was asked why none of the chapters in his book, *Become a Better You*, had any mention of God or Jesus. His response was simply, "That's just my message. There is scripture in there that backs it all up... there's a lot better people qualified to say 'here's a book that's gonna explain the scriptures to you. I don't think that's my gifting.'"¹²³

This blatant avoidance of God is exactly what scares Francis Chan. Chan is a Christian author, and former mega-church pastor of Cornerstone Church in Simi Valley California. He decided to leave his church after he "was hearing Francis Chan at Cornerstone more than the Holy Spirit."¹²⁴ On the other hand, almost every book written by Osteen, Jakes, and Meyer has a picture of them on the cover. Chan's decision to leave Cornerstone was based in his belief that the Christian message transcends any single man, but rather is based in the truth of who God is, revealed through His Holy Scripture. By rejecting his personal authority, Chan was rejecting the pleasures propagated by, and the charismatic authority structure of the prosperity movement.

¹²³ CBS News.

¹²⁴ Mark Galli, "The Relentless Passion of Francis Chan" *Christianity Today*, January 4, 2013. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/december/relentless-passion-of-francis-chan.html?paging=off>.

The third most common criticism arises from the fact that the prosperity is simply out of touch with reality, especially the pain and suffering that is an inevitable part of life. John Piper in his “Why I Abominate the Prosperity Gospel” asks why prosperity preachers don’t preach their sermons in the ICU units of hospitals¹²⁵. How do prosperity preachers deal with real suffering and pain in the world? Piper believes that it simply isn’t possible biblically. Suffering is a very real part of life, and to teach that faithful Christians will be healed from incurable diseases is simply malicious.

Mark Driscoll, former pastor of Mars Hill Church decided to address the rising popularity of the prosperity gospel by showing his church a clip from one of Joel Osteen’s sermons. After it ended, Driscoll pointed out that “walking with God in maturity means that you are wealthy, with good relationships, living in victory, without pain, and without anxiety, excludes Jesus... whatever definition you have of a good life should include God.”¹²⁶ Jesus, the Son of God, was born into a poor family, was broke, lived homeless, and went hungry. If God had intended all of His children to live as Osteen outlines, why did Jesus live the way He did? Summing up his message Driscoll concluded, “A relationship with God is not all lollipops, skipping, while singing hymns. There are days that are very, very hard, and very difficult, and very painful.”¹²⁷ There will be broken relationships, there will be anxiety, there will be hard times, and anyone who denies these realities is simply a liar. It is foolish and

¹²⁵ Piper, 9:30.

¹²⁶ Damian Lee. “Mark Driscoll on Prosperity Gospel and Joel Osteen” *YouTube* video, October 29, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BpNBhJvWpoQ>.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*.

mean spirited to set up Christians for inevitable failure by promising them more and more, when these things will simply never come to fruition. Even Jesus did not experience “total victory”, yet He had the perfect relationship with God. How then can Christians ever expect to live a more perfect life than Jesus?

Conclusion

As seen through the evidence presented over the course of this paper, the prosperity gospel has gained popularity due to its appeal to the ideals of the American dream and not from any Christian teachings found in scripture or church tradition. Beginning with E.W. Kenyon during America's gilded age, Christian preachers began to create a theology that incorporated and emphasized popular American ideals such as individualism, hard work, and self-reliance. Over time these virtues became of primary significance, relegating the atoning work of Jesus Christ to secondary importance. Today, the prosperity gospel has become one of the most popular forms of Christianity in America as a result of its emphasis on the consumer values of wealth, hard work, and self-reliance while still preserving a semblance of Christian rhetoric that resonates with many Christians. However, unlike traditional Christianity, the prosperity gospel embraces a monist theology in which there is no divide between creator and creation, ignores Jesus' atoning work for salvation, and rejects the reality of pain and suffering that Christians are called to address.

It is for these reasons that the prosperity gospel should not be recognized as a legitimate movement within Christianity until it submits to the ultimate authority of scripture and Church tradition and rejects its unbiblical monist theology, its embrace of wealth, and its denial of pain and suffering.

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