

Holy High Rollers

BLESSED:

A HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN PROSPERITY GOSPEL

REVIEWED BY **RANDALL STEPHENS**

THEY ARE AS UBIQUITOUS ON THE AMERICAN landscape as the split-level home or McDonalds drive-through. Churches with epic names like World Overcomers, Victory International, and Word of Faith International Christian Center are visible from highways throughout the country. Christian television networks Daystar, TBN, and CBN air preachers such as Joel Osteen, Joyce Meyer, and T. D. Jakes, who promise the spiritual and material rewards of faith. Their books—with titles like *Become a Better You* and *Can You Stand to Be Blessed?*—are sold in Walmart stores. Their congregations claim 20,000 members or more. To paraphrase H. L. Mencken: Heave an egg out of your Ford Focus window and you might hit a prosperity gospeler, wearing a snazzy three-piece suit and diamond cufflinks.

Versions of the prosperity gospel have long animated the faithful in America.



By Kate Bowler
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The idea that God rewards the righteous with good health, wealth, and happiness has driven the belief and practice of Pentecostals, charismatics, and evangelicals of various stripes. For the blessed, passages from the Bible such as 3 John 1:2 unlock treasures from heaven: “Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth.” To critics, it all looks too much like pyramid-scheme religion. But the faithful see clear promises in the Old and New Testaments, just waiting to be claimed. The check that arrives out of the blue, an inheritance, a surprising pay raise, or a real estate deal that seems too good to be true all are signs of God’s overabundance. Stalwarts remain on the lookout for the hand of God.



TIME & LIFE PICTURES / GETTY IMAGES

Oral Roberts, an early champion of the prosperity gospel, stands before the Tulsa, Oklahoma, headquarters of his ministry, the Abundant Life Building, in 1962.

In a lively book on the subject, Kate Bowler observes that “prosperity theology turned to the cross as the solution to all human needs. Jesus’s death and resurrection abolished not only sin and disease but also poverty.” Bowler, an assistant professor of the history of Christianity in the United States at Duke Divinity School,

fuses ethnography, religious studies, and cultural history to tell a fascinating story of this influential movement.

The prosperity gospel is a major strain within evangelicalism, but the two are not synonymous. There are many evangelical Christians who do not embrace the gospel of wealth, and even recoil at the movement’s name-it-claim-it theology (the belief that the faithful have been promised much in the Bible, but must articulate that claim to get those blessings). To many within the conservative Protestant fold, the prosperity gospel’s brazen divine materialism is as much bad taste as it is bad theology. In 2009, a

branch of the Lausanne Movement, an organization founded in part by Billy Graham, described the prosperity gospel as “false and gravely distorting of the Bible.”

Bowler expertly traces the movement from its origins in the late 19th century as it spun out of Holiness and Pentecostal churches. The growth of this material

Christianity paralleled and was occasionally even linked to the metaphysical religion of the day. Mind cure, Christian Science, proto–New Age mental magic, and various transcendental schemes inspired millions. Most of these religious strains focused strongly on the connection between the spiritual/psychic and material worlds. In an era of proliferating elixirs for health complaints, the faithful looked to heaven for relief.

E. W. Kenyon, a pioneering radio preacher and early-20th-century champion of the health and wealth gospel, took inspiration from the divine healing movement of his day and drew an eager following. African-American preachers in subsequent decades—Elder “Lightfoot” Solomon Michaux and Father Divine among them—carried the message into black communities. The guarantee of riches and relief uplifted followers in the brutal Jim Crow era. Aware of shifts in theology, culture, and politics, Bowler shows how new generations of proponents and laypeople reformed the faith to fit their needs.

Bowler zeroes in on the men and women in the pew, with an ethnographer’s keen insight. Proponents run the spectrum from angry-eyed apocalyptic Christian Zionists to soft-spoken holy therapists. Many of them live in suburban

and exurban communities. Few find their way to the chilly climes of New England, far removed from the Bible belt. Followers care deeply for each other and for potential converts. Food drives, drug rehab programs, and inner-city outreach extend their work beyond church walls. Their faith communities are vital centers for the down-and-out as well as the successful small-business owner.

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Yet the author mostly tells the story of the high-profile movers and shakers, and for good reason. Strong personalities dominate the movement’s history—starting with early stalwarts of the mid-20th century such as Oral Roberts and Kenneth Hagin. Over the decades, believers have wanted their ministers and revivalists to look the part, to model unimaginable success. The aptly named Creflo Dollar, a “pastorpreneur” with unequaled charm, founded the non-denominational World Changers Church

International in Georgia and has confidently faced down several scandals. At one point he assured his congregation, “I own two Rolls-Royces and didn’t pay a dime for them. Why? Because while I’m pursuing the Lord, those cars are pursuing me.”

In the eyes of the movement’s critics, this mix of God and mammon is despicable. In 1955, the influential theologian Reinhold Niebuhr spoke frankly about what he saw as a vacuous, feel-good gospel. From his perch at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, Niebuhr warned that “there is nothing in this religion of Biblical faith.” It amounted, he said several years later, to “a soporific for tired businessmen.” Later in the 20th century, many evangelicals wondered about the implications of the prosperity doctrine. What did it have to do with the message of Jesus? asked writers in *Christianity Today*. Were the poor responsible for their poverty, or the sick for their infirmities? As Bowler indicates, prosperity practitioners deal with these issues in widely different ways. Some throw up their hands and assume that such nettlesome questions won’t have an answer this side of eternity.

Detractors have not just protested the prosperity gospel’s aesthetics and

theology. Egregious wealth and fraud also top the list of indictments. Bowler briefly discusses the scandals that, like demons from hell, have plagued key leaders, including the double-whammy sex-and-finance imbroglio that toppled Jim and Tammy Bakker’s empire of Christian kitsch. Televangelists Robert Tilton and Jimmy Swaggart made headlines with bold claims about God’s riches that would pour down on the saints. On television, Tilton earnestly asked viewers to send prayer requests to him. Then a news program aired footage of those requests after they had been pitched, by the ton, into the trash. Swaggart also hoisted himself with his own petard. He was vicious in denouncing the sexual sins of others, including Jim Bakker, but in 1988 his own Christian empire began to crumble as he confessed to picking up prostitutes.

Then there have been embarrassments of riches that were just . . . well, embarrassing (e.g., the \$23,000 toilet seat in Joyce Meyer’s opulent home). Bowler briefly notes Senator Chuck Grassley’s 2007 investigation of some of the most famous prosperity preachers. But otherwise, discussions of the tension with other Christian groups and the negative attention of the media are missing in this book. Filtering out the outrage

from noninitiates may help us get a clearer picture of the prosperity gospel movement and reveal more about the beliefs and desires of believers. Still, scandal, intrigue, and outside scorn have shaped the movement considerably, and to ignore them to the extent Bowler does is to overlook an important dimension of adherents' experience.

In a superb conclusion, Bowler asks about the "Americanness" of the prosperity gospel, which, she observes, deified and ritualized the American dream. A Gatsbyian hope runs rich in American soil, whether sacred or profane. To borrow from Fitzgerald, prosperity preachers

bank on "the orgasmic future that year by year recedes before us." The promise of health and wealth, Bowler says, has also fared well overseas, making the prosperity gospel a leading religious export to the global South. Bowler compellingly describes the allure and the power of it all. ■

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