

# BLESSED



A History of the American Prosperity Gospel

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monthly magazine, even while their own General Supervisor Roy Hicks's friendship with Kenneth Hagin and Gordon Lindsay was written all over his publications, *The Word of Faith: Use It or Lose It*, and *Praying Beyond God's Abilities*.<sup>25</sup> The Assemblies of God looked askance at teachers within their fold who preached on divine wealth, as ministers like Karl Strader and Jim Bakker tested the limits of denominational bounds. The leading Assemblies of God evangelist Jimmy Swaggart publicly denounced them as more "charismatic" than "pentecostal" for their prosperity leanings. "Pentecostals and charismatics are two different worlds," he declared. "It is my feeling they should be one way or the other."<sup>26</sup> Jack Hayford, at the helm of the 6,000-member Church on the Way, cautioned humility and patience to the throngs of those "claiming authority." He could continue to act as father, then grandfather, to a movement centered on a familiar account of a God who "deals in words."<sup>27</sup>

Most overlooked the rift between the two, while supporters protested that their gospel was simply that old-time religion. "Pentecostal historians have told me that the very same things my father teaches today were taught by the pioneers and founders of the Pentecostal movement, and I know this is so," said Kenneth W. Hagin Jr., who called his father's work a "distillation of all that was good in the great movements in the past."<sup>28</sup> Certainly a number of faith teachers saw themselves as grounded in the work of a previous generation. T. L. Osborn's apprentice Don Gossett published *The Power of Your Words* and *Words that Move Mountains* with alternating chapters by himself and E. W. Kenyon. Gordon Lindsay edited a collection of the writings of John G. Lake, while Watchman Nee was resurrected as a like-minded preacher for his thoughts on the spiritual man.<sup>29</sup> The purified truth centered on faith, the unseen force that turned the spoken word into reality. With the structures of the movement firmly established, secured by educational, ministerial, and promotional platforms, followers set out to convince subsequent generations that "without faith it is impossible to please God" (Hebrews 11:6). As the ranks of the faith-filled ballooned, believers smiled at the newfound prosperity of their home-grown gospel.

### *Jehovah Jireh*

Daisy and T. L. Osborn raised their flutes of orange juice in a toast for the camera under the caption "GO FOR IT!"<sup>30</sup> The 1983 photo book featured a day in the life of the two wealthy evangelists enjoying the latest, greatest

fads of the decade. They jogged through suburbia in sweatbands, cruised to the mall in a shiny Chevrolet, and lounged in their florid home on overstuffed couches. Interspersed with footage from their lifetime of overseas crusades, Daisy marveled about the life that a true believer could aspire to. "Can you imagine, honey," she gushed, "they'll be able to get material success, pay their debts, get out of poverty!!! It will be easy with the 7 SECRETS and the 60 SECONDS a day for just 7 days!" The free booklet, advertised in the *National Enquirer*, was a testimony to celebratory consumption. To followers of the prosperity gospel, God revealed himself as *Jehovah Jireh*, God the Provider.

God lavished on believers not only spiritual blessings but also the material comforts that lightened the load of everyday living. "The Lord shall provide all my needs," ran the lyrics of Benny Hinn's favored crusade anthem, "*Jehovah Jireh* takes care of me."<sup>31</sup> The Christian way offered more than subsistence living. Tradition-bound Christians scraped by with barely enough while true believers drilled deeper to tap into the abundant lives that God promised. "He is *Jehovah-Jireh*," explained up-and-coming Rod Parsley, "the God of more than enough. He gives us the ability to plant, to harvest, and to gather the abundance into the storehouse."<sup>32</sup> (According to Genesis 22:14, *Jehovah Jireh* referred to the place where God provided a ram for Abraham to sacrifice instead of his son Isaac.) Everyone possessed the God-given potential to sow and reap their financial harvest with plenty to spare. Poverty marked a spiritual shortage. Faith believers claimed the promise from Jesus' lips that he came "that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly."<sup>33</sup> Outsiders called it baptized materialism. Followers called it living in the overflow.

Three arguments grounded the movement's defense of biblical wealth. First, prosperity theology turned to the cross as the solution to all human needs. Jesus' death and resurrection abolished not only sin and disease but also poverty. In order to understand this financial provision of the atonement, we must recall the priority placed on spirit by the movement. Poverty took on spiritual dimensions as a demonic force that separated people from their godly inheritance. Poverty—as an evil spirit—required a spiritual solution. Jesus reclaimed dominion over the earth from Satan when he took on the spiritual debt of poverty on the cross. "He took your place in *poverty*," argued the African American pastor Leroy Thompson of Word of Life Christian Center in Darrow, Louisiana, "so you could take His place in *prosperity*."<sup>34</sup> As a result, believers could claim wealth as one of their rights and privileges in Jesus' name.



Some teachers found it more difficult to explain wealth than they did health. Jesus' crucifixion tied the atonement to suffering as a corollary of sickness, but there was no moment teachers could point to that signaled Christ's defeat over poverty. Only those who specialized in divine finance approached the subject with much gusto. Pastor Thompson described Jesus' resurrection as the moment when "He couldn't stand being broke any longer! He came up on the third day! He said, in effect, 'Enough of this!'"<sup>35</sup> Jesus rose from the grave as the redeemer of poverty's curse.

Second, believers argued that they followed in the Master's steps. Jesus himself possessed great wealth, and it followed that his devotees should also. Snippets from Jesus' life offered a few clues. "As soon as Jesus arrived, that anointing to prosper acted like a magnet, drawing wise men with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh," argued the Kenneth Copeland protégé Creflo Dollar. "Those were not cheap gifts, either. Prosperity attached itself to baby Jesus immediately, and that same gift to prosper has been given to us as heirs of Christ."<sup>36</sup> That the guards divided Jesus' cloak among them at his crucifixion suggested that his belongings were valuable.<sup>37</sup> *Heart of a Billionaire* author Thomas Anderson, pastor of the Living Word Bible Church in Mesa, Arizona, counted Mary and Joseph's donkey ride to Bethlehem as proof of their wealth, arguing that the animal was the contemporary equivalent of a Cadillac.<sup>38</sup> *Rich God, Poor God* author John Avanzini detailed Jesus' designer clothes and expensive anointing oils as further evidence. To be sure, the matter caused some disagreement. Kenneth Hagin Sr. and Oral Roberts established a strong precedent for the argument that Jesus lived a wealthy life but defeated poverty on the cross, while others seemed to be content that Jesus' lifetime of poverty was part of his messianic purpose.<sup>39</sup> Further examples of righteous people of wealth sprang readily from the pages of the Old Testament. Preachers understood the high stakes of proving that their savior could be an economic exemplar, much as a late medieval debate about the poverty preached by the mendicant orders had caused a defense of Jesus and his disciples as members of the landed gentry with their own coats of arms. So, too, televangelists continued to scour Jesus' life for signs that he had paved the way for prosperous living.

Third, believers rooted prosperity in covenant theology as an extension of the ancient promises God made to Abraham.<sup>40</sup> Favor and riches sprang from faithfulness to the Abrahamic covenant. "In the Old Testament, according to Deuteronomy," Kenneth Hagin explained, "poverty was to come upon God's people if they disobeyed Him."<sup>41</sup> The scriptures were

shot through with the Deuteronomic imperative that blessings accompanied the keeping of the Law (and curses greeted its disobedience). Christians were beneficiaries of Abraham's "spiritual promissory note," explained the Denver evangelist Marilyn Hickey.<sup>42</sup> Pre-Fall humanity once enjoyed unimpeded access to wealth in the Garden of Eden, "when He surrounded Adam and Eve with every material blessing they could possibly need."<sup>43</sup> Their sin transferred legal dominion of the earth to Satan, who kept humanity in want of health, provision, and God's power. Jesus' death and resurrection flooded the world with new victory and financial reminders of believers' redeemed status as God's children. As the gospel-singer Donald Lawrence sang in "Back to Eden":

Our families blessed; finances blessed . . .  
 . . . Jesus came now all is well.

The saints claimed a rich inheritance as their own.

The surprising gains of prosperity theology in pulpits, publications, conferences, and television airtime strengthened its leaders' resolve to raise their ministries to ever-increasing heights. Teachers, invigorated by constant growth, confidently confessed brighter futures. They concluded that nature yielded to the proper use of divine principles. Mechanistic accounts of giving and receiving dominated. Faith teachers differed in their interpretations of the exact relationship between the spoken word and its coming into being. This was a decade of *hard prosperity*.

Hard prosperity drew a straight line between life circumstances and a believer's faith. Faith operated as a perfect law, and any irregularities meant that the believer did not play by the rules. Specificity was the key to successful prayer. Participants were instructed to name their pleas, their wishes, and even their dollar amounts to command spiritual forces to their desired ends.

Charles Capps stood as one hard prosperity preacher among many. Capps, an ordained minister and popular guest on Gloria and Kenneth Copeland's television program, systematized faith theology into an ironclad system of causality. The spoken word, by activating faith, bound God to the individual's proclamation. When the one-time farmer built a housing subdivision north of England, Arkansas, he took on a mountain of debt to finance his project. Convinced that faith could remedy the situation, he arranged the numerous mortgages for the development properties on the kitchen table. "Notes," he said, "listen to me. I'm talking to

you. Jesus said you would obey me. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, I command you, I say to you, BE PAID IN FULL . . . DEMATERIALIZED . . . DEPART . . . BE GONE . . . IN JESUS' NAME, YOU WILL OBEY ME!"<sup>44</sup> When asked if this seemed "silly," Capps confidently replied that the Bible was more practical than believers realized. After all, the proof of the pudding is in the eating: the mortgages were paid, the properties sold, and his subdivision became a success. Capps's major work, *The Tongue: A Creative Force*, sold more than three million copies.<sup>45</sup>

Hard prosperity hammered giving and receiving into rigid rules. First, pay tithes. Though all faith teachers preached about the significance of tithing, hard prosperity found God in the details. Some churches kept detailed financial reports on their members, even asking them to submit tax records to verify that they paid their full tithes. Finance teacher John Avanzini spoke for all when he cited failure to tithe as the primary reason that God failed to return money to believers. Second, hard prosperity made financial miracles an everyday prospect. Positive confessions tailored to "supernatural debt-cancellation" or blessed billfolds that automatically multiplied its contents, arrived in believers' mailboxes.<sup>46</sup> Testimonies of sudden infusions of cash dominated the discussion.

Third, the process was largely epistemic. "Proper thinking produces finances," Avanzini stated simply.<sup>47</sup> Positive confession seemed so powerful that considerable debate arose within the faith movement about the degree to which anyone could use it, regardless of holiness. More than a few suggested that perhaps wealthy people unconsciously lived out the truth. The first lady of one North Carolina congregation argued that anyone could tap into it without personal faith, as she had begun "naming it and claiming it" before she understood its implications.<sup>48</sup> The finer theological points mattered less than the conclusion: divine wealth came with an easy trigger.

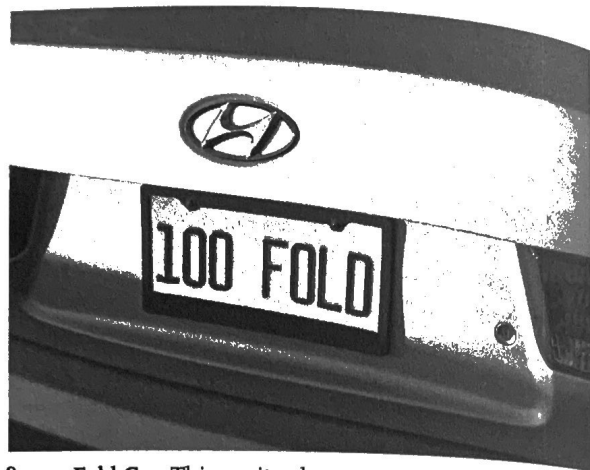
Formulas for wealth grew increasingly precise. Tithes alone did not guarantee that the windows of heaven stayed open. The doctrine of "first fruits," first introduced in the 1960s, became a standard classification of donation. For example, the person who received a \$50 raise had to donate the first \$50 to God. Positive confessors began to affix their tithes and offerings with specific wishes, a practice Oral Roberts had dubbed "naming your seed." Some whispered their desires as they placed their envelope in the offertory. Others took it a step further, taking pains to inscribe the donation itself with their confession. Believers with checking accounts might have their checks printed with scripture about blessing or write verses in

the memo line. One wrote, "Money cometh unto you," on the check, hoping that the bank teller would repeat it and positively confess on her behalf. Believers occasionally scribbled their confessions on dollar bills. It was an inventory of ordinary hopes that required small miracles. "For a new car." "For a promotion." "For new school clothes." When needs were met, believers proudly put them on display. Automobiles were marked as heaven-sent with vanity plates boasting PRAYED 4, BLESSED, 100 FOLD, and LUKE 12:31 ("But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added unto you").

The "hundredfold blessing" (last mentioned in our discussion of the midcentury healing revivals) served as the most common calculus of God's "money-back guarantee." It was often said that God rewarded givers a hundred times their original donation.<sup>49</sup> Gloria Copeland, a famous evangelist in her own right, calculated the returns: "You give \$1 for the Gospel's sake and \$100 belongs to you; give \$10 and receive \$1000; give \$1000 and receive \$100,000. . . . Give one airplane and receive one hundred times the value of the airplane. Give one car and the return would furnish you a lifetime of cars. In short, Mark 10:30 is a very good deal."<sup>50</sup> Hard prosperity emphasized its contractual nature, describing God as unable to "multiply back" blessings except to those who give correctly.<sup>51</sup> The laws of the harvest formed an exact science. Televangelist Jimmy Swaggart decried the hundredfold blessing as "outright fraud."<sup>52</sup> Kenneth Hagin later repented of his own teaching on the matter: "I no longer tell people to expect the hundredfold return on their offerings. I just stay with what the Word of God says: '*Give and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over*' (Luke 6:38). I always claim the 'running over' blessing."<sup>53</sup> Though other faith teachers protested that the world could not contain enough riches to reward everyone with a hundredfold return, popularity favored the literal minded.

The extravagant promises of the hundredfold blessing became increasingly popular during the troubled 1970s. Money-multiplication strategies seemed credible in light of the broad cultural shifts concerning credit that left Americans with greater faith in an invisible economy. In the mid-1970s, growing inflation and stagnation, dubbed "stagflation," were hallmarks of a sluggish economy. Unemployment and the price of consumer goods continued to rise.<sup>54</sup> Credit and debt—previously stigmatized as marks of moral weakness—became a strategy to cope with soaring inflation.<sup>55</sup> Consumers who paid for goods on credit could expect to pay less in real terms, as inflation devalued the amount they owed. Money became





**FIGURE 3.8 100 Fold Car** This vanity plate, seen outside a Joel Osteen event, suggests the driver's confidence that God rewards with mid-sized family sedans.  
Source: Author's photo.

increasingly theoretical, as the connection between the value of one's labor and one's income grew increasingly unpredictable. From the creation of the Visa card in 1973, credit card spending grew at a rate of \$3.5 billion a year as more shoppers began to put their faith in the value of dollars they did not yet see. These economic conditions boosted consumer confidence in unseen multipliers. For many, faith in supernatural hundredfold returns appeared a reasonable economic strategy. It was a movement that treasured the God of checks and balances, whose financial formulas and principles ensured that, when all was tallied, God was more than fair.

### *Megaministry*

In 1983, the Bakkers opened their Praise the Lord (PTL) television studio at Heritage USA to fanfare and a personal note from the equally sunny President Ronald Reagan, who congratulated the duo on their efforts to help "many Americans endure and triumph."<sup>56</sup> This was an America of renewed confidence. It had ditched the president associated with national malaise and humiliation in the Iran hostage affair and replaced him with one whose campaign slogan was "It's Morning Again in America."<sup>57</sup> In foreign policy the nation finally felt able to forget the debacle of Vietnam and flex its muscles once more as first Grenada and then Panama were invaded and bent to the American will. A new generation of medium-range missiles

was installed in Europe despite massive protests and Soviet opposition. The diffident Carteresque approach to the Soviet Union gave way to an uncompromising vision of the USSR as an "evil empire." Popular culture reveled in glitter and extravagance: disco, the drug-soaked club scene, big hair, shoulder pads, glam rock, and designer fashions. The decade's economic expansion accompanied a market-oriented viewpoint and an ethic of excess memorialized in the film *Wall Street* as "greed is good." By 1989, the unlooked-for fall of Eastern European communism produced a triumphalist aura surrounding all things capitalist. The galloping optimism and individualism fit well with a decade of growth by the faith movement.

Ministry took on larger-than-life proportions. Megachurches (with 2,000 plus members) loomed large on the religious landscape as innovative centers of revival. In 1970, megachurches numbered 50. By 1990, the total swelled to 310.<sup>58</sup> Of these, roughly three dozen congregations orbited within the prosperity network, a modest but vital minority. Celebrities like Jimmy Swaggart, the Bakkers, and the Crouches headed multimillion-dollar media conglomerates supported by hundreds of thousands of viewers. Oral Roberts alone commanded an annual budget of \$125 million.<sup>59</sup> By 1980, his eponymous university had graduated its thirteenth and largest graduating class at 781 students. A. A. Allen's Miracle Revival Fellowship headquartered in Dallas claimed 500 affiliated churches and approximately 10,000 members.<sup>60</sup>

Prosperity megachurches were comparatively late bloomers in the church growth movement that believed that bigger was always better. In the 1970s, the broader conservative Christian culture—fundamentalist, charismatic, evangelical, and pentecostal camps alike—had fallen in love with church growth as an end in itself. Los Angeles pastor Frederick Price spoke for them all when he said: "Every church should be a big church."<sup>61</sup> In their enthusiasm for the great commission, American evangelicals discovered the possibilities for expansion embedded in the work of Donald McGavran, his successor C. Peter Wagner, and their institutional home, Fuller Theological Seminary's School of World Mission. This seedbed and its resulting conferences, seminary classes, literature, and knock-off institutes formed the framework of the church growth movement. In the early 1980s, prosperity preachers joined its interdenominational leadership as natural experts in increase. The intersection between the two movements was like a meeting between old friends. The faith movement's emphasis on results and the materiality of salvation easily absorbed the goal of church growth as a sign of its own faithfulness. Thus in 1985, the Chicago Church Growth and Leadership Conference advertised the expertise of

Word of Faith star Billy Joe Daugherty, *Your Church Can Grow* author C. Peter Wagner, positive thinker Robert Schuller, and the Korean pastor of the world's largest church, David Yonggi Cho. All shared a vision of the God who wanted to bless them abundantly.

The prosperity movement rapidly cultivated transnational connections. By the mid-1980s, Christ for the Nations Institute could claim an astounding overseas legacy. The small school had helped build 4,074 churches in 100 countries and translated 25 million books into 50 languages.<sup>62</sup> David Yonggi Cho became the patron of American prosperity preachers and a wildly popular conference speaker in his own right. His influential book *The Fourth Dimension* (1979) featured a dense theological exposition of the unseen forces of faith and a foreword by church-growth expert Robert Schuller. The success of these native megaministries cemented the international dimensions of the prosperity movement.

During the larger-than-life 1980s, America's largest churches were growing—not from a flood of the unchurched—but from the increasing concentration of seasoned churchgoers under one roof. Some theorists predicted that these baby boomers were spiritual wanderers whose comfort in big box establishments—university classrooms, corporate cubicles, and Walmart aisles—predisposed them to church models that resembled these large institutional forms. Others, such as sociologist Mark Chaves, argued that there was an economy of scale at work; small churches simply could not compete with the range of services larger churches could provide.<sup>63</sup> Church growth strategists hoped to capitalize on this by making contemporary churchgoing feel as comfortable as trips to the mall. Continuing in this commercial vein, experts recommended that churches implement marketing strategies and view their church as a product and their worshippers as consumers. As populations drifted from city centers to the suburbs, and later to “edge cities” growing near metropolitan hubs, pastors and congregations built sprawling church campuses near freeways and interstates, hoping to capture the largest market share. Each congregation tailored their product to capitalize on their target audience, demographic preferences, and selling features.<sup>64</sup> Nondenominational evangelical churches that adopted market-driven features to make their services visitor friendly won recognition as “seeker sensitive” churches.<sup>65</sup>

Prosperity megachurches embodied the entrepreneurial logic of this movement to the utmost, and included the corporate models that seeker-sensitive megachurches were willing to employ in both theology and practice. Many prosperity megachurches built in this decade minimized

“churchlike” features such as crosses, steeples, or stained glass in favor of the bricks, steel, and glass of a corporate headquarters. Predominantly white prosperity churches with strong evangelical connections cultivated the atmosphere of an unbuttoned workplace. Women and men could forgo dressy Sunday fashions in favor of the attire of casual Fridays. (Not that polo shirts, khakis, and artfully distressed loafers—the uniform of the average suburban man—did much to disguise their comfortable economic status.) African American megachurch fashion tilted in the opposite direction; custom monograms on the inside of a man's jacket cuff or the gleaming buckle of a woman's designer purse displayed a more overt indication of personal wealth.<sup>66</sup> Yet the same logic prevailed: for faith worshippers there was never a clear distinction between church and the marketplace. Senior pastors took on the title chief executive officer (CEO), frequently splitting their ministries into “for profit” and “not for profit” branches. Successful pastors considered themselves true entrepreneurs, arguing that kingdom principles were, in fact, business principles.<sup>67</sup> They called it kingdom business.

California televangelist Robert H. Schuller, *The Hour of Power* broadcaster and church-growth guru, was one of the ministers most in the public eye.<sup>68</sup> Ordained in the Reformed Church in America like his positive thinking predecessor Norman Vincent Peale, Schuller exhibited an early flair for advertising and church growth. For example, when he could not find property for his church plant in Garden Grove, California, he rented a drive-in theater and preached to the 50 assembled cars while perched on the roof of the refreshment stand. His advertising jingle said it all: “Come as you are in a family car.” Drive-in church services (later with sermons piped in through the car radio) remained a fixture of his ministry and a tribute to his interest in making religion appealing to the unchurched. This consumerist model paid off handsomely, allowing Schuller to undertake a hugely expensive building project dubbed the Crystal Cathedral, a church of glass large enough to house a river. The Tower of Hope, with a 90-foot glowing cross, soon followed. Schuller's expansive vision won the day. His church ministry sprawled and added a school, retirement home, call center, and local outreach programs. He topped the *New York Times* bestseller list with a reconfiguration of “positive thinking” into “possibility thinking.” His books, which included *Move Ahead with Possibility Thinking* (1967), *Peace of Mind through Possibility Thinking* (1977), *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation* (1982), *Tough Times Never Last But Tough People Do* (1983), and *The Be Happy Attitudes* (1985), established Schuller as the self-help



authority of his generation. He founded the Robert H. Schuller Institute for Successful Church Leadership to show others the path he had trod. Schuller's career shows how the earlier trends of positive thinking had grown intertwined with the pentecostal prosperity crowd. At the end of his career, when Schuller sat down with Paul Crouch on Praise the Lord, the two old friends marveled at their personal discoveries of God's abundance, albeit using different language.<sup>69</sup>

### Televangelism

This was the golden age of televangelism and prosperity preachers ruled the decade as stars of the small screen. The "Electronic Church" ballooned from five million in the late 1960s to 25 million by the mid-1980s, giving numerous faith teachers top-billing in living rooms across the country (see table 3.2).

In 1983, Jimmy Swaggart, Oral Roberts, Robert Schuller, and Rex Humbard were the most watched of the religious programs nationwide. Schuller's *The Hour of Power* repackaged the church's worship services for mass viewing, an unlikely idea that by 1983 garnered 2.5 million viewers.<sup>70</sup> Three religious networks—the Bakkers' Praise the Lord (PTL), the Crouch's Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN), and Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN)—pumped out religious programming 24 hours a day, seven days a week. As these ministries could produce no more than a few hours of programming per day, they desperately needed other material to fill the time. This offered a golden opportunity for up-and-comers to gain exposure, albeit for small audiences. Sociologist Jeffrey Hadden noted that "for a while, almost anyone who could produce a videotaped program could send it to one of these new networks and be

Table 3.2 Top Syndicated Television Ministries (1981)

Television Ministry	Number of Viewers
Oral Roberts	2,351,000
Jimmy Swaggart	1,780,000
PTL Club	1,050,000
700 Club	705,000
Kenneth Copeland	381,000

Source: Margaret M. Poloma, *The Charismatic Movement: Is There a New Pentecost?* (Boston: Twayne, 1982), 175.

accepted for satellite broadcast."<sup>71</sup> The focus on money that characterized the televangelist decade owed some of its reputation to these cowboy preachers who jockeyed for attention with their low-budget shows saturating the airwaves.

Through the 1980s, prosperity preachers squeezed television for every last emotional drop. The frequent use of direct appeals to the camera—teaching, arguing, cajoling, or even pleading with at-home audiences—defined the era as the high drama of tent revivalism brought to prime-time television. Emotion ebbed and flowed through every broadcast, and those who taped their programs before live audiences learned to ride the current. Nothing tested the financial resolve of viewers (and the mettle of leaders) like telethons. Their marathon programming was a feat of organization and improvisation as preachers scrambled to fill the time with education, entertainment, and financial pleas. Jim Bakker made fundraising history when the fledgling CBN failed to meet its telethon goal and he burst into tears. The boards lit up with incoming calls, flooding the station with pledges as viewers frantically responded to his emotional entreaties.<sup>72</sup> Subsequent telethons tried to duplicate Bakker's magic, with varying results. TBN founder Paul Crouch credited his first telethon, side-by-side with Jim Bakker, as the beginning of his experimentation with the prosperity gospel. "Without really realizing it at the time," Crouch recounted, "I had put into motion one of God's most powerful laws—the laws of giving and receiving—sowing and reaping."<sup>73</sup> Close-up camera shots and roller-coaster emotions made telethons the favored fundraising tool of the decade and a perpetual demonstration of the power of sentimentality. Bakker proved to be one of the most successful fundraisers in television history, perennially demonstrating his ability to connect to audiences with his maudlin charm.

Television and prosperity theology were a natural fit; spiritual programming proved not only an effective tool of evangelism but also one of generating income. Outsiders commonly reduced all prosperity theology to fundraising, a cliché that had some merit. Faith televangelists dominated religious programming as masters of persuasion, able to inspire the continuous financial donations required to maintain their electric churches. Appeals for donations came in many forms. The Bakkers kept a loose lid on their emotions, weeping or rejoicing openly as financial goals were missed or met.<sup>74</sup> Televangelist and church planter Don Stewart mastered the hard-sell tactics of his predecessor A. A. Allen, promising viewers miraculous returns on their donations. Faith pledges became a fundraising

basic with audiences phoning in their promised donation. Yet the networks' dependence on faith pledges repeatedly left them in the lurch. A Trinity Broadcasting Network telethon went awry when it turned out that a fourth of its pledges had come from prank callers.<sup>75</sup> Teachers threatened that "unpaid vows" constituted a terrible sin, but they could do little.<sup>76</sup> They too had to live by faith.

Faith televangelists memorably went to great lengths to cultivate intimacy with their television audiences. Teachers presented themselves foremost as family, inviting viewers into stage sets imitating the preacher's own home. Constant declarations by teachers that "I love you . . . I pray for you each day" assured viewers that they were known and loved.<sup>77</sup> Studios trimmed their stages to mirror conventional notions of gender. Male preachers sat at a desk or living room chair with few accessories, while women were perched among flower arrangements or at the kitchen table itself. Husband and wife teams were popular, referring to one another by first names, and often revealing personal information and anecdotes about their married life. Couples such as Jim and Tammy Bakker and Jan and Paul Crouch lived out their married life on camera, teasing, flirting, and even arguing before live studio audiences. Children and extended family popped in, introducing viewers to the cast as a family and inviting listeners to be part of the family. The staff of volunteers answering phones in the backdrop of the Bakkers' shows reminded audiences that they were only a call away. The steady stream of footage of faces in the audience—joyful, concerned, inspired, or chastened—further connected viewers to a preacher who almost seemed as close as the television screen.

Televangelism soaked up the glamour and conspicuous consumption of the decade. Though hemlines might be a tad longer and suit jackets a little stiffer, on-screen preachers wanted to be counted every bit as fashionable as any other wealthy celebrity in the public eye. The prosperity gospel made modest inroads in men's fashion, as its star preachers updated their designer apparel with the width of their ties or the length of their sideburns. The young Jim Bakker made a splash with his gold chains and blue and green suits. T. L. Osborn took the greatest fashion risks, as he surprised his suit-and-tie colleagues by alternating between native costumes from his crusades and bell-bottoms, open shirts, and leisure suits. On the controversial terrain of women's bodies—especially female preachers' bodies—the prosperity gospel made a lasting impression. Teachers like Tammy Faye Bakker and Jan Crouch became media icons for their conspicuous displays of wealth, earning them the constant criticism (or shy

admiration) of viewing audiences for their "worldliness." Their radical departure from pentecostal-holiness standards of dress dismayed traditionalist supporters. Jan Crouch's infamous beehives were piled high with cotton-candy pink and purple tufts of hair. Tammy Bakker faced constant opprobrium for her heavy mascara, blond bouffant, and country-girl sex appeal. "Painted hussy, that's all I can see, like Jezebel," huffed an elderly male viewer.<sup>78</sup> But when Tammy Faye peeked out at the camera from under her white fur hat, she embodied (as well as sang) the title of her musical album: *We're Blest*.<sup>79</sup>

### Testing Televangelism

Before the scandals. After the scandals. The prosperity gospel can be divided into these two distinct eras, separated by a gulf of suspicion. The exponential growth of prosperity TV sputtered in 1987 when a series of outrages tested audiences' faith in its leaders. In February, the City of Faith hospital founder Oral Roberts faced national ridicule when he fell short of his eight million dollar fundraising goal and wrote to followers that he would retreat to Oral Roberts University's prayer tower to fast and pray until the stated goal was met or "God calls me home." Richard Roberts confirmed his father's dire situation in a follow-up letter, stating that without the funds earmarked for medical missions, "God will not extend Dad's life."<sup>80</sup> The media derided Roberts's emotional blackmail, while the sympathetic observed that prophecy was a lonely profession.<sup>81</sup>

The following month the fresh-faced Jim Bakker shocked the nation when reporters revealed that he had committed adultery in 1980 with a 21-year-old church secretary named Jessica Hahn. *The Charlotte Observer* broke the news that Bakker used PTL funds as hush money. Rival televangelist Jimmy Swaggart led the charge against his fellow Assemblies of God minister, denouncing him as "a cancer that needed to be excised from the body of Christ."<sup>82</sup> John Ankerberg, a Christian talk-show host, further accused Bakker of homosexual encounters. Bakker resigned his presidency of PTL and attempted to salvage his faltering empire by giving temporary control to the *Old Time Gospel Hour* preacher Jerry Falwell. Yet the damage had been done. Shortly thereafter, the Assemblies of God defrocked Bakker for sexual misconduct.

Bakker's trouble had only begun. Falwell discovered the full extent of the Bakkers' financial mismanagement and denounced them in a news conference as unrepentant frauds. A firestorm of controversy ensued as





**FIGURE 3.9** Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker interviewed by reporters at U.S. Bankruptcy Court, June 29, 1988.

Source: Copyright © Don Sturkey 1988, North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library.

the public learned about the Bakkers' lavish living while their ministry had floundered in debt, and cover stories in *Time* and *Newsweek* gave details of the Bakkers' annual salaries and bonuses in excess of a million dollars. Reports emerged that a few years prior, the Bakkers' questionable spending had narrowly escaped charges from a Federal Communications Commission investigation of their purchases of a Corvette, mink coat, and 42-foot houseboat. PTL ministries filed for bankruptcy and, in 1989, Jim Bakker stood trial for fraud and conspiracy. A jury convicted him for defrauding viewers by overselling lifetime "partnerships" that entitled members to stay at the Heritage Grand Mansion, raking in payment for thousands of time-shares that the property could not accommodate. Long lines of picketers protested the court's mistreatment of Bakker who, they argued, was a man of God. To many insiders, these faith teachers loomed as spiritual giants beyond reproach because they had transformed believers' lives. Bakker went to prison for five years, and Tammy filed for divorce.

PTL's downfall exposed the uncomfortable disparity between rich leaders and traditional views of Christian stewardship. The extravagant lifestyle that once testified to the Bakkers' piety now sealed their condemnation as reports of their gold-plated bathroom fixtures and air-conditioned doghouses emerged. In many ways, the couple's convictions accelerated their downfall. Audiences loved them for their demonstrative faith—yet the burden of their gospel was it always had to be proven in an endless cycle of bigger and better. Only scant days before their disgrace, the debt-plagued ministry broke ground on what was to be the world's largest church, a 1.25 million square foot complex with a \$100 million price tag.<sup>83</sup> Heritage USA alone cost an exorbitant amount to build, and Jim's illegal attempts to keep it afloat landed him in deeper waters. As Tammy later reflected, the financial pressure was suffocating. Tammy developed an addiction to anti-anxiety medication, while Jim turned to romantic affairs. They skated the "thin ice of monthly contributions."<sup>84</sup> Soon they fell through.

At the close of the 1980s, the American televangelist seemed like an unredeemable figure. Audiences dropped from 15.1 million in 1986 to under 10 million. The career of Jimmy Swaggart (who by this time had abandoned the prosperity gospel) fell to pieces when he exposed the adultery of a fellow preacher, Marvin Gorman. Gorman, himself a proponent of prosperity teaching, retaliated by producing evidence of Swaggart's sexual misconduct.<sup>85</sup> The Assemblies of God suspended and defrocked Swaggart. An estimated 100 million people worldwide tuned in to watch Swaggart's tearful apology. Televangelists and their humiliation was fodder for popular derision. In 1990, even NBC's furry extraterrestrial ALF openly parodied the recent scandals by mortifying his sitcom family with his attempts to open a Christian theme park and become a faith healer.<sup>86</sup> Television viewership plummeted as the widespread support for celebrity preachers soured. The grins, tears, and fundraising pleas that had defined the decade no longer won popular support for this upwardly mobile message, and few observers, academic or otherwise, predicted its return.

What appeared to be a theological and ethical crisis of confidence had multiple causes. The declining viewership of religious television in the late 1980s partly reflected market forces. The expanding opportunities that fueled televangelism in the early 1980s—from 24-hour religious networks to ballooning television syndication—tapered off by mid-decade, leaving too many big fish in a shrinking pond. The crowd of preachers that had filled

up round-the-clock programming now saturated the market, driving up prices for airtime. In 1975, the televangelism pioneer, Rex Humbard, appeared on 175 stations with an average audience of almost 10,000 households per station. Increased competition and airtime costs forced Humbard to cut back, his losses barely mitigated by aggressive mass mailing and telemarketing solicitations. In 1985, the Ohio evangelist had lost 36 percent of his stations. By the year's end, the *Cathedral of Tomorrow* broadcast tumbled off the air.<sup>87</sup>

The disgrace of financial mismanagement continued to haunt faith networks. Larry Lea, dean of the seminary at Oral Roberts University, called it a "chasm of mistrust."<sup>88</sup> Earlier attempts to subject televangelists to financial oversight had failed. The 1979 formation of the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability (ECFA) worked with organizations willing to be scrutinized, but many are forced to remain in the shadows. The National Religious Broadcaster's Ethics and Financial Integrity Commission was scarcely more effective. Though it expelled Jimmy Swaggart, the commission refused to fully investigate charges brought against TBN founder Paul Crouch.<sup>89</sup> Broadcast ministries continued to fill their boards with family members who reaped rewards from the ministry, further obscuring financial transparency. "God is shaking his church," warned *Charisma* editor Jamie Buckingham. "Today's shaking is forcing leaders to turn to one another."<sup>90</sup>

When prosperity teachers returned to the spotlight, some things had changed significantly. In a media environment that had learned to mistrust overwrought emotional preaching and beseeching figures, new faces like Joel Osteen, Joyce Meyer, T. D. Jakes, Creflo Dollar, and Eddie Long replaced flamboyant stereotypes with a suave, businesslike image. By the mid-1990s, these postmodern prophets would not beg but rather focus on the returns. They would offer "tools" in the form of relationship guides, financial principles, or family reconciliation. The new generation of teachers set aside much of the hard prosperity that had characterized the decade in favor of the therapeutic inspiration of *soft prosperity*. They were now preaching to a less credulous, more cynical generation, who tended to put little faith in institutions but were willing to invest heavily in relationships and personal emotion. They elected a president who could "feel their pain." It was a wired generation, linked by e-mail and search engines, exploring all that the World Wide Web could do for them. But for all that audiences had become media-savvy and accustomed to high-tech solutions to daily inconveniences there were still millions who sought the now old-fashioned and supernatural working of the prosperity gospel.

## The New Overcomers

The decline of white televangelist empires did little to dampen many black churches' enthusiasm for faith, wealth, and victory. In the same year that Jim Bakker was sentenced to federal prison and Oral Roberts's City of Faith hospital shut its doors because of lack of funds, Frederick Price opened the 10,000-seat Faith Dome in Los Angeles, which would become the nation's largest worship center. The prosperity gospel thrived in numerous black churches with all the innocence and delight of youth. The faith message is only a newborn, warned Pastor Ed Montgomery in 1988, "and we must get that baby through childhood and adolescence and into adulthood."<sup>91</sup> More and more African Americans, undeterred by the scandalous dalliances of a few white television preachers, shared Montgomery's desire to raise up the message in their own churches.

Throughout the 1980s, prosperity theology rose with new vitality in African American churches and enormous prosperity churches sprang up like daisies (see table 3.3). The largest black congregations in the country were swept up in a larger charismatic revival of their own, a turn toward

Table 3.3 African American Prosperity Megachurches Founded Before and After the Televangelism Scandals

Senior Pastor	Church (Location)	Founded
I. V. Hilliard	New Light Christian Center (Houston, TX)	1983
Eddie Long	New Birth Missionary Baptist Church (Lithonia, GA)	1983
Lamont McLean	Living Faith Christian Center (Pennsauken, NJ)	1985
Creflo Dollar	World Changers Ministries (College Park, GA)	1986
William Winston	Living Word Christian Center (Forest Park, IL)	1988
Marvin Winans	Perfecting Church (Detroit, MI)	1989
David Evans	Bethany Baptist Church (Lindenwold, NJ)	1990
Rickie Rush	Inspiring Body of Christ Church (Dallas, TX)	1990
Dale Bronner	Word of Faith Family Worship Center (Austell, GA)	1991

Note: Ron Gibson's Church of God in Christ congregation was effectively reborn in 1987 when he took charge. It grew from nine members to more than 4,500 under his guidance.



enthusiastic worship and gifts of the spirit. The majority were massive, one-off start-ups, led by magnetic and well-educated pentecostalized preachers across denominational lines.<sup>92</sup> Scholars have parsed this phenomenon in various ways. Jonathan Walton divided these spirit-filled churches into ecclesial categories, each with its own aesthetic and culture: neopentecostal (both denominational and independent), charismatic mainline (historic black denominations), and Word of Faith (nondenominational prosperity churches).<sup>93</sup> Tamelyn Tucker-Worgs's illuminating sociological survey found pentecostal influences common to virtually all black megachurches, though they exhibited diverse theological orientations (prophetic, black theology, nondenominational, and prosperity gospel).<sup>94</sup> But the lines between these categories often blurred. The prosperity movement had nurtured black preachers inside their predominantly white independent networks, but now the message had outgrown its original structures. African American leaders from classic pentecostal, neopentecostal, and historic black denominations not only began to join faith preachers onstage, but tailored the message of wealth for their own audiences.<sup>95</sup>

The influence of the prosperity gospel spread far beyond the faith movement we have mapped so far, for at least four reasons. First, the message suited the economic mood. An emerging generation of black prosperity preachers spoke to a rising black middle class and those hungry for spiritual gifts that fed daily life. As African Americans entered the middle class in greater numbers, becoming more prosperous, mobile, and aware of a hard-won higher status, many flocked to the churches that reified their hopefulness and ambition. Observers worried that black churches were no longer able to seat the middle class and the poor under the same steeple.<sup>96</sup> The this-worldly focus of African American megachurches in general (and prosperity-preaching megachurches in particular) reflected believers' yearning to extend the economic, social, and political gains of the civil rights movement into limitless possibilities.<sup>97</sup>

The second (and related) reason centers on African American migration. In the Reverse Great Migration, as it is sometimes known, African American populations drifted away from Northern cities and settled in the South and Southwest.<sup>98</sup> Further, African American city-dwellers everywhere were leaving for the suburbs. These uprooted people (much like white pentecostals before them) sought out prosperity churches to make sense of their new social location. Their burgeoning churches predictably settled in urban black centers like Houston, Dallas, Los Angeles,

Atlanta, Chicago, Washington D.C., and Detroit, home to the highest number of megachurches and African Americans.<sup>99</sup> As Tucker-Worgs argued, the new black megachurches functioned like prewar storefront churches—migrant churches for a transplanted people.<sup>100</sup>

Third, interaction among megachurch leaders led to theological cross-pollination. The prosperity movement was growing increasingly top-heavy, captivating many of the country's largest white and black churches. Prosperity preachers were fast becoming the gatekeepers to the most coveted pulpits, and those who joined them onstage could expect exciting and lucrative opportunities to follow. As black churches of all ecclesial and doctrinal varieties grew larger and more successful in the 1980s, their leaders enjoyed friendlier relationships and often found more in common with each other than with their denominational kin or headquarters. Megachurch pastors were orbiting in a postdenominational sphere of shared platforms and concerns. Multimillion dollar institutions had saddled these pastors with common burdens and elevated them to similar heights. Further interaction bred familiarity (and often similarity). Pastors in close physical and relational proximity often found themselves speaking two languages—one reflecting their theological and educational training and another better suited to address postdenominational popular audiences.

Fourth, African American congregations have historically been the institutional epicenter of mutual aid, what W. E. B. Du Bois called "the central organ of organized life," and the place to debate and work out questions of political action, spiritual solace, and community meaning.<sup>101</sup> Black churches forged a long tradition of self-help. As C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya observed, this survivalist practice began in "the crucible of the slave quarters" and carried through the country's barbed history of racial inequality.<sup>102</sup> Black religious communities, barred from the luxury of separating spiritual and socioeconomic spheres, not only shouldered social services but assumed the tasks of fostering economic mobility.<sup>103</sup> In this context, the spiritual solutions proposed by the prosperity gospel joined timeworn debates about the relationship between the so-called black church and forms of social and economic liberation.<sup>104</sup> The materialism and hyper-individualism of the prosperity gospel—what scholars have identified variously as "thaumaturgical" or "positive thought materialism"—was tempered by other emancipatory visions.<sup>105</sup> As diverse denominational streams poured into the prosperity gospel, these newcomers allowed a blurring of roles not seen

before: the prophetic could merge with the priestly or the social gospel with the empowering of individuals. In African American churches (particularly denominational churches) the prosperity gospel emerged as a concordant theme that blended with other long-standing concerns.

Consider these four factors—class, migration, cross-pollination, and mutual aid—in the rise of one black megachurch in suburban Atlanta. In 1986, the Disciples of Christ called one of their rising stars, Cynthia Hale, to found a congregation in Decatur, Georgia. This bedroom community of Atlanta was the new home of thousands of wealthy black migrants looking for religious experiences that mirrored their growing ambitions.<sup>106</sup> The growing reputation drew her outside of her predominately white mainline televangelism than seminary disputes.<sup>107</sup> The constant interaction with prosperity preachers, observed Hale, began to influence her theology to the point where her sound technician casually remarked that she was “finally starting to sound like everyone else.” The comment stopped her in her tracks. “I had to check myself,” recalled Hale candidly. She maintained her conviction in divine economic empowerment (as well as her respect for thoroughgoing prosperity preachers) but made a concerted effort to balance her message of “whole life prosperity” with her theological and exegetical roots. The result was a hybrid pentecostal-mainline identity and a revolving door of guest preachers with similarly varied commitments.<sup>108</sup> She did not mind being called a prosperity preacher as she promoted tithing, seed-faith, and “more-than-enoughness,” but flatly rejected mechanistic accounts of divine formulas as “Reverend Ike-ish.” The church bought her a Mercedes (“people don’t want to see their pastor looking broke”) but also established a nonprofit ministry to fulfill their “social mandate from God” to provide far-reaching healthcare, education, and affordable housing for the community’s poor.<sup>109</sup> The prosperity gospel was breaking new ground.

### *Holy Ghost Prosperity*

Holy Ghost denominations—black and white—handled the prosperity gospel like quicksilver. Most proceeded cautiously and trusted only the most experienced hands. And yet who could resist the chance to transform spiritual mettle into something more? Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the prosperity gospel appeared as a common resolution to the problem of

modernizing the pentecostal legacy. The Church of God in Christ and the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World, the two largest denominations, stood astride black pentecostalism with questions to resolve. Should they follow the well-trod way of television ministries? Should their annual conferences remain a dignified assembly of bishops or show an openness to the wider pentecostal world? All denominations had begun to face the slow hemorrhaging of church attendance and aging demographics. The inherent conservatism of denominational headquarters tested the patience of the senior pastors of their largest churches who searched for ways to stay young, fresh, and on the pulse of cultural trends. The famed televangelist Clarence McClendon put his small (and historically white) Four-square denomination on the map with his vast television ministry and bustling 12,000-member church. His buoyant prosperity preaching and youthful good looks (said to draw so much attention that he was forced to file restraining orders against women in his congregation) charmed audiences with such success that his denomination hesitated to rein in his extravagant lifestyle.<sup>110</sup>

The Church of God in Christ (COGIC) cracked open their doors to the prosperity movement under the leadership of Bishop G. E. Patterson and his era of media expansion, shining a spotlight on COGIC through radio and television expansion.<sup>111</sup> He and Charles Blake, the future head of the denomination and pastor of one of the country’s largest churches, ruled as denominational royalty on the pentecostal conference circuit.<sup>112</sup> They wore the priestly collar, robes, the stoles of consecrated men and the slight frown of administrators. Patterson embraced a televangelist career on Black Entertainment Television and the Trinity Broadcasting Network, but with none of the glitz of television mainstays like Frederick Price. Blake was foremost a pastor and ambassador of the largest African American denomination. In a decade marked by cutbacks in social services, his West Angeles Church of God in Christ earned a reputation for community outreach with programs addressing unemployment, homelessness, small business development, and neighborhood revitalization.<sup>113</sup> Both thrived within the high walls of classical pentecostalism as esteemed bearers of its traditions. Here they adopted forms of the prosperity gospel altered to familiar aesthetic forms, with the red carpets, dark wood pews, rich choir gowns, lively praise, and the breathy cadence of hooping (sermonic song) so at home in black pentecostalism. Blake and Patterson became decorated speakers at Oral Roberts’s International Charismatic Bible Ministries’ Conference. (Blake would go on to join the Board of Directors for

both the ministry and university.) They appeared frequently beside Word of Faith favorites, often seeming more at home with the wider prosperity network than shut up in denominational circuits. For example, in 1993, Blake joined Frederick Price and Joyce Meyers as the headliners at the West Coast Azusa Conference, and, in 1994, Patterson appeared with R. W. Schambach, T. L. Osborn, John Osteen, Rod Parsley, Daisy Osborn, and David Nunn under a canvas cathedral.<sup>114</sup> The annual COGIC Holy Ghost conference began to feature not only a robed assortment of in-house leaders but also visiting faith celebrities.

Charles Blake's message, for example, demonstrates the diverse forms of "prosperity preaching" inside denominational pentecostalism. His preaching lacked the instrumentalism of classic Word of Faith theology: while he spoke little of positive confession, he promised listeners their faith would transform their economic and physical health situations. Rather than the story of Abraham's covenant, Blake preferred the biblical tale of the slave-turned-ruler named Joseph, who "kept faith in the dream, no matter what his circumstances. He made the best of the situation and God caused him to prosper."<sup>115</sup> It modeled the entrepreneurialism and sweat equity of a prosperity gospel but also communal and institutional transformation of a social gospel.<sup>116</sup>

The prosperity gospel became a common language within classic pentecostalism to talk about a religion of solutions. Apostle Otis Lockett of Evangel Fellowship Church of God in Christ billed his church as "Providing Biblical Solutions for Life, Family, and Work."<sup>117</sup> The chief apostle of COOLJC (Church of Our Lord Jesus Christ), William Lee Bonner, son of a Southern sharecropper, gloried in his discovery of prosperity teaching through its nineteenth-century roots in Ralph Waldo Emerson and showed his flock how their thoughts could take them to financial levels they never dreamed possible.<sup>118</sup> Pentecostals, black or white, who could preach prosperity and grow their churches found that they had their uses to denominational headquarters. Despite the ambivalent legacy of the prosperity gospel inside denominational structures, successful prosperity teachers always seemed to land on their feet and be called to serve at the highest levels. After his church reached 2,000 members, *Anointing for Acceleration* author Otis Lockett was appointed the National Director of Church Growth and Development for the Church of God in Christ.

Charles H. Ellis III, later chosen as the leader of the 1.5 million-member Pentecostal Assemblies of the World, blended prosperity theology into

a densely pentecostal form. His recent predecessors in the presiding bishop's seat, Norman Wagner and Horace Smith, had been old hands on the conference circuit that brought prosperity preachers into their churches and confidences.<sup>119</sup> Ellis continued this tradition in his sacramental vestments befitting a pentecostal bishop, clergy jackets embroidered with his Greater Grace Temple logo at his breast pocket and a clerical collar bobbing at his neck. He preached with the fervor of a Holy Ghost minister rather than the didactic manner of most prosperity teachers, an exclamation of "Hya!" serving as the metronome of his melodic phrases. He stuck to the fundamentals—salvation, prayer, praise, healing—but returned to the inevitability of victory and blessing. As Ellis made clear in a Sunday sermon about living abundantly in the face of dire economic circumstances:

[God] said "Whatsoever he doeth shall prosper."  
 And that's where I'm trying to move to in my walk with God.  
 I'm trying to get to the place, where *everything* I do,  
 according to the Word and will of God,  
 it comes to fruition.  
 It's got to prosper.  
 It's got to come to pass . . .  
 But if you *plug in*,  
 to the Word of God—  
 like the blessed man of Psalm One—  
 If you *plug in* to the source of the power . . .  
 if you stay connected to the vine,  
 then you will produce and you will bring forth.  
 And it will not matter what's going on in the world,  
 people will look at you and have to call you blessed.  
 People will look at you and have to call you delivered.  
 People will look at you and have to call you the righteousness  
 of God.  
 Am I talking to anybody in here?  
 I'm trying to get to the place, where everything I touch  
 it turns to gold.  
 I'm trying to get to the place, where everything I touch  
 it's got to come forth.  
 Where everyone around me  
 They've got to be blessed.<sup>120</sup>



To grasp hold of these blessings, he continued, believers must delight in the Lord. Read the scriptures. Speak words of praise and wait until the appointed (but fast approaching) time when God will bring forth "their season" of provision. Like Blake's, his was not a hard prosperity. Ellis evoked the images of harvest without the laws of sowing and reaping; he implored listeners to dwell on the upbeat without the mechanism of positive confession. Yet the gilded guarantee of the prosperity gospel remained: God brings adherents to that place where dust turns to gold.<sup>22</sup>

### *Prosperity and Black Neopentecostalism*

One of the most striking sources of growth in the prosperity movement was the rise of African American neopentecostalism unmoored by denominations. A wave of independent ministries brought an emphasis on spiritual gifts and ecstatic worship to some of the nation's largest congregations. The New Black Charismatics, as the historian Scott Billingsley has called them, shared the earlier charismatic movement's playful wonder at the Spirit and classic pentecostalism's investment in its power. But unlike the charismatic movement's nostalgic and alternative vibe, neopentecostal congregations positioned themselves as modern, media literate, and expansionist. As Jonathan Walton argued, these churches adopted a contemporary aesthetic and a flexible attitude to popular culture, jettisoning traditionalism as a barrier to the spread of the gospel. Efforts to engage contemporary audiences ranged from the entertaining (senior pastors and their first ladies dressed like drill sergeants to host spiritual bootcamps) to the mildly scandalous (like R. A. Vernon's church-growth manual entitled *Size Does Matter*). Many neopentecostal churches developed into natural allies of prosperity theology as they sought to become relevant in a highly consumerist culture. They engrossed audiences with the latest in video projection; theater seating; and sermons on sex, work, and children that addressed the pressures of a fast-paced world. The typical neopentecostal male pastor had two uniforms, an untucked tailored shirt with designer jeans and a fitted three-button suit-and-vest combination. Pastors found that parishioners wanted leaders who looked and preached like an ambassador for unrelenting progress.

The prosperity movement grew so pervasive that it captured the imagination of even the most preeminent African American preacher of his generation and one of the most sought-after speakers in the country, Thomas Dexter (T. D.) Jakes.<sup>122</sup> Jakes, founder of the nation's eleventh

largest church, the Potter's House, ruled the American media as one of the nation's leading preachers. He solemnly stared out from the cover of *Time* magazine under the heading, "Is This Man the Next Billy Graham?" and was a *New York Times* bestseller, a Hollywood film producer, Grammy nominee, and an advisor to presidents. His fame had not come easily. Reared a Baptist, he converted to pentecostalism as a teenager, pounded the preaching circuit in West Virginia, and, in 1979, began Greater Emmanuel Temple of Faith, a small congregation in the mining town of Montgomery. His first evangelistic efforts in the early 1980s yielded a short-lived radio ministry, *The Master's Plan*, and a fledgling Bible conference. In the 1990s, Jakes moved his ministry to Charleston, where it grew from a hundred members to more than a thousand. His message centered on emotional healing, a theme that struck market gold with his series *Woman, Thou Art Loosed!* Jakes's focus on psychological healing for women addressed domestic violence, discrimination, rape, and divorce, issues he explored in his 1993 book and conference of the same name. *Woman, Thou Art Loosed!* became a phenomenon, with two million copies in print, record-breaking conference attendance, a play, a gospel album, and a film adaptation. It also began a long stream of media exposure. In 1993, Jakes began a weekly television program, *Get Ready with T. D. Jakes*, and, a year later, an accompanying radio program. By 1995, his national success brought increased scrutiny, as West Virginia newspapers drew attention to Jakes's lavish living. In 1996, Jakes decided to forget winning them over and transplanted his ministry to Dallas, Texas. He founded The Potter's House Church, headquarters of T. D. Jakes Ministries, his nonprofit outreach, and T. D. Jakes Enterprises, his for-profit wing. Potter's House flourished in its new locale, attracting predominately African American audiences with white and Hispanic minorities. His church claimed over 50 outreach programs, intent on raising the economic status of believers and nonbelievers alike. He earned a reputation as a preacher who taught "the formula of faith" but knew its limits: "Do I believe in supernatural return on your giving? Yes, sir! Do I believe God blesses tithes and offerings? Yes, I do. But why should we teach you to claim a car without teaching you about the car payment and interest rates on the loan?"<sup>123</sup> His tempered messages did not prevent him from "sowing into" the ministries of hard prosperity preachers. Ron Carpenter Jr., for example, claimed that T. D. Jakes had helped buy his megachurch for him.<sup>124</sup> At one time, Jakes both counted Paula White and Juanita Bynum as his spiritual progeny.