

BLESSED



A History of the American Prosperity Gospel

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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.¹²¹

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.¹²² 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?"¹²³ 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.¹²⁴ At one time, Jakes both counted Paula White and Juanita Bynum as his spiritual progeny.

Though fellow neopentecostals could never match Jakes's fame, they exhibited a similar flair for sanctified commerce. These churches embraced luxury and personal blessings as an extension of their stylish, contemporary aesthetic.¹²⁵ In 1990, Pastor Rickie Rush founded the Inspiring Body of Christ Church in Dallas with a reputation for frenetic sermons and a megawatt smile. Over the cheers of worshippers, he preached about a God who, like a fast-food chain, worked tirelessly behind the scenes to "fill your special orders." First, however, the believer has to pay for what they want. "God never said you couldn't have it," he chastised, "only that you had to pay for it first."¹²⁶ In 1989, Marvin Winans of the Grammy-winning musical Winans family founded The Perfecting Church in a Detroit, Michigan, basement with a congregation of eight people. Outgrowing location after location, the church came to build a performing arts charter school, a transitional home for women, a television studio, and 30 ministries serving a range of needs. These neopentecostal churches were densely networked to each other but also to the larger prosperity movement. Marvin Winans's annual conferences, for example, regularly assembled Word of Faith stalwarts R. W. Schambach, Charles Capps, Kenneth Copeland, and Creflo Dollar with neopentecostals like T. D. Jakes, Paul Morton, and Noel Jones. (See figure 3.10 for Marvin Winans's neopentecostal conference associations.) Neopentecostal preachers adeptly wove the prosperity gospel into a modern message of Christian adaptation to an ever-changing digital world.

Historic Black Denominational Prosperity

The prosperity gospel followed in the wake of neopentecostalism and its surprising revival of charismatic influences within mainstream African American churches. Pentecostal-flavored preaching, emotional worship, emphasis on the Spirit, and an interest in supernatural gifts enlivened these old-line churches and opened their doors to a new perspective on holiness. High-spirited talk of wealth and health found its way into some of the largest churches in the dominant Baptist and Methodist culture. The aesthetics of these churches remained mostly unchanged: pastors in clerical collars, prominently displayed crosses, and sanctuaries fashioned in the age-old style rather than as television studios. There was little of the didactic atmosphere found in worship spaces of independent prosperity churches, where parishioners were wont to bring pens and notepaper to take down the teaching,¹²⁷ rather congregants could be found waving their

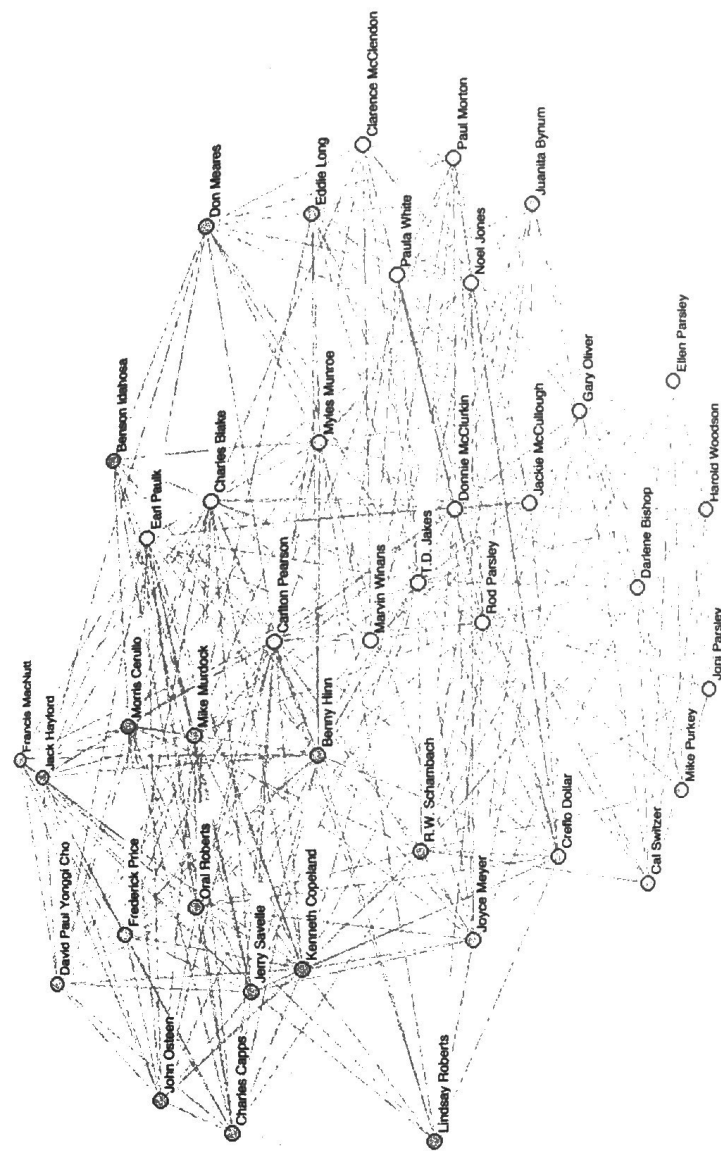


FIGURE 3.10 Marvin Winans's Conferences Marvin Winans's conference participation as advertised in *Charisma* magazine. Winans's sphere of associates offers a snapshot of shared Word of Faith and neopentecostal influences like Noel Jones and T. D. Jakes.

arms, shouting "Amen!" and taking off uncomfortable shoes to dance in the Spirit. Those pastors who began traveling in prosperity circles tended to be media-savvy, entrepreneurial, and trend-setting mavericks willing to take a little heat from headquarters in order to broaden the scope of their ministries. Their parishioners, in turn, loved them for lingering on topics so close to everyday life.

Frank Reid, pastor of the historic Bethel African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) church in Baltimore, Maryland (and guest star on the gritty crime show *The Wire* set in the Charm City), hoped to steer his denomination toward a distinctly Wesleyan prosperity gospel. In the 1980s, his presiding bishop, John Bryant, was instrumental in reclaiming Methodism's sanctified heritage and opening the denomination to pentecostal influences and explosive church growth. Educated at Yale and Harvard, Reid was one of several Bryant protégés with the talent, media savvy, and administrative image.¹²⁸ Young guns, like Baltimore megachurch pastor Jamal Bryant (the bishop's son), followed in these footsteps with eye-catching sermon titles like "I Just Want to Be Successful" and seminars on "How to Create Wealth."¹²⁹ Reid understood his role as a mediator between those attempting to ignore the prosperity gospel and those too easily persuaded by its extremes. He sought to reclaim the prosperity gospel as a Methodist idea with a liberative end—the wholesale economic empowerment of black America. Just as God's promise of abundant life had once fostered upward mobility for the newly disciplined Methodists drawn from slavery and the English lower classes, Reid argued, so should contemporary believers be counseled to be better managers of their time, talent, and treasure.¹³⁰ This, he warned, would be a "costly" prosperity gospel, while an easy prosperity gospel required nothing but a hustling preacher. He decried abuses of practices, like confession and visualization, but cautioned believers not to ignore the scriptural foundations of 30-, 60-, 100-fold blessings and Mark 11:24's "I shall have what I say." He preferred to be called an "empowerment preacher" as his sermons unveiled God's "biblical keys to abundant living" and the need to "put on the winning ways of Christ-like champions."¹³¹ He spoke of generational "strongholds" rather than curses that bound Christians who used fatalistic words (others might have spoken here of "negative confession"). He hoped that the denomination could offer a reasoned middle ground between independent pentecostalism and historic black churches. "The survival of the African Methodist denomination," warned Reid, "hinges on how well we engage and embrace this debate."

Kirbyjon Caldwell headed the second-largest congregation in the largely white United Methodist Church and traveled in the nation's highest circles. Caldwell was well known for his role as a spiritual advisor on the national political scene and a pioneer in community development as the founder of the Power Center—a cluster of services including a bank; an AIDS outreach center; Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) center; and the Memorial Hermann Hospital health clinic. His book, *The Gospel of Good Success*, promoted "God's mathematics" and common-sense wisdom for creating financial abundance; he could be found on the rosters of national conferences dominated by prosperity teaching.¹³² Nary a Methodist book could be found in his ministry's bookstore, stuffed with the glossy inspiration of neopentecostals like Eddie Long and Myles Monroe. Caldwell promised readers a sure path to God-given prosperity and the miracles wrought by the divine "multiplication process" of tithing. He plotted a slow (but measurable) trajectory toward Christian victory proven by his own example. Even so, many of the familiar ingredients of prosperity messages were absent. He preferred to speak of praise over positive confession, no longer attributing to words the properties of quick cement. He downplayed the instantaneousness of health and wealth; nonetheless, faith yielded rewards. "God has promised you power, abundance, and good success," Caldwell argued, "God did not make provisions—whether it's stocks and bonds, nice cars and nice homes, or peace of mind, joy, and healthy self-esteem—for Satan's kids. God's provisions are for His children, if they're for anybody!"

Pentecostalized Baptists (playfully called "Bapticostals") seemed to find a natural place for the prosperity gospel. A dozen of the largest black Baptist congregations responded quickly to the growing interest in divine health and wealth (see table 3.4). These churches, some independent and some denominationally tied, began to incorporate faith teachers and theology into their Baptist identity. In 1992, Paul Morton of New Orleans' St. Stephen's Baptist church accepted spiritual gifts as central to his ministry. Saying that he knew too much about the Holy Spirit to ignore it, he added Full Gospel to the church's name (along with 10,000 more members) and embarked on a more independent ecclesial path that would see him presiding over the Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship with more than 5,000 affiliates. He "covenanted" other black leaders, like Kenneth Ulmer, Clarence McClendon, and Eddie Long, with the dream of synthesizing black Baptist and pentecostal traditions.¹³³ The fellowship was diverse, but

among many things it soon became a hotspot for prosperity megachurch pastors aspiring to bishoprics.¹³⁴

A new pentecostalized realm had been opened. Many of the most successful African American pastors had forged a postdenominational world of densely networked churches and leaders. Publishers and Bible colleges clamored to share in their reputations, and new opportunities arose for conferences, speaking tours, and accolades. Friends International Christian University, a distance-learning institute centered in Florida, granted honorary doctorates to the highest rung of African American celebrity pastors, including prosperity preachers like T. D. Jakes (Dallas), Clarence McClendon (Los Angeles), Paul Morton (New Orleans), and Ira Hilliard (Houston). Small networks of local black prosperity churches thrived by matching their preachers as visiting speakers. In the 1980s and 1990s, the movement had far outreached its largely white foundations. African American churches baptized in the prosperity gospel were like the Grammy-award-winning Clark Sisters—they went from singing “Nothing to Lose” to “Name It, Claim It.”

Table 3.4 African American Baptist Megachurches Participating in the Prosperity Movement

Church	Senior Pastor	Numbers	Location
Mount Zion Baptist Church	Joseph Walker III	25,000	Nashville, TN
New Birth Missionary Baptist Church	Eddie Long	25,000	Lithonia, GA
Bethany Baptist Church	David Evans	23,000	Lindenwold, NJ
The Fountain of Praise	Remus Wright	16,000	Houston, TX
Jericho City of Praise	[In Transition]	15,000	Landover, MD
Faithful Central Bible Church	Kenneth Ulmer	13,000	Inglewood, CA
St. John Church	Denny Davis	12,000	Grand Prairie, TX
First Cathedral	Leroy Bailey Jr.	11,000	Bloomfield, CT
Greater St. Stephen Full Gospel Baptist Church	Debra Morton	10,000	New Orleans, LA
The Park Church	Claude Alexander Jr.	8,000	Charlotte, NC
Elevation Baptist Church	T. L. Carmichael Sr.	3,000	Raleigh, NC

Soft Prosperity

The prosperity movement that emerged in full health and vigor in the early 1990s was more diverse than ever before. It had survived the disgrace of many of its standard-bearers and outgrown its denominational boundaries. It appealed both to white Americans and those of color. It was no longer a child from the wrong side of the tracks but a powerful movement with boundless confidence. It claimed many of the nation's largest churches, and others like the Victorious Faith Center in Durham, North Carolina, one of hundreds of small congregations swept up in the heterogeneous prosperity movement. Nationally, prosperity theology coursed through popular television, radio, books, seminars, conferences, and many of the country's largest congregations. Locally, the message wound its way into hundreds of independent pentecostal churches, loosely associated with other like-minded churches, sharing ministers, church programs, worship events, and healing services, offering the saints a host of solutions for their particular spiritual and physical needs. In churches large and small, the movement had developed a smooth new language and style of persuasion that admirably fit the times. It was therapeutic and emotive, a way of speaking that shed its pentecostal accent for a sweeter and secular tone that I call “soft prosperity.”

Teachers like Joel Osteen, John Osteen's son and successor at Houston's Lakewood Church, softened the hard causality between the spoken word and reality. Prophets of soft prosperity tied psychological to fiscal success, believing that a rightly ordered mind led to rightly ordered finances. Osteen chose mainstream language over Christian jargon, changing the term “positive confession” to “positive declarations.” Yet the principle remained the same: change your words, change your life. He wrote: “Every day, we should make positive declarations over our lives. We should say things such as, ‘I am blessed. I am prosperous. I am healthy. I am talented. I am creative. I am wise.’” For Osteen, the transformative power of positive confession could be demonstrated psychologically, rather than appealing to the forces of faith. The words build self-image, Osteen taught, for “as those words permeate your heart and mind, and especially your subconscious mind, eventually they will begin to change the way you see yourself.” A healthy mind became an important indicator of good spiritual health and a vibrant conduit of faith. Life's circumstances still depended on a believer's use of faith. Divine wealth eventually came to good people, he reasoned, for a chain of causality-linked thought, the

spiritual self, and life's circumstances. "As you speak affirmatively, you will develop a new image on the inside, and things will begin to change in your favor." God rewarded the faithful with wealth, though believers typically earned it indirectly. Perhaps a careful budget tamed household spending or the boss noticed the believers' cheerful attitude and tapped them for promotion. "If you'll do your part, God will do His," promised Osteen. "He will promote you; He'll give you increase, but first you must be a good caretaker of what you have." Promotion and increase arrived as an assortment of ordinary and supernatural opportunities. A believer should simply rely on God's promises of an abundant life. "Call in what God has promised you," Osteen urged readers.¹³⁵

African American prosperity preachers, in particular those with denominational ties, often added an entrepreneurial twist in emphasizing the slow work of upward mobility. Debt counseling. Tax write-offs. Job banks. Small business loans. Pragmatic and bootstrapping methods charted the long journey to prosperity. Bishop Noel Jones, pastor of the 10,000-member City of Refuge church, demonstrated this dual mental and tactical commitment in *Vow of Prosperity*. His soft prosperity defined success as the net result of right thinking because "your spirit will either attract negatively or positively," but he also lent equal weight to the gritty details of financial management.¹³⁶ He warned readers of the dangers of overnight success, urging them to embrace the process of receiving God's blessings.

Paula White embodied the therapeutic spirit of the times as the everyday woman who offered biblical solutions to poverty and a broken spirit. This televangelist and megachurch pastor preferred to call herself a life-coach and motivational speaker. Her books, *You're All That*; *Deal With It*; *Simple Suggestions for a Sensational Life*; *Birthing Your Dreams*; and *He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not* promised to deliver readers, especially women, from pain that might prevent victory. As Phil Sinitiere and Shayne Lee observed, it was a spiritual climate that favored confessional tones.¹³⁷ Believers wanted their pastors to have tell-all journeys to share and minds they had to master along the way. White introduced readers to a thought-world that was potent, where the successful would learn to get their minds to "work for them."¹³⁸ She traced the relationship between these thoughts, positive or negative, and life's circumstances.

Your thoughts become your words.
Your words become your actions.

Your actions become your habits.
Your habits become your character.
Your character becomes your destiny.¹³⁹

In a sense, therapeutic language replaced sentimentality as the preferred medium of religious advice giving. Healing revivalists before them had worried that it hovered too closely to positive thinking. The new generation had converted to a new way of thinking, in which spirituality doubled as mental warfare and mental health.

Sunday Prosperity

Most Sunday services passed without a word from the first lady of the Victorious Faith Center in Durham, North Carolina, who appeared calmly to accept her husband's fiery prose, nodding or fanning herself. Her stillness may have been mistaken for mildness, but she too had a stubborn fire. Other worshippers seemed to draw their enthusiasm from the crescendoing piano or the pastor's admonitions, rather than the stolid presence of the first lady. Yet one Sunday, the first lady rose unexpectedly from her seat in the first row, turning toward the congregation.

Faith requires action, she declared with surprising volume. Faith requires that believers resist signs of Satan's power—disease, poverty, and lack—and reclaim God's abundance. Her small figure seemed to grow as the room grew more excited when she led believers in a measure to put poverty in check. She urged everyone to stand and prepare to receive. She explained that after she called, "Money cometh unto me, NOW!" each congregant must proclaim this faith and reach out for God's blessings. They must act as if God's financial blessings poured out, and money fell from the sky to meet every need. "MONEY!" she shouted, the congregation calling out with her. "Cometh unto me . . ."—she paused in anticipation—"NOW!" With that, the first lady began to dance. Her legs bounced in place, high-heeled shoes kicked under a chair, and her short arms pumped as she reached high and plucked invisible dollar bills from the sky. The room danced, as some 80 believers, young and old, threw off their inhibitions and joined her. The murmur rose to a din as people began to call out their needs. Most of them fervently reached out for the money visible to their spiritual eyes. Young mothers jostled their babies as they jumped, while elderly women waved their arms to catch what fell. Tears streamed down as people remembered what they desired or the losses that they

hoped to replace. "Money cometh unto me NOW!" voices called again, echoing the first lady's refrain. When the moment faded, feet slowed and hands clutched their invisible findings. The first lady sank into her seat and resumed her quiet authority, the silent demonstration of what invisible faith, when made visible, could accomplish.¹⁴⁰

Prosperity congregations, unable to find sufficient precedent in pentecostal and Holiness church practices, developed modern rites to celebrate divine wealth on Sunday morning. Although, there was little uniformity across the movement's diverse congregations, several trends emerged. Tithing eclipsed the sermon, worship, and communion as the emotional peak of the service, as pastors pushed their audiences to envision greater financial miracles. Soft prosperity churches commonly kept the mood light as the ushers took the offering, reminding audiences "God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7). Hard prosperity congregations adopted stronger measures, dwelling on the negative consequences that befell the uncharitable. In the book of Malachi, teachers found ample evidence that Christians cursed themselves when they "robbed God."¹⁴¹

Financial themes surfaced throughout the service. Congregations might open the worship service with positive confessions tailored to wealth, such as, "I am out of debt. I am healthy and wealthy. I'm having good success." Testimony found new purpose as churches made liturgical space to glorify the financial and physical improvements in their members. Small churches allowed members to pipe up with news of a newly acquired car, promotion, or home, while megachurch pastors read them aloud in a segment for prayer and praise. St. Peter's Church and World Outreach Center placed tall glass coffers labeled "Answered Prayers" at the foot of the pulpit. One might be forgiven for thinking that at a prosperity gospel service speech and ceremonies would be about receiving, but, in fact, the emphasis is often on giving—to the ministry. There seemed to be as many ways to separate the faithful from their money as there were pastors. Giving was turned into a public spectacle, the new liturgy.

Innovative tithing rituals compelled members to present their donations before curious eyes. Pastor Marvin Winans of Perfecting Church in Detroit separated the givers from the bystanders when he asked those "who give more than \$30, but only more than \$30" to stand and bring their offerings to the altar. "I want you to give 'cause we need a bigger church," he stated bluntly.¹⁴² Soft prosperity preachers in tune with white evangelical audiences typically offered more subdued requests, sometimes simply announcing what percentage of their congregation was

giving their full tithes. Numerous black prosperity churches followed sanctified church custom in asking all present to stand and file past the offertory plate or (in the case of megachurches) bucket.¹⁴³ Empty-handed believers touched the bucket and prayed that they might soon have something to give. It raised to new heights the old-fashioned custom of placing a wooden tablet at the side of the sanctuary, totaling last week's attendance and offerings. Lynette Hagin, Kenneth E. Hagin's daughter-in-law, introduced an interactive tithing convention adopted by many Rhema churches. Participants raised their tithing envelopes in the air and repeated this offering prayer:

This is my seed. I sow it into the Kingdom of God. I sow because I love God and want to see [insert name of church] continue to fulfill what God has called us to do.

I believe that as I sow my seed, it shall be given unto me—good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over! It shall come back to me in many ways!

I thank You, Lord, for good opportunities coming my way. I thank You that the windows of Heaven are opening because of my obedience to sow my seed.

I thank You, Lord, for the favor of God upon my life and the grace to prosper, as You have promised me in Your Word.¹⁴⁴

At the mention of "good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over," Rhema Bible Training Center graduates even added their own playful actions.

Tithing, in part, was about show and tell. People were called to stand, dance, wave, or parade their donations before the congregation and television cameras. In Orlando, Florida, Faith World placed transparent buckets emblazoned with the word "release" on the stage at the end of every aisle for parishioners to "sow into" a moment in the sermon. At Paula White's Without Walls church, a feminine aesthetic pervaded the sanctuary and encouraged giving through the provision of floppy pink envelopes which tithers were encouraged to wave during the service. Solicitations for tithes to her church offered concrete guidelines:

I'm enclosing my best offering of:

- ☐ One month's pay
- ☐ One day's pay

- ☐ One week's pay
- ☐ My best First Fruits offering

The Minneapolis megachurch Speak the Word Church International suggested to its mostly immigrant congregation that they could donate fine jewelry and foreign currency in lieu of dollars. "The silver is mine and the gold is mine," declares the Lord Almighty" (Haggai 2:8) read the hand-out, explaining that treasures placed in the offering bin would be hand-dated for resale.¹⁴⁵ (Tiny print at the bottom allowed that the vendors used may include businesses that church board members have an interest in.) Other churches laid the bare bills on the platform as the preacher paced a stage littered with cash and checks.

The significance of divine wealth led churches to publicize tithing and to set givers apart from the crowd. Pressure was often unobtrusive. Pastors might ask congregants to turn to their neighbors in the pew and inquire: "Did you give what you were supposed to?" and to tell any reluctant givers, "I'm not going to sit by you if you're not here for victory!" At a megachurch in a destitute area of Maryland the speaker breathlessly recounted how the previous week for the culmination of Pastor's Appreciation Month many givers had promised donations of \$1,000, even \$50,000. What would be given this week? Those who had been absent last Sunday and missed out on this opportunity were told to stand and to "name their seed" of no less than \$1,000. The first man to stand coughed and looked around as the video camera closed in on his face. With his shirt untucked and his cautious expression, he seemed like a man out of step with the polish and confidence of the congregation. When the speaker asked him to announce what he was "sowing," he stunned the audience by saying: "I'll sow what I got." This news was received with silence and muttering, as the preacher surmised that he could not have been at this church very long to think that those with a small or vague offering would prosper.¹⁴⁶

Seminars to teach pastors these financial techniques became a cottage industry. Bishop Don Meares of the 5,000-member Evangelical Cathedral and Michael Chitwood, creator of the *Building and Accumulating Wealth* system, toured the United States for months with their "Church Financial Seminars." Hyped by a theological cross-section of the prosperity movement (including Shirley Caesar, Kenneth Ulmer, Dennis Leonard, Clarence McClendon, and John Avanzini), it promised to teach pastors the basics:

- How to Prove Tithing is in the New Testament
- How to Deal with Delinquent Tithers
- How to Double the Pastor's Salary
- How to Complete Your Pledges in 120 Days
- How to Prove that Non-Tithers are Robbers

Seminar topics like "How to Setup a Love Offering Program LEGALLY" allowed pastors to receive gifts without violating their tax exemption status as charities.¹⁴⁷ The advertisement featured Bishop Jimmie Ellis of the Victory Christian Center raving, "I did not realize how underpaid I was on my salary and housing allowance. I am now making 3 times what I was making." Divine finances came as a lesson to all.

The megachurch pastor Clint Brown stressed the significance of touch, urging those in the audience who would not or could not tithe to "Just get something in your hand. If you are not tithing then at least give an offering, have something in your hand!" James Hash, an African American graduate of Rhema Bible, paraded with his wife on the stage of his St Peter's Church and World Outreach Center in Winston-Salem, telling his congregation, "You're looking at Mr. and Mrs. Favor!" One of the deacons was asked to join them, followed by a dozen more representing the different ministries of the church, holding hands to create a long chain that would allow the pastor's favor to rub off on them and spread to the whole church.¹⁴⁸

Small churches claimed an equal share of prosperity. Bishop Edward Peecher's Chicago storefront church, the New Heritage Cathedral, printed their "Personal Confession" in the bulletin:

I am under Divine Decree of Increase. God has spoken Increase to me. I am destined to Increase, my anointing is Increasing, my wisdom is Increasing, my health is improving—EVERY DAY is a day of Increase for me and my family.¹⁴⁹

A banner near the altar of the Memorial Baptist Church of Newark read: "Are you giving God a tip or a tithe?"¹⁵⁰ Large churches proclaimed victory over their own financial woes. The conference organizer of "Would Thou Be Made Whole?"—in celebration of the singer-preacher Shirley Caesar—attempted to meet the conference's diminishing budget by praying over the offerings asking God that the small bills be transformed into larger denominations. It was a frequent joke at prosperity gatherings that

the audience be given more time to write out their checks because it was time consuming to write all those zeros at the end of the amount.

Some prosperity preachers earned their reputations as biblical mathematicians. Earlier pentecostals and fundamentalists, like many before them, had mined apocalyptic literature for the raw data of prophecy, unearthing fragments from Daniel or Revelation for clues that foretold the unraveling of time. This was exacting work, a tangle of dates counted backward and forward through the reigns of kings and stretches of exile. A handful of prosperity evangelists including faith healer Benny Hinn and Millionaire University™ creator John Avanzini approached scripture as a treasure trove of covenants, agreements cut between God and ancient Israel. The obsession with numerical precision often influenced the ways they encouraged Sunday giving. Televangelist Mike Murdock, a staple on *Paula White Today* and Benny Hinn's *This Is Your Day*, saturated his messages with numbers: 365 *Wisdom Keys*, 31 *Reasons People Do Not Receive Their Financial Harvest*, and 7 *Ingredients In Every Miracle*. Symmetry was encouraged. Ministers might ask for \$3,500 for a 35th anniversary in the ministry. George Bloomer, spiritual son of Eddie Long, divided his Durham-based Bethel Family Worship Center into lines come tithing time: a \$10 line, a \$50 line, a \$100 line, etc. Grammy-winning Shirley Caesar preferred marches: marches of men, marches of women, with a preordained amount in their hands. Sometimes mathematics worked in favor of the congregation. Pastor Mike Freeman of Spirit of Faith Christian Center in Temple Hill, Maryland, celebrated the 17th anniversary of his church by giving away envelopes full of money to 17 people born on the 17th. (Pastor Mike was not born yesterday—he spent fifteen minutes of his sermon checking the IDs of those claiming to be born on the auspicious day.)

Sometimes preachers abandoned smooth persuasion for old-fashioned hell-fire. The mild-mannered Jim Hammond of Minneapolis' Living Word Christian Center played the part of a financial exorcist, releasing his audience from satanic control over their money. "Devil, take your hands off my \$9,500!" he shouted, asking his white congregation filled with lapsed Lutherans to substitute their own number and demand that the Devil release it. It was a low-flying theology, hovering just above people's daily needs and desires.

Give and get. Divine prosperity rested on a simple exchange. To be sure, careful preachers warned believers against giving to get, but all agreed that openhearted givers should expect to see significant returns. Money served as a common and practical means of assessing one's faith.

Yet the actual calculation of gains and losses in a believer's life proved more difficult. Whether donations appeared in the heat of a crusade or the cool of a casual Sunday, believers often struggled to account for precisely how much the prosperity gospel yielded.

Every now and again, divine wealth came as miraculously as a sudden bank transfer or a mysterious envelope of cash in the mailbox. Joan, a visiting prophetess to the Victorious Faith Center, testified that her \$255 tithe was recompensed by following God's instructions to find the same amount in the parking lot of a particular store.¹⁵¹ Most often, however, calculations demanded a roundabout arithmetic. One of Kenneth Hagin's favorite stories of financial obedience illustrates this calculus at work. A poor widow in his congregation scarcely had enough to eat but faithfully paid her tithes. One night during a revival, the woman's mentally ill daughter accepted the gospel and was miraculously restored to near-perfect mental health. She soon married. Hagin later discovered that the young woman's husband died in a truck accident, and that his ample insurance left her several hundred thousand dollars. "I was so glad, praise God," wrote Hagin, "that I had obeyed God and had taken her mother's tithes. This girl had learned to pay tithes, too. . . . Would she ever have gotten to that place if she hadn't been obedient in her finances?"¹⁵² To the casual observer, the connection between a mother's donation and her daughter's tragic loss seemed a distant one. Yet the faithful saw providence, not coincidence, at work. As Paula White explained of God, "He is the master puppeteer who is making all the right moves, orchestrating each event that comes your way, preparing your blessing . . . and He is doing everything that concerns you in His perfect time."¹⁵³ No circumstance fell outside God's purview. Believers did what they did best: they found God in the particulars of their lives. Members of VFC told me of God's providence in securing a loan, a company car, or winning a bidding war over a new home. God provided for them as faithfully as He did for Moses, parting the seas that they might pass through.

The flip side of this same coin was the veiled threat of misfortune for those who tried to escape God's consequences. Evangelist Joyce Meyer recalled that her attempts to avoid tithing caused all her household appliances to malfunction, exacting from her the amount that her tithes would have been. Because she did not have her "seed" in the ground, she explained, Satan stole her money.¹⁵⁴ Pastor Walton warned parishioners that robbing God might bring a curse on their houses. Their appliances and cars would break down. "Money gets away from you," he said, shaking

his head.¹⁵⁵ Followers repented of withholding their tithes, but then worried about the residual debt they owed God. "How can I 'clear my account with Him?'" fretted a reader of Marilyn Hickey's *Charisma* column.¹⁵⁶ The world of prosperity was a closed spiritual system, encompassing all aspects of everyday life. "Spiritual currency works the same as natural currency," explained Gloria Copeland. "If you have an abundance in your natural bank account, you can enjoy plenty of material things. If you have an abundance of faith in your spiritual account, you can enjoy plenty of *everything*—wealth, health, good relationships, peace, success."¹⁵⁷ Be an explanation for causality in which all actions brought good or ill consequences. It was both the carrot and the stick, as "whatsoever we sow, whether good or bad, is coming up again!"¹⁵⁸

For those who could not yet see prosperity in their own lives, patience became the highest virtue. "Patience! The power twin of faith!" exclaimed Kenneth Copeland.¹⁵⁹ Virtually every book on the subject of prosperity addressed the issue of God's timing. Brother John Avanzini listed "No Patience" as one of the 25 major obstructions to blessing. "Everything God does is scheduled. . . . Just hold on," urged Paula White.¹⁶⁰ Juanita Bynum's popular song encouraged believers to rest in the gap between asking and receiving with the single, repeated refrain: "I don't mind waiting for you, Lord."¹⁶¹

Leading by Example

Leaders proved to be the most powerful demonstrators of divine wealth, and the living testimony and continued revelation of successful prosperity teachers presented an idealized portrait of what it meant to live victoriously. Their chauffeured cars and private jets served as tangible reminders of their blessedness, as Creflo Dollar reminded 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."¹⁶² As embodiments of prosperity, these pastors offered tangible reminders of God's goodness and the abundant provisions in store for all who believed. Frederick Price, pioneer of African American prosperity theology, made his financial success a perennial theme with a theological bottom line: "I'm only doing it so that you can see that there's somebody the same color that you are, breathing the same contaminated air, paying the same outrageous prices for everything else, and I'm prospering because of the Book."¹⁶³ In short,

they served as "proof-producers," divining rods for the community to understand the work of the Lord.

Dollar's rise to fame demonstrated this desired career trajectory. When Atlanta singer and rap-phenomenon, Ludacris, starred in the music video, "Welcome to Atlanta," a faux-tour of his city's hip-hop landmarks, Pastor Dollar was the first stop. Between footage of a raunchy tour guide and Ludacris's camera-close rapping, the senior pastor of World Changers Church International stood solemnly in front of the 30,000-member facility that had made him an urban black sensation. As pastor of the 15th-largest church in America, an African American congregation, Dollar's popularity reached into unlikely spheres. As the spiritual son of Kenneth Copeland, an older generation of pentecostals respected Dollar's exuberant traits. Handsome and quick-witted, he commanded a female fan base that crossed racial lines and ensured frequent invitations to women's conferences. In 2008, for example, Joyce Meyer's Women's Convention slated Dollar as the sole male speaker. A popular presenter across diverse sectors of the American Christian landscape, Dollar succeeded in bringing an urban black ministry to national acclaim.

Dollar's reputation was born and bred in Atlanta. A native of College Park, Dollar grew up in the Methodist church, converting to pentecostalism as a teenager. His first pastoral efforts came in West Georgia College, where he and a roommate started a "World Changers Bible Study." Under his guidance, the group grew to 300 attendees.¹⁶⁴ Dollar's subsequent graduate work in counseling, though unrelated to theology, equipped him as a teacher and self-help advisor. In 1986, Dollar founded a church in College Park, Georgia, with eight members. Their numbers grew steadily, though not meteorically, despite Dollar's ambitions.¹⁶⁵ In the early 1990s, however, the church's growth increased exponentially. In 1991, Dollar began construction on an \$18 million facility, the World Dome. While large-scale building projects formed the rule, not the exception, in faith ministries, Dollar's projects facilitated both his growing ministry and a spiritual symbolism. In keeping with his teachings against debt, Dollar refused any bank financing, gradually paying for the facility himself. By December 24, 1995, World Changers Ministry International began services in the new 8,500-seat sanctuary and Dollar proved his theological point. As his church biographers stated, "The construction of the World Dome is a testament to the miracle-working power of God and remains a model of debt-freedom that ministries all over the world emulate."¹⁶⁶

Dollar majored in spiritual finances. His television program, *Changing Your World*, launched in 1990, was syndicated on almost 200 television stations and cemented his reputation as God's financier. Each broadcast offered strategies to achieve Christian victory, largely through the "super-natural method of finance."¹⁶⁷ The close of his November 24, 2004, broadcast explained things clearly. As Dollar sat comfortably beside his wife, Taffi, they summarized the findings of their series, "Becoming Financially Fit." "God is the one giving us the power to get wealth," he explained, quoting Psalm 66:10, that "we went through the fire but thou brought us to a *wealthy place*." He smiled jubilantly as he arrived at the punch line: "We've been bought out! And brought out!" God saved and rewarded, a lavish promise to every believer. His dozen popular titles like *Total Life Prosperity* (1999), *No More Debt!: God's Debt Cancellation Strategy* (2001), and *Claim Your Victory Today* (2006) detailed his financial promises from God. Dollar's consistent focus on godly acquisition made financial empowerment seminars a hallmark of his ministry.

Fellow faith teachers hailed Dollar as one of the youngest success stories of the American prosperity movement. In 1998, Oral Roberts confirmed his achievement with an honorary doctor of divinity degree, and a host of like-minded preachers, black and white, counted him as an ally. His was an unlikely accomplishment: a multimillion dollar ministry in an Atlanta neighborhood where 20 percent of citizens lived below the poverty line. Yet the ministry itself seemed proof that Dollar's optimistic brand of self-help delivered concrete results.

Believers, for the most part, wanted their leaders to live well. Yet these examples of lavish living rarely escaped the criticism that they exploited their followers by profiting from their donations. Media pundits relentlessly cataloged televangelists' assets and expenses as evidence of greed and probable corruption. Insiders protested that heaven's windows stood wide open, and pastors hardly could be faulted for acting on a divine prescription for prosperity. In truth, believers rarely acknowledged the line between manipulation and abundant living until it had been crossed. In 2007, the publication of images of Dollar's mansion provoked heated criticism, as did reports of Ohio evangelist Joyce Meyer's \$23,000 toilet seat.¹⁶⁸ Yet, on the face of it, these displays of wealth were not a *theological* problem. Their divine economy operated on the principle that they lived in a world of more-than-enough. It was when pastors mishandled funds that believers typically lost faith. When Jim Bakker defrauded shareholders of Heritage USA, the problem at first was not that he profited. That he

resorted to deception undermined the grounding logic of his gospel: *wealth comes to any and all who ask*. If accumulation was easy, why do it secretly? And why must he do it at the expense of others? Bakker, by his actions, had seemed to live in a world of not-enough.

The mighty fell hard. Famed faith teacher Robert Tilton made national news when reporters showed him dumping thousands of prayer requests into the dumpster after removing the money from the envelopes. In 2007, into the dumpster after removing the money from the envelopes. In 2007, a lawsuit alleging the illegal use of university funds led Richard Roberts to resign his presidency of Oral Roberts University.¹⁶⁹ (The university survived with an infusion of cash from Pat Robertson and Christian retail mogul Mart Green, as well as the interim presidency of Billy Joe Daughmerty of Victory Christian Center.) The same year, Senator Chuck Grassley of Iowa opened an investigation into the finances of many of the most famous names in prosperity theology: Benny Hinn, Eddie Long, Joyce Meyer, Kenneth and Gloria Copeland, Creflo and Taffi Dollar, and Randy and Paula White. It was a narrow road, and few managed to walk it without rebuke.

Some gave up the prosperity gospel altogether. Jimmy Swaggart was one of the first. In 1982, in his *The Balanced Faith Life*, Swaggart excoriated his fellow Assemblies of God televangelists for preaching prosperity theology, retracting the message that he himself had espoused in *The Confession Principle and the Course of Nature*, published earlier that year.¹⁷⁰ Jim Bakker's post-prison biography *I Was Wrong* denounced the faith message as false. The globetrotting healer Benny Hinn waffled. The celebrity T. D. Jakes played both sides of the prosperity debate. Though he closely associated himself with prosperity preachers, promoting the ministries of up-and-coming faith teachers like Paula White, he avoided the "P-word" for fear of "being positioned in a camp of preachers who some say have marginalized the Gospel and relegated it in favor of capitalist ideals." He rejected the "so-called Prosperity Gospel" as a confused attempt to reach a "capitalistic, tax-sheltered heaven."¹⁷¹ The elderly Kenneth Hagin penned *The Midas Touch* to correct some of the abuses of the movement he helped shape, forbidding ministers to "lead people to believe that prosperity means conspicuous, lavish wealth. It simply is not true that everyone who has faith for prosperity will live in a palace, drive a luxurious car, and dress in expensive designer-label clothes."¹⁷² Before his death, he assembled a meeting of some of the leading prosperity preachers (including Kenneth Copeland) and castigated preachers who sought financial gain, corrupting spiritual truths with wrong motivations at the expense of the Body of Christ. Yet the

message that faith works had proved so successful that no one, not even Hagin, could take it back.

Tammy Faye Bakker later recalled that the impetus behind Heritage USA was that they wanted a place where followers could catch the vision. Bakkers built a Christian wonderland testified to the joyful and enterprising spirit of the movement. They had wanted believers to meet Jehovah Jireh, the God of more-than-enough.

4

Health

Jehovah Rapha (my healer)

THE VICTORIOUS FAITH CENTER (VFC) in Durham, North Carolina, was lit up like a jack-o'-lantern, its orange-tinted fluorescent lights illuminating the bustling sanctuary as seen from the street outside. Sandwiched between a nail salon and a payday loan office in a mini-mall, the storefront church rang with shouts of praise and prayer on this and every Wednesday night. A dozen or so women—elders, deacons, and mothers of the church—bantered and laughed as they prepared for the service. The din of chatter ceased when a woman stumbled through the doors and stood teetering there, her eyes scanning the room and her face twisting as if she were in pain. A mother of the church sprang from her seat, crossed the room, and pulled the newcomer, a fellow church member, into a tight hug.¹ "Praise God!" Shouts of encouragement erupted from all corners. The woman's face brightened and ran with tears as people clustered around her in a spontaneous praise circle.

"I'm going to praise His name!" sang the church mother, beginning the familiar tune of a VFC favorite. "Each day is just the same!" joined another. The stomping of tennis shoes on the beige-carpeted floor anchored the chorus:

He healed my body, He touched my mind,
He saved me JUST IN TIME.²

The woman, whose name was Essence, I soon learned, had just taken her first unaided steps after a sudden illness had left her paralyzed. The VFC members celebrated her healing as a triumph over Satan, who robs believers of the health, prosperity, and abundant life that God grants to all the faithful.