

The Prosperity Gospel Preys on Poverty

By Charles Hicks on Nov. 23, 2009

The United States of America, while not an officially Christian nation, is certainly a nation populated mostly by Christians. Because of this fact, changes in American religion will always be accompanied by changes in America itself. Specifically, the teachings of American churches will influence the way Americans live their lives, at least to some extent.

For a very long time, Protestant Christianity preached frugality and revered the self-made man. Pastors instructed congregations that correct moral behavior and ethical choices would be rewarded in the next life, but that temporal success here on Earth was in their own hands. The great economist and sociologist Max Weber felt that this uniquely Protestant ethic, which encouraged people to take their well-being into their own hands, contributed to the very development of modern capitalism and the dominance of Western societies.

Today, many pastors and churches still honor these concepts, but there is a growing movement in American Christianity that is changing the way many people conduct their lives. It's called the prosperity gospel, and it emphasizes material success in the here and now, as opposed to in the next life.

The basic idea that this prosperity gospel hinges on is the notion that God rewards the faithful with financial success. In the words of Joel Osteen, who is probably the most popular of today's prosperity gospel preachers: "God wants us to prosper financially, and to have plenty of money." For the rank-and-file churchgoer, this sort of instruction translates into one simple message: If I follow God's commandments, I will have plenty of money.

Prosperity theology was initially slow to develop. But with the advent of television and radio in the 20th century, the movement gained traction. Oral Roberts, Billy Graham and other pioneers of the televangelist format adhered to the prosperity movement. Today, nearly all TV preachers teach some form of the prosperity gospel.

Prosperity theology sounds harmless enough at first, but it has done enormous damage to thousands of Americans, if not millions. The televangelists of the 1980s developed a particularly dangerous form of doctrine that challenged viewers to make donations as a gesture of faith. God was supposed to see this donation as a measurable display of a person's faith, and the individual expected a financial reward from God as a result.

Some pastors, including those at Trinity Broadcasting Network here in Orange County, even challenged people with high levels of credit card debt to max out their cards in order to donate. This was supposed to be the ultimate act of faith, and televangelists went so far as to promise that God himself would pay off the credit cards that very month.

Of course, none of these rewards ever came. Prosperity theology tends to appeal to the very poor. That has meant that these challenges from televangelists have only served to place lower-income people in an even worse financial position. Donations came in by the millions, and televangelists bought luxury cars, private jets and dozens of homes across the country with the money.

This may sound like robbery in its pure form. But, unfortunately, it is almost impossible to prosecute religious organizations in the United States. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled long ago that it is not the business of the Court to test the truth or falsity of religious doctrine. For prosperity gospel preachers, this means that because the prosperity gospel is a religion, they can aggressively market for donations, receive them and do whatever they want with them. A court of law cannot stop this from happening, because it cannot rule that any religion is illegitimate.

The prosperity gospel is controversial. There are many evangelical Christians who are aware of the dangers of prosperity theology. Some actively preach against it. Rick Warren, the founder of Saddleback Church here in Orange County, told Time magazine: "This idea that God wants everybody to be wealthy? There is a word for that: Baloney." Referring to the many poor Christians who live faithful lives, he asked, "Why isn't everyone in the church a millionaire?"

Warren donates 90 percent of his income to charity and lives off the other 10 percent, a lifestyle he refers to as "reverse tithing." Of course, Warren is a rich man, so 10 percent still leaves him with a comfortable lifestyle, but his reverse tithing stands in stark contrast to the extravagant lifestyles lived by prosperity televangelists.

Unfortunately, despite the reservations of some evangelicals, the prosperity theology is finding fertile ground for growth. Mainstream Christianity is becoming increasingly affected by it. The notion that God rewards faith with money is spreading in both conservative and moderate churches. The average, reasonable person with a mind firmly grounded in reality should be able to figure out that prosperity theology is completely ridiculous, but this is not stopping the movement from gaining ground.

Prosperity theology advocates are making baseless promises on behalf of God; this is something that I firmly believe no human being has the right to do. These men are proof that religion, while a beautiful and important tradition and a vital expression of humanity, can be used for the worst possible purposes when placed in the wrong hands.

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