

Prosperity gospel is growing movement among churches

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Believing in Jesus is good for your bank account.

Shore Christian Pastor G. Dewey Friedel has long preached that God will bless believers with material riches: money, houses, and cars. And that God-given wealth will even entice others to believe in Jesus as well.

The prosperity gospel may seem unfamiliar to some churchgoers, but Friedel is one pastor in a growing movement among nondenominational churches.

Evangelist Paula White of the Without Walls International Church in Tampa, Fla., and wealth coach Mike Murdoch all proclaim that God's hand will be on believers' finances. Both have at various times made pilgrimages to Shore Christian to spread the message.

A more famous preacher, Joel Osteen of Texas, offers a similar, if less explicit, message. Creflo Dollar of Georgia is another famous adherent.

The prosperity gospel's message is that material is part of the "total salvation" brought by Jesus. It comes if you believe, and particularly if you donate one-tenth of your income to your church or give offerings to aligned ministries.

Friedel, in his sermon series "The Winner's Circle," talked about a congregant who prayed to make more money and secured a promotion the next week that moved his annual income from \$40,000 to \$100,000.

Jesus, Friedel said, "died and gave his blood that you might have your sins forgiven, that you might be protected, that you might be delivered, that you might be healed and that you might experience wealth."

Believers are often asked to "plant a seed" with their donations, which will come back to them in a harvest of heavenly blessing. They are told that God has called them into "dominion" on the earth and, quoting a passage from the Book of Deuteronomy, should expect to "be the head and not the tail."

In addition to material blessings, that prosperity may also include having a better marriage or avoiding disease or accidents.

Some 20 percent of U.S. churches hold to some form of the prosperity gospel, estimates Scott L. Thumma of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research.

Thumma said he's not aware of anyone who has attempted to study to see whether believing in the prosperity gospel works, but he hasn't seen much evidence that it does.

The prosperity teaching is criticized in other quarters of Christianity.

Ole Anthony, president of the watchdog group Trinity Foundation, has been investigating national prosperity gospel ministries and sending the information to the Senate Finance Committee, which has opened an investigation. Anthony said in an interview that he considers the prosperity message a scourge on Christianity.

"It's the antithesis of scripture, and they end up putting (congregants) in a bind," Anthony said in an interview. "Everything is a promise, and they deserve the wealth. They should end up living like millionaires, and they are working for minimum wage.

"The prosperity gospel has infected American Christianity unlike anything else," he added.

H. Vinson Synan, longtime historian of the Pentecostal and Charismatics movements, said the prosperity gospel did not become popular until after World War II, when Oral Roberts began preaching to formerly poverty stricken Pentecostals who had begun making money again.

Synan, who is Dean Emeritus of the Divinity School at Regent University, said he sees good things coming from a version of the prosperity gospel preached in Africa — where believers are taught to abstain from drinking, drugs and sexual promiscuity to obtain God's blessing.

But Synan said that the prosperity gospel is not part of any mainline denomination, nor of any Pentecostal denomination, and he does not believe there is a theological foundation for the idea that God will find ways to fill bank accounts and otherwise bless believers with material things.

"It's never been a big official doctrine," Synan said. "Most Christians have been poor for most of history."

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