

# Prosperity Gospel on Skid Row

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Difficulties of high-profile pastors may reorient movement—or reinforce it.

**Bobby Ross Jr.** | posted 1/15/2009 09:40AM

Some of the high-flying icons of the prosperity gospel—the belief that God rewards signs of faith with wealth, health, and happiness—have run into financial turbulence.

Not all of their troubles can be blamed on the nation's economic crisis, say critics of the name-it-and-claim-it theology found in some charismatic churches.

"I believe the charismatic movement, of which I am a part, is in the midst of a dramatic overhaul," said J. Lee Grady, editor of *Charisma* magazine. "God is shaking us." Grady predicts the movement will look much different in a few years as it refocuses on evangelism and overcoming what he calls the distraction of "materialism, flashy self-promotion, and foolish carnality." But Scott Thumma, a Hartford Seminary sociologist who studies megachurches, is not so certain.

"Most clergy who preach a prosperity gospel would interpret for their congregation any conflict, scrutiny, or questioning as an attack of the Devil and proof that they are following God," he said.

Among recent developments:

- In Fort Worth, Texas, a review board ruled December 7 that Kenneth Copeland Ministries' \$3.6 million jet did not have tax-exempt status. The ruling came after the ministry, whose 1,500-acre campus includes a \$6 million church-owned lakefront mansion, refused to release the salaries of Copeland, his wife, and others.
- In suburban Atlanta, Georgia, a sheriff's deputy served an eviction notice November 14 at Bishop Thomas Weeks III's Global Destiny Church. Court documents indicate the bishop, the ex-husband of televangelist Juanita Bynum, owed half a million dollars in back rent. The church has lost roughly half of its 3,400 members since Weeks and Bynum's 2007 fight in a hotel parking lot, in which Weeks was accused of pushing, choking, and beating his then-wife.
- In Tampa, Florida, Without Walls International Church—which once attracted 23,000 worshipers—has shrunk drastically after co-pastors Randy and Paula White announced in 2007 they were divorcing. The church faces an uncertain future after the Evangelical Christian Credit Union began foreclosure proceedings November 4 and demanded repayment of a \$12 million loan on the church's property.
- In suburban Minneapolis on November 18, Living Word Christian Center pastor Mac Hammond won the first stage of a court battle with the Internal Revenue Service to keep his salary private. Yet in 2008, he was forced to put his private jet up for sale and cut Living Word's hour-long television show in half to save money amid falling contributions.

Meanwhile, Copeland and the Whites are among six televangelists whose large organizations have been targeted in a Senate Finance Committee investigation into allegations of questionable spending and lax financial accountability. All six preach some form of the prosperity gospel.

Could followers of the prosperity gospel—encouraged by pastors to "sow a seed" of faith by spending money, often in the form of a donation to the pastors' ministries—be turned off by the recent turmoil?

Craig Blomberg, author of a 2001 study of prosperity theology, said he expects the movement to "take a small hit among those who recognize that it can't deliver on what it promises."

But many followers could view the financial difficulties as consequences for sin and personal failings—from Weeks's assault conviction to the Whites' divorce—and determine to try that much harder to please God and prosper themselves, he suggested.

"Some may well interpret this as judgment on the leaders who have abused their positions or proved immoral in other respects," said Blomberg, a New Testament professor at Denver Seminary. "And many may simply assume this is the time to call others and themselves to an even truer faith so that the 'system will work' as it is supposed to in their minds."

In Grady's view, the notion that "God blesses us so we can be a blessing" is biblical. What is needed, he believes, is a shift to a more selfless movement where people "realize that God wants to bless us so that we can feed the poor, lift up the broken, and transform society.

"We need that kind of prosperity," he said, "and I think that is where things are going."

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