

Foreword

Early in my current pastorate, a church member came to see me. After a few minutes looking around my office, she turned to me and exclaimed: “Now I know your problem. You have too many books!” This prayerful and faithful lady had concerns about my leadership. She felt that, despite my intelligence and giftedness, I lacked “the anointing.” But she was relieved because she now knew what to pray—“Please, God! Deliver our pastor from the shackles of all of those books!” I didn’t need all of that stuff I studied in seminary. The anointing would enable me to teach people how to prosper.

I was not in the least bit surprised by that encounter, and she was not alone in the congregation in mixing prosperity theology with our Baptist faith. Like many devout Christians today, these church members saw no contradiction between our biblically based doctrine and their overtly “Word of Faith” and prosperity gospel leanings. And why would they? The popular preachers who dominate the television networks have long invited Christians to experience a gospel that allows them to “prosper, even as [their] soul prospers”!

These celebrity prosperity preachers had identified some glaring weaknesses in the traditional church: aging clergy, declining membership, and lifeless worship. They took advantage of declining biblical literacy, and they tapped into a desire that many African Americans possessed in the post–Civil Rights era—a desire to redefine the role of church and faith. By the 1980s and 1990s black Christians were seeking leaders who would restore a sense of moral clarity, spiritual authenticity, and divine possibility. There was no Martin King on the horizon. But there were well-dressed, articulate, photogenic preachers (who were not prophetic enough to protest anything).

These preachers didn't preach elaborate, oratorical sermons laced with poetry and philosophy week after week. They abandoned the traditional hymns that included negative references such as “a wretch like me” and substituted praise songs that focused on joy and victory. They became inspirational speakers rather than prophetic preachers, offering a formula for tapping into divine power and accruing financial wealth. But they never discussed self-denial, personal sacrifice, or social justice.

In the preceding 250 years, the overwhelming majority of African American religious voices had come from prophetic leaders who employed an intuitive hermeneutic that produced a tradition emphasizing justice and righteousness. These black prophets preached a gospel of liberation from the same Bible that their oppressors used to justify their oppression.

And in the late eighteenth century, as black Christians separated from their white Christian brothers and sisters in response to their innate desire for equality and justice, the historically black church became the first major division of Christianity formed, not out of doctrinal disputes or political schism, but in response to an internal issue of injustice—that of racist ideology and practice within the church. Thus from the late 1700s until the late 1970s, black religious leaders had to possess a commitment to the pursuit of racial justice in order to be credible. The prophetic response to the social

injustices faced by the black community was a core theological imperative.

Of course, outside the dominant prophetic tradition that has undergirded black struggle and survival, we have also seen charismatic leaders whose ministries have been overwhelmingly otherworldly or flamboyantly materialistic. The difference between then and now is that historically such religious leaders have been perceived as aberrations whose minority movements have existed only on the fringe of the black church as a whole.

Today cable and satellite television provides a ubiquitous presence for the prosperity message, allowing those ministries to experience phenomenal growth and to appear theologically mainstream. What's more, American culture overall has seen a shift in values that place emphasis on the individual over the group, earth over heaven, and success over service. This cultural shift has created a context that is receptive to prosperity theology.

Thankfully, many have already rejected the prosperity gospel—some because they are offended by the celebrity status and institutional successes of its leading proponents and others because they hear its false ring without having analyzed its teachings. And now, at last, a faithful Christian with a critical and discerning eye has accepted the call to dissect this movement in a manner that will help the entire Christian church. In *Exploring Prosperity Preaching*, homiletics professor Debra Mumford provides a thorough and integrally biblical critique of the growing prosperity gospel movement.

My mentor, the late Dr. Samuel D. Proctor, always said that proper Bible study asks three questions of every Scripture text:

1. *Is the text descriptive or prescriptive?* Does the text describe the reality of a particular time and place (e.g., smash an enemy's child against the stones), or is the text prescribing something for all time (e.g., love your neighbor as yourself)?

2. *Is the text a portrait or a photograph?* Does it use metaphor or hyperbole to “paint a picture” as a portrait artist would (e.g., Jesus sweat blood), or does it describe events plainly as a photographer documents reality (e.g., Jesus wept)?

3. *Is the text normative or germinative?* Does it offer a timeless truth (e.g., in Christ there is no slave or free), or is it something that seed-like must germinate and grow into a greater reality (e.g., slaves, obey your masters)?

Dr. Mumford observes that the biblical literalism common in prosperity preaching neglects our responsibility to ask these questions and thus allows preachers to proclaim feel-good messages that have no foundation in trustworthy hermeneutics.

The beauty of *Exploring Prosperity Preaching* is that Mumford is neither condemnatory nor judgmental in her analysis. She researches the origins of the Word of Faith movement, documents its core beliefs, and offers a constructive critique that is worthy of objective consideration. She also recognizes the prosperity movement’s contributions to Christianity and challenges mainline churches to learn from its strengths and insights.

This is the most important book written about prosperity theology in the last thirty years. Adherents of prosperity preaching need this resource to understand the origins and implications of the gospel they preach. Mainline and prophetic preachers need this book because much of the thought, language, and expectations of Christian disciples today are being shaped by the popular prosperity message. And so lay-people also need this book to assist them in evaluating and understanding the messages that they hear. I believe this book is the key to saving black churches. Every preacher needs a copy in his or her hands.

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