

Preface

Cedric Mumford, my brother, was my inspiration for studying prosperity preaching. Cedric was a member of a Word of Faith congregation in Goldsboro, North Carolina, for several years. While Cedric was attending that church, the pastor's financial demands on the members continually increased until they became unbearable. Members were told they not only had to give tithes and freewill offerings but also other offerings as requested by the pastor. Officers of the church, like Cedric, were required to give even more. Moreover, officers were expected to look prosperous by wearing nice clothes and driving expensive cars. The pastor's authority was conflated with biblical authority to such an extent that members felt that by obeying the pastor, they were obeying God. While the pastor got richer, some members gave until their homes went into foreclosure. Others, like Cedric, left and went to another church.

Cedric was fortunate to be able to go to a church with a pastor he could trust—our father. But some people had a difficult time keeping their faith in God after leaving the church, because blame for not being prosperous was placed, by the

pastors of prosperity-preaching churches, squarely on their shoulders. According to some pastors, if they had had enough faith, they would have been rich rather than in foreclosure.

Our father's church, of which Cedric is currently a member, has also adopted prosperity theology. While growing up, I saw my father reading the books of Kenneth E. Hagin and Fred Price in his study. In his more than forty years of preaching the gospel, Rev. Jimmy A. Mumford wed the prosperity theology with the theology of his Missionary Baptist tradition. In recent years, prosperity theology has become a more prominent part of his theology. The difference between the approach my father takes to prosperity theology and the approach of Cedric's former pastor is that my father does not make financial demands on his members. He teaches prosperity theology but allows members to determine for themselves the level at which they would like to give to the church. He teaches his members to tithe and proclaims the blessings God promises to give when they sow seed. However, he does not mandate them to give at any particular level. Though he does not make financial demands on his members, he does insist that his members develop an unwavering faith in God.

The major strength of my father's ministry is his faith in God's ability to do all things, which he conveys to his congregation in his preaching, teaching, and prayers. When he prays for the sick and ministers to those who have lost hope in their futures, he stands firmly on his faith in God. He truly believes there is nothing God cannot do. He teaches his members never to confess doubt and unbelief. He never confesses doubt publicly or privately. The same faith that he teaches his members is the faith he lives at home. The faith he conveys every week in his sermons is the faith both of my parents live out in their daily lives. Though my father and many members of his church are financially comfortable, no one has gotten rich. My parents have lived in the same small house in Kinston, North Carolina, for more than forty years.

While they are not financially wealthy, they are physically healthy and rich in faith.

Cedric's divergent experiences in prosperity-preaching churches demonstrate the perils and strengths of prosperity theology. All preachers of the prosperity gospel teach their hearers that God promises them wealth and good physical health. To obtain the promises of God, believers must sow seed or give money to people or churches to whom God directs them. However, some preachers blame their hearers if hearers do not become wealthy. In the meantime, the church or ministry continues to prosper along with the preacher. Other prosperity ministries are led by sincere pastors who teach the prosperity gospel because they truly believe in God's ability to do all things—including making the faithful wealthy. Some of these preachers never become wealthy.

In the pages that follow, I offer critiques of prosperity theology and discuss many of its controversial tenets.