

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.

Introduction

Every day millions of people in the United States, Australia, Kenya, England, Brazil, Canada, Ukraine, and many other countries are able to turn on their televisions, download podcasts on iTunes, and visit popular websites to hear their favorite preachers share the “prosperity gospel.” Prosperity gospel, also known as Word of Faith preaching, is a Christian theology whose signature teaching is that God wants believers to be rich and enjoy good physical health. To realize wealth and good health, believers need only believe in the promises of God and be obedient to God’s word.

Word of Faith Controversy

To say that the preaching of the Word of Faith movement is controversial is a bit of an understatement. However, the reasons for controversy are varied. For some in charismatic or evangelical circles, the theology of the Word of Faith movement raises doctrinal concerns. Charismatic/evangelical detractors contend that Word of Faith preaching is heretical because it espouses New Thought metaphysical teachings

such as “positive confession,” “visualization,” “inner healing,” and “positive thinking,” which they believe to contradict orthodox Christian doctrine.¹

Others inside and outside of charismatic/evangelical circles are primarily concerned about Word of Faith hermeneutics or biblical interpretation. For these hermeneutical critics, the practice of interpreting texts out of their historical and literary contexts enables Word of Faith preachers to justify their consistent messages of prosperity.²

For others, social justice is the main concern. Some proponents of social justice are disturbed that preachers of the Word of Faith movement get rich at the expense of their poor congregants.³ The poor not only listen to Word of Faith messages but also donate money to Word of Faith ministries with the hope that when they give to God according to the instructions of the preacher, they will reap a hundredfold return on their money. The tithes and offerings of members of prosperity churches, including the poor, pay for the mansions, Gulfstream jets, and Rolls-Royces of preachers of large ministries. These poor masses, who have not been able to realize their desires for financial prosperity while operating within their local social economies, hope that by following the laws of the divine economy explicated weekly by Word of Faith preachers, they will finally have all of their financial needs met. They also hope to receive the desires of their hearts in the form of material goods.

Social justice is also an issue because prosperity theology ignores discrimination, racism, sexism, classism, and other justice concerns in the larger society. In some cases, injustice is not only overlooked in prosperity churches but is sometimes supported.

A concern for biblical interpretation and social justice are at the heart of this project. Does God truly promise in biblical texts that all believers can be rich? Does God promise all believers perfect physical health? Are Word of Faith preachers simply taking advantage of sincere people who want to

believe that they can achieve the American dream of wealth and prosperity through the promises of God? In this book I seek answers to these questions by examining the theology of prominent Word of Faith preachers to understand how they arrive at their message of prosperity. It is with biblical interpretation and social justice in mind that I have also chosen to compare and contrast Word of Faith preaching with black prophetic preaching.

My Preparation for Writing This Book

This book is intended to provide Word of Faith adherents with a critical analysis of the theology and alternative ways of understanding God in relation to financial prosperity, physical health, and Christian social responsibility.

To understand how Word of Faith preachers are taught to interpret biblical texts, I enrolled in and completed a Bible Interpretation correspondence course at the Rhema Bible Training Center (RBTC) in Broken Arrow, Oklahoma. The school was founded by Kenneth E. Hagin and has trained pastors and laity of Word of Faith churches all over the world for active ministry. In addition to providing an overview of the Bible and synopses of each of the books, the course also taught students how to adjudicate biblical prophecy, how to understand the role of the anointing, how they can know the will of God, how to turn hopeless situations around, and how to live a *zoe*, or God, kind of life.

In January 2007 I attended five worship services in the World Dome of Creflo Dollar's World Changers Church International and in a small chapel on the church's campus. I also interviewed David Bernknoff, Creflo Dollar's publicist. Though a complete narrative of my site visit is not included in this book, the worship experiences provided essential first-hand knowledge of the worship context and overall ministry that allowed me to validate some information found during my research.

Throughout this book, the terms “prosperity theology,” “prosperity gospel,” and “Word of Faith theology” are used interchangeably to refer to the theology of the Word of Faith movement. I have not capitalized the word *word* when it refers to God’s word, the Bible, to distinguish it from Jesus (the Word of God).

An Overview of the Book

Although the prosperity gospel is relatively new on the religious landscape, its worldwide media presence has enabled the dissemination of its message to people of all ages, ethnicities, races, and religious and denominational affiliations. We will closely examine the prosperity gospel to deconstruct its teachings. But first we need to understand how prosperity preaching evolved and learn about the people responsible for its existence. Therefore, chapter 1 provides an overview of the history of prosperity preaching, including people and movements that influenced its origins, such as E.W. Kenyon, Kenneth E. Hagin, and Oral Roberts. I survey African American preachers of New Thought, including Father Divine, Reverend Ike, and Johnnie Rae Colemon, and introduce contemporary Word of Faith ministers as well.

The next ten chapters outline the core teachings of the prosperity gospel. Each chapter bears a title that represents a frequently used phrase by prosperity preachers. The theology that undergirds each phrase is explained, and affirmations and critiques are included in a section titled “Sifting the Wheat from the Chaff” in each chapter. Biblical texts that prosperity preachers use to justify their teachings are included where applicable.

Chapter 2, “The Word of God Means Exactly What It Says,” explores the biblical assumptions on which the prosperity gospel is based. Word of Faith preachers interpret the Bible using proof texting, typology, and propositional revelation.

I examine the rationale of literal interpretation and rejection of biblical exegesis. In the Sifting the Wheat from the Chaff section, I describe the dangers of interpretation without context. (I present an alternative interpretive approach in another chapter.)

Chapter 3 looks at the prosperity gospel's teaching that declares, "The world's economy is not your economy." According to Word of Faith theology, two economies exist in the world—the secular economy and God's divine economy. In the divine economy, believers become wealthy only by giving away what they have. Adherents are advised to ignore the realities of the world's economy and to believe that God will supply not only their needs but also the desires of their hearts. In *Sifting the Wheat from the Chaff*, I examine the potential consequences of ignoring secular realities, using prosperity preaching's role (as reported in some news articles) in the 2008 housing crisis as an example.

Chapter 4, "Poverty Is a Curse, and Jesus Was Not Poor," explores the Word of Faith contention that poverty is a curse. Since the central figure of the gospel (Jesus) cannot be under a curse, they also argue that Jesus was not poor. I will study the Scriptures used to support Word of Faith teachings about poverty, including how prosperity preachers offer alternate interpretations of biblical texts that describe Jesus' socioeconomic status. In *Sifting the Wheat from the Chaff*, I differentiate between the poor people as "cursed of God" and "poverty" as "a curse." I also offer an African American prophetic preaching perspective on Jesus' social status.

In chapter 5, I consider the "God is your source" teaching. While all preachers of Word of Faith theology contend that God is the source of all blessings, including finances, some preachers are more specific about the sources of wealth available for Christians. For example, some teach that "the wealth of sinners is laid up for the righteous." In order for the righteous to receive stored money, they literally need to cry out

for it. In *Sifting the Wheat from the Chaff*, I offer an African American prophetic preaching perspective. I also offer a basic approach to biblical exegesis.

Chapter 6, “The Anointing Produces Victory,” examines how the teachings of Kenneth E. Hagin, who believed in the power of the Holy Spirit (the anointing) to empower believers for ministry, have been adopted by Word of Faith preachers to teach that the anointing also empowers believers to prosper financially. I investigate interpretations of Joel 2:18–4:17, including the teachings of the Latter Rain movement. In *Sifting the Wheat from the Chaff*, I examine the concept of anointing in the Old Testament and present an African American prophetic preaching alternative.

In chapter 7, we will explore the Word of Faith teaching in the refrain “There is authority in the name of Jesus.” Word of Faith preachers proclaim that believers should use that authority to create their own life realities. Essentially, adherents are taught that their lives are direct reflections of their verbal confessions. In *Sifting the Wheat from the Chaff*, I look into the dangers of misusing the concept of “authority” and offer an African American prophetic preaching perspective.

In chapter 8, “Claim Your Healing,” I probe the Word of Faith assertion that believers need never be sick. Good physical health is a right of all Christians, and so believers have only to claim their good health in order to receive it. I highlight the Word of Faith interpretation of Isaiah 53:4–5 as it relates to God’s promise of healing. In *Sifting the Wheat from the Chaff*, I offer an alternative interpretation of the Isaiah text and examine other healing texts. Using the testimony of Betty Price, wife of prosperity preacher Fred Price, I encourage readers to broaden their thinking about healing beyond the miraculous.

In chapter 9, “You Are the Righteousness of God,” we will test the Word of Faith teaching that asserts that believers have been declared righteous in God’s sight and therefore have at work in them the same unlimited ability and wisdom

of God as Christ had. I contrast Word of Faith theology of the righteousness of God and the favor of God of prosperity preachers with that of Swiss reformer John Calvin. In *Sifting the Wheat from the Chaff*, I dissuade readers from conceiving of God as their personal valet.

In chapter 10, “Race Doesn’t Matter,” I examine the teachings of Word of Faith teacher Creflo Dollar Jr. on race. Building on the promise of the elusive American Dream, his teaching asserts that people no longer need to identify with their natural heritage (race) once they are born again, because they have a new spiritual heritage with which to identify. Identifying with a particular ethnic or racial group creates division in the church. I will contrast Word of Faith’s theology of race with the teachings of evangelical and prophetic traditions. In *Sifting the Wheat from the Chaff*, I argue that racism is not a personal problem but a systemic issue.

Chapter 11 examines Word of Faith’s belief that “living by the word of God eliminates social ills.” Adherents say that all of society’s issues of social injustice would be resolved if all people would convert to Christianity. Word of Faith’s focus on individual conversion is indicative of the individualistic nature of prosperity theology. Believers are taught to make confessions (verbal claims to the promises of God) to God on behalf of themselves and their families rather than on behalf of others. I highlight the entitlement issues that result and compare and contrast these claims with those of black prophetic preaching.

In chapter 12, “Affirmations, Denouncements, and Reconstruction of Faith,” I delineate the gifts that prosperity theology brings to Christendom, along with its shortcomings. I offer observations and insights about the primary beneficiaries of prosperity theology, draw conclusions about the value of and need for critical biblical interpretation and holistic theological education, and suggest approaches to reconstructing faith after rejecting the prosperity gospel. Finally, I appeal to all people of God to work for the resurgence of the African American prophetic preaching tradition.

Before closely examining the particulars of the theology of the Word of Faith movement, however, we will seek to understand its origins and the people who knowingly and unknowingly helped to develop it. That is our starting place in chapter 1.

NOTES

1. Dave Hunt, *Occult Invasion* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1998), 17. See also John MacArthur, *Charismatic Chaos* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 322–53.

2. Andrew Perriman and World Evangelical Alliance Commission on Unity and Truth among Evangelicals, *Faith, Health and Prosperity: A Report on Word of Faith and Positive Confession Theologies by ACUTE* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003), 88–92.

3. Shayne Lee, *T. D. Jakes: America's New Preacher* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 109.