

A Poverty of the Soul:  
History, Impact and Assessment of the Prosperity Gospel in the United States

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## **Abstract**

### **A Poverty of the Soul: History, Impact and Assessment of the Prosperity Gospel in the United States**

Hugh Campbell

The Prosperity Gospel is not a gospel. It has not been subjected to the process of canonization, consequently, it will not be found in the Bible. It is a term pejoratively ascribed to evangelical Christian groups who believe that God wants them to be wealthy and that their wealth is a sign of God's favour. Obtaining this wealth appears to be contingent on the strength of one's faith. However, a yard stick of that faith can only be determined by how wealthy or poor a person is or will become. A wealthy person in theory has a greater faith than a poorer person. Acting on the claimed premise that the Bible is inerrant, Prosperity Gospel adherents use a fundamentalist approach in their hermeneutic. However, their area of concentration is mainly with Scripture that advocates wealth and riches. Although there are ample verses in the Bible to support this point of view, PGAs embrace a particular hermeneutic. This thesis will examine the Prosperity Gospel, how it evolved, its purpose, who are its adherents, who are its leaders, and any impact it may have on the social reality of the United States.

## **Key Terms**

Prosperity Gospel (PG), Prosperity Gospel Adherents (PGAs), Christianity, evangelical, Pentecostal, revivals, liberal thought/new thought, naming/saying and claiming, inerrancy, infallibility, fundamentalism, faith offering, seed faith, word of faith, law of faith, covenant (Abrahamic), confession/positive speech, poverty, mega church, creationism, evolutionism, social gospel, protestant work ethic.

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## Introduction

### Statement of the Question

As I began researching a thesis topic, I came across the “Prosperity Gospel.” Intrigued, I read on. I found both a dynamic and disturbing tension unfolding. On the one hand this “gospel” message could transcend poverty and illness, while on the other, it seemed as if it could be damaging and abusive and could ruin lives. I needed to understand if this apparent dichotomy existed. As a child, through to young adulthood, my Christian experience was quite active.<sup>1</sup> Although “prosperity” was a term discussed coming from a Baptist background, I considered it to be related to my soul rather than a prosperity of physical health and wealth that the Prosperity Gospel advocates. Indeed, I had been taught that material wealth was of the devil. Yet Koch points out that within the Prosperity Gospel, “poverty, far from a blessing, is a sign of God’s disfavor.”<sup>2</sup> Tara Burton supports Koch stating that the Prosperity Gospel “holds that divine favour yields material financial results.”<sup>3</sup> Then, in my adolescent and early adult years, I regularly watched Oral Roberts and the *PTL Club* (“Praise the Lord” Club) hosted by Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker on television – three highly influential names within the genesis of the Prosperity Gospel movement.

*The Lausanne Movement*<sup>4</sup> has listed 10 affirmations challenging the Prosperity Gospel movement stating, among other points, “the flamboyant and excessive wealth and extravagant lifestyles... constant emphasis on money as if it were a supreme good.”<sup>5</sup> *The Religious Literacy Project* refers to “the Prosperity Gospel movement frequently associated with Pentecostalism, evangelicalism, and charismatic Christianity... to transcend poverty and/or illness through devotion and positive confession.”<sup>6</sup> Kate Bowler, author of *Blessed*, defined it as somewhat of a phenomenon: “The Prosperity Gospel is a wildly popular Christian message of spiritual, physical and financial mastery that dominates not only much of the American religious scene but some of the largest churches around the globe” [and] “a decisive theological, economic, and social force shaping American religion.”<sup>7</sup> According to *Pew Research*, 25% of Protestant Christians are evangelicals and 17% of those are Prosperity Gospel adherents.<sup>8</sup>

Granville Oral Roberts (1918-2009) was an American evangelist and faith healer based out of Tulsa, Oklahoma. Following a miraculous cure from stuttering and tuberculosis he began his healing revivals in the late 1940s and 50s, attracting thousands to his crusades. In 1956, he authored *God’s Formula for Success and Prosperity*. His ministry spread out to radio, television

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<sup>1</sup> The term “Prosperity Gospel” did not exist when I was young.

<sup>2</sup> Bradley A. Koch, “Who are the Prosperity Gospel Adherent,” *Journal of Ideology* 36, no. 2 (2014): 2.

<sup>3</sup> Tara Isabella Burton, *Strange Rites, New Religions for a Godless World* (New York: Public Affairs, 2020), 105.

<sup>4</sup> “The Lausanne Movement connects influencers and ideas for global mission. With a vision of the gospel for every person, disciple-making churches for every people and place.” See <https://lausanne.org>.

<sup>5</sup> *The Lausanne Movement*, “A Statement on the Prosperity Gospel,” Published January 10. Last accessed August 2, 2020. <https://lausanne.org/content/a-statement-on-the-prosperity-gospel#:~:text=We%20define%20prosperity%20gospel%20as,payments%20of%20tithes%20and%20offerings>.

<sup>6</sup> Harvard Divinity School, “Religious Literacy Project,” last accessed July 28<sup>th</sup>, 2020. [rlp.hds.harvard.edu](http://rlp.hds.harvard.edu).

<sup>7</sup> Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 9.

<sup>8</sup> David Masci and Gregory A. Smith. “5 facts about U.S. evangelical Protestants,” Pew Research Center, published March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2018, last accessed October 12<sup>th</sup>, 2023. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2018/03/01/5-facts-about-u-s-evangelical-protestants/>.

and later into education where he opened Oral Roberts University. He is considered to be one of the original builders of the Prosperity Gospel movement.<sup>9</sup>

Along the lines of televised evangelism, the Praise the Lord (*PTL*) *Club* located in Charlotte North Carolina aired on television from 1974 – 1987. It was cohosted by Jim Bakker and his wife Tammy Faye. What had started with intentions of being a Christian Johnny Carson type talk show became immensely popular. The *PTL Club* established “partners” who would donate monthly pledges to the ministry. The ministry evolved, additionally developing a Christian hotel and theme park. By 1987 the ministry was having financial problems despite enormous donations. However, the lavish lifestyle of Jim and Tammy, the theme park and hotel provided the illusion of success. An extramarital sexual involvement Jim had with an employee, and prescription drug addiction of Tammy Faye contributed to the demise and ending of the PTL club.

As I tried to maintain an open mind about what I was hearing and seeing, I could not deny my own sense of conflict when I heard these pastors requesting money to further their ministry. More concerning was the fact their gospel not only placed pressure upon congregants to donate money, but that cash donations would aid them in healing their physical ailments as well. It was not only about wealth. It was also about health. If one had enough faith all one had to do was to believe that any health problem would be resolved through prayer and most importantly by making a demand of God to be healed “in the name of Jesus.”<sup>10</sup> Donors were typically given gifts such as free books, holy water from Israel, or a prayer cloth from the Holy land for a “faith offering” to help move the ministry forward. However, donors could also receive intercessory prayers made on their behalf. To add incentive to this, the more money one contributed, the higher they could ascend on a donors list. This would infer a high social status on those who contributed. As such, wealth, health, and social rank all intertwined within the Prosperity Gospels of Roberts and the Bakkers.

While reading *The Armageddon Factor* by Marci McDonald, a book on the Religious Right in Canada, there are stories of Prosperity Gospel movements soliciting donors to the point where, in some cases, they would be asked to give up all they had to help fund their ministry.<sup>11</sup> This included selling their homes, cars, and businesses, and then sending all profits to the ministry. Some families were left destitute, unable to house themselves, or feed and clothe their children. Sociologically speaking, Prosperity Gospel Adherents (PGAs) are strongly guided by the principles of American society which to some degree reflect certain Christian values as defined in Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.<sup>12</sup> However, the Prosperity Gospel movement is ultimately a movement modeled after the “American dream” of being successful as opposed to the more conservative perspective of asceticism. For example, Joel Osteen,<sup>13</sup> one of the more prominent Prosperity Gospel pastors today explains: “Low

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<sup>9</sup> Kate Bowler, *Blessed*, 48–49.

<sup>10</sup> It is required that when advising God’s assistance for something that “in the name of Jesus” is stated in the request.

<sup>11</sup> See Marci McDonald, *The Armageddon Factor: The Rise of Christian Nationalism in Canada* (Toronto: Random House of Canada, 2010), 271.

<sup>12</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic And The Spirit of Capitalism* (Pantianos Classics, 1930).

<sup>13</sup> Joel Osteen is the senior Pastor at Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas. Weekly attendance at his church is 45,000. Additionally, Osteen has authored several books on the New York Times Best Seller list, including “Your

expectations will trap you in mediocrity. You must think positive thoughts of victory, thoughts of abundance, thoughts of favor, thoughts of hope: good, pure excellent thoughts.”<sup>14</sup> At face value, there are many Americans who would agree with this regardless of having a religious affiliation or not. Although the Bible does make mention of wealth and success and how one’s relationship with God is the route to get there, the intention of God, indeed Christianity, is not primarily focused on materialistic pursuits.<sup>15,16</sup>

The term “Gospel” refers to “good news.” Yet, some definitions of the Prosperity Gospel suggest personal condemnation, punishment, and poverty are due to an alleged lack of faith in God. Of concern with the Prosperity Gospel is its hermeneutic, that wealth is obtained through faith in God, and that lack of faith will not only prevent wealth but cause some significant problems. Although various types of Prosperity Gospels exist throughout the world in such countries as Africa, Latin America, Nigeria, Ukraine, Canada and the Philippines, the overall focus of this thesis will be limited to the United States and mainly the white Prosperity Gospel movement. I wish to note that through my research I have learned that there are some interesting differences between white and black Prosperity Gospel adherents, for example “prosperity preaching generally stresses the individual person’s will over history as the God-approved route to overcoming oppression.”<sup>17</sup> However, whites are not oppressed *per se*.<sup>18</sup> This certainly conflicts with the oppression that Blacks experience due to the colour of their skin. Unless specified, this thesis will present Prosperity Gospel ideas without reference to race. Specifically, my objective is to present the consequences of this teaching of prosperity touted by its adherents, whoever they may be, weighing its benefits and its liabilities. The Prosperity Gospel is not only about wealth, it was also about health, using the power of God to heal from both simple and life-threatening illnesses. Although there will be allusions to health, this sphere will not be within the scope of this thesis.

## Methodology

Similar to the ancient gospels, the Prosperity Gospel provides directives on having a relationship with God. It diverges in its preponderance on achieving material wealth. When compared to the Biblical gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, the Prosperity Gospel has not been in existence very long. It is an evolutionary construct that developed over the past 100 years in the United States. It is modern and has a direct impact on societal norms. To analyze the development of the Prosperity Gospel in the United States, I will approach the topic along the lines of Arthur Lovejoy’s classical definition of the history of ideas, which states:

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Best Life Now.” He is seen by 10 million viewers on television and has a radio station on Sirius XM satellite radio. See <https://www.joelosteen.com>.

<sup>14</sup> Joel Osteen, *Your Best Life Now* (New York: Faith Words, 2015), 17.

<sup>15</sup> Shayne Lee, “Prosperity Theology: T.D. Jakes and the Gospel of the Almighty Dollar,” *Cross Currents* 57, no. 2 (2007): 227-236.

<sup>16</sup> Lauren Effron, Andrew Paparella, and Jeca Taudte, “The scandals that brought down the Bakkers, once among US’s most famous televangelists,” *ABC News*, published December 20, 2019, last accessed July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2024. <https://abcnews.go.com/US/scandals-brought-bakkers-uss-famous-televangelists/story?id=60389342>.

<sup>17</sup> Eric L. McDaniel, “The Prophetic and the Prosperous: Religious Ideologies and the Maintenance of Group Consciousness,” *Political Research Quarterly* 72, no.2 (June 2019): 488.

<sup>18</sup> Within this context, I am referring to the racial oppression of Blacks throughout the history of the United States, where people were discriminated against in areas such as education, employment, salary, and being forced into slavery, these being experiences that Caucasians were not subject to.



[The history of ideas] is especially concerned with the manifestations of specific unit-ideas in the collective thought of large groups of persons, not merely in the doctrines or opinions of a small number of profound thinkers or eminent writers. It seeks to investigate the effects of the sort of factors which it has — in the bacteriologist's sense — isolated, in the beliefs, prejudices, pieties, tastes, aspirations, current among the educated classes through, it may be, a whole generation, or many generations. It is, in short, most interested in ideas which attain a wide diffusion, which become a part of the stock of many minds... (It attempts) to understand how new beliefs and intellectual fashions are introduced and diffused...<sup>19</sup>

The purpose of this thesis was to demonstrate whether or not the Prosperity Gospel had redemptive qualities that worked towards the overall good of society. I believe this methodology will aptly assist to achieve that goal.

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<sup>19</sup> A.O. Lovejoy, *A Great Chain of Being. A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge: MA; Harvard University Press, 2001), 19–20.

## Chapter 1: Contextualizing the Prosperity Gospel: Terms and Concepts

### An Etymological Understanding of Fundamentalism, Inerrancy & Infallibility

Nearly identical to all evangelicals, Prosperity Gospel adherents have a unique method of understanding the Bible. They have what is termed a “literalist” interpretation of the Bible, reading it as a text that provides the fundamentals of the faith. This hermeneutical perspective requires the examination of three codependent terms *Fundamentalism*, *Biblical inerrancy*, and *infallibility* to understand its rationale.

#### Fundamentalism

A key component of prosperity theology is its dogmatic adherence to a fundamental belief of the text, that it is the literal word of God, and that it is ageless and always relevant. The term “fundamentalism” was used regularly by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, replacing the term “evangelical” within certain segments of Christianity to describe the standard by which these Christians examined the Bible. However, a change took place around the 1920s. George Marsden explains that this “new evangelical sub-culture repudiated fundamentalism as too exclusive in implication.”<sup>20</sup> For evangelicals, fundamentalism was too rigid. Consequently, “the term went through a period of redefinitions from the 19<sup>th</sup> century up until the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Evangelicalism became fundamentalism, then New Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism, to Fundamentalistic Evangelicalism.”<sup>21</sup>

Looking back to the roots of the prosperity movement, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a preacher by the name of E. W. Kenyon, considered by some to be the progenitor of the Prosperity Gospel, expressed his fundamental faith in the Word of God. Statements such as, “You can depend on his word utterly... The word is God, speaking is a part of God... God and his word are one,”<sup>22</sup> provided a base on which his fundamentalism rested. Not surprisingly, Kenyon had rejected “New Thought,”<sup>23</sup> finding it to be a “substitution of truth with ‘abstract’ principles.”<sup>24</sup> Likewise, in the present era, Kenneth Copeland,<sup>25</sup> a current Prosperity Gospel preacher, advocates his belief in the Scripture borrowing loosely from Romans 10:17, where it states: “We are putting the Word of God first and foremost... faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the Word of God.”<sup>26</sup> The “Word of God” theme can easily be found in much of the literature on the Prosperity Gospel. From the past through to the present, many evangelicals, including prosperity adherents understand the Bible to be the Word of God; the Bible would therefore literally contain God’s own words.

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<sup>20</sup> George M., Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 195.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 234–235.

<sup>22</sup> E.W. Kenyon, *Jesus the Healer* (Kenyon's Gospel Publishing Society, 2010), accessed on Kindle, 11.

<sup>23</sup> New Thought, which sprung out of Christian Science, was a faith-based construct used to access God’s supernatural ability. Through prayer and self-mastery of a given situation, such as illness, and the belief that one was in control of the outcome rather than a victim, one could be cured or have a situation go as the person desired.

<sup>24</sup> Bowler, *Blessed*, 15.

<sup>25</sup> Kenneth Copeland is a current popular American evangelist. He is known for his use of the phrase “word of faith.” His wife, Gloria, is also an evangelist. Copeland was one of a number of evangelists under scrutiny for controversial financial practices. See Joshua Bote’s “Fraud, private jets and a Lamborghini: 10 televangelists who have faced controversy” last accessed July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2024. [www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2019/06/17/joel-osteen-kennedy-copeland--10-evangelists-trouble/1471926001/](http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2019/06/17/joel-osteen-kennedy-copeland--10-evangelists-trouble/1471926001/).

<sup>26</sup> Kenneth Copeland, *The Laws of Prosperity* (Fort Worth: Kenneth Copeland Publications, 1974), 9.

But what was the cause for this fundamentalism? Around the 1880s, scientific discoveries such as Darwin's *Nature of the Species*,<sup>27</sup> threatened evangelical doctrine. Modernist thought such as self-improvement had become wildly popular. Mind cure, self-help, positive thinking, and other such self-mastery skills were driving down church attendance. The ability to self-manage without having to attend church seemed to make sense. These philosophies had been growing since the early 1800s, with ideas such as Ralph Waldo Emerson's transcendentalism and Emmanuel Swedenborg's neo-platonic theory of correspondence and mind power, brought to its apex by Phineas Quimby. By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, Kenyon, who had made a great impression on the evangelical community, lighting it up with his "dominating faith,"<sup>28</sup> along with his book, *Christ the Healer*, and radio program *National Radio Revival Missionary Crusaders*, revived the Pentecostal community. Kenyon's doctrine had become quite popular with some Pentecostal leaders of the day, though Kenyon himself did not identify as belonging to Pentecostalism. Notwithstanding, from his works, the evangelical community had been revived.

The term "fundamentalist" was first used in the 1920s by Curtis Lee Laws, "to protest the incursions of liberal theology."<sup>29</sup> Laws described fundamentalists as "those who still cling to the great fundamentals... do battle royal for the fundamentals."<sup>30</sup> George Marsden, referring to H. L. Mencken, a reporter for *The Baltimore Sun*, whose news articles were pivotal in the consequential downward spiral of fundamentalism during the "Scopes Monkey Trial," stated, "if any man stands up in public and solemnly swears that he is a Christian, all his auditors will laugh."<sup>31</sup> By the mid-1920s, however, this came to a crashing end with the Scopes trial of 1925: the challenge of a teacher's right to teach evolution in the classroom almost fully extinguished the fundamentalist movement.<sup>32</sup> In the years following the "Scopes Monkey Trial," the fundamentalist movement subsided greatly but not entirely. In the 1950s, Billy Graham, a popular conservative evangelist, nearly singlehandedly revived fundamentalism. Due to the negative perception associated with the term since the Scopes trial, the label "evangelical" became the dominant definition of the revived fundamentalist movement. From that point forward, the evangelical community continued to thrive, utilizing the media to spread its message. The Prosperity Gospel, in particular, has played a significant role in promoting the fundamentalist hermeneutics previously discussed within evangelical Christianity.

### Inerrancy

Prosperity Gospel adherents place a strong emphasis in the belief that the Bible is the inerrant word of God. Looking to the Bible, the book of Titus 1:2 states, "In the hope of eternal life that God, who never lies, promised before the ages began..."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Also known as the Theory of Evolution.

<sup>28</sup> Kate Bowler, *Blessed*, 15.

<sup>29</sup> Frances FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals, The Struggle to Shape America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017), 71.

<sup>30</sup> Curtis Lee Laws, *Convention Side Lights, The Watchman-Examiner* 8, published July 1, 1920, 834.

<sup>31</sup> George Marsden is a historian with notable expertise in Christian history and fundamentalism; see *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 3.

<sup>32</sup> The Scopes "Monkey" trial of 1925 in Tennessee challenged a teacher named John T. Scopes' right to teach evolution in class. William Jennings Bryan prosecuted the case, with Clarence Darrow defending. Although Bryans won his case in public opinion, due in large part to the newspaper articles on the topic written by mainly but not exclusively H. L. Mencken, fundamentalism lost much credibility in the public eye.

<sup>33</sup> HarperCollins, *The Harper Collins Study Bible* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2006).

Among several biblical verses which seem to support biblical inerrancy is 2 Timothy 3:16-17, “All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, or correction, and for training in *righteousness* so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.” According to James McGrath the word righteousness in Greek is *dikaiosyne*, which when translated in English is “justice.” “Righteousness,” in this context, suggests a certain morality of a person which does not equate with justice. McGrath provides an example of bringing a criminal to justice, not righteousness. The difference here is that justice imposes a prescribed logical understanding, whereas righteousness allows for a moral emotional subjective understanding. In another example when reading passages that appear contradictory, McGrath explains how a rationalization is applied, so that both can be accepted regardless of their seeming incongruence. Rather than determine which one is inaccurate, “you will deny what they mean to say, in order to insist that they are both right.”<sup>34</sup>

As will be presented here, the interpretation applied to such passages by proponents of the Prosperity Gospel can possibly misconstrue their meaning. Biblical inerrancy is a relatively new term originating in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>35</sup> The matter of inerrancy traces back to the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE, where questions were being asked about interpretation of the Talmud. Jewish interpreters understood that taking each word of the Talmud literally presented problems of textual interpretation, and so they developed different levels of meaning, such as a metaphorical meaning, a plain meaning, and a spiritual meaning. Similarly, Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk, who in effect unintentionally initiated what was to be the Protestant Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, examined the Bible, attributing similar metaphorical meaning. The historical precedence for biblical inerrancy, the historical precedence for different interpretations of Scripture “goes back to the inception of the church and was held until the enlightenment in the 1600s when Christians began to question whether the Bible was completely truthful.”<sup>36</sup> As Flannery and Werline explain, biblical inerrancy is “a largely American phenomenon that is only a little over 100 years old.”<sup>37</sup> Prior to the evangelical push to take the Bible literally, early 20<sup>th</sup> century “leaders and teachers of the earliest Christian Church often avoided a literal interpretation... in favour of understanding it as allegory, moral teaching, or a mystical text.”<sup>38</sup> By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the challenge of biblical inerrancy influenced by liberal thought was establishing itself. Charles Hodge, a theologian at Princeton University did not believe that the Bible was errant and responded saying: “the infallibility and divine authority of the Scriptures are due to the fact that they are the word of God; and they are the word of God because they were given by the inspiration of the Holy Ghost.”<sup>39</sup> Hodge and his peers B. B. Warfield and Alexander Archibald Hodge, Charles Hodge’s son, were pivotal in arguing for biblical inerrancy.

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<sup>34</sup> Fred Clark, “The Symmetric Property of 2 Timothy 3:16,” *Patheos*, last modified August 18<sup>th</sup>, 2012, last accessed October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2023. <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/slacktivist/2015/10/05/the-symmetric-property-of-2-timothy-316/>.

<sup>35</sup> It has also been linked to biblical literalism, a term usually ascribed by those within theology, also known as Biblicism, where one takes the Bible word for word as literal truth.

<sup>36</sup> Karen Engle, “The Inerrancy of Scripture Versus Infallibility,” *Logos*, published July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2021, last accessed July 20<sup>th</sup>, 2023. <https://www.logos.com/grow/inerrancy-of-Scripture>.

<sup>37</sup> Frances Flannery and Rodney A. Werline, “Introduction,” in *The Bible in Political Debate, What Does it Really Say?* (New York: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2016), 8.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 8.

<sup>39</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Louisville: GLH, 1960), 31.

The debate on the inerrancy of the Bible has bounced back and forth over the centuries. Looking ahead to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the belief in biblical inerrancy was maintained. Under the initiative of Jay Grimstead,<sup>40</sup> the 1978 *Chicago Statement of Biblical Inerrancy* (CSBI)<sup>41</sup> consisted of 19 articles, each composed of affirmations and denials related in one way or another to biblical inerrancy. In the preamble, a declaration like that of Charles Hodge, states that “being wholly and verbally God-given, Scripture is without error or fault in all of its teachings.”<sup>42</sup> Another report commissioned by the *Constitution of the Evangelical Theological Society* (CETS)<sup>43</sup> affirmed this, formally approving the authenticity and inerrancy of the Bible. Despite these proclamations of inerrancy, both Hodge and Grimstead accepted there were some problems with the belief in biblical inerrancy. Hodge stated that although inerrant, the Bible was not perfect. Grimstead, on the other hand believed that perceived problems within the Bible were due to liberal thinking. He explains, “when a pastor, writer, or theologian gives up the view that the Bible is fully God-inspired and inerrant in all it says, then a long list of other Christian doctrines and positions begin to unravel... he then proceeds... to accept more and more liberal, anti-Biblical positions... in his descent into relativism.”<sup>44</sup>

Biblical inerrancy is one of the core tenets of many PGAs, but Hans Madueme looks at inerrancy from a more nuanced, arguably rationalized lens, referred to as “divine accommodation:”

Christians have historically endorsed the doctrine of divine accommodation. However, some scholars reject inerrancy by appealing to accommodation. They want to relieve the dissonance that Christians sometimes perceive between an inerrant Scripture and theories from the natural sciences, or they invoke accommodation as a way to play down the hard ethical passages in the Bible.<sup>45</sup>

Albert Mohler further explains that as a contingent text it will “bear all the errors of its contingent authors.”<sup>46</sup> Madueme explains that some scholars, rather than battling with inerrancy, they settle in with accommodation saying, “God speaks to us in and through the mistakes.”<sup>47</sup> According to Madueme, accommodation is largely rejected as it cannot be trusted with geography, science, or history.<sup>48</sup> Where to draw the line with accommodation becomes a

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<sup>40</sup> Dr. Jay Grimstead, 1935 – June 2024 was an American theologian, the founder and president of *Coalition on Revival (COR)*, a national think tank comprised of leading conservative thinkers. He also founded the *Church Council Project*. “He was instrumental in creating a host of important theological documents ...taking a clear stand against dangerous and apostate trends prevalent in all too many churches today.” See <https://www.movieguide.org/news-articles/the-most-dangerous-man-in-america.html>.

<sup>41</sup> Jay Grimstead, *Rebuilding Civilization on the Bible, Proclaiming the Truth on 24 Controversial Issues* (Ventura: Nordskog, 2014), 18-26.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>43</sup> Jackson Wu, “The Doctrine of Scripture and Biblical Contextualization: Inspiration, Authority, Inerrancy, and the Canon,” *The Gospel Coalition*, last accessed August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2021.

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/the-doctrine-of-Scripture-and-biblical-contextualization/>

<sup>44</sup> Jay Grimstead, *Rebuilding Civilization on the Bible*, 19.

<sup>45</sup> Hans Madueme, “Inerrancy and Divine Accommodation,” *Tabletalk*, published September 21<sup>st</sup>, 2018, last accessed October 29, 2023. <https://tabletalkmagazine.com/posts/inerrancy-and-divine-accommodation/>.

<sup>46</sup> Albert Mohler, “The Inerrancy of Scripture: The Fifty Years’ War... and Counting,” *Albertmohler.com*, published August 16<sup>th</sup>, 2010, last accessed July 20, 2023. <https://albertmohler.com/2010/08/16/the-inerrancy-of-scripture-the-fifty-years-war-and-counting/>.

<sup>47</sup> Hans Madueme, “Inerrancy and Divine Accommodation.”

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

problem. In his work *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture*, Christian Smith explains “Biblicism,” as a term, is not usually known within the evangelical world, however, the concept itself is overarching within this community and can be defined differently by different people. For clarification of his definition, he lists a constellation of ten related assumptions and beliefs about the Bible’s nature, purpose, and function.<sup>49</sup> These assumptions lend themselves quite well to a literal, fundamental reading of Scripture which, as Smith explains, “informs and animates the outlooks and practices of major sectors of institutional and popular conservative American Protestantism, and especially evangelicalism.”<sup>50</sup> Although this is well and good, according to a Gallup poll in May of 2022, a decreasing number of Americans believe the bible to be the literal word of God. Strikingly, only “20% of Protestants say the Bible is literally true.”<sup>51</sup> This then challenges the doctrine of inerrancy.

### Infallibility

Intertwined with inerrancy, is the term “infallibility.” In the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy*, there is a duly signed broad sweeping explanation by over 300 theological scholars referring to infallibility:

Holy Scripture, being God’s own Word, written by men prepared and superintended by His Spirit, is of infallible divine authority in all matters upon which it touches: it is to be believed, as God’s instruction, in all that it affirms: obeyed, as God’s command, in all that it requires; embraced, as God’s pledge, in all that it promises.<sup>52</sup>

Infallibility first gained ground as a response to modernism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century in arguments supporting the Bible as being inerrant. “Infallible means will not fail or trustworthy. So to say Scripture is infallible signifies its full trustworthiness as a guide that is not deceived and does not deceive... Infallibility does not mean the Bible cannot contain errors – but rather that it cannot fail.”<sup>53</sup> A common biblical reference to that perspective is 2 Peter 1:20-21, “First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.” Karen Engle further explains that “Infallibility means that the word of God will do what God intends it to do for his expressed purpose.”<sup>54</sup>

Gabriel Desjardins, in concurrence with Jay Grimstead, consider the terms “infallible” and “inerrant” as separate but related. In referring to Biblicism within an evangelical context, Desjardins states,

This constellation of hermeneutical assumptions connects to biblical authority. Inerrancy, however, is but one outlook on biblical authority. Two other critical hermeneutical frameworks in evangelicalism are literalism and infallibilism,

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<sup>49</sup> Christian Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism Is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press. 2011/2012), 4.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>51</sup> Frank Newport, “Fewer in U.S. Now See Bible as Literal Word of God,” Gallup, published July 6<sup>th</sup>, 2022, last accessed September 14<sup>th</sup>, 2023. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/394262/fewer-bible-literal-word-god.aspx>.

<sup>52</sup> Jay Grimstead, *Rebuilding Civilization on the Bible*, 19.

<sup>53</sup> Karen Engle, “The Inerrancy of Scripture Versus Infallibility.”

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

though once interchangeable and synonymous, these frameworks have developed into separate hermeneutics related to biblical authority.<sup>55</sup>

But is a greater understanding required? Engle and Grimstead both allow for accommodation. Of the three terms, infallible seems to attenuate the rather strong rigidity of literalism and inerrancy. This creates in turn a type of notwithstanding clause under which all these terms could come together homogenously. We should note that Ted G. Gelen argues that “infallibilism, however, does not necessitate an inerrant Bible. Some infallibilists relate this category strictly to matters of faith and religion, meaning that the Bible can err in terms of science and history without failing its mission.”<sup>56</sup> As such, infallibility – much like inerrancy and even fundamentalism – is a complex term which may be thought of differently depending on the person, community, or tradition promoting it.

Ultimately, these terms come down to a matter of interpretation.<sup>57</sup> Arguably, these three terms are little more than semantic word play, as what is really at stake is interpretation. Christian Smith refers to the inductive method of examining Scripture where “laypeople can sit down with the Bible and inductively draw from the clear, relevant and universal truths it teaches.”<sup>58</sup> In his discussion, he describes how “a Biblicist assumption [and] expository preaching... proceeds on the assumption that a minister can select virtually any passage of Scripture and adduce from the text any authoritative, relevant applicable teaching to be believed by members of his or her congregation.”<sup>59</sup> Smith argues that “in a crucial sense it simply does not matter whether the Bible is everything that Biblicists claim theoretically... since in actual functioning the Bible produces a pluralism of interpretation... knowledge of Biblical teachings is characterized by pervasive interpretative pluralism.”<sup>60</sup> Robert Johnson in his book *Evangelicals at an Impasse: Biblical Authority in Practice*, concludes, “To argue that the Bible is authoritative, but to be able to come to anything like agreement on what it says (even with those who share an evangelical commitment) is self-defeating.”<sup>61</sup> Even Martin Luther, while writing his polemics against the Catholic Church, realized that there could not be only one correct view that many doctrinal positions could be obtained from randomly putting verses together even if they did not fit. He concluded that, “If this be the way, then I can easily prove from Scripture that beer is better than wine.”<sup>62</sup> As far back as the 5<sup>th</sup> century, Vincent of Lerins concluded “all do not accept it in one and the same sense but one understands its words one way, while another in another, so that it seems capable of as many interpretations as there are interpreters.”<sup>63</sup>

### **Calvinism, the Protestant Work Ethic and the Prosperity Gospel**

Wealth is a dominant theme with prosperity adherents. Using certain texts, such as Psalm 112:3 (“wealth and riches are in their houses, and their righteousness endures forever”) and Deut. 8:18 (“But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that

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<sup>55</sup> Gabriel A. Desjardins, *Crossing the Presuppositional Divide: A Problematization and Comparative Analysis of the Inerrancy Debate in Evangelicalism*, Concordia, master’s thesis, 7. 2020.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>57</sup> The list of terms could also include “authoritative,” “perspicuous,” “beyond reproach,” etc.

<sup>58</sup> Christian Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible*, 11.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 11 and 12.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 18.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 50.

he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today”),<sup>64</sup> preachers like Creflo Dollar,<sup>65</sup> for example, back up their theology. They use such biblical verses to support claims like “it is God’s will for Christians to prosper financially,”<sup>66</sup> or Joel Osteen’s, “Don’t let anybody convince you that God wants you to barely get by in life... He’s called El Shaddai the God of more than enough... he’s not El Cheapo the God of barely enough.”

According to C. Peter Wagner, “Most people do not need to adopt a monastery mindset. They need a prosperity mindset!”<sup>67</sup> Yet, throughout the Bible there are numerous references to the value of asceticism.<sup>68</sup> Verses such as Mark 10:21 (“go sell what you own, and give the money to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven”), Matt 6:19-20 (“do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth... but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven where neither moth nor rust consumes and thieves do not break in and steal”), Mark 10:23 (“how hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God”) and 1 Tim 6:9-11 condemn wealth. How then can there be such a difference between these biblical texts?

In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber<sup>69</sup> observed that 17<sup>th</sup> century European Calvinists had a religious work ethic which “lay the ideological groundwork for modern capitalism.”<sup>70</sup> Kathryn Tanner explained that Weber believed “that certain Christian beliefs... were necessary to get capitalism started.”<sup>71</sup> Weber recognized the amount of work involved in capitalism, yet wondered why people would work so hard to make so much money when an overabundance of wealth was not necessary to sustain life. One possibility is that, under Calvinism, a Christian’s success was a demonstration of their favour with God. It provided them more than a prestigious social status; it also placed them in a good place with God. Peter Munday explains that, “just as modern components of the Prosperity Gospel believe material blessing are a sign of God’s favor, Weber’s Calvinist’s believed that success in the economic realm was a sign of God’s favor, and more precisely that one was predestined to spend eternity in heaven.”<sup>72</sup> Weber’s Calvinists were not opposed to wealth, but unlike modern era capitalists and Prosperity

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<sup>64</sup> Some other verses are John 14:4: “I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the father may be glorified in the Son”; Phil. 4:19: “and my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in heaven”; Mark 11:24: “So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it and it will be yours”; Isaiah 1:19: “If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land”; Psalm 112:3: “Wealth and riches are in their houses and their righteousness endures forever.” Interestingly, in some cases, they do not appear to be directly amenable to wealth *per se*, yet they are attributed as if they are.

<sup>65</sup> Creflo Dollar is the founder and senior pastor of World Changers Church International. His award-winning Changing Your World Broadcast allegedly reaches nearly 1 billion homes. See: <https://creflodollarministries.org/Dr-Dollar>.

<sup>66</sup> Creflo Dollar, *You’re Supposed to be Wealthy*, (New York: Faith Words, 2014), accessed on Kindle, vii.

<sup>67</sup> C. Peter Wagner, *The Great Transfer of Wealth* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 2014), 59.

<sup>68</sup> Getting by with only what is needed, to be less involved, less distracted with earthly pursuits so that a focus on God will ascend to a rewarding rich relationship.

<sup>69</sup> “Among the foremost social theorists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Max Weber is known as a principal architect of modern social science along with Karl Marx and Emil Durkheim... Weber’s two most celebrated books were the ‘rationalization thesis’...and the Protestant Ethic Thesis... that helped launch his reputation as one of the founding theorists of modernity.” See Sung Ho Kim, “Max Weber,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, last modified September 21<sup>st</sup>, 2022, last accessed July 10<sup>th</sup>, 2024. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/weber/>.

<sup>70</sup> Peter Munday, “The Prosperity Gospel and the Spirit of Consumerism According to Joel Osteen,” *Pneuma* 39, no. 3 (January 2017); 322.

<sup>71</sup> Kathryn Tanner, *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019). 1.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 322.



Gospel adherents, it was not to be for pleasure; “rather, wealth was supposed to be spent rationally, saved diligently, and given away generously to worthy causes.”<sup>73</sup>

Weber stated, “the protestant work ethic transcended its Calvinist origins and was secularized, thus removing religious restraints on discretionary spending.”<sup>74</sup> Capitalism then rewarded fruits of its labour rather than to give it all away. Colin Campbell went a step further identifying romantic and ascetic twin ethics of consumerism that “supplement rather than contradict each other.”<sup>75,76</sup> Campbell explains that combining both ascetic and romantic consumerism “partially contributed to the hedonistic elements of consumerism, including acquisitiveness, shopaholism and over the top discretionary spending.”<sup>77</sup> It should be noted that neither Weber nor Campbell felt that Protestant beliefs caused consumerism, rather, they argued only that religious beliefs could “partially shape... economic behaviour.”<sup>78</sup>

We may note that *The Lausanne Movement* uses the term “interested giving,”<sup>79,80</sup> where God’s law of compensation<sup>81</sup> is used to support the idea that the more a person gives, the more a person or organization gets, that God will bless that person or group. This law of compensation is defended by the use of biblical text such as Mark 10:29-30, Luke 18:29-30, and 2 Cor. 9:6, where “the one who sows bountifully will reap bountifully.”

To summarize, the Protestant Work Ethic did support the accumulation of wealth for humane purposes. It was not intended as a philosophy to justify work towards a single-minded idea of accumulating corporate and personal wealth. Rather than adopt the pure protestant work ethic, Prosperity Gospel adherents have adopted the modified capitalist ideology. Supporting it with specific bible verses, they are in effect looking through the lens of romantic consumerism, actively shunning the ascetic consumerism that Campbell speaks of. In part, capitalism in its removal of wealth for humanitarian reasons was a key attractant of the prosperity movement.

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 322.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 322.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 323.

<sup>76</sup> The contrasting definitions of romantic consumerism that favours a liberal approach to consumerism vs. the more conservative ascetic perspective of consumerism, Munday explains that people generally apply “elements of both” in their consumer ethic.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 323.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 323.

<sup>79</sup> David J. Downs, “Giving for a Return in the Prosperity Gospel and the New Testament,” *The Lausanne Movement*, published October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2015, last accessed September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2022. <https://lausanne.org/content/giving-for-a-return-in-the-prosperity-gospel-and-the-new-testament-2>.

<sup>80</sup> Whereby material possessions are given in place of gifts.

<sup>81</sup> As expressed by Robert Tilton, a current televangelist and Prosperity Gospel preacher.

## Chapter 2: Shaping the Prosperity Gospel

### Defining the Prosperity Gospel within an Evolutional Context

If one is to look through the index of a Bible, the “Prosperity Gospel”<sup>82</sup> will not be found. Unlike other gospels in the New Testament, the Prosperity Gospel is a movement rather than a gospel. It is a social construct, which may be classified in a rubric of adherents. The term “Prosperity Gospel” is seen as pejorative by those who are labeled as “adherents.” The Prosperity Gospel, in essence, is a means to become wealthy through the use of God who will provide to believer’s wealth on earth. This is accomplished by praying for things in faith, knowing that by believing, God will provide what is requested. Acquiring this wealth in turn is an indication that one is in good standing with God.

### Fundamentalism vs. New Thought

In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the United States was considered by many to be a Protestant Christian nation.<sup>83</sup> Around this time there were two “Great Awakenings”<sup>84</sup> that challenged fundamentalist doctrine. The first awakening was in the 1830s, the second in the 1840s, which continued into the 1870s. Christians were moving away from the influence of the church that directed its adherents on living life under God’s prescription. Christian revivals were taking on a more emotional flavour. However, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in the U.S., the self-help movement<sup>85</sup> began to challenge conservative doctrine more successfully than during other periods in the past.<sup>86</sup> In effect, the relevancy of the Bible, as has been periodically throughout its inception, was once again beginning to be questioned in new ways.

Following the American Civil war, the “Gilded Age,”<sup>87</sup> was in full swing. The fundamentalist gains made from the Great Awakenings were losing their lustre. Individualism and self-help were the new norm. In addition to technological advances in industry and invention, metaphysical thought which had been stewing for decades was reaching an apex.

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<sup>82</sup> Other terms ascribed to this doctrine are the “health and wealth gospel” and the “Word of Faith” movement; see Joe Carter, “What You Should Know about the Prosperity Gospel,” published May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2017, last accessed May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2023. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/what-you-should-know-about-the-prosperity-gospel/>.

<sup>83</sup> The two awakenings, or the great revival of 1857 – 58. See Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 11.

<sup>84</sup> In her explanation, Frances FitzGerald explains the awakenings as a “rebellion against the formalism of the established churches and an effort to recover an authentic religious experience: a religion of the heart as opposed to the head.” See Frances FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals, The Struggle to Shape America* (New York: Simon & Schuster. 2017), 13.

<sup>85</sup> The self-help movement was a period of movement away from the ideology of the church that advocated seeking God’s help in all things. People were realizing that using science in their own thinking were able to solve many of their own problems without having to give them to God.

<sup>86</sup> For example, challenges to the accuracy of the Bible and the Talmud date to before the Common Era.

<sup>87</sup> The Gilded Age was a period in the U.S. that began in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that produced exorbitant materialism and political corruption by creating industrial monopolies. Some of the key players have names that remain prominent today, such as Vanderbilt, Stanford, and J.P. Morgan.

Ralph Waldo Emerson,<sup>88</sup> Helena Blavatsky,<sup>89</sup> and Emanuel Swedenborg<sup>90</sup> among others, focused on the power of the mind. Phineas Parkhurst Quimby an American, known as a mesmerist, philosopher, healer, and physician, believed that by using the power of the mind one could cure illnesses and disease. He who had been ill with tuberculosis allegedly cured himself. He concluded that with an alignment of spirit and mind one could be made well. Quimby believed that religion was a superstition that caused fear, leaving people in bondage, and that this type of thinking was an error, an error that caused misery.<sup>91</sup> By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, liberal thought began to dominate many schools of higher learning such as Harvard, Yale, Boston University, Oberlin, and the University of Chicago. Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians were among the denominations adhering to the new non-religious theology. As Frances FitzGerald states, “the shift in Protestant thinking had progressed to the point that biblical infallibility and the immutability of church doctrines were no longer common understanding among educated people in the North.”<sup>92</sup> In addition, the clergy “adapted their theology to modern scientific thinking and proposed that Christians must concern themselves with structural reform of society.”<sup>93</sup> The challenge against fundamentalism was on.

That is not to say that the desire to maintain a fundamental understanding of the Bible had been extinguished. Notwithstanding the new liberalism, there remained old school Presbyterians and Princeton theologians who, in response, developed a five-point declaration of essential doctrines, among those being the “inerrancy of Scripture, his (Jesus’) bodily resurrection, substitutionary atonement and the authenticity of Jesus’ miracles.”<sup>94</sup> Assisting in the promotion of the fundamentalist cause was a new Bible that reinforced the fundamentalist perspective. In 1905, the revolutionary *Scofield Reference Bible*,<sup>95</sup> published by Oxford University, became wildly popular with its cross referencing and historical referencing in support of dispensationalism.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson was an American philosopher during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. “He influenced generations of Americans from his friend David Thoreau to John Dewey, and in Europe Friedrich Nietzsche... and the critique of Christianity.” See Russell Goodman, “Ralph Waldo Emerson,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, last modified October 21<sup>st</sup>, 2022, last accessed July 10<sup>th</sup>, 2024. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/emerson/>.

<sup>89</sup> Helena Blavatsky “cofounded the still-existing Theosophical Society in 1875, aiming for a synthesis of science, religion, and philosophy.” See Matthew Wills, “Spiritualism, Science, and the Mysterious Madame Blavatsky,” *JSTOR Daily*, published October 25, 2016, last accessed July 11<sup>th</sup>, 2024. <https://daily.jstor.org/spiritualism-science-and-the-mysterious-madame-blavatsky>.

<sup>90</sup> Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) was a Swedish Theologian. He “was steeped ...in the ...world of the physical sciences and a deep Christian faith... He lived during the height of the Enlightenment.” See Swedenborg Foundation, “Swedenborg’s Life,” last accessed July 11<sup>th</sup>, 2024. <https://swedenborg.com/emanuel-swedenborg/about-life/>.

<sup>91</sup> For more on Quimby, see Tara Yarlagadda, “Phineas Parkhurst Quimby: The Mind Can Heal the Body,” last accessed January 17<sup>th</sup>, 2025. <https://people.howstuffworks.com/phineas-parkhurst-quimby-new-thought.htm>.

<sup>92</sup> Frances FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals*, 95.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 57.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 96.

<sup>95</sup> *The Scofield Reference Bible* was published in 1909 by Oxford University Press, edited by R.I. Scofield who had no formal education. It was considered to be a highly influential publication within fundamentalism. It was replete with cross referenced notes and is considered to have canonized dispensationalism. See FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals*, 100 and 101.

<sup>96</sup> Dispensationalism defined a series of historical periods (dispensations), in which seven specific events would occur in a sequential order ending with Jesus ruling over and on the earth for 1000 years.

Though the Scopes Trial of 1925 hurt the fundamentalist cause, the 1906 *Azusa Street Revival* in Los Angeles sustained the movement,<sup>97</sup> and fundamentalists once again were experiencing a resurgence of their faith. Religious revivals and rallies sprouted up regularly. Their Pentecostal brand of preaching and healing services was composed largely of speaking in tongues, healing the infirmed, and falling to the ground being “slain in the spirit.” The need of many for an emotional experience increased the popularity of their apostolic faith. But this was not to last. Following the Scopes trial, in which fundamentalists went up against modernists in a battle of creationism vs. evolution,<sup>98</sup> the socio-cultural power and presence the Fundamentalist once had was now gone. They now seemed resigned to modernist beliefs. FitzGerald notes that “fundamentalists seemed to be acting out the roles that the modernists had assigned to them.”<sup>99</sup> Despite this sense of resignation, there were religious groups such as the “Defenders of the Faith” and the “Crusaders of America” who organized crusades to change state laws that would favour the biblical version of creation. Unfortunately for them, these groups were largely ineffective in making changes. Although fundamentalism was not fully extinguished, it seemed to have gone underground.

### **Fundamentalism Reborn**

In 1949, a fundamentalist preacher by the name of Billy Graham came on to the scene with an old-style revivalist tone. Graham had become highly effective in drawing crowds to his religious crusades, but more importantly, he reignited a neo-fundamentalism which became the evangelicalism of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. FitzGerald states, “Church affiliation rose from 43 percent before the war... to 69 percent in 1960.”<sup>100</sup> Religious leaders who believed Christianity was in decline were surprised by his success in re-establishing the fundamentalist cause. However, as FitzGerald points out “this upsurge in churchgoing took place without the creativity, the enthusiasm, and the chaos of previous periods of national revival.”<sup>101</sup> She also notes that “Protestants, Catholics and Jews poured into churches and synagogues in more or less equal proportion.”<sup>102</sup> While Graham was having success with his conservative fundamentalism, the Pentecostal world was also making great strides. The Pentecostal community was seeing a dramatic increase in their attendance numbers. Religious revivals consisted of singing and praying, “but the climax was always the moment when the preacher stepped forth to work his miracles.”<sup>103</sup> The sick were healed, demons cast out, and later the “floor of the tent would be covered by discarded crutches, braces bandages, and wheelchairs.”<sup>104</sup>

In 1948, a Bible school in Battleford, Saskatchewan, Canada, had a revival that went on for months – a revival which would have a major impact on those adhering to the Prosperity Gospel. During this revival, emphasis was placed on the laying on of hands to transmit the power of the Holy Spirit, the belief in exorcism, and spiritual warfare to combat demonic forces which were making waves throughout North America. This group, known as the *New Order of the*

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<sup>97</sup> The Azusa Street Revival of 1906 brought about a new subtype of Christianity known as Pentecostalism. At the Azusa Street church, congregants began to speak in tongues, bringing about resurgence in evangelicalism that spread across the country converting many of other denominations including Baptists and Methodists among them.

<sup>98</sup> The biblical explanation known as creationism, vs. Darwin’s evolutionism.

<sup>99</sup> FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals*, 140.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 146

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 146.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, 96.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, 213.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, 214.

*Latter Rain*,<sup>105</sup> believed that the last days as described in dispensationalist thought were soon to be upon the world. Consequently, they promoted the belief in a “fivefold ministry of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers,”<sup>106</sup> to prepare for the return of Christ. This required a decisive separation from the typical democratic type of authority of the church. This *New Order*, with its new undemocratic church authority, would eventually be embraced by many in the evangelical community throughout North America, and especially by those who embraced the Prosperity Gospel.

## The Fathers of the Prosperity Gospel

There were and are many Prosperity Gospel preachers from the inception of the movement to the present day. These preachers played a pivotal role in the development and perpetuation of the movement. Each of them had their own style and their own contribution, creating a functional whole. People such as E. W. Kenyon,<sup>107</sup> William Branham,<sup>108</sup> A. A. Allen,<sup>109</sup> Oral Roberts, Kenneth Hagin,<sup>110</sup> Kenneth Copeland,<sup>111</sup> and Benny Hinn,<sup>112</sup> made significant impacts on the prosperity movement.

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<sup>105</sup> This term is taken from the King James version of Bible, in Joel 2:23, “Be glad then, ye children of Zion and rejoice in the Lord your God: for he hath given you the former rain, and he will cause to come for you the rain, the former rain, and the latter rain in the first month.”

<sup>106</sup> FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals*, 213.

<sup>107</sup> E. W. Kenyon was an American evangelist in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. According to Kate Bowler “His evangelical appropriation of this concept of spiritual power channeled New Thought and Pentecostal streams, shaping the prosperity movement into, to borrow a title from Norman Vincent Peale, “A Guide to Confident Living.” See Bowler, *Blessed*, 11.

<sup>108</sup> William Branham was an American evangelist and faith healer. In 1946 he was visited by an angel who informed him that he would be able to detect illness, as well as see people’s sins. From that point on he established a healing ministry. On one occasion he reportedly healed a congressman William Upshaw who had been crippled. In the mid 1950’s he began having financial problems that were picked up on the by the Internal Revenue Service. See Apostolic Archives International, “Branham, William Marion,” last accessed July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2024.

<https://www.apostolicarchives.com/articles/article/8795590/179510.htm>.

<sup>109</sup> Asa Alonzo (A.A.) Allen was an American Pentecostal minister and evangelist. He had worked as a revivalist then as a church minister until he went to a tent revival by Oral Roberts. He was so impressed that he opened his own tent revival ministry. “His teaching on prosperity was a major theme in his meetings.” He died from complications due to acute alcoholism. See Jonas Clark, “The Miracles of A. A. Allen: They Called Him the Miracle Man,” *Pentecostal Theology*, published April 18<sup>th</sup>, 2019, last accessed July 16<sup>th</sup>, 2024.

<https://www.pentecostaltheology.com/the-miracles-of-a-a-allen/>.

<sup>110</sup> Kenneth Hagin was an American Pentecostal preacher considered to be the progenitor of the “Word of Faith” movement. Like A. A. Allen, he was also a preacher under the Assemblies of God. He is widely considered to have plagiarized the work of E. W. Kenyon. See Apostolic Archives International, “Hagin, Kenneth E. “Word of Faith,” last accessed July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2024. <https://www.apostolicarchives.com/whos-who.html#:~:text=The%20Who's%20Who%20is%20an,of%20God%20came%20in%201913>.

<sup>111</sup> Kenneth Copeland is a popular American televangelist. In 1966 while studying and working at Oral Roberts University as a student, singer and pilot for Roberts, he met Kenneth Hagin whose “word of faith” and “positive confession,” combined with Roberts’ acumen for prosperity in his theology, led Copeland to found Kenneth Copeland Ministries. See Bowler, *Blessed*, 67.

<sup>112</sup> Benny Hinn is a popular American/Canadian televangelist and faith healer. In 2019 he renounced the Prosperity Gospel theology. However, “Hinn has done this before. In 1987, 1990, 1991, and 1993 he denounced prosperity theology – only to preach it again in the years to follow.” See Ryan Sanders, “Benny Hinn denounced the prosperity gospel again – how should Christians respond,” *The Dallas Morning News*, published September 22, 2019., last accessed July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2024. <https://www.dallasnews.com/opinion/commentary/2019/09/22/benny-hinn-denounced-the-prosperity-gospel-again-how-should-christians-respond>.

### William Branham

William Branham, unlike several other fathers of the Prosperity Gospel, did not grow up in a religious home. He discovered Christianity after a serious illness in his early adult life. Though not known as a “Prosperity Gospel preacher” *per se*, Branham died with an estate of over three million dollars. Branham, an influencer in the evangelical movement, began his healing ministry in 1945 under auspicious events. In one example, Congressman William D. Upshaw, who had been seen physically running, “entered one of Branham’s meetings as an invalid in a wheelchair [and] was healed of his bedridden condition.”<sup>113</sup> Notwithstanding, Branham’s alleged and self-proclaimed powers to detect illness and effect cures, many of his healings were challenged and proven to be fraudulent.

Branham, generally considered to be a devotee to dispensationalism, developed his own religious doctrines, steering away from conventional thought and practice. Among his more extreme claims were that Eve had sexual relations with the serpent in the Garden of Eden, therefore man was of “serpent seed.” A unique element to Branham’s theology was his own mythology claiming that God had written three Bibles: The Zodiac, the Pyramid, and finally the Holy Bible, the text currently used in Christianity. Through his keen interest in astrology, he engaged in his particular interpretation of the Bible. Despite his initial popularity, whose followers believed him to be a prophet, his fame waned in the late 1950s. By contrast there were others who considered some of his belief systems to be unorthodox and questionable.

### A.A. Allen

Another key figure was A. A. Allen. Allen grew up in poverty and began his preaching career in the 1950s. His revivals consisted of dramatic healings where people would cough out cancers into containers and vomit out evil spirits. In addition to allegedly working miracles, he postulated that the “laws of faith” and “divine reciprocity”<sup>114</sup> would provide financial wealth; a major tenant of those preaching the Prosperity Gospel even to the present day. Using the scriptural reference of 3 John 2 to support his statement, Allen said: “GOD WANTS YOU TO PROSPER... to prosper FINANCIALLY... he has promised you literally to open the windows of heaven and cut you out a blessing (and that means a FINANCIAL blessing).”<sup>115</sup> Allen, similar to people like Creflo Dollar, Kenneth Hagin and Ken Copeland, believed that the love of money, not the possession of money, was the real sin; they used Scripture to support their claim. Recently, Creflo Dollar publicly denounced his position on tithing. In a recent video he states that the way in which he had understood things was “incorrect... [and asked that his congregants] throw away every book, every tape and every video on the subject of tithing”<sup>116</sup> he had ever made. Creflo Dollar and Joel Osteen claim that they do not take money from their mega churches, rather earnings come from book sales and speaking engagements, among other sources of revenue.

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<sup>113</sup> A.A. Allen, “The Secret to Scriptural Financial Success,” last accessed September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2021. <https://miraclevalleyarchives.org/subpage35.html>.

<sup>114</sup> HarperCollins, *The Harper Collins Study Bible* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2006); see Matt. 7:7 and Luke 6:38.

<sup>115</sup> A.A. Allen, “The Secret to Scriptural Financial Success.”

<sup>116</sup> Creflo Dollar, “The Great Misunderstanding,” Creflo Dollar Ministries, published June 26<sup>th</sup>, 2022, last accessed July 24<sup>th</sup>, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zOSboAvvy9E>.

### Granville Oral Roberts

Granville Oral Roberts was a significant player in creating Prosperity Gospel strategies of achieving wealth. Roberts was raised in a Christian household and his father was a Pentecostal pastor. As was the case with Branham and Allen, Roberts grew up in poverty. As an adult, he found work in menial jobs, selling door to door. Eventually, he obtained a steady job at a rubber company. Believing that this type of work was not for him, and having adopted Christianity as a lifestyle, he looked to the Bible for guidance. In one of Roberts' books consisting of contributions entirely written by others and edited by Roberts and an assistant, Clifford Ford, one of his writers, said that while reading the Bible, Roberts came across the biblical text of Psalm 1:3. Referring to the latter half of the verse ("whatsoever he doeth shall prosper"), Roberts said, "Those words seemed to literally leap from the page and fasten themselves in my brain and in my heart."<sup>117</sup>

Roberts preaching career started with revivals in tents much like Allen and Branham, but he was more subdued in his approach. Unlike them, there were no dramatic healings or deviations from basic doctrine. Additionally, he was able to relate to the "working poor" and those without education. Most Prosperity Gospel preachers like Roberts tended to reach out to those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Roberts' appeal garnered him an immense following, due in no small part to his evangelical outreach through radio and television. By the late 1950s, he was aired on at least 300 radio stations and 135 television stations. By the 1970s, Roberts modified his television outreach from recorded sermons to talk shows with live guests such as Pat Boone, a popular Christian singer and Hollywood actor. With an uncanny acuity for what people wanted, Roberts garnered great popular and financial success.

Despite Roberts's evangelical prowess, all this was trumped by his ability to fundraise. Like Billy Graham, he learned that mail solicitation was a powerful tool. Roberts would send out "healing cloths" and other "blessing pacts" to hundreds of thousands of people in hopes they would, in return, send a donation to his ministry. Mail solicitation became his primary means of funding and is still used abundantly by most prosperity preachers today.<sup>118</sup> In return, they would provide a financial offering to his ministry and would receive financial, physical, and spiritual gifts. In his book, *The Miracle of Seed Faith*, Roberts answers the question: "Is money good for you?" Roberts responds using 1 Timothy 6:10,<sup>119</sup> interpreting the verse saying: "he said love of money (not money itself) is the root of evil."<sup>120</sup> This response is similar to other Prosperity Gospel preachers such as Creflo Dollar and Kenneth Copeland. While the contributions of Branham, Allen and Roberts laid out the roadmap of how Prosperity Gospel preachers would operate, Roberts reached a pinnacle of success never seen before. From fundraisers, to healing ministries, to a mega church, building an accredited university and Christian television broadcasts, Roberts achieved success like no other. With the increased interest in this new type of evangelism, the Prosperity Gospel became an efficient financial machine.

### Kenneth Hagin

Kenneth Hagin was another profitable and influential Prosperity Gospel preacher, who, similarly to Roberts, founded an academic institution, the Rhema Bible Training College. Hagin

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<sup>117</sup> Oral Roberts, *God's Formula for Success and Prosperity* (Muriwai Books, 2018), 8.

<sup>118</sup> FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals*, 217.

<sup>119</sup> The love of money is the root of all evil according to 1 Timothy 6:10.

<sup>120</sup> Oral Roberts, *The Miracle of Seed Faith* (Tulsa, OK: Oral Roberts Evangelistic Association, 1982), 59.



began his career at the end of the 1940s, but it was not until the 1960s where he established himself. Hagin, credited as the “father of the Prosperity Gospel,” developed the “law of faith,”<sup>121</sup> an idea that would provide Christian believers with the power of God on earth. This law of faith granted certain rights and privileges to those who believed. The law of faith was and remains a tool used with great effectiveness even today. Despite the status of Hagin being acclaimed as the father of the Prosperity Gospel, McConnell explains that he was not the author: “it would not be overstated to say that the very doctrines that have made Kenneth Hagin and the Word of Faith movement such a distinctive and powerful force with the independent charismatic movement are all plagiarized by E. W. Kenyon.”<sup>122</sup>

A term frequently used by Prosperity Gospel preachers is “word of faith,” which morphed into the *Word of Faith* movement in the 1960s. *Word of Faith* was a term coined during the New Thought-inspired-Christianity of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The term took on a greater importance for Hagin, later modeled by other prosperity preachers such as Kenneth Copeland, and Joel Osteen. The word of faith, when enacted, involves speaking out what one needs by “claiming it.” According to Hagin, “The Lord said I was to claim whatever it was I needed in Jesus name, to command Satan to take his hands off my money, and to send out ministering spirits to cause the money to come.”<sup>123</sup> Supporting his statement with a reference from Mark 11:23,<sup>124</sup> the word of faith involves not only having faith in God and his word in the Bible, but also saying or claiming<sup>125</sup> what is needed. Realizing that some people may perceive claiming as an opportunity to obtain great wealth or material possessions, Hagin clarified that whatever one claims should not be something “off the wall... you can only believe and confess in line with God’s word.”<sup>126</sup>

### Kenneth Copeland

Kenneth Copeland is also a popular Prosperity Gospel preacher. He originally worked as an airplane pilot for Oral Roberts and attended Oral Roberts University. In the late 1960s, Copeland began his own ministry: Kenneth Copeland Ministries. As Kenneth Hagin’s *protégé*,<sup>127</sup> Copeland shared a similar point of view about the power of God’s word saying, “Your faith is in direct relation to the level of the word in you. Get your word up so that you can believe spiritually, mentally, physically, financially, and socially.”<sup>128</sup> Like E. W. Kenyon, Copeland placed importance on God’s covenant, saying: “God has established his covenant – for salvation,

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<sup>121</sup> Hagin defined his “law of faith” as a legal document obtained through Christ’s death, whereby Christians would have salvation, protection, and victory over all things. Taken from E. W. Kenyon, God gave a “power of attorney” to all believers. In effect, believers would have God’s power on earth acting as “causal agents” to effect change throughout the world. The “law of faith” could heal illness, bring prosperity, end famine, etc., if one had the faith necessary to accomplish this. Hagin is widely considered to have plagiarized verbatim many of Kenyon’s works. See Apostolic Archives International, “Hagin, Kenneth E. (Word of Faith,” last accessed July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2024. <https://www.apostolicarchives.com/whos-who.html#:~:text=The%20Who's%20Who%20is%20an,of%20God%20came%20in%201913>.

<sup>122</sup> Robert Jackson, “Prosperity Theology and the faith movement,” *The Gospel Coalition*, last accessed July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2024. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/prosperity-theology-and-the-faith-movement/>.

<sup>123</sup> Kenneth Hagin, *Biblical Keys to Financial Prosperity* (Tulsa, OK: Faith Library Publications, 1995), 70.

<sup>124</sup> “Whoever shall say...and shall not doubt in his heart but shall believe that these things which he saith shall come to pass; he shall have whatsoever he saith. What shall he have? Whatsoever he saith.” See Kenneth Hagin, 70.

<sup>125</sup> The term “name it and claim it” is popular with preachers such as Kenneth Copeland, & Kenneth Hagin.

<sup>126</sup> Hagin, *Biblical Keys*, 75.

<sup>127</sup> Bowler, *Blessed*, 65.

<sup>128</sup> Copeland, *The Laws of Prosperity*, 23.



for healing, for deliverance, for prosperity.”<sup>129</sup> According to Copeland “if you do not use the covenant, you will live in defeat.”<sup>130</sup> Copeland further explains: “if you have more faith in your job and your own ability to work than you have in the word of God, then it definitely won’t work for you.”<sup>131</sup> When speaking about the “law of faith,” Copeland also suggested that lack of faith would cause believers to live beneath their privileges. This implies that there is a criterion. Believing in God then requires faith to obtain God’s privileges; what is not clear, is the degree of faith required. It almost seems as if there are echelons of faith to attain, whereby those with enough faith will have more and those with less faith will have less. The concern for those who have less is how much less they will have and how it will impact their spiritual and day to day lives.

In this chapter, I have argued that the Prosperity Gospel is deeply connected to the Fundamentalist movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the 20<sup>th</sup> century Evangelical movement which spawned from Fundamentalism. As of 2011, Prosperity Gospel preachers Joel Osteen, Creflo Dollar and T. D. Jakes occupied the top three positions in terms of attendance to their mega churches ranging from 30,000–38,000 adherents.<sup>132</sup> Bowler identifies 116 prosperity preachers (see Appendix) of whom the vast majority are male, with 6 identified females such as Paula White who recently held a special portfolio under U.S. President Donald Trump. Additionally, Bowler identifies 25 married couples who co-operate in their ministries. According to Pew Research,<sup>133</sup> 70.6 % of the U.S. population identifies as Christian by tradition, family, and denomination. Within this Christian grouping, the largest Christian segments are Evangelical Protestants making up 25.6 % of the Christian population; this is where the Prosperity Gospel movement has its base. According to Burton, “a little fewer than 20% of Americans officially subscribe to the Prosperity Gospel.”<sup>134</sup> With that said, it is important to note in concluding that the Prosperity Gospel as I have come to describe it is a widespread and powerful movement within American evangelicalism.

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid, 35.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>132</sup> Bowler, *Blessed*, 239–248.

<sup>133</sup> Pew Research Center. “Religious Landscape Study,” last accessed October 10<sup>th</sup>, 2021.  
<https://www.pewresearch.org/religious-landscape-study/database/>.

<sup>134</sup> Burton, *Strange Rites*, 106.

## Chapter 3: The Prosperity Gospel: Hermeneutic, Adherents, and Impact

### The Abrahamic Covenant and Its Role Within Prosperity Theology

A commonly used text supporting a position of prosperity theology is the Abrahamic covenant,<sup>135</sup> found in Genesis 12, 15, 17, and 22, between God and Abram.<sup>136</sup> In these texts as a covenant between God and Abram, Abram among other things is asked to leave his country to go where God wants him to go, that he will be blessed in many significant ways including making a nation of him. According to Pousson, in his assessment of how adherents see this covenant, he states that “Christians are Abraham’s spiritual children and heirs to the blessings of faith... this Abrahamic inheritance is unpacked primarily in terms of material entitlements.”<sup>137</sup> David W. Jones further explains that the covenant is “akin to an inviolable contract with God... because God is obligated to come through if a believer exercises belief in the covenant.”<sup>138</sup> Kenneth Copland also refers to the covenant saying “Since God’s covenant has been established, and prosperity is a provision of this covenant, you need to realize that prosperity belongs to you now!”<sup>139</sup>

In these examples the emphasis of the covenant is in obtaining wealth through faith. Yet there is another consideration that is ignored. Jones explains that although adherents see faith as the pathway to God’s blessings, the covenant is unconditional; it applies to everyone. If it is not carried out by one of the two parties than God will not carry out what he has said, nor is it about physical health and material wealth. There is a tacit omission of Scripture by PGAs that effectively changes the interpretation. As an example, Jones explains that Prosperity Gospel preachers refer to Galatians 3:14 yet exclude the latter half of the verse.<sup>140</sup> The intention here is that “in this verse Paul is clearly reminding the Galatians of the spiritual blessings of salvation not the material blessings of wealth.”<sup>141</sup> Although PGAs subscribe to the Abrahamic covenant, they apply it as an active guideline to acquire rewards for following Gods demands and curses when they do not. Within the many components of the Abrahamic covenant, PGAs understand that as part of the Christian faith, once a PGA has committed a request, or more specifically a demand of something in faith to God, it automatically becomes a guarantee that God will provide it. For example, Kenneth Copland made a demand of God for a new jet. As this demand was made in faith, God would grant it. If one side or the other does not hold up their end the covenant is broken. It is in effect a contract, an agreement that God will honour just as long as a Christian carry out their side and make their demands in faith.

#### Prayer

Prayer is a dialogue of fellowship with God, with the intention of being in a fulfilling communicative relationship that includes spiritual renewal. It can be used to petition God to intervene should there be a need. For PGAs, the common theme is not about spiritual renewal or

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<sup>135</sup> As a note of interest, the Abrahamic Covenant was no longer valid once Christ was on earth.

<sup>136</sup> Changed to “Abraham” as part of the covenant between God and Abram.

<sup>137</sup> Edward Pousson, *Spreading the Flame: Charismatic and Christian Missions Today* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 15.

<sup>138</sup> Russel S. Woodbridge and David W. Jones, *Health, Wealth, and Happiness: How the Prosperity Gospel Overshadows the Gospel of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications. 2011/2017), 53.

<sup>139</sup> Copland, *The Laws of Prosperity*, 48.

<sup>140</sup> Galatians 3:14: so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles.

<sup>141</sup> Woodbridge and Jones, *Health, Wealth, and Happiness*, 56.

a fulfilling relationship, rather wealth is a sign that they have favour with God. In any PGA literature the theme is the same. Creflo Dollar, a current popular Prosperity Gospel preacher explains that “When we pray, believing that we have already received what we are praying, God has no choice but to make our prayers come to pass.”<sup>142</sup> However, Jones believes that Dollar is missing the purpose of prayer. He states, “prayer is asking that God’s will be done, not that our will be fulfilled.”<sup>143</sup> Kenneth Hagin refers to Mark 11:24<sup>144</sup> as his support of the ideology found in virtually all PGA literature. Hagin among other Prosperity Gospel preachers goes on to speak about “positive speech” also known as “confession.” This confession of faith in God is to actualize the person’s request that in turn will instantly be provided because of their faith. However, Hagin notes the type of prayer may not grant the request from occurring. Is prayer made in hope of having something happen or in faith that it will happen? For Hagin, a prayer of hope is not a prayer of faith, therefore, it will not happen, whereas in comparison, “Those who have a quick confession of faith receive almost immediately.”<sup>145</sup>

### Adherents

There is much to consider when identifying Prosperity Gospel adherents. From their theology to their socio-economic status, educated are but a few. In terms of the theology of Prosperity Gospel adherents, it is not in line with that to which most Christians subscribe. The belief that having wealth is a sign of God’s favour runs counter to that. As stated by David Jones: “the Prosperity Gospel’s doctrine is built upon faulty motives. Whereas Jesus taught his disciples to give hoping for nothing in return, Prosperity Gospels theologians teach their disciples to give because they will get a great return.”<sup>146</sup>

At face value one could imagine the adherents would be those who attend churches that promote the “health and wealth” credo of the Prosperity Gospel.<sup>147</sup> That could be accurate practically speaking, but no PGA would agree with that. When looking deeper, other questions may arise such as the educational level, ethical make up, and socio-economic status. Is there a link between any of these and the Prosperity Gospel? There is data to indicate there is. In a study by Schieman and Jung, it was “demonstrated that lower levels of education and income are negatively associated with belief in the Prosperity Gospel.”<sup>148</sup> Additionally, one of its enticing elements is “that the Prosperity Gospel resonates only with those of the lower class by offering them the opiate of upward mobility.”<sup>149</sup> By comparison, there is an acceptance by the wealthy that their affluence is “spiritually derived and deserved”<sup>150</sup> from God. In another study, researchers found that “New Age conceptions of prosperity which many see as having influenced the Prosperity Gospel... equate success in the marketplace with spiritual progress.”<sup>151</sup> This is in

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<sup>142</sup> Creflo Dollar, “Meditation Scripture and Inspirational Nuggets,” Creflo Dollar Ministries, last accessed June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2022. <https://creflodollarministries.org/Daily-Devotionals/Weekly-Grace/Ways%20That>.

<sup>143</sup> Woodbridge and Jones, *Health, Wealth, and Happiness*, 59.

<sup>144</sup> “So, I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it and it will be yours”; Mark 11:24.

<sup>145</sup> Kenneth Hagin, *You Can Have What you Say* (Broken Arrow, OK: RHEMA Bible Church, 1979), accessed on Kindle, 4.

<sup>146</sup> David J. Downs, “Giving for a Return in the Prosperity Gospel and the New Testament.”

<sup>147</sup> “Health & Wealth” is a mildly pejorative term, according to Bowler; see *Blessed*, 7.

<sup>148</sup> Koch, “Who are the Prosperity Gospel Adherents,” 5.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

line with “mainstream goals and values of modernity... that neo-Pentecostalism and the faith movement in particular are motivated by instrumental rationalism,”<sup>152</sup> or the need to get something done in whatever way works as long as it meets one’s needs.

Bradley Koch listed ten statements as identifiers to who the adherents of the Prosperity Gospel are. This list includes such beliefs as: material wealth as being a sign of God’s blessing; poverty as a sign that God is unhappy with something in your life; the idea that if you pray enough God will give you the money you asked for, etc., just to name a few. Paradoxically, income level is not a predictor of Prosperity Gospel adherence. African Americans have the highest predictability of being members of a prosperity movement (16%); “born again” evangelicals do not score significantly for agreeing that poverty is a sign that God is unhappy; increased education levels inverse the impact on the belief that wealth is a sign of God’s blessing. With reference to income, Koch states: “I find that income has no effect on adherence to the Prosperity Gospel... those who are less educated, however, are more likely to seek out Prosperity messages.”<sup>153</sup>

Notwithstanding, Koch notes that the average American does not believe that having wealth is a sign of God’s blessing or that poverty is a sign that God is unhappy. However, 61% of Americans believe that God wishes people to be financially prosperous. Whether wealthy or not, the Prosperity Gospel does not produce change in the financial behaviour of its adherents. Yet, as stated in the literature of several of the more popular Prosperity Gospel preachers, the level of one’s faith will dictate the level of spiritual and financial wealth a person will acquire.

Geographically speaking, according to Kate Bowler, Prosperity Gospel adherents can be found in the southern states, their mega churches can be close to highways for easy access to the church, and, in some cases, close to some ethnic populations. Prosperity Gospel adherents are not usually found on the northeastern U.S. or in the rocky mountain areas such as Utah and Idaho. PGAs can be found throughout the U.S. but are more concentrated in the southern states such as Texas. As to the denomination of PGAs, Koch states that “prosperity ideas and adherence should be less common among Catholics and those who are not evangelical.”<sup>154</sup>

Among other considerations describing Prosperity Gospel adherents is their ideology of charity and race. When looking to charitable causes in white mega churches, Bowler refers to a “hard prosperity,” which is more individualistic, moving towards an instantaneous link between faith and rewards, believing that God essentially gives us all that we need; whereas Black prosperity churches are a more “soft prosperity,” that are less individualistic more general supporting causes on a macro level such as housing, and prison reform.<sup>155</sup> Although not within the scope of this thesis, there are several interesting distinctions between the white and black Prosperity Gospel adherents and their theology.

### **Impact of the Prosperity Gospel on Poverty and the Social Gospel**

A family or person, who is not prosperous, without enough to live adequately in life, can develop a sense of poor self-value. Among its outward symptoms are an inability to feed oneself or one’s family, to live in a secure, safe residence, to have adequate medical care, and education

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>154</sup> Koch, “Who are the Prosperity Gospel Adherents,” 7.

<sup>155</sup> “Blessed,” C-SPAN Book TV, published March 18<sup>th</sup>, 2014, last accessed March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2022. <https://www.c-span.org/program/book-tv/blessed/343731>.

which in their entirety, may place them into the lower tier of society. One does not have to look far to see the infinite tension and gap between poverty and wealth. How does this prosperity of wealth that PGAs subscribe play into the social needs of society? The values of helping the poor, improving education, having adequate housing, making health care available to all, countering racism, creating pathways to reducing problems with mental illness are but a few of the challenges. The “social gospel,” the collective Christian mandate to help remedy the social malaise of society can be seen throughout the Bible, in passages such as Zechariah 7:9–10: “Show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another,” or Acts 20:35: “In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said it is more blessed to give than to receive.”<sup>156</sup>

Throughout history, there have been doctrinal and scientific oppositions made against the Bible. Martin Luther’s challenge to the Catholic church by writing 95 theses opposing the practice of indulgences, or Charles Darwin’s work *The Origin of the Species* challenged creationism with the theory evolution, are two such examples. The Prosperity Gospel alleges it makes no challenges. Rather, it claims to take the Bible literally as is without change. However, Weber’s seminal work *Capitalism and the Protestant Work Ethic* helps us understand how the business model of capitalism eventually became imbued but modified into the Prosperity Gospel. God does not want one to live an ascetic lifestyle or have enough to live a satisfactory life, meeting life’s needs, but to have great wealth. Is this yet another way to challenge or distort the teachings of the Bible or at least to imbue more capitalistic, less Christian perspectives within it?

Kenneth Copeland, in explaining the covenant between God and humans refers to Deuteronomy 28:15 stating that if one does not listen to God, they will be cursed.<sup>157</sup> Copeland builds a strategy towards the benefits of wealth, as part of God’s covenant with Abraham that “prosperity is a blessing and poverty is under the curse of the law.”<sup>158</sup> He lays responsibility of having poverty being due to people depending on themselves rather than God: “The fact that you have more faith in this [yourself] than you have in the Word of God and in your own competence as a Christian is keeping you robbed.”<sup>159</sup> The lack of prosperity then according to Copeland is one’s own responsibility. By comparison Joel Osteen provides an example of compassion towards a person in financial difficulty saying, “You don’t just pat them on the back and give them a quick Scripture verse. No, you take the time for them, and you do what you can to help.”<sup>160</sup> This is a strong indicator of support for the social gospel.

Is there a link between poverty and social problems? In short, yes. But within the Prosperity Gospel, poverty is not God’s will. As stated by Creflo Dollar: “Where did we get this idea that it is ok to toil and struggle and live in a perpetual state of insufficiency... Poverty does not make you humble, it makes you desperate for resources.”<sup>161</sup> Scott Schieman, who completed a study on the impact of socioeconomic status and belief in the Prosperity Gospel, presents an observation by Karl Marx which suggests that religion may intentionally keep people poor:

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<sup>156</sup> Some other related verses are Proverbs 19:17; Isaiah 58:10; Galatians 6:2.

<sup>157</sup> The entire chapter of Deuteronomy 28 presents both blessings that occur from obeying God and curses from disobeying him.

<sup>158</sup> Copeland, *The Laws of Prosperity*, 47.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>160</sup> Joel Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 241.

<sup>161</sup> Creflo Dollar, *You're Supposed to be Wealthy*, 10.

“Marx viewed religion as a tool of social control in which the rich managed the poor by keeping them more keenly attuned to otherworldly concerns.”<sup>162</sup> Schieman goes on to explain that Reinhold Niebuhr’s<sup>163</sup> belief that in the next life people would be rich, supported the stratification of socioeconomic status which loaned itself to the “deprivation – compensation thesis”<sup>164</sup> and the similar “secular resources hypothesis.”<sup>165</sup> Supporting that hypothesis, Schieman explains that the majority of Prosperity Gospel church members who have wealth gospel beliefs do not have more than a high school education, that in fact, the lower the education, the higher the belief in the wealth gospel. His research indicates that “both education and income are associated negatively with the Prosperity Gospel; that is, people with higher levels of education and income are less likely to believe in the wealth gospel.”<sup>166</sup> Schieman’s rationale for that is because “people with less education tend to report a greater sense of personal powerlessness and external control.”<sup>167</sup>

In a sociological work studying the evolution of group consciousness that develops into a common identity in the black community, Eric L. McDaniel theorizes that the sense of community and justice that make up the social gospel is in conflict with the Prosperity Gospel, which emphasizes “individualism and material gain... that may erode the group cohesion developed by the social gospel.”<sup>168</sup> The “Cape Town Commitment,” an article by the Lausanne group,<sup>169</sup> speaks of physical and material blessings by confessions of faith and sowing seeds that lead to rewards within the gospel. They refer to “interested giving...(which) in this understanding, material possession can be exchanged for other blessings, particularly material or financial blessings.”<sup>170</sup> Robert Tilton, an American televangelist refers to it as “God’s law of compensation”<sup>171</sup> supported by biblical texts such as 2 Cor. 9:6: “the point is this: he who sows sparingly will reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.”<sup>172</sup> Kate Bowler refers to this as one of the components of “hard prosperity,” where one gives in order to receive, and that when there is giving, reward is expected.<sup>173</sup>

Oral Roberts is considered to be the originator of “seed faith,” a term used regularly by several prosperity preachers. In essence, a seed of faith is planted so that something will grow out of it. Oral Roberts, Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth Copeland, Creflo Dollar, and Joel Osteen,

<sup>162</sup> Scott Schieman and Jong Hyun Jung, “‘Practical Divine Influence’: Socioeconomic Status and Belief in the Prosperity Gospel,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 51, no. 4 (December 2012): 5.

<sup>163</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr was an influential American theologian in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was known for his work on social ethics from a theological point of view. “He was relatively unconcerned about doctrinal precision and denominational identity, but felt strongly about the divinity of Christ, the supernatural inspiration of the Bible, and the centrality of prayer in the religious life.” See Yun Jung Moon, “Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971),” *The Boston Collaborative Encyclopedia of Modern Western Theology*. Last accessed August 14th, 2020. [https://people.bu.edu/wildman/bce/mwt\\_themes\\_770\\_niebuhrreinhold.htm](https://people.bu.edu/wildman/bce/mwt_themes_770_niebuhrreinhold.htm).

<sup>164</sup> Schieman and Jung, “Practical Divine Influence,” 7.

<sup>165</sup> The secular resources hypothesis “references the ways that education and income often provide individuals with a variety of resources that might reduce the reliance on religious beliefs like the Prosperity Gospel,” see Schieman and Jung, “Practical Divine Influence,” 740.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>168</sup> Eric L. McDaniel, “The Prophetic and the Prosperous,” 488.

<sup>169</sup> David J. Downs, “Giving for a Return in the Prosperity Gospel and the New Testament.”

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Other related biblical verses are Mark 10:29-30; Luke 18 29-30; Galatians 6:7.

<sup>173</sup> David J. Downs, “Giving for a Return in the Prosperity Gospel and the New Testament.”

among other Prosperity Gospel preachers, are diligent in how sowing seeds can advance the Kingdom of God and improve one's relationship with God; however, the main focus is on acquiring wealth. A *protégé* of Roberts by the name of Carlton Pearson once said: "God will increase thirty-sixty-and hundred-fold return on the tithe... giving is not a debt you owe, it's a seed you sow."<sup>174</sup>

The contrast between PGA theology and biblical understanding is well stated by Baptist ethicist David Jones: "The Prosperity Gospel's doctrine is based upon faulty motives. Whereas Jesus taught his disciples to give hoping for nothing in return prosperity theologians teach their disciples to give because they will get a great return."<sup>175</sup>

Historically, and in a similar vein, going back to the time of Martin Luther, the practice of financial or other material payment in order to receive penitence from God, was used by the Catholic church for those who wished to atone for their sins. After discussion with a priest, an individual could purchase indulgences. Luther believed that one did not receive salvation from doing good things but through faith through God's grace that was offered without cost.<sup>176</sup> The focus in both of these examples is that payment should not be expected or charged. That God's love is offered for free.

## Conclusion

The Prosperity Gospel is unique in that it does not formally exist. It is a construct that identifies a specific group of mainly Protestant Christian evangelicals who focus on obtaining

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<sup>174</sup> Bowler, *Blessed*, 91.

<sup>175</sup> David J. Downs, "Giving for a Return in the Prosperity Gospel and the New Testament."

<sup>176</sup> Martin Luther was a German priest in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. He is best known for penning 95 theses challenging the practice of purchasing indulgences by the Catholic Church. These theses in turn, spawned the birth of the Protestant reformation. See David M. Whitford, "Martin Luther (1483-1546)," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, last accessed January 17<sup>th</sup>, 2025. <https://iep.utm.edu/luther/>.

material wealth through faith in God. Being a relatively new construct from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is nonetheless adequately defined, following a pedagogy that is readily identifiable and consistent. There is solid information which, although not voluminous, paints a fascinating picture of the evolution and eventual birth of the Prosperity Gospel movement. Over the course of this thesis, it was argued that the Prosperity Gospel works cater to the overall good of Christianity, indeed of American society. Employing Arthur Lovejoy's history of ideas, this thesis has described the evolution of the movement, presenting and exploring how the ideas and thinking of several key players took hold, while others were abandoned. Contributing to the development were changes in religious values such as the challenges to fundamentalism, inerrancy and infallibility brought about in part by logic and increased influence of science over religion on society and metaphysical thought.

From a historical perspective, by the mid 1800s, Protestantism was losing its appeal, and was considered to be too dry, emotionless, not relevant, only to be reinvigorated as a result of the two great awakenings in the 1830s–1870s. However, with the Gilded age, the influence of “New Thought” supported by the thinking of people such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Helena Blavatsky and Emanuel Swedenborg, and the “mind power” of Phineas Parkhurst Quimby – a believer in self-healing, and that the church left people in bondage and fear – there was a collective movement away from the church. People found answers within themselves to understand and cope with life. The *Azusa Street Revival* of 1906 and the introduction of the *Scofield Reference Bible* reinforced fundamentalist thought. In 1925, the fundamentalist perspective took a heavy blow in the Scopes trial, which, in effect, challenged creationism, pitting it against evolutionary theory. The trial all but put an end to fundamentalism in the eyes of many, only to return decades later.

From a doctrinal perspective, some of the core tenets of PGAs are their belief that the Bible is inerrant and infallible, a key fundamentalist doctrine of faith. Pastors from the era of E. W. Kenyon to Billy Graham to Oral Roberts, Kenneth Hagin, and more recently Kenneth Copeland and Benny Hinn, have made such claims. Jay Grimstead went so far as to qualify inerrancy by a series of affirmations and denials in what he spearheaded in a collaborative document entitled the “Chicago Statement on Inerrancy,” which, in effect, states that the Bible is inerrant and without flaw. However, even this statement has its detractors. Where inerrancy seems problematic, Kenton Sparks refers to divine accommodation. Divine accommodation acts as an escape valve rationalizing Scriptures that are sometimes ethically difficult to harmonize or that minimize the errancy in inerrancy.<sup>177</sup> The ambiguous nature of biblical interpretation then can impact one's beliefs, actions, and relationship with God.

Possibly the strongest attractant to PGAs is the possibility of attaining financial wealth. Interestingly, there is a historic Christian association. Max Weber's *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*,<sup>178</sup> links the work ethic of 17<sup>th</sup> century Calvinists to modern day

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<sup>177</sup> There are biblical texts that can at times contradict other texts while at other times may seem to be errant. Rather than attempting to define a text as contradictory, errant or inerrant, Sparks suggests that divine accommodation, our inability to not always understand God's thinking, be left as is, not understood, but in time with faith in God that eventually will be.

<sup>178</sup> There have been countless studies of this work. A main criticism of the PWE (protestant work ethic) is that Weber ascribed the PWE to the values of ascetic Protestantism with its roots to Calvinism, suggesting that it was the impetus of capitalism. “Most of this academic criticism, as well as a large popular literature both positive and negative, interpreted Weber's essay as setting up a causal hypothesis deriving capitalism from Calvinism – in short



capitalism. Contrary to modern day capitalism, wealth under Weber's protestant work ethic was not considered to be a goal in and of itself; it was also an outward display of God's favour, in addition to procuring eternity in heaven. By comparison PGAs certainly are in favour of wealth, they regularly claim that it is God's will for Christians to be wealthy, and that they can have it all now. Successful PG pastors are usually very wealthy, owning several homes, expensive cars, airplanes, and live a lavish lifestyle. The downside of this for some of them is the unpopular notoriety in the media, the courts, and the Internal Revenue Service, but not for their generous giving to worthwhile causes, of which there are few usually linked to the promotion of their own ministries, but for their questionable financial practices. Jim Bakker, the famous televangelist who founded the PTL club, was convicted of conspiracy and fraud, being sentenced to 45 years in prison.<sup>179</sup>

PG pastors, in effect, followed the profitable side of present-day capitalism without consideration of the protestant work ethic. As Colin Campbell explained, "both ascetic and romantic consumerism partially contributed to the hedonistic elements of consumerism."<sup>180</sup> Consequently, PG pastors have an abundance of wealth that is financial, not spiritual. From the earlier 1900s to the 1950s to modern day, the means to become profitable has been worked and reworked to reach as many people as possible within the era in which PG pastors were living. During the era of the revivals, thousands would attend, who in turn would be solicited to continue funding God's work. As technology evolved, radio shows, tracts and books, television, and the internet provided easy access to literally millions of people where the given ministry would have the opportunity to proclaim the gospel, but also to request financial offerings from the attendees.

From a perspective of biblical hermeneutics, this thesis stated that Prosperity Gospel preachers often partake in questionable interpretations of Scripture. One such example is their interpretation of the Abrahamic covenant, and its usage in promoting their theology. By using it, believers could obtain material wealth through faith by merely making a request to God whereby God would hold up his end of the covenant. Interestingly this makes the Abrahamic covenant a conditional covenant. Another omission of PGAs is in their interpretation of Galatians 3:14: "in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles so that we might receive the promise of the spirit through faith." It is not about the promise of wealth through faith. The difference here is the promise of the Spirit not the promise of material wealth. This is an example of how PGAs interpret the bible in almost any way that they want.

Throughout the Bible there are directives to improve the social needs of society. Verses such as Zech. 7:9-10 or Acts 20:35 are quite clear in expressing the needs to improve societal needs. In referring to poverty, Kenneth Copeland explains that people are in poverty because they have more faith in themselves than in God, that lack of competence as a Christian or in God's word, is keeping them robbed. In effect, poverty is one's own responsibility, that only God can help one out of it. Karl Marx, "viewed religion as a tool of social control in which the

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as supplanting the materialistic hypothesis with a spiritual one." See Ephraim Fischhoff, "THE PROTESTANT WORK ETHIC AND THE SPIRIT OF CAPITALISM: The History of a Controversy," *Social Research* 11, no.1 (February 1944): 57.

<sup>179</sup> Lauren Effron, Andrew Paparella, and Jeca Taudte, "The scandals that brought down the Bakkers, once among US's most famous televangelists."

<sup>180</sup> Munday, "The Prosperity Gospel and the Spirit of Consumerism," 5.

rich managed the poor by keeping them keenly attuned to otherworldly concerns.<sup>181</sup> He further explains that people without higher education and income have a greater sense of powerlessness and control. A further support of this is in how PGAs omitted a section of Weber's Protestant work ethic by not giving their wealth to needy causes, choosing to keep it to themselves which follow along a capitalist mindset. It is perhaps valid to presume that not offering financial help to needy causes would seem to support that poverty, in effect, sustains the Prosperity Gospel. When considering the education, ethical make up and socio-economic status in identifying who the PG adherents are, there is evidence according to Schieman that there is a link that people with lower levels of education see the Prosperity Gospel favourably, as it offers them the opiate of upward mobility. It would seem reasonable that if all PGAs were to achieve the level of material wealth that is achieved by PG pastors, the Prosperity Gospel would no longer have any adherents as there would be no need. The reality is that the vast majority of PGAs never attain wealth within the Prosperity Gospel ideology of health and wealth. The Lausanne Movement developed a statement providing criticism of the PG movement. Amongst several points made, the following points are included below. They are:

1. Flamboyant and excessive wealth and extravagant lifestyles.
2. Unethical and manipulative techniques.
3. Constant emphasis on money, as if it were a supreme good – which is mammon.
4. Replacing the traditional call to repentance and faith with a call to give money.
5. Covetousness which is idolatry.
6. Living and behaving in ways that are utterly inconsistent with either the example of Jesus or the pattern of discipleship that he taught.
7. Ignoring or contradicting the strong New Testament teaching on the dangers of wealth and the idolatrous sin of greed.
8. Failure to preach the word of God in a way that feeds the flock of Christ.
9. Failure to preach the whole gospel message of sin, repentance, faith and external hope.
10. Failure to preach the whole counsel of God but repackaging it with what people want to hear.
11. Replacing time for evangelism with fund raising events and appeals.<sup>182</sup>

As we can see through these points, the Prosperity Gospel does present problems for the larger Christian community as they do not feel it is representative of conventional Christian doctrine. Through media exposure and legal actions, the Prosperity Gospel is being challenged, which may cause people to ponder its legitimacy.

One of the tools in the PGAs toolbox is the belief that the Bible is inerrant and without flaw. Yet all information that we hear, see or read requires interpretation. Is the Bible inerrant or is it our interpretation of it? PGAs choose to interpret the Bible in a particular way. For many of them it works. With reference to the inerrancy or interpretation of the Bible, an important question is whether the Prosperity Gospel is good for society. There is a selective use of Bible passages and verses that can and does omit sections of the same verse that leads to misinterpretation. This hermeneutic of omission and interpretation could be well challenged through calm dialogue that discusses not only contrary biblical passages but that also presents the

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<sup>181</sup> Koch, "Who are the Prosperity Gospel Adherents," 5.

<sup>182</sup> *The Lausanne Movement*, "A Statement on the Prosperity Gospel."

ethical, moral and spiritual message the Bible is intended to promote, which is a point that they seem to miss. The doctrine of the Prosperity Gospel is a material prosperity, actively reserved for prosperity preachers. Despite literature and biblical referencing that material wealth is God's desire for everyone, it is not for the congregants who attend the services they lead. The complex socio-economic challenges of society such as lack of education, physical and mental handicaps and psychosocial problems cannot be resolved in this manner. The attention to a greater spirituality in a relationship as indicated throughout the Bible with God is ignored, preferring to demonstrate God's favour and preferred status through material wealth. The Prosperity Gospel, in effect, seems to produce a spiritual deficit in one's relationship with God, thereby resulting in a poverty of the soul.

## Appendix

**Table 1. Prosperity Megachurch Table<sup>183</sup>**

APPENDIX A					Prosperity Megachurch Table (continued)				
Church	Senior Pastor	Self-Reported Attendance	Location	Founded	Church	Senior Pastor	Self-Reported Attendance	Location	Founded
Lakewood Church	Joel Osteen	38,000	Houston, TX	1959	Crenshaw Christian Center	Fred Price, Jr.	22,000	Los Angeles, CA	1973
World Changers Ministries	Creflo Dollar	30,000	College Park, GA	1986	Abundant Living Faith Center	Charles Nieman	20,000	El Paso, TX	1977
The Potter's House	T. D. Jakes	30,000	Dallas, TX	1996	Gateway Church	Robert Morris	19,000	Southlake, TX	1999
New Light Christian Center	I. V. Hilliard	29,000	Houston, TX	1984	"THE WORD" Church	R. A. Vernon	19,000	Cleveland, OH	2000
Mount Zion Baptist Church	Joseph Walker III	25,000	Nashville, TN	1866	Victory Christian Center	Sharon Daugherty	17,000	Tulsa, OK	1981
New Birth Missionary Baptist Church	Eddie Long	25,000	Lithonia, GA	1939	Phoenix First Assembly of God	Tommy Barnett	16,000	Phoenix, AZ	1980
Bethany Baptist Church	David Evans	23,000	Lindenwold, NJ	1990	The Fountain of Praise	Remus Wright	16,000	Houston, TX	1959
West Angeles Church of God in Christ	Charles Blake	22,000	Los Angeles, CA	1943	Family Christian Center	Steve and Melody Munsey	15,000	Munster, IN	1950
					Jericho City of Praise	[in transition]	15,000	Landover, MD	1964
					Jubilee Christian Center	Dick Bernal	14,000	San Jose, CA	1980
					Redemption World Outreach Center	Ron Carpenter	14,000	Greenville, SC	1991

<sup>183</sup> The table in the appendix is found in Bowler, *Blessed*, 239–240.

Prosperity Megachurch Table <i>(continued)</i>				
Church	Senior Pastor	Self-Reported Attendance	Location	Founded
Windsor Village United Methodist Church	Kirbyjon Caldwell	14,000	Houston, TX	1982
The Rock and World Outreach Center	Jim and Deborah Cobrae	13,750	San Bernardino, CA	1988
Living Word Christian Center	William Winston	13,500	Forest Park, IL	1988
Faithful Central Bible Church	Kenneth Ulmer	13,000	Inglewood, CA	1936
World Harvest Church	Rod Parsley	12,000	Columbus, OH	1977
Free Chapel Worship Center	Jentezen Franklin	12,000	Gainesville, GA	1953
Higher Dimension Church	Terrance Johnson	12,000	Houston, TX	1999
St. John Church	Denny Davis	12,000	Grand Prairie, TX	1921
First Cathedral	Leroy Bailey, Jr.	11,000	Bloomfield, CT	1968
Word of Faith International Christian Center	Andre Butler	11,000	Detroit, MI	1979

*(continued)*

Prosperity Megachurch Table <i>(continued)</i>				
Church	Senior Pastor	Self-Reported Attendance	Location	Founded
Church on the Move	Willie George	11,000	Tulsa, OK	1987
Faith Fellowship Ministries	David Demola	10,300	Sayreville, NJ	1980
Greater St. Stephen Full Gospel Baptist Church	Debra B. Morton	10,000	New Orleans, LA	1937
Crystal Cathedral	Bobby Schuller	10,000	Garden Grove, CA	1955
Cornerstone Church	John Hagee	10,000	San Antonio, TX	1975
Covenant Church	Mike and Kathy Hayes	10,000	Carrollton, TX	1976
Trinity Fellowship	Jimmy Evans	10,000	Amarillo, TX	1977
Christian Faith Center	Casey and Wendy Treat	10,000	Seattle, WA	1980
Faith Community Church	Jim Reeve	10,000	West Covina, CA	1980
Living Word Christian Center	Mac and Lynne Hammond	10,000	Minneapolis, MN	1980
The Living Word Bible Church	Thomas Anderson	10,000	Mesa, AZ	1986
Word of Faith Family Worship Center	Dale Bronner	10,000	Austell, GA	1991
City of Refuge	Noel Jones	10,000	Gardena, CA	1994

Prosperity Megachurch Table <i>(continued)</i>				
Church	Senior Pastor	Self-Reported Attendance	Location	Founded
Church on the Way	Dan Hicks	9,869	Van Nuys, CA	1951
Evangel World Prayer Center	Bob and Margaret Rodgers	9,000	Louisville, KY	1950
The Park Church	Claude Alexander, Jr.	8,000	Charlotte, NC	1913
Bethany World Prayer Center	Larry Stockstill	8,000	Baker, LA	1963
Rhema Bible Church	Kenneth W. Hagin	8,000	Broken Arrow, OK	1974
Greater Mt. Calvary Holy Church	Alfred Owens	8,000	Washington, D.C.	1966
Faith Chapel Christian Center	Michael Moore	8,000	Birmingham, AL	1981
Shoreline Church	Rob and Laura Koke	8,000	Austin, TX	1993
Elevation Church	Steven Furtick	8,000	Charlotte, NC	2006
Victory Christian Center	Mark Crow	7,800	Oklahoma City, OK	1994
Acts Full Gospel Church	Bob Jackson	7,500	Oakland, CA	1984
Inspiring Body of Christ Church	Rickie Rush	7,500	Dallas, TX	1990
Jubilee Christian Church	Gideon Thompson	7,000	Boston, MA	1982

*(continued)*

Prosperity Megachurch Table <i>(continued)</i>				
Church	Senior Pastor	Self-Reported Attendance	Location	Founded
Living Faith Christian Center	Connie McLean	7,000	Pennsauken, NJ	1985
Empowerment Temple	Jamal Harrison-Bryant	6,750	Baltimore, MD	2000
Turner Chapel AME Church	Kenneth Marcus	6,500	Marietta, GA	1839
Champions Centre	Kevin and Sheila Gerald	6,500	Tacoma, WA	1986
The City Church	Judah and Chelsea Smith	6,085	Kirkland, WA	1992
Greater Grace Temple	Charles Ellis	6,000	Detroit, MI	1927
Victory World Church	Dennis and Colleen Rouse	6,000	Norcross, GA	1990
Calvary Assembly of God	George Cope	5,000	Orlando, FL	1953
Christian Faith Center	Brenda Timberlake	5,000	Creedmoor, NC	1974
Calvary Christian Center	Phillip Goudeaux	5,000	Sacramento, CA	1980
The Potter's House of Denver	Christopher Hill	5,000	Denver, CO	1985
Without Walls International Place	Paula White	5,000	Tampa, FL	1990

Prosperity Megachurch Table (continued)

Church	Senior Pastor	Self-Reported Attendance	Location	Founded
Faith World	Clint Brown	5,000	Orlando, FL	1993
Abundant Living Family Church	Diego and Cindy Mesa	5,000	Rancho Cucamonga, CA	1994
Life Church of God in Christ	Ron Gibson	4,500	Riverside, CA	1987
Perfecting Church	Marvin Winans	4,500	Detroit, MI	1989
Kingdom Church	Dharius Daniels	4,500	Trenton, NJ	2005
Deliverance Evangelistic Church	Glen Spaulding	4,000	Philadelphia, PA	1961
Evangel Cathedral	Don Meares	4,000	Upper Marlboro, MD	1968
Rock Church	Anne Gimenez	4,000	Virginia Beach, VA	1968
Straight Gate International Church	Andrew Merritt	4,000	Detroit, MI	1978
Word of Life Church	Brian Zahnd	4,000	St. Joseph, MO	1981
Cornerstone Church	Sergio and Georgina De La Mora	4,000	San Diego, CA	1998
Saint Peters World Outreach Center	James Hash	3,500	Winston-Salem, NC	1940
Detroit World Outreach Center	Ben Gilbert	3,500	Redford, MI	1993

(continued)

Prosperity Megachurch Table (continued)

Church	Senior Pastor	Self-Reported Attendance	Location	Founded
Elevate Life Church	Keith and Sheila Craft	3,500	Frisco, TX	2000
The Church at South Las Vegas	Benny Perez	3,500	Henderson, NV	2003
Orchard Road Christian Center	Reece and Sarah Bowling	3,000	Denver, CO	1960
Victory Worship Center	Zane Anderson	3,000	Tucson, AZ	1970* [says early 70s]
Abundant Life Christian Centre	Rick Thomas	3,000	Margate, FL	1977
Speak the Word International	Randy Morrison	3,000	Golden Valley, MN	1977
Solid Rock Church	Lawrence and Darlene Bishop	3,000	Monroe, OH	1978
Faith Christian Family Church	David and Roxanne Swann	3,000	Clovis, NM	1980
Oasis Christian Center	Philip and Holly Wagner	3,000	Los Angeles, CA	1984
Greenville Community Christian Church	James Corbett	3,000	Greenville, NC	1982
More Than Conquerors Faith Church	Steve Green	3,000	Birmingham, AL	1982

Prosperity Megachurch Table <i>(continued)</i>				
Church	Senior Pastor	Self-Reported Attendance	Location	Founded
Word of Life Christian Center	David and Vicki Shearin	3,000	Las Vegas, NV	1982
Abundant Life Christian Center	Walter and Cindy Hallam	3,000	La Marque, TX	1985
Family Harvest Church	Robb Thompson	3,000	Tinley Park, IL	1983
Spirit of Faith Christian Center	Mike Freeman	3,000	Temple Hills, MD	1993
Elevation Baptist Church	T. L. Carmichael Sr.	3,000	Raleigh, NC	1998
Wave Church	Steve Kelly	3,000	Virginia Beach, VA	1999
DFW New Beginnings Church	Larry and Tiz Huch	3,000	Irving, TX	2004
City Bible Church	Frank Damazio	2,900	Portland, OR	1951
Summit Christian Center	Rick and Cindy Godwin	2,834	San Antonio, TX	N/A
Kingdom Life Christian Church	Jay Ramirez	2,500	Milford, CT	1991
Impacting Your World Christian Center	Ray and Tracey Barnard	2,500	Philadelphia, PA	1994
Destiny Christian Center	Lee and Shonia Stokes	2,500	Greensboro, NC	2000

*(continued)*

Prosperity Megachurch Table <i>(continued)</i>				
Church	Senior Pastor	Self-Reported Attendance	Location	Founded
Legacy Church	Steve Smothermon	2,400	Albuquerque, NM	1980
Agape Family Worship Center	Lawrence Powell	2,200	Rahway, NJ	1990
Word of Life Christian Center	Tim Bagwell	2,000	Lone Tree, CO	1970
Covenant Church of Pittsburgh	Joseph Garlington Sr.	2,000	Pittsburgh, PA	1971
Evangel Fellowship	Otis Lockett	2,000	Greensboro, NC	1982
The Love of Jesus Family Church	Jason and Gale Alvarez	2,000	Orange, NJ	1982
Overcoming Faith Christian Center	Gene and Sue Lingerfelt	2,000	Arlington, TX	1984
Ray of Hope Christian Church	Cynthia Hale	2,000	Decatur, GA	1986
Covenant Love Family Church	Al Brice	2,000	Fayetteville, NC	1991
Place For Life	Rick Hawkins	2,000	San Antonio, TX	1993
Winners Church	Fred Shipman	2,000	West Palm Beach, FL	1997
Gospel Tabernacle Church	David Martin	2,000	Dallas, TX	N/A



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