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10 December 2018

Final Research Paper: The Prosperity Gospel

Sociological researchers Jong Hyun Jung from Purdue University and Scott Schieman from University of Toronto define the prosperity gospel in their article, “‘Practical Divine Influence’: Socioeconomic Status and Belief in the Prosperity Gospel” as, “a transdenominational doctrine that emphasizes that God grants material prosperity, good health, or relief from sickness to those who have enough faith.” This doctrine, with its roots in Pentecostalism, began to spread across the United States in the 1940’s (Jung, Schieman). The foundational tenants of the prosperity gospel are rooted in fiscal gains and physical health. The aim of this paper is to define and understand the prosperity gospel and its origination in the United States, how it is different from contextual Christian thought (that which strives to understand scripture in their historical and exegetical context without cherry picking verses to suit unrelated topics or ideas), and how one would view the prosperity gospel through the lenses of Marx, Weber, Freud, and Nietzsche. Through this lens, I aim to make an observation on this sect of Christianity and evaluate the effect it has on its adherents.

A study of the origins of the prosperity gospel in the United States will take you back to the gilded age. A post Civil War America was piecing itself together again; individuals desired physical and financial healing along side a nation that yearned for ideological and financial healing as a whole. In this climate, the values of “hearty

individualism” and “bold pragmatism”, as Kate Bowler describes in her book “Blessed: a history of the American prosperity gospel” were enabled to flourish.

In this climate, founder of Christian Science Mary Baker Eddy emerged with her logical and knowledge based approach to Christianity, claiming that the ethereal world was but an illusion, and with the power of the mind a true believer can reject and therefore remove all ailments and illnesses from their lives. The emergence of this new religion made provision for its successor, the foundation of the prosperity gospel in America: New Thought. New Thought is important to understand because from it came what we now recognize as the prosperity gospel. Various philosophers, poets, and respected minds of the culture of that age such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Emmanuel Swedenborg, Helena Blavatsky, all tilled the ground for this particular gospel to grow (Bowler).

New Thought had three key foundational beliefs. Firstly, New Thought declared that there was unity between God and man, that “separation from the divine was only a matter of degree (Bowler).” Secondly, New Thought saw human beings as not inherently flawed, but as full of potential for greatness, if accessed. Salvation was a matter of accessing that potential, not the act of a merciful God reaching down to save humanity from a condition they are powerless to save themselves from.

Lastly, New Thought taught that people, utilizing the power of their mind, could create a new reality or alter their current state of being. The world “reimagined as thought rather than substance” could be manipulated by strength of mind (Bowler). The spiritual world, according to New Thought, is the true immutable reality; the material world is a

product of the mind. These foundational facets of New Thought set the stage for the prosperity name it and claim it gospel.

This structure of belief says that negative circumstances can be changed by positive thoughts. Claim what you wish to be and it will be. If one does not see the change they desire, the problem is in a lack of faith, a lack of brainpower given by God. The radio boom of the 1920's and thirties provided a new and wider reaching pulpit for prosperity preachers to disseminate this new "dominating faith" as New Thought preacher E. W. Kenyon called it. These preachers inspired Americans to view their faith as a vehicle to take them to a higher plane of reality, as a key to unlock the power long reserved for God to change the negative circumstances of life.

This New Thought movement gained popularity and continued strong into the 1950's, when preacher Norman Vincent Peale from New York City published his popular work, "Power of Positive Thinking." In his work he stressed the power of words, and faith in self. The scope of power was to touch the believer's health and fiscal circumstance. New Thought says a healthy mind is equivocal to a healthy body, and thinking successful thoughts will manifest its self in successful financial dealings.

As time and technology progressed, so did the New Thought movement. Preachers who spoke on the radio began to relocate to television, creating the televangelism sensation and further dissemination of the prosperous New Thought teaching. These foundational ideas influenced men like Oral Roberts and Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth Copeland, Fredrick Price, Robert Tilton, Benny Hinn, among others, who have built churches and ministries on the ideas provided by New Thought ideology. The

prosperity gospel, a product of the New Thought movement in the U.S. is a tailor made religion for the American dream (Jung, Sheiman).

A pull yourself up by your boot-straps, independent, elbow grease approach to religion, this is essential to the prosperity approach to God. This effort, this work, according to the American dream, will earn you material success. According to the prosperity gospel, the pursuit of wealth is synonymous with the pursuit of favor with God and men.

The material “blessings” one has is proof that one is full of faith, the apple of God’s eye, and is the center of the outpouring of His blessing. If one is not experiencing these material gains, the problem lies with their own measure of faith or work ethic. Schieman and Jung made the argument in their article that the relationship between religion, wealth, and divine favor arguably impacts its adherents at a class level.

Upper class members of society attribute their wealth and success to godly favor. The lower class members of society cling to hope of climbing out of their current societal rung by just having more faith, and looking up to the wealthy as holy. Marx made the argument that religion is simply a tool utilized by the rich to keep the poor preoccupied with “otherworldly concerns”.

This passivity, critiqued by Marx as well as Engels and Nietzsche, prevents people from truly changing their circumstances as they simply have faith that their lives will change by an act of divine favor, not personal action. A specific text that incorporates the traditional tenets of the prosperity gospel worth analyzing is an article written by Lisa Comes for Joel Osteen Ministries called, “Claim your inheritance”. In this

article Lisa begins by discussing the billions of dollars of unclaimed wealth in the United States.

She compares this to the inheritance believers have in Christ. She says, “Did you know there are billions of dollars worth of unclaimed inheritances in the United States? You can search online and Google “unclaimed inheritances”; and you will find that there are unclaimed properties, assets and inheritances because the heirs can’t be found. There are people who have received inheritances, and they don’t even know it!” She goes on to make seven claims throughout the text. Comes provides scriptural references for only three of the seven claims, and for those three lists verses taken out of their historical and cultural contexts to fit your average middle-aged American.

For example, Comes references the Abrahamic blessing of the Old Testament for her first and second points, being, “I will bless you” and “I will make you into a great nation”. She says, “Abraham was very wealthy in livestock, silver and gold. He wasn’t rich when God first called him, but he became rich because of the blessing of God upon his life. (Genesis 13:2, Deut. 8:18). He also had great favor. The people said to him, “You are a mighty prince among us.” God can supernaturally elevate you to places of favor and influence. Psalm 75:6 says that promotion comes from God.” For these examples Comes does not provide the historical context in which they were written, but cherry picks verses to prove that God wants everyone to “be rich.”

For her fifth point, “I will bless those who bless you” she says, “When people bless and help you, God will bless them. Your favor will rub off on them. Every person who touches your life in a positive way will receive a touch from God. That’s how blessed we are.” This continues with the general narrative of the prosperity gospel as a

whole: God wants to bless you. Proof of that in your life is riches and the absence of ailments.

This prosperity philosophy, birthed from the New Thought movement, views reality and circumstances as those subject to a lesser spiritual reality that can be tapped into by the amount of faith and positive thinking one can muster. In his work, “The Future of an illusion” Freud explains that illusionary thought is something that is intricately connected to our hopes and wishes, although this is not an “error”. It is not necessarily false like a delusion, but more so a hope that perhaps has not happened but is possible, like a young girl wishing to be rescued by a prince. He correlates this wishful thinking to religion, saying that belief is an illusion when “wish-fulfillment is a prominent factor in its motivation, while disregarding its relations to reality, just as the illusion itself does.”

Freud says that an underlying unconscious drive causing belief in religion is the need for preservation. We feel a need to control and regulate one another, to establish a “divine world order” so that people will feel they must follow societal laws that keep people from following the desire to pursue their own power. We instinctually feel the need to “endure life” and maintain social order through religion, according to Freud.

The crux of the prosperity, “name it and claim it” gospel is this wish fulfillment. It feeds off the hope of its adherents to imagine a better life, and believe in that “illusion” enough to make it a material, physical or fiscal reality.

This approach to Christianity seems to deny much of what Jesus, the actual crux of the faith, had to say about health and wealth in His lifetime. Just a few examples are, “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where

thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also...No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.” (Matthew 6:19-24) In Mark 10:17-25 Jesus meets a young rich man who desires to be saved. When asked what he must do, Jesus replies saying that he must go and sell as he has. Scripture says the young man walked away “sorrowful”. Jesus responds to the situation by saying, “How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God,” referring to those who worship and treasure their wealth above God. These are just a few of the numerous occasions Jesus himself does not declare that having wealth in itself is evil, but warns against riches in the context of the pitfalls of the human heart. These are the verses that prosperity preachers seem to dance around and slip through, in their books, articles, and sermons.

Another major issue with the prosperity approach to religion is one of Nietzsche’s primary critiques of religion in general, the roles of guilt and shame. Nietzsche said in his book, “On the Genealogy of Morality”, he discusses the poisonous effect that guilt has upon people. He calls bad conscience and guilt a “sickness” that has existed as long as the creditor-debtor relationship has in society. He says that Christianity possesses the epitome of this mindset, saying” Christianity’s stroke of genius: God sacrificing himself for the guilt of man, God himself exacting payment of himself, God as the only one who can redeem from man what has become irredeemable for man himself—the creditor

sacrificing himself for the debtor, out of love (is that credible-?), out of love for his debtor!” He says that this puts the debtor forever in the debt of the creditor, and forever in a state of dependence and “bad conscious” towards the creditor. In general, Nietzsche denies the inherent sinful state of man and does not see Jesus’s death as a means for freedom from a bad conscience, but as a ball and chain permanently connecting you with the guilt of sending God to the cross. This is important to highlight because of the nature of the prosperity gospel- if you are not healthy and wealthy, there is something wrong; you have fallen out of favor with God. Therefore poverty and illness breed guilt and shame among the adherents of the prosperity gospel, adding to the cycle of class stagnation and the “poison” as Nietzsche calls it, of guilt and shame.

Sociological researchers Jung and Schieman found that within prosperity gospel philosophy “the socioeconomically disadvantaged tend to have an otherworldly focus to compensate for their lack of earthly rewards.” Poor people feel they must keep working to earn the favor of God, and the wealthy seem to have achieved it. This correlates to the ascetic ideal that Weber discusses in “The Protestant Ethic and the “Spirit” of Capitalism”, that in the Protestant context, “...it regarded wealth achieved as the fruit of labor in a calling as a blessing from God. Furthermore, as even more important, a religious value was placed on ceaseless, constant, systematic labor in a secular calling as the very highest ascetic path and at the same time the surest and most visible proof of regeneration and the genuineness of faith.” This prosperity gospel structure of wealth bred favor and favor bred wealth induces a mindset that keeps its adherents locked within a labor oriented spirituality that equates the top 1 percent of society with the true sons of God; their goal is to be counted among them. This is detrimental because it puts spiritual

motivation (one that I would argue is one of the most powerful motivations of men) behind wealth accumulation, rather than wealth distribution.

People who buy into this gospel live in a mindset that glorifies a capitalistic society where the few who have truly pursued “the very highest ascetic path” are counted as worthy and blessed and are holding the purse strings. I would argue that spiritual motivations are better served elsewhere besides wealth accumulation for the sake of wealth accumulation. Although money is needed for altruistic societal relief and betterment efforts as well, this is not the aim of the prosperity gospel.

The questions this gospel asks are not, “How is our community? What is our unemployment rate? Where is our poverty line? How is the health of our society? Are our shelters and streets filled with need? Can our funds address these problems?” Instead, the prosperity gospel asks, “How is my bank account? How is my health? How big is my home? How many cars do I have? What do I need from God?”

This aim of wealth accumulation for the sake and favor of the individual, rather than the betterment of society, perpetuates the philosophy of earthy rewards related to socioeconomic status as discussed by Jung and Schieman. This prosperity philosophy perpetuates capitalistic mindset fueled by the pursuit of “genuineness of faith” as discussed by Weber. This arguably unhealthy attachment to and pursuit of wealth is inherently contradicting to the claims of Jesus and the scriptures in their contextual entirety.

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